

ANTITHESIS AND COMPLEMENTARITY: TEZCATLIPOCA
AND QUETZALCOATL IN CREATION MYTHS

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1. *General introduction*

Without doubt, Tezcatlipoca is one of best-known deities of pre-Columbian Mexico. This god with a multiform personality is one of the most enigmatic representatives of the Aztec Pantheon. He is also generally regarded by researchers as an essentially baneful deity. This should not surprise us; the Mexicans themselves described him as a terrifying and unpredictable god. The Franciscan Sahagún, author of the monumental and invaluable *Histoire des Choses de la Nouvelle-Espagne*, gives us some striking descriptions of this:

It was believed that he alone ruled the world, that from him proceeded prosperity and riches and that he alone withdrew these things on a whim [...] when he roamed on earth he incited wars, enmities, disagreements, which led to trouble and perturbation. They said that he set men against one another in order to promote war, they also called him Necoc Yaotl, wich means sower of discord (Sahagún 1880, 14-15).

His apparently arbitrary character also comes across in the prayers which the Aztecs addressed to him:

Your majesty knows very well what [the new king] will do in a few days since we men are your entertainment, your theatre, and serve as a laughing stock for your amusement. (*idem*, 307).

Tezcatlipoca was also a sorcerer. He liked to prowl the roads after sunset to surprise tardy travellers. According to Sahagún, when some unfortunate was suddenly confronted by terrifying apparitions, such as a death's head following behind him, a headless, footless wraith groaning ceaselessly, or a simple ghost, he immediately attributed these visions to Tezcatlipoca (*idem*, 297-308). The propensity of the Smoking Mirror (the literal translation of Tezcatlipoca) to assume a variety of

forms is to be seen clearly in one of the key moments of his struggle against his “benevolent” brother, Quetzalcóatl, told in one of the most well-known myths of Ancient Mexico. Quetzalcóatl was the high priest of the fabled city of Tollan, where abundance reigned. However, Tezcatlipoca devised the downfall of his brother and his subjects, the Toltecs. Through many tricks, and thanks to his skill at metamorphosis, Tezcatlipoca succeeded in massacring a large number of the Toltecs, so much so that Quetzalcóatl, in despair at the diverse catastrophes which piled up without respite against his people, resolved to leave Tollan (*idem*, 207-217).

At first sight, therefore, the picture of Tezcatlipoca which Sahagún draws seems very negative. Between the capricious and changeable deity, the despot amusing himself at the expense of mankind and the malevolent enemy of Quetzalcóatl, it is hard to discern any agreeable aspect to this god. It is thus natural that a large number of researchers have echoed the descriptions given by Sahagún,⁰ and have chiefly analysed the maleficent characteristics of Tezcatlipoca.¹

However, some sources seem to suggest that Tezcatlipoca was not solely an evil and destructive god. An analysis of these myths enables us to highlight the beneficial counterbalancing role which this deity played at different stages in the creation of the universe, to as great an extent as his brother Quetzalcóatl who is universally seen as a predominantly beneficial god.

The accounts of the Creation lead me to believe that the bond which unites these two divinities is not simply the relationship between the persecutor (Tezcatlipoca) and the persecuted (Quetzalcóatl); but that they were in fact complementary, even inseparable.

Unfortunately for the historian of religion who wishes to examine the relationship between Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcóatl, the number of texts relating to Mexican myths can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Among them, the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas* (composed about 1547, perhaps by the Franciscan Olmos) is certainly a major source. It describes the origin of the gods, the creation of the world and of the human race, and gives a version of the myth of the Suns.²

⁰ Other sources confirm the view which Sahagún gives us of Tezcatlipoca. According to the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas*, for example, Tezcatlipoca was: (...) the greatest and the worst [of the four gods of creation] (...). (Pomar, 1941 : 209)

¹ For analyses of the negative sides of Tezcatlipoca, see especially: Brundage, 1979, 82-101; Nicholson, 1971, 412. Tezcatlipoca as a symbol of evil contrasted with the benevolent Quetzalcóatl, see Caso, 1962, 25.

² The Mexicans imagined that, once created, the world passed through a succession of eras, and the gods who presided over them, were called Suns (written with a capital letter). According to ancient sources, there were four or five of them.

Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcóatl play particularly important parts here, which makes this source particularly valuable for our purposes. The content of the *Leyenda de los Soles* (dated 1558, author and provenance unknown) is very close to that of the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas*. We will therefore refer to this work during the course of this article.

Finally, the *Histoyre du Mechique* (written after 1547 by the traveller and cosmographer Jean Thévet) and the *Popol Vuh*, the well-known text of Mayan myth, also offer us useful information on the cosmogony. The *Histoire des Choses de la Nouvelle Espagne* (begun before 1547 and completed several decades later) by the Franciscan Sahagún gives us a complete overview of Aztec civilization. This extraordinary work, which includes several myths and describes many rituals, conceals a mine of valuable information for the historian of religions.

2. *The Creation of the World*

The *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas* describes to us how, at the dawn of time, Quetzalcóatl and Huitzilopochtli created a half sun, fire, and the ancestors of men: “*Then they made a man and a woman: the named the man Uxumuco and woman Cipactonal, ordered them to work the land and the woman to spin and sew and from them were born the macehuales, who never rested but worked all the time (...)*. These men were doubtless intended to populate the earth (Pomar 1941, 210).³

3. *The first Sun and the giants*

The text goes on to explain that later Tezcatlipoca made himself Sun, as the half sun created by his brother provided insufficient light to the world: “*(...) the gods saw how little light came from the half sun which had been created, and they decided that they would have to make another, in order to light the whole world; and seeing this, Tezcatlipoca made himself Sun(...)* (Pomar, 1941, 212).

After Tezcatlipoca became Sun, the gods created giants : “*(...) who were very large men, so strong that they could tear up trees with their hands,*

³ Huitzilopochtli, who is mentioned at the same time as the Plumed Serpent as the creator of the first *macehuales*, has a much less prominent role. He makes no further personal interventions in the following stages of the creation, and plays a minimal part in the following outline. Furthermore, in all the other creation myths, whether from the *Histoyre du Mechique* (two versions) or from the *Popol Vuh*, only Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcóatl are named as demiurges (*Histoyre du Mechique* 1905, 30-31 and 33; Tedlock, 1985, 72-83.).

and they ate nothing but acorns (...) (idem, 212). The giants lived until the end of Tezcatlipoca's Sun. It is almost certain, furthermore, that they and not the *macehuals* formed the population at this period. The *Histoire du Mexique* mentions only the giants when referring to the inhabitants of the first era: *(...) the men of the first world were as great as giants. (Histoire du Mexique 1905, 29).* It is thus possible that the creation of the *macehuals* by Quetzalcóatl and Huitzilopochtli was something of a failure, since they do not seem to have constituted the human race of the first Sun (or, at least, were not the dominant population).

Let us now compare the *macehuals* of Quetzalcóatl with the giants of the Smoking Mirror's Sun. The men made by the Plumed Serpent were farmers and laboured constantly in order to survive. They confronted the giants of Tezcatlipoca's Sun, who were gatherers. Moreover, the ability of these giants to tear up trees with their bare hands, and thus in some manner to destroy the vegetation, seems to form a direct contrast with the long and hard labour of the farmers, who devoted their lives to the cultivation of plants. In terms of the myth, therefore, the giants enjoy a life of ease compared with the farmers, who are condemned to struggle.

3.1 *The size of the giants*

There is more. The size of the giants was perhaps perceived as a threat to the superiority of the gods. According to the *Histoire du Mexique*, Ehecatl went to Mictlan to find human bones in order to create modern man. However, whilst fleeing from Mictlantecuhtli, who wanted to recover the remains, Ehecatl dropped his precious burden, which broke. As a result :

(...) man came out small; for they say the men of the first world were large as giants (...) on the fourth day, man and woman were created: but they were not full-sized at first, allowing nature to take her course (idem, 28-29).

The text then explains that after the creation of mankind, Ehecatl created maguay, so that men should be happy on earth:

(...) behold, man will be sorrowful, unless we can do something to bring him joy, so that he takes pleasure in life and praises us, and sings and dances. This was heard by the god Ehecatl, god of the air, who pondered in his heart where he might find a liquid to give to man to make him joyful (idem, 29).

There are two points to emphasise here:

1. The text explicitly states that men would have been giants, had Ehecatl not inopportunely broken the bones;
2. man is described as a creature who is *a priori* sad, and who must be consoled.

Let us compare this text with an extract from the *Popol Vuh*. In this celebrated Mayan text, modern man is shown to be of outstanding intelligence: “*Perfectly they saw, perfectly they knew everything under the sky, whenever they looked. (...) As they looked, their knowledge became intense*” (Tedlock, 1985, 165). This displeased the gods, for the extraordinary vision of men made them their equals: “*Yet they’ll become as great as gods(...)*” (*idem*, 166). Huracan therefore blurred their sight (read as: intelligence) and: “*(...) such was the loss of the means of understanding, along with the means of knowing everything(...)*” (*idem*, 167). The conclusion of this text is particularly interesting. According to the myth, mankind was subsequently given women, and: “*Right away they were happy at heart again, because of their wives*” (*idem*, 167). Did they have to be made happy once more to compensate for the loss of their uncommon wisdom? If so, we can suppose that the men of the *Histoyre du Mechique* were unhappy because of their loss of stature. The two cases thus present a similar pattern:

1. Men are very large/very intelligent;
2. For one reason or another, their exceptional qualities diminish;
3. They are unhappy, and have to be cheered by drink/ they are *once more* happy thanks to women.

The third point needs some comment. *L’Histoyre du Mechique* tells how Ehecatl, searching for some drink which would make mankind happy, remembered a maiden called Mayahuel. He went to her side and said “I have come searching for you to lead you to the world ” (*Histoyre du Mechique*, 1905, 29). After many adventures, the maiden was killed and from her bones grew the tree from which the drink, *pulque*, was subsequently made. The parallel between the extract from the *Popol Vuh* and the account in the *Histoyre du Mechique* is thus reinforced. Mankind is cheered in the first case by women, and in the second by a drink derived from the remains of a maiden.⁴

⁴ Women and intoxicating drink are equally linked in Indian myth. According to a passage from the Mahabharata, two groups of gods became involved in a conflict. One of the groups called on the help of an ascetic who made a gigantic man named Mada (Drunkeness). This

It seems, therefore, that a parallel exists between the formidable size of the giants of Tezcatlipoca's Sun and the too powerful intelligence of the men of the *Popol Vuh*. Was the stature of the giants a crime of "lèse-divinité" (offending the majesty of the gods), too close an approach to the gods themselves, as threatening as too great an intelligence? It is not impossible. Does not Huracan say of the giants that they must be destroyed: "(...) because what they do on the face of the earth is no good. They are surpassing the Sun in size, un weight, and this should not be that way" (Tedlock, 1985, 99)? These words recall the indignation of the gods at the intellectual performance of the first men. In both cases it is Huracan who takes responsibility for reducing to proper proportions, indeed for eliminating, these exceptional beings.

However, in order for the words of Huracan to apply equally to the giants of Tezcatlipoca's Sun and thus serve to demonstrate our point, we must prove that the latter were comparable with their Mayan counterparts. These seems indeed to be the case. None of the three gigantic beings who provoked the anger of Huracan were farmers. The first ate the fruits of a tree, the second fish and crabs, whilst the third had a preference for birds (*idem*, 90-101). Following the example of their Mexican brothers, they escaped the exhausting labour of the farming *macehuals*. Instead of devoting their days to ceaseless toil, two of the three spent most of their time making and moving mountains (*idem*, 89). It was, of course, their inordinate strength which enabled them to carry out these exploits, which resemble those of the giants of Tezcatlipoca's Sun who tore up trees with their bare hands.

The Mayan giants share another characteristic with their Mexican counterparts: they are presented as the antithesis of men. The quarrels which the giant named Zipacna had with the four hundred (i. e. a countless number of) young men seem to epitomise this opposition. This giants met the four hundred when they were struggling to drag along a beam to build a hut (*idem*, 94). The young men, whom Zipacna questioned, complained of their inability to lift the beam to carry it. The friendly giant, therefore, transported it for them; but in return the young men decided to kill him: "*We should kill him, because what he does is no good. He lifted that log all by himself (...)*" (*idem*, 95). However, after several incidents, it was Zipacna who massacred the four hundred young men. The text goes on to state that their deaths profoundly upset the divine twins .

creature threatened to devour the world. The gods, therefore, became reconciled; the ascetic cut the giant into four pieces, and his spirit was divided among four intoxicating things: women, drink, gambling and hunting (Dumézil, 1986, 285-6).

There is a contrast between the giant and the four hundred young men. The latter dragged the beam with difficulty, whereas Zipacna lifted it with ease. Is this an antithesis comparable to the one which I believe can be drawn between the giants of Tezcatlipoca's Sun and the *macehuales*? Perhaps so. The twins, acting in the name of Huracan, lament the deaths of the four hundred young men. Their moderate strength was no doubt regarded as ideal, since the god they served was precisely the divinity who took care that men should not become equal to the gods. Zipacna, on the other hands, was seen by the twins as an enemy to be destroyed. This should not surprise us, since the text makes it clear, through the words of the young men, that his physical strength was a bad thing.

The giants of *Popol Vuh* and those of Tezcatlipoca's Sun are thus comparable. In consequence, it is possible that the size of the latter, by analogy with the Mayan example, was a threat to the precedence of the gods.

To summarise: we know now that Tezcatlipoca remedied the weakness of the half-star created by his brother by making himself Sun, thus leading to the first era: that of the giants. The latter, rather idle and with an immoderate strength which challenged the superiority of the gods, contrast with the men created by Quetzalcóatl and Huitzilopochtli, who are not so powerful and who labour unremittingly. There is thus at the same time contrast (the characteristics of the men and the giants are antithetical) and complementarity (Tezcatlipoca creates a half Sun which completes that of Quetzalcóatl) between the creations of the two gods.

However, this analysis is incomplete. In order to be sure of the relevance of the pattern displayed in the episode in which Tezcatlipoca created the first day-star, we must be sure that it appears in the inverse situation, i.e. when Quetzalcóatl made himself Sun. We therefore turn to the analysis of this new myth in the following section.

4. *The Last Sun*

Let us now turn to the creation of the last Sun, which was the star of Quetzalcóatl's son. In some respects, the situation which preceded the birth of this era is similar to that which gave rise to the first (that is, to the Sun of Tezcatlipoca). The *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas* explains that the fourth sun came to an end through floods, which caused the skies to fall in on the earth (Pomar, 1941, 214). It was thus necessary to raise the heavens and revive the earth (*idem*, 214). We then witness a re-creation of the universe (perhaps related to the creation

myth described in the *Histoyre du Mechique* in which the torn halves of Tlalteotl formed the heavens and the earth) (*Histoyre du Mechique*, 1905, 28). Furthermore, they remade the *macehuals* and, according to the *Histoyre du Mechique*, the underworld and rain were also re-created (*idem*, 28). Lets us compare this with the first creation of the world, from the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas*:

(...) they fashioned a man and a woman (...) and from them were born the macehuals(...). Then they formed Mictantecutli and Mictecacihuatl, husband and wife, who were the gods of the underworld, and they set them there (...); all four [gods] came together once more to create the god and goddess of water (...) they constructed the earth from the fish named Cipactli(...) (*idem*, 214).

There thus seems to be a parallel between the first creation of the world (which took place during the era of Quetzalcóatl's half-sun) and that which preceded the succession of the last Sun.

Moreover, the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas* refers to an apparently important birth before the creation of both the first and the last Sun: the first being that of Piltzintecutli, the son of the first human couple; the second that of Cinteotl, Piltzintecutli's son (*idem*, 214). The following table summarises the comparison between the first creation and that which preceded the succession of the last Sun:

<i>first creation</i>	creation of the <i>macehuals</i>	creation of the gods of the underworld	creation of the god and goddess of water	creation of the earth from the fish <i>cipactli</i>	Birth of Piltzintecutli
<i>events leading up to the last Sun</i>	re-creation of the <i>macehuals</i>	creation of the underworld	creation of rain	the gods give life back to the earth	birth of the son of Piltzintecutli

The parallel between the circumstances which ushered in the first and fifth Suns is underlined by the absence of any re-creation of the universe before the second and third Suns. This is at least implied by the *Histoyre du Mechique* which asserts that "(...) according to their account of the creation of the world, their wise men told them that the world had been destroyed once (...) and that at the first creation, the gods had made four Suns in four forms (...)" (*Histoyre du Mechique*, 1905, 25).

Here we seem to have a new starting point. The Sun of this new era is to be the son of Quetzalcóatl.⁵ What features must he have, in order to confirm the pattern established through the analysis of the first Sun? They are quite straightforward. What we have here is the reverse of the situation which we found in the first era. In other words, when the son of Quetzalcóatl (who is confused with his father, see note 5) becomes the last Sun instead of Tezcatlipoca, we may reasonably expect that their roles will be partly reversed throughout the myth, thus:

1. It is now Tezcatlipoca who creates inadequate light, which forces Quetzalcóatl, through his son, to become Sun in order to light the world properly.
2. Tezcatlipoca will “create” the first man, possibly in order to people the earth, but it will be the macehuales, fashioned afterwards, who will dominate the Sun of Quetzalcóatl’s son.

It is indeed now Tezcatlipoca who first brings light to the world, by lighting fires: “(...) *the second year after the flood (...), Tezcatlipoca (...)* wanted to celebrate the gods, and therefore he made fire with scraps of wood, (...) and once the fire was started, for the festival they lit many great fires.” (Pomar, 1941, 215). These fires may be compared with the half-sun of the Plumed Serpent, since the text tells us, a little further on, that “(...) *the four gods said that as the earth was not lit and remained in darkness, and that there was only the light of the fires to brighten it, they would have to make a Sun to illuminate it(...)*” (*idem*, 215). Quite reasonably, Quetzalcóatl makes himself Sun through his son, thus compensating for the weak light given out by Tezcatlipoca’s fires, reversing the pattern of the first creation.

Let us now look at the creation of men to live in the era of the fifth Sun. The *Leyenda de los Soles* tells us that after the floods which sounded

⁵ According to the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas*, Quetzalcóatl asked that his son should become Sun (Pomar, 1941, 25). However, a comparison with other texts which describe the creation of the sun and the moon suggests that it was Quetzalcóatl himself who became the day-star. These refer to Nanahuatl as sun, Nanahuatl being an avatar of Quetzalcóatl (Texts naming Nanahuatl as sun : *Codice Chimalpopoca* 1945, 122; *Histoire du Mexique*, 1905, 32; See also, Coe, Michael D., Whittaker, Gordon, *Aztec Sorcerers in Seventeenth Century Mexico. The Treatise on Superstition by Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón*, Albany, New York, The University, 1982, 101.). One may add the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas*, which alludes to the “son of Quetzalcóatl” as Sun, also stating that the Moon was the “son of Tlaloc”, god of rain (Pomar, 1941, 216). This certainly means that the Sun shares the essence of Quetzalcóatl, whilst the Moon is equated with Tlaloc (the night-star was associated in Mesoamerican thought with the rain god. The ancient Mexicans imagined that the paradise of Tlaloc (Tlalocan), the destination of those who, for example, met their death by drowning, was situated on the moon (*Codex Vaticanus* A pl. 2, 11). For further details on the subject of the links between the moon and Tlalocan see Graulich, Michel, M. *Mythes et rituels du Mexique ancien préhispanique*, Bruxelles, Académie royale de Belgique, 1987, 124.)

the knell of the fourth era, Tezcatlipoca advised a man and a woman (called Tata and Nene) to take refuge in the hollowed-out trunk of a cypress tree (*Códice Chimalpopoca*, 1943, 120). One must suppose that the Smoking Mirror intended thus to save them, so that they might form the nucleus from which the human race could develop during the fifth Sun. But fate decided otherwise. Seeing the water level decline, the two human creatures came out of their refuge and lit a fire in order to cook a fish (*idem*, 120). To punish them Tezcatlipoca cut off their heads and stuck them to their behinds, thus turning them into dogs (*idem*, 120). In some interpretations, the lighting of fire is a metaphor for coupling. To procreate is to assume the right to creation, which is the prerogative of the supreme couple (Graulich, 1987, 107). Tata and Nene, by their impious act, had made themselves equal to the gods.

To recapitulate: before the creation of the first Sun, Quetzalcóatl and Huitzipochtli created a half-star which gave out little light, and the *macehuales* who were meant to populate the world during the first era. To remedy the weakness of the light produced by his brother, Tezcatlipoca made himself Sun, thus beginning the era of the giants, whose size and strength were perhaps regarded as a threat to the superiority of their creators. Quetzalcóatl was thus faced with a double failure, since neither the sun nor the men he created can fill (or only imperfectly) their roles.

A globally inverted pattern appears with the creation of the last Sun. It is now Tezcatlipoca who fails to light the world sufficiently with his great fires, and who tries to found a new human race from two beings (Tata and Nene) who by their acts come to equal the gods. Subsequently Quetzalcóatl's son makes himself into the Sun in order to make up for the insufficient brightness of the fires built by the Smoking Mirror. We can thus see that the two deities were not simply contrasting, as would be the case with two entirely incompatible gods, but were equally indispensable to the smooth running of the world.

To complete our comparison, there remains only to examine humanity living under the Sun of Quetzalcóatl. The *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas* tells us that these were *macehuales* (Pomar, 1941, 215), as we would expect. According to this source, they were created by all the gods.

The contrast, therefore, is between Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcóatl:

- a) each in turn suffers a double failure;
- b) each puts right the mistakes of the other, at least in the matter of the illumination of the world.

In the case of mankind, the situation is more complicated. According to the *Historia de los Mexicanos*, the failure of the god attempting

creation (who is always the first to try to people the world) is corrected by all the gods (who created the giants in the first case and the *macehuales* in the second). Some sources, however, link the *macehuales* more closely to Quetzalcóatl. In the *Leyenda de los Soles* and the *Histoyre du Mechique* it is Quetzalcóatl or his atavar Ehecatl who looked for the bones in Mictlan in order to create the mankind of the fifth Sun (*Códice Chimalpopoca*, 1945, 120 ; *Histoyre du Mechique* 1905, 28). This association is implied in the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas*, since the Plumed Serpent is described as the creator of the *macehuales* (first creation), or, through his son, as the Sun which dominates them (last era).

From this we can conclude that the creations of the Plumed Serpent are characterised by their *moderation*, so that men are inferior to gods. By contrast, Tezcatlipoca stands out as the creator and ruler of *immoderation*, which threatens, in various ways, the superiority of the gods.

However, despite the excessive natures of the creatures most closely associated with him, Tezcatlipoca plays as large a part as his brother in maintaining the world in a dynamism indispensable to its survival. Through their different creations, the brothers each correct the mistakes of the other, suggesting that they were intended as part of a single plan, and are fundamentally complementary. Neither can do without the other. In such a perspective, there is little place for positive and negative extremes.

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