

Gender, Sex, and Violence

Women and the Process of Enslavement in Pre-Columbian Mexica Society

by

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ABSTRACT

Slavery is a significant factor to consider when studying Mexica society and its economy, including societal roles and gendered labor. Many scholars who explore slavery within this culture and state look at the topic from specific angles and focus on the post-conquest and colonial periods. Pre-Columbian slavery is mentioned only briefly in the histories of the Mexica despite it being a key facet of their way of life. Questions of gender and class in relation to slavery are often missing from examinations of the topic. This project will, therefore, examine the process of enslavement, slave status and labor, and the written and visual evidence of enslaved individuals within Mexica society during the fifteenth and early sixteenth century. By specifically examining slavery within the city-states of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and the Mexica region, this thesis will argue that enslaved women played a much more significant role than enslaved men, and that slaves constituted a social class in pre-Columbian Mexica society.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the late fourteenth century, somewhere on the island of the Mexica and its city of Tenochtitlan, a boy was born. Within the reeds and chinampas, the square adobe houses and river canals, Itzcoatl (“Obsidian Snake”), one of the many sons of chief Acamapichtli (“Fistful of Reeds”), was not raised like the heir of the Mexica, his half-brother Huitzilihuitl (“Hummingbird Feather”) would be, but with the option to become a high priest or powerful military figure. Itzcoatl grew, passing his days as a boy foraging among the blue-green waters of the canals and later emerged as a loyal warrior at his half-brother’s side, and later, Huitzilihuitl’s son, Chimalpopoca (“Smoking Shield”).¹

After the death of Tezozomoc, the tlatoani of Azcapotzalco, in the next few decades, Itzcoatl found himself in the middle of a political crisis in Tenochtitlan. With the death of his nephew Chimalpopoca at the hands of Maxtla of Azcapotzalco, and the short reign of Chimalpopoca’s heir, Itzcoatl rose to power.² Ambitious and cunning, Itzcoatl led the Mexica people into a new era. Allying himself with Nezahualcoyotl of Texcoco and the Acolhua people, and the bitter Tepanec people of Tlacopan to form an unofficial triple alliance, these three altepetls raided and fought ferocious battles across the valley against the reigning state of Azcapotzalco. By 1430, Itzcoatl was the tlatoani of the Mexica, and huey tlatoani of the valley, pulling his people out of obscurity and weakness into one of the greatest positions of strength and power in the valley.³

¹ Camilla Townsend, *Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 38.

² See Townsend’s speculation as to why Itzcoatl rose to power on pg. 43

³ Townsend, *Fifth Sun*, 41-46.

Itzcoatl is a unique example of a chief's son not raised to be heir becoming not only the tlatoani of the Mexica but the huey tlatoani of the entire valley. Tlatoani is defined as ruler or king. In Itzcoatl's case, he was not only ruler of the Mexica and their city-state, Tenochtitlan, but also the ruler over the lands and other city-states under control of the unofficial triple alliance.⁴ Itzcoatl's unique significance not only lies in this fact but also in the fact that he was the son of a slave. Itzcoatl's mother, who is never named, was a slave said to be from the town of Azcapotzalco. She spent her days selling vegetables in the bustling market streets before she became one of Acampapichtli's wives. She became a simple tecpan (palace compound) woman of no royal bloodline or noble title and deemed "no one of any importance."⁵

Itzcoatl's slave-mother will never be known to us by any other name. She is sadly reduced to her relationships to her son and husband. There is no verifiable story to tell, no birth or death, no tale about how she became a slave in the first place. This is all we know of her: she was the mother of Itzcoatl, the wife and slave of Acamapichtli, and she was from Azcapotzalco. Slaves in Mexica sources are simply described that—slaves (tlacotli). They are never named; only their social status is mentioned. We know slaves were given names, but these names were lost in time, deemed too unimportant to be mentioned in pictorial and written sources of the Mexica. And in a society where identity depended on one's ethnic unit—in the case of the Mexica, their altepetl—and their personal name, not

⁴ While it may be said that Itzcoatl was huey tlatoani, any city-state within the tributary system of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan was subject to all three tlatoani. But Tenochtitlan and the Mexica received the biggest share due to the fact that they were the main force behind displacing Maxtla and taking control of the valley. See Townsend, *Fifth Sun*, 46-47.

⁵ Townsend, *Fifth Sun*, 37.

to possess a name was to not possess an identity.⁶ Itzcoatl's slave-mother was simply known as Itzcoatl's slave mother. Malintzin, La Malinche, or Marina, was only referred to by titles that did not reflect her identity. The name she was given as a slave is not known.⁷ To speak and write about slaves is to generalize. We do not possess specific examples to call upon, besides Itzcoatl's mother and Malintzin, and even then, their stories are not well known. We know slaves existed and their place in society as well as the process of how an individual became enslaved, but specific information about their individual identities, thoughts, and everyday lives are lost to us. By examining the process of enslavement, the placement of slaves in the Mexica social hierarchy, and what written and visual evidence there is about enslaved individuals, we can begin to establish enslaved Mexica individuals as more than just a footnote in historical narratives.

The process of enslavement played a significant part in the social hierarchy, alongside the culture and religion of the Mexica. And yet, the topic is often neglected in secondary sources. Many historians that explore Mexica slavery look at the topic from a broader viewpoint or at post-conquest and colonial slavery, which is vastly different from pre-Columbian slavery. Comprehensive secondary sources on the day-to-day lives or the complete history of the Mexica all briefly mention slavery but do not delve any deeper than a cursory look. Despite the simple summaries within these sources, certain aspects of enslavement and its process are being debated by archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians alike. Many explore this topic from specific angles, like historian Jerome

⁶ Identity in the pre-Columbian Mesoamerican world was dependent on one's tribal unit, and "documents reveal that women and men unfailingly identified themselves by personal name...and by their tlaxilacalli, or indigenous neighborhood..." Susan Schroeder, Stephanie Wood, and Robert Haskett, eds., *Indian Women of Early Mexico* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 12-14.

⁷ Townsend, *Fifth Sun*, 87.

Offner's legal studies of Texcoco, historian Camilla Townsend's studies of Nahua women, and archeologist Michael E. Smith's comprehensive study on the Aztecs.⁸

In this thesis, I argue that enslaved women played a much more significant and substantial role than enslaved men in pre-Columbian Mexica society. I examine slavery within the city-states of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and the Mexica region with a focus on the process of enslavement, slave labor, and the physical and visual imagery of enslaved individuals. By examining the process of enslavement, I explore how class and social status work, how identities were perceived in primary sources, and the performance of gender in the pre-Columbian era. This thesis will also describe enslaved persons as enslaved rather than describing them as simply slaves, as “using enslaved (as an adjective) rather than ‘slave’ (as a noun) disaggregates the condition of being with the status of ‘being’ a slave. People [were not] slaves; they were enslaved.”⁹

A challenge in the historical study of the Mexica and other Mesoamerican societies is the primary source base. Most of the sources historians use to study Indigenous societies, like the Mexica or Maya, were from the perspective of European colonizers and settlers. They do not accurately reflect or represent the Indigenous people in most cases. When writing about the Mexica, then, it is important to use primary sources from a Mexica perspective. However, because most primary sources of the pre-Columbian era and sources on the Indigenous peoples' perspective are lost to us and/or

⁸ Jerome Offner, *Law and Politics in Aztec Texcoco* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Michael E. Smith, *The Aztecs* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996). Camilla Townsend, “‘What in the World Have You Done to Me, My Lover?’ Sex, Servitude, and Politics among the Pre-Conquest Nahuas as Seen in the Cantares Mexicanos,” *The Americas* 62, no. 3 (2006): 349-389.

⁹ P. Gabrielle Foreman, et al. “Writing about Slavery/Teaching About Slavery: This Might Help” community-sourced document, accessed April 1, 2021. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1A4TEdDgYsIX-hlKezLodMIM71My3KTN0zxRv0IQTOQs/edit>.

come from the colonial period, we must use both sources of the European colonizers and sources with Mexica influence. This thesis will primarily use the *Florentine Codex* and the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas*, both primary sources produced by both the Spaniards and Mexica.

The *Florentine Codex* is one of the most famous sixteenth century sources on Aztec culture, consisting of numerous encyclopedic books on a multitude of Mexica beliefs, rituals, and state history. The twelve-volume source is attributed to Bernardino de Sahagún, a Spanish friar who wished to learn and record the history of the Mexica.¹⁰ However, the codex was written using the extensive knowledge and comments of native Nahuatl speakers and prominent Mexica individuals who lived during the conquest and pre-Columbian years. The codex can be viewed as a biased account of the Mexica and their culture due to the heavy editing done by Sahagún and the other editors involved in producing it, alongside the potential bias via the questions they asked to receive information and knowledge from their Indigenous informants. While Sahagún wanted to know the Mexica's history and culture, this project was also used to understand how his homeland conquered and subsequently colonized the Mexica in order to convert them. The information it holds on Mexica society and culture, however, is too valuable to dismiss.

The other main source I will use is the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas*, or "The History of the Mexicans by Their Paintings." A source which is resurfacing in Mexica studies, the *Historia* is an early, significant document detailing

¹⁰ Bernardino Sahagún, *General History of the Things of New Spain: The Florentine Codex*, trans. Charles E. Dribble and Arthur J. O. Anderson (Santa Fe: School of American Research, 1959).

Aztec beliefs, history, and laws based upon pre-Columbian pictorial sources and corresponding oral performances by Mexica spiritual and political leaders. The document mainly focuses on the legends and myths, but it does give us some insight into the pre-Columbian legal laws of the Aztec.

The English translation of the document, produced by Henry Phillips Jr., calls it the Codex Ramirez after the Bishop of Cuenca, Ramírez de Fuen Leal, for whom the codex was prepared.¹¹ Ángel María Garibay K. states that the *Historia* was prepared for both Ramírez de Fuenleal and fray Martín de Valencia.¹² According to Garibay, Fray Andrés de Olmos wrote and compiled the document by reading rare Indigenous manuscripts and interpreting them with the help of Indigenous informants.¹³ Garibay also gives us a timeframe for when the *Historia* was produced, sometime between 1528 and 1533. Mercedes de la Garza in “Análisis comparativo de la *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas y la Leyenda de los soles*,” however, states that the document was produced between 1531 and 1537.¹⁴ In Jerome Offner’s “The Future of Aztec Law,” he states the document can be dated to around 1535, or a generation after Spanish colonialism began, and Miguel-Leon Portilla states that Olmos researched and wrote the *Historia* during 1533-1536, and in 1536 the manuscript was taken to Spain.¹⁵ The date of

¹¹ Henry Phillips, Jr. “Notes upon the Codex Ramirez, with a Translation of the Same,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 21, no. 116 (1884): 616.

¹² Ángel María Garibay K., ed., *Teogonia e historia de los mexicanos; tres opúsculos del siglo xvi*, (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1965), 11.

¹³ “Tenía que leer aquellos raros manuscritos de los indios, interpretarlos, con ayuda de estos, saber sus relatos, conocer sus leyendas, indagar con detenimiento una y otra vez lo que los informantes le decían.” Garibay K., *Teogonia e historia de los mexicanos*, 11-12.

¹⁴ Mercedes de la Garza, “Análisis comparativo de la *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas y la Leyenda de los soles*” *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* 16 (1983): 123.

¹⁵ Jerome Offner, “The Future of Aztec Law,” *The Medieval Globe* 2, no. 2 (2016): 5. Miguel Leon-Portilla, “Have We Really Translated the Mesoamerican ‘Ancient Word’?” in *On the Translation of Native American Literatures*, ed. Brian Swann (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 323.

the *Historia* is hard to pinpoint, but comparing all of these sources, it would be accurate to state the document was compiled and finished by Olmos between 1528 and 1536.

Regarding how Olmos compiled the *Historia*, many historians agree that Olmos worked alongside Indigenous informants to help interpret and produce the source. According to Phillips, the entire document's explanation of Mexica society and culture came directly from Aztec "sages and priests," although they are not named, following the conquest of the Mexica by the Spanish.¹⁶ However, as historian Jongsoo Lee points out, Aztec "sages" was a colonial invention by Sahagún.¹⁷ These Aztec "sages" were merely priests or religious leaders separated into different subgroups to fit the Aztecs into a European model. For Miguel-Leon Portilla, the *Historia* constitutes "a 'reading' of several indigenous books," created and written down by informants who only divided the "reading" into paragraphs and suppressed the names of their gods.¹⁸ While we may not know the Indigenous informants who helped compile and interpret the Mexica histories and Nahua myths, the primary author of the *Historia*, Olmos, took the mode of communication used by the Mexica—oral traditions and pictorial representations—and re-formed it into the Spanish mode of communication, the Spanish language, and a linear alphabetic writing form. Despite this reshaping, the source is valuable as it was created with the help of multiple Mexica individuals who could read and speak about their peoples' culture and society.

¹⁶ Phillips, "Notes upon the Codex Ramirez," 616.

¹⁷ Jongsoo Lee, "The Europeanization of Prehispanic tradition: Bernardino de Sahagún's transformation of Aztec priests (tlamacazque) into classical wise men (tlamatinime)," *Colonial Latin American Review* 26, n.3 (2017): 305.

¹⁸ Leon-Portilla, "Have We Really Translated the Mesoamerican 'Ancient Word'?", 323-4.

The other primary sources used within this thesis will be the *Anales de Cuauhtitlan*, *Anales de Tlatelolco*, the *Mapa Quinatzin*, and the *Codex Mendoza*. The *Anales de Cuauhtitlan* and *Anales de Tlatelolco* are documents that detail yearly accounts of the Aztecs and their history, mainly related to political and military history. These annals incorporate “vivid descriptions, conversations, speeches, and song texts, [and] offer a rich sampling of the old Aztec oral literature” which other sources may lack.¹⁹ They are mainly general histories of the city-states in the valley, but they offer specific examples of slaves and the process of enslavement within the narrative which will be used for this thesis. While there are discrepancies between translations, like Bierhorst and Tena’s translations of the *Anales de Cuauhtitlan*, these annal sources are valuable for their information on the Mexica and their history.

The *Mapa Quinatzin* “was composed in the Nahuatl [graphic communication system] but with some Spanish influence in its composition. We do not know why it was prepared...Further, we cannot determine how closely its presentation of legal rules and precedents followed precontact indigenous practice.”²⁰ The document contains three pages and is housed at the Bibliothèque nationale de France. The first page reveals early Texcocan history; the second page showcases the legal and administration layout/structure of Texcoco; and the third page depicts specific legal rules and cases in Texcoco. The *Codex Mendoza* was written and compiled by Spanish friars, alongside

¹⁹ John Bierhorst, *History and Mythology of the Aztecs: The Codex Chimalpopoca* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992), 3.

²⁰ Offner, “The Future of Aztec Law,” 12.

Indigenous scribes and interpreters in Mexico City around 1542.²¹ The name, *Codex Mendoza*, more than likely comes from the viceroy of New Spain, Antonio de Mendoza, who may have commissioned the codex. It is presently located in Oxford University's Bodleian Library. The codex "contains seventy-two annotated pictorial leaves and sixty-three pages of related Spanish commentary."²² It is split into three parts. Part one and two are detailed accounts of military conquests and tribute obligations of communities under Mexica rule. Part three is a detailed account of Mexica daily life.

The methodological goal of this thesis is to rely on Nahua and Indigenous sources more than the Spanish sources. Therefore, I will be mainly using the *Anales de Cuauhtitlan*, *Anales de Tlatelolco*, *Historia*, *Mapa Quinatzin*, *Codex Mendoza*, and the *Florentine Codex*. I cannot use every available Nahua/Indigenous and Spanish source on the Mexica, but the six primary sources that I have listed are often cited by other scholars, like González, Townsend and Smith, who discuss slavery in Mexica society. By extensively analyzing each source, this project will attempt to offer a Mexica narrative, rather than a Spanish-colonial narrative, on slavery.

²¹ Patricia Rieff Anawalt and Frances Berdan, *The Essential Codex Mendoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), xii. Daniela Bleichmar, "History in Pictures: Translating the *Codex Mendoza*," *Art History* 38, no. 4 (2015): 683.

²² Anawalt and Berdan, *Codex Mendoza*, xi.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORIOGRAPHY

The amount of scholarship on the Mexica, and Mesoamerica as a whole, is growing exponentially as of late. Scholars are exploring more and more of the region and the Indigenous societies, looking at religious rituals, long-distance travel and trade, everyday life, and Indigenous histories told through their own language and narrative sources. There are multiple comprehensive studies on the Mexica and Nahuatl, detailing social hierarchies, language and art, religious festivals and rituals, amongst other topics. Slavery, however, remains largely untouched by present-day historians and scholars. Post-conquest and colonial slavery are being explored and examined in the recent works of Pablo Miguel Sierra-Silva and Tatiana Seijas.²³ But pre-Columbian slavery is often a footnote in Mexica histories, even though it was a significant facet of their society and economy.

One of the earliest and formative works to address the process of enslavement is Manuel Moreno's *La Organización Política y Social de los Aztecas*, originally published in 1931. Moreno's work is not exclusively on slavery, but slavery is included as a facet of society and culture in a work focused on the social and political organization of the Mexica before the conquest era. For Moreno, "la esclavitud entre los mexicas debe más bien ser considerada como una modalidad especial impuesta a la condición social o mejor dicho a la capacidad jurídica del que incurría en ella."²⁴ Slavery is therefore not a

²³ Pablo Miguel Sierra Silva, *Urban Slavery in Colonial Mexico: Puebla de los Ángeles, 1531–1706*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Tatiana Seijas, *Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico From Chinos to Indians* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

²⁴ Manuel M. Moreno, *La organización política y social de los aztecas* (México: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1962), 69-70. Rough translation: "slavery among the Mexicas should rather be

permanent social position or role in Mexica society, but rather a temporary diminishing of status. The other key point in Moreno's work is his explanation of how one enters slavery. There were four routes: debt-enslavement, capture in warfare, self-enslavement or the selling of children, and enslavement as a legal punishment. These four routes would become the standard when discussing Mexica enslavement.

Another early work on the Mexica is George Vaillant's *Aztecs of Mexico: Origin, Rise and Fall of the Aztec Nation*, published in 1941.²⁵ Vaillant's monograph synthesizes all the works of his time on the Mexica into one comprehensive study, which includes religion, economics, fine arts and crafts, and general history. He attempted on some topics to emphasize the Mexica's side of the narratives, specifically regarding the conquest of 1519, although he only cites the works of Diego Durán, the *Florentine Codex*, and the Lienzo de Tlaxcala to do so.²⁶ Regarding slavery, Vaillant states that "slavery, except in the case of war prisoners, was not too exacting."²⁷ The social position of a slave was simply the loss of some but not all civil rights. Slaves could control their family and own property or slaves of their own, but they were not eligible for tribal office or public service. They were housed and fed by their owner, and typically only performed domestic services.²⁸

Vaillant's avenues of enslavement are the same as Moreno's, as is his conclusion that Mexica slavery was not as harsh as other slave systems. And while Vaillant does not

regarded as a special modality imposed on social status or rather to the legal capacity of the one who incurred it."

²⁵ George C. Vaillant, *Aztecs of Mexico: Origin, Rise and Fall of the Aztec Nation* (New York: Doubleday, 1941).

²⁶ Vaillant, *Aztecs of Mexico*, 295.

²⁷ Vaillant, *Aztecs of Mexico*, 119.

²⁸ Vaillant, *Aztecs of Mexico*, 119.

outright say that the social role or position of a slave was temporary, he agrees with Moreno that slavery was simply a reduction of civil rights within society. Summarized, both Moreno and Vaillant were firmly in the school of thought that, one, “slavery contributed little to the economic reproduction of the society,”; second, Mexica slavery was a socio-legal category with no major influence on the economy, religion, and warfare; and third, slavery in Mexica society lacked similarities to other slave societies.²⁹

Following the works of Moreno and Vaillant, French anthropologist and politician Jacques Soustelle published *La vie quotidienne des Aztèques (The Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest)* in 1955.³⁰ Soustelle writes a comprehensive history of the urban life of the Mexica in Tenochtitlan and its surrounding cities. To him, slaves lived a life without misery or danger, and “they were above all people who had escaped from their responsibilities, who had given up the rights and duties of freedom.”³¹ He is firmly in the school of thought that Mexica slaves were well-treated, and that the fact they did not pay tribute and were not required to do military service equaled a benign life. He does not stray far from Moreno and Vaillant’s conclusions on slavery and offers no new theories or conclusions on the subject.

One of the last essays specifically examining Mexica slavery is Yolotl González’s “La esclavitud en la época prehispánica” in 1979.³² González’s main thesis argument is

²⁹ Robert D. Shadow and María J. Rodríguez, “Historical Panorama of Anthropological Perspectives on Aztec Slavery,” in *Arqueología del norte y del occidente de México: Homenaje al Doctor J. Charles Kelley*, ed. Barbro Dahlgren de Jordán and María de los Dolores Soto de Arechavaleta (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1995), 306.

³⁰ Jacques Soustelle, *The Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest* (New York: Macmillan, 1968).

³¹ Soustelle, *The Daily Life of the Aztecs*, 78.

³² Yolotl Torres González, “La esclavitud en la época Prehispánica,” in *Mesoamérica: Homenaje al doctor Paul Kirchhoff*, ed. Barbro Dahlgren (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1979).

that at the time before contact, slaves formed a well-determined social group in society; were an important part of the workforce but not the primary labor or productive force of the economy; and that these slaves were “foreign” or not from the local communities they worked in. Where González diverts from previous theses is that she argues that slaves were from outside the community they worked and lived in, and that slaves did form a social group or class within the Mexica hierarchy. Because most slaves were war captives before being enslaved, González concludes that most slaves were from outside the community they lived in, as there are few examples of those who were put into slavery for debt or voluntarily gave up their freedom.

Another aspect González puts forth that the other scholars did not in regards to slavery is the idea of gender and gendered labor. When Moreno and Vaillant discuss slaves and slavery within their works, they assume that the slave is male and almost always use male pronouns in descriptions. González differentiates between male and female slaves, specifically in her discussion of labor and the transformation of war captives to slaves. She states that within many chronicles, including Bernal Diaz del Castillo, Lopez de Gomara, and Francisco Cervantes de Salazar’s writings, slave women are referenced quite often, more so than male slaves. And “la proporción de las mujeres sacrificadas, según los relatos de los cronistas, es mucho menor que la de los hombres; por lo tanto creemos que la mayor parte de las cautivas eran conservadas como esclavas para diferentes usos.”³³ González believes slaves did a number of tasks in society. For male slaves this included agricultural work, hauling water, wool, and building materials,

³³ González, “La esclavitud,” 89.

and domestic services. For women, labor included the tilling of maize, beans, peppers, and cotton. González's essay is the one of the most influential on Mexica slavery.

When discussing the historiography of pre-Columbian Mexica slavery, Shadow and Rodriguez's "Historical Panorama of Anthropological Perspectives on Aztec Slavery" needs to be mentioned as well.³⁴ Their article is essentially a historiographical essay on the significant works that either factor in slavery as major facet of Mexica society or specifically examine and explore the process of enslavement and the variety of functions fulfilled by slaves. The two scholars discuss Moreno, Vaillant, Soustelle, and González's works as well as the works of Carlos Bosch, Chavez Hayhoe, Frederick Katz, Victor Castillo, and Frederick Hicks, and identify the differences and similarities between them, as well as calling attention "to the manner in which diverse political and social forces have influenced the adoption and/or acceptance of particular conceptual frameworks and theoretical models."³⁵ They provide a much more extensive exploration of the historiography of Mexica slavery up to 1995, which does not need to be replicated or repeated here. Shadow and Rodriguez conclude their essay with their own three core features of Mexica slavery, agreed upon by their examination of the literature: first, that compared to the slave systems in Rome or the U.S. South, slaves in Mexica society were not treated harshly and were given some civil rights; second, Mexica slaves were not primarily employed in the agricultural fields but rather in domestic labor; and thirdly, Mexica slavery was a significant social, economic, and ideological facet of the Mexica state and its continued prosperity. This essay remains the most recent work which

³⁴ Shadow and Rodriguez, "Historical Panorama."

³⁵ Shadow and Rodriguez, "Historical Panorama," 299.

primarily focuses on slavery in pre-Columbian Mexica society. Further explorations of the topic have appeared within the broader works of Mexica history, like Inga Clendinnen's, James Lockhart's, and Jerome Offner's monographs.³⁶ However, there are three works that should be mentioned despite their main objective not being an examination of slavery.

A significant monograph on the Mexica which includes slavery is archaeologist Michael Smith's *The Aztecs*, published in 1996.³⁷ Smith uses both physical and textual primary sources, utilizing his own archeological evidence and research, alongside primary documents such as the *Codex Mendoza*, *Cantares Mexicanos*, and the works of Durán, Sahagún (the *Florentine Codex*), and other Spanish sources. Smith also uses the leading secondary sources on the Mexica including the writings of Clendinnen, Townsend, Frances Berdan, Leon-Portilla, and Lockhart. While Smith is not the first scholar to write a comprehensive history of the Aztecs, he is one of the few to feature archaeological evidence within his narrative. With his research, and the recent discoveries of ruins, temples, towns, and houses during the 1990s, Smith provides a narrative of the rural areas of the Mexica region and the lives of commoners rather than just focusing on urban life and the lives of nobles as others like Soustelle and Vaillant did.

³⁶ Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). James Lockhart, *The Nahuas after the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), [https://hdl-handle-net.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/2027/heb.00274](https://hdl.handle-net.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/2027/heb.00274). Jerome Offner, *Law and Politics in Aztec Texcoco* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

³⁷ Michael E. Smith, *The Aztecs* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996).

Regarding the question of slavery and social classes, Smith seems to fall in line with Moreno and Vaillant, in that he sees enslavement as a diminishing of social status and slaves falling on the scale of commoners within the hierarchy. It is important to note that Smith defines social class as a “category of people who stand in a similar relationship with respect to the basic resources of society.”³⁸ Smith is arguing against a common definition of social class which requires class consciousness and allegiance to one another.³⁹ With the understanding of social class defined in terms of class consciousness, Mexica nobles are a social class but commoners are not. However, Smith states there are two social classes: nobles and commoners. These two classes can then be split on a scale, including slaves, the *calpulli* groups, high lords (*tetecuhtin*), and regular nobles (*pipiltin*).

The most recent works which discuss slavery, though not specifically focused on the topic, are Offner’s article on Aztec law and Townsend’s *Fifth Sun*. Offner’s article briefly mentions slavery as a facet of the Mexica legal system and notes “there is still no thoroughgoing study of Aztec slavery as an economic and legal institution, leaving a significant investigational avenue open for future scholarship.”⁴⁰ In Townsend’s acclaimed book on the history of the Aztecs, slavery is briefly mentioned here and there with no specific section dedicated to discussing the process of enslavement.⁴¹ Townsend avoids these questions of social status versus social class, foreign or native, male or

³⁸ Smith, *The Aztecs*, 311.

³⁹ Smith cites *The Sources of Social Power* (1986) for this definition of social class related to class consciousness and allegiances with each other in the social class. Smith, *The Aztecs*, 311.

⁴⁰ Offner, “The Future of Aztec Law,” 10, f. 28.

⁴¹ Townsend, *Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs*.

female. This is more than likely due to the fact her monograph is for a public audience and not the academic sphere.

In the last decade or so, there have been no in-depth examinations of Mexica slavery and these questions about whether slavery is a social class or simply a diminished status; if slaves are “foreign” or locals to the communities they work in; and if most slaves are male or female. I will contribute with an in-depth examination of slavery and the process of enslavement in Mexica society, similar in nature to Gonzalez’s essay but incorporating more recent research. And I will argue that most of the slaves in Mexica society were women. By re-examining slavery and enslavement in Mexica society, we can explore how class and social status works, how identities are perceived in sources, the “exceptionalism” of culture of the Mexica, and gender roles and gendered labor in the pre-Columbian era.

CHAPTER 3

THE PROCESS OF ENSLAVEMENT IN MEXICA SOCIETY

To define slavery within Mexica society, it is important to know how one becomes enslaved. There are several ways one could enter slavery. For historians Moreno and González, there were four routes to slavery: debt-enslavement, capture in warfare, self-enslavement or the selling of children, and enslavement as a legal punishment. According to sociologist Orlando Patterson, there are eight different ways to become a slave: (1) capture in warfare, (2) kidnapping, (3) tribute and tax payments, (4) debt, (5) punishment for crimes, (6) abandonment and sale of children, (7) self-enslavement, and (8) birth.⁴²

Moreno, González, and Patterson both include debt-enslavement, self-enslavement, enslavement as legal punishment, and capture in warfare within their frameworks. Patterson makes a distinct between self-enslavement and sale of children, which Moreno and González do not do. Patterson also includes tribute and tax payments, birth, and kidnapping within his framework of enslavement. While Patterson is not an expert on Mexica slavery, it is important to use his framework of enslavement because Moreno and González miss three significant avenues (kidnapping, selling one's kin, and birth). I believe Moreno and González do not include these avenues due to the conflation or interchangeability between kidnapping and capture, and the way the primary sources always mention self-enslavement and selling one's kin in the same respect. It is also quite

⁴² Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 105, <https://hdl-handle-net.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/2027/heb.03237>.

clear why Moreno and González did not include the birth avenue because slavery was not hereditary in Mexica society.

Therefore, to fully examine the process of enslavement in Mexica society, we will need to incorporate Moreno, González, and Patterson's frameworks together. With these frameworks, there were seven avenues of enslavement in Mexica society: (1) enslavement via legal punishment, (2) kidnapping, (3) capture in warfare, (4) tribute or tax payment, (5) debt-slavery, (6) self-enslavement, and (7) selling one's kin. The eighth avenue of Patterson's framework does not apply to the Mexica context as every child was born free and slavery was not hereditary. I will primarily use the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas*, or "The History of the Mexicans by Their Paintings" to explore the avenues of enslavement in Mexica society, in addition to the *Florentine Codex*, *Anales de Cuauhtitlan*, and other secondary sources.

Enslavement via Legal Punishment

The first and most prominent example of enslavement is the legal avenue, or the punishment for crimes. There are a variety of crimes which resulted in enslavement. An individual might become a slave as punishment for theft, murder, failure to pay back a debt, conspiracy, and treachery. Legal enslavement was a common punishment for theft, although it is not clear whether there was a time limit on how long a person could be enslaved for. In Texcoco, "theft of important items, especially from the temples or from the palace of the ruler, was punished on the first offense by enslavement and on the second by strangulation."⁴³ This law "implies that enslavement was imposed if the stolen

⁴³ Jerome Offner, *Law and Politics in Aztec Texcoco* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 277.

item was still recoverable; [if] it was valuable and not recoverable, the thief was executed.”⁴⁴ Another example regarding theft was if the perpetrator broke through a house wall to steal something, the first offense was punishable by enslavement and by strangulation on the second offense.⁴⁵ It is worth noting that the law states there can be multiple offenses for an individual. It is unclear if it meant they committed the crime before being apprehended or once they finished a period of enslavement. In other words, it does not make clear whether there was a limit on the amount of time a person could be required to spend as a slave in punishment for theft. These legal rulings on thievery come from the writings of Toribio de Benavente Motolinía and Francisco de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, a colonial-interpreter of the *Codex Xolotl*.⁴⁶ It is only Motolinía’s writings that state that the same crime can be committed multiple times by the same individual. There is no timeframe to help clarify if the individual committed multiple offenses before being apprehended or if they committed crime, were punished, and lived through it, and then committed a similar crime again. This clarification would help historians understand if legal enslavement occurred with a time limit.

From the *Historia*, there are a few more examples of enslavement as punishment for theft. The first legal case is two boys who stole maize and were subsequently sold as slaves “and the price paid for each one was five mantas.”⁴⁷ The second case involving enslavement and theft in the *Historia* reads more descriptively than normatively. A

⁴⁴ Offner, *Law and Politics*, 276.

⁴⁵ Offner, *Law and Politics*, 277.

⁴⁶ Offner, *Law and Politics*, 276-79.

⁴⁷ Henry Phillips, Jr. “Notes upon the Codex Ramirez, with a Translation of the Same,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 21, no. 116 (1884): 639. Joaquín García Icazbalceta, “Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas,” *Anales Del Museo Nacional De México* (1882): 103. Mantas can be defined as cotton textiles, which can come in a variety of styles and colors.

woman stole maize but was caught by a man, who stated that “if she would let him lie with her he would not inform on her, and she did so.”⁴⁸ The man accused her of stealing, despite her compliance with his demands, and she confessed. After confessing to the theft, the woman was freed, while the man was enslaved and given to the owner of the maize.⁴⁹ This reads as a specific example regarding a punishment. It may be inferred that the case was the first example of this type of crime and was later used as the precedent for punishing similar crimes. The case is interesting in its ambiguity regarding the sexual encounter between the man and woman. It can be read as either consensual—as she agreed to the act—or as coerced, as she may have only agreed to avoid legal punishment and/or death. In either case, the law puts the fault on the man, presumably because he benefited from his lie to the woman.

The next examples of theft and enslavement in the *Historia* involve items and animals instead of maize. The theft of a fishing net, canoe or vessel resulted in enslavement if the criminal was not capable of repaying its value in mantas.⁵⁰ Requiring restitution for the objects stolen is logical given the objects were presumably from laborers who needed them to make a living and participate in the state. But if the thief could not repay the value of the laborer’s tool, how does the laborer benefit from the thief’s enslavement? Potentially, the laborer may have been given the thief as a slave, or the sale of the enslaved thief could have gone to laborer so that they may buy another

⁴⁸ Phillip, “Notes upon the Codex Ramirez,” 639. Icazbalceta, “Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas,” 103.

⁴⁹ Phillip, “Notes upon the Codex Ramirez,” 639. Icazbalceta, “Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas,” 103.

⁵⁰ Phillips, “Notes upon the Codex Ramirez,” 641. Icazbalceta, “Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas,” 104.

tool. Unfortunately, it is not clear from the text what or who this law was benefitting, though we can assume the law mainly values the upper classes rather than the common laborer or slave. Another example is “he stole a hen was enslaved, but he who took a dog was not punished, for they said that the dog had teeth wherewith to defend itself.”⁵¹ Objects or people who cannot defend themselves need some protection against those who would cause them harm, or in this case, steal them, hence the law. From these examples, often the criminal is gendered as male, except for the case of the woman stealing maize. However, all those who were enslaved were male.

Gender and its connection to slave status are important to analyze in regards to the language used within the *Historia*. In these examples, the criminal is gendered as male, except for the case of the woman stealing maize. However, when women are mentioned in the *Historia*, they are almost always slaves. Several of the laws address the consequences of men having sexual intercourse with enslaved women. What is interesting about these punishments for the men is that they imply that men involved with enslaved women were responsible for them afterwards. For example, “if a man lay with a woman slave who was under age he became a slave also with her, and if she became sick and died, he became a slave, and if she did not die he paid for her cure,”⁵² the man is held accountable if she becomes sick, he pays for the cure to help her. If she does become sick and dies, he becomes a slave himself.

Another example of accountability comes when a man engages in sexual intercourse with a slave woman and she becomes pregnant. There is no mention of an

⁵¹ Phillips, “Notes upon the Codex Ramirez,” 640. Icazbalceta, “Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas,” 103.

⁵² Phillips, “Notes upon the Codex Ramirez,” 641.

established relationship or marriage. The law states, “if a man lie with a slave, and she dies, being pregnant, he shall become the slave of her master, but if she conceive and bring forth a child, the child is free, and shall belong to its father,” which implies that the father in this case becomes responsible for the child.⁵³ With this example, it is understood that the father takes the child, meaning the child more than likely grew up a free person unlike their mother. From this chapter of the *Historia*, it is not entirely clear what the birth status of a child between a slave and free individual, or a slave and a slave is. This statement does not indicate the father’s status, but it does not matter regarding the child’s. The status of the mother, however, does matter as the child is free if the mother survives. It is unclear then, what the status of the child is if the mother dies. The example of Itzcoatl, on the other hand, indicates that slavery was not inherited from an enslaved mother and therefore not an avenue into slavery.⁵⁴

The law may also imply that a man responsible for getting an enslaved woman pregnant was responsible for her healthcare during the pregnancy. Paying for medicine or healthcare in general for the slave woman would be in the man’s best interest because it would help him avoid slavery. But, based on this legal example, readers cannot know if men did this in practice. One might expect that paying for the cure for a slave woman’s illness or health problem would be the obligation of her master. Why then make the man responsible for impregnating the enslaved woman pay for her medicine or healthcare if he did not own her? Clearly, one of the potential reasons behind making the man financially responsible for the woman’s healthcare may be due to the financial loss the

⁵³ Phillips, “Notes upon the Codex Ramirez,” 641.

⁵⁴ Smith, *The Aztecs*, 151. Townsend, *Fifth Sun*, 37. Offner, *Laws and Politics*, 142.

enslaver will take on due to one of their slaves being pregnant and possibly unable to economically produce as much as they had previously. Either way, the enslaver does not lose anything with the enslaved woman's death or healthy pregnancy, as they gain a slave to replace her (the man who impregnated her) if she dies or they do not lose their slave.

Most mentions of women in regard to slavery are either slave women or a captive woman. The language used in the *Historia* describes a man or men committing the crimes deserving of enslavement. The other examples given in this chapter are coded with male pronouns, 'he,' 'man' or 'son.' Language is important to analyze within this primary source, especially considering if the source is normative or descriptive. Certain terms related to slavery are more than often gendered and can give readers insight into who or what gender was often related to certain terms. For example, slaves—individuals who are already slaves and not becoming a slave—within the *Historia* are often referred to as female.

An issue with the *Historia* is that my analysis of language within the source is based on the English translation and Spanish version. It is quite clear in translating words regarding slavery across the globe that the words used in the original language or culture do not have an equivalent in the language it is being translated to, or use one word that is used to define multiple versions of slavery. This translation issue often appears in the Mexica sources. *Tlacotli*, which is defined as "slave," is used to describe house slaves, but also captives.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Camilla Townsend, "'What in the World Have You Done to Me, My Lover?' Sex, Servitude, and Politics among the Pre-Conquest Nahuas as Seen in the Cantares Mexicanos," *The Americas* 62, no. 3 (2006): 349-350.

The other issue with translations is that Spanish is a gendered language. In the Spanish version of the *Historia* (and other primary source materials), the mentions of slaves are divided into *esclavo*, a male slave, or *esclava*, a female slave. The male plural, *esclavos*, is also used for groups of mixed genders in Spanish. In Phillips' English translation, the word slave used by itself consistently refers to a male slave. When he wants to refer to a female slave, Phillips will use the phrase "slave woman" in most cases. However, he does not consistently use this distinction between slave (implied male) and slave woman because in one example, he uses the word slave by itself but then clarifies that the slave is female: "if a man lies with a slave, and she dies..."⁵⁶ Even without the pronoun, she, the phrase "a man lies with a slave," implies the slave is a woman based on heterosexual (cisgender) relationships and social norms. It is not clear if Mexica society allowed homosexual relationships between males. It is quite clear with "if one woman lay with another, they strangled them with the garrote," female homosexual relationships were not legal and punishable by death.⁵⁷

Both the Spanish and English versions of the *Historia* gender slaves either linguistically (in Spanish) or by implication (in English). Nahuatl is not a gendered language like Spanish is. Nouns in Nahuatl "are not masculine, feminine, or neuter...(and) neither the prefixes nor independent pronouns distinguish gender. Nahuatl has absolutely no way to say 'he' or 'she,' only third person singular subject, no 'his' or 'her,' only third person singular possessive."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Phillips, "Notes upon the Codex Ramirez," 641.

⁵⁷ Phillips, "Notes upon the Codex Ramirez," 642.

⁵⁸ James Lockhart, *Nahuatl as Written: Lessons in Older Written Nahuatl, with Copious Examples and Texts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001): 1.

The main word for slave in Nahuatl is *tlacotli*, which is regarded as an animate noun, and is not gendered. How did the Spanish author of the *Historia* know whether to translate the ungendered *tlacotli* into the gendered *esclavo* or *esclava*? Because the unknown Spanish author was speaking directly with Mexica priests and leaders, they may have been able to ask directly whether the individual they were speaking about was male or female (or neither). But this is not stated, so the historian can only make assumptions. However, the examples within this chapter of the *Historia* point us to why the author used female terms for slaves. When slave women are mentioned, it is always because they were a victim of a sexual crime, in one case resulting in pregnancy. In this context, it makes sense that the translator and author gendered the *tlacotli* female. This is, however, ignoring the fact that anyone, no matter the gender, can be sexually assaulted. Even in the case of the slave who becomes pregnant, it ignores the existence of transgender individuals.⁵⁹ Different gender identities existed in Aztec society, and colonial Spanish authors did have some comprehension of gender outside of the dual identities (male and female) but more than likely felt no need to include them if they were mentioned.

Kidnapping, Capture in Warfare, and Tax Payments

Another example which involved enslavement as a legal punishment in the *Historia* is a kidnapping case. The case states that whoever conspires to sell a freeman as a slave shall become slaves themselves and be given to the freeman, the freeman's

⁵⁹ See Peter Sigal's "Queer Nahuatl: Sahagún's Faggots and Sodomites, Lesbians and Hermaphrodites," and/or "The Cuiloni, the Patlache, and the Abominable Sin: Homosexualities in Early Colonial Nahua Society," for more on queer/sexual identities in Aztec society.

mother and the one who reported the crime.⁶⁰ The group conspiring to sell a freeman is not described with specific genders. This case can be read as a descriptive case and reveals how the Mexica viewed kidnapping in law. By examining this kidnapping case, it allows us to compare it to capture in warfare, which are two different avenues of enslavement in Mexica society.

For this discussion, we will use archaeologist Catherine Cameron's definition of captive, which defines it as a woman, child, and man "who are unwillingly (and usually violently) seized, taken from their homes, and introduced into a new society."⁶¹ In Nahuatl, *malli* is defined as a prisoner of war or captive.⁶² Captivity often implies the captive may become free by either agreement between parties or through a ransom. However, when captives are mentioned in Mexica primary sources and society, they are mentioned as going on to be sacrifices (mainly the male captives) or they are placed in the slave markets. There are no examples so far which show that a Mexica captive was returned to their home.

The issues with this interchangeability between slave and captive are when the captive becomes a slave. Mexica sources often use the words *tactoli* (slave) or *malli* (captive) interchangeably, making it hard to differentiate between the two.⁶³ According to Patterson, there are three facets to slavery: the threat of violence, shame or dishonor, and natal alienation.⁶⁴ Both the slave and captive may be subject to all three facets. They can

⁶⁰ Phillips, "Notes upon the Codex Ramirez," 641. Icazbalceta, "Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas," 105.

⁶¹ Catherine Cameron, *Captives: How Stolen People Changed the World* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 9.

⁶² For this discussion, prisoner and captive will be interchangeable terms.

⁶³ Townsend, "What in the World Have You Done to Me, My Lover?" 358.

⁶⁴ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 1-2.

be beaten and sacrificed in various Mexica rituals or festivals, like the Flayed Man ritual. Captives and slaves are alienated from their homes and brought to the infamous slave markets in Azcapotzalco or Itzocan, or other altepetls. Dishonor and shame for male captives is clear, as they were beaten, captured, and often their warrior lock of hair cut by their captor.⁶⁵ The female captives given in peace agreements or tribute may have felt shame or dishonor as they were considered a “symbol of submission” of their community.⁶⁶

For female captives taken as concubines or wives, it is unclear if they felt shamed or dishonored. The male victor who took on the female captive, their wife or wives may feel dishonored by another woman, especially a captive turned concubine or if the captive came from a more prominent political family. There are a few examples in Mexica sources where elevated or noble wives denounced or complained of their husbands “ignoring (them) and cloistering himself with his concubines.”⁶⁷ The case of the tlatoani of Tlatelolco in 1473 who caused political and social chaos when he ignored his wife, the sister of the ruler of Tenochtitlan, for his concubines is a prominent example of the disastrous consequences competition of concubines and wives for the attention of their husband.⁶⁸ A lack of pre-Columbian primary source material written or spoken by indigenous women leaves historians with more questions than answers and potentially, because they were not considered an elevated or noble wife of their now-husband if they were a noblewoman before becoming a captive. There is no clear answer whether a

⁶⁵ Inga Clendinnen, “The Cost of Courage in Aztec Society,” *Past & Present*, no. 107 (1985): 70.

⁶⁶ Townsend, ““What in the World Have You Done to Me, My Lover?”” 362.

⁶⁷ Lisa Sousa, *The Woman Who Turned into a Jaguar, and Other Narratives of Native Women in Archives of Colonial Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 62.

⁶⁸ Sousa, *The Woman Who Turned into a Jaguar*, 113.

female captive turned concubine was considered a “slave-prisoner or as a sort of minor wife.”⁶⁹

The key difference in what route the captive is taken down is gender. Male captives were deemed to only be taken as captives to be used in sacrifices. The most common context for captive sacrifice was the festival to honor Xipe Totec, the Flayer or the Flayed One. In this ritual, warriors captured in battle were “forced to engage in mock combats” and then sacrificed.⁷⁰ There are a variety of paths a female war captive was forced down that male captives were typically not taken down. Women might be sacrificed in religious rituals as well, although a majority of sacrifices were male.⁷¹ They might be taken as a concubine or wife outside of their natal communities through a peace agreement between city-states. Some women who experienced this form of captivity were from the leading political families of the city-states offering peace. Otherwise, female captives might be sold in the Azcapotzalco slave market.⁷²

The example of Tecocoatzin’s daughter from the *Anales de Cuauhtitlan*, who was taken captive during war, shows how a female captive became a wife of an individual in her captor’s state and how she personally felt about it. The daughter of Tecocoatzin, the ruler of Cuauhtitlan, was taken into captivity during the Tepaneca War and became the wife of the tlatoani Epocoatl of Toltitlan.⁷³ While in captivity and in marriage with Epocoatl, she was spying on the Toltitlanalque and sending the information to her father Tecocoatzin. And when the forces of Nezahualcoyotl, the tlatoani of Texcoco, reached

⁶⁹ Townsend, ““What in the World Have You Done to Me, My Lover?”” 373.

⁷⁰ Clendinnen, “The Cost of Courage in Aztec Society,” 68-70.

⁷¹ Townsend, ““What in the World Have You Done to Me, My Lover?”” 360. Townsend, *Fifth Sun*, 49.

⁷² Townsend, ““What in the World Have You Done to Me, My Lover?”” 362.

⁷³ Rafael Tena, *Anales de Cuauhtitlan* (Mexico City: Cien de México, 2011), 166.

Totitlan, “por eso, cuando comenzó el combate, la señora hizo como que vigilaba y subió a lo alto del templo de Totitlanuien; y luego ella misma prendió fuego al techo de zacate del templo.”⁷⁴ Tecocoatzin’s daughter used her position to help her blood-family—her father and brother—against the husband who had taken her as a captive. This example shows that female captives taken during war and married in their captor’s society did not necessarily approve of, personally like, or feel loyalty to their new family..

The *Florentine Codex* does not describe the fate of female captives. The text does not mention the gender of captives in the context of capture. When describing those who were sacrificed, either no gender was associated with the captive(s) or male pronouns were used to describe them. For example, in *Florentine Codex* Book 2, on the feasts and blood sacrifices of Toxcatl, the male pronoun was used in physically describing the captive used in the ceremonial blood sacrifice. This captive was specifically chosen from a group of captives to be a god-impersonator “if *he* was good to look upon and fair of body. Then such were taken, and the guardians cared for them.”⁷⁵

The other main example from the *Florentine Codex* of this change in gender regarding captives is on the feast of Tlacaxipeualiztli. This feast revolves around the sacrifice of all captives, “all those taken in war--the men, the women, the children.”⁷⁶

After the beginning statement above, there is no gender associate with the captives until

⁷⁴ Tena, *Anales de Cuauhtitlan*, 166. Rough translation: “And for this reason, when the battle had begun, she was very definitely on the watch. Indeed, she climbed to the top of Totitlan’s house of the Devil. And then this lady all by herself set fire to the thatched roof of the Devil’s house and burned it up, etc.”

⁷⁵ Bernardino Sahagún, *General History of the Things of New Spain: The Florentine Codex*, trans. Charles E. Dribble and Arthur J. O. Anderson (Santa Fe: School of American Research, 1959), 3:64. My own emphasis.

⁷⁶ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 3:46.

the paragraph regarding the actual sacrificial ceremony. That section states “And when some captive faltered, fainted, or went throwing *himself* upon the ground, they dragged *him*.”⁷⁷ Later on in this chapter, they call these captives killed “eagle-men.”⁷⁸ This ceremony, however, is focused on warriors and ritual combatants who would be primarily male.

In this same chapter of the *Florentine Codex*, there is an example of how gender is viewed by the Mexica in relation to captivity. When describing the male captive making his way up the pyramid steps to his death, the section states

“And when one showed himself strong, not acting like a woman, he went with a man’s fortitude; he bore himself like a man; he went speaking in manly fashion; he went exerting himself; he went strong of heart and shouting, not without courage nor stumbling, but honoring and praising his city. He went with firm heart, speaking as he went: “Already here I come! You will speak of me there in my home land!”⁷⁹

At first glance, this section seems to be influenced by Spanish stereotypes and gender roles, of the weak-willed woman and strong man. But in the context of the Mexica, it is accurate. Mexica’s enemies are labeled as women and their weapons likened to tools used in women’s work in gender-based insults for warfare, including “speaker envisioning his potential attackers as his sisters who come bearing fluffed cotton and thread (*ini ichca*

⁷⁷ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 3:46-47. My own emphasis.

⁷⁸ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 3:47.

⁷⁹ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 3:46-47.

tlahuitec ini icpateuh).”⁸⁰ In this tradition, this section showcases these gender implications regarding warfare and ceremony of women being seen as lesser/weak-willed in warfare and death/sacrifice compared to their male counterparts.

Kidnapping and capture in warfare are similar in nature—in that a group of people take another individual without consent for the purpose of either selling them into slavery or sacrificing them. The main distinction between kidnapping and capture in warfare, according to Patterson, is that kidnapping is “conducted with the sole aim of acquiring captives, whereas this was often only a by-product of warfare.”⁸¹ Archaeologist Cameron argues against this distinction and states that raiding “expeditions have a variety of social and political purposes” and restricts the definition of kidnapping to small-scale events where a few captors target one or a few victims.⁸² In this case from the *Historia*, the kidnapers were plotting (as far as we know) to kidnap someone within their own community. It was a small-scale plot of a few individuals targeting one free person and not an entire group of warriors attempting to take another altepetl and war captives.

Yet, this distinction does not apply neatly to the Mexica. In Mexica society, warfare was aimed not only at defeating their enemies but also at capturing warriors, as well as the women and children. For the Mexica warrior class, social mobility within their class is dependent on the taking of warrior captives in battle.⁸³ And as the unofficial triple alliance began to enforce a tributary system, the tlatoque or chiefs of those under their rule were forced to pay tribute/tax in the form of trade goods, like corn, beans,

⁸⁰ Sousa, *The Woman Who Turned into a Jaguar*, 38.

⁸¹ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 115.

⁸² Cameron, *Captives*, 7.

⁸³ Clendinnen, “The Cost of Courage in Aztec Society,” 48. Smith, *The Aztecs*, 170.

cotton, and chocolate, as well as people for religious ceremonies. To avoid sending their own people to the cutting stone, chiefs constantly engaged in war against their neighbors to fulfill their tax obligations.⁸⁴ In one way, free people were sent to Mexica rulers as tribute and were enslaved through tax payments. In another way, free people were captured during war, were enslaved, and in some cases sent to another Mexica ruler as a tax payment rather than remaining in the city-state they were captured by. This tax obligation was the fourth avenue of enslavement in Mexica society. In conclusion, the second avenue of slavery is kidnapping, the third is capture in warfare, and the fourth is tax or tribute payment.

Debt-Slavery, Self-Enslavement, and Selling One's Kin

The last three avenues of enslavement are debt-slavery, self-enslavement, and the selling of one's kin. These avenues are described and illustrated within the *Historia* and the *Florentine Codex*. Debt-slavery, the fifth avenue of enslavement, is illustrated in the *Florentine Codex* Book 7: The Sun, Moon, and Stars, and the Binding of the Years. The illustration (Figure 3.1; see below) depicts a family of slaves, which includes a woman and man (presumably the mother and father), and two children. The wooden collars symbolize that the individuals are slaves. The woman's hairstyle indicates she is married and/or a mother.

⁸⁴ Townsend, *Fifth Sun*, 48.



Figure 3.1. Delivering Children into Bondage. Source: Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 8:38-39.

The context of this illustration is important for understanding how one enters slavery. In the eighth chapter of Book 7, the text describes the famine and hardships of One Rabbit when it ruled the year count. Among the hardships was an example of selling oneself or one's kin into slavery. One Rabbit was a time of famine, according to the Mexica, which required putting aside provisions before the year count began in preparation. During this time, people were bought and sold, entering the homes of merchants and those well-off during One Rabbit, "going into bondage, entering house after house--the orphan, the poor, the indigent, the needy, the pauper, the beggar, who were starved and famished...who in place found their rest, relief or remedy."⁸⁵

Selling oneself or one's kin into slavery was a common form of enslavement within Mexica society. It occurred due to the need to "safeguard against scarcity," often

⁸⁵ Sahagún, *The Florentine Codex*, 8:23.

famine.⁸⁶ Self-enslavement was an option for those in desperate need to avoid hardships brought on by natural disasters or social change. The example in Book 7 is evidence of this. Historian Clendinnen also specifically states “men sold themselves or their children into slavery for maize,” during times of disaster.⁸⁷ By selling oneself or their kin into slavery, the individual would gain “rest, relief or remedy,”⁸⁸ in the form of housing and food. The famine of One Rabbit (1454) saw a high number of children being sold into slavery, where a girl was worth 400 ears of corn and a boy 500.⁸⁹ The children were housed and fed during the famine by their new owners while their family was fed for the time being via the food/resources they received from the slave owners for selling their children.

The challenge of the description of selling oneself during the One Rabbit year count is that it seems to describe not only self-enslavement and selling one’s kin, but also debt-slavery. In the first section regarding the purchasing of individuals, the text states that “at this time one sold oneself. One ate oneself; one swallowed oneself. Or else one sold and delivered into bondage his beloved son, his dear child.”⁹⁰ But in the following paragraphs, the text reveals that after the one individual sold themselves into enslavement or servitude (as the translation and potentially the Nahuatl text conflate the two terms together), the obligation was continued by their kin, their children or grandchildren. The debtor’s family and children “went on paying the debt and concerning themselves [with

⁸⁶ Townsend, “What in the World Have You Done to Me, My Lover?” 269.

⁸⁷ Clendinnen, “The Cost of Courage in Aztec Society,” 52.

⁸⁸ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 8:23.

⁸⁹ Ross Hassig, “The Famine of One Rabbit: Ecological Causes and Social Consequences of a Pre-Columbian Calamity,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 37, no. 2 (1981): 173.

⁹⁰ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 8:23.

it].”⁹¹ The first individual in this example of One Rabbit enters slavery through selling themselves. The continued obligation of their kin after the sale of the first individual reads as more of an example of debt-slavery or debt-servitude. For debt-slavery or the sale of oneself, and selling of one’s kin, there is no escape “for in truth [slavery] had come upon them; they had come against that which they could not leave--of which they could not be rid...”⁹²

Debt-slavery, selling oneself, and selling one’s kin are three different avenues of enslavement, according to sociologist Orlando Patterson. In the Mexica context, and from the primary source evidence, self-enslavement and selling kin are almost always mentioned together and debt-slavery is very similar to self-enslavement. The examples of debt-slavery in the primary sources, and in the specific example of One Rabbit, always consist of an individual selling themselves. To Patterson, there is a clear distinction between slavery and debt-servitude, though not well explained in his description of the avenues into enslavement. Debt-servitude is best explained as a temporary position or status, where the individual has a chance to pay off their or their family’s debt and leave servitude, becoming a free person once again. Slavery is a permanent status. However, Patterson does state that “in all societies where debt-slavery existed, the possibility of the debt-slave falling into permanent slavery was always present.”⁹³

Regarding the distinction between debt-slavery, selling oneself, and selling one’s kin, Patterson states the sale of children was mainly due to poverty, but also the attempt

⁹¹ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 8:24.

⁹² Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 8:24.

⁹³ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 124.

to get rid of children with birth defects, etc.⁹⁴ The selling of oneself was also primarily due to poverty, but could also be due to political insecurity or for pure economic gain.⁹⁵ And like the sale of children or of oneself, another prominent reason for debt-slavery was poverty. “Debt is usually a reflection of other causes such as poverty,” but a person could enter debt from risks not as pressing.⁹⁶ In the case of the Mexica, the sale of children, oneself, and debt-slavery is blurred. Each of the three avenues is directly related to poverty and pressing risks such as famine and natural disaster. The One Rabbit example in the *Florentine Codex* showcases the risk of famine or natural disaster, and the example of debt-slavery in the *Historia* is clearly an example of the cycle of poverty.⁹⁷ Debt-slavery and the sale of oneself and children are virtually for the same purpose but may occur in different ways. The why they become enslaved is the same, but the how is different. The sale of children or oneself is an individual choice—they chose (though again maybe not voluntarily due to poverty and hunger, etc.) to become a slave—whereas in the case of debt-slavery, specifically the *Historia* example, one becomes a slave as a punishment for not paying back a loan. In the *Florentine Codex* example, one becomes a slave through choice due to gambling debts.

In contrast to the *Florentine Codex*, in the *Historia*, there is only one example of debt-slavery. If an individual borrows mantas as a loan and fails to repay it, they are

⁹⁴ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 129. Within the *Historia*, children were sold “if any one did not grow up to natural size, and the relations sold him, and it was known afterwards, when he had come of age, the judges should order as many mantas to be paid as to them seemed fit to give his owner, and the slave became free.” Phillips, “Notes upon the Codex Ramirez,” 641.

⁹⁵ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 130-31.

⁹⁶ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 124.

⁹⁷ “Whoever should borrow mantas as a loan, and neglect to pay them, should be a slave.” Phillips, “Notes upon the Codex Ramirez,” 641.

enslaved.⁹⁸ Borrowing mantas indicates, in most cases, that the individual is lacking wealth to sustain themselves or their families. If interest rates are added to the loan, the borrower who is already in a state of distress and debt, may not be able to repay the loan in the time frame allotted.⁹⁹ There is no grace period or time frame for repayment in the legal statement from the *Historia*, which makes it challenging to know what chance individuals had in repaying the loan back before being punished.

This example of debt-slavery also assigns no gender, as the other enslavement cases of the *Historia* do. It is vital to know if women may take out a loan or incur debt, and if so, if it was possible for women from every social status. The Spanish version of the *Historia* does describe the individuals who may become slaves if they did not repay their loans as esclavo, which is masculine.¹⁰⁰ The English translation only states “whoever should borrow mantas as a loan and neglect to repay them, should be a slave.”¹⁰¹ If women were allowed to incur a debt, this legal statement with no assigned gender may be accurate in that both men and women may be enslaved for not paying back their loans.

The other example of self-enslavement and debt-slavery from the *Florentine Codex* also blurs the line between the two avenues. In *Florentine Codex* Book 4: The Soothsayers, The Omens, it states that individuals may sell themselves due to gambling debts or because they were “slothful and pleasure-loving.”¹⁰² The individual sold

⁹⁸ Phillips, “Notes upon the Codex Ramirez,” 641. Icazbalceta, “Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas,” 104.

⁹⁹ “Because of the high interest rate and the fact that debt-slave’s service often could not repay even the interest, most debt-slavery became a perpetual—hence genuine slavery.” Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 404, n. 134.

¹⁰⁰ Icazbalceta, “Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas,” 104.

¹⁰¹ Phillips, “Notes upon the Codex Ramirez,” 641.

¹⁰² Townsend, ““What in the World Have You Done to Me, My Lover?”” 359.

themselves into slavery due to gambling debts, but was not legally punished for not paying them back. It is interesting to note that an individual who sells themselves if they incurred a gambling debt is stated to be male, while the slothful and pleasure-loving individual is referred to as a woman.

Manumission

While there were seven avenues into enslavement, there are very few ways to be manumitted in Mexica society. One of these avenues is taking refuge in the palace of the *tlatoani*. An example of this type of manumission is the runaway slave from the *Mapa Quinatzin*. On the second page of the *Mapa Quinatzin*, there is an example of a slave in the bottom center. In the many reproductions of the *Mapa Quinatzin* as well as the original housed in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the bottom center of the document is barely visible.



Figure 3.2. Enlarged image of the bottom center of the *Mapa Quinatzin*. Source: *Mappe Quinatzin*. From Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, Mexicain 11-12. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b103038173/f2.item.zoom#>

In this reproduction from *Artes de México Magazine*, the image is more visible, but still unidentifiable.

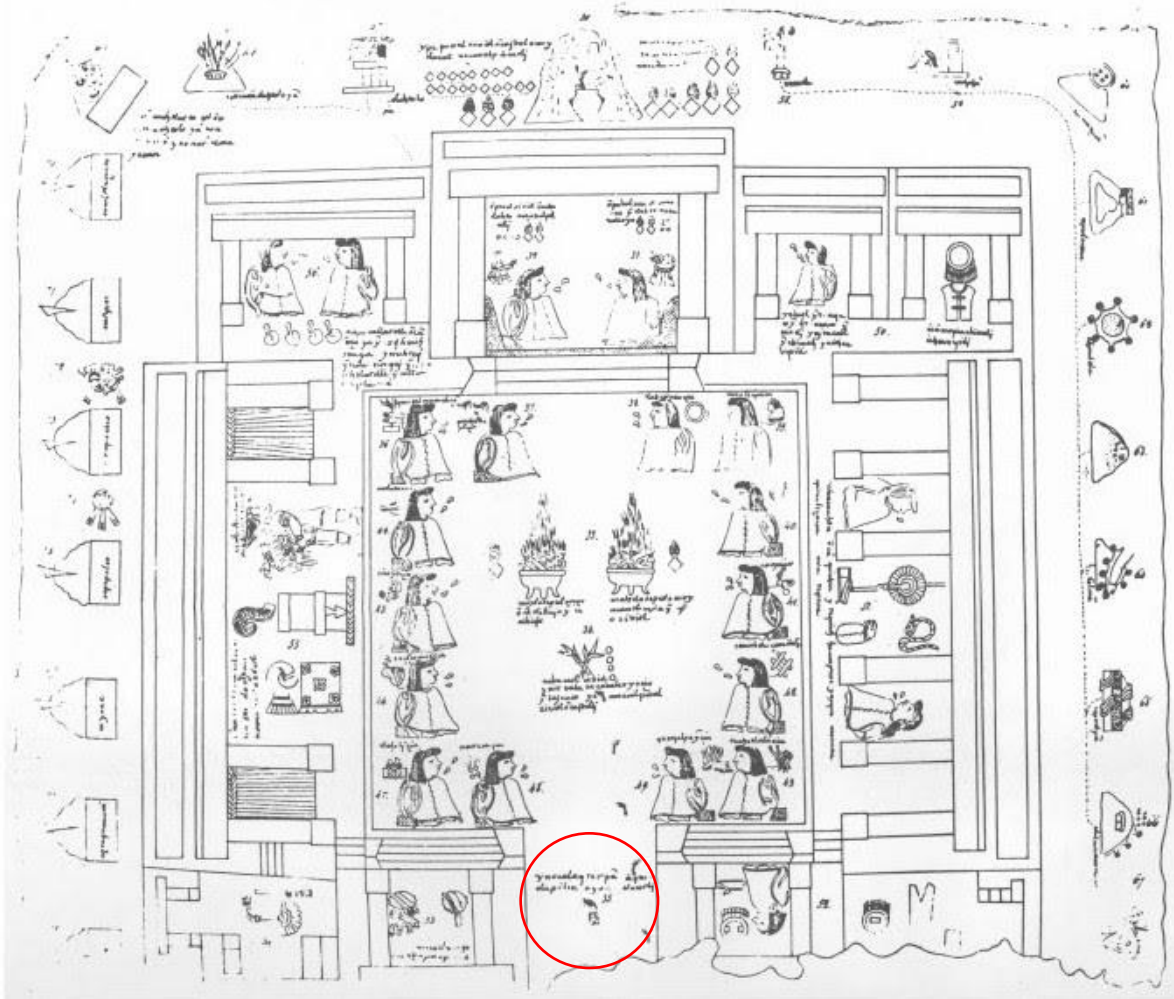
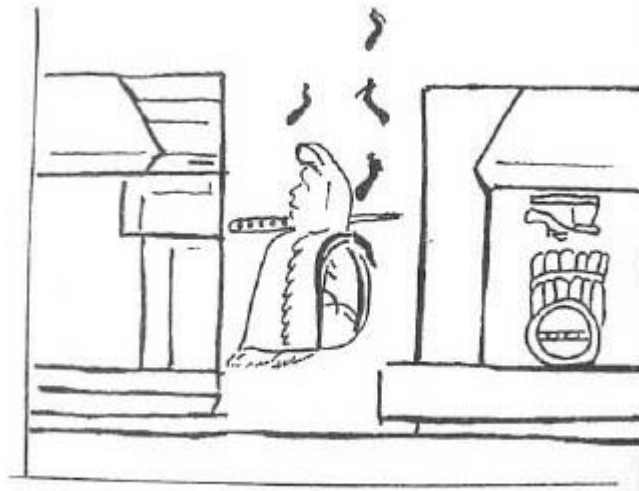


Figure 3.3. Reproduction from *Artes de México Magazine*. Source: V.M.C.F. “Mapa Quinatzin.”
in *Artes de México* no. 151 (1972): 34-37.

Historians Aubin and Lesbre state that the figure is somewhat erased but that the vine or rope around the figure’s neck clarifies its status as a slave.¹⁰³ Pichardo’s reproduction of the *Mapa Quinatzin* provides a much clearer illustration of this slave.

¹⁰³ Patrick Lesbre, “Manumission d’esclaves dans la Mapped Quinatzin?” *Amerindia* 23 (1998): 2. J. M. A. Aubin, *Mémoires sur la Peinture Didactique et l’Écriture Figurative des Anciens Mexicains*, (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1885), 89,
<https://archive.org/details/MissionScientifiqueAuMexiqueEtDans/page/n114/mode/1up>.



Mappe Quinatzin, pl. 2. Copie de Pichardo

Figure 3.4. *Mappe Quinatzin*. Source: Lesbre, “Manumission d'esclaves dans la Mappe Quinatzin?” 3

In Pichardo's reproduction, the image of the figure in the bottom center reveals the rope or wooden collar around the figure's neck. The wooden collar around the neck symbolizes the status of slave in Aztec illustrations. It is thus quite clear from Pichardo's reproduction that the figure is a slave.

The placement of this slave figure is significant in understanding a legal avenue of manumission in Aztec society. One of the legal processes by which a slave could become freed is through taking refuge: “el esclavo por causa de pena nunca tenía derecho al rescate; pero en cambio podía recuperar la libertad refugiándose en el Tecpan. En este caso el único que podía estorbarle la entrada era su amo, pues cualquiera otro que

intentara hacerlo se volvía esclavo.”¹⁰⁴ With the slave entering the corridor of the Texcocoan palace, a specific space that guaranteed safety and manumission through legal law, the reigning tlatoani can and should manumit them.

Within Mexica society, there were seven avenues into slavery: enslavement as a legal punishment, debt-slavery, self-enslavement, selling of children, kidnapping, capture in warfare, and tribute or tax payment. An individual may be enslaved as a legal punishment for theft, murder, treachery or conspiracy, failure to pay back a debt, and sexual relations with slave women. They may sell themselves or their children into slavery to obtain food and housing. They may be kidnapped and sold into slavery. An individual may be given as tribute or tax payment to the city-state and tlatoani that rules over them. Or, they may be captured in warfare and either sacrificed or sold into slavery. With this analysis of the process of enslavement, we can fully understand where enslaved individuals stood within the social hierarchy and whether the enslaved population of Mexica society constituted a social class.

¹⁰⁴ Manuel M. Moreno, *Organización política y social de los aztecas* (México: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1962), 69. Rough translation: “the slave was never entitled to ransom; but instead he could regain his freedom by taking refuge in Tecpan. In this case, the only one who could get in his way was his master, for anyone else who tried to do so became a slave.”

CHAPTER 4

DEFINING SLAVERY WITHIN MEXICA SOCIETY AND ITS HIERARCHY

Slavery is a significant facet for understanding Mexica social roles and social mobility, gender roles and gendered labor, and economic labor and goods. The threat of violence, shame or dishonor, and natal alienation highlight the power behind the process of enslavement, especially forcing other altepetls into their tributary systems and taking captives. Within the historiography of Mexica slavery, however, there are two descriptions of slaves or slavery in social context, either a social class at the bottom of the hierarchy or a reduction of social status within the commoner class. What is social class versus social status? What social classes and what social statuses existed in Mexica society? Is class or status more appropriate to describe slavery? And how do we define slavery in comparison to other types of unfreedom in Mexica society? These are all questions which need to be answered in order to truly get to a definition of Mexica slavery.

First, we need to understand the Mexica social hierarchy and where enslaved individuals fall within it. The highest title in Aztec society was the *huey tlatoque*, the kings of the Triple Alliance. Underneath these *huey tlatoque* were the *tlatoani* (pl. *tlatoque*) of the city-states. *Tlatoque* rule a city-state and their wealth and power “varied with the size and power of his realm.”¹⁰⁵ The highest class underneath the rulers in Mexica society were the nobles. Historian Frederic Hicks and archeologist Michael Smith

¹⁰⁵ Michael E. Smith and Frederic Hicks, “Inequality and Social Class in Aztec Society,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Aztecs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 424.

agree on defining this nobility as “an elite class that is hereditarily and legally defined.”¹⁰⁶ There are two types of nobles: *pilli* (pl. *pipiltin*, sing. *pilli*) and *tecuhtli* (pl. *tetcuhtin*, sing. *tecuhtli*). *Pilli* are considered full nobles but lack positions of power. *Tecuhtli* are the ‘high lords’ and typically occupy positions of powers in state government.¹⁰⁷ The nobles in Mexica society were often “more concerned to organize [themselves] around war and power than around agricultural food production,” which allowed them to reproduce themselves “through a model of dynastic kinship backed up by the ideological and segregative notion of consanguinity.”¹⁰⁸ Due to the hereditary nature of class and its definition and structure in Mexica society, class mobility was highly limited.

While Aztec society was split between nobles (which were split between *pilli* and *tecuhtli*) and commoners, there were special categories or subgroups of the commoners, the *macehualli*. These subgroups were held a higher rank or position among commoners than the dependent laborers and urban commoners. Historian Jerome Offner states there were two main subgroups, the *pochteca* and craftsmen. In Texcoco, historian Jerome Offner describes eight classes, although the main division between the classes is either *pipiltin* or *macehualli*. Within these two divisions, classes are split into a variety of positions with certain obligations, such as *pochteca*, craftsmen, *tecpanpouhque*, *mayeque*, renters, and slaves.

¹⁰⁶ Smith and Hicks, “Inequality and Social Class in Aztec Society,” 424.

¹⁰⁷ Smith and Hicks, “Inequality and Social Class in Aztec Society,” 424.

¹⁰⁸ Claude Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold*, trans. by Alide Dasnois (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 328.

Important aspects of the class structure of Texcoco				
Class	Labor Obligation	Tribute Obligation	Military Service	Civil governmental service
Pipiltin (nobles)	Exempt	Exempt	Expected	Expected
Pochteca (merchants)	Exempt except in emergency	Trade goods	Required	A privilege
Craftsmen	Exempt except in emergency	Craft items	Required	A privilege
Tecpanpouhque (palace people)	Unclear, perhaps only to palace	Unclear, perhaps only to palace	Required	A privilege
Calpulli (ward members)	Yes	Yes	Required	A privilege
Renters	Yes	Yes	Required	Unlikely
Mayeque (serfs)	Exempt, owed only to master	Exempt, owed only to master	Required	Unlikely
Slaves	Unclear	Unclear	Unclear	Unlikely

Figure 4.1. Important aspects of the class structure of Texcoco. Source: Jerome Offner, *Law and Politics in Aztec Texcoco*, 143.

Hicks and Smith, however, state there were five: *pochteca*, luxury artisans, top warriors, high priests, and *calpixque* (officials).¹⁰⁹ These subgroups often had “their own political organization, internal hierarchy, and political goals, which were in varying degrees different and separate from those of the overarching state organization to which they were subject.”¹¹⁰

The majority of commoners fell into the category of farmers or dependent laborers. There were two types of dependent laborers within Mexica society: the *calpulli* members and the *mayeque*. As historian Hicks explains, members of the *calpulli* were

¹⁰⁹ Smith and Hicks, “Inequality and Social Class in Aztec Society,” 428.

¹¹⁰ Jerome Offner, *Law and Politics in Aztec Texcoco* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 121-22.

individuals who worked community lands as part of their tribute to the state.¹¹¹ These laborers performed a variety of tasks and “a family that belonged to a *calpulli* was, ideally, assured of land to supply the necessities of life and little surplus, or the right to be supported in exchange for work in a craft at which he was skilled.”¹¹² A *calpulli* is “a group of families who lived near one another, were subject to a single lord, controlled a block of land, and often shared a common occupation.”¹¹³ The *tecpanpouhque* (palace people), described by Offner, are basically the same as *calpulli* members, though they may hold a higher status than the *calpulli* because they were within the palaces of the nobles and *tlatoani*. While *calpulli* were tied to the land (though they could leave without punishment), they were not enslaved because their status was not considered shameful and they were not natively alienated.

The other laborers, the *mayeque*, are often described as serfs. The *mayeque*, “Were tenants on the patrimonial lands of nobles, and in lieu of paying tribute to the state directly, they paid it to their noble overlord. They received allotment of land for their own use and in return were required to cultivate their master’s land, provide domestic service, keep his household supplied with water and firewood, supply kitchen help, give one or more turkeys at specified intervals, spin and weave [fibers], and provide other goods and services on a regular basis.”¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Frederic Hicks, “Dependent Labor in Prehispanic Mexico,” *Estudios de cultura nahuatl* 11 (1975): 244.

¹¹² Hicks, “Dependent Labor in Prehispanic Mexico,” 247.

¹¹³ Michael E. Smith, *The Aztecs* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996), 145.

¹¹⁴ Hicks, “Dependent Labor in Prehispanic Mexico,” 251.

The *mayeque* were parallel to *calpulli* members, the only difference being that while the *mayeque* paid tribute to their noble, the *calpulli* paid the state directly. Like the *calpulli*, the *mayeque* also included both men and women. Household maintenance and spinning and weaving indicate female laborers. The *mayeque* were not enslaved either, though they seem much closer to servitude than the *calpulli*. Their servitude to the noble of the land they cultivate was similar to how an enslaved person serves their enslaver. While the *mayeque* were tied to the land and a noble lord, there is no indication they were punished if they left the land. There is no indication that they were dishonored as *mayeque*, and like any other individual in Aztec society, they could be subject to military or religious violence.

To summarize, at the top of the Mexica hierarchy was the *tlatoani*, who was deemed the ruler or king of an altepetl. Underneath the *tlatoani* were the two noble classes, the high lords (*tetcuhtin*), and the regular nobles (*pipiltin*). Following the noble classes were the *macehualli* or commoners. The *macehualli* were split into *calpulli* groups and social roles or occupations, like the *pochteca* or craftsmen.¹¹⁵ The social hierarchy of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and presumably the whole Mexica region consists of these four classes: *tlatoani*, the noble classes (*tetechutin* and *pipiltin*), *calpulli* groups (including craftsmen, *pochteca*, and *calpulli* members), and *mayeque*. The fifth class, for historians like Yólotl González Torres and Offner, is slaves.

This five-class structure for Mexica society, however, is inaccurate in terms of social class and status. Instead, this thesis will use the two-class structure, where the Mexica social hierarchy is primarily split between nobles and commoners—*pipiltin* and

¹¹⁵ Smith, *The Aztecs*, 144.

macehualli. *Pochteca*, *calpixque*, luxury artisans, priests, and top warriors, while part of the *macehualli*, were slightly higher in status than the regular commoners—the dependent laborers and urban commoners.

Enslaved Individuals within the Hierarchy

Within Aztec society, there are other types of unfreedom besides the enslaved: the dependent laborer and war captive. The key difference between captive and slave is that captivity is a temporary role or state, while slavery is more fixed social position in Mexica society. While it can be argued that the social position of a slave may be temporary in some cases, like enslavement as a legal punishment or debt-slavery, it can be safely assumed or speculated that these individuals did not leave enslavement until their deaths. Captivity in Mexica society is an entrance to slavery in this sense. Individuals are taken captive and transported to their victor's *altepetl* before they are chosen to be sacrificed, sold into slavery, or if they are female, given as a reward to another as a slave. This taking of captives showcases political and social power. It also showcases cultural power, as captives used in sacrifice improved the social standing of the warrior within their class.

A key difference between dependent laborers and enslaved individuals is the labor they perform. The *calpulli* and *mayeque* mainly performed agricultural work in the Mexica economy, due to their state obligations to give an unspecified amount of resources and goods produced as tribute. The Mexica economy did not heavily depend on

a slave mode of production like the slave systems in Rome or the U.S. South did.¹¹⁶

There was a large dependent laborer population, as the nobility classes (*pipiltin* and *tetchutin*) only made up two percent of the population in central Mexico.¹¹⁷ Therefore, there was no need for a large enslaved population to produce resources and goods for the economy and society to survive.

The state tribute and labor obligations of the *mayeque* and *calpulli* also highlight the other crucial difference between dependent laborers and slaves: dependent laborers were considered a social class in Mexica society. Scholars, like historian Offner and archeologist Smith, always list the *mayeque* and *calpulli* as social classes within the division of the *macehualli* (see table of social classes on page 46). For slaves, scholars cannot agree on whether they constituted an established social class or if enslavement in this context merely meant the diminishing of social status.

To analyze whether slaves were a social class or not, we need to defined social class within Mexica society. Offner bases his class definition on labor and tribute obligation, military service, and civil government service to the Aztec state.

Anthropologist Claude Meillassoux distinguishes between a class, a status, and a state within his work of African slavery. He defines a social class as a “social component placed in organic relations of exploitation with respect to another.”¹¹⁸ Meillassoux also defines a status is a “set of de jure and de facto prerogatives enjoyed by an individual

¹¹⁶ Hicks, “Dependent Labor in Prehispanic Mexico,” 256. Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 140. Robert D. Shadow and María J. Rodríguez V., “Historical Panorama of Anthropological Perspectives on Aztec Slavery,” in *Arqueología del norte y del occidente de México: Homenaje al Doctor J. Charles Kelley*, ed. Barbro Dahlgren de Jordán and María de los Dolores Soto de Arechavaleta (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1995), 320.

¹¹⁷ Smith and Hicks, “Inequality and Social Class in Aztec Society,” 425.

¹¹⁸ Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery*, 343.

through membership of a class or an order.”¹¹⁹ It should also be noted that a social state—the individual’s state and not the state government—is a “social and juridical situation of an individual deprived of status: status is defined by a set of prerogatives, state by a set of privations.”¹²⁰ While Offner’s definition of class is based around the Mexica and simply social class specifically within Texcoco, Meillassoux’s definitions allow historians to differentiate between the different types of unfreedom and subcategories of the nobles and commoners within the Mexica state. As Meillassoux states, “the slave is indistinguishable, in strictly legal terms, from other categories of dependents,” and that the distinction between the state and the condition of the slave is key to understanding the structure of slavery and the slave’s position within a society.¹²¹

By these definitions, I believe that enslaved persons made up a social class within Mexica society. The process of enslavement is a diminishing of social status, with the loss of some if not all prerogatives afforded to a free person. Enslavement is a social status to gain/have but is not a state. Because a social state is defined by a set of privations or lack of human necessities, and social status is defined by a set of prerogatives or rights exclusive to class, enslavement is a social status because enslaved persons do not lose all of their rights and privileges afford to them under law and do not lack all human necessities. Enslaved individuals do not lose their right to freely marry who they chose. They also have the ability to buy themselves back from their enslaver, if

¹¹⁹ Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery*, 344. De facto means it is true but not legally sanctioned while de jure means it is legally and officially sanctioned.

¹²⁰ Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery*, 344. Privations are defined as “a state in which things that are essential for human well-being such as food and warmth are scarce or lacking.” Prerogative is defined as “a right or privilege exclusive to a particular individual or class.”

¹²¹ Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery*, 10-11.

they entered enslavement through debt-slavery. There is a law in place allowing for manumission through taking refuge in the tlatoani's palace after running from the market and their enslaver.

Enslaved persons in Mexica society did have some legal rights or privileges, like the ability to buy themselves back and marry freely, as shown by the *Historia* as well. Crimes committed against enslaved women often resulted in death or enslavement. Enslaved individuals could own property and own other enslaved persons. Historian George Valiant argues that an enslaved person could “control his family, own property, or even have slaves of his own...What the slave lost was his eligibility for tribal office...”¹²² Yet in a later paragraph, Valiant states that “an important aspect of the legal code of the Aztecs involved the loss of civil rights as a result of flagrant antisocial acts.”¹²³ Enslavement within the *Florentine Codex* and the *Historia*, are primarily through legal punishments and voluntary acts, which are both viewed as “antisocial” or unacceptable social practices/behaviors.

Valiant is not the only historian to state that enslaved individuals had these civil rights. Historians Jacques Soustelle, Offner, and Smith all state that an enslaved person could own property or other slaves, control their family, and were free to marry outside of their condition or status.¹²⁴ The primary source which states that these rights are afforded to the enslaved people and used by each historian is Motolinía's *Memoriales*, which is not examined in this thesis. An in-depth analysis of this source and its potential

¹²² George C. Vaillant, *Aztecs of Mexico: Origin, Rise and Fall of the Aztec Nation* (New York: Doubleday, 1941), 119.

¹²³ Vaillant, *Aztecs of Mexico*, 119.

¹²⁴ Jacques Soustelle, *The Daily Life of the Aztecs, on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 74. Offner, *Law and Politics in Aztec Texcoco*, 141-142. Smith, *The Aztecs*, 151.

Spanish bias may clear up some of the issues surrounding the civil rights of enslaved individuals. Offner in his work does admit, however, that these legal rights of an enslaved person may be associated with *huehuetlatlacolli* or “old slavery.”¹²⁵ It needs to be noted that Offner’s work is specifically focused on the legal aspects of Texcoco, and not on the Mexica or the Aztec empire as a whole. And, archeologist Smith leaves out that an enslaved individual could own other enslaved people.¹²⁶ I agree in the fact that enslaved individuals were free to marry outside their status and class. The example of Itzcoatl corroborates this, where Itzcoatl’s mother was an enslaved woman who then was married to Acamapichtli, the *tlatoani* of Tenochtitlan.

As for control of the family, women and men held complementary but parallel positions to one another in terms of gender and authority.¹²⁷ It could be said that the husband of the household may have final decision and authority over said household, but women held influence and authority in family matters as well. The other issue is what do these historians mean by “control the family?” Do they mean control of finances and labor? We could most likely assume, women did hold influence and authority within the household and family, as shown with the childrearing and teaching of daughters.

¹²⁵ Offner, *Law and Politics in Aztec Texcoco*, 141-142. Huehuetlatlacolli or “old slavery” is an inherited type of slavery, which includes a contract where “one or a number of households agreed to provide a slave in perpetuity, across the generations, to another household, in return for a one-time financial gain.”

Motolinía and Ixtlilxochitl both assert the Nezahualpilli, the *tlatoani* of Texcoco after Nezahualcoyotl, abolished this type of slavery. It seems to be a legal form of slavery only found within Texcoco.

¹²⁶ Smith, *The Aztecs*, 151. Smith states, “slaves could marry, have children (who were free), and even own property.”

¹²⁷ Caroline Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood: Gender, Lifecycle, and Sacrifice in Aztec Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 10, ProQuest Ebrary. Susan Kellogg, “From Parallel and Equivalent to Separate but Unequal: Tenochca Mexica Women, 1550-1700,” in *Indian Women of Early Mexico*, ed. Susan Schroeder, Stephanie Wood, and Robert Haskett (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997): 133.

However, it is more than likely the husband or primary male of the household had the final say.

The enslaved women and legal statements from the *Historia* have the enslaved woman's child given to the father. We do not know if this means she is still caring for the child and residing at that family home (her own household) or if she is residing with her enslaver and is not involved in the rearing of her child. Childrearing was primarily a woman's duty and responsibility within the Aztec household. Infants were dependent on the mother for some time, but after this "initial period of dependency on the mother, fathers became intimately involved in the upbringing of their children. They assumed responsibility for their sons from an early age and were frequent advisors to their daughters."¹²⁸ Once these children reached the age of three, they followed their parents in their duties and crafts: "sons accompanied their fathers fishing, gathering firewood and learning a trade, while daughters learned spinning, weaving and cooking from their mothers."¹²⁹ With the legal statement of the *Historia*, it could be assumed that the enslaved woman kept the child for this dependency period before handing the child off to its father if it was a boy. However, if the child was a girl, it is unclear or unknown whether the enslaved mother would hand the child over to the father due to the girl's need to be taught her duties and craft, unless, the girl is given to another female within the father's kin to be taught.

The evidence of enslaved individuals owning property or other enslaved persons, however, does not seem accurate. Most enslaved individuals, especially those who

¹²⁸ Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, 66.

¹²⁹ Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, 67.

became enslaved through self-enslavement, were dependent on their enslaver for housing. These people willingly entered slavery to gain access to food and shelter during times of famine and natural disaster. As archeologist Smith states, the enslaver “was responsible for feeding and housing the slave and had control over the slave’s labor.”¹³⁰ Enslaved individuals were completely dependent on their enslavers for these human necessities. Enslavers were also mainly urbanites, the wealthy and upper classes of Aztec society, indicating that enslaved persons were a “product” only few could afford. As shown with debt-slavery and self-enslavement, these enslaved individuals more than likely could not afford to purchase another enslaved person.

Enslaved Individuals and Labor

Enslaved people in Aztec society were generally used for domestic labor and not used for agricultural work. As anthropologists Shadow and Rodriguez state, a “majority of central Mexican slaves were urban residents, and that their labor was employed primarily in domestic activities.”¹³¹ These domestic activities consist of cleaning or housekeeping, cooking, childrearing, spinning, and weaving. These activities performed by enslaved individuals were within urban areas and households, where many nobles and wealthy commoners resided.

The enslaved persons within the household were not the only ones performing domestic labor. The free women of the household also contributed to the household’s wealth and production, particularly through domestic activities. Women “performed

¹³⁰ Smith, *The Aztecs*, 151.

¹³¹ Shadow and Rodriguez, “Historical Panorama,” 320.

many essential productive tasks within or for households, including cooking, cleaning (which had both sanitary and religious implications), caring for children, marketing, spinning, weaving, and carrying out the daily round of household rituals.”¹³² They also worked outside the home, providing labor in the marketplace, working as midwives, healers, and marriage brokers, and serving as teachers and priestesses in the temples and song houses, though this was more likely for commoner women than noblewomen.¹³³ Slave labor is truly not distinct from free labor. Women, no matter their class, spend time spinning and weaving as it was a huge part of their gender performance. But commoner women spent much more time cooking and preparing food for the household.¹³⁴ With this in mind, an enslaved person in the households of their enslaver (which were typically the wealthy and upper classes) would more than likely perform this domestic activity—cooking—the most to allow the noblewoman to spend more time spinning and weaving.

The religious ceremonies also offer an insight into how valuable female labor was to enslavers and Aztec society. In *Florentine Codex* Book 9: The Merchants, during the ceremony of the ceremonially bathed ones, the merchant places their purchased enslaved persons within wooden cages to await the ritual.

“And when he had made him arrive, then he placed [the slave] in a wooden jail during the night. And when it had dawned, he brought him out. To a woman he gave unspun cotton;

¹³² Kellogg, “From Parallel and Equivalent to Separate but Unequal,” 127.

¹³³ Susan Kellogg, *Weaving the Past: A History of Latin America's Indigenous Women from the Prehispanic Period to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 25, ProQuest Ebrary.

¹³⁴ Smith, *The Aztecs*, 141.

perhaps she might yet spin as she was waiting her death, to which they were to condemn her. But for a man he did nothing.”¹³⁵

This example is highly significant. While these ‘bathed slaves’ were to be sacrificed later, it is interesting to note that the enslaved woman is given cotton to spin as she waits for her death, but the enslaved man is not given any labor or activity. Her role is to be sacrificed, that is her one and only purpose in this situation and why she was purchased by the enslaver or merchant. There is no significance within the ceremony to have her perform labor, and there is no real reason that we can glean from the text why she would. This indicates that the labor of enslaved women was much more valuable than their male counterparts’ labor to enslavers. While both male and female slaves were sacrificed, it specifies that the woman is not to be “wasted” and to have her perform labor—the spinning of cotton—besides her role as a religious sacrifice.

Spinning and weaving were essential activities to the performance of gender identity in Aztec society. Weaving is central to Aztec women’s lives and is where women form their identities.¹³⁶ Many of these domestic activities are also essential to the female gender identity. The domestic sphere is the female realm and is female-identified and organized parallel to how warfare was the realm of men.¹³⁷ If enslaved individuals are primarily bought and used for domestic activities—which are heavily coded as female

¹³⁵ Bernardino Sahagún, *General History of the Things of New Spain: The Florentine Codex*, trans. Charles E. Dribble and Arthur J. O. Anderson (Santa Fe: School of American Research, 1959), 10:46.

¹³⁶ Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, 107.

¹³⁷ Pennock, *Bonds of Blood*, 116.

labor—it is not unreasonable or inaccurate to state that most enslaved individuals were women.

Also, many of the legal statements within the *Historia* involve enslaved women and crimes committed against them. Although many of the male perpetrators are enslaved, this could be an issue of translation. Nahuatl is not a gendered language, but the translations of the *Historia* in Spanish and English are. These examples of men becoming enslaved could be that English and Spanish did not have a word for what was used in Nahuatl, using the male pronouns instead of gender-neutral terms, or it was an issue of interpretation by the authors and translators. And, these legal statements showcase that these types of assaults and crimes happened often enough to be established as law, but it does not give us statistical data of how often it occurred and was brought before the court.

The routes of captives in Mexica society also showcases how women are enslaved more than men. Many of the male captives were killed in religious ceremonies while the female captives were enslaved: “La proporción de las mujeres sacrificadas, según los relatos de los cronistas, es mucho menor que la de los hombres; por lo tanto creemos que la mayor parte de las cautivas eran conservadas como esclavas para diferentes usos.”¹³⁸

Mexica society did have both male and female slaves, as shown by the *Historia* and *Florentine Codex*. Enslaved women, however, played a much more significant and substantial role in Mexica society than enslaved men. Women mainly worked in the

¹³⁸ Yólotl González Torres, “La esclavitud en la época Prehispánica,” in *Mesoamérica: Homenaje al doctor Paul Kirchhoff*, ed. Barbro Dahlgren (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1979), 89. Rough translation: “The proportion of sacrificed women, according to the chroniclers’ accounts, is much lower than that of men; therefore we believe that most captive women were preserved as slaves (esclavas) for different uses.”

household, the market, and temples, and performed Mexica female-identified labor—cooking, cleaning, sweeping, spinning, and weaving. Most enslaved persons are described as performing these duties within the sources. In short, most enslaved individuals would be women due to the essential labor they perform.

“Bathed Slaves” or the Ceremonially bathed ones

Within Mexica society, besides the common enslaved person, there were “bathed slaves,” or the “ceremonially bathed ones.” Bathed slaves were enslaved individuals chosen to impersonate the gods and be sacrificed in a ceremony. These slaves were specifically chosen with a set of criteria in mind and they were sold primarily by the *tecoani* or *tealtiani*. The *tecoani* were a group of merchants who were essentially slave dealers and handled much of the slave trade within Mexica society.¹³⁹ Bathed slaves were sold by the *tecoani* and could be bought by them to be put forth as tribute for ceremonies requiring bathed slaves. They could also be bought by other merchants, noblemen, featherworkers, stewards, priests and dignitaries, physicians and midwives, water vendors, mat-makers, pulque-makers, salt-makers, lapidaries, and in one case, a group of goldsmiths, engravers, embroiderers, and weavers.¹⁴⁰

In *Florentine Codex* Book 9: The Merchants, the text lists the physical and mental requirements of a bathed slave, including:

¹³⁹ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 11:59

¹⁴⁰ Arthur J. O. Anderson, “The Institution of Slave-Bathing,” *Indiana 7: Gedenkschrift Walter Lehmann Teil 2* (1982): 87-88.

“And one who would buy a slave very carefully considered which one he would take. He sought on who was of good understanding; who sang well; who made his dance accompany [the beat of] the two-toned drum; and who was pleasing of countenance, of sound body, very clean, without blemish; nowhere scarred [nor] swollen with bruises, [nor] of shuffling feet, afflicted by wens [or] depressions on the forehead, etc.; one who was well disposed in body, who was very healthy, slender, in all parts like a round, stone column. Thereupon [the buyer] reached an agreement with the slave dealer on how much the price of his slave would be.”¹⁴¹

The description of what a bathed slave should be like is an individual of no physical faults and one who can sing and dance well necessary for celebrations requiring bathed slaves. Being chosen as a bathed slave raised the enslaved persons status higher than the common slave, however their status was still lower than the other subcategories of commoners in Mexica society. They were called “bathed slaves,” but in their last days before their sacrificial death, they were treated as gods. They were dressed, fed, and given drinks and gifts on a similar level to the merchant who bought and made them a bathed slave, as “before he died, [the merchant] favored him greatly. The bather was careful of [the victim]; he enriched him [with gifts]; he restored all to him. All the food which he offered him was good.”¹⁴² The merchant or bather of slaves was dressed similarly to the bathed slave, where “he who bathed slaves arrayed himself; he put on his

¹⁴¹ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 10:46.

¹⁴² Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 3:155.

godly sleeveless jacket, just like the ones the ceremonially bathed ones had put on...”¹⁴³

They are, in this instance, elevated to a higher social status than the common slave.

Bathed slaves were also elevated to a higher status than the war captive. In the ritual Panquetzaliztli, bathed slaves were treated better than the captives who were also sacrificed. The captives sacrificed were rolled down the pyramid after their death, bouncing down the steps and falling to the base of the pyramid. The bathed slaves were carried down the pyramid after their death and then carried to the home of the enslaver.¹⁴⁴

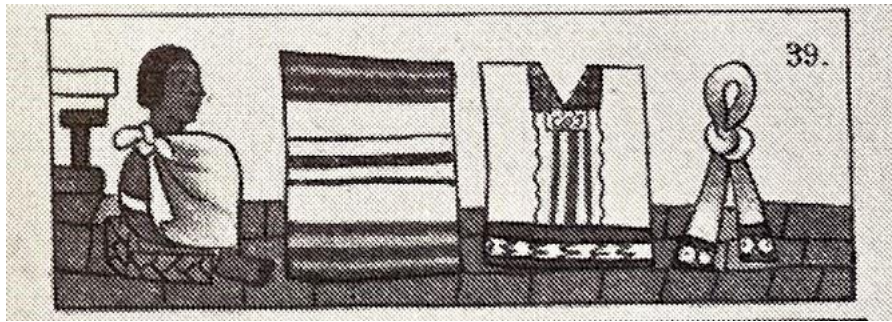


Figure 4.2. The array of the sacrificed slave. Source: Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 10:49-50.

¹⁴³ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 10:63.

¹⁴⁴ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 10:66.

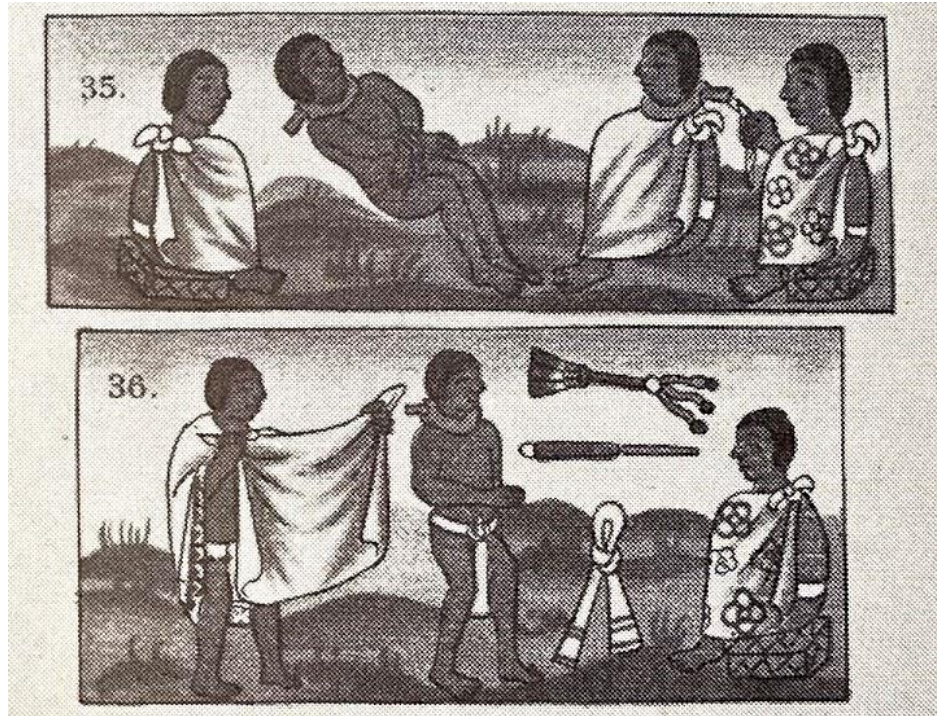


Figure 4.3. **Top:** Buying slaves in Azcapotzalco. **Bottom:** Arraying of slaves. Source: Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 10:49-50.

The description of these ceremonies in the *Florentine Codex* also gives us insight into how much bathed slaves were sold for in the Azcapotzalco slave market and how wealthy one must be to own and present bathed slaves for sacrifice. After choosing a slave, the buyer would pay thirty large capes if the slave was not a highly skilled dancer. If the slave was a skilled dancer and “clean of body” the buyer paid forty large capes.¹⁴⁵ This is illustrated in *Florentine Codex* Book 9 (see Figure 3.3). This price of a bathed slave may differ from the price of a common slave, but this is one of the only places which mentions the selling price of a slave.

¹⁴⁵ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 10:46.

Regarding the wealth needed for the ceremony requiring a “bathed slave,” the merchant or *tecoani* and slave bather could spend up to “800 to 1,200 elaborate capes, 400 breechclouts, and unnamed quantities of skirts and shifts; sufficient quantities of shelled maize, beans, chia, squash seeds, chilis, and tomatoes; 40 to 60 jars of salt; 80 to 100 turkeys and 20 to 40 dogs; 20 sacks of cacao beans; three or four boats of water per day; sufficient wood and charcoal for cooking; and equipment consisting of 2,000 to 4,000 chocolate-beating sticks and unnamed quantities of baskets, sauce dishes, cups, and plates, besides other essentials such as mats and godly costumes for the slaves on exhibit, gifts for the owner’s assistants who guarded and otherwise looked after the slaves, and unestimated quantities of tobacco, smoking tubes, and flowers.”¹⁴⁶

Whether or not this is accurate, one needed to be extremely wealthy to purchase, sustain, and present a bathed slave or bathed slaves for sacrifice. Through these public displays associated with the ceremony, the lavish banqueting and gift-giving, the purchase of “bathed slaves” and their dress, the merchants (*tecoani*) could increase their prestige and status within their hierarchy.¹⁴⁷

The process of becoming a bathed slave is detailed in *Florentine Codex* Book 2: The Ceremonies. During the celebration of Panquetzaliztli, the slaves are bathed in sacred water from the spring called Uitzilatli in the village of Uitzilopochco. The slaves are

¹⁴⁶ Anderson, “The Institution of Slave-Bathing,” 87-89.

¹⁴⁷ Anderson, “The Institution of Slave-Bathing,” 91.

sprinkled with this water at the temple of Uitzilopochtli.¹⁴⁸ However, there does not seem to be a standard process of bathing a slave. In the celebration feast of Uauhquiltamalqualiztli, “the bather [of a victim]”: he continually bathed his victim with hot water all the time until he went to his death...”¹⁴⁹ which is different from the Panquetzaliztli bathing process. The bathing of the slave transforms them into a “bathed slave” or ceremonially bathed one (*tlatlatilti*) necessary for the celebration or ceremony. The process of becoming a bathed slave was religious, but it is also a cultural and social transformation of the individual’s status and state in society.

This ceremony also reflects on another debate surrounding enslaved persons within Mexica society: whether most enslaved persons came from outside the Mexica-Aztec city-state or if they were locals. On the ninth day before the feast, the individuals chosen to be sacrificed were bathed and became *tlatlatilti*, which is translated to “the ceremonially bathed ones, or those to die the captives’ death.”¹⁵⁰ On the twentieth day of the festival, the bathed slaves visited their owners’ house and left handprints in black stain, blue mineral earth, or red ochre on the home, and “when they had proceeded to several places where their relatives’ were, then they again went to [their owners’] homes.”¹⁵¹ This visitation of the relatives’ homes of the slaves is important to consider when discussing where many of the slaves in Mexica society came from.

The slaves visiting their relatives during the festival, which ended in their death, meant that the slaves described were from the surrounding area and community.

¹⁴⁸ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 3:130-131.

¹⁴⁹ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 3:155.

¹⁵⁰ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 3:130.

¹⁵¹ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 3:130.

Historian Arthur J. O. Anderson argues that slaves, specifically sacrificed slaves or bathed slaves, were not foreigners but “naturales de los mismos pueblos,” or natives of the area, and that the visitations of relatives during the festival indicates this.¹⁵² However, could relatives in this case mean the people who were specifically involved in the bathing and ceremonial dressing of the bathed ones—the owners who had bathed them and seized them, those who were to bring them down from the temple when they were slain, those who would carry the banners, and the women who would wash their faces? Historian Inga Clendinnen supports this theory and argues that ‘relatives’ in this situation refers to a “fictive ritual kinship, By comparing both the *Florentine Codex* and the *Historia*, however, I do not believe that this theory of kinship and Clendinnen’s argument that this example indicates a majority of enslaved individuals are foreigners.

The process of becoming a sacrifice or bathed slave is religious, where the bathing of the slave transforms them into a sacrifice or *ixiptlas*, a god-image. Then the bathed slave performs in a ritual for the people of the altepetl and is sacrificed. The bathed slave thus meets one or two of the criteria of slavery. The bathed slave is going to be sacrificed which is a threat or act of violence. They are not shamed or dishonored, rather they are honored as a god-image before and during the ritual. Natal alienation is complicated to pinpoint for them, as it is unclear if these slaves or captives transformed to slaves are from the surrounding community or from foreign areas outside of Mexica influence. If these bathed slaves are from foreign areas, as Clendinnen argues, they meet the criteria of natal alienation. If they are from the surrounding communities as Anderson argues, they do not meet the criteria. So, are these “bathed slaves” actually slaves within

¹⁵² Anderson, “The Institution of Slave-Bathing,” 85.

Mexica society? It would be accurate to state that these “bathed slaves” are more like *ixiptlas*, or the sacrificed god-images. They do not perform the typical labor of enslaved persons. These “bathed slaves” or ceremonially bathed ones were slaves, but in the process and transformation caused by the bathing, they are no longer considered enslaved. It would be more accurate to call them the ceremonial bathed ones or *tlatlatilti*.

To conclude, the Mexica social hierarchy is primarily split between nobles and commoners—*pipiltin* and *macehualli*. *Pochteca*, *calpixque*, luxury artisans, priests, and top warriors, while part of the *macehualli*, were slightly higher in status than the regular commoners—the dependent laborers and urban commoners. Through this examination of the Mexica social hierarchy, it is revealed that slaves constituted both a social class and status. Common slaves held certain legal protections and the right to marry freely and buy themselves back from their enslaver. The enslaved population class is at the bottom of the hierarchy, with “bathed slaves” or the *tlatlatilti* holding a higher status within that class than the common enslaved individual. And, through the examination of their labor and economic production and value, it is accurate to state that enslaved women were more significant to Mexica society than enslaved men.

CHAPTER 5

ENSLAVED INDIVIDUALS WITHIN THE SOURCES—AN EXAMINATION OF HAIRSTYLES AND ENSLAVED WOMEN

This chapter will examine the physical descriptions and visual imagery of enslaved individuals within the *Florentine Codex* and *Codex Mendoza*. Most of these descriptions and illustrations will focus on the hairstyles of individuals. These hairstyles are a performance of not only gender, but age, occupation, and social class or status. Hair and haircutting also played a role in religious ceremonies and legal punishments. Through this examination, I argue that specific hairstyles are tied to social statuses—free or enslaved; upper or lower class—occupations, age, and gender.

Hairstyles and Hair-cutting

Hairstyles in Mexica society indicated class and social status. The male commoners wore their hair to the middle of the neck with short bangs; priests wore their hair long, tied back with white ribbon and covered in black soot; the warriors aspired to wear the Tequihua warrior hairstyle which “left the frontal section of the scalp pulled up into a columnar shape” and male *telpochtlato* (‘masters of youth’) “wore their hair long and shaved at the temples, and wore the identifying forked, white heron feather in their hair.”¹⁵³ Mexica warriors usually wore a topknot, signifying their rank and status.

¹⁵³ Manuel Aguilar-Moreno, “Daily Life,” in *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 368.

Married and unmarried women were also differentiated by hairstyle. The married woman “wore their hair divided at the nape of the neck, tied with a cord, and drawn up toward the crown of the head so that the bulk of the hair draped at the nape. The ends were secured to the top of the head in such a way that the ends created tufts peeking from the crown of the head.”¹⁵⁴ Hairstyles are key to understanding the status and role of an individual in Mexica society.

The *Florentine Codex* lists many of the hairstyles women and girls wore in Mexica society. In Book 8: Kings and Lords, it details these hairstyles, stating that “They had hair hanging to the waist, or to the shoulders; or the young girls’ lock of hair; or the hair [twisted with black cord] and wound about the head; or the hair all cut the same length. [Some] cut their hair short [so that] their hair reached to their noses. It was cut and dyed with black mud--[so] did they place importance upon their heads; it was dyed with indigo, so that their hair shone.”¹⁵⁵

Female hairstyles ranged from long to short, with symbolic hairstyles of marriage and motherhood versus youth. Unfortunately, there is no context to who specifically wore these hairstyles and what they mean. This section of the chapter—and this book which is dedicated to lords and kings—is focused on nobles. These are more than likely hairstyles of noblewomen, and as I discuss later, may or may not reflect how the commoner women stylized their hair.

¹⁵⁴ Aguilar-Moreno, “Daily Life,” 328.

¹⁵⁵ Bernardino Sahagún, *General History of the Things of New Spain: The Florentine Codex*, trans. Charles E. Dibble and Arthur J. O. Anderson (Santa Fe: School of American Research, 1959), 9:47-8.

The accompanying illustration with this chapter of the *Florentine Codex* (Figure 5.1) takes us through the hairstyles of females.¹⁵⁶ In my opinion, this is a linear timeline of the evolution of a female's hair through age and marital status. The two figures in the upper left are the youth, who had “the young girls’ lock of hair.”¹⁵⁷ The upper left figures do not necessarily have short hair. Their hair looks to be tied in two buns on each side of their head. Or, their hair is cut short everywhere but where these buns or “locks” of hair are located on each side of the head. The written description of hairstyles from Book 8 do not describe anything similar to this image. The possible explanation of this is that it means the “young girls’ lock of hair,” which could be interpreted in many ways.

The two figures in the upper right also indicate youth—or what I deem pre-teens—with the hair cut to the shoulders or to the noses. The bottom left figures had hair hanging below their shoulders, not quite to the waist, as detailed in the chapter, but it could be similar in nature to the upper right female figures. These two would also be considered teenagers or young adults. The bottom right figures have their hair styled “[twisted with black cord] and wound about the head,” which as noted previously is a hairstyle symbolizing motherhood or marriage. These figures would be the adult women of Mexica society.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ The description with this illustration is that it is on women's arrayment, focusing on their clothing. The Nahuatl words used after the comment are defined as skirts and shifts.

¹⁵⁷ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 9:47.

¹⁵⁸ I am using modern day terms to explain these out: youth, pre-teen, teenager or young adult, and adult. The *Florentine Codex* Book 10 does detail age differences (see pg. 72), however, I felt they did not equate/translate well enough for this illustration.



Figure 5.1. *Florentine Codex*, Book 8, pg. 65, <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/10619/view/1/65/>.

The *Codex Mendoza* supports this interpretation of hairstyle connected to youth and adulthood. In the illustrations within volume four (Figure 4.2), there are visual images of young girls learning to weave and spin. The top right figure is a seven-year old girl. Her hair is cut short, above her shoulders and almost to her nose. The bottom right figure is a fourteen-year-old girl with long hair past her shoulders. On folio 60r of the *Codex Mendoza*, it shows a twelve-year old girl, a thirteen-year old girl, and fourteen-

year-old girl, each with long hair. The first girl in the row, however, appears with short hair above her shoulders and is stated to be eleven years old.¹⁵⁹

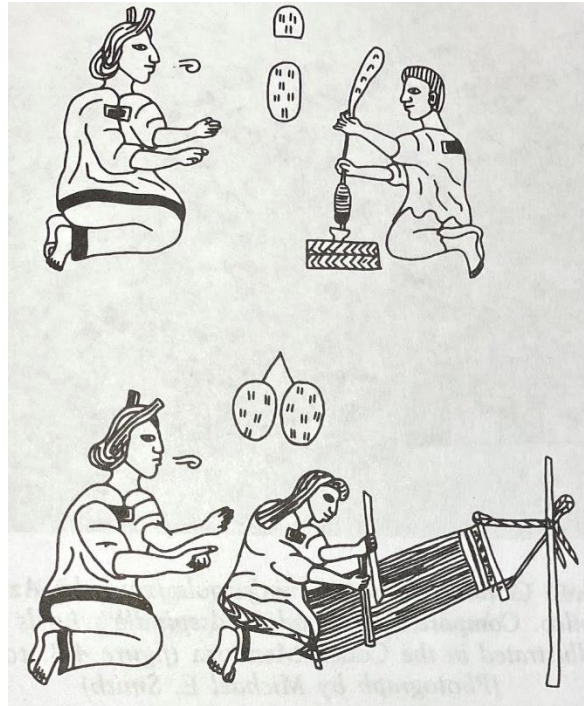


Figure 5.2. **Top:** a seven-year old learns to spin (Codex Mendoza 1992 v.4, 123, folio 59r). **Bottom:** a fourteen-year old learns to weave with backstrap loom (Codex Mendoza 1992 v.4, 125, folio 60r). Source: Smith, *The Aztecs*, 93.

The seven-year old girl (or youth) in the Codex Mendoza matches the linear timeline of hair in the *Florentine Codex* Book 8 illustration of youth (girls) having short hair or a “young girls’ lock of hair.” The twelve- to fourteen-year-old girls match the depiction of the teenage or young adult female. It needs to be noted that maturity ages in Aztec culture were different from modern standards. Young girls or young teenagers could be married

¹⁵⁹ Patricia Rieff Anawalt and Frances F. Berdan, *The Essential Codex Mendoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 125.

“as early as 10 or 12 years old.”¹⁶⁰ The teenage or young adult female could wear the long hairstyle as early as twelve, as shown in these illustrations from the *Codex Mendoza*. In between seven and eleven, the girl would wear her hair in the pre-teen style, described as short and no longer than the shoulders, per the *Codex Mendoza*.

The *Florentine Codex* Book 10 does detail age differences, but I argue that the illustrations do not adequately represent these age differences. There is no numerical age to correspond with the age titles. The chapter in Book 10 begins with the old man and woman. The old man is physically described as white-haired and “hardened with age,” while the old woman is merely described as one who guards the home.¹⁶¹ Following the old man and woman are the middle-aged man and woman. The middle-aged woman is described as a parent and wife.¹⁶² The middle-aged man is simply described as an active worker. Next is the mature man and woman. Both are described as active workers—the mature woman works in the home and is not a courtesan or whore.¹⁶³ The youth and the maiden follow the mature man and woman. The youth is given male pronouns and is described as a good man, obedient and modest.¹⁶⁴ The maiden is described as a good woman, “modest, pure, pleasing of appearance, honest. [She is] one’s daughter...”¹⁶⁵ After the youth and maiden is the boy, the child, the little child, and baby. The boy is clearly gendered as a male, while the child, little child, and baby are given no pronouns. However, these age titles are either not illustrated or there appears to be no difference

¹⁶⁰ Michael E. Smith, *The Aztecs* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996), 138.

¹⁶¹ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 11:11.

¹⁶² Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 11:11.

¹⁶³ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 11:12.

¹⁶⁴ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 11:12.

¹⁶⁵ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 11:12.

between them. The terminology is very unequal. The male begins as a baby, child, a boy, and then a youth, before becoming a mature man, etc. The female, on the other hand, begins as a baby, child, but then a maiden, mature woman, etc. The female is not allowed to be a youth or girl, she is a child and then a “modest, pure, pleasing of appearance” woman.¹⁶⁶ While this may be the historically accurate terms and gives scholars insight into how the Mexica view age and gender, it leaves one to wonder if the colonizers imposed how they see men and women among the Mexica causing such a discrepancy. As shown with these illustrations of enslaved versus the commoner or merchants, the text of the *Florentine Codex* and the illustrations which are meant to correspond with the text may not necessarily match. Many illustrations of female subjects in the *Florentine Codex* do not match their written descriptions.

With Figure 5.1, the top row of girls would merely be called children, despite the differences in hairstyles. The bottom left subjects would be deemed maidens, and the bottom right subjects would be mature or middle-aged women. Using more modern terms—the youth, pre-teen, teenager or young adult and adult—allows us to differentiate based on hairstyle and more specific age groups. To summarize, the female youth is illustrated with young locks of hair and ranges in age from birth to seven. The pre-teen has short hair and ranges from seven years-old to eleven. The teenager or young adult has long, unarranged hair and ranges from eleven years old until they are married or become a mother, where they are then illustrated with the twisted cord wound around the head. The key to the age differences and hairstyle is maturity and marriage, at least in the case of Aztec women.

¹⁶⁶ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 11:12.

Regarding enslaved individuals and hairstyles, there is only one physical description of one in the *Florentine Codex*. Within the *Florentine Codex* Book 2: The Ceremonies, there is a physical description of a slave as an individual involved in a ceremony. In the feasts and blood sacrifices called Toxcatl, which require a god-impersonator, an *ixiptlas*, the eight men who follow the *ixiptlas* are described as such: “Four [of them] had fasted for a year; their hair was shorn like [the hair of] slaves, cut and clipped, not smooth like a gourd, nor cut [too] short, not [made like] growing whiskers on the head.”¹⁶⁷ The men’s hairstyles are described and compared to the enslaved hairstyle. This is one of the only physical descriptions of an enslaved person within the written text of the *Florentine Codex*. This physical description of a slave hairstyle is focused on the male hairstyle. This specific hairstyle is “cut and clipped, not smooth like a gourd, nor cut [too short], not [made like] growing whiskers on the head.”¹⁶⁸ The male slave hairstyle is short but not bald and not smooth. Unfortunately, this description is no different from the male commoner, who also has hair to the middle of their neck—which can be described as short—and short bangs. The illustrations of male commoners and male slaves are not that different in terms of hairstyle. The same can be said about the male slave and the merchants from the *Florentine Codex*.

¹⁶⁷ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 3:66.

¹⁶⁸ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 3:66.

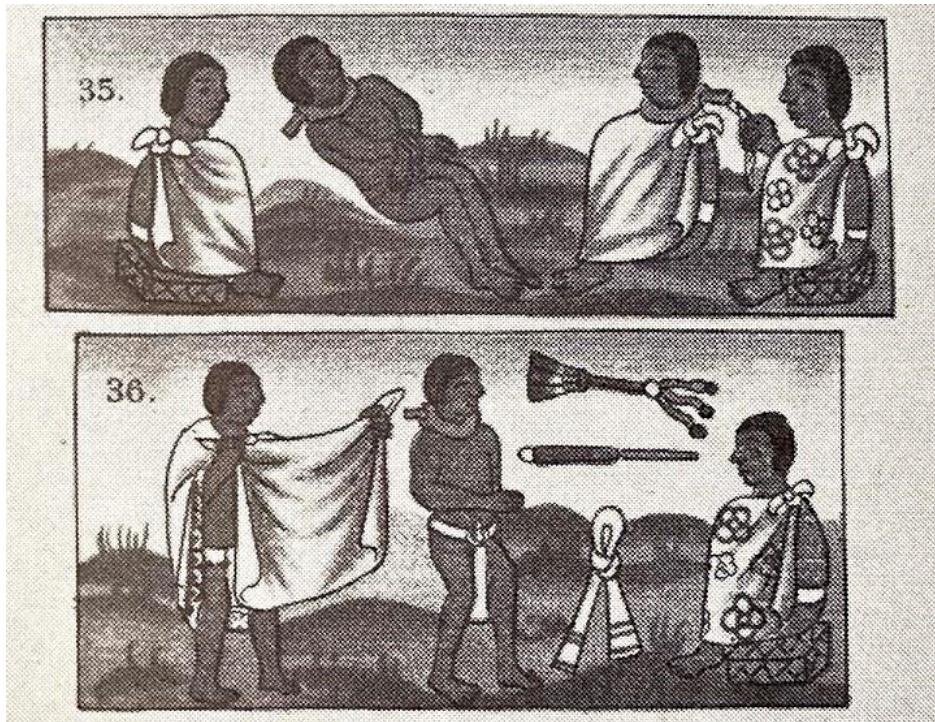


Figure 4.3. **Top:** Buying slaves in Azcapotzalco. **Bottom:** Arraying of slaves. Source: Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 10:49-50.

The merchants' hairstyle looks similar to the slaves' hairstyle. What truly differentiates the merchants from the enslaved individuals in the illustration is the wooden collar and clothing. Did enslaved individuals then keep their hairstyles from when they were a free person? If so, then why did this ceremony of *Toxcatl* specifically mention the styling of hair and the specific process of cutting it?

The cutting of hair of both free and enslaved people's is, in fact, key to many Aztec rituals and ceremonies. There are multiple instances of hair-cutting in the ceremonies from *Florentine Codex* Book 2, including the feast of *Tlacaxipeualiztli* and feast of *Totec* or *Xipe*. In one ceremony regarding *Xocotl uetzi*, after the midnight vigil of the captives who were to be sacrificed in the ritual, "the captors then took [some of the captives'] hair;

they took hair from the crowns of the captives' heads."¹⁶⁹ From this line alone, it is unclear on what the significance of the hair-cutting is. The following paragraph gives an indication of why:

"After they had taken [the hair], then they put it into a small, woven reed basket, called the "hair basket." This hair basket the captor carried to his house and hung it high, that thus it might be shown that he had taken captives; that thus his manly exploits might be boasted. Always it hung from the roofing of the house, from the roof beams. It never came down until the time that he died."¹⁷⁰

The cutting of hair and its collection by the captor reveals that the cut hair is a trophy. This act is symbolic of dominance. By cutting the hair of captives, the captor is diminishing the captives' status and humiliating them. This act is similar to the process of bathing a slave, where it represents a social and cultural transformation into another social status.

Cutting hair occurred within the religious ceremonies, but it was also used as a punishment. Alongside "exile, restitution, loss of office, destruction of home, prison sentences, [and] slavery," the shaving of the head was also used as a legal punishment.¹⁷¹ Avalos makes no mention of gender when discussing shaving as punishment. There is no evidence of the judge of the punishment keeping the hair as a symbol of dominance or

¹⁶⁹ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 3:106.

¹⁷⁰ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 3:106-107.

¹⁷¹ Francisco Avalos, "An Overview of the Legal System of the Aztec Empire," *Law Library Journal* 86, no. 2 (1994): 267.

trophy. This is not surprising, since the act of shaving hair is associated with punishment in many societies and cultures. The shaving of women's hair almost always signifies punishment,¹⁷² though I have not come across an example of female pronouns specifically being used in the hair-cutting ceremonies, which will require more research. The stylization of female hairstyles is much more elaborate than their male counterparts, and requires a more in-depth analysis, especially concerning enslaved women and their hairstyles.

Free & Enslaved Women's Hairstyles

This next section will focus on comparing the noblewomen's hairstyle and their depictions versus those of "sinful" nature and the commoner woman. First, Figure 5.4 is an illustration of a noblewoman who is, literally by the written descriptions, a good noblewoman.

¹⁷² Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 44.



Figure 5.4. *Florentine Codex*, Book 10, pg. 74, <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/10621/view/1/74/>.

The hairstyle of the noblewoman matches that of an adult woman (mature or middle-aged) who is married or a mother. The arranged hairstyle of cords tied around the head indicates the woman is married or a mother. There are multiple illustrations with the titles of noblewoman or noblewomen. They are highly detailed and almost always showcase the married or mother hairstyle.

However, there is only one depiction of a common woman (Figure 5.5). Clearly, this is because the *Florentine Codex* is primarily focused on the upper classes and occupations, as the later chapters of Book 10 are dedicated to merchants, weavers, goldworkers, etc. There are numerous chapters dedicated to describing the multitudes of nobles—both male and female—within Aztec society. There is one chapter dedicated to the “nature of the common woman.” There is no mirror chapter for common men, but there are several chapters dedicated to commoner occupations and labor.

The one illustration of the common woman does not exhibit a hairstyle to examine. She is covered in what seems to be a hood or cowl, and her hair cannot be seen nor the rest of her body. While it cannot be fully analyzed here, there is a question on if the commoner woman's hairstyle is different than the noblewoman's stylization. Similar to how there were “sumptuary laws on clothing and jewelry,” regarding nobles and commoners, there may have been—not a law—but a societal expectation for commoners to wear a different hairstyle than the nobles.¹⁷³



Figure 5.5. *Florentine Codex*, B10, pg. 74, <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/10621/view/1/74/>.

The lower classes of Aztec society only matter and are only described and mentioned in the *Florentine Codex* in relation to their labor - merchants or farmers or carpenters, weavers, and spinners. The two chapters dedicated to the “evil” men and

¹⁷³ Michael E. Smith and Frederic Hicks, “Inequality and Social Class in Aztec Society,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Aztecs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 429.

women are those outside the social norms—those who are considered the outcasts, the lawbreakers, etc. They are referenced to others as examples they should not emulate.

What can be examined within the *Florentine Codex* is the binary of the “good” woman versus the “evil” woman. In *Florentine Codex* Book 10, in between the depictions of noblewomen and weavers, there are two illustrations titled, ‘The Harlot.’





Top: Figure 5.6. **Bottom:** Figure 5.7. Source: Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 10:82, <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/10621/view/1/82/>.

In the top illustration (Figure 5.6.), the harlot’s hair is down, similar to the typical teenage girl hairstyle. In the bottom illustration, the harlot’s hair is like the hairstyle of the mother or married woman. Within the written description corresponding to these illustrations (chapter fifteen of Book 10), the text describes that “[Half] of [the harlot’s] hair falls loose, half is wound about her head. She arranges her hair like horns.”¹⁷⁴ The chapter also refers to the harlot as an old woman multiple times.¹⁷⁵ In the bottom illustration (Figure 5.7.), the woman depicted appears to have wrinkles around her mouth, eyes, and cheekbones. This is likely indicative of her age, implying she is an old woman matching

¹⁷⁴ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 11:55.

¹⁷⁵ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 11:55.

the written description in the chapter. But the hairstyle described does not match the illustrations.

There is one illustration in Book 10 that does match the written description of the harlot's hairstyle. The woman in the middle background has her hair half up, tied in horns like the married hairstyle, and the rest of her hair worn down.



Figure 5.8. Source: Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 10:66, <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/10621/view/1/66/>.

This illustration, however, was grouped together with nine others under ‘the noblewoman.’ Analyzing this with intersectionality in mind, this woman illustrated like a harlot can and may also be a noblewoman. The harlot is not a class position, it is rather a title given to someone who violates societal norms in a certain way.

Further examination of Figures 5.6. and 5.7. brings up questions regarding the connection between age and hairstyle. The bottom image (Figure 5.7.) illustrates an older woman with the married hairstyle, despite being called a harlot. The top image does not have wrinkles like the harlot in the bottom illustration. This harlot is younger, though it is

not clear how young. If we base her age off the linear timeline in Book 8, she could be the age of twelve and up. There is no specific age where a female subject would be given the married or mother hairstyle

But what else could the unarranged long hair indicate besides age? In some cultures, like the Mende culture, “it [is] morally unfitting to leave the hair unarranged and equates wild hair with wild behavior.’ Loose, unplaited hair is associated with loose morals.”¹⁷⁶ Aztec culture is very similar in this aspect. Each individual must have their hair styled in a certain way: the warrior with his topknot; the priest with tied-back, long hair; the hair tied in a cord for married women or mothers, etc. These hairstyles are tied to occupation and social and marital status, similar to African and African American styles where “elaborate hair designs [reflect] tribal affiliation, status, sex, age, occupation, and the like...”¹⁷⁷ And descriptions of wild or loose hair in Mexica culture are often tied to the “evil” women, like the harlot. Within this context, the unarranged hairstyle can indicate the female subjects’ sexual availability. In the case of “evil” women, the hair unarranged and loose indicates loose morals and sexual promiscuousness. In the case of age, however, the unarranged hair indicates the teenager or young adult who is not yet married or a mother but is deemed mature enough for marriage, sex, and motherhood.

The idea of sexual availability related to age is also apparent in the *Historia*: “if a man lay with a woman slave who was under age he became a slave also with her,” the

¹⁷⁶ White and White, *Stylin*, 59.

¹⁷⁷ White and White, *Stylin*, 41.

legal case reveals this idea of sexual availability related to age.¹⁷⁸ Unfortunately, this legal case does not indicate what age or age group would be under age for sex. The use of “woman” in the English translation more than likely does not reflect the enslaved female’s age, as the Spanish translation only calls her “esclava,” which is only defined as female slave and does not indicate an age group either.¹⁷⁹ If we do consider the English translation’s use of “woman” as somewhat accurate, the enslaved female could be a teenager or young adult, as these age groups were considered “women” or mature enough to be married or engage in sexual relations.

The styling and grooming of hair is a repetitive social and cultural ritual. As philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler argues, “the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time.”¹⁸⁰ By stylizing the hair in specific ways, the subject conveys his or her occupation, social status or class, age, and gender. It is an act of both social conformity and differentiation.¹⁸¹ The performance of gender is a shared experience and collective action.¹⁸² There is some uniformity to it—each subject acts individualistic but is performing within a certain structure or frame of societal expectations. When a subject does not conform to these norms of the established structure of sex and gender, that subject is punished for performing one’s gender wrong.¹⁸³ The hermaphrodite is

¹⁷⁸ Henry Phillips, Jr. “Notes upon the Codex Ramirez, with a Translation of the Same,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 21, no. 116 (1884): 641.

¹⁷⁹ Angel María Garibay K., ed., *Teogonía e historia de los mexicanos; tres opúsculos del siglo xvi* (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1965), 74.

¹⁸⁰ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 523.

¹⁸¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), xv, ProQuest Ebrary.

¹⁸² Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” 525.

¹⁸³ Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” 528.

considered “evil,” alongside the harlot who styles her hair and physical appearance differently from the “good” woman. In an Aztec context, the styling of hair will either put the subject within the norms of gender or will differentiate the subject from others in a violent and harmful manner.

The subject’s performativity—their naturalization in Aztec society—is due to the repetitive nature of styling the hair and the body each day. Their naturalization in the narrative comes from the various and multitude of illustrations within the primary sources, specifically the *Florentine Codex*, which depict each gender and occupation differently from one another but uniformly within its designation. We cannot necessarily say that this act of styling was strict, due to the nature or bias of the *Florentine Codex* writing. The structure of sex, gender, and heterosexuality are present in the *Florentine Codex*, alongside the good and evil binary. Although, the codex’s writing in relation to queer and gender theory requires more research, from the sources discussed, however, this strict structure is apparent and will be our frame of reference.

This social ritual of hair styling for female subjects exhibits age and sexual availability. The female hair style goes through numerous evolutions over time, which are connected to social status and occupation, and always the “female” or “feminine.” Young girls wear their hair short, above the shoulders, while the teenage girl and young adult wear their hair long to showcase their availability for marriage and their “maturity.” The old woman and adult (middle-aged) woman wear their hair up to indicate marriage or motherhood. The young girl’s hairstyle is reminiscent or similar to the young boy’s or the male commoner’s hairstyle. This hairstyle indicates the girl’s age and maturity, but in a way, does not actually indicate their gender. In the illustrations of the girls, the *Codex*

Mendoza specifically, we only know they are female subjects from the labor they perform—the weaving, spinning, and cooking—and the style of clothing within the illustrations and the corresponding texts. Essentially, the styling of hair is intricately tied to age and gender performance, but also to this idea of maturity and sexual availability.

Enslaved women illustrated in primary sources bring an interesting dynamic to these Aztec ideals and societal norms. Enslaved women are always depicted with the married or mother or mature hairstyle despite the fact that enslaved individuals were considered degenerates, bad, or sinful. In *Florentine Codex* Book 7, Chapter Eight, the one who sold themselves into slavery was considered sinful and their transgressions are passed onto their family.¹⁸⁴ The women who sell themselves into slavery are considered slothful and pleasure-loving. Enslaved individuals are not considered good or valiant—like the good noblewoman or the valiant warrior—they are the bad nobleman, the bad warrior, etc. The illustration of the female slave in Book 7 (see Debt-slavery section), the illustration of a market with both male and female slaves in Diego Duran's *Historia de Las Indias*, and the male and female slave in the *Codex Mendoza*, are all drawn and depicted with the marriage or motherhood hairstyle.

¹⁸⁴ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 8:24.

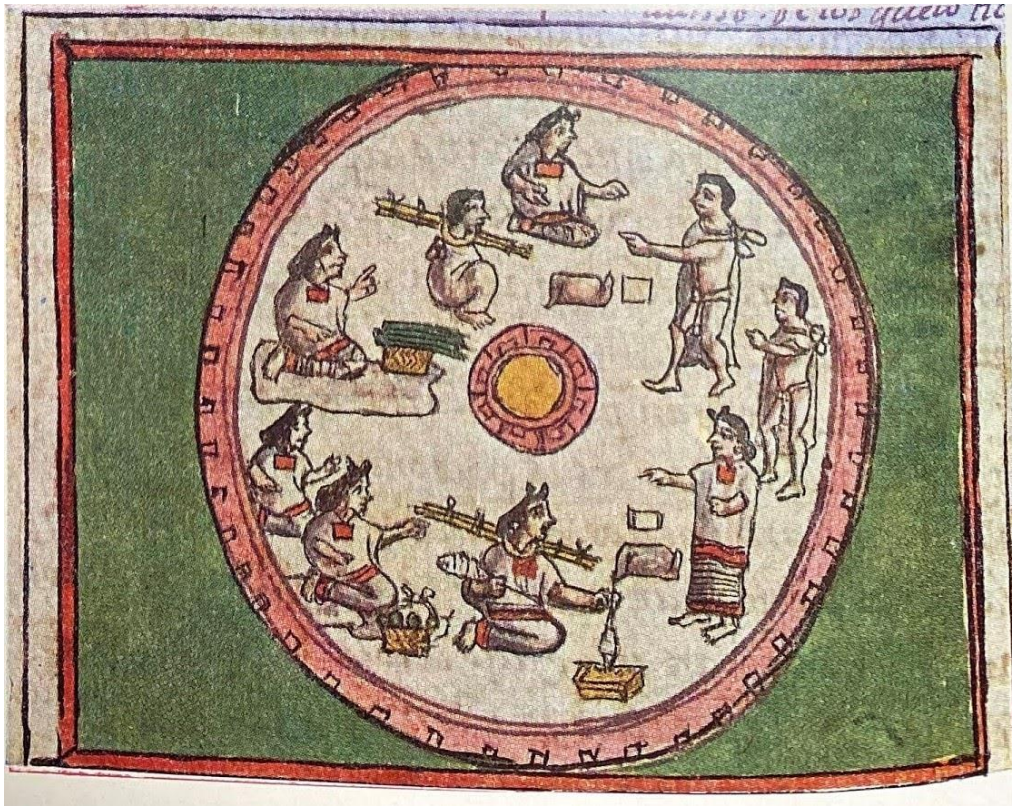


Figure 5.9. Source: Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e Islas de la tierra firme*, ed. Angel María Garibay K. (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1967).

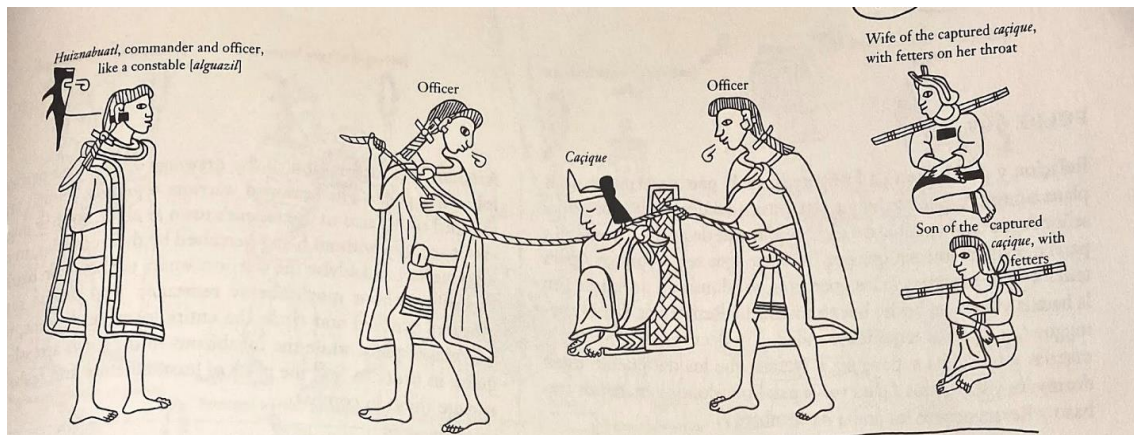


Figure 5.10. *Codex Mendoza*, fol. 66r, upper right. Source: Anawalt and Berdan, *Codex Mendoza*, 137.

The illustrations of enslaved women do not match, in these cases, the descriptions within the primary source materials. Every enslaved woman is shown in the illustrations to be married, yet the written descriptions either describe them as the “bad woman” or make no mention of their marital status. With the exception of the illustration of the enslaved family from Book 7, where the woman’s hairstyle indicating her status as married or as a mother is accurate, the other examples of enslaved women depict contradictions between visual representations and written representations.

First, if enslaved women were considered “sinful” or degenerate, similar to the prostitute, hermaphrodite, gambler, etc., then I would expect them not to be portrayed as the good mother or married woman unless they actually wore that hairstyle. In fact, women’s hairstyle may have nothing to do with slave status. A second explanation is that the illustrator is implying something by depicting enslaved women with this specific hairstyle. Could the illustrator be implying that the enslaved woman is not sexually available, even if they are not legally married or technically a mother? This implication of unavailability is tied to the fact that an individual—the enslaver—owns the enslaved, including in the case of female subjects, their reproductive rights. The legal punishment cases from the *Historia* clearly state when an enslaved woman gives birth, the child is free and is under the father’s legal status and protection.¹⁸⁵ This does, however, open the possibility of the enslaver being the father, in which case, could this mean that the enslaved woman could also be defined as a concubine?

Could the married-mother hairstyle indicate that even if the enslaved woman is not legally married to another free or enslaved individual, that they are technically the

¹⁸⁵ Phillips, “Notes upon the Codex Ramirez,” 641.

partner, wife or kin of the enslaver? This would then make them unavailable for marriage, sexual relations, or any type of relationship because they are essentially dependent upon and the “property” of the enslaver. This idea of property and sexual ownership over Aztec slave women, however, requires more research and investigation.

A third explanation is that the hairstyle of enslaved women may also be an attempt to invert societal norms and expectations and improve their condition. In the eighteenth century, some enslaved Africans and African Americans adopted hairstyles that showcased long and bushy hair as a way of affirming their difference from whites and others and “even of defiance, an attempt to revalorize a biological characteristic that white racism had sought to devalue.”¹⁸⁶ While enslaved Mexica women are not depicted as ethnically different from the noblewoman or other free women that we know of, the idea of styling their hair similarly to their enslaver (if the enslaver is female) or their enslaver’s wife or wives as an act of defiance, mockery/parody, or emulation is important to consider. Each interpretation comes with its own implications. Stylizing their hair as act of defiance against or as a parody of the enslaver and their condition allows some agency to the enslaved. Or, the enslaved woman is attempting to emulate the enslaver or enslaver’s wife in order to appear as a “good” higher class woman.

With the contradictions or lack of connections between the visual images and written aspects of the primary sources, specifically the *Florentine Codex*, the way the source is analyzed and interpreted needs to be discussed. Should we read the *Florentine Codex* text as fixed or should we read the text as variable? Due to the codex’s origins, the way it was created and produced and who created it, both Spanish and Indigenous

¹⁸⁶ White and White, *Stylin’*, 47.

creators/producers, we should read the codex as variable. The text is inconsistent, as there is Spanish bias within the text, primarily with the sections on religion and spirituality, but also with the good and evil binary of Spanish thought and philosophy. Within the *Florentine Codex*, particularly Book 10, descriptions of individuals and groups are split between the good and evil binary by which the Spanish divided their worldview. This is not the way the Aztec would have envisioned or categorized their world. In the Nahuatl or Aztec “moral universe,” they made “distinctions between order and chaos and moderation and excess.”¹⁸⁷ Descriptions of noblemen and women start with detailing the “good” nobleman before describing the “evil” one—which is how the Spanish see the world rather than the Aztec perspective.

It is also important to consider the way the author was writing—the terminology used and the translation—and the way the illustrator/artist was conveying a specific term or section of writing. There can be a disconnect between the writer, artist, and translator. Take for example, the hermaphrodite within *Florentine Codex* Book 10. Historian Pete Sigal argues that the visual image does not depict what the text describes as the hermaphrodite.¹⁸⁸ The description says the “hermaphrodite” has a penis, a man’s body, and is bearded.¹⁸⁹ The visual image does not have a beard or a man’s body, but appears to have breasts. Not every visual image within the primary sources have been translated or

¹⁸⁷ Pete Sigal, “Queer Nahuatl: Sahagún’s Faggots and Sodomites, Lesbians and Hermaphrodites,” *Ethnohistory* 54, no. 1 (2007), 24.

¹⁸⁸ Sigal, “Queer Nahuatl,” 24. Alongside this argument, Sigal argues that the Spanish translation by Sahagun and the English translation by Anderson and Dibble inaccurately translated the Nahuatl term, *patlache*, to mean hermaphrodite or ‘a lesbian.’ Sigal states there is no evidence of a sexual identity within the image and text from the *Florentine Codex*.

¹⁸⁹ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 11:56.

described accurately. The way enslaved individuals are illustrated in the sources, then, may not be reality.

Art historian Pamela Patton in her work on medieval Iberian imagery of slaves shows how visual language can connect or disconnect from the text of a manuscript or primary source. In the *Vidal Mayor*, Patton shows how the use of the word *moro*—which at the date of the source’s production meant both a Muslim and a slave—in the text initially differed from the visual language (the image associated with the text). The visual image depicts “two dark-skinned captives presented to a pale-skinned king by two equally white soldiers,” and for modern viewers, this could be interpreted as people of African-origin.¹⁹⁰ Patton argues instead that “these figures draw on a visual shorthand that was often used to represent slaves both in medieval Iberia and elsewhere, including some Islamic lands,” regardless of their geographical origin.¹⁹¹

When examining these visual images from the *Codex Mendoza* and *Florentine Codex* and what they are conveying to us, or how we are interpreting them, it can be said that some of the images may be visual shorthand. For example, the wooden collar around the neck of subjects in Aztec codices and pictorials is a visual shorthand for enslavement. Enslaved bodies were often “a surface on which signs of their inferior status were inscribed.”¹⁹² However, the symbol may not be reality. In examining and interpreting the primary sources and their illustrations, it is difficult to say here whether

¹⁹⁰ Pamela Patton, “Source: Initial Q from the Vidal Mayor: Two Soldiers Leading Two Slaves before a King,” accessed March 4, 2021, <http://medievalslavery.org/europe/source-initial-q-from-the-vidal-mayor-two-soldiers-leading-two-slaves-before-a-king/>.

¹⁹¹ Patton, “Source: Initial Q from the Vidal Mayor,” <http://medievalslavery.org/europe/source-initial-q-from-the-vidal-mayor-two-soldiers-leading-two-slaves-before-a-king/>.

¹⁹² White and White, *Stylin*, 40.

or not the hairstyles of the enslaved women and men symbolized their status or condition of enslavement.

In conclusion, the styling of hair is not only a performance of gender, but also age, occupation, and/or social station in Aztec society. Hair played a key role in religious ceremonies with the cutting of hair and “hair basket,” and in legal punishments with the shaving of the head, thus, revealing the social and cultural transformations of social conditions and statuses. The hairstyles of Aztec women are much more complex than the hairstyles of men, which are mainly based around occupation. The styling of women’s hair is based on age and social status—the noblewoman versus the commoner, the “good” woman versus the harlot. Unarranged hairstyles indicate in age a teenager or young adult who is not married or a mother, and sexual availability and promiscuousness. The arranged hairstyle of cords tied around the head indicates a married woman or a mother, and a woman of middle to old age.

Regarding the hairstyles of enslaved persons in the primary sources, it is much more complicated. The enslaved men and their hairstyles within the *Florentine Codex* and *Codex Mendoza* do not appear any different from their free counterparts, like the merchant or commoner. The only visual differentiation between enslaved and free men is the wooden collar around the enslaved man’s neck, which may be a visual shorthand used by the illustrator and does not necessarily reflect the day-to-day appearance of male slaves. Yet, the enslaved hairstyle described in the ceremony of Toxcatl indicates that enslaved men had a specific hairstyle that was short but not too short, and not smooth like

a gourd.¹⁹³ This hairstyle does not appear as a visual shorthand for slavery in the illustrations, however.

Enslaved women are all depicted with the married hairstyle of a free woman. Despite the fact that those who entered slavery by any means were considered “sinful” or degenerate according to the text, enslaved women were visually depicted as “good” women or married. A much more in-depth examination and analysis of hairstyles within Aztec society is needed, especially the hairstyles of women. This research would allow us to better understand class, social status/condition, age, occupation, and gender within the Aztec culture. Alongside this examination, there is need for an analysis of visual imagery of enslaved Mexica people across a variety of primary sources to help better understand how they are portrayed versus the reality (or as close to reality as we can get).

¹⁹³ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 3:66.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I examine the process of enslavement, slave status and labor, and the written and visual evidence of enslaved individuals within Mexica society. This analysis reveals the multifaceted process and establishment of Mexica enslavement and its key role in social class, gender and identity, and culture. I argue that enslaved women played a much more significant role than enslaved men in pre-Columbian Mexica society. This examination also allows us to paint a much more distinct picture of enslaved individuals and their lives in Mexica society.

Through an examination of the Mexica social hierarchy, it is revealed that slaves constituted both a social class and status. The enslaved class is at the bottom of the hierarchy, with “bathed slaves” holding a higher status within that class than the common enslaved individual. These enslaved individuals had certain legal protections, as shown through the *Historia*, and were afforded the right to marry freely and buy themselves back from their enslaver. Through the examination of slave labor and their economic production and value, I argue that enslaved women played a much more significant role in Mexica society than enslaved men.

The process of enslavement was a diminishment of social status within the Mexica hierarchy. There were seven avenues into slavery: enslavement as a legal punishment, debt-slavery, self-enslavement, selling of children, kidnapping, capture in warfare, and tribute or tax payment. An individual might be enslaved as a legal punishment for theft, murder, treachery or conspiracy, failure to pay back a debt, and

sexual relations with slave women. They might sell themselves or their children into slavery to obtain food and housing. They might be kidnapped and sold into slavery. An individual might be given as tribute or tax payment to the city-state and tlatoani that ruled over them. Or, they might be captured in warfare and either sacrificed or sold into slavery.

Through an examination of the one physical description of an enslaved individual in the *Florentine Codex* and the visual illustrations throughout the primary sources, an analysis of hairstyle and its connection to social status—free or enslaved; upper or lower class—occupation, age, and gender is revealed. The styling of hair in Mexica society was a performance of gender, age, occupation, and social status. It played a key role in religious ceremonies and legal punishment.

Enslaved hairstyles require more research and comparison of visual imagery throughout the primary source bases. But, through my examination, there seems to be a specific hairstyle for enslaved men, and it is similar to the commoner hairstyle. For enslaved women, it is unclear why they are all depicted with the married or mother hairstyle despite the text not indicating so. It could mean a lack of sexual availability or it could be a parody/mockery of noblewomen and their enslavers. It could simply indicate their age. Or, it could be the illustrator drawing every woman similarly, and only indicating her enslaved status with the wooden collar around her neck. More analysis and research on Aztec hairstyles and visual images of enslaved people within the primary sources is needed.

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