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PENITENTIAL RITE OF THE ANCIENT
MEXICANS**

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ZELIA NUTTALL

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A PENITENTIAL RITE

OF THE

ANCIENT MEXICANS

BY

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HONORARY ASSISTANT IN MEXICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

WITH 5 PLATES AND 3 TEXT ILLUSTRATIONS

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PENITENTIAL RITE OF THE ANCIENT MEXICANS.

WHATEVER views may be held concerning the religion of the Ancient Mexicans; whether we adopt the ideas promulgated by the Berlin school of Mexican mythology, which speaks of a Mexican "pantheon," and crowds its labyrinthian passages with innumerable "gods" and "goddesses;" or whether, as many analogies indicate, the Ancient Mexican sociological and religious system was a development on the same lines of thought which produced that of the Zuffi and Pawnee people of today, there is one point on which all must agree, namely, that the Ancient Mexicans practised their religion with a zeal and devotion worthy of a better cause.

It was not only the priesthood which subjected itself to a stern discipline which enforced prolonged fasts and excruciating self-torture, but the painful rite of drawing blood from one's body and offering it to the deity, commonly practised by all persons, young and old, was a feature of everyday life. Some time ago, whilst making a special study of the rituals of the Ancient Mexicans, I collected and translated, from the works of various writers, a number of passages relating to the native rite of drawing blood from the ear, the tongue, and other parts of the body. The fact that, in passages describing the rite of blood-sacrifice, the piercing or cutting of the helix of the ear is usually mentioned first, tends to show that a particular sanctity or significance was associated with this particular organ. The precedence accorded to this rite, which must not be confounded with the ceremonial of piercing the lobe of the ear for the purpose of wearing ear-ornaments, is particularly interesting in connection with Miss Alice Fletcher's recognition of the importance attached to the ceremonial piercing of the ear amongst the tribes of the Siouan group.

It has seemed to me that the most satisfactory method of presenting the material which I have collected from the writings of Friars Sahagun, Motolinia, Duran, Mendieta, the Chronicles of Tezozomoc and other authorities, would be to present literal translations of such passages as best preserve details and local coloring.

In honor of the Lord of the Night, this being one of the

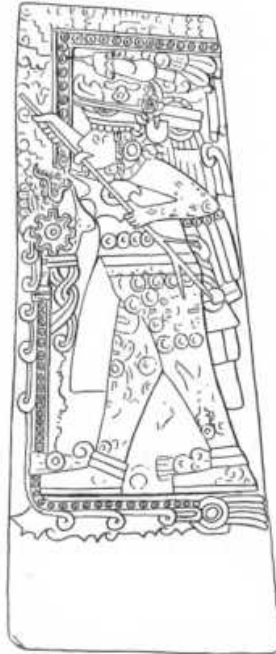


FIG. 1.

many titles bestowed upon Tezcatlipoca, the Lord of the North, of the Underworld, etc., a festival was held once or twice a year on the day Nahui Ollin. According to Sahagun the priests fasted during the four days preceding this festival and, at noon, blew conch-shells, flutes, and whistles, and then passed slender twigs or sticks through their tongues. An interesting bas-relief preserved at Jalapa (Fig. 1) illustrates

this painful rite, the most graphic description of which is given by Friar Mendieta in his *Historica Ecclesiastica Indiana* (chap. xvii): "At Tlaxcalla . . . the priests . . . performed an unheard of and horrible self-sacrifice . . . the servitors of the temple brought together a great quantity of sticks, as long as an arm and as thick as a wrist. These had been manufactured by a number of carpenters who had prepared themselves for doing so by fasting and praying during five days. The master stone workers, after praying and fasting, also made many black obsidian knives which were to be used in perforating the tongues of the priests and which, after having been sanctified, were laid on a clean cloth."

"They first performed a dance with songs and beating of drums. Then a master who was an expert in this office came with the obsidian knife, and made a large opening in the tongue of each of the principal priests . . . The Acheauhtli, or high priest then drew through his tongue, on that day, four hundred of those sticks. Other old, practised and strong-minded priests, imitating his example, also drew the same number of sticks through their tongues. The less aged priests used three hundred sticks, some of which were either as thick as a thumb, as a great toe or as the index and middle finger together. Younger priests did not employ more than two hundred sticks, but all according to their strength and valor, performed this rite, at the termination of which their aged leader intoned a chant, although he could hardly raise his voice on account of his lacerated tongue. All made efforts, however, to sing and offer sacrifices and then those of the temple began an eighty day fast during which, at intervals of twenty days, they drew the sticks through their tongues four times . . ."

In chapter xviii Mendieta specially describes the ear sacrifice performed by the priests who fasted during periods of four years and who, at intervals of twenty days, passed through the holes, cut in their ears, sixty pieces of cane, as long as an arm, some thick and some thin. "These blood-stained offerings were placed in a heap, in front of the idols and were burnt at the end of the four years . . ." Friar Sahagun relates that, every day of the year, the priests offered blood from their ears

to the sun at sunrise and also at noon, on the day *Nahui Ollin*, when all persons, old and young, also drew blood from their ears in strictly observed silence and in front of the sculptured and painted image of the Sun which was in the temple named *Quauhxicalco*. This image, the Friar adds, represented the sun as a human face encircled with rays. The partly unpublished MS. of Sahagun's work, preserved in Florence, contains an interesting illustration to this passage, in which the image of the sun is held by a man whose body is partly hidden, and two men, seated opposite to each other in the foreground, are in the act of piercing the helices or external borders of their ears (Fig. 2). On the same day and at the same hour, blood was



FIG. 2.

also drawn from the ears of "babes in their cradles," who were thus made to participate in the general blood-offering. All adults made offering of their blood during five days preceding the fixed festivals held at intervals of twenty days. The men made incisions in their ears and painted lines on their faces with the blood thus obtained. The lines they drew were straight and extended from the eyebrow to the jaw-bone. The women drew circles on their faces and, as an act of special devotion, sometimes offered blood in this way during a consecutive period of eighty days, cutting themselves at intervals of three or four days. This ceremony was named *Nenacaztequiliztli* (lit. the ear-cutting).

Another rite, named *Tlazcaltiliztli*, was performed, as an

act of homage to the sun or to the element fire, whenever any one finished building a new house, or when the sign of the sun reigned in the native Calendar.

This rite consisted in drawing a drop of blood from the ear and catching it on the nail of the first finger and flinging it towards the sun or into the fire.

Sahagun distinctly states that this rite was the same as that named *Acxoiatemaliztli* which he describes as follows: "As an act of devotion some offer their blood in the temples during the vigils of the festivals. In order to make their offering more acceptable they first went and gathered branches of the wild laurel named *Acxoiatl* which grows in great quantities in their woods, and brought them to the *calpulcos* or houses of communal government, situated in their respective quarters



FIG. 3.

of the city. There they took two of the sharp points of the agave leaf and drew blood from their shins, then carried these blood-stained points to the temple where they offered them to the god to whom they rendered devotion on a sort of circular cushion or mat made of the young branches of the wild laurel." Sahagun's association of this ceremony with the drawing of blood from the ear, is corroborated by an illustration contained in the Anon. Hispano-Mexican MS. preserved in the National Library at Florence entitled "The Book of the Life of the Ancient Mexicans" (Fig. 3).

This represents a step-pyramid surmounted by an image of the "Lord of the North or of the Underworld," and the per-