

This is an extract from:

Gender in Pre-Hispanic America

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Jeffrey Quilter, General Editor

Published by

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection

Washington, D.C.

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Trustees for Harvard University

Washington, D.C.

Printed in the United States of America

www.doaks.org/etexts.html

Asking about Aztec Gender: The Historical and Archaeological Evidence

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Anthropological studies of gender address gender roles, gender ideologies, and gender identities in human social life. Gender roles consist of the economic, political, and cultural activities of men and women as well as their status within society. Gender ideologies include the expectations, associations, and sentiments attached to gender categories. Gender identities refer to any individual's affiliation with a gender category and his or her feelings about that identity. Gender studies have three goals: (1) to describe the variation in gender roles, ideologies, and identities from one society to the next; (2) to define the child-rearing practices and forms of symbolic action by which gender roles, ideologies, and identities are produced; and (3) to examine the interaction of gender with other economic, political, and cultural processes (Conkey and Spector 1984; Conkey and Gero 1991).

In dealing with past societies, gender studies draw heavily upon archaeology and ethnohistory. Archaeology analyzes the material remains of past activities, while ethnohistory interprets the texts left by the members of a culture or by outside observers. Both sources of information are problematic. Ethnohistorical sources often describe the activities and attitudes of men and women, but they inevitably express the viewpoint of the writer, who is sometimes mistaken or biased, and—because of familiarity, discretion, or ignorance—may not tell us everything we want to know. Material culture is more democratic. All members of society leave material remains of their activities, even if the materials left by some are at times more striking than those left by others. Material culture is also more abundant: it is coextensive with human history. Texts are produced only during limited periods of a culture's past. However, the archaeological record is itself riddled with omissions: because of decay and site disturbance, only a fraction of the material record of human activity is available for study. Moreover, to move from material objects to the activities and attitudes of the

past, archaeologists must use a series of inferences or bridging arguments, so-called middle range theory.

Ethnohistory and archaeology complement each other. Each may provide information where the other is silent. On topics where both supply data, archaeology can be used to correct the errors and biases of literate observers, while ethnohistory can provide the bridging arguments that link material objects to past activities and attitudes. It is difficult to lay down a set of general procedures for testing the ethnohistorical record or interpreting artifacts. The historical and archaeological records are different for each region of the world, and in each region they offer different problems and possibilities for recovering gender. In all regions, however, gender research should be oriented toward questions that arise from coherent theoretical approaches to gender.

Political economy supplies one such approach. It studies the organization of production and exchange that underlies and supports a system of power. Since the mid-1970s, this approach to gender has generated two large bodies of literature relevant for the study of gender in the ancient past. The first includes studies of women and work. Literature on this subject explores women's (often neglected) participation in the domestic and extradomestic economies, their strategies for integrating domestic and extradomestic economic activities, the ways in which women's economic contributions do or do not translate into their status and power, the effect of gender ideologies upon the gendered division of labor, and the effect of women's economic activities upon their self-identities and sense of agency (Hartmann 1976, 1981; Friedl 1978; Tilly and Scott 1978; Nash and Fernández-Kelly 1983; Gero 1985; Leacock and Safa 1986; Benería and Roldán 1987; Stephen 1991; Tiano 1994).

A second, somewhat smaller, body of literature examines the relationship between women and the state. State formation has long been regarded as having important consequences for women's status (Engels 1972). Since most production in agrarian states is household-based, political leaders invariably intervene in household economic activity in order to extract goods and labor with which to fund their administrations (D'Altroy and Earle 1985; Brumfiel 1994). The state's demand for goods and labor produces change in the household division of labor; it also transforms the gender ideologies that order relationships among household members (Gailey 1985). Gender identities change in response to these new gender roles and ideologies. In addition, gender relationships may be altered by the state efforts to break up corporate kinship groups in order to end their monopoly of important resources. For example, the destruction of corporate kinship groups can leave women exposed to the demands of unreasonable fathers and husbands (Diamond 1951; Ortner 1978; Rapp 1978; Sacks

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1982; Leacock 1983; Conkey and Spector 1984; Gailey 1985; Silverblatt 1988).

In this essay, I examine what historical and archaeological data can tell us about the Aztec gender system when these data are explored from the perspective of political economy. After reviewing the nature of the Aztec historical and archaeological records, I turn to a particular class of archaeological data, ceramic spindle whorls, to investigate how the Aztec state was supported by a gender-based division of labor and how gender roles, ideologies, and identities were affected by the expansion of the Aztec state.

AZTEC ETHNOHISTORY

Historical sources concerning native life in Central Mexico are exceptionally rich. First of all, they include the usual records of discovery, conquest, and colonial administration produced by the Western empire builders (Cline 1973; Lockhart 1992). Such documents provide only snapshot portraits of native cultures. They lack historical depth, focus on only a narrow range of topics, and are uninformed by the native perspective. They are, therefore, of limited value. Nevertheless, observers like Hernán Cortés (1986) and Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1956) were sharper than most, and their descriptions of markets, palaces, political alliances, and rivalries supply information on the institutional context for Aztec gender systems.

Sources of the second type—sixteenth-century ethnographic documents such as Bernardino de Sahagún's (1950–82) Florentine Codex and the Codex Mendoza (Berdan and Anawalt 1992)—are much more informative. These works cover a wide range of topics, including the roles of men and women in production and ritual, their behavioral norms, and the domains of power of male and female gods. In addition, these documents are illustrated by native artists. The illustrations frequently provide information not given in the text, which can sometimes be used to critique the text itself. For example, the Florentine Codex shows women weaving, cooking, healing, midwiving, and marketing, which belies textual statements that recognize only cooking and weaving as women's work (Nash 1978: 356). Similarly, the *Primeros memoriales* (Sahagún 1993) shows women in ceremonial roles that are not mentioned in the text (Brown 1983).

Illustrations are especially valuable for archaeologists because they suggest how artifacts were used. From illustrations, archaeologists can extract ideas concerning artifacts' functions as well as the gendered division of labor. For example, the Florentine Codex does not state which members of the household hunted and which cared for domestic fowl, but it does contain illustrations of men hunting and turkeys being fed by women (Sahagún 1950–82, 10: fig. 188;

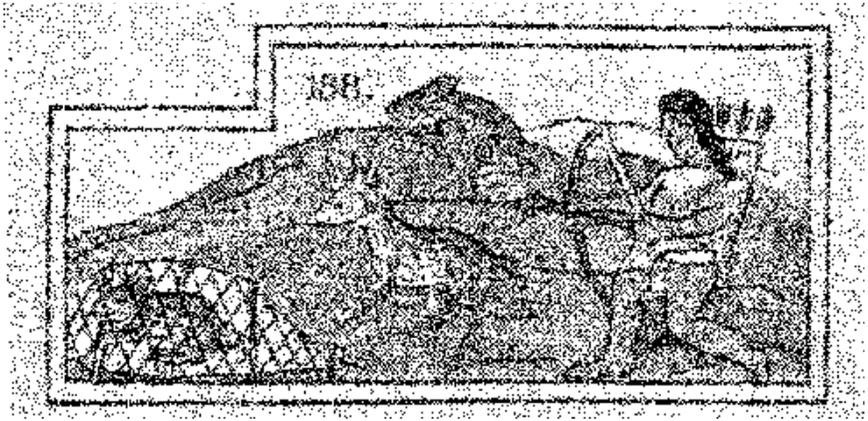


Fig. 1 Man hunting a deer and a rabbit (after Sahagún 1950–82, 10: fig. 188). Courtesy of the School of American Research, Santa Fe, N.M., and the University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

11: fig. 744; see Figs. 1, 2). This information helped me to interpret archaeological materials from Aztec Xaltocan. It lent plausibility to the argument that the decrease in the bones of aquatic birds and the increase in turkey bones at Xaltocan signaled a shift in the gendered division of labor, with increasingly less hunting by men and increasingly more turkey-raising by women (Brumfiel n.d.).

Native histories constitute a third category of ethnohistorical document. These come in two indigenous forms: illustrated annals (*xiuhamatl*) and cartographic histories (Boone 1994). They also survive from the colonial era as books that record the oral narratives accompanying ancient pictorial texts (Gibson 1975). Native historical documents deal with fewer topics than the ethnographic documents; they mostly record migrations, marriages, succession, and warfare. However, they do lend historical depth to these few topics, especially political organization. They also provide information on some forms of symbolic action, such as feasting and gift-giving, that were used to negotiate power and worldview (Brumfiel 1987; M. Smith 1987).

Native histories sometimes contain useful bits of random information. For example, from Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl's (1975–77, 1: 346) account of an encounter between a Texcocan prince and a commoner woman in the Chalca countryside, we learn that the woman was out gathering *aguamiel* (the sap of maguey plants). To my knowledge, this is the only source that mentions the fact that women gathered *aguamiel*. Such information can be used to call into question statements of gender ideology that appear elsewhere, such as the Florentine



Fig. 2 Woman feeding *teopochtli* seed to turkeys to fatten them (after Sahagún 1950–82, 11: fig. 744). Courtesy of the School of American Research, Santa Fe, N.M., and the University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

Codex assertion that “the girl was one who went nowhere” (Sahagún 1950–82, 4: chap. 1, 4).

Most important, when subjected to structural analysis, the native histories are highly informative with regard to the principles that ordered native gender systems (Gillespie 1989). Native gender stereotypes are revealed when male or female characters are repeatedly assigned the same roles in different historical incidents. For example, Susan Gillespie (*ibid.*) shows that women in Aztec history frequently initiate periods of chaos ending with their own sacrificial deaths and the establishment of new periods of order.

The corpus of historical documents from Central Mexico is so rich that archaeology is often dismissed as not very helpful. It is felt that the impoverished archaeological record can tell us little that we do not already know from historical documents. As rich as they are, however, the documents suffer from certain deficiencies.

First, the documents are temporally limited with regard to gender. They provide little information on gender norms and practices as they changed over time. June Nash (1978) has suggested that imperial expansion resulted in the subordination of Aztec women, but there is little information in the historical records that can be used to assess this argument. Second, the ethnographic

documents are geographically limited. Most of them come from the Aztec and colonial capital, Tenochtitlan/Mexico City; they may or may not reflect gender norms and practices in hinterland towns and villages. Hinterland settlements differed from political capitals both because they lacked the wealth and sophistication of centers and because, to resist exploitation, they organized themselves differently, especially in the areas of kinship, marriage, and gender (Gailey 1987; C. Smith 1995). Third, insofar as we know, writing was an exclusively male activity in Central Mexico; thus, the documents present the male view of gender norms and practices. They give voice to male hopes and expectations, without specifying whether these hopes were shared, contested, fulfilled, or frustrated by native women (McCafferty and McCafferty 1988). Finally, all of the documents were produced either by Spanish men or by men of the native ruling class who themselves interacted with the Spanish men. Thus, the gender norms and practices expressed in the documents may have been influenced by Western beliefs and customs (Brown 1983; Hill 1997; Burkhart, this volume). For example, it is possible that recorded versions of the story of the birth of the Aztec patron deity, Huitzilopochtli, appropriated Spanish concepts of gender and chastity to explain why Huitzilopochtli's sister, Coyolxauhqui, was angered when their mother became pregnant while performing temple service.¹

Archaeology can help to remedy the deficiencies of the historical record. However, the nature of the contribution that archaeology can make to Aztec gender studies depends on the particular character of Aztec archaeology.

AZTEC ARCHAEOLOGY

Elite Structures

The spectacular finds at the Aztec Great Temple appear to provide excellent opportunities for studying gender. Pieces of monumental art recovered from the excavations present female and male figures in stereotyped poses and contexts, while patterned arrangements of objects in buried offerings at the temple express the Aztecs' engendered worldview (López Luján 1994). However, the construction of both the temple and its contents was guided by the same class of elite males that supervised the production of native documents, and therefore engendered images at the temple tend to reiterate the views expressed in native histories. In fact, the Great Temple was meant to evoke the memory of

¹ A comparison of this list of deficiencies in Aztec documents with the one supplied by Costin (1995) for the Andean region suggests some of the ways in which the quality of historical records differs by geographic region, with varying implications for gender research.

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Huitzilopochtli's birth, which is recounted in the text and illustrations of the Florentine Codex and several other historical documents (Matos Moctezuma 1988: 135–145; Hill 1997). This story presents gender roles in highly ideological forms. For example, the main antagonist of the story, Huitzilopochtli's sister, Coyolxauhqui, is portrayed as a generator of cosmic conflict, an enemy who is destined for defeat (Klein 1988; Gillespie 1989). Her role as the antagonistic and subordinated "other" is commemorated in sculpture at the Great Temple: Coyolxauhqui's dismembered body, carved on a large monolith, was placed at the foot of the stairway leading to Huitzilopochtli's shrine. The archaeology of the Great Temple demonstrates that the gender roles communicated in oral narratives assumed material form in sculpture and ritual here. These material forms were one means of lending an aura of reality to the elite gendered mytho-logic (Kus 1982; DeMarrais, Castillo, and Earle 1996).

Although Coyolxauhqui occupies a prominent place in the external adornment of the Great Temple, women and female symbols are rare in other Great Temple contexts. For example, although the buried offerings at the Great Temple are organized according to a plan of binary opposition (López Luján 1994: 138–139), the opposition of male and female aspects in these offerings is muted. Instead, the opposition centers on heaven and earth, sun and rain, and fire and water (the opposing fluids that symbolized war). Warfare was seen as producing the union of contraries through the incorporation of the defeated by the conquerors; it therefore served as a metaphor for sexual intercourse and fertility (Klein 1994; López Luján 1994: 290–291). This was, however, a peculiar representation of fertility, where the female principle was displaced by the enemy male warrior while sexual intercourse was presented as an act of coercive dominance. Such androcentric symbolism seems to pervade the offerings.

In order to recover other views of gender in Aztec culture, archaeologists must work in nonelite settings. Artifacts and images, floor plans and burials from nonelite contexts are the fundamental sources of archaeological data used to reconstruct gender systems (Costin 1995).

Household Contexts

In the Basin of Mexico, a regional site survey has provided information on the size, complexity, and location of Aztec settlements (Sanders, Parsons, and Santley 1979). These data have not yet furnished any information on the Aztec gender system, but they have established its economic and political contexts. Potentially, the survey data could be combined with a documentary study of how the Aztec landscape was engendered through the naming of mountains and other natural features (e.g., Broda 1991: 89–90; Serra Puche, this volume;

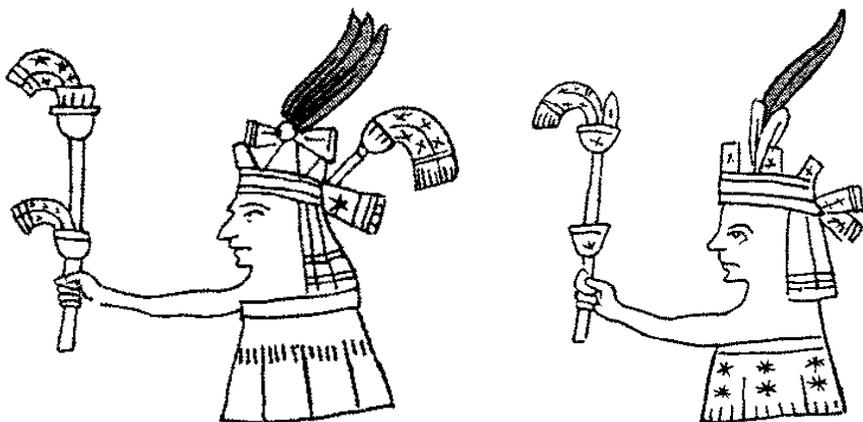


Fig. 3 Personifications of the volcanoes Popocatepetl (*left*) and Iztaccíhuatl (*right*) shaped from amaranth seed dough for ritual occasions (after Sahagún 1950–82, 1: figs. 25, 26). Courtesy of the School of American Research, Santa Fe, N.M., and the University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

see Fig. 3). This might enhance our understanding of both the way in which settlements were located and the way in which individuals came to view the gender system as part of the natural order.

Intensive surface collection and excavations in the hinterland settlements surrounding Triple Alliance capitals have yielded large assemblages of artifacts, many of which are quite informative about the operation of the Aztec gender system at the household level. Usually (but not always; see Dobres 1995) the first step in studying gender on the basis of artifacts is gender attribution. This means establishing that certain categories of artifacts were used in tasks performed primarily by men or women, or that certain attributes (for example, particular design elements) or certain sectors of household and settlement space were regarded as characteristically male or female. Once the artifacts and contexts are thus engendered, they can be employed in three kinds of studies. The artifacts can be used, first, to trace changes in the intensity or the organization of female and male labor, and second, to study the cultural processes by which the gender system was generated. Third, artifact decoration can serve as a medium for recovering distinctive male and female views on gender and other issues.

The floor plans of residential structures are also valuable sources of information on gender. The arrangement of rooms and the distribution of male and female activities within household space can reflect the level of control exer-



Fig. 4 Ceramic spindle whorls from Huexotla, Basin of Mexico: large spindle whorls for maguey fiber (*top*) and small spindle whorls for cotton (*bottom*). Note that the large whorls are painted and have molded decorations, while two of the small whorls are plain. Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

cised by male and female household members (Hodder 1984; Moore 1986; Small 1987; Hastorf 1991; Hendon 1992). The distribution of facilities for gender-specific work and ritual can suggest the opportunities for men or women of different households to gather together in order to nurture their separate male or female views and their collective power (Jackson 1991).

Burials supply two further important sources of data on gender, i.e., skeletons (Cohen and Bennett 1993) and burial arrangements (Robb 1994; Joyce n.d.). However, since few Aztec burials have been recovered, these data contribute little to the following discussion.

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Current limitations of the archaeology of gender include (1) a lack of imagination with regard to the archaeological situations in which gender might be “seen,” and (2) a lack of imagination concerning the theoretical questions that might be asked about gender, questions that go beyond statements of “women did this, and men did that.” For this reason, I devote the remainder of this essay to investigating what we can learn about the Aztec gender system by analyzing



Fig. 5 Mother holding unspun cotton teaches her four-year-old daughter to spin. Note the dark-colored spindle whorl on the end of the spindle and a tortilla above. Codex Mendoza, fol. 58r (after Berdan and Anawalt 1992).

archaeological data—in this case, spindle whorls—using research questions generated by the literature on women and work and on women and the state.

Spindle whorls are perforated ceramic disks used to weight spindles during spinning (Fig. 4). The use of spindle whorls is illustrated in several documents (Sahagún 1950–82, 8: chap. 16; Berdan and Anawalt 1992: fols. 58r, 68r), and they are still used in many areas of Mexico today (Parsons and Parsons 1990: 317–332; Berdan n.d.). Mary Parsons (1972) has shown that the spindle whorls from the Basin of Mexico fall into two categories—small and large.² According to Parsons, the small spindle whorls were used for spinning cotton, and the large for spinning maguey fiber. Parsons's suggestion is widely accepted (e.g., Mason 1980; Smith and Hirth 1988; Brewington n.d.).

Spindle whorls, and textile production in general, were heavily gendered as female in Central Mexico. Sixteenth-century ethnographic documents provide pictures of baby girls being awarded spindles to signify their life's work as

² Small spindle whorls weigh 10 grams or less and have hole diameters of 2 to 4 millimeters. Large spindle whorls weigh more than 10 grams with hole diameters of 6 to 12 millimeters.

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spinners and weavers. Girls were taught to spin and weave from the age of four, while boys were taught other crafts (see Fig. 5; also Berdan and Anawalt 1992: fol. 57r). Sahagún (1950–82, 6, chap. 18) reports that girls (but not boys) were told, “Apply thyself well to the really womanly task, the spindle whorl, the weaving stick. . . .” Gerónimo de Mendieta (1980: 122–123) states that in noble families little girls showed their fathers their weaving in order to receive their praise or reprimand, while little boys presented their fathers with the flowers and fruits that their mothers had given them for the purpose (see Rodríguez 1988: 49–50). Female goddesses were portrayed with spindles adorning their hair and weaving implements in their hands (Sahagún 1950–82, 1: illus. 6, 12; see McCafferty and McCafferty 1991). Thus, the historical record provides strong evidence that spinning and spindle whorls were gendered female.

In Central Mexico, women wove to produce clothing (Anawalt 1981; Hicks 1994), which served a number of functions. In the high intermountaine basins of the Aztec heartland, clothing provided welcome protection against cool morning and evening air, but it was also worn because of modesty and concerns about pollution (see Monaghan, this volume) and to assert one’s affiliation with gender, class, and ethnic groups (Anawalt 1981). Rulers distributed gifts of clothing to validate social status and to win political allies (Berdan 1975: 126–129; Broda 1976: 41–42). Cloth was demanded as tribute by both local lords and imperial rulers (Guzmán 1938; Mólins Fábrega 1954–55; Berdan 1975; Hicks 1982: 238–241), as well as being used as currency in regional markets (Motolinía 1971: 374). Since cloth was so important in the economic and political affairs in ancient Mexico, accumulating stores of tribute cloth became a primary concern of the Aztec state (Fig. 6).

Using a diachronic analysis, we can examine the impact that the creation and expansion of the Aztec Triple Alliance had on existing gender systems. To begin with, we might ask how the increased demand for tribute cloth affected household economic activity. In order to answer this question, we can examine changes in the frequency of use of small spindle whorls and other implements used in household tasks.

The appearance of cotton textiles on almost every page of Aztec tribute lists (see Berdan and Anawalt 1992) leads us to expect that the quantity of small spindle whorls increased markedly as each province was brought under imperial control. Dramatic increases in the quantity of small spindle whorls did occur in some areas, but not in others; for example, spindle whorl numbers did not increase in prime food-producing regions close to Tenochtitlan (Brumfiel 1991). This suggests that households in different regions had different strategies for acquiring cloth that was to be used as tribute. In many areas, women wove

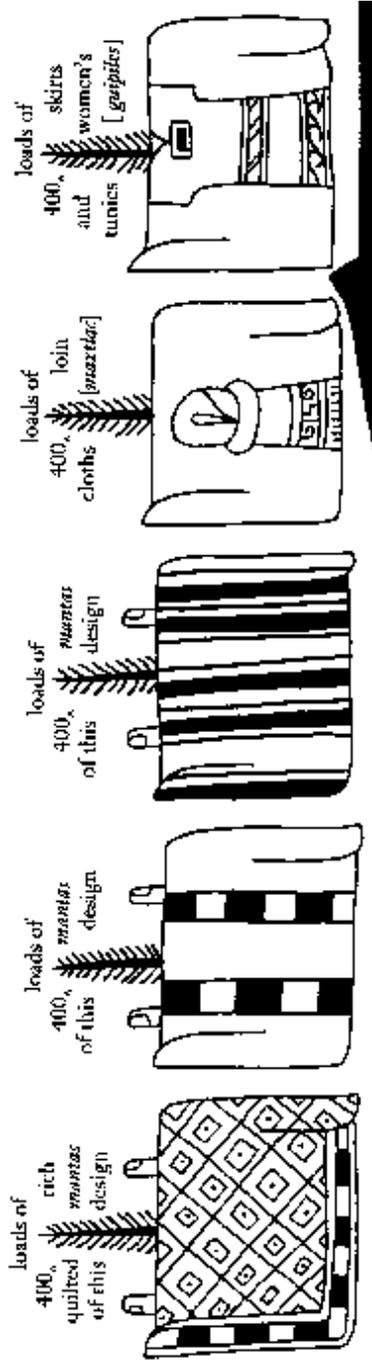


Fig. 6 Tribute cloth paid to the Aztec Triple Alliance by the province of Coaxtlahuacan, in the Codex Mendoza (after Berdan and Anawalt 1992). The tribute included loads of cotton mantles bearing designated patterns as well as loads of loincloths, blouses, and skirts. The treelike element at the top of each bundle designates units of 400. The fingers attached to the first three bundles may specify the required length of the cloth. Codex Mendoza, fol. 43r (Berdan 1992: 95).

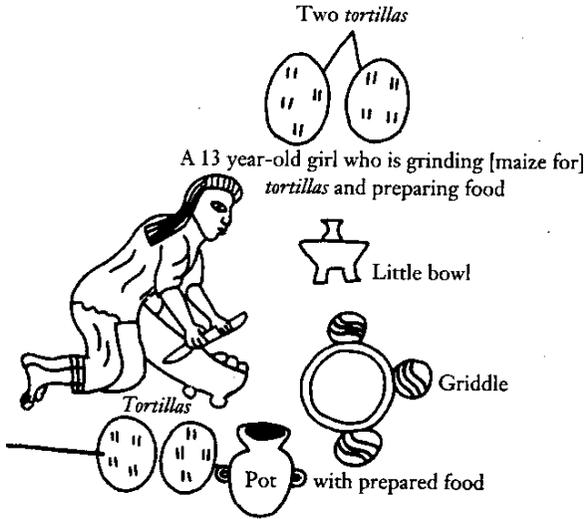


Fig. 7 A thirteen-year-old girl making tortillas. Note the jar containing soaked corn and the griddle on a three-stone hearth waiting to receive tortillas. Codex Mendoza, fol. 60r (after Berdan and Anawalt 1992).

the cloth that their households paid as tribute. However, in prime agricultural areas close to the Triple Alliance capitals, the production of food surpluses for sale in urban markets enabled households to purchase the textiles that they needed to meet their tribute payments. Thus, the impact of the state policies on household labor, and particularly women's labor, was variable. It was modified by the character of local resources and the accessibility of markets. While the ethnohistorical record suggests uniformity, the archaeological record reveals variation.

Did the state's demand for tribute cloth create ripple effects in other aspects of the gendered division of household labor? Apparently so. Cooking, like weaving, was gendered as women's work in Aztec culture (see Fig. 7; Guzmán 1938: 94; Sahagún 1950–82, 10: chap. 3; Díaz del Castillo 1956: 73, 138, 205; Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1975–77, 1: 347; Berdan and Anawalt 1992: fol. 60r). Changes in the quantities of different cooking vessels reveal that changes in food preparation routines must have occurred to accommodate the need to acquire cloth. Within the Basin of Mexico, the numbers of jars decreased while those of griddles increased, suggesting that food was less commonly stewed and more commonly toasted under the Triple Alliance rule. In Mexican cooking, stewed

foods require less labor than foods prepared on the griddle; however, Blanton et al. (1981: 71–72) suggest that foods prepared on griddles are drier and more portable than foods prepared in jars. Drier foods, they argue, become more popular when household members are drawn away from their homes by the extrahousehold labor demanded by the state. In the Basin of Mexico, dry griddle-cooked food may have been preferred by commoners who were cultivating new, more distant, fields and carrying the surplus to urban markets in order to purchase tribute cloth. In regions like Morelos, however, where women wove more and households marketed less, stewed food retained its popularity and jars predominated throughout the prehistoric era (see Brumfiel 1991). Thus, archaeology suggests that the Aztec state caused a general reorganization and renegotiation of household activities.

In some circumstances, this reorganization might have led to a major alteration in the gendered division of labor. For example, at Cholula, in a mass grave containing the remains of fifty individuals, spindle whorls were associated with both male and female skeletons, suggesting that both men and women engaged in textile production (Suárez Cruz 1989; G. McCafferty 1992).³ This poses an interesting series of questions. What economic and political conditions drew men into “women’s work”? What were the consequences for individuals involved, for the gender system, and for the wider social structure? The investigation of the social identity and fate of these males who spun seems to offer a fruitful line of research, warning us that gendered divisions of labor are not absolute and eternal, even when they are strongly inscribed in a culture.

Increases in the quantity of labor demanded from the household might be accompanied by decreases in its quality. The functional and formal attributes of spindle whorls might reflect the effort invested in cotton cloth production. For example, spindle whorl weights and diameters vary according to the quality of the thread being spun (Parsons and Parsons 1990: 316–332; Barber 1991: 52–53; Keith n.d.; McCafferty and McCafferty 2000). Greater weights and diameters imply the production of a thicker, more loosely spun thread and a poorer-quality cloth, while smaller weights and diameters imply the production of a finer, more tightly spun thread and a higher-quality cloth.

Data from six sites in Central Mexico show that spindle whorl weights and diameters either remained constant or declined under Aztec and Spanish rule, when tribute demands were heavy (Brumfiel 1996). This is surprising since we might expect that women would produce lower-quality cloth in response to

³ Spinning by males during the mid-20th century has also been reported by the Mexican ethnographer Miguel de Mendizábal (1947: 162) for the Mezquital Valley.

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the demand for more tribute; yet evidently they did not. The explanation might involve considerations of gender ideology. Women might have produced high-quality tribute cloth because skills in spinning and weaving were important measures of a woman's status. Alternatively, the quality of cloth could have been maintained through state coercion (Brumfiel 1996).⁴

The decorative attributes of spindle whorls may indicate the attachment of women to their identities as cloth producers. In many regions of the world, the decorated artifacts serve as sources of gender identity and gender claims to power (Hodder 1982; 1986: 105–115). Sharisse and Geoffrey McCafferty (1991) suggest that spindle whorls in Postclassic Central Mexico bore elaborately painted, molded, or incised decorations because they were an important means of communicating female identity and power.

In Cholula, for example, spindle whorl decorations enabled women to identify with the power of both female deities and the priestesses, midwives, and curers associated with them (McCafferty and McCafferty 1991). Early Postclassic spindle whorls in Cholula were sometimes decorated with bitumen, which was associated with Tlazolteotl, an earth goddess connected with childbirth, the moon, menses, purification, sexuality, witchcraft, and healing (Sullivan 1982). In ethnographic documents Tlazolteotl is portrayed with a headband of unspun cotton, spindles (with whorls) in her hair, and bitumen paint around her mouth (Fig. 8). Thus, women who spun with bitumen-decorated spindle whorls asserted their access to the considerable power exercised by Tlazolteotl (Fig. 9; McCafferty and McCafferty 1991).

The importance of spinning for women's identity, however, evidently diminished as women became more heavily engaged in tribute cloth production. This is suggested by changes in the quantity and quality of spindle whorl decoration. For example, in the northern and central Basin of Mexico, large spindle whorls were often decorated, while small spindle whorls were generally plain. Possibly, women felt that their role as providers of maguey-fiber clothing for their households was a source of pride and personal prestige, while their role as producers of cotton tribute cloth for the empire was not. In the southern Basin of Mexico, Robbie Brewington (n.d.) found that spindle whorl decoration became simplified under Aztec rule. Complex spindle whorls (i.e., painted, carved, and polished, or painted, engraved, and polished) accounted for 50 per-

⁴ McCafferty and McCafferty (2000: 46) suggest that thin thread and lightweight cloth were produced under Spanish rule in order to stint on raw materials and resist tribute demands. However, demands by Spanish administrators that tribute cloth be "*mejor tejidos y más delgados*," that is, better woven and thinner (Riley 1973: 47) suggest that lightweight tribute cloth was actually produced in response to Spanish requirements.



Fig. 8 The Aztec goddess Tlazolteotl, with a band of unspun cotton around her forehead and two spindles stuck in her hair. The lower half of her face is painted with bitumen (after Sahagún 1950–82, 1: fig. 12). Courtesy of the School of American Research, Santa Fe, N.M., and the University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

cent of the spindle whorls deposited before Aztec dominance, but only for 23 percent of the whorls deposited during the period of Aztec rule. Conversely, simple spindle whorls (i.e., plain unpainted or molded unpainted) accounted for 40 percent of the pre-Aztec whorls and 73 percent of the Aztec whorls. In Cholula, as the McCaffertys (2000) report, moldmade spindle whorls recovered from an Early to a Middle Postclassic context were very carefully crafted. In contrast, moldmade spindle whorls from a Late Postclassic context were poorly formed, with uneven impressions. Thus, both Brewington's and the McCaffertys' data suggest that the significance of women's roles as spinners and weavers weakened as tribute extraction intensified.⁵

⁵ Who controlled the production and decoration of these artifacts, with their messages about gender? Archaeological data suggest that spindle whorls were probably made by craft specialists (see Charlton, Charlton, and Nichols [1993: 163] for a description of a spindle whorl workshop). If women did not make their own spindle whorls, then how did the spindle whorls come to bear decorations that underscored women's power? Did the craft specialists share in these conceptions of women's power? Were the craft specialists themselves women? Given the presence of a highly developed market system, did the craft specialists cater to female customers who purchased spindle whorls according to their own tastes? The archaeological study of spindle whorl production now being undertaken by Cynthia Otis Charlton at Otumba may reveal how gender identity formation was affected by the regional market system.



Fig. 9 Spindle whorl with bitumen paint from Santa Cecilia in the Basin of Mexico. Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Within states, gender systems differ according to class (Fernández-Kelly 1983; Benería and Roldán 1987; Silverblatt 1987; Ohnersongen n.d.). Therefore, we might expect that gender roles, ideologies, and identities were different for Aztec commoners and nobles. These distinctions might be reflected in the spatial distribution of spindle whorls in the houses of elites or commoners. Both in the Basin of Mexico and in Cholula, spindle whorls are widely distributed throughout the rooms of commoners' houses (Evans 1988; McCafferty and McCafferty 2000). Evidently, female commoners were not confined to particular rooms or work areas; they seem to have enjoyed autonomy within the domestic sphere. However, space may have been more segregated in upper-class residences. In a hinterland palace in the Teotihuacan Valley, excavated by Susan Evans (1988: 118–181), the floor areas of public rooms at the front of the palace near the entry (Rooms T–Y) contained fewer spindle whorls than domestic suites along the back of the palace, and a semi-public dias room in the middle of the palace (Room L) contained an intermediate number of spindle whorls (Fig. 10). The number of spindle whorls found on living floors, twelve, is relatively small, and their association with these floors is not certain. Thus, this single example supplies no compelling argument. However, the low number of spindle whorls near the entrance to the palace may indicate that women engaged in spinning were not usually present in the public areas of the palace

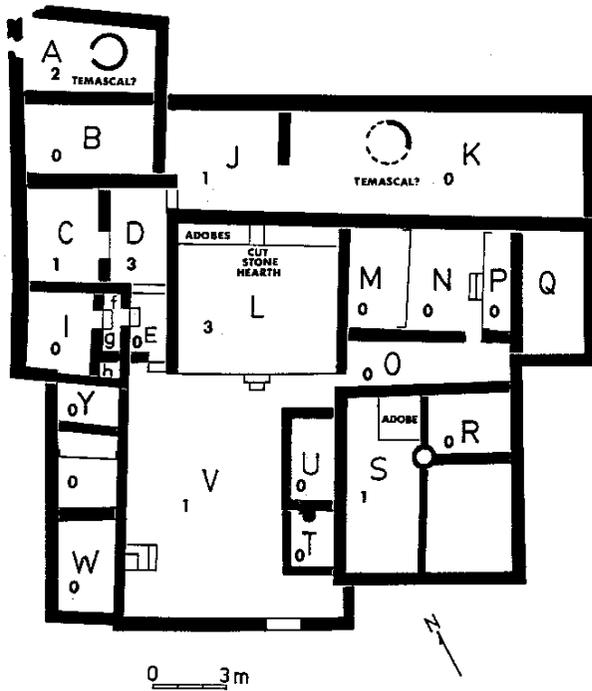


Fig. 10 Plan of Structure 6, a provincial palace at Cihuatecan, Basin of Mexico. The number of spindle whorls found in each room is noted; most were recovered in rooms at the back of the structure. Possible sweatbaths were found in rooms A and K (after Evans 1991: fig. 3.10).

and enjoyed only limited participation in the administrative activities that occurred in these areas. This appears to have been the case in the Classic Maya households investigated by Julia Hendon (1992) at Copán, Honduras.

Spindle whorls were present in intermediate numbers along the back of the palace where two possible sweatbaths (*temazcalli*) were located. In Aztec culture, sweatbaths were used to cure both men and women of disease, but women also visited sweatbaths regularly before and after childbirth (see Fig. 11; Sahagún 1950–82, 1: 70; 6: 155; 8: 48; Boone 1983: fol. 77r; see Houston 1996). Evans (1991: 88) suggests that, since sweatbaths were not present in every residential structure at Cihuatecan, women from several households might have converged at the available facilities, for example, those present in the Cihuatecan palace. The patchy distribution of these ceremonial facilities promoted



Fig. 11 Midwife massaging a pregnant woman in a sweatbath (after Sahagún 1950–82, 6: fig. 25). Courtesy of the School of American Research, Santa Fe, N.M., and the University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

interhousehold contacts among women. Sweatbaths might have constituted a segregated female context where a separate female identity could be nurtured. Interestingly, however, the documents warn us that this was not an exclusively female space. Diego Durán (1971: 270) insists that “when women went to bathe, if they were not accompanied by a man or two, they dared not enter, considering it ill fortune. In the same way, in our own times, a man dares not enter if a woman does not accompany him.” Thus, it is uncertain whether the sweatbath was an institution that nurtured the development of a “backroom transcript,” a separate women’s world-view (Scott 1992).

CONCLUSIONS

This discussion has focused on spindle whorls, artifacts that were clearly gendered female in Aztec culture. Would a discussion of male artifacts yield similar results concerning the status of Aztec men? Perhaps not. In drafting men into military service or labor on public works, states often establish relations with men that are not duplicated in their relations with women. Thus, states introduce asymmetries in female and male ideologies and identities (Nash 1978; Silverblatt 1988; Hastorf 1991), which are sometimes reflected in the archaeological record.

For example, in Aztec assemblages there is no category of artifact that is as significant for male identity as spindle whorls are for female identity. It is always

dangerous to argue from an absence of evidence in archaeology; in this case, however, the absence of highly symbolic male artifacts seems to be confirmed by the illustrations in ethnohistorical documents where male commoners in plain clothing work with plain tools. Such male artifacts may be absent because male ideology was broadcast through the use of larger, more public media such as temple mounds and monumental sculpture. The absence of household artifacts symbolic of male identity might thus suggest that male commoners had less opportunity than females to construct their own identities and that they were more absorbed by the system of militaristic achievement promoted by the Aztec state. If so, then in important ways, male commoners had less ability to pursue their own interests than did female commoners.

One of the strengths of archaeological data is the ability to recover variability in past gender systems. Whereas ethnohistory often gives us a static, normative view of gender systems, archaeological data reveal how gender roles, ideologies, and identities varied according to geography, social status, and changing economic and political conditions. This variation challenges the idea of a single, genetically determined gender system existing for humans, and it even calls into question the idea that gender systems are rigidly dictated by culture. Numerous factors in Central Mexico generated wide variation in gender roles, ideologies, and identities, and these components of the gender system were not stable, but changed even as environmental variables and social practices evolved.

Archaeologists can use the spatial, temporal, and social variation in gender roles, ideologies, and identities to make controlled comparisons of gender systems and to test new theories of gender system development. For example, in Central Mexico, spinning as a part of a woman's role reached its peak importance (gauged by spindle whorls' numbers) during the period of Aztec rule when large quantities of tribute cloth were produced in commoners' households. However, spinning as a part of a woman's identity (as gauged by spindle whorl decoration) was most salient at an earlier point in time, during the Middle Postclassic period. This suggests that the importance of an activity in terms of gender roles does not directly determine its salience in terms of gender identities. Probably, in determining an activity's significance for gender identity, the social relations implicated in that activity should carry equal or more importance than the sheer quantity of labor devoted to it (Hodder 1984:108–109).

As archaeologists explore the complex range of variables that affect gender systems, they will begin to identify the strategic, and often creative, choices that women and men made as they navigated ecological and social structures in pursuit of their goals. Although artifacts are fragmentary and nonverbal, they have the advantages of being ubiquitous and sensitive to variation. With these

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advantages, archaeology is sometimes able to recover more of the agency of past peoples than is history with its reliance upon a documentary record, which is more articulate but also more limited and normative.

Acknowledgments This essay has benefited greatly from the comments and criticisms of Mary Collar, Margaret Conkey, Susan Evans, Cecelia Klein, Bille Wickre, and the anonymous reviewers of this volume. I am grateful for the time and intelligence that all of these scholars have generously lent to improve this discussion. Susan Evans was particularly helpful in specifying which spindle whorls from Cihuatecpan were found immediately above and below the living floors, therefore possibly reflecting women's activity areas.

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