

## The Jaguar: The Aztecs' Dark Side of Power.

SANDRA BUSATTA

Anthropologists have found especially useful to analyse human relationships with animals, including the meanings assigned to them and the ways of classifying them (Mullin 1999:207, Foucault 1970, Ritvo 1991, Haraway 1991, Geertz 1994). Lévi-Strauss in particular, thought that animal species offered «conceptual support for social differentiation» (1963:101). In his study of feline symbolism, Saunders (1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1998, 2001), in turn, argues that studying it offers the prospect of understanding «a deeply rooted, pan-American, and fundamentally shamanic conception of political power» (1998:43). In addition, Saunders analyses the Aztec god Tezcatlipoca to support the jaguar metaphor of Aztec royal power. Both arguments are nothing new.<sup>1</sup> I am going to demonstrate, however, that jaguar-power does not actually represent royal power in general, but its darkest aspect within the Aztecs' dualistic conception of the universe.

If the feline can be considered the great unifying factor in Pre-Columbian cultures, only the jaguar (*Panthera onca*) and the puma (*Felis concolor*, also known as cougar or mountain lion) pre-occupied Amerindian artists and religious thinkers. The jaguar-shaman religious complex has been established as one of the fundamental traits of royal power in Central and South America for decades<sup>2</sup>. It is an archaic shamanic substratum which runs through the Americas, as Furst (1972:67, 42) put it, suggesting an Asian origin associated with the metaphoric cluster made of the bird, the tiger and the serpent, which in Mesoamerica became the eagle, the jaguar and the serpent. On the other hand, the eagle-jaguar complex, central to the Aztec warrior cult in Tenochtitlan, originated among the Toltecs, and Tezcatlipoca itself is thought of as Toltec-Chichimec, and therefore, of probable northern origin (Caso 1953, Tozzer 1957:129-35).

In a nutshell, Nahuatl theology, of which the Aztec one is a latter day development,

is based on duality: an immediately perceivable trait is the dual, androgynous character of many deities, and the tension between opposing, complementary pairs (or twins) of divine beings (Léon-Portilla 1990 [1959])<sup>3</sup>. The universe was also structured around opposing/complementary pairs: female/male, cold/warm, lower/upper, jaguar/eagle, number 9 (the 9 levels of the underworld)/ number 13 (the 13 levels of the upper world), underworld/sky, night/day, dry/rainy, etc. Tezcatlipoca can be understood only within this dualistic thinking: he created the first and darkest of the five Suns, called *Nahui Ocelotl* or “4 Jaguar”, which was destroyed by jaguars (Léon-Portilla 1990 [1959], Durand 2004). Tezcatlipoca is the god of the sorcerers, the adulterers and the assassins, the acrobats, jesters and puppeteers, the patron of the slaves and the warrior school for commoners, the *telpochcalli* (Caso 1953)<sup>4</sup>. He stands for the nocturnal sky (the diurnal sky and the south, are represented by the tribal god of the Aztecs, Huitzilopochtli<sup>5</sup>), the earth sun with lunar traits. Handsome, young, lame and left-handed, Tezcatlipoca is associated with sexual excess, homosexuality included<sup>6</sup>, sin and punishment, repentance and sacrifice, fate and deceit (Léon-Portilla 1990 [1959]). His smoking mirror hides more than reveals<sup>7</sup>; he is a creator-demiurge, a trickster and a god of discord. In contrast, he is the patron of princes and, as One Acatl, presides banquets; his glyph is the sacrifice knife (Caso 1953, Léon-Portilla 1990 [1959])<sup>8</sup>. The Jaguar Throne is a metaphor for Aztec power (Benson 1997), albeit usually in the phrase “the Eagle and Jaguar Throne” (Davies 1973:152).

Furthermore, Aztec beliefs about the jaguar can be summarized, after Kubler (1972), this way: first, as the image of Black Tezcatlipoca<sup>9</sup> as patron of the north, struck by the spear of the planet Venus (Quetzalcoatl, as god of Dawn) in the second phase of its revolution. He ruled the night from his northern abode, with his wheel, called Jaguar (the Big Dipper or Big Bear); he presided over the

cosmic ball court (Gemini) where the gods played a game to set the fate of humankind. He lit the fire sticks (Orion's belt) that brought warmth to the hearth and, at the end of every 52 years cycle, he tinned the rattlesnake's tail (the Pleiades) so that it passed over at midnight, and his festival was at the winter solstice (Aveni 2001). Second, as designation for brave warriors (the Jaguar order, representing the deceitful, cunning, furtive fighters), usually mentioned together with the Eagle warriors in ritual chants, poetry and the Codices (Léon-Portilla 1990 [1959]). Third, as the devourer of the sun during eclipses, hence the representative of darkness and earth (Aveni 2001, Caso 1953). Fourth, as an image of Tlazolteotl, the moon goddess of the 14<sup>th</sup> day. She was one of Tezcatlipoca's four wives, and the most important goddess associated with individuals considered asocial, such as prostitutes, adulterers and sodomites. Her name, although usually translated as Goddess of Filth, could also read Divine Filth or even Divine Excrement. She “ate” spiritual ordure, heard all confessions and removed corruption (Klein 1993). Fifth, as the jaguar form (*nahual*) of Tepeyollotl, the god of caves and regent of the west and the sunset, the celestial region where the mothers dead at childbirth accompanied the sun (Graulich 1981)<sup>10</sup>. Tezcatlipoca's *nahualli* (animal guises) are the jaguar Tepeyollotl (the Heart of the Mountain), the coyote (*canis latrans*) Huehucoyotl (Old Coyote, there was also a Coyote warrior order), the turkey or Jewelled Fowl (Huey Xolotl, the Great Xolotl, a dog deity), and an eerie apparition named Ioalteputztli (Night Axe), whose chest and belly were broken open and who tested men's bravery (Klein 1993). Sixth, the Aztecs separated the Toltec cult of Tezcatlipoca as a jaguar from that of Quetzacoatl as a feathered serpent. Tezcatlipoca was especially worshipped in Texcoco, the intellectual capital of the Aztecs (Caso 1953). Duality governed not only the Aztec pantheon, but also the state, which was made of the Triple Alliance of the Mexica of

Tenochtitlan, the Acolhua of Texcoco and the Tepaneca of Tlacopan. The Chronicles relate that the *tlatoani* (the “orator” or the “speaker”, like Moctezuma II, represented Huitzilipochtli as warrior sun) took no decision without consulting the *cihuacoatl* or Snake Woman, and no decision was valid if Snake Woman had not given his consent (Davies 1973, Olguin 2004). The *cihuacoatl* was a position that was always held by a man, and probably reflects the religious conception of the Aztec universe: that the universe had been created from a male and a female principle. The fact the *cihuacoatl* was a female name (it is also the name of the earth goddess presiding over childbirth and fertility, one of Tezcatlipoca’s four wives) indicates that it was probably meant to represent the female principle<sup>11</sup>. Hence, the *tlatoani* represents the “outside” and male creative power, the *cihuacoatl* the “inside” and female creative power.

Saunders (1994a, 1994b, 1994c) does not explain well why volcanic obsidian, and the heat of volcanoes are associated to Tezcatlipoca as well as one of his *nahualli*, the jaguar. Yet, the connection between caves, obsidian and magmatic fire with the jaguar gives us a clue about the real meaning of both this animal metaphor, and of Nahuatl notions of power. Obsidian is congealed fire, that is “cold”, or “old” fire: in fact, the Nahuatl word, *itzli*, is part of the name of Itzlacolihqui (Curved Obsidian Knife), the god of cold and ice, one of the aspects of Tezcatlipoca as the master of the North and the North Star<sup>12</sup>. Spatially obsidian is represented by the cave-womb, and temporally, by the first sun destroyed by jaguars (Caso 1953, Léon-Portilla 1977, 1990 [1959], Matos Moctezuma 2003, Durand 2004). Thus, the jaguar represents not only the chthonian and nocturnal aspects of feminine creative power, but also the link with the ancestors through “old” or “iced” volcanic fire, obsidian. In fact, both the god and the jaguar are connected with the creation of the hearth fire, and the New Fire after a 52-year-cycle. Hence, they stand for the beginning. From a dynastic point of view, this aspect connects the royal line, even that of newcomers like the Aztecs, to the immemorial past of the first creation; it also recognizes pragmatically that warrior bravery and priestly wisdom are not enough to keep the power. In the dualistic Aztec world there is a tension between that diurnal power

and the nocturnal one, made of deceit, treachery and sorcery, the shamans’ “black ops”. The jaguar belongs more to the chthonian *cihuacoatl*, the “feminine”, shamanic side of Aztec royal power than to the solar *tlatoani*, and the clear thinking of the *tlamatimimeh*, the “wise men” or priests who wrote the Codices.

Sexual and moral ambiguity and liminality are the shaman’s trade mark all over the Americas (and the world, Eliade 1962). The jaguar is as much ambiguous: in South America it sometimes is female, sometimes male, it may stand either for matriliney or patriliney (Turner in Coe 1972:14-15). It may symbolize both “paragon” and “peril”: his upper body and yellow jaguars are identified as male founders of a community, whilst jaguar claws and black jaguars are seen as the negative, feminine threat to society (Roe 1998). The jaguar is the lord of the fire “within”: the fire inside the mountains and the earth, and the cooking fire (Lévi-Strauss 1964, 1966). This feline expresses the vital energy in nature, and especially male energy, which can easily become a destructive agent, one which the shaman must tame, in order to become an agent of social control (Gossen 1975, Reichel-Dormatoff 1972, Knab 1995).

In the Aztec context, this tension between nature and culture, the raw and the cooked (Lévi-Strauss 1964, 1966), is controlled by the dualistic, opposing forces which gave birth to *Ollin Tonatiuh*, the Sun of Movement or Fifth Sun. The Aztec jaguar is connected with the notions of moral, social and cosmic disorder, sin and death, as well as unchecked, primordial, androgynous creative power. It is both chthonian and lunar and a celestial constellation governing a critical part of the year. In the Aztecs’ pessimistic view of the world, however, chaos will prevail in the end, and the orderly cosmic equilibrium of the current Fifth Sun will be unbalanced by the destructive aspects of Tezcatlipoca. The roars of his jaguar *nahual* in the depths of the earth will originate terrible earthquakes and destroy their world.

#### Notes

1 What makes me uncomfortable with Saunderson’s articles (1994a, 1994b, 2001) is, firstly, that he does not even mention the previous discussions on the subject, such as the landmark Conference on the Cult of the Feline (1970); secondly, that he compares the Aztec god Tezcatlipoca with ethnographic Amazonian cultures and he simply ignores the well studied Mesoamerican Nagualism (see, for example, Brinton 1894, Foster 1944, Villa Rojas 1947,

Kaplan 1956, Saler 1964, Pitt-Rivers 1970, Tranfo 1979, Buchler 1980, Musgrave-Portilla 1982, Sandstrom 1991, Paz, 1995, Baez-Jorge 1998, Gossen 1975, 1994, Knab 1995, Klein 2002.), which is an obvious descendant of Pre-Columbian religious ideas. Furthermore, in order to demonstrate the shamanic basis of Aztec power, Saunders (1994a, 1994c) describes only those aspects of Tezcatlipoca which fit his model, but by doing this he betrays his rather shaky grasp on the fundamentals of Nahuatl religion in general, and Aztec theology in particular (see, for example, Soustelle 1940, Léon-Portilla 1990 [1959], 1993, Caso 1953, Séjourné 1956, Graulich 1981, Klein 1997, Matos Moctezuma 2003, Durand 2004). The Nahua are a group of indigenous peoples of Mexico. Their language of Uto-Aztecan affiliation is called Nahuatl and consists of many dialects. Often the term *Nahuatl* is used specifically with reference to Classical Nahuatl, the administrative language of the Aztec empire. Properly speaking, all the Nahuatl-speaking peoples in the Valley of Mexico were Aztecs, while the culture that dominated the area was a tribe of the Mexica called the Tenochca.

- 2 See, for example, the discussion between Furst and Coe (in Coe 1972:16), or Reichel-Dolmatoff (1972:54-62).
- 3 The supreme deity, Ometeotl, Two Deity, lives in the 13th sky, the highest, Omeyocan, Two Place or Place of Duality. S/he divides her/himself into Ometecuhtli, Two God or Lord of Duality and Omecihuatl, Two Goddess or Lady of Duality. The Mictlan, the lowest of the nine-tiered underworld has also a pair of Death deities (Léon-Portilla 1990[1959]).
- 4 Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent, was the god of the warrior school for noblemen, the *Calmecac*, and of the priests.
- 5 The Blue Hummingbird on the Left, supreme god of the Aztecs, whose name derives from the mythic Aztlan, where they came from in the north. He guided his elected people southward as the war god and day god, patron of the Eagle warrior order, complementary, in reality and speech with the Jaguar warrior order. The name Mexica of the Aztecs came from one of the other names of this god, Mexitli (Matos Moctezuma 2003).
- 6 The Aztecs were very puritanical and abhorred homosexuals. The axe was a reminder of their fate; Tezcatlipoca in this aspect was addressed as “wretched sodomite” (Klein 1993).
- 7 Actually, he has two mirrors, in the codices, one on his temple, close to his forehead, and one substituting the foot he lost when he was dismembering the Earth Monster together with Quetzalcoatl. His obsidian statue was painted with a powder with metal reflection, which was called *tezcapotli*, or “smoke which reflects”. Astronomically, it means that at austral latitudes one of the stars of the Big Dipper stays below the horizon, and thus it “disappears” (Caso 1953).
- 8 The sacrificial knife was made of flint or obsidian (the lancets for self-sacrifice and blood-letting were mostly of obsidian): as such he is Itzlacolihqui, the Curved Obsidian Knife, god of cold and ice. He is also Nezahualpilli, The Fasting Nobleman, and Yaotl, the Enemy (Caso 1953, Léon-Portilla 1990[1959]).

- 9 Lord and Lady of Duality had four sons, to whom they entrusted the creation of the other gods, the world and humankind. These sons were: the first son, Red Tezcatlipoca or Xipe Totec, Our Flayed Lord, associated with the east; Black Tezcatlipoca, usually called simply Tezcatlipoca, associated with the north; Quetzalcoatl, the god of wind and Venus, also called White Tezcatlipoca, associated with the west, and Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec tribal god of the war, called Blue Tezcatlipoca, associated with the south. Xipe Totec was borrowed from southern peoples, and together with Quetzalcoatl probably replaced the original aspects of the pairs of gods of creation. In many Nahuatl stories of the origins, probably originated among the Toltecs, the rival pair of brothers/creators became Quetzalcoatl and (Black) Tezcatlipoca (Léon-Portilla 1990 [1959]).
- 10 For the ancient Mexicans as well as some modern Mayas the sun rises in the sky until midday, and then returns to the east. What we see in the afternoon is only the reflection of the sun on a black (obsidian) mirror and, hence, a "lunar", deceitful sun, in essence. Morning is the House of the Sun, where warriors who died heroically in battle or on the sacrificial stone accompany the sun until midday. In the afternoon "heroic" women, died in childbirth (the child was considered a "prisoner"), take over from the warriors and guide the sun to its sinking in the west (Graulich 1981:45).
- 11 How long this division of power between the two roles lasted is not certain, as only one man is known to have exercised real power as the *Cihuacoatl*. This was Tlacaellil (1398- 1496), who in his eighty-odd years was the power behind at least three *Tlatoanis*. Tlacaellil was the mastermind of the religious-military reform that made Hutzilipochtli the supreme god, together with Tlaloc, as represented by the Great Temple in Tenochtitlan, the place of contact between the sky, the underworld and this world, and the navel of the universe (Durand 2004).
- 12 Borgia Codex, plate 21. Léon-Portilla (1977-49:52) argues that Red Tezcatlipoca is Ursa Major and Black Tezcatlipoca is Ursa Minor

## References

- Aveni, A. F. 2001. Skywatchers: A Revised and Updated Version of Skywatchers of Ancient
- Báez-Jorge, F. 1998. *Entre los naguales y los santos*. Xalapa, Mexico: Universidad Veracruzana.
- Benson, E. (ed.) 1972. *The Cult of the Feline. A Conference in Pre-Columbian Iconography*. October 31<sup>st</sup> and November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1970. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections.
- Benson, E. 1997. *Birds and Beasts of Ancient Latin America*. Gainesville: University of Florida. Press.
- Benson, P. E. and Coe, M. 1972. Preface. In E. Benson (ed.) *The Cult of the Feline. A Conference in Pre-Columbian Iconography*. October 31<sup>st</sup> and November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1970. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections. Trustees for Harvard University.
- Brinton, D. G. 1894. *Nagualism. A Study in Native American Folklore and History*. Philadelphia: MacCalla & Co.
- Buchler, I. 1980. Nagualism: A Structural Sketch of Tales from a Mexican Village. *Anthropology* 4:1-14.
- Caso, A. 1953. *El pueblo del Sol*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Economica [English Trans. 1958]
- Coe, M. 1972. Olmec Jaguars and Olmec Kings. Discussion. In Benson, E. (ed.) *The Cult of the Feline. A Conference in Pre-Columbian Iconography*. October 31<sup>st</sup> and November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1970. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections.
- Davies, N. 1973. *The Aztecs*. London: Macmillan.
- Durand, G. O. 2004. L'universo sacro degli Aztechi. In *I tesori degli aztechi*. Milano: Electa.
- Eliade, M. 1962. *Mephistopheles et l'androgyne*. Paris : Gallimard.
- Foster, G. 1982. Nagualism in Mexico and Guatemala. *Acta Americana* 2 (1944): 85-103.
- Foucault, M. 1970. *The Order of the Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Random House.
- Geertz, C. 1994. Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight. In A. Dundes (ed.) *The Cockfight: a Casebook*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Gossen, G. H. 1975. Animal Souls and Human Destiny in Chamula." *Man* 10:448-461.
- Gossen, G. H. 1994. From Olmecs to Zapatistas: A Once and Future History of Souls. *American Anthropologist* 96:553-570.
- Graulich, M. 1981. The Metaphor of the Day in Ancient Mexican Myth and Ritual. *Current Anthropology* 22:45-60.
- Haraway, D. J. 1991. *Symians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Kaplan, L.N. 1956. *Tonal and Nagual* in Coastal Oaxaca, Mexico. *The Journal of American Folklore* 69:363-274.
- Kein, C. F. 1997. Teocuitlatl, "Divine excrement": The Significance of "Holy Shit" in Ancient Mexico. In M. S. Werner (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Mexico: History, Society & Culture*. Vol. 2. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn.
- Knab, T. J. 1995. *A War of Witches: A Journey into the Underworld of the Contemporary Aztecs*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Kubler, G. 1972. Jaguars in the Valley of Mexico. In Benson, E. (ed.) *The Cult of the Feline. A Conference in Pre-Columbian Iconography*. October 31<sup>st</sup> and November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1970. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections.
- Léon-Portilla, M. 1990 [1959 La Filosofía Nahuatl] *Aztec Thought and Culture : A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Léon-Portilla, M. 1977. *Los Antiguos Mexicanos através de sus crónicas y cantares*. Mexico City : Fondo de Cultura Economica.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. 1964. *Le cru et le cuit*. Paris : Plon [Italian Transl. 1966].
- Lévi-Strauss, C. 1966. *Du miel aux cendres*. Paris : Plon. [Italian Transl. 1970].
- Lévi-Strauss, C. 1969 [1963]. *Totemism*. London : Pelican.
- Matos Moctezuma, E. 2003. Aztec History and Cosmovision. In D. Carrasco and E. Matos Moctezuma (eds.) *Moctezuma's Mexico. Visions of the Aztec World*. Boulder: University of Colorado Press.
- Mullin, M. 1999. Mirrors and Windows: Sociocultural Studies of Human-Animal Relationship. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 28:201-224.
- Musgrave-Portilla, L. M. The Nahualli or Transforming Wizard in Pre- and Postconquest Mesoamerica. *Journal of Latin American Lore* 8:3-62.
- Olguin, F. S. 2004. L'impero azteco. In *I tesori degli aztechi*. Milano: Electa.
- Paz, J. 1995. The Vicissitude of the Alter Ego Animal in Mesoamerica: An Ethnohistorical Reconstruction of Tonalism. *Anthropos* 90:445-465.
- Pitt-Rivers, J. 1970. Spiritual Power in Central America: The Naguals of Chiapas. In *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*. M. T. Douglas (ed.). London: Tavistock Publications.
- Reichel-Dormatoff, G. 1972. The Feline Motif in Prehistoric San Augustin Sculpture. In Benson, E. (ed.) *The Cult of the Feline. A Conference in Pre-Columbian Iconography*. October 31<sup>st</sup> and November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1970. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections.
- Ritvo, H. 1991. The Animal Connection. In J.J. Sheenan and M. Sosna (eds.) *The Boundaries of Humanity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Roe, P. 1983. *The Cosmic Zygote: Cosmology in the Amazonian Basin*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Saler, B. 1964. Nagual, Witch, and Sorcerer in a Quiché Village. *Ethnology* 3:305-328.
- Sandstrom, Alan R. *Corn is Our Blood: Culture and Ethnic Identity in a Contemporary Aztec Indian Village*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.
- Saunders, N. J. (ed.) 1998. *Icons of Power: Feline Symbolism in the Americas*. London: Routledge.
- Saunders, N. J. 1994a. Predators of Culture: Jaguar Symbolism and Mesoamerican Elites. *World Archaeology* 26:104-117.
- Saunders, N. J. 1994b. A Dark Light: Reflections on Obsidian in Mesoamerica. *World Archaeology* 33:220-236.
- Saunders, N. J. 1994c. Tezcatlipoca: Jaguar Metaphors and the Aztec Mirror of Nature. In R. Willis (ed.) *Signifying Animals: Human Meaning in The Natural World*. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Séjourné, L. 1957. *Burning Water. Thought and Religion in Ancient Mexico*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Soustelle, J. 1940. *La Pensée Cosmologique des anciens mexicains*. Paris : Hermann et Cie.
- Tozzer, A.M. 1957. *Chichen Itza and Its Cenote of Sacrifice; a Comparative Study of Contemporaneous Maya and Toltec*. Cambridge: Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Vols. 11-12.
- Tranfo, L. 1979. Tono y Nagual. In I. Signorini (ed.) *Los Huaves de San Mateo del Mar.. Mexico, D.F.: Instituto Nacional Indigenista*.
- Villa Rojas, A. 1947. Kinship and Nagualism in a Tzeltal Community, Southeastern Mexico. *American Anthropologist* 49:578-587.