

Migration and Identity Appropriation in Ancient Mesoamerica

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Figure 1. Geographic region of Mesoamerica.

Source: <http://www.famsi.org/>

This paper introduces a new area of inquiry for Mimetic Theory that explores the religious dimensions of violence likely hidden within ancient mythic narratives from Mesoamerica.¹ With a Girardian lens I re-read the saga of the *Mexica* migrants [Me-shee'-ka]² more popularly known as the *Aztecs* (the people of Aztlán). Although difficult to ascertain fact from fiction, historicity from legend and myth, there are various accounts of how the Mexica (Aztecs) slowly moved

themselves from the desert lands somewhere in Northwestern Mexico to the vast fertile region of the Central Basin.³ After many generations struggling as “outsiders”, the Mexica eventually establish their capital Tenochtitlan upon an island in a lake. From this obscure spot the powerful Aztec empire emerges by 1345 A.D. only to meet its abrupt demise by Spanish conquest in 1521 A.D.

I explore the Mexica migration story anthropologically and consider how the formation of group identity is fundamentally related to the mimetic dynamic of

1 Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies (www.famsi.org): *The term “Mesoamerica” refers to a geographical area occupied by a variety of ancient cultures that shared religious beliefs, art, architecture, and technology that made them unique in the Americas for three thousand years – from about 1500 B.C.E. to C.E. 1519.*

2 Throughout this paper I use pronunciation prompts from Kay Almere Read and Jason J. Gonzalez, *Handbook of Mesoamerican Mythology: A Guide To The Gods, Heroes, Rituals and Beliefs of Mexico and Central America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

3 See “Legend of the Suns,” in *Historia and Mythology of the Aztecs: The Codex Chimalpopoca*, trans. from the Nahuatl by John Bierhorst, 139-162 (Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 1992). See also the Nahua history in Read and Gonzalez, *Handbook of Mesoamerican Mythology*, 90-126.

appropriation and reciprocity which violence and religion appear to foster.⁴ I ask how experiences of ethnic differentiation among generations of Mexica migrants might explain an eventual imperial identity. As the Mexica journey unfolds over many generations they admire and learn from the desires of other groups (as models), including the ancient Toltecs. What are the identity implications of mimetic appropriation? How did the Mexica evolve from a people despised into a people both revered and reviled, with an extensive influence connecting markets from Arizona and New Mexico to important destinations throughout Central America?⁵ I highlight how this journey to the Central Basin depends a great deal on what Girard would call “acquisitive mimesis”, the power of which seems to motivate the Mexica to copy or enhance certain religious beliefs and practices (e.g., human sacrifice). To what extent did religious practice in Mesoamerica limit or propel propensities for conflict and chaos within and between migrant communities? These and other related questions are significant when attempting to apply Girard’s mimetic theory to Mesoamerican mythology and history.

Following Girard my inquiry presumes that the violence associated with the imitative propensity of humans produces culturally specific expressions.⁶ These expressions become long-lasting, even though not always evident or obvious in the primal traditions or subsequent legends. Girard argues anthropologically that “hidden since the foundation of the world” is the fact that imitation among rivals seems to galvanize people to define and delimit their social interactions.⁷ Desires

4 I am summarizing the basic migration story from three articles in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures: The Civilizations of Mexico and Central America, Vol. 1*, ed. David Carrasco (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001): “Azcatitlan Codex” by Michel Graulich, 66-68; “Aztec” by Alfredo López Austin, 69-72; and “Aztlán” by Roberto Lint-Sagarena, 72-73. In the same volume, see also “Chichimec” by Charlotte M. Gracie, 187-189, and “Chicomóztoc” by Blas Roman Castellon Huerta, 189-190.

5 For research on Aztec influence, see Michael Smith, “Long-Distance Trade under the Aztec Empire: The Archaeological Evidence.” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 1/2 (1990): 153-169, doi:10.1017/S0956536100000183.

6 See Girard’s important essay “Teotihuacan”, where he explores this Aztec Creation Myth retold by George Bataille: René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 57-65.

7 See René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World. Research Undertaken in Collaboration with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort* [Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde], trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978).

intensify when rivals increase their pursuit of what another person possesses or represents, until *proprietorship* or identification becomes a key objective. What *others* seem to possess or hold as precious becomes an object of desire. As such, it can shape ontological identity for a group or individual, informing one's sense of being or belonging, one's identity and purpose. These "objects" can be ideas or symbols, religious or political practices, or material things. If a model impedes acquisition of the object sought, then that particular exemplar becomes a challenge or threat to what seems worth obtaining. Overcoming the impediment to procurement can escalate to violence, unless otherwise mediated. For the Mexica Aztecs the "flower wars" (in the Nahuatl language, *Xochiyaoyotl*) of limited, non-mortal combat among groups in the empire may have represented one form of conflict mitigation.⁸

When examining the myths and gods of Mesoamerican peoples, Girard's fundamental insights offer a useful tool for analysis and interpretation. Examining violent interactions born of mimetic rivalry brings a critical perspective to claims of identity. For instance, in the pre-Hispanic era we can ask new questions about the fratricidal struggles that frequently occurred among Nahuatl peoples settled in the Valley of Mexico.⁹ We can take a fresh look at the competitive enmity at work when Hernan Cortez arrived in 1519 and took full advantage of local rivals who resented the Aztecs for their brutal imperial tribute system and unceasing demand for prisoners of war to sacrifice.¹⁰ But these indigenous rivals also took advantage of the Spanish "outsiders," whose military possibilities offered amazingly attractive models for imitation and incorporation.¹¹

However tragic the Spanish onslaught, it might be argued that its anguish pales in comparison to the centuries of desolation *before* the Conquistadors. For all of its ingenious achievements, pre-Columbian civilization was nevertheless rife with constant internal conflicts and internecine warfare vexing primitive and

8 A "xochiyaoyotl" could be brief or last many decades. See Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 128-130; and Ross Hassig, *Time, History, and Belief in Aztec and Colonial Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 106.

9 Camilla Townsend, *The Fifth Sun: a New History of the Aztecs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 42.

10 Townsend, *The Fifth Sun*, 50.

11 Townsend, *The Fifth Sun*, 85-106.

complex communities alike. Groups would contend over territory for tribute obligations, trade routes and difficult-to-obtain commodities such as prisoners of war for ritual sacrifices or exotic feathers from Guatemala. The peoples of Mesoamerica were repeatedly attempting to raid or control one another's communities so as to exploit important resources.¹² Organized warfare began some 1500 years before the arrival of the gold-seeking explorers from Spain – who were themselves anxious to exploit and appropriate goods and services from indigenous peoples of the “Americas”.¹³ The role of mimesis for religiously motivated violence in these conflicts is uncertain, but equally opaque is how violence (or the fear of it) might meaningfully organize religion and other social structures.

Documents and artefacts from Pre-Columbian and Colonial times tell us about the ancient Mexica migrations as roughly taking place between the 12th and 15th centuries A.D.¹⁴ Although different codices depict varying versions of the basic story, in general, the main narratives tell about the fate of some seven tribes traveling south. Various codices tell us of the ancient land of “white cranes” or Aztlán – an environment akin to a lake oasis surrounded by arid desert, a legendary place in the north known as *Chicomóztoc* [Chee-ko-moz'-tok] meaning “place of the seven caves.”¹⁵ At different moments each particular group of Mexica emerges to begin their migrant journey south to the central valley of Mexico.¹⁶ According to the legend, it is the year 1143 A.D. when the epic journey begins for the Mexica “Aztecs”, the last group to emerge. They are called forth out of obedience to leave their blissful existence (where they never grow old) and follow

12 See Ross Hassig, *War and Society in Ancient Mesoamerica* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

13 From the Italian Explorer and Cartographer Amerigo Vespucci.

14 Townsend, *The Fifth Sun*, 13-32; as well as María Castañeda de la Paz, “De Aztlan a Tenochtitlan: Historia de una peregrinación,” *Latin American Indian Literatures Journal* 18/2 (2002): 163-212.

15 According to Roberto Lint-Sagarena, “Aztlán,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures: The Civilizations of Mexico and Central America, Vol. 1*, ed. David Carrasco (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 72, “Aztlán” is a term with several interpretations, variously translated to mean “place of whiteness” or “place of the herons (or Storks).”

16 See Blas Roman Castellón Huerta, “Chicomóztoc,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures – The Civilizations of Mexico and Central America, Vol. 1*, ed. David Carrasco (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 190. Each cave represents a distinct identification of people: the Xochimilco, the Chalca, the Tepanec, the Colhua, the Tlalhuica, the Tlaxcala, and the Mexica (Aztecs).

their patron deity, the truculent and formidable Huitzilopochtli [Weet-zee-lo-pocht'-lee].¹⁷ Generally, the narratives recount how the Mexica and other groups began their journeys with one common ethnic identification but then over several generations experience transformations of identity as they encounter other groups along the way.¹⁸

Migration is a fundamental human experience of changing places and modes of living and so gives rise to stressful situations exacerbated by division. The Mexica story highlights one particular moment of crisis when part of the group decides to de-identify or liberate themselves from the larger body of migrants. As the story goes, this daring attempt by some to establish their own unique, differentiated identity brings forth the divine wrath of Huitzilopochtli for failure to follow his prerogative.¹⁹ Consequently, the Mexica become a fierce warrior people after wandering and suffering an embattled existence over eight decades. They finally settle in the “promised land” that Huitzilopochtli provides for them. Hence, the founding of Tenochtitlan upon lake Texcoco in the Central Valley of Mexico is of symbolic and ideological importance for cultural identity formation.²⁰ The great Templo Mayor at the center of Tenochtitlan, for example, was begun one year after they founded their city in 1325, dedicating the northern half to the god of rain, Tlaloc, and the other southern half to the god of war (Huitzilopochtli). As Hassig says, “Thus the Great Temple is a symbolic depiction of the earthly, underworldly, and heavenly planes, the legendary Aztec origin story, and the symbolic contrast between ... Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli, water and blood, agriculture and war (the sun is northerly during the summer or agricultural season and southerly during the winter or war season).”²¹

17 See Pedro Carrasco, “Mexica,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures – The Civilizations of Mexico and Central America*, Vol. 2, ed. David Carrasco, 297-298 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

18 See Carlos Martínez Marín, “Migrations,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures – The Civilizations of Mexico and Central America*, Vol. 2, ed. David Carrasco, 305-309 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

19 Townsend, *The Fifth Sun*, 13-32.

20 See Elizabeth Hill Boone, *The Aztec World* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 1994), 35-38. See also Ross Hassig, *Time, History, and Belief*, 19-23.

21 See Ross Hassig, *Time, History, and Belief*, 22-23.

The migration myth is not without some historical elements, but it is largely a transformation allegory. From the perspective of Mimetic Theory, the story provides hints about how violence structures religious development in Mesoamerica.²² As the Mexica begin to settle in the great central basin around lake Texcoco, those who had established communities several generations earlier see the newcomers as wild barbaric nomads (Chichimec) from the North.²³ As newcomers to the central valley, the Mexica might have felt they had very little that others admired about them, except perhaps their growing reputation as fierce warriors. Alfredo López Austin demythologizes the migrant narrative of how the poor, uneducated, “barbarian” Chichimec rose so quickly to become the mighty “Aztecs”:

Accounts of the Mexica’s origin—like those told of other Mesoamerican peoples—contain many supernatural sites, personages, and episodes. The reason for this joining of earthly and divine history stems from the search for legitimacy in the political context of the period, in which land tenure was justified above all through grants made by patron deities to their protected peoples.²⁴

These “barbarians,” however, apparently experience some sort of mimetic crisis which they later glorify in mythic remembrance as that decisive event at mount Coatepec, for it was there where they were transformed from lowly “dogs” to a proud and powerful warrior people.²⁵

22 A succinct summary of this period comes from John Pohl's Chronology of Mesoamerica, found at www.famsi.org.

23 Charlotte M. Gradie, “Chichimec,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures: The Civilizations of Mexico and Central America, Vol. 1*, ed. David Carrasco, 187-188 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), argues that among the different language groups of the Northern deserts, “those groups . . . who lived closer to the civilized peoples of Mesoamerica adopted some of their neighbors’ cultural traits and religious beliefs and practices.”

24 Alfredo López Austin, “Aztec,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures: – The Civilizations of Mexico and Central America, Vol. 1*, ed. David Carrasco, (Oxford University Press, 2001), 68. For how the Mexica made their identity claims through appropriation and strategic projection, see María Castañeda de la Paz, “De Aztlan a Tenochtitlan: Historia de una peregrinación,” *Latin American Indian Literatures Journal* 18/2 (Fall 2002): 163-212.

25 Gradie, “Chichimec,” 188, exposes the myth-history problematic, indicating “how the somewhat deprecating portrayal of the *Chichimeca* found in a number of iconographic narratives refers to Nahuatl speakers who lived not in Northern Mexico (desert region) but actually in the north and west of the Valley of Mexico (of the great central basin), and has therefore more of a symbolic than ethnological meaning.”

Historically, as generations of “Chichimec” (barbarians, hunter-gatherers) moved from North to South, they naturally came to know about the abandoned but awe-inspiring ancient ruins of *Teotihuacan*, i.e., “the city of gods” as the Mexica identified the place in their language. Along with the legacy of the fallen Toltec civilization that rose to splendor after the collapse of Teotihuacan but not to last, by the 13th century A.D., the Mexica migrants are already mimetically incorporating the notions of grandeur and artistic styles of admirable and powerful predecessors. The Mexica Aztecs begin to project a new sense of themselves by boldly claiming that the patrimony of their leaders is based on the union of “barbarian” Chichimec leaders but also the descendants of the ancient Toltec ruling lineage.²⁶ However, once they establish themselves in the Central Valley, the dilemma of mimetic rivalry begins to manifest itself. The Aztecs enter into contest with the other Nahuatl speaking groups in the region, but protected by their god of war, Huitzilopochtli. After many struggles, the Aztecs manage to incorporate their former rivals into an extensive tributary conglomerate.²⁷

From Tenochtitlan, the Aztecs develop ways to project their dominance through intimidation, a political posture that may reflect a chronic sense of social inferiority and cultural illegitimacy. Aztec leaders were mimetically adept at manipulating myth and history with coercive sociopolitical intentions. David Carrasco argues as much and observes further that when faced “with the overwhelming evidence of their predecessors’ monumental achievements, sacred genealogies, and complex social structures, the Aztecs felt immensely inferior and strove to construct a city, mythology, and destiny in order to impress and intimidate others and to legitimate themselves.”²⁸ In founding their capital the Aztecs deliberately join their unknown god, Huitzilopochtli, to Tlaloc the god of rain, a more ancient and well-known figure for Mesoamerican peoples. They build their first great temple as a twin pyramid so that each deity would have his own dedicated temple side by side at the apex.²⁹

26 Gradie, “Chichimec,” 188.

27 See http://www.famsi.org/research/pohl/pohl_aztec1.html.

28 David Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Sacrifice in Civilization*. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1999); *Quetzalcoatl And The Irony Of Empire - Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition*, (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 2000), 160.

29 See Ross Hassig, *Time, History, and Belief*, 98.

Mimetic Theory provides a new way to interpret this legendary migration in the historical context of other Mesoamerica peoples. We can see the formative role mimetic interaction plays in the historical drama of identity formation as groups move in and beyond the Central Valley developing complex institutions from what they perceived other people's doing or had established before them. As mentioned earlier, key models in this regard were the ancient Toltecs of Tollan whose cultural legacy they admired greatly, but also their former political masters, the Tepeyac, who were both models and model-obstacles.

Some of this complexity can be seen in the depiction of the mythic birth of Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec's principal deity who stood for cosmic creation, the vitality of the Sun, war, governance, and trade. He miraculously springs from the womb as a full-grown man, dressed in complete war attire, ready to defend his divine mother, *Coatlicue* [Ko-wat-lee'-kway] (Snake Skirt). Accused of infidelity because of her mysterious pregnancy, Coatlicue is under attack by her daughter Coyolxauhqui [Koy-ol-shauw'-kee] and her 400 brothers, the *Centzonuitznaua* (southern stars). The myth tells of how Huitzilopochtli, once born, quickly decapitates his sister, eats her heart, dismembers her body and throws it to the bottom of Snake Mountain (Coatepec); he then proceeds to vanquish all 400 brothers with a mighty fire stick.³⁰



Figure 2. Representation of the Sacrificed Warrior Goddess, Coyolxauhqui, (Moon goddess), the jealous sibling rival who sought to murder her brother, Huitzilopochtli, the Mexica Sun god. Photo: Boris de Swan / Raíces. Imager: Julio Emilio Romero. Source: <https://arqueologiamexicana.mx/mexico-antiguo/coyolxauhqui-una-diosa-guerrera-sacrificada>

30 Read and Gonzalez, *Handbook of Mesoamerican Mythology*, 105-106; 150-156.

This mythic engagement may symbolically recall some early victories over enemies the Mexica encountered on their journey south, but it most likely represents a cosmological metaphor for how blood sacrifice honors “Mother earth” (Coatlicue) and sustains the Sun on its East-West axis (Huitzilopochtli), rising in the East to overcome the Moon in all its phases (Coyolxauhqui), shining brighter than all the stars of the Milky Way (Centzonitznaua). What is interesting for Mimetic Theory is how this battle narrative – the incident at Mount Coatepec – was repeatedly re-enacted at the major temple pyramid in Tenochtitlan. Here, upon “snake mountain” prisoners of war underwent sacrifice by means of a) heart extraction as oblation to Huitzilopochtli, b) decapitation c) dismemberment of limbs and d) the body flung down the steps to the foot of the mountain.

Anthropologist Cecelia F. Klein, gives us some more detail about Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec’s fearsome patron god of war, and how he “was said to have acquired his distinctive face painting and costume from his vanquished enemies, the Centzonhuitnahua.”³¹ Klein elaborates:

During the month festival named Panquetzaliztli, the Aztec annually reenacted this primordial defeat at the main temple in their capital. There, numerous war prisoners, painted and dressed like the Centzonhuitnahua, had their hearts excised and offered to the statue of Huitzilopochtli. In other Aztec sacrificial ceremonies, the victims were painted with the red and white stripes of another primordial god, Mixcoatl, and represented a mythical group called the Mimixcoa, who had been sacrificed at the time of the creation to feed the sun. A deity’s appearance, we see, could derive from that of a former enemy and later be acquired by a living leader; some primordial enemies were impersonated by sacrificed war captives.³²

Noting such imitative practices throughout the region, Klein concludes that in Mesoamerica “this ontological unity between the representor and the represented would therefore be less a matter of the impersonator resembling or representing

31 See Cecilia F. Klein, “Impersonation of Deities,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures: The Civilizations of Mexico and Central America*, Vol. 1, ed. David Carrasco (Oxford University Press, 2001), 33-37.

32 Klein, *Impersonation of Deities*, 34.

the god than of his rendering it present.”³³ Here, it seems to me, Klein is suggesting that the imitating of divine beings has a kind of sacramental quality, rendering primordial experience as present. This iconic gesture allows the mysterious and somewhat murky memories of the past to become meaningfully extant for the migrant (and former migrant) community. Despite many points of similarity, ethnic differentiation from others encountered during migration is called to mind, made real to all participants through ritual mimesis (anamnesis).

Throughout their passage to the promised land, the Mexica reshape and even exalt their sense of Peoplehood by elaborating customs and rituals through imitation, appropriation and representation.³⁴ For example, there was one important custom that centered around a cross-gender ritual in which a male priest would dress himself up as the fierce goddess *Cihuacoatl*. Dressed up as this formidable female divinity, the male priest is hailed by all around him as the second most powerful dignitary in the Aztec hierarchy. He was called the *charcoal*, notes anthropologist Cecilia Klein, named thus after the goddess *Cihuacoatl* whose cult was given to the Mexica people as a divine award with exclusive rights and benefits for having led Aztec warriors in the conquest of a foreign city where she was the patron deity.³⁵ The male priest wins the privilege and high honor of playing this divine female role. Only the priest had this honor and privilege to impersonate this powerful and fearsome female deity.

The story of Chichimec tribes moving south from the Northern deserts to reach the verdant valleys of Central Mexico (Anahuac) is based on an oral tradition. It is a compelling epic tale of a humble but determined people growing in strength and experience as they move to reach an unknown promised land.³⁶

33 Klein, *Impersonation of Deities*, 35.

34 Elizabeth Hill Boone, “Migration Histories as Ritual Performance,” in *To Change Place: Aztec Ceremonial Landscapes*, ed. David Carrasco (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1991), 121-151. See also Johanna Broda, “The Sacred Landscape of Aztec Calendar Festivals: Myth, Nature, and Society,” in *Aztec Ceremonial Landscapes*, ed. David Carrasco, with preface by William Fash (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1999). 75; 111-112; Ross Hassig, *Time, History, and Belief*, 98-104.

35 Klein, *Impersonation of Deities*, 34.

36 For syntheses and analyses of the various accounts of the Mexica migrations, see Paul Kirchhoff, “Civilizing the Chichimecs: A Chapter in the Culture History of Ancient Mexico,” in *Ancient Mesoamerica: Selected Readings*, ed. John A. Graham, 273-278 (Palo Alto, CA: Peek Publications, 1966). See also Hill Boone, “Migrations Histories,” 121-151; Hill Boone, *The Aztec World*, 29-57; Castañeda de la Paz, *De Aztlan a Tenochtitlan*; Christopher Beekman and Alexander F. Christensen, “Controlling

The legend depicts a subservient tribe that does not really rise to power until the propitious year of 1428 A.D., and then only after a successful rebellion against their over-lords of many decades, the Tepanec of Azcapotzalco. Having allied themselves with former rivals, the city-state powers of Tetzcoaco and Tacuba, the Mexica Aztec establish the formidable “Triple Alliance” which quickly becomes the Aztec empire.³⁷

The seven Chichimec tribes emerge from Aztlán at different times and as they encounter communities already settled, they appropriate admirable or useful aspects.³⁸ They even linger in temporary settlements. Researchers at the Foundation of Advanced Mesoamerican Studies describe what appears to be a form of mimetic desire among the Mexica-Aztec migrants:³⁹

Finding they had little to offer other than their reputation as fearsome warriors, the Méxica had no other choice than to hire themselves out as mercenaries to rival Toltec factions. Eventually they were able to affect the balance of power in the region to such a degree that they were granted royal marriages. The Méxica, now the most powerful of the seven original Aztec tribes, incorporated their former rivals and together they conquered an empire.

Prior to the rise of the empirical Mexica or “Aztecs” it is important to remember that according to legend this particular migration took some 80 years. Along the way, the Mexica find themselves faced with a tremendous crisis of *differentiation* vs. integration, resolved only by the violence of Huitzilopochtli’s divine intervention. As the story goes, it was at the sacred mountain of Coatepec, the mythical birth place of the Huitzilopochtli, god of the sun, god of war. This is where a

for Doubt and Uncertainty through Multiple Lines of Evidence: A New Look at the Mesoamerican Nahua Migrations,” *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 10/2 (2003): 111-164.

37 See Edward Matos Moctezuma, “Tenochtitlan” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures: The Civilizations of Mexico and Central America, Vol. 1*, ed. David Carrasco (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 198-200.

38 Martínez Marín, “Migrations,” 306, offers a different take on the Seven Chichimec Tribes, suggesting they left their homeland to assist the Toltec-Chichimec, “who could no longer endure the tribute burden and mistreatment as subjects of the Cholteca (Olmec) . . .”

39 A slow migration suggests acquisitive desire. See http://www.famsi.org/research/pohl/pohl_aztec1.html.

significant number of the Mexica protest that they will go no further. Those who refuse to continue the migration insist that Mount Coatepec will be their final stop. At this point, Huitzilopochtli becomes infuriated and demands that the offending faction be killed overnight by the excision of their hearts.

Lint-Sagarena points out the significant aspect in the mythic narrative: “because it replays the myth of the birth of Huitzilopochtli—one of the offending leaders killed was a woman named Coyolxauhqui. This mythic trope is repeated again later at Tenochtitlan in the design of the Templo Mayor and the placement of the Coyolxauhqui stone.”⁴⁰ (See Figure 2).

The miserable wandering of the Mexica-Aztec finally comes to an end only when their patron god, Huitzilopochtli, provides them with a propitious sign indicating where, precisely, they are to settle. As hoped for, by the portent of an eagle with a snake in its mouth, perched on a prickly-pear cactus (Figure 3), Huitzilopochtli indicates where they are to build their city.



Figure 3. The glyph for the founding of the Mexica capital, Tenochtitlán, c 1325. Source: FAMSI.org

40 Roberto Lint-Sagarena, “Atzlán,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures – The Civilizations of Mexico and Central America*; ed. David Carrasco (NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 73.

Witnessing this sign affirms the Mexica understanding of what benefits may come when they provide for their god's particular cosmic desire: to consume the precious hearts and blood of human beings, especially those of their enemies, as a fair exchange for keeping the Sun in motion. Thus, around 1325 A.D., according to legend, the Aztecs establish their foundation at Tenochtitlan near the Western edge of then lake Texcoco (see *Figure 4*) in the great basin of central Mexico (today, the capital of México, known as the Mexico City).⁴¹

Their archetypal journey brings the Mexica awareness of how much they owe their success to Huitzilopochtli, the god of fire, Sun, war. To him they owe everything they have and are (identity). Indeed, their collective obedience and mimetic acuity lead them to act like their patron, and thus to aggressively dominate the peoples around lake Texcoco and beyond. They spread their fearsome threat of ritual human sacrifice upon which they and their patron god seem to thrive. This realization is underscored by Alfredo López Austin who points out how much during the Late Postclassic period Mexica communities reflected a religious emphasis on warfare: "The Mexica," he writes, "were the prototype of the communities given to the sacred mission of maintaining the cosmic equilibrium: they supported their bellicose actions religiously—attributing them to the obligation of sustaining the sun with the blood and hearts of their vanquished enemies."⁴²

Summarizing the importance of the migration myths, beginning with the upheavals of the 12th century A.D., Carlos Martínez Marín compares the Mexica migration story to other population movements, indicating how evidence about such a journey can reveal structure and in what ways certain groups evolved: "their ethnic and social composition, their conflicts, their thought, and in general a good deal about their culture and history. For this reason, and because each day allows researchers to separate the historical from the mythical elements, the Mexica have become the best model for understanding the migrations."⁴³ The largely

41 Figure 4 shows two illustrations: one from John Berkey produced for a National Geographic education story, "Tenochtitlan, Mexico," in <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/photo/island-painting-990-60963/>. The map view comes from HJTD. Tenochtitlan. World History Encyclopedia, 24 September, 2013.

42 López Austin, *Aztec*, 71.

43 Martínez Marín Marín, *Migrations*, 308.

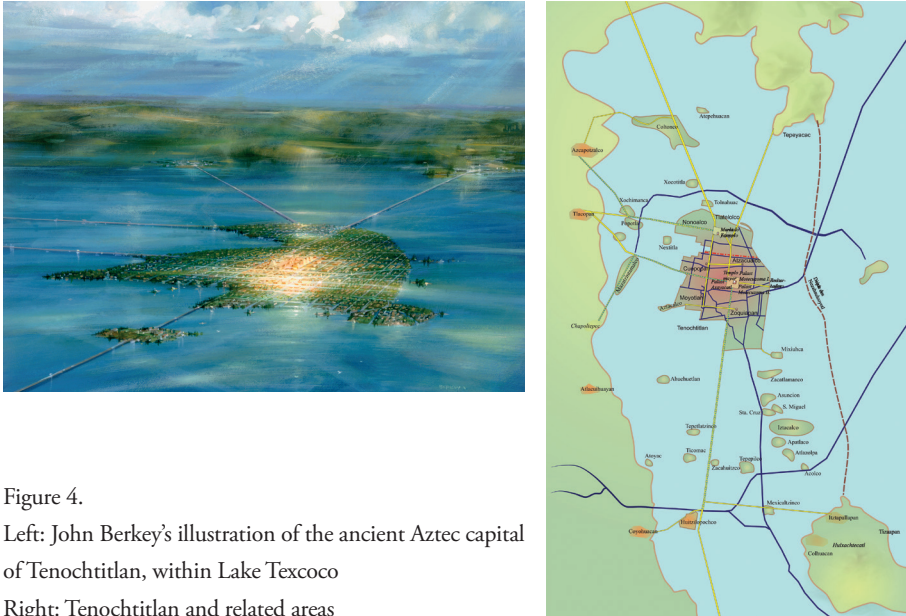


Figure 4.
Left: John Berkey's illustration of the ancient Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, within Lake Texcoco
Right: Tenochtitlan and related areas



Figure 5. Map of the Chichimeca pilgrimage according to the Códice Azcatitla
Source: Image created by María Castañeda de la Paz, "De Aztlan a Tenochtitlan: Historia de una peregrinación," Latin American Indian Literatures Journal 18/ 2 (2002): 190.

unknown Northern zone becomes the perfect canvass upon which to paint, as it were, an imagined past; it is a significant representation that aids in explaining from where, how, and to what purpose the great and powerful city of Tenochtitlan came to exist, a people transformed by a “divine” purpose.

In terms of how their particular migration relates to violence and religion, the legendary migration also provides some vital reasons for why human sacrifice must take place according to the will of their patron god, Huitzilopochtli. In developing his cult, the Mexica-Aztec are not only able to establish but also *perpetuate* their claim to a unique historical destiny (following public customs of sacrificial ritual violence copied from Teotihuacan and Tollan). This sense of place in history produces a differentiated identity at the expense of other Nahuatl speaking peoples of the region. The attempt to perpetuate the power of the mythic journey is, however, short-lived, when the empire comes to an unexpected halt after 200 years of development. It all comes to a crashing end with the mimetic violence of Hernán Cortez and his small band of Conquistadors in 1521, to which a great many Aztec rivals rally their support.

The Mexica-Aztec empire fell when Hernán Cortez and his Spaniards won the battle of Tenochtitlan in 1521. But they did not take the Mexica capital all by themselves. They had lots of help from hundreds of indigenous allies who sought the demise of the Aztecs, their fearful rivals and common enemy. Evidently, grievances grew as the Aztecs sought to acquire ever more captives for their temple sacrifices.⁴⁴ Resistance could come from any number of recalcitrant tribute communities eager to resist the supply demands of Tenochtitlan.⁴⁵ Cortez’ allies might have their own acquisitive mimesis, alacritous to appropriate the new Spanish models for obtaining power, prestige and pecuniary possibilities.

44 For critical perspectives on the development and practice of human sacrifice, see Mendoza, Rubén. “The Harvest of Souls: Mimesis, Materiality, and Ritual Human Sacrifice in Mesoamerica.” Paper presented at *The 81st Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology*, Orlando, Florida. 2016 (tDAR id: 402886): <https://core.tdar.org/document/402886/the-harvest-of-souls-mimesis-materiality-and-ritual-human-sacrifice-in-mesoamerica>. See also David Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice*; and Michel Graulich, “Aztec Human Sacrifice as Expiation,” in *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice*, ed. Jan Bremmer, 9-30 (Leuven: Peeters, 2007).

45 Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*, 25-26; 267. Regarding the final struggle against Aztec hegemony see Michael E. Smith, *The Aztecs* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 282-283.

Perhaps one truth remains constant when studying ancient migrations of diverse populations and their changing circumstances: much that is experienced as divinely inspired seems driven by imitative desire. Whether induced by gods or the desires and drives of human-kind seeking status or transformation, human beings seem willing to journey far to obtain what they find desirable, especially if it means having to appropriate another's desires.

In this particular historical example of the Mexica migration we see the power of the mysterious "other." The migrants are at first marginalized, but they later become the very center of power and transcendence. A "rags to riches" tale, yes, but it is *desire* itself that migrates. The journey teaches the Mexica the fundamental roles of victim and victimizer. Chaotic violence (disorder) is held at bay through the effective means of ritual violence (sacrifices), which makes violent action a key dynamic for identity formation. The Aztec migration provides investigators important clues for understanding identity formation through the power of myth and the myth of power (violence). The Aztecs employed ritual violence most frequently upon victims from communities *other than their own*; it was, perhaps, one way to deal with fundamental fears and desires, to mitigate or intensify their longings for being, belonging and battling.

Finally, it is interesting to note how much the success of the Mexica depends upon the salvific role of their fearsome god Huitzilopochtli. Following Girard's "Scapegoat theory", might this divine figure once upon a time – in the pre-historic formative period – have been something of an innocent victim? One possible clue for a closer look is to see how even though born a young adult with full warrior regalia, Huitzilopochtli was also born with a "thin left foot" (a club foot).⁴⁶ It is unclear whether this figure was always a god, or some historical personage deified over time. Perhaps like King Oedipus of the Greek Myth, the story of Huitzilopochtli deserves a new reading from the scapegoat point of view. What this "club foot" mark means within a migration story is difficult to fathom, but René Girard may be pointing scholars of Mesoamerica in the right direction.

⁴⁶ See Read and Gonzalez, Read and Gonzalez, *Handbook of Mesoamerican Mythology*, 106 (note 50).

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