

Rituals and Sacrifices in the Aztec Civilization

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Abstract

This research deals with the topic of rituals and sacrifices in the Aztec civilization, which is one of the most important pillars of religious thought in the religious beliefs of the Aztecs, and includes a number of practices supervised by specialized priests on specific periodic occasions at specific times aimed at pleasing the gods to ward off dangers and evils from the king and subjects. The research is divided into two axes, the first axis is concerned with explaining and clarifying the ritual of sacrifices and offerings, while the second is concerned with explaining the rest of the rituals associated with religious life among the Aztecs.

Keywords: Aztec, civilization, rituals, sacrifices, priests.

Introduction

Introduction: The Aztecs are among the most important peoples of ancient America. They have a civilization that deserves study and attention from researchers and specialists in archaeology and anthropology, due to the great similarity, which puzzled scientists, with the ancient civilizations that preceded them, especially the civilizations of the ancient Near East. Hence, I had the desire to study their religious history, specifically the aspect of rituals and sacrifices.

Ritual represents the practical aspect of belief, and despite the supervision and guidance of priests, people work to transform it into a deep-rooted habit for reasons and means that periodically recreate faith because ritual and belief depend on each other. Although ritual comes as a result of a specific belief and works to serve it, it itself soon returns to influence the belief and increases its cohesion and strength. The Aztec religious rituals were nothing but a means to please the gods and get rid of their anger, and the Aztec people believed that the god feels what humans feel, so the temple was his home and he needed the necessities of water, so rituals were performed to please the gods such as offering human, animal and plant sacrifices, prayers, burning incense and chants, and the king was keen to perform the ceremonies of these rituals, and when he performed and supervised them he was known as (the high priest) and in his hand were the sacrifices that were presented to the gods and he had a special temple.

1st Topic: Rituals of Sacrifices

Religious rituals played an important role in showing the religious life of the Aztec people, as they had many periodic rituals, and other daily rituals. These rituals were famous in this civilization, which was characterized by many features, the most important of which was the feature of brutality. It was a civilization that offered human sacrifices, and the word Vimana in the Nahuatl language meant sacrifice, a word derived from Ventli, which means offerings, and Mana means spreading. These sacrifices and rituals helped in the cycle of growth, death and energy. It was a civilization that was thirsty for blood, and rituals were performed in horrific, brutal ways, as they would remove the beating heart of the victim while she was still alive, cut off the head, flay the skin and cut it into pieces. Despite their brutality, these rituals, in their belief, were a guarantee for

the continuation of humanity. When they removed the heart brutally, they raised it to the sky in the air as a sign of offering it to the gods.

The Aztec people had ideas and methods for choosing human sacrifices, the most important of which were:

First: Warriors.

Second: Prisoners.

Third: Children.

First: Warriors

The victims were often chosen from Aztec warriors or from their enemy warriors, who were taken prisoner. Wars were often fought for one purpose, which was to present candidates for sacrifice. This was called an indecisive war, so that the Aztecs could obtain prisoners through it. As for the Aztec warriors who were sacrificed by drawing lots and choosing them, they fought bravely and were the most handsome. These were considered the best candidates and most likely to please the gods. These warriors received great honor and had direct contact with the gods. These warriors used to meet in special halls, and these halls were like the house of eagles, and in these halls, they decided who they would choose to offer as a sacrifice to the gods. The priests had fake ways to obtain the warriors' sacrifices. They would give the warriors fake weapons and tie them to the sacrificial stone. The warrior had to fight enemy warriors who were armed with real weapons. This was the way the Aztecs obtained sacrifices from the best Aztec warriors. If the warrior was able to get rid of the stone and eliminate his opponent, he would take him prisoner and offer him as a sacrifice instead of him to the gods. There is a very important ritual for the Aztecs, which is a ritual known as the (wrestling sacrifice) ritual, where the wrestler who enters the duel is given a drink with a narcotic substance and they are tied to the stone with wooden weapons in their hands and they had to fight against five warrior knights with eagles and tigers. If the wrestler wins, he gets his freedom, and if he loses the fight, they will offer him as a sacrifice to the gods and remove his heart and cut off his head, and throw him from the top of the mountains and roll and go down the slope, as they believed that they would gain the approval of the gods and grant them rain and goodness.

Second: Prisoners

They had special rituals known in the Aztec civilization as the ritual of (heart sacrifice) and it was one of the most hideous rituals in the religious life of the Aztec civilization where they sacrificed the heart of the prisoner, when the man was slaughtered they would take his heart after they cut his chest open and take it to the top of the pyramid temple holding his hands and placing it on the sacrifice stone and the priest had a knife in his hand to cut the man and raise his heart to the sun god and the temple steps were covered in blood and the priest would cut off the head and place it on the skull shelf next to the pyramid and the victims of this ritual were not considered ordinary people but were viewed as gods whose deaths were repeated in the bodies of these people.

This ritual is called by many names including Muertesacrificial, meaning redemptive death, and it is a ritual reserved only for prisoners and slaves. There is another important ritual dedicated to the prisoners, known as the ritual of dressing the bars (Atrnuesamiento de varas). It was performed on specific days. They would gather all the body parts of the sacrifice, such as the ears, tongue, and legs, and pierce them with thorns, insert a stalk of grass or a stick into them, and place them stretched out on the mountains. When they left the next day, they would sweep the ground around it, which was filled with grass and stained with blood. =====

Third: Children

The society in the Aztec civilization is often associated with sacrifice and fighting, and perhaps many peoples of other civilizations are surprised by the loving relationship that connected Aztec parents to their children. This stage begins before birth, and because of their intense love for their children, they would sacrifice them to the gods they loved. The Aztec men viewed infants as raw material that needed to grow and develop. These children were fed with corn that the gods gave them and drank the water that the gods sent down to them. Because the gods gave food and drink to children, they believed that there was a direct relationship between children and the gods in order for children to continue to grow. Parents performed rituals in gratitude and to please them, and they usually began some of these rituals even before the child was born.

From the moment they know that the woman is pregnant, the mother and father's family celebrate the good news and hold a celebration where relatives and relatives gather to celebrate the coming baby and perform a ritual and summon the bodies of deceased ancestors to protect the mother and the child. They do this to remind the woman that the child who will be born is a gift from the gods and the mother is very happy and at the time of her birth the midwife is present.

The midwife is a woman who is highly respected in Aztec society because as a person who helped bring new life into the world it is a gift from the gods to the earth, and the mother was seen as a warrior. Four days after the birth of the child, the midwife comes again to perform the ritual of purification and naming the child and the child is brought to the courtyard where many formalities are carried out, the midwife breathes on the water and then gently washes the child and says to him: (My beloved little one, take the blue and yellow waters, approach your mother Tlatliño Htliquo to receive you and purify your heart and grant you goodness).

Then the midwife puts a symbol in the child's hand. If it is a boy, she puts a shield and an arrow in his hands, which indicates that he will become a warrior. If it is a girl, she puts a broom and a spindle for her. After that, the midwife raises the child to the sky to slap him and let the sky drink him because he has a direct relationship with the gods. Twenty days after birth, a ceremony is held in which the parents choose the type of education they want for their child. If the child is desired by the priests, they take him to Kalmykak, a temple school affiliated with the education of the priests for the future.

This school allowed the entry of children of dignitaries and there are savage rituals performed for these children, as the priests make incisions in the body of the infant and cut off the lower lip with an obsidian knife and insert a jewel into the incision after taking blood in a vial for the god. As for the girls, their wounds were on the hips and breasts. Because children were fed corn, they were in direct contact with the gods, so they were sacrificed to the god of corn and rain. Children were held over a fire to disguise them, and their ears were pierced and a cotton thread was inserted. The ear hole was gradually widened as the child grew, so that by the time of puberty the ear ornament would be 2 cm long.

This ritual is done at the deity. They believe that this ritual helps the child grow quickly. These children, because of the purity of their hearts, were a large part of the rituals in the life of the Aztecs. The victim played a large role in some of these rituals, including the naming ceremony at the age of twenty days. They performed a ritual for children, cutting off the earlobes of all infants, and if the child was a boy, his penis was cut off as a form of bloodletting.

The Aztecs hid by offering sacrifices and boats of children to the rain god as a request for rain. These children represent the rain gods and the Aztecs believe that children are small creatures magically linked to the growth of corn. These sacrifices are called Nextlahualli, which is a debt

payment sacrifice. They sacrifice a large number of children, about 1000 children per day, and the sacrifices are made on the mountaintops in honor of the gods so that they can give them rain water. When the children were sacrificed, they were dressed in luxurious clothes. When they were taken and placed on their shoulders, they were placed on their heads with feathers and flowers for the children and the priests played, danced and sang in front of them. When they took the children to be slaughtered, if the children cried and shed a lot of tears, the priests and those who carried them were happy because this was evidence that the god would send down a lot of rain on them in this month. These children wore necklaces of green stone, bracelets and branches of quetzal feathers around their necks, and their clothes were brown. These rituals were supervised by the high priests.

2nd Topic: Other Worship Rituals

1- Fire Show Ritual

This ritual is considered one of the important rituals for the Aztec civilization, where a fire was placed in a clay chimney and they put incense and embers in it and they put out the fire in front of the image of the god in the middle of the courtyard and they incense the god with it and offer their offerings to the god and these sticks that they incense the god with have a good smell.

2- Grass Offering Ritual

The family in the Aztec civilization was the one who performed the grass offering ritual in basins and they ate the soil in which the grass was planted and this was like taking an oath and when they passed in front of the god they threw the grass in front of him and when war was waged they took the grass first and threw it in front of the sun and said that this is a vow they have to offer to the sun if the warrior died in war or became a prisoner he cut his vow towards the sun.

3- Sun Ritual

Every day at sunrise, the Aztecs would sacrifice a quail with incense and cut the necks of these birds and raise them as an offering to the sun. The incense was offered four or five times at night, accompanied by flute playing, and offered to the sun god.

4- Serpent Feather Ritual

This ritual was attended by warriors who danced a wavy dance, and beautiful young women had to bring corn after roasting it and making it popcorn, and they would decorate themselves with popcorn threads that symbolized food and fertility. At the end of the ritual, the priests would practice bloodletting on all children, while other priests would go around people's homes and spread incense.

5- Animal Ritual

Animals were closely linked to human life, as they were hunted for their meat, skins, and bones, in addition to the feathers that they used as head coverings and made into jewelry. The Aztecs believed, as their myths showed, that animals participated in the creation of the universe and the human world, and that animals in the Aztec civilization participated in many rituals, including hunting rituals. Among the most important animals that played an important role in the religious rituals of the Aztecs are:

Dogs: Dogs were animals that played an important role in religious rituals due to their closeness to the human race and their loyalty and devotion to them, as they helped them protect their homes and crops. Dogs were highly respected by the Aztecs, on the one hand, and on the other hand, dogs played an important religious role in the lives of the people of Mexico, as they accompanied the dead to Mictlan, the city of the dead. The Aztec god Xolotl was known as a god whose face resembled a dog's face and whose body resembled a dog's body. Not only did the Aztecs respect

dogs, but wolves were also highly respected, as wolves were guardians and protectors of their military activities. The Aztec men performed the ritual of prayer to the ancient wolf, a god they had known as Huehue Coyotl. Their prayers were for health, longevity, and preservation of their lives, as remains of dogs and statues of dogs were found in Mexico City in human facilities dating back to 9000 BC.

Tigers and Cats: Tigers and cats were important animals to the people of Mexico and they viewed tigers in particular as intermediaries between the supernatural and the ordinary in the universe. The Aztecs had emblems, ranks and authority for tigers. One of the most important rituals they performed was that they sanctified food and meat for the jaguar through daily rituals and performed special prayers for it because it protected them from dangers. The Aztecs used to go on exploratory trips to get live jaguar cubs on the mountains and then they would perform ritual celebrations because they found animals to perform their important religious rituals because the jaguar gave them a sense of power and the thrones of the kings were made of jaguar skin.

Snakes: Snakes played a versatile and crucial role in the mythology of ancient Mexico. Snakes were associated with the sun gods and fertility gods. They used the snake as a weapon known as the fire snake. They likened the heavy rains that fall from the sky to water snakes that fall from the sky during heavy rains and storms. They believed that the upper layer was made of intertwined snakes like a sacred carpet from which men and animals emerge. Snakes are the guardians of sacred space. The Aztecs built serpent walls with stairs and pillars that resembled snakes because the earth goddess who was worshiped in these temples was the goddess with the snake skirt known as Coatlicue and the rattlesnake was her symbol.

The Aztec people respected snakes and they were of great importance to them because snakes represent renewal according to the Aztec belief because they shed their dead skins and appear with a new appearance and look. They represent the energy that gives life.

Rabbits: The Aztecs associated the rabbit with the pulp, which is a drink made from wine, because they believed that the rabbit digs around the root of the maguey plant, and maguey means cactus, and the homeland of this plant is Mexico, and for many centuries they made alcoholic drinks from it. The rabbit is strongly linked to the moon god, because when the moon god did not immediately offer the necessary sacrifice himself to become the sun due to his fear and cowardice, he was thrown in the face by the rabbit. The ritual for the Aztec god Hunt Kama Castli was that on his feast day and ritual, he would drink silver bracelets and arrows on his head and rabbit skins on his shoulder, where animals were hunted, including rabbits, and what was hunted alive was placed in front of the idol and slaughtered in the most hideous way, and its heart was extracted as if it were a human sacrifice.

The Aztecs depended on selective hunting in their animal rituals and sacrifices, meaning they hunted more than one rabbit and took the best one to offer to their gods. In Mexico City, artifacts were found that were made by humans and were in large quantities of animal remains in caches. They were part of the rituals of offering sacrifices in the Aztec civilization, where a jaguar skeleton was found with a green stone ball in its jaws.

Conclusions

The most important conclusions reached by the researcher:

- 1- The impact of religious thought among the Aztecs embodied in rituals on the life of society and became mixed with all their customs and traditions, and even a source for them.
- 2- The ritual of sacrifice among the Aztecs was distinguished as the strangest among the rituals of sacrifice in the religions of the ancient world, due to the presence of the ritual of human sacrifice.

- 3- The king had a special religious status in the Aztec civilization, which came from his direct supervision of the performance of rituals, especially the ritual of sacrifices or offerings, and he was called (the high priest).
- 4- The family in the Aztec civilization was an important axis in establishing religious rituals through the sacrifice of children or other groups.
- 5- The Aztec religion was interested in animals of all kinds and had a role in establishing many rituals.

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