

Abstract

The Aztec religious system had a profound impact on every aspect of the Aztec culture and society. Living under the fifth sun, created by the sacrifice of their own gods, the Aztecs found themselves in a constant metaphysical war to keep the sun moving. In order to pay back what was given to them by the gods, the Aztecs performed human sacrifices on a regular basis, guided by their ceremonial calendar. This was not religious homicide for the Aztecs, but a constant fight for the survival of the cosmos. The majority of captives were procured through warfare, but also in the elusive xochiyaoyotl, the Flower Wars. The Flower Wars were ritualised non-fatal battles that took place between the Aztecs and their opponents, seemingly with the aim of procuring captives for sacrificial rituals. While death did occur in the Flower Wars, it was seen as a great honour, the warriors gave their lives for the gods. This thesis poses the question: "Why did the Aztecs conduct Flower Wars?" Through the years, multiple motivations have been presented, removing the concept of religion of the equation. This thesis argues that religion had a central role in the waging of the Flower Wars.

Abstract Dansk

Aztekerne levede under den femte sol, skabt da guderne ofrede sig selv så verdenen kunne blive til. Dette betød at Aztekerne levede i konstant kamp for at opretholde verdenen, ved at betale guderne tilbage. Tilbagebetalingen skete ved religiøse menneskeofringer, primært med fanger taget i krig. For Aztekerne var ofret en hellig opgave, fangerne blev derfor hædret og behandlet godt. Udover regulær krig, så udkæmpede Aztekerne også det de kaldte for Blomsterkrigene. Grundlaget for krigene har været omdiskuteret. Dette speciale behandler spørgsmålet: "Hvorfor udkæmpede Aztekerne Blomsterkrigene?" Grundet religions vigtighed, argumenterer specialet et religiøst grundlag for udførelsen af disse krige.

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A brief guide to Nahuatl

When writing and conducting research into Mesoamerican, and more specifically Aztec history, one will come across a plethora of names and words that might seem alien and hard to read for the uninitiated. Therefore, it is necessary to provide a brief yet easy guide on how to pronounce Nahuatl words and names. Nahuatl was the native language of the Aztecs, and is still spoken by indigenous people in present day Mexico. In her book “Fifth Sun”, Camilla Townsend presents three rules that will aid the reader in pronouncing Nahuatl. The first rule regards the “tl” consonant cluster, which is pronounced softly as a simple “t” sound, such as in the word “water”. The second is when the letter “h” is followed by a “u”, it produces a “w” sound, as in the word “wait”. Both of these rules are used in the word “Nahuatl” which would be pronounced NA-wat. The third and final rule is the pronunciation of the letter “x”, which is pronounced like the English “sh” sound, like the word “shank”. The Aztecs did not refer to themselves as such, but rather as Mexica, which is hence pronounced as Me-SHEE-ka. Another example would be the word for flower, “xochitl”, which would by the rules outlined be pronounced SHO-cheet.¹

¹ Townsend (2019): 12.

Glossary

- **Altepetl** – The Nahuatl term for state regardless of size. Close to the modern understanding of city-state
- **Calmecac** – School for the nobility
- **Huitzilopochtli** – God of war (amongst other things) and patron god of the Aztecs
- **Macehualli** (pl. **macehualtin**) – The common people
- **Pilli** (pl. pipiltin) – People of the nobility
- **Pulque** – An alcoholic beverage made from the sap of the maguey plant
- **Telpochcalli** – School for the commoners
- **Tenochtitlan** – The capital of the Aztecs, built on an island in Lake Texcoco. After the conquest it became the site of Mexico city
- **Tlaloc** – God of rain
- **Tlatoani** – Translates to “one who speaks” and implies the one who speaks on behalf of a group. Used to denote the leader of an altepetl, and approximates to our understanding of king
- **Tlaxcala** – A large altepetl to the west of Tenochtitlan, who remained unconquered and was the target of multiple Flower Wars. They were among the first to ally with the Spanish
- **Triple Alliance** – Also referred to as the Aztec Triple Alliance. The fifteenth-century alliance between the ruling families of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan
- **Quetzalcoatl** – The feathered serpent, God of wind and knowledge
- **Xipe Totec** – God of life, death, and rebirth
- **Xochiyaoyotl** – Nahuatl word for Flower Wars

Introduction

“And may all, the eagle warrior, the ocelot warrior, merit a little; may [the warrior] be covered with chalk, with down feathers. Show him the Marvel. May his heart falter not in fear. May he savor the fragrance, the sweetness of death by the obsidian knife. With his heart may he gladden Necoc tene, the ritual feathering, [the goddess] Itzpapalotl. May he desire, may he long for the flowery death by the obsidian knife. May he savor the scent, savor the fragrance, savor the sweetness of the darkness, the din of battle, the roar of the crowd. Take his part; be his friend.”²

The Aztec empire and its culture is perhaps one of the biggest contrasts in history. The capital of Tenochtitlan was so beautiful that the conquistadors compared it to contemporary Venice. But amidst all the beauty, the conquistadors also found what, according to them, were great horrors. The people of Tenochtitlan were elegantly dressed, wearing jewellery of gold and jade. Temple pyramids arose above the great marketplaces, where busy merchants sold their wares and cooks made dishes with chocolate, spices, beans, maize, and tortillas. In the centre of Tenochtitlan stood the great twin temples, huey teocalli, dedicated to the gods Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, the gods of war and rain.³ It was at the temples of Tenochtitlan that the conquistadors witnessed the Aztec practice of human sacrifice, which, to them contrasted greatly with the otherwise beautiful city.

One of the most debated topics concerning the Aztec empire is, unquestionably, the concept of the human sacrifice, conducted throughout the Empire and the evident importance of the concept to its people. Throughout the years, scholars have attempted to explain, or in other ways justify, the underlying rationalities for instigating such events. Many scholars have researched and debated the subject of the Aztec sacrificial body, the scale of which sacrifices were conducted, reasoning and underlying motivations.⁴ The same search for motives and reasoning has been conducted on the concept of the Aztec Flower Wars.⁵ The Flower Wars, or xochiyayotl in the indigenous tongue of Nahuatl, were pitched battles planned by two different altepetls (self-governing community boasting their own tlatoani (king)).⁷ The sources usually describe the goal of these battles to ensure sacrificial victims, but scholars have tried to denounce that notion, in search of something more

² Extract of a prayer to Tezcatlipoca; Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 6): 14.

³ Templo Mayor in Spanish.

⁴ See Harner (1977); Price (1978); Pennock (2012).

⁵ See Hicks (1979); Price (1978); Isaac (1983); Hassig (1988); Pennock (2022).

⁶ In other places called Floral, Flowery or Garland Wars.

⁷ Townsend (2019): 40.

‘humane’ or in the least more reasonable from a modern perspective. Since then, multiple motivations have been presented such as political, military or economical goals.

This thesis seeks to challenge these motivations, asking the simple yet difficult question:

Why did the Aztecs conduct Flower Wars?

Aztec or Mexica

An important distinction to make when writing on the Aztec is the way to which they are referred as to avoid confusion and misconceptions. As I touched on briefly in the section *a brief guide to Nahuatl*, the indigenous people did not call themselves Aztec; they would have used the term Mexica. The two words have been used interchangeably throughout history and can often confuse the reader. The term ‘Aztec’ has been criticised in recent times, as it was not used by the people themselves and carried the weight of colonial misrepresentation.⁸ The word ‘Aztec’ has its etymological foundation in the mythical homeland of ‘Aztlán’, from which several groups migrated in the twelfth century. It was used by scholars in the eighteenth century and was popularised in the nineteenth century by William Prescott.⁹ While this thesis aims to explore the topic of Flower War in light of Mexica culture and tradition, the term can easily blur the line between the Aztec civilisation and the Mexica people themselves. In light of this, to provide a streamlined and easy to understand analysis of certain elements of the culture, and differentiate from other altepetls in Mexico, I find the term Aztec to be the most suitable. Therefore, when I refer to Aztecs, I primarily refer to the people and the rulers of Tenochtitlan. In some cases, this will also include the whole Aztec Empire, also called the Aztec Triple Alliance, which consisted of the three altepetls Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan. Should cases arise where a clarification is needed, it will be provided immediately after.

⁸ See Townsend (2019).

⁹ Pennock (2008): xii.

An introduction to the sources

On the subject of the Flower Wars, we face a rather disheartening fact; the sources very rarely mention or describe them. The sources that do mention them, usually does it in passing. To give a potential reasoning or motivation for the Flower Wars, we have to look at the Aztec culture in its entirety. This means that we must consider the way the Aztecs practiced their religion and sacrifices, how they conducted war, and how they educated their children. In doing this, we will be able to piece together a potential motivation for the Aztecs conducting the Flower Wars.

After the conquest of Tenochtitlan in 1521, the Spanish conquistadors destroyed any trace of the civilization's culture, deeming it too dangerous to survive and replaced it with their own. Hence the majority of sources on the Aztec Empire were written by Spanish conquistadors, missionaries, and historians, which in itself leads to leads to inherent problems. The reason I say majority, and not all, is due to a small number of descendants of the Aztecs, who wrote on the subject as well. Historians like Don Domingo de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin Quauhtelhuantzin, usually referred to as Chimalpahin from Chalco, and Don Hernando de Alvarado Tezozomoc who was a grandson of Moctezuma Xocoyotl.¹⁰ Their works were written during the seventeenth century, almost 100 years after the conquest of Tenochtitlan. This means that even their writings become problematic in the context of this thesis. Compared to fray Bernardino de Sahagún, both would have limited access to people who remembered life before the Spanish conquest. In closing, due to their upbringing in the now Eurocentric Mexico, the old ways would have been buried quite deeply. So, even in the best-case scenario, with indigenous sources at hand, one must act with absolute care.

This brings us to a source that is invaluable to this thesis: *La Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España* (General History of New Spain), or as it is commonly known, the Florentine Codex, written by fray Bernardino de Sahagún, commonly referred to as Sahagún.

Sahagún was a Franciscan friar born in 1499 or 1500, in the Spanish town of Sahagún, from which he took his name.¹¹ Little is known of his early life as a student, before becoming a mendicant friar and his eventual mission to spread the Gospel in Mexico. It is not before the year 1529, when he and nineteen other friars, under Fr. Antonio de Ciudad Rodrigo, arrived in Mexico, that we start to learn more about Sahagún's life and work. After his arrival in Mexico Sahagún quickly learned to

¹⁰ Townsend (2019): 11; Moctezuma Xocoyotl is usually referred to as either Moctezuma the younger, or Moctezuma II, the latter will be used from this point on.

¹¹ Anderson in Florentine Codex: Introduction & Indices (2012): 30.

speak and write in Nahuatl, eventually earning the reputation of being one of the best interpreters in New Spain. Even though Sahagún is often credited as one of the first ethnographers and linguists of New Spain, it is important to remember that his main priority was his work as a priest and missionary.¹² At first glance this creates several problems, regarding the validity of the Codex. However, as I will explain in short order, these problems can actually work to our advantage.

Work on the Codex began with Sahagún's arrival in New Spain in 1529. During his first years stretching into the 1530's, he actively cooperated in the selecting and training of young natives, who would later become his collaborators. Schools were established to instruct the indigenous youth and Sahagún would become one of the instructors. Sahagún instructed the youth in Latin at the college of Santa Cruz, which were founded in 1536. The youth that Sahagún instructed became a valuable resource in the translation of Christian sermons and texts into Nahuatl.¹³ It was the collaboration between religious and linguistic scholars during this time that made the creation of the Codex possible. The first evidence of work that relates to the Codex appears in 1547, and would eventually become part of Book VI. This volume is mainly a collection of Christian sermons, prayers, and orations by the indigenous elders to instruct the people in proper conduct. At the end of the book there is a statement, which explains that the work was conducted thirty years before the translation into Spanish:

*“This was translated into the Spanish language by the said Father, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, in this year of 1577, thirty years after it had been written in the Mexican language.”*¹⁴

In 1555, Sahagún prepared an account of the Conquest of Mexico, from the native's point of view, which subsequently became book XII in the codex.¹⁵ The order to begin the work that would become the Codex came in 1558, when Fray Francisco de Toral became Provincial of the Franciscans in Mexico. Sahagún's work the past twenty years as a missionary and linguist were of such quality that Francisco de Toral ordered Sahagún to:

¹² Anderson (2012): 31.

¹³ Dibbles in Florentine Codex: Introduction & Indices (2012): 9.

¹⁴ Dibbles (2012): 10.

¹⁵ Dibbles (2012): 10.

*“write in the Mexican language that which seemed to me useful for the indoctrination, the propagation of the Christianization of these natives of this New Spain and as a help to the workers and the ministers who indoctrinate them.”*¹⁶

This prompted Sahagún to move to Tepepulco, near Texcoco. There, he gathered the leaders of the village, including Don Diego de Mendoza, an elderly native, and requested ten or twelve elderly informants, who understood the ancient practices and beliefs of the Aztecs. He also recruited four native Latin scholars, from the College where he had previously taught.¹⁷ Sahagún and his small group of colleagues interviewed many indigenous inhabitants in the areas where he held missionary posts in Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco and Tepepulco. The identities of the interviewed informants have unfortunately been lost, though we know that they included community leaders who had been educated at the calmecac schools of Tenochtitlan.¹⁸ The natives whom Sahagún worked with revered him, and mourned him once he died. He was lovingly described by the indigenous he worked with as “mild, humble, poor, and in his talk sagacious and affable to all”.¹⁹ The considerable affection towards Sahagún is important to acknowledge, especially when his main task was to propagate the faith and did so with little mildness. It gives an indication of how the indigenous people viewed Sahagún’s character, and how they willingly trusted him with information on their history and culture.²⁰ The work Sahagún and his native colleagues carried out until his death in 1590 would eventually become the 12 books that constitute the Florentine Codex.²¹

The individual books explain overarching themes of the Aztec culture, and are listed as follows:

- Book I: The Gods
- Book II: The Ceremonies
- Book III: The Origin of the Gods
- Book IV: The Soothsayers
- Book V: The Omens
- Book VI: Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy
- Book VII: The Sun, Moon and Stars

¹⁶ Dibbles (2012): 11.

¹⁷ Dibbles (2012): 12.

¹⁸ Pennock (2008): 6.

¹⁹ Anderson (2012): 38.

²⁰ Anderson (2012): 38.

²¹ Anderson (2012): 38.

- Book VIII: Kings and Lords
- Book IX: The People
- Book XI: Earthly Things
- Book XII: The Conquest

Sahagún and his Codex will act as the main keystone of my thesis and, in extension of this, there are a few things that need to be taken into consideration and addressed. First and foremost was his motivation for writing the Codex. As a missionary, his main goal was to propagate the Christian faith, replacing the old ways of the Aztecs. This would usually be a considerable pitfall due to the implications, that the material would misrepresent the Aztec way of life in an effort to dissuade the inhabitants of New Spain to fall back into their old ways. But to quote Sahagún himself:

*“(a) physician cannot advisedly administer medicines to the patient without first knowing of which humour or from which source the ailment derives”, and “preachers and confessors are physicians of the souls for the curing of spiritual ailments”.*²²

It was clear to Sahagún that he thought the best cause of action, would be to gain as much knowledge of the Aztec culture as possible. This means that he thought he would be doing the Church a disservice by misconstruing the Aztec ways, and that an objective representation of their ways would be favourable. According to Pennock, the popularity of the Codex has been wavering over the years: historians have generally fixated on the potential corrupting influence of the colonial context in which it was produced. Bearing this in mind, it is important to remember that Sahagún viewed the Aztecs through a European lens. Expounding on this, in some rare cases, some notions and concepts in the Aztec society are not clearly interpreted and will need further clarification. With regard to Sahagún himself, it appears that he took a responsible, diligent approach to gathering and organizing and verifying information and sources for his time.²³ In an evaluation of the works of Sahagún and his character, the prominent Mesoamerican historian Miguel León-Portilla writes:

In producing “the first integral ethnohistorical investigation in the New World, Fray Bernardino knew full well, as all social anthropologists today know, that in order to introduce the processes of change in a human group it is an indispensable requirement to start with the most complete possible investigation of its various institutions and cultural patterns, of its antecedents and

²² Pennock (2008): 8.

²³ Pennock (2008): 7.

historical evolution, and also of the environment in which it was developed, with special emphasis as to its resources and possibilities. This, which today seems self-evident, was Sahagún's point of departure more than four centuries ago. With these criteria he put himself in direct contact with the human and cultural realities of the Nahuatl-speaking communities, as he searched for a firm basis which without violence would permit directing the processes of change and acculturation that, from the time of the conquest, and been inevitably affecting the native societies. Only by knowing their language, their mentality, and their way of life would it be possible to bring them the message of Christianity in their own cultural context, as was the main object of the Friars' activities."²⁴

While Sahagún's goal was religious in nature, even a quick glance at the books of the Codex reveals he was interested in areas outside of religion as well, which indicates a profound interest in Aztec culture proper. In closing it is worth noting that during the time Sahagún conducted his research, he would have had the opportunity to interview individuals who were adults before the conquest, a notable rarity when it comes to sources on the Aztecs. Sahagún was therefore, the first 'historian' to have direct access to contemporary memory of the Aztec way of life before the European invasion. As noted in the start of this section, Chimalpahin and Tezozomoc did not have that luxury. Therefore, one of the common weaknesses of sources on the Aztecs, the colonial fundamēt is turned on its head. In Sahagún's diligent efforts to propagate the Christian faith, he inadvertently created what might be considered the best historical evidence of the Aztec culture. While this certainly seems evident, the writings of Sahagún are not without its flaws and fallacies. When such a problem arises during the analysis, I will point them out and discuss them further.

In addition to the Florentine Codex, Fray Diego Durán and Bernal Díaz will provide valuable knowledge in the section on warfare. Compared to the Florentine Codex, I view both Durán and Díaz as supplementary sources to the thesis, and therefore, they do not warrant a full section and introductions. As with Sahagún, should problems arise that relegates to the sources of Durán and Díaz, I will address them appropriately.

²⁴ Anderson (2012): 34.

Literature review

The human perception of history changes with time as new methodologies, theories, sources and materials are uncovered. Therefore, the literature I have selected for review will be examined chronologically to explore how our interpretation of the Flower Wars and human sacrifice, and the interplay between them has changed over time. The literature was selected with several parameters in mind, though the individual articles and books did not have to include all of the topics but did need to be relevant to the overall topic. In descending order of importance, the topics are:

- Human Sacrifice, which I believe was an integral part to the flower wars.
- The Flower Wars themselves, as these events forms the focal point of this thesis.
- War as a general concept in Aztec society
- How Tenochtitlan society functioned educationally, militarily, and religiously

The reason that the Flower Wars is not the first priority is that the research on the topic is rather vague and needs to be viewed through a broader lens, or perhaps multiple different lenses to reach a reasonable understanding. Warfare and Aztec culture is important as it differs greatly from modern notions of war, albeit most research is a comparison with European cultures, more specifically the Spanish due to the colonisation.

Human sacrifice as a source for nutrition, and the start of the great debate (1977-1983)

In February 1977 the American Anthropological Association (AAA) released the fourth volume of *American Ethnologist* wherein anthropologist Michael Harner wrote the article *The Ecological Basis for Aztec Sacrifice*. The work started a discussion on the topic of the Aztec human sacrificial complex and the rationale for the Flower Wars, which lasted until 1983. Harner proposed that the necessity and volume of human sacrifices found in Aztec society, was a natural result of distinctive ecological problems, which he found through the theory of population pressure of social evolution. In essence, Harner sought to explain “*peculiar or unusual cultural developments*”.²⁵ Viewing the Aztec sacrificial culture as peculiar or unusual is faulty due to the subjectivity of the statement.²⁶

²⁵ Harner (1977): 118.

²⁶ Harner (1977): 117-118.

Harner asserts that:

*“The long-term increase of human population has led to increasing degradation of wild flora and fauna used for food”.*²⁷

The lack of domesticated herbivores for consumption leads to a lack of the necessary nutrients in their society. Harner proposed that; *“large-scale cannibalism, disguised as sacrifice, was the natural consequence of this situation”.*²⁸ The sources used by Harner to support his argument are mainly of Spanish origin, specifically letters from Hernán Cortés, Bernal Díaz, Sahagún and Diego Durán, the latter of whom he refers to as “less reliable”.²⁹

The sources chosen by Harner, carries a lot of weight and would need to be processed with caution, which he fails to do. Harner uses these sources to establish an overview of accounts regarding human sacrifices and cannibalism, including a wide range of sacrificial victims in Central Mexico. The difference between the lower and upper bounds of this, ranges from an extremely high number of sacrifices to a more malleable number, coupled with the questionable authenticity of Harner’s sources, suggest that the number of sacrifices was likely conflated and conjecture at best.³⁰ Harner does not evaluate the validity of these numbers in his research. I will look at these numbers again later in this section of the thesis, and through the work of Caroline Dodds Pennock demonstrate that the numbers are unrealistic and misconstrued.

Interestingly, Harner does touch on the Flower Wars, albeit only in passing and he does not dive deeper into the nature of the wars. He does establish, however, that the purpose of the Flower Wars was to procure prisoners, whose inevitable fate was to be laid across the sacrificial stones.³¹ I accept Harner’s simplistic stance towards the Flower War, however, as I will show, the connection between the Flower Wars and human sacrifice is more nuanced and complicated than that.

The main problem with Harner’s paper is the way he uses the sources. He regards them as literary truths and facts, while neglecting issues such as language barriers or cultural and religious differences between the Spanish and Aztecs. Harner eventually concludes:

²⁷ Harner (1977): 118.

²⁸ Harner (1977): 118-119.

²⁹ Harner (1977): 119.

³⁰ Harner (1977): 119.

³¹ Harner (1977): 131.

“What we can see in the Aztec case, then, is an extreme development, under conditions of environmental circumscription, very high population pressure, and an emphasis on maize agriculture, of a cultural pattern that grew out of a Circum-Caribbean and Mesoamerican ecological area characterized by substantial wild-game degradation and the lack of a domesticated herbivore. Intensification of horticultural practices was possible and occurred widely; but for the necessary satisfaction of essential protein requirements, cannibalism was the only possible solution. That cannibalism, disguised as propitiation of the gods, bequeathed to the world some of the most distinctive art and architecture developed by humanity. The ecological uniqueness of the situation led inevitably to unique cultural products, among them the famous Aztec sacrificial complex. From the perspective of cultural ecology and population pressure theory, it is possible to understand and respect the Aztec emphasis on human sacrifice as the natural and rational response to the material conditions of their existence. Population pressure theory capable of explaining the development of unique cases as well as of regularities in human social and cultural evolution.”³²

This theory paints the Aztecs and their priesthood as butchers, searching for a protein source, due to the lack of domesticated livestock, and disregards the indigenous position on the matter. Cannibalism was certainly practiced by the Aztecs, to an extent, following certain sacrificial rituals. These incidents, however, was also ritualised and reserved for the elite. I will not discuss Harner’s theory further, as it has been done so extensively elsewhere.³³

In a response to Harner, Barbara J. Price challenged the notion of cannibalism as a goal for human sacrifices in her 1978 paper *Demystification, Enriddlement, and Aztec Cannibalism: A Materialist Rejoinder to Harner*. Price argues that protein deprivation is highly unlikely to have been a major issue in the Mexican basin. The primary food source in Mexico was and is maize regularly consumed with beans which are naturally rich in protein. A more pressing issue was famine, such as the one striking the Mexican basin in 1454.³⁴ Price argues that the contemporary population of Mexico, particularly poorer families, consume meat perhaps once or twice a year, with a diet consisting of mainly maize and beans. A family would buy chickens for the purpose of selling eggs so that they could purchase maize and beans. Price does concede that this diet would lead to a lower life expectancy, higher morbidity and an increase in child mortality in the poorer part of society. Price draws parallels between the Aztecs and their modern Mexican counterparts, with the middle

³² Harner (1977): 132-133.

³³ See Price (1978); Hicks (1979); Isaac (1983); Pennock (2012).

³⁴ Isaac (1983): 418.

and higher classes having access to finer diets, and hence would live longer. This is a situation that persists to this day.³⁵

I won't go further into the Aztec diet and nutrition, since it does not contribute to my thesis. It does however disprove Harner's theory of nutrition being a motive for cannibalism and in extension human sacrifices. It narrows down the list of reasons for human sacrifices, and in extension the flower wars. Price also briefly touches on the concept of the Flower Wars, offering a further compelling counterargument to Harner's theory:

*"Given the regularity of this type of inconclusive military operations [flowery wars], nothing would be more probable than the existence of ideological mechanisms capable of keeping up an understandable sagging military morale ... Ritualizing the drawn-out process of conquest into "flowery wars" provides an emic transformation of a standstill into a situation where something is ostensibly happening, ideologically justifying behavior that need not look too promising."*³⁶

According to Price, the main goal of the Flower Wars was to provide a morale boost for the soldiers during stalemates in the conflicts fought throughout the basin. Price's theory is certainly interesting and offers a more credible foundation than that of Harner's. It does, however, disregard other, both minor and significant, details surrounding the Flower Wars.

The Flower Wars centralizes

Frederic Hicks, arguing against both Harner and Price, proposed a more thorough examination of the Flower Wars in his 1979 paper *Flowery War*. Hicks dismissed the cannibalistic approach of Harner and the stalemate approach by Price while acknowledging that there is more to it than to satisfy religious ritual requirements. Hicks states that:

*"There were indeed "flowery wars" in ancient Mexico. But were they waged primarily to obtain the sacrificial victims?"*³⁷

In Hicks' own words:

"The notion that the Aztec fought "flowery wars" primarily to provide captives needed for human sacrifices is called into question. The data on wars called "flowery" in the ethnohistorical sources

³⁵ Price (1978) 98-100.

³⁶ Price (1978): 110.

³⁷ Hicks (1979) 87.

indicate that they were simply wars not aimed at conquest, and that the most common motive for waging them was to provide military training and practice."³⁸

The ethnohistorical sources referred to by Hicks were primarily written by Chimalpahin, a descendent of the ruling family of Amecameca, and whose works were created during the seventeenth century, basing them on earlier pictorial sources and oral traditions.³⁹ Hicks based his analysis on three series of Flower Wars mentioned by Chimalpahin, examining the reasons for why these wars were fought. According to Chimalpahin, wars started out as flowery wars (*xochiyaoyotl*), where some died and the captured prisoners would eventually be released, given back to the enemy faction. In time, these wars turned into *angry wars* (*cocoltic yaoyotl*), and now captives were taken for sacrificial rituals, implying a shift from a Flower War to conventional warfare.⁴⁰ Hicks assesses that most modern writers researching the Flower Wars have been dealing with the intervalley wars between the Aztec Triple Alliance and the Transmontane states (also called the Tlaxcala-Pueblan Alliance, consisting of Huexotzinco, Tlaxcala, Atlixco, Tliliuhquitepec and Cholula), and argues that since the combined forces of the Aztec Triple Alliance did not conquer these states, the wars must have been Flower Wars.⁴¹ Hicks concede that the captives were a byproduct of the later Flower Wars, but argued that the sacrifices themselves were political, not religious. He bases this on two conflicting sources. The first is an account of, the Spanish captain Andrés de Tapia, who allegedly asked Moctezuma II, the Aztec huey tlatoani (Emperor), why the Triple Alliance did not conquer Tlaxcala. Moctezuma II answered that they would lack a nearby source for sacrificial captives and training for the soldiers. The second source comes from the Tlaxcalan historian Diego Muñoz Camargo, who denies Moctezuma II's claim. Hicks accept the view of Camargo.⁴² The point, according to Hicks, is that the Aztecs themselves did not claim that they went to war, flowery or otherwise, for sacrificial captives.⁴³ Hicks conclude, by comparing the three series of Flower Wars he examined with actual wars, arguing they were fought for sport, not for conquest. Hicks follow this conclusion with the question: "*Why did the Aztecs fight wars for sport?*"⁴⁴ Answering his own

³⁸ Hicks (1979): 87.

³⁹ Hicks (1979): 87; Codex Borgia would be an example of these kind of sources.

⁴⁰ Hicks (1979): 88.

⁴¹ Hicks (1979): 88.

⁴² Hicks (1979): 88-89.

⁴³ Hicks (1979): 90.

⁴⁴ Hicks (1979): 90.

question, Hicks argues that out of the three series of wars, only one procured sacrificial victims, and the only realistic reason, would be practical training and exercise.⁴⁵

Flower Wars as a political motivator and a temporary pause in the great debate

In an extension to the research presented, Barry L. Isaac seeks to elaborate upon the Flower Wars, by examining sixteenth-century Hispanic writings on the Flower Wars in the 1983 article *The Aztec "Flowery War": A Geopolitical Explanation*. Specifically, the origin and persistence of ceremonial exchange between the elites of the warring factions, reports of battlefield behaviour and results, and the Aztec Triple Alliance's incentive and ability to conquer the Tlaxcala-Pueblan Alliance.⁴⁶

Isaac evaluates the intervalley wars from 1450 to 1521. He begins by assessing two potential reasons for the initiation of the Flower Wars, starting in 1450. He also notes that he will refrain from going into the validity of the post-conquest Hispanic sources, treating them carefully. The sources are conflicting on the matter and ranges from famine striking the Mexican basin in 1455, which in turn incentivises pillaging, Tenochtitlan initiating Flower Wars for sacrificial purposes, training, and political spin for Tenochtitlan's inability to conquer the Tlaxcala-Pueblan Alliance due to them resisting becoming tributary states.⁴⁷

During lulls in the Flower Wars, there were secretly exchanged gifts between the rulers of the warring factions, and invitations between them to witness grand events in both Tenochtitlan and Tlaxcala.⁴⁸ Isaac speculates, why these arrangements would happen in secret, arguing that it shows an overall geopolitical goal for both factions as the political elite wanted to avoid the general population knowing about the arrangements.⁴⁹ Isaac continues to analyse a series of major battles fought during the period of 1503 to 1517. During this period Huexotzinco disbanded their alliance with the Tlaxcala-Pueblan Alliance, facing retaliation by Tlaxcala, and eventually joined the Triple Alliance. Isaac concludes that this period is described by multiple sources as a bloody period with high casualty rates, which he then uses to dismiss both Harner's and Hick's theories.

Isaac argues that the inclusion of Huexotzinco into the Aztec Triple Alliance was an odd choice, since they were denied in an unknown request in 1499, which could very well have been an offer of inclusion. Isaac questions Harner's theory, that the reason to not let them enter the alliance would

⁴⁵ Hicks (1979): 90-91.

⁴⁶ Isaac (1983): 415.

⁴⁷ Isaac (1983): 415-416.

⁴⁸ Isaac (1983) 418-419.

⁴⁹ Isaac (1983): 418-420.

be to have a steady and close stock of sacrificial victims and at cannibalism. Why, then, would Tenochtitlan and their allies, allow them to join the Triple Alliance shortly after in 1512?⁵⁰ Isaac asserts that the Triple Alliance's military effort in the Tlaxcala-Pueblan valley, were focused on the strongest current power, which until then had been Huexotzinco. After the Tlaxcalan offensive stance towards Huexotzinco was concluded, the Triple Alliance saw the opportunity to reduce the number of enemies in the valley by one.⁵¹ Isaac concludes that the end goal for the Triple Alliance eventually was to conquer the Tlaxcala, being the strongest faction in the valley in 1518-1519, but being unable to because of the following:

- The Triple Alliance had suffered dire attrition due to prolonged fighting.
- Tlaxcala had a geographical advantage.
- Tlaxcala-Pueblan Alliance fought for continued independence, while the Triple Alliance fought for expansion. Tlaxcala therefore had more to lose.
- The Triple Alliance expanded rapidly and experienced rebellions in occupied areas, the Triple Alliance armies were therefore spread too thin to put down rebellions.⁵²

In closing, Isaac argues that modern historians should not be misled by Triple Alliance war propaganda and its self-serving historical rationalisations, whether recorded in codices or by the indigenous nobility, stressing that critical thinking is required.⁵³ This concludes the first stage of the inter-scholarly battle, which had been fought since 1977.

Ross Hassig and the intricacy of Aztec warfare

In 1988 Ross Hassig published the most extensive work on the topic of Aztec Warfare to date, including Flower War, *Aztec Warfare – Imperial expansion and political control*. Hassig's work engulfs everything related to Aztec warfare, will form the foundation of my analysis on Aztec warfare.

In contrast with the earlier works in this section, Hassig do not directly aim to disprove the other theories. Before delving into Hassig's view on the Flower Wars, it is important to take his stance on the interplay between religion and warfare into consideration.

According to Hassig's own perspective:

⁵⁰ Isaac (1983): 420-423.

⁵¹ Isaac (1983) 423-425.

⁵² Isaac (1983): 425-426.

⁵³ Isaac (1983): 427-428.

*“My approach, by contrast, applies perspectives that are more congruent with the Aztec Empire as it functioned. Although my focus is largely political and economic, I do not rule out the role of religion and ideology. People today fight for ideological reasons, and there is no justification for eliminating such reasons from any analysis of Aztec practices.”*⁵⁴

Hassig himself does not deny the potential of religious motivation in the Flower Wars, but it is not his focus point. For Hassig the goal of most campaigns was conquest, and when an opponent would prove too difficult to conquer, two separate strategies were applied: encirclement and the Flower War. The encirclement strategy was an effort to cut off the opponent from its allies and supply lines, reducing their ability to retreat through piecemeal conquest of enemy territory in successive battles, eventually leading to capitulation. This strategy would either be conducted alone or in conjunction with a Flower War. Hassig argues that Flower Wars were the initial phase of a protracted conflict that would eventually evolve into a war of conquest. Most importantly, it was a demonstration of martial skills, which distinguishes it from an ordinary war. The Flower Wars would not be fought for conquest, but as a way to allow the Aztecs to demonstrate military superiority over their opponents, which in extension showed the futility of resistance. Another purpose for the Flower Wars was attrition. According to Hassig, the Flower War was fought with numerical equal armies, and as such, the side with a bigger numerical advantage outside the Flower War, would eventually weaken the opponent, prompting them to surrender. Lastly, Hassig argues that the Aztecs used the Flower Wars as propaganda. In the case that the Aztecs did not subdue their opponents outright in a war of conquest, engaging in Flower Wars would permit a continued show of force and resolve as a warning to other altepetls. Hassig concludes that the Flower Wars was an efficient means of continuing a conflict that was too costly to conclude immediately.⁵⁵

Caroline Dodds Pennock, sacrifices, and the old debate (2012-2022)

Human sacrificial culture in Tenochtitlan takes the centre stage in Caroline Dodds Pennock’s paper *Mass Murder or Religious Homicide? Rethinking Human Sacrifice and Interpersonal Violence in Aztec Society*. Pennock seeks to dispel some of the myths regarding the Aztec empire and their practice of human sacrifice. While the Aztecs practiced human sacrifices on a larger scale than any of the other indigenous cultures in the Americas, Pennock is quick to point out that during the same period, the Spanish church and state were executing heretics and opponents in bloody ritualistic violence. A typical depiction, according to Pennock comes from the French anthropologist,

⁵⁴ Hassig (1988): 12.

⁵⁵ Hassig (1988): 254-255.

ethnologist, and philosopher Claude Lévi Strauss who attributed to the Aztecs: “*a maniacal obsession with blood and torture*”. Pennock states that the reality is far more complex, and the people of the empire were far from alien to the rest of the world, living expressive, human and familiar lives.⁵⁶ In other words, the Aztecs are always associated with human sacrifices, and it often overshadows their culture, while it was practiced elsewhere as well. Pennock’s aim with the paper is, in her own words:

*“to evaluate the statistical and quantitative evidence which will allow Aztec society to be placed into a comparative understanding of homicide; to consider how we should categorize this violence; and to analyse the rhetoric of ‘civilization’ which has influenced, and at times obscured, its understanding.”*⁵⁷

To accomplish this goal, Pennock starts by posing a significant problem regarding the modern understanding of the Aztec society, specifically that of Tenochtitlan. Pennock assesses that violence was a central aspect of the Aztec way of life, but to categorise the understanding of this violence poses a significant struggle. To that end, a statistical appraisal of the victims would be invaluable, but it would be impossible to assess Tenochtitlan through that lens. Pennock argues that a lack of sources makes it difficult to enter any statistical debate; however, she concedes that it is important to try and give an indication of the figures despite being speculative and would lack accuracy.⁵⁸

The first statistical evidence of pre-colonial Mexico Pennock analyses was made in 1946 by demographer and historian Sherburne Cook, who estimated that 15,000 victims were sacrificed annually from a population of 2,000,000. Cook based his work on material drawn from the Aztec federation, which Pennock deems problematic, despite the larger base of information. Pennock argues that no judicial, criminal or legal records have survived, therefore the numbers are merely speculative following a reliance on general assertions from early colonial texts about the society and annual ritual calendar.⁵⁹

The second statistic Pennock examines is the claim that 20,000 ritual sacrifices occurred annually, which is frequently mentioned by historians. The foundation of this number is vague, but might have originated from the first bishop of Mexico, Juan de Zumarraga, who allegedly included in a

⁵⁶ Pennock (2012): 276-277.

⁵⁷ Pennock (2012): 278.

⁵⁸ Pennock (2012): 278.

⁵⁹ Pennock (2012): 279.

letter written a few years after the conquest of Tenochtitlan, that 20,000 children were sacrificed annually. This assertion was recorded by the missionary chronicler Juan de Torquemada in 1615, and in the following years by early writers, such as José de Acosta and Francisco López de Gómara, where the number of victims was raised to 50,000.⁶⁰ This was yet again amplified by Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, who stated that one in every five children of Aztec tributaries were to be sacrificed. Pennock argues that these numbers, while problematic, relates to the larger general area of Central Mexico, and that examining the sacrificial practices in Tenochtitlan would prove even more problematic due to an even greater dearth of source material.

The third statistic comes from the sacrificial ceremony dedicated to the newly constructed Templo Mayor in 1487. Two sources from the 1570's, the *Annals of Cuauhtitlan* and the writings of Diego Durán states that 80,400 men were sacrificed during the four days of celebrations, which are numbers that still circulate the historical societies to this day. Pennock states that the logistical problems that four priests attempting to conduct over 80,000 sacrifices and in extension the exposing of the same amount of bodies would make this very unlikely and would amount to one sacrifice every two minutes. Cook's calculations equated to 14,100, the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* mentions 20,000, and Torquemada mentions the very precise 72,344 and 60,000, sacrifices during the celebrations.⁶¹ Pennock reflects on this, stating that regardless of the exact figure, the dedication to the Templo Mayor, would have seen an unusually large number of sacrifices, since the Aztecs regarded it as extraordinary. With this in mind, Pennock concludes that the sacrifice of several thousand during a ceremony would be a rare occurrence, and an annual 20,000 sacrifices in Tenochtitlan would be excessive, except in occasional circumstances such as the dedication to Templo Mayor.⁶²

Further problems arise with the uncertainties regarding the Central Mexican population. In an unpublished work (written collaboratively with Woodrow Borah), Cook revises his initial estimate upwards from 2,000,000 to 25,000,000. Borah recalculated that 250,000 people would be sacrificed annually, which equates to approximately one percent of the Central Mexican population at the time. Pennock argues that while this is for the Central Mexican population, and not confined to Tenochtitlan, the estimate of sacrifices is very high, and that the population of Central Mexico

⁶⁰ Pennock (2012): 279.

⁶¹ Pennock (2012): 280-281.

⁶² Pennock (2012): 281.

would have been doubled their estimate.⁶³ Regarding the number of ritual sacrifices in Tenochtitlan, Pennock examines the ritual calendar. The Florentine Codex written by Bernardino de Sahagun, suggest 500 annual sacrifices in the ritual calendar with 87 instances of human sacrifices in a single round of religious festivals, with victims ranging from one to an indeterminate number per festival.⁶⁴ Pennock concludes that a regular number of around 500 sacrifices cycle in Tenochtitlan seems plausible, with the possibility for special events such as wars, or rituals of specific significance. Pennock assess that specific rituals might have been conducted independently in each of the calpulli districts of the city, which then would multiply the number by twenty.⁶⁵ This would surmount to around 1,000-20,000 sacrifices annually in Tenochtitlan, at the time of the Spanish conquest.

The final piece of evidence that Pennock examines, comes from Andrés de Tapia who described a tzompantli (skull rack), and his men who counted them surmounting to 136,000 skulls. Pennock argues that Cook accepts this claim by the Spanish sources, while Pennock herself taking a more sceptical stance. Cook presumes that the tzompantli first saw use during the inauguration of the Templo Mayor. Pennock states that there is no reason that the tzompantli was not put into use before the construction of the temple, since sources state that earlier celebrations at the temple ground had been made. Therefore Pennock concludes that the number of skulls on the tzompantli is in accordance with her own calculations, but they had been accumulating over many years.⁶⁶ Pennock's analysis on the numbers of human sacrifices leads her to concede that the homicide rates in Aztec society was extremely high, if one were to view the sacrifices through that lens. Pennock argues whether the Aztec sacrificial culture should be viewed as part of the history of murder and violence at all. Interpersonal violence and murder was a criminal offense in Aztec society, but human sacrifices did not fall under that category.

This, however, has not stopped scholars putting the Aztecs into the same category as modern genocidal and terrorist states. Pennock argues that the state-sponsored violence was rooted in religious ideals of celebration, expiration, and debt, not targeted ideologies of hatred. The victims of the sacrifice were honoured in both life and glorified in death and the sacrificial victims were not limited to the foreign Spanish. In fact, the majority were the Aztecs themselves, both in

⁶³ Pennock (2012): 281.

⁶⁴ Pennock (2012) 282.

⁶⁵ Calpulli translate to "great house", acted as a combined political ward and religious parish; Townsend (2019): viii.

⁶⁶ Pennock (2012): 283-284.

Tenochtitlan but also in the various other cities that shared their religious ideology. A better comparison, according to Pennock, would be that of the Christian martyr.⁶⁷

Pennock concludes the article with a discussion on how the subject of human sacrificial culture in Aztec society relates to modern understanding:

*“The Aztecs were ardently religious and deeply superstitious, but scholars seem to have found it difficult to accept that religious motivations alone can explain the public acceptance of mass human sacrifice... Many ethnologists, myself included, have found the blind refusal to acknowledge indigenous people's views of their own motivations somewhat offensive. Although the brutality of Aztec rituals provides a difficult juxtaposition to their 'civilised' social, legal and political structures, this is no reason to dismiss the participants' own understandings of their religion, rather we must look harder and challenge our own preconceptions of 'civilisation'.”*⁶⁸

According to Pennock the difficulty for present-day historians to view the Aztecs motives for human sacrifices as religious, lies in two parts. Firstly the Spanish sources seem extreme, and are often misconstrued as a justification for conquest. While the Spanish most likely exaggerated certain things, not everything should either be tossed aside or believed wholeheartedly, which is admittedly is not an easy task. Furthermore, the modern day understanding of those sources depicts a system so far removed from modern day understanding that it is simply unfathomable to believe that the Aztecs themselves, believed as fervently in the necessity of human sacrifice. The marriage between a highly civilized society and brutal religious sacrificial practice, two extremes of a spectrum, can coexist according to Pennock, as was the case with the Aztecs.⁶⁹ I firmly believe that this failure to recognize that a society can both be highly civilized and religiously fanatical has led to numerous misunderstandings. This failure continues in the case of the Flower Wars where, scholars have spent many resources in trying to remove the sacrificial aspect of the wars, to the point of forgetting that the whole society was built upon a religion where sacrifice formed a major component; one must remember the principle of Occam's Razor: the correct explanation is oftentimes the most simple one.

In the 2022 paper *A warlike culture? Religion and war in the Aztec world*, Pennock engages the topic of the Aztec culture, primarily being seen as warlike including the topic of the Flower Wars in

⁶⁷ Pennock (2012): 285-286.

⁶⁸ Pennock (2012): 287.

⁶⁹ Pennock (2012): 287-296.

her analysis. According to Pennock the Aztec saw themselves as warlike and their cultural identity were closely tied in with military ideals and behaviour. Combined with that, their religion and understanding of the supernatural were deeply embedded in their belief and behaviour that the line between religious practice and day-to-day activities blur. Pennock states that scholars have tried to ‘rationalize’ Aztec culture and by extension reject religious motives for their interpersonal violence, which leads to her thesis of explaining that the separation of the spiritual and physical would have made no sense to the Aztecs. The capital of Tenochtitlan formed the *axis mundi* of the Aztec society, the centralisation of their cosmology and the hub of a powerful military institution.⁷⁰

The Aztec practice of warfare was deeply rooted and ingrained in their mythology, which blend fact and myth; they were the chosen people of Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec god of war (among other things). Pennock argues that the Aztecs mirrored the mood of Huitzilopochtli by migrating only following acts of warfare, eventually settling and founding the city of Tenochtitlan, which she further argues led to warfare and conquest being integral to the Aztec’s self-perception.⁷¹ In 1431, the tlatoani of Tenochtitlan, Itzcoatl, ordered the destruction of manuscripts stored in the state archives and created a new official history in order to stop the spreading of ‘falsehoods’. The new histories, which placed war at the heart of the Aztec ideology, were written during a time where the Aztecs were rising to power in the Aztec Triple Alliance, seeking to consolidate their authority.⁷²

Pennock argues that warfare was inextricable from faith in Aztec culture, and critical to that argument according to her:

*“is the fact that the sacred underpinnings of Aztec warfare and the mytho-historical foundations of their shared warrior identity would have been widely understood by both men and women of every status.”*⁷³

This occurred through the strict school systems of Tenochtitlan, where both boys and girls were taught the histories of their people, along with the role which they were to play in society. Boys were taught to be warriors or priests from a young age, while the girls were taught to be keepers of the home and hearth, which by Aztec standards was not far removed from the role of warring soldier.⁷⁴ The male role in Aztec society in regards to warfare is self-explanatory, but the female

⁷⁰ Pennock (2022): 100.

⁷¹ Pennock (2022): 2-3.

⁷² Pennock (2022) 103.

⁷³ Pennock (2022): 103.

⁷⁴ Pennock (2022): 104-105.

role is more complex. While the men were off fighting wars, the women became the spiritual warriors of the homefront. Through rigorous symbolic religious acts, the women waged war against evil spirits, bad luck and other ill fates, not only to ensure the safety of home, but also to aid the men far away. An example of this is women in childbirth were believed to be physically embodied by the goddess Cihuacoatl, battling for the soul of the unborn child. Childbirth was framed in military terms, and if a woman died during childbirth, they were literally raised to the rank of warriors equal to the men.⁷⁵

Pennock also touches on the subject of sacrifices gained through warfare. Non-combatants were exposed to the drama of war, with the captives taken to Tenochtitlan for sacrifice. Pennock states that warfare was profitable and politically significant, but also religious acts to provide opportunities to secure captives for sacrifice. According to Pennock, the Flower Wars were the most explicitly religious wars in Aztec history, arguing against Hicks' explanation of training, as they seem to have been fought by the most able warriors, not trainees. Pennock states that the Flower Wars were occasions where elite warriors could achieve the perfect 'aesthetic of war', while the combat itself honoured the gods. On the rationale for waging the Flower Wars, Pennock argues that securing captives for sacrifice was the main goal.⁷⁶

In her conclusion, Pennock argues that while religion should never be seen as the sole motivation for warfare. However, ignoring it completely is, according to her patronizing words towards the current culture. Pennock states:

“The Aztecs are ideal fodder for those reductionists who wish to argue that ‘religion causes violence’. But for Tenochtitlan, no less than for the West, ‘essentialist attempts to separate religious violence from secular are incoherent. What counts as religious or secular in any given context is a function of different configurations of power’. Only by seeing the Aztecs within their own cultural frame of reference, giving value and meaning to their rituals and mythical histories, can we understand the inextricability of religion and war in their embracing and active vision of cosmos ... For the indigenous peoples of Mexico, religion was rational: it provided explanations, motivations, structures and identities. One did not go to war solely for religious reasons, but the process of reasoning, of decision making, occurred within a universe in which the physical and metaphysical was interwoven. For the Aztecs, warfare was a sacred act performed in the service of the gods.

⁷⁵ Pennock (2022): 107-112.

⁷⁶ Pennock (2022): 113-114.

They framed themselves as warriors, not only in tangible terms, but historically, mythically and metaphorically. Yet, rather than attempting to reconcile practical politics and religious conviction – to integrate functional imperatives and spiritual ideals – scholars are determined ‘to see beneath the religious cloak to the underlying material causes and issues’.”⁷⁷

I support Pennock in this statement. The Aztecs and their practices such as the Flower Wars and human sacrifices need to be viewed from their cultural and contemporary perspective. This is easy in theory, but hard in practice. The sources available to us as scholars, primarily written by the Spanish post-conquest, gives us insight but at the cost of potential validity, which I will cover in the section regarding sources. Harner, Price, Hicks, and Isaac all provide interesting ideas for the explanation of both the Aztec sacrificial complex and Flower Wars, but as Pennock states, they disregard the religious motive as it doesn't support their notion of a highly developed culture and civilisation. Hassig does acknowledge that religion might have had an effect on the way of operation of the Aztecs, but he does not delve deeper into this. In my process of studying the aforementioned earlier research on the subject of human sacrifices and the Flower Wars, I can comfortably say that I support Pennock's and Hassig's method of analysis. With all the original indigenous sources missing, and only post-conquest Spanish or indigenous sources available one must act with care. In analysing the sources it is important to, insofar as possible maintain the Aztec viewpoint.

⁷⁷ Pennock (2022) 116-117.

Method

The topic of Flower Wars and human sacrifice has long been a heavily debated topic amongst scholars. In my research I have examined several studies written by scholars of Mesoamerican history. These provide me with inspiration, but also present the opportunity to revise what is already known by critically analysing the foundation of earlier works in order to expand upon what is known, and what is merely conjecture. I believe that the two topics of the Flower Wars and human sacrifice, are inevitably intertwined, but the literature does not always take that into consideration and can often be seen to focus on certain topics in isolation, thus ignoring the broader view of Mesoamerican culture and history. In the scope of this thesis, I will present and explore the evidence of the connection between the Flower Wars and human sacrifices.

My literature review revealed a previously understudied aspect of the Flower Wars. The conclusions of the scholars I reviewed, in broad terms, failed to consider the Aztec education, religion, and culture in their research. This in turn resulted in answers based on modern concepts of war. The Flower Wars is an elusive subject, understanding and acknowledging previous research was instrumental in finding a suitable approach to the question that I have posed in this thesis. The long debates on the supposed reasons for the Flower Wars gave inspiration and food for thought in finding a stable footing in regards to the sources, from which I could conduct an empirical analysis. It proved that researching a concept such as the Flower Wars in isolation would be folly, and it became clear that a broader approach was needed. The approach I find the most suitable is an empirical analysis of sources, primarily the Florentine Codex, which portray the Aztec's ways of practicing religion and their ritual human sacrifices, the education of their youth pre-conquest. The knowledge contained in each volume of the Florentine Codex is extraordinary and somewhat difficult to process, due to the sheer amount of information that falls outside the ramifications of this thesis. For these reasons, I decided to restrict myself to the books that delve into topics of Aztec religion, sacrifice, war, and education. Those books that contain supplementary information are also included. With that in mind, the books most useful for my thesis are: I, II, III, VII, and, VIII. This is due to the fact that all of these contain either small or large quantities of information on the outlined topics above.

As opposed to previous scholarship, the present investigation re-examines these topics from the Aztec point of view and their experience. In order to do so, the inherent layers of European, Christian, and Spanish imperialistic bias in our extant source material will have to be taken under

consideration and peeled away to better get an understanding of these practices from an indigenous perspective. In order to deal with the historic mischaracterisation of the Aztecs, we must consider their perspectives and subsequent motives. To try to explain or rationalise Aztec concepts from a European or modern perspective would not yield any new answers. My aim, therefore, is to leave behind any notions of European and modern ideas imbedded in the source material, as far as possible, and focus on the Aztec perspective. There is a few ways that I seek to do this. First and foremost is my choice of sources. The bulk of the sources consulted in the present thesis come from the Florentine Codex, which I deem as being particularly important in regards to an accurate portrayal of the Aztecs, and their perspective. Secondly, I leave behind the notion of human sacrifices being a choice, or a matter of good and evil, that is, a reflection of Christian moral values where these sorts of religious practices were being considered heathen and uncivilised in nature. For the Aztecs, this was simply not the case. Human sacrifices were a constant and a necessity. This practice was deeply rooted in their mythology and for the Aztecs, the survival of the cosmos depended on it. The ritual human sacrifice were not just a barbaric and heathen behaviour, as the Spanish saw it. Acknowledging the cultural importance of religion, or at least what we perceive as religion, sheds a new light on the sacrificial rituals conducted by the Aztecs and, in extension, the importance of taking captives in battle or Flower Wars. As such, when I analyse a source or statement from the Spanish, it will be measured against the culture and mentality of the Aztec society, rather than simply acknowledging or discarding it.

Finding an answer to why the Flower Wars were conducted is a difficult task, as my literature review proved. However, focusing on establishing a motive for the Flower Wars through several institutions of Aztec culture and society, instead of (only) looking at individual mentions in isolation, could yield a more nuanced conclusion. Therefore, this analysis will differ from previous scholarship on the Flower Wars. Instead of analysing the Flower Wars in isolation, or as simply an aspect of warfare, the Flower Wars will be considered against the backdrop of larger aspects of the Aztec cultural education and their religious practices. As mentioned in my *introduction to the sources*, sources describing the Flower Wars are scarce, so in order to build an argument for the motivations of the Flower Wars, examinations of the previously mentioned parts of the Aztec culture will form the bedrock of the analysis.

Research design

The analysis will divided into sections, each handling a different area of the Aztec culture.

The first section deals with the Aztec religion, sacrificial body, priests and their rituals. Priests were central in the Aztec society, ranging from spiritual leaders, advisors, medicinal knowledge, scrying, and military morale. How did the Aztecs view their rituals, the captives, and others who likewise would be sacrificed for their Gods, and how would this affect their position on warfare. Understanding the importance of sacrifice in Aztec religion would provide an understanding acquiring captives for sacrifice through warfare, but more importantly through Flower Wars.

The second section will look into the military education of the youth. The Aztecs had two schools, the calmecac, which was for the nobles, and the telpochcalli which was for the commoners. The early life of the Aztecs will give insight to the overall exposure of religion and warfare, which was so central to the way of life in Tenochtitlan. What society expected of the children, especially during military training, on how important captives for sacrifice would have been. In extension of this, the education of the future priests could also provide significant insight on the same, especially since priests did accompany the Aztec war parties.

The third section dives into Aztec warfare, military strategy, combat, and weaponry, and in extension of this, how these themes would differ in a Flower War. I will also be examining the intricate nature of the Flower Wars, and how they changed character from circa 1350 until the later days of the Aztec Empire, before the Spanish conquest.

Retracing the steps of the Aztecs

Before we deal with the topics of human sacrifice and the Flower Wars, it is important to who the Aztecs were, where they came from, and how they eventually became the dominating power in the Valley of Mexico. This section will therefore provide an overview of their history, from their humble beginnings as outsiders arriving in the Valley of Mexico sometime before 1299, until the formation of the Aztec Triple Alliance in 1428. The overview in this section will establish a basic understanding of the Aztec history, and provide a backdrop from which to engage the main topics of the thesis. This section will not delve deep into the Aztec concepts of religion and warfare, as they will be explored later in the thesis.

The arrival of the Aztecs and the founding of Tenochtitlan (Before 1299)

The early history of the Aztecs is shrouded in mystery. In the middle of the thirteenth century, multiple nomadic tribes entered the Valley of Mexico from the north.⁷⁸ The mythical origin of the Aztecs explains that they had travelled from Chicomoztoc, “the place of the seven caves”. Some of the nomadic groups instead referred to a specific place of origin named “Aztlán”, which is a word of uncertain meaning but some argue that it translates as “Place of the White Heron”.⁷⁹ To this day, we do not know where this place was located, and we probably never will.⁸⁰ Last of the tribes to enter the Valley of Mexico, were the Aztecs. The tribes that travelled from the mythical place of Aztlán had carried with them sacred bundles devoted to their deities, among them Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec patron god. They would eventually bury the relics of Huitzilopochtli at the main temple site in Tenochtitlan. The Aztecs found an island in Lake Texcoco, that no other tribes had claimed, probably due to it being too marshy. The Aztecs, however, decided to claim it as their own and there they build the city Tenochtitlan.⁸¹

Rise to power and building an empire (1350s-1450s)

In 1357, Acamapichtli (Reed-Fist) was elected to rule Tenochtitlan as tlatoni, taking his place on the symbolic reed mat, which was a symbol of leadership for the Aztecs.⁸² Through the tumultuous early period of their time in the valley of Mexico, the Aztecs had battled the people of Culhuacan to the south. Being half-Culhua himself, Acamapichtli secured peace between the two tribes. To further strengthen the bond between them, Acamapichtli married a Culhua woman, Ilancuiehl. The

⁷⁸ León-Portilla (1992): xxxii.

⁷⁹ Townsend (2019): 27.

⁸⁰ Townsend (2019): 27.

⁸¹ Townsend (2019): 31.

⁸² Hassig (1988): 128; Townsend (2019): 34.

growing city was expanded with dikes, causeways, canals, and streets. Neighbourhoods were established, and contained an extended kin group called *calpolli*, with its own leading families who supported the *tlatoani* in efforts such as organising labours and war parties. These families were called *pilli* (pl. *pipiltin*), which roughly equates to nobles. The commoners were called *macehualli* (pl. *macehualtin*).⁸³ During this time in the city's development, the Aztecs decided to add a layer of gravel, to provide a base platform to begin the construction of a large temple pyramid. This temple would be cared for by the priests, who additionally began to record the history of their people on animal skins.⁸⁴

Eventually the *tlatoani* *Acamapichtli* died in 1391, and was succeeded by his heir *Huitzilihuitl* (Hummingbird-Feather) who became the second *tlatoani* of Tenochtitlan, ruling for twenty-four years.⁸⁵ During the reign of *Huitzilihuitl*, the Aztecs started expanding their influence across the valley. They would ally with smaller tribes to fight larger ones, and in turn harvest resources they desired. The cities of *Xochimilco* and *Culhuacan* were reduced to subsidiary status and Tenochtitlan rose in status. Most importantly, *Huitzilihuitl* waged war against *Cuernavaca*, and subsequently won. *Cuernavaca* was valuable for its cotton, and hence a great resource for the Aztecs to gain control of. *Huitzilihuitl* fathered a son with the daughter of the king of *Cuernavaca*, who received the name *Moctezuma Ilhuicamina* (He-Who-Frowned-Like-A-Lord He-Pierces-The-Sky-With-An-Arrow) and would later be a ruler in his own right.⁸⁶ Under the leadership of *Huitzilihuitl*, Tenochtitlan became a vassal-state of the greater altepetl *Azcapotzalco*, the leading town of the *Tepanec* people, which at the time was the most powerful altepetl in the valley. When the *Tepanecs* defeated an enemy, they would take the best lands for themselves, but a share was set aside for Tenochtitlan. However, if the *Tepanecs* decided that the losers should not abandon their lands, some would instead become vassal states, forced to pay tributes to them and others to Tenochtitlan. *Huitzilihuitl* took a *Tepanec* woman as his primary wife, which meant that their sons would be heirs to the throne. When *Huitzilihuitl* died in 1417, it was his son *Chimalpopoca* (He-Smokes-Like-A-Shield) that ascended the throne as *tlatoani*. By this time, Tenochtitlan was recognised as a dominant power in the valley.⁸⁷

⁸³ Townsend (2019): 35.

⁸⁴ Townsend (2019): 36.

⁸⁵ Hassig (1988): 132.

⁸⁶ Townsend (2019): 39; *Moctezuma Ilhuicamina* is usually referred to as either *Moctezuma the elder*, or *Moctezuma I*, from here on the latter will be used.

⁸⁷ Hassig (1988): 136; Townsend (2019): 39-40.

In 1426, during Chimalpopoca's reign, problems would arise in the valley. Tezozomoc, the tlatoani of Azcapotzalco had died. Tezozomoc had for long been the personified symbol of power in the valley and with his death created a power vacuum in the region. Infighting and civil war broke out over the succession. The son of Tezozomoc, Maxtla came out on top, and proceeded to kill off potential threats to his leadership. He invited Chimalpopoca to a feast in honour of his ascend to the throne, and had him strangled to death. The death of Chimalpopoca sent Tenochtitlan into turmoil. Azcapotzalco had for years acted as Tenochtitlan's authority in matters of war and politics, but with the betrayal of Maxtla that would be no more. Xihuitl Temoc, son of Chimalpopoca briefly ruled Tenochtitlan, but eventually fell. He was succeeded by Itzcoatl (Obsidian-Serpent), half-brother of Huitzilihuitl and son of Acamapichtli.⁸⁸

The Aztec Triple Alliance

Itzcoatl was elected tlatoani in 1427, by this time he would have been in his forties and possess great experience as he had lived alongside three tlatoanies of Tenochtitlan.⁸⁹ Itzcoatl's plan was to use the infighting and turmoil against Maxtla.⁹⁰ The old tlatoani of Azcapotzalco had multiple sons with different wives, and all of them pressed their claim to rule, which caused further infighting over succession.⁹¹ Itzcoatl needed allies to support him in the coming war efforts, therefore he looked to the people Maxtla had ousted. First, he sought to make allies with the noble family of Tlacopan, of which Maxtla had slain his half-brother by a Tlacopan mother. Next, he sent emissaries to Texcoco, located on the eastern side of Lake Texcoco.⁹² Like Tenochtitlan, Texcoco had been somewhat dependent on old Tezozomoc of Azcapotzalco. Due to Texcoco's supplication to Azcapotzalco, the tlatoani of Texcoco's main wife was one of Tezozomoc's daughters. However, he actually favoured a lesser wife who was from Tenochtitlan, who might even have been a daughter of Huitzilihuitl, and therefore a sister of the murdered Chimalpopoca.⁹³ Before the death of Tezozomoc, the Texcocan tlatoani decided, that his state was powerful enough to break away from the position of a vassal state of Azcapotzalco. He did this by exalting his Aztec wife to a higher position than his Azcapotzalcan wife, which resulted in Tezozomoc attacking Texcoco, slaying the tlatoani. His son, by his Aztec wife, Nezahualcoyotl would survive and flee. Itzcoatl was related to Nezahualcoyotl, and would find him years later, during his reign as tlatoani. Itzcoatl knew that

⁸⁸ Townsend (2019): 42.

⁸⁹ Hassig (1988): 141.

⁹⁰ Townsend (2019): 43.

⁹¹ Townsend (2019): 41.

⁹² Townsend (2019): 43.

⁹³ Townsend (2019): 44.

Nezahualcoyotl was the rightful heir to the Texcocan throne, and offered to put him on it, if he ensured Texcoco joined Itzcoatl and the Aztecs against Azcapotzalco.⁹⁴

Thus, the Aztec Triple-Alliance between Tenochtitlan, Tlacopan, and Texcoco was formed. They went to war against Azcapotzalco in 1428, securing victory over Azcapotzalco, with Maxtla himself disappearing in 1431. Itzcoatl was declared huey tlatoani, by his people and allies, the emperor of the Aztec Triple Alliance. The tlatoanies of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan now ruled the valley as an unofficial triumvirate. What that essentially meant, was that no movement in the valley would go undetected by at least one of the three altepetls. Following the victory of the Aztec Triple-Alliance, they worked together to bring down individual and common enemies. The conquered were forced to pay tribute to the members of the alliance, who then divided shares between them. The Aztecs of Tenochtitlan would receive the largest share, as they had played the greatest role in the war against Azcapotzalco.⁹⁵ However, the political landscape did, in fact not change much, following the defeat of Azcapotzalco. Each altepetl continued to govern its own kingdoms, choosing their own tlatoani, and rotating tasks and responsibilities between them as had been the case prior to the war. This also included conquered communities that were not a part of the Triple-Alliance, as long as they answered the call to war when it came, and delivered tributes on time.⁹⁶ The tributary system however, was not an easy endeavour. For example, an altepetl might be assigned to pay tribute to Texcoco, their regional leaders, but by terms of the peace agreement, the altepetl would have to pay the next segment of tributes to Tenochtitlan. Adding to the confusion would be different calendars. At this point in time, not all in the valley utilised the same calendar system, so what might be one date for Tenochtitlan, would be another date for a separate altepetl. The inhabitants of the valley did make an effort synchronise their calendars, which never completely succeeded, albeit they came close.⁹⁷

Itzcoatl would pass away in 1440, succeeding him was Moctezuma I. During his reign, that would last for twenty-nine years, under his leadership, the Aztec territory would expand dramatically. Previously conquered altepetls rose in rebellion, but was quickly put down, solidifying the Aztec's

⁹⁴ Townsend (2019): 45.

⁹⁵ Townsend (2019): 46; Hassig (1988): 144.

⁹⁶ Townsend (2019) 46-47.

⁹⁷ Townsend (2019): 47.

power.⁹⁸ The Aztec would continue to grow in power until the Spanish conquest in 1521. However, until that point, the inner workings of the Aztec empire largely remained the same.

⁹⁸ Townsend (2019): 55; Hassig (1988): 157.

The Aztec mythology, religion, and rituals

This thesis argues that the Aztecs conducted Flower Wars for captives to be used in sacrificial rituals. In order to reach that end, we must first understand the practice of human sacrifice itself. Why was the concept of human sacrifice so important to the Aztec way of life and their religion? What type of religion did the Aztecs practice? How did the religious foundation of the Aztecs influence their perception of war and spectacles? How did the Aztecs view the act of getting sacrificed? Lastly, how frequent and planned were these events? The above questions are paramount in order to understand the religious foundation as the fundamental motivation for the carrying out of the Flower Wars. Human sacrifices were not merely a barbaric custom and drive or simply a way to control the population. To decode the importance, of religion in connection to the Flower Wars, we must first look to the Aztec cosmological creation myth.

The origin of the cosmos

Before the world as we know it came to be, there had been four previous worlds. The Aztecs referred to these worlds as suns, which means that the Aztecs, and by extension us, lived under the fifth sun. The four previous suns had been incomplete, and subsequently suffered cataclysmic events that destroyed the world(s).⁹⁹ Eventually the gods decided that a new sun was required, and a new world was to be built.

The gods gathered at the great city complex of Teotihuacan, to discuss how this new sun should take shape.¹⁰⁰ In order for a new sun to be created, one of the gods had to willingly sacrifice themselves, giving their life to become the sun. The gods spoke to each other: *“Come hither, O gods! Who will carry the burden? Who will take it upon himself to be the sun, to bring the dawn?”*¹⁰¹ Out of the gods present, Tecuciztecatl, who was rich and strong, volunteered to sacrifice himself in order to become the sun. But it required another sacrifice to become the moon, yet no one stepped forward as they were all afraid of the action. The gods looked among each other, and all eyes fell upon one: *“Thou shalt be the one, O Nana[h]uatzin.”*¹⁰² Contrary to Tecuciztecatl, Nanahuatzin was poor and humble, but gladly accepted the decision and thanked the other gods for considering him for the task. The two gods fasted and performed penances for four days. Among

⁹⁹ Townsend (2019): 21.

¹⁰⁰ Teotihuacan was briefly inhabited by the Aztecs during their nomadic period. It is located approximately 40 kilometers northeast of Mexico City.

¹⁰¹ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 7): 4.

¹⁰² Sahagún spelled Nanahuatzin without the H, likely to ease the pronunciation for the reader albeit not correct; Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 7): 4.

the valuables the two gods had, Tecuciztecatl's were luxurious and beautiful, while Nanahuatzin's were of poor quality. Meanwhile, the other gods prepared two pyramids, one for the sun and the moon, and a platform on which they created a large bonfire that burned for the duration of the fast.¹⁰³ At midnight on the fourth day, the gods gave Tecuciztecatl and Nanahuatzin their sacrificial adornments. Tecuciztecatl was given a forked heron feather headdress and a sleeveless jacket, while Nanahuatzin received a paper headdress and paper clothes. Everything was now ready for the birth of the new sun and moon, and the two gods faced the fire. The gods told Tecuciztecatl to take courage, and to cast himself into the fire. Tecuciztecatl looked into the flames and when the time to jump came, he hesitated and stepped back. He did this four times, and the other gods lost patience with him. Instead they looked to Nanahuatzin and urged him to plunge into the flames. Nanahuatzin did not hesitate, and leapt selflessly into the fire and burned away. Tecuciztecatl saw this, and cast himself upon the fire as well, inspired by Nanahuatzin's courage.¹⁰⁴ With the sacrifice completed, the sun and moon arose in the sky, however not all was well yet. The two celestial objects did not move, and the sun, Nanahuatzin, burned the ground making it impossible for humans to survive. The remaining gods looked to each other, and decided that they too must sacrifice themselves in order to make the sun move. And through their sacrifice, humanity could live and thrive upon the earth.¹⁰⁵

The sacrifice of the gods resulted in the living, breathing world that the Aztecs found themselves in. A world formed where, they could live, thrive, conquer and love. But the creation came with a serious implication, one that formed a bond between the Aztecs and the gods they venerated. In order for the sun to keep in motion and for the rain to keep falling in order to make the crops grow, payment in the form of human sacrifice, mirroring the acts of Nanahuatzin and Tecuciztecatl, was required of the Aztecs. A *do ut des* relation had been established, the gods had given, and in return the Aztecs would pay back the gods to uphold the cosmos.¹⁰⁶ This religious contract between gods and the subjects is typically seen in what the sociologist Robert N. Bellah categorises as 'Archaic Religions'

"The characteristic feature of archaic religion is the emergence of true cult with the complex of gods, priests, worship, sacrifice, and in some cases divine or priestly kingship ... In the archaic

¹⁰³ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 7): 4-5.

¹⁰⁴ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 7): 5-6.

¹⁰⁵ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 7): 5-9.

¹⁰⁶ Do ut des translates to 'I give so that you might give'.

religious symbol system mythical beings are much more definitely characterized. Instead of being great paradigmatic figures with whom men in ritual identify but with whom they do not really interact, the mythical beings are more objectified, conceived as actively and sometimes willfully controlling the natural and human world, and as beings with whom men must deal in a definite and purposive way – in a word, they have become gods.”¹⁰⁷

The transition from mythical beings to ‘real’ gods is evident in the creation myth. Nanahuatzin taking the role as the physical sun and Tecuciztecatl, the moon, creates a bridge between the metaphysical and the physical. In the newly reborn world that the Aztecs found themselves in, the significance of the sacrifice that the gods endured was clear all around them. The Aztecs would mirror their gods’ practice in these sacrifices, paying the ultimate price with human life.

Huitzilopochtli, Tlaloc, and human sacrifice

The gods which the Aztecs worshipped were all in charge of a specific aspect of the world, sometimes multiple aspects. The amount of gods that the Aztecs worshipped are quite staggering, and to cover all of them would be a thesis in of itself. I have decided to focus on arguably two of the most important gods in the Aztec pantheon: Huitzilopochtli, the patron gods of the Aztecs, and Tlaloc, the god of rain. Both carried monumental weight for the Aztec’s way of life and culture, and their practice of human sacrifice. After all, in order for human sacrifice to seem sensible from the Aztec perspective, the gods themselves must be considered vital for the Aztecs survival. The first of these is Huitzilopochtli. In the words of Sahagún:

“[H]uitzilopochtli was only a common man, just a man, a sorcerer, an omen of evil; a madman, a deceiver, a creator of war, a war-lord, an instigator of war. For it was said of him that he brought hunger and plague – that is, war. And when a feast day was celebrated, captives were slain; ceremonially bathed slaves were offered up. The merchants bathed them. And he was thus arrayed: he had an ear pendant of lovely cotinga feathers; his disguise was the fire serpent. He had the blue netted sash, he had the maniple. He wore bells, he wore shells.”¹⁰⁸

It is noteworthy that Sahagún immediately associates Huitzilopochtli with negative things, at least from the perspective of Christian monk. Huitzilopochtli was the patron god of the Aztecs, and arguably the most important. Dismantling the image of Huitzilopochtli and replacing it with the Christian God was likely one of Sahagún’s hardest tasks. With that in mind, however, he does

¹⁰⁷ Bellah (1964): 364.

¹⁰⁸ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 1): 1-2.

attribute Huitzilopochtli with his most meaningful traits, war and the instigator of war, and as will become evident below, his role as the sun god. It was not unusual for a god to possess multiple traits, or control different aspects of the cosmos. In the case of Huitzilopochtli, he is associated with warfare and the sun, but also the act of sacrifice, which become clear in his origin myth.

Huitzilopochtli's origin starts at Coatepetl, near Tula, where his mother Coatlicue lived.¹⁰⁹ Coatlicue was performing penances, and one day a ball of feathers fell upon her. She picked up the feathers and placed them at her waist, but it turned out that the feathers had impregnated her. The Centzonuitznaua, infuriated by this, turned to their elder sister, Coyolxauqui for advice. Coyolxauqui explained to her younger brothers, that they had to slay their mother, as she had dishonoured them. Coatlicue was terrified for the impending danger, but Huitzilopochtli, still in her womb, comforted her. Coatlicue's fears were rightly founded, however, as the Centzonuitznaua was all seasoned warriors, and now, they readied for war against her. When the adversaries arrived at Coatepetl, Huitzilopochtli was born. He was armed for war, wielding his shield, *teueuelli*, and his blue dart thrower, *xiuatlatl*.¹¹⁰ A serpent was put on fire, *xiuhcoatl*, which Huitzilopochtli also wielded. Huitzilopochtli struck down Coyolxauqui and knocked her head off, while the rest of her body fell down the mountain. The Centzonuitznaua fled with Huitzilopochtli at their heels. Huitzilopochtli chased after them, not content until they were all annihilated. When this was done, Huitzilopochtli claimed their belongings and was satisfied.¹¹¹

According to Sahagún:

*"[the] Mexicans respected [Huitzilopochtli]. Hence they made offerings to him; hence they honored him, they exerted themselves for him ... And this veneration was taken from there ..."*¹¹²

The Aztecs would find inspiration in the mythological origin of Huitzilopochtli. The decapitation of Coyolxauqui and the subsequent tumbling of her body down the mountain, the latter part was mirrored in the Aztecs own practice of human sacrifice, where the bodies of the sacrificed would be cast down the step pyramids.¹¹³ When the Aztec Triple Alliance was founded in 1427, and subsequently after their victory over Azcapotzalco, Huitzilopochtli would be elevated, replacing

¹⁰⁹ A mythical mountain of the Aztecs.

¹¹⁰ *Atlatl* was an Aztec spear thrower.

¹¹¹ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 3): 1-5.

¹¹² Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 3): 5.

¹¹³ Pennock (2008): 21.

Nanahuatzin as the sun, and his sister, Coyolxauhqui as the moon.¹¹⁴ The myth was hence interpreted as the metaphoric tale relating to the birth of the sun (Huitzilopochtli), which defeated the moon (Coyolxauhqui) and chased the stars (Centzonitznaua). This represents how Huitzilopochtli as the sun chases the Centzonitznaua every day, resulting in the sun rising and setting.¹¹⁵ The traits Huitzilopochtli demonstrates in his origin myth, of determination, eagerness, and prowess in war were all traits that the Aztecs highly valued. This is evident in the early history of the Aztecs. Indeed, Huitzilopochtli would follow them, from the beginning of their journey in Aztlan, to their eventual destination at Lake Texcoco. When the Aztecs arrived in the Valley of Mexico, they sought a place of permanent residence. After failed attempts at settling in some of the flourishing city states, facing humiliation everywhere they turned, the Aztecs would find a temporary place to settle.¹¹⁶ This place was called Tizaapan, but the struggles of the Aztecs were not yet over. Huitzilopochtli was an enemy of peace and quiet, instead searching for unrest and strife. Believing that the Aztecs had settled too soon in Tizaapan, Huitzilopochtli ordered the Aztecs to find him a bride, a ‘woman of discord’. The Aztec sent emissaries to Achitometl, the tlatoani of Culhuacan, and requested that his daughter to become the bride of Huitzilopochtli and hence a living goddess. Acknowledging this as a great honour, the tlatoani approved. This, however, would prove to be a grand misunderstanding between the tribes. Achitometl and his court arrived at the Aztecs temple in Tizaapan, where the daughter of Achitometl was taken. The tlatoani witnessed different rituals take place, but was horrified when a priest dressed in the skin of his daughter entered the scene as *ixiptlatl* (impersonator) of the earth goddess Toci. Realising what had happened to his daughter, the tlatoani fled and war broke out between the two tribes. Eventually the Aztecs were driven out of Tizaapan and required a new place to settle. Satisfied with the Aztec’s effort, Huitzilopochtli, according to myth, showed them a sign of an eagle resting on a nopal cactus on an island in the great lake of Texcoco.¹¹⁷ Huitzilopochtli had thus, figuratively carried the Aztecs, and they had physically carried him (his relics), from their mythical place of origin, to their final place of settlement that would become the dominant power of the Valley of Mexico. The Aztecs raised a central temple pyramid, with two twin temples at its top, the *huey teocalli*.¹¹⁸ The two temples were dedicated to Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc and were viewed by the Aztecs as the centre of their cosmos

¹¹⁴ Boone (1989): 1-2.

¹¹⁵ Heyden, annotation in Durán’s History of the Indies of New Spain: 27.

¹¹⁶ Townsend (2019): 31.

¹¹⁷ Pennock (2008): 16.

¹¹⁸ The main temple complex is called Templo Mayor in Spanish.

and symbolic of their religious power. From here they would celebrate religious festivals with human sacrifices, offering the hearts of their captives to the gods.

Sahagún describes the temple in depth:

“All which was [in] the courtyard of [the Temple of] [H]uitzilipochtli was like this: As it appeared, it was perhaps two hundred fathoms [square]. And there in the center of [the square] were very large temples; they were the temples of the devils. The one which was taller, which was higher, was the house of [H]uitzilipochtli ... And with it was the house of Tlaloc. They were indeed together; they were indeed joined to each other ... And at the top of each was a temple; at the top was a house. There was the image of [H]uitzilipochtli ... And in the other [temple], there was the image of Tlaloc. And also at the top [of the pyramid] were circular stones ... upon which they slew victims in order to pay honor to their gods ... And this Temple of [H]uitzilipochtli and Tlaloc faced there toward the setting of the sun ... ”¹¹⁹

It is evident, that Sahagún’s own bias comes through in the above description. The temples are described being of the devils, reflecting their adversary nature to that of the Christian god. This is a recurring theme when Sahagún describes or refer to what he deems false idols.

In a typical case of a sacrificial ritual, the victim ascended the great pyramid, likely observing the bloodied stairs from the previous victims that had fallen upon them minutes before. As Sahagún described it: “... the blood, the blood of those who died, indeed reached the base; so did it flow off”.¹²⁰ After climbing for what must have felt like an eternity, the victim would finally reach the temple platform. At the centre of the platform, stood a great sacrificial stone, stained with blood, and beside it stood several, likely five, priests whose magnificent ritual garbs were covered in the sacred blood of the victims.¹²¹ The priests would seize the victim and bring them to the sacrificial stone. The victim would be stretched backwards over the sacrificial stone, such that the back was arched and the chest was rising towards the heavens. The fifth priest would then struck the victims chest with a obsidian sacrificial knife, known as a tecpatl, excising the heart with the knife and hands, raising it to the sky for the gods to witness. The lifeless body of the victim would then be

¹¹⁹ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 2): 179.

¹²⁰ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 2): 179.

¹²¹ One priest per arm and leg, and one to complete the sacrifice.

cast down upon the stairs, falling down the steps until finally coming to rest amidst the other victims.¹²²

In the fifteenth month of the Aztec calendar called Panquetzaliztli, they celebrated a feast in honour of Huitzilopochtli. The feast was an event that spanned multiple days in the Panquetzaliztli, and required the attendance of the whole city. On the second day in the month, the people of Tenochtitlan gathered in the courtyard where the pyramid was located to dance and sing. This would stretch from the afternoon, late into the evening. Dancing and singing would be a common event throughout the month. On the ninth day, the Aztecs “*with great ceremonies*”, dressed the sacrificial victims in ceremonial adornments, until dancing and singing with them.¹²³ On the sixteenth day, the slave-owners began a fast that lasted until the nineteenth day. On this day, more celebratory events would take place in the courtyard, with the victims participating. After this had been completed, a priest adorned in the attire of the god Paynal, slew four slaves in a ball court, from where he would travel around the city to sacrifice more slaves. Lastly, before the main event, a mock battle between two factions was staged, with some of the warriors eventually losing their lives. And lastly:

*“After many ceremonies, at last they slew captives on the Pyramid of [H]uitzilopochtli, and also many slaves. And, having slain one, they sounded musical instruments. And on finishing [with one], they seized another, to slay him. And, on killing him, they again sounded [musical instruments]. Thus they did to each one until finishing them [all]. On ceasing to slay these unhappy ones, they started to dance and to sing, to eat and to drink, and thus the feast ended.”*¹²⁴

Sahagún makes a differentiation between slaves and captives, during this ritual. Slaves in the Aztec society were a collection of people, who voluntarily sold themselves into temporary servitude to pay off personal debts, or someone charged with a criminal act to serve off a sentence as a slave. However, captives from warfare could also be sold into slavery. There were not clear distinctions between the slaves and the macehualtin as social classes.¹²⁵ Captives, on the contrary, were taken during military campaigns, either regular wars or Flower Wars and were by far the most common sacrificial victims. The vast majority of sacrificial victims were men, but would in rare instances include women and children. After the establishment of the Aztec Triple-Alliance, the conquered

¹²² Pennock (2008): 21.

¹²³ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 2): 27.

¹²⁴ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 2): 28.

¹²⁵ León-Portillia (1992): xlii; Townsend (2019): 37.

vassal states would pay tributes to the Triple-Alliance. The tribute payments would include materials such as corn, beans, chocolate, and cotton, but the vassals would also supply people to serve as sacrifices for rituals. If an altepetl resisted the Triple-Alliance, and refused to pay tribute to them, the punishment would be swift and ruthless. Such was the case with the Huastecs to the northeast of Tenochtitlan. They had resisted the rule of the Aztecs, winning battles to a varying degree but ultimately lost. Warriors of the Triple-Alliance attacked Huastec in force, capturing men, women, and children. The captives were tied together in a long line and taken to Tenochtitlan. A great causeway had been constructed by the defeated people of Xochimilco, which stretched from the southern shore of the lake, to Tenochtitlan. Upon arriving in Tenochtitlan, most of the captives would be distributed amongst the nobility as slaves or sacrifices. Those taken by a particular warrior would be sent to their captor's neighbourhood temple for sacrifice. If a warrior had captured a woman, he could decide to take her to his home. Others would be sent to the main temples of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc for sacrifice.¹²⁶ The captives, who were not needed in the temples, or by the individual captors, were sent to slave markets. Here they would either be bought by individual neighbourhoods in need of sacrificial victims, or occasionally men needing concubines.¹²⁷ It is uncertain whether Sahagún differentiates between slaves and captives, out of knowledge of the ritual, or confusion of the European understanding of slave and captive. As stated above, the usual description of slave does not fit the Aztec understanding of the word. If the Aztecs sacrificed slaves in the ritual described above, then they would likely have been slaves by captivity, or as a punishment. Whether self-imposed slaves were subjugated to ritual sacrifices is unclear. Sahagún also describes a mock battle before the climax of the ritual. This does not sound too dissimilar to a Flower War, but it is indeed not one. It is fought between the Aztecs themselves, likely to invoke the aspect which Huitzilopochtli was associated with the most, war. Sahagún mentions that few of the warrior died during the mock battle, it is however unclear as to why. It could either have been spontaneous sacrificial acts, or accidents, we do not know. It does however attribute to the warlike nature of the Aztecs, and how it easily intermingled with the religious aspect of their society.

The ritual honouring Huitzilopochtli shows quite vividly the duality of Aztec society. Large parts of the month long celebration were filled with joyful events such as dance accompanied by music, while war and sacrifice centralises in the latter. The majority of the inhabitants of Tenochtitlan would likely have participated in the event, and as such, was used to the spectacle. It gave the

¹²⁶ Townsend (2019): 48.

¹²⁷ Townsend (2019): 49.

inhabitants regular displays of warfare and death, which in turn would normalise it. It also gives insight into an important part of the sacrificial rituals, the victims and how they're treated by the Aztecs. In this ritual the victims are cared for and dressed for their inevitable demise, which not only shows the importance of the task they must complete, but also the Aztecs veneration of the victims. In another instance, at a feast, honouring the god Tezcatlipoca the victim was chosen a year prior to the sacrifice. The chosen would become the avatar of Tezcatlipoca and be treated as a god from the day of inauguration until the day of sacrifice.¹²⁸ The victims were not just bodies for the altar, but in fact borderline holy beings in the face of sacrifice. Similarly, the victims would not always face the sacrificial stone, kicking and screaming, but with honour. This is particularly evident in another ritual where the victim's mood is described approaching sacrifice:

“And when some captive lost his strength, fainted, only went continually throwing himself on the ground, they just dragged him. But when one made an effort, he did not act like a woman; he became strong like a man, he bore himself like a man, he went speaking like a man, he went exerting himself, he went strong of heart, he went shouting. He did not go downcast; he did not go spiritless; he went extolling, he went exalting his city. He went with firm heart; he went saying: “Already here I go: You will speak of me there in my home land!”¹²⁹

The second god to live in the huey teocalli was Tlaloc, the god of rain. Contrary to Huitzilopochtli, Sahagún describes Tlaloc in a more benevolent light, however still with a wrathful aspect:

“Tlaloc, the provider. To him was attributed the rain; for he created, brought down, showered down the rain and the hail. He caused the trees, the grasses, the maize to blossom, to sprout, to leaf out, to bloom, to grow. And also were attributed to him the drowning of people, the thunderbolts.

And he was thus arrayed: his face was covered in soot; his face was painted with liquid rubber; it was anointed with black; his face was [spotted] with [a paste of] amaranth seed dough. He had a sleeveless cloud-jacket of netted fabric; he had a crown of heron feathers; he had a necklace of green stone jewels. He had foam sandals, and also bells. He had a green and white plaited reed banner.”¹³⁰

While Huitzilopochtli kept the sun moving, and wars plenty, Tlaloc nurtured the Aztecs through rain that would help their crops grow. As Tenochtitlan was founded on a marshy island in Lake

¹²⁸ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 2): 9.

¹²⁹ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 2): 48.

¹³⁰ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 1): 7.

Texcoco, it provided some unique challenges for the Aztecs. Across the valley of Mexico, the tribes had long been dependent on agriculture, farming corn and beans. The swampy conditions the Aztecs faced ruled out this possibility, at least as a sole source for food. The Aztecs solved this partially by constructing chinampas, which were gardens built in shallow waters by constructing a wooden or straw-basket ring wall, piling up mud and applying soil above the water level. The chinampas were difficult to build, but they proved tremendously fertile. Combining the farming of chinampas with fishing and the collecting of bird's eggs, insects, and the nutritious blue-green algae, secured sufficient food resources the growing society of the Aztecs.¹³¹ This would have had major implications for the Aztec relationship with Tlaloc. They needed their chinampas to succeed in yielding crops, in order to secure a steady food resource. To ensure the continued growth of crops and by extension a reliable food resource, Tlaloc had to be satisfied through the means of human sacrifice. The *do ut des* comes full circle; Tlaloc secured the Aztecs cultivation of chinampas, and the Aztecs honours Tlaloc with sacrifice. With Tlaloc's active role in providing sustenance for the Aztecs, it seems fitting that the Aztecs dedicated one of twin temples to Tlaloc, in order to ensure bountiful harvests. In the first month of the Aztec calendar year, sacrifices dedicated to Tlaloc would be undertaken.

This first month of the Aztec calendar year was called Atl cuaualo, and according to Sahagún, was equivalent of February second in the Julian calendar.¹³² Sahagún describes:

*“In this month they slew many children; they sacrificed them in many places upon the mountain tops, tearing from them their hearts, in honor of the gods of water. That these might give them water or rain.”*¹³³

He continues to describe the ritual itself:

“The children whom they slew they decked in rich finery to take them to be killed; and they carried them in litters upon their shoulders. And the litter went adorned with feathers and flowers. [The priests] proceeded playing [musical instruments], singing, and dancing before them.

*When they took the children to be slain, if they wept and shed many tears, those who carried them rejoiced, for they took [it] as an omen that they would have much rain that year.”*¹³⁴

¹³¹ Townsend (2019): 34.

¹³² Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 2): 1.

¹³³ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 2): 1.

The importance of Tlaloc's gifts is exemplified in this ritual. It is the first ritual in the Aztec calendar month, which implicates urgency, and it requires children. Whether these children were Aztecs themselves or captives from wars is not clear, but it is safe to assume that if situation demanded it, they would sacrifice their own – such was the reality of their worldview. Continuing in this month, 'gladiatorial' sacrifices would also be made:

“Also in this month they slew many captives in honor of these same gods of the water. They slashed them first, [with their swords] fighting them as they were tied upon a stone like a mill wheel; and when they threw them down, wounded, they carried them off to tear their hearts from them in the temple which was called Yopico.

When they slew these captives, their owners-they who had taken them-went gloriously arrayed in feathers, dancing before them and showing their valor. This continued through all the days of this month. In this feast were enacted many other ceremonies, which are set down at length in its telling”¹³⁵

While still dedicated to Tlaloc, this ritual has quite a different tone to it. The warlike nature of the Aztecs takes centre stage in the latter sacrificial ritual. While this specific instance does not go into full detail on how the sacrifice functioned – a similar ritual fills in the remaining details of the gladiatorial sacrifice:

“Then began the gladiatorial sacrifice. The captives were placed in order; the captors remained accompanying each one, remained bringing each one. Then also the striped ones came forth. An ocelot warrior swiftly led; he swiftly led them ... He displayed his shield, his obsidian-bladed club; he raised them in dedication to the sun ... When this was done, there then followed him, there came second after him an eagle warrior; he came second. Similarly he raised his shield, his obsidian-bladed club in dedication to the sun ... One [of the captors] quickly seized a captive. The captor, he who owned the captive, went holding him by the head in order to bring him to the round stone of gladiatorial sacrifice. When they had brought him, they gave him pulque ... Then he took the “sustenance” rope, which reached to the center [of the stone and] which fastened [to it]. Then he tied it about the waist of the captive. And he gave him a war club decked with feathers, not set with obsidian blades. And he placed before him four cudgels, his missiles to throw at one, to defend himself with ... Then they fought each other ... They looked at each other well [to see] where they

¹³⁴ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 2): 1-2.

¹³⁵ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 2): 1-2.

would smite each other, would cut each other in a dangerous place, perchance in the calf of the leg, or in the thigh, or on the head, or in the middle. And if some captive was valiant, courageous, with great difficulty he surpassed [his adversary]. He met all four of the ocelot [and] eagle warriors; he fought them ... And when one only went faltering ... they snatched his war club ... And then they quickly grabbed him, quickly seized him, held him thrown down, held him stretched out on the edge of the round stone of gladiatorial sacrifice ... He gashed [the captive's] breast, seized his heart, raised it in dedication to the sun ..."¹³⁶

The spectacle of the gladiatorial sacrifice shows a large part of the Aztec warrior culture, and in extension how religion and warfare intermingled. The public display of the gladiatorial sacrifice leaves several ramifications and understanding to the Aztec view on warfare. Unlike the ritual honouring Huitzilopochtli, this ritual contained staged duels between the warriors and captives. The captives would receive mock weapons, while the warriors conducting the sacrifice would use sharp weapons. The inference was clear, the captives were not supposed to survive the ritual, but they would have a chance to prove themselves in front of the crowd and the gods. Like the mock battle in the sacrifice to Huitzilopochtli, the gladiatorial sacrifice would normalise acts of warfare for the inhabitants of Tenochtitlan. The act of serving pulque to the captive serves a dual purpose. On one hand, the alcoholic beverage would dull the captive for the upcoming fight and inevitable sacrifice, but it also served a symbolic purpose. Pulque was reserved for ritualistic events, such as this, but was otherwise illegal to be consumed in public, except for the military elite, such as the Jaguar (ocelomeh) and Eagle warriors (cuacuauhtin). The offering of pulque to the captured warrior by the military elite, functions as a symbolic, yet temporary, induction into the military elite, perhaps as an honouring of the sacrifice that the captive was about to endure. It is important to acknowledge that the warriors that were in charge of the captives for this type of sacrifice, were jaguar and eagle warriors. These were some of the most elite warriors of the Aztec society, and in order to join these military orders one had to be of the pipiltin. However, that was not the only requirement. One also had to demonstrate impressive military prowess in the act of capturing opponents. A warrior had to secure more than four captives in order to be inducted into the prestige military orders. Jaguar and eagle warriors were not the top of the hierarchy however. Above them was the otontin and the cuahchicqueh (the shorn ones), which required five or six captives in order to be inducted in to the

¹³⁶ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 2): 50-53; Sahagún likely confused the Nahuatl word ocelotl, which means jaguar, with ocelot which is a different animal. The jaguar however was a sacred animal of the Aztecs.

orders.¹³⁷ In essence, to be a successful warrior, simply winning a battle or multiple was not enough. In fact, it was the amount of captives a warrior secured that showed his military capabilities.

In regard to the human sacrifices, it is obvious what the Aztecs gained in honouring their gods. The cosmological order was upheld, the sun would rise, and their crops would grow. But what about the sacrificial victims, what was their gain? The final destination of the victims would ultimately be death, and the Aztec's religion is quite clear on what becomes of humans when they die. When a person died, the gods would choose between three destinations, where the soul could live on. The first was Mictlan, where the majority would be sent. I will refrain from going into depth about Mictlan, as its inner workings are insignificant to this thesis. Those who drowned, or died by a lightning strike, however, would go to Tlalocan. In Tlalocan there was great wealth, riches, and no suffering. Tlaloc watched over this realm, and there would always be spring. Warriors, those who died in war, or sacrifice, all went to Huitzilopochtli, the sun.¹³⁸ The ramifications are clear. Were one to be killed in a ritual sacrifice, whether to Tlaloc or otherwise, one secured a place in what would be the equivalent of heaven to the Aztecs. The *do ut des* circle continues. The Aztecs gives back to the gods, and the gods in return, grants the individual sacrificial victims access to the Aztec concept of paradise. Even though that it is likely, that not all Aztecs believed in religion, the majority did, as is evident by their society as a whole. As such, the majority accepted their sacrificial fate as an honour.

In order to keep track of the sacrificial rituals, we can look to the Aztec calendar system. The Aztecs had two calendars, a 365 day civil cycle and a 260 day ritual cycle. The first cycle, had the year divided into eighteen months, each lasting for 20 days. This would surmount to 360 days, leaving five days out, which the Aztecs called idle and unlucky days since they were not dedicated to specific gods. Each month were dedicated to a god, and during that month they would have celebrations and sacrificial ritual. The only exception is two months that where dedicated to four gods, each receiving ten days. The ritual cycle of 260 days was divided into twenty named signs and a sequence of days numbering one to thirteen. The ritual cycle was important to keep track of rituals, soothsaying, and other religious activities. The two calendars were structured such that they would reset in concert every 52 years, where the Aztecs would hold a celebratory feast would be

¹³⁷ Hassig (1988): 45.

¹³⁸ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 3): 49.

held, and their temple idols would be renewed.¹³⁹ The calendar system allowed for the planning and preparation of such events. Resources could be gathered, such as foodstuff, animals, and captives for sacrifice. With the rituals running throughout the year, plenty of sacrificial material would have to be acquired.

¹³⁹ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 4 & 5): 137-138.

Aztec warrior training, warfare, and the Flower Wars

The impact that the Aztec religious belief system had upon both education, their methods of waging war, and by extension, the Flower Wars was important. Researching the importance of the act of taking captives during warfare, and the relationship between war and religion, will yield a clear perspective on why the Aztecs conducted Flower Wars for the purpose of rounding up captives. The relationship between the supernatural and warfare intermingled and blur the lines, between wars fought for political and materialistic gain, and wars dictated by the Aztec religious system. This becomes particularly evident with the Aztec priesthood, who would take a more active role, both in the education of the youth, but also as combatants on the battlefield. From the time of the birth, in itself considered a metaphysical and physical battle, a boy was on the road to becoming a warrior.¹⁴⁰

The young warrior

Already from the birth of a boy, ritualistic traditions were utilised to secure the boys future prowess as a warrior. Four days after the birth, if the father was a warrior, he would give the child symbols of his profession, such as a shield and arrows. The umbilical cord of the newborn, and the weapons given to him, would be buried in the direction of the enemy, to signify the boys future steeped in sacred blood.¹⁴¹ If the parents wished for their child to join the army, he would be taken to a school when he was twenty days old, in order to secure him a place at the school, once he came of age (ranging from five to fifteen depending on the school). Depending on the status of the parents, the child would either be taken to the calmecac or the telpochcalli. The calmecac was usually attended by the pipiltin and the telpochcalli by the macehualtin.¹⁴² Those who attended the calmecac were trained to become priests, but the Aztec political and military elite were also trained there. The overwhelming majority of the attendees at the calmecac were of noble status, but also some of the macehualtin. Those of the macehualtin that attended the calmecac did so primarily to join the priesthood, while the pipiltin did so to become either priests or warriors.

The calmecac in Tenochtitlan was located at the main ceremonial complex, while each calpolli in Tenochtitlan had a telpochcalli attached to it. The calmecac was dedicated to Quetzalcoatl, who was the god of the wind, and patron god of the priesthood. Attached to the calmecac in Tenochtitlan, was a temple, dedicated to Quetzalcoatl, signifying its importance in training priests, but also to elevate its status in the eyes of the gods. The youth attending the calmecac were trained more

¹⁴⁰ Pennock (2022): 110.

¹⁴¹ Hassig (1988): 30; Pennock (2022): 108.

¹⁴² Hassig (1988): 30.

privately and individually in ways of war, making for particularly effective combatants.¹⁴³ Parents would seek out the leaders of the *calmecac*, and symbolically hand over the children to the priests. The priests would then take the youth to the temple dedicated to Quetzalcoatl, where the parents would give gifts to the priest, poor gifts if the family was poor, and rich if they were rich. The priests would, upon accepting the child, cut his ears and draw blood as a sacrifice to Quetzalcoatl. There are several accounts of when children attended the *calmecac*.¹⁴⁴ If the child was of the royalty, education would start at the age of five, whereas the children of the *pipiltin* would start between the ages of six to thirteen. Once accepted into the *calmecac*, the children would usually live at the school, only going home to eat. If the child was young, they would stay at the family home, moving into the *calmecac* when they came of age. If a boy was the child of the *tlatoni*, he would stay at the *calmecac* from childhood, and primarily be raised by its teachers, cultivating him into becoming suitable for succession. The children attending the *calmecac* would be taught rigorously, covering the intellectual aspects of Aztec life, in addition to everything taught at the *telpochcalli*.¹⁴⁵ In terms of warfare, the children of the *pipiltin*, and children of warriors, were more inclined to become warriors than those of the *macehualtin*, indeed they often excelled at warfare. This was due to their training taking place at the houses of the eagle and jaguar orders, where they were personally trained by the military elite.¹⁴⁶

When a child was to be inducted into the *telpochcalli*, the parents would take their child to the master of youths, and present appropriate gifts, in the hopes that the child would be accepted when he came of age.¹⁴⁷ In the *telpochcalli* the youth would be tasked with ordinary duties, such as tending the fires and sweeping the house, designed to strengthen his character. He would eat at his own home, but was required to sleep, socialise, and work at the *telpochcalli*. The boys' hair would be shaven continually in his youth, but when he turned ten, a tuft was allowed to grow back. This practice also took place before joining the *calmecac*, and as we shall see, was an important aspect of the hierarchy of the youth hoping to become warriors. When he turned fifteen, the tuft would have

¹⁴³ Hassig (1988): 34; Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 1): 9.

¹⁴⁴ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 8): 71; Durán (1967), 1:189 (chap. 21); Torquemada (1975-1983): 3:275 (bk. 9, chap. 13) cf. Hassig (1988): 35.

¹⁴⁵ Hassig (1988): 34-35; It is unclear at what age someone would be deemed too young to stay at the *calmecac*, but it seems likely that it would be below the age of ten.

¹⁴⁶ Hassig (1988): 36.

¹⁴⁷ Hassig (1988): 30-31.

grown long, which signified that he had yet to take any captives. From here on, the parents would relinquish the boy to the priests in charge of the school, to become a warrior.¹⁴⁸

“Our Lord, the Ever-present, places you [priests] here. And we have come to tell you [lit., and now you hear and understand] that our Lord has given us a child [lit., has dropped a jewel, a quetzal-plume]. A son has arrived, and here he in truth now wishes to stay [lit., He wants to become substantial]. But we confess we do not know how to raise him [lit., Shall we put a spindle and a weaver’s reed in his hand?]. Therefore, he is yours; he is your child, your son. We place him in your charge [lit., into your laps and on your carrying devices]. You are skilled in training children to be men [lit., You have children. You raise men, you bring up men. You create eagles, you create jaguars. You bring up men for our Mother and our Father, Tlalteuctli (Earthlady) and Tonatiuh (Sun)].”¹⁴⁹

The symbolic gifting of the child to the priests of the schools signified the importance of the spiritual leaders in the Aztec society. They were charged with teaching the youth the fundamental concepts of the Aztecs, such as religion, warfare, laws, morality, and politics, ensuring the youth’s adherence to Aztec ideological ideals. Fundamentally, the priests had the power to indoctrinate the next generation into the Aztec worldview. They would do this both religiously by instilling the *do ut des* relationship with the gods, but also in matters of war by exemplifying the importance of taking captives. Thus, the teachers would nurture the relationship between the youth and the gods, ensuring the continued survival of the cosmos even after their own death. The Aztec priesthood, however, did not only take a passive role in the society, they were also active on the warfront, and by extension could teach the youth about war as well. Senior priests participated alongside the warriors in wars. They symbolically represented the gods on the battlefield by bearing symbols of the gods and prior to the battle they prepared the warriors for the upcoming battle by performing religious rituals. Before leaving for war, the warriors would ascend the temple of Huitzilopochtli. The priests gifted the warriors their weapons and lead them in ritualistic autosacrifices, which was the act of self-sacrifice, such as piercing their ears, arms, and the tip of their tongues with cactus spines, to offer blood for the gods in return for blessings.¹⁵⁰ On the battlefield, the priests were elite warriors in their own right, and just as taking captives were emphasised by the warriors, it was equally important for the priests participating in war:

¹⁴⁸ Hassig (1988): 31.

¹⁴⁹ Díaz (1908-16): 1:241-42 (bk. 4, chap. 66) cf. Hassig (1988): 31.

¹⁵⁰ Hassig (1988): 9; Pennock (2008): 32.

*“... when already the fasting in honor of Tlaloc was to begin, when night fell, then the offering priests crowded themselves in to the houses [of the calmecac]; there was crowding into the houses - the warrior offering priests [who had taken three or four captives], and the offering priests [who had captured only one]; then the offering priests who were singers, who beat [the drums]; then all the lesser offering priests, and those who were still children, the novices, the little offering priests.”*¹⁵¹

Sahagún does not mention the act of warfare in the above but considering that he uses the phrase ‘taken x captives’, as he does when he refers to warriors returning from war.¹⁵² It becomes clear that these captives were taken by the priests during warfare. Thus, did warfare intermingle with the religious rituals in Tenochtitlan, but the religious intermingled with warfare outside of Tenochtitlan. As the leaders in matters of religion, philosophy, politics, and morality, the priests of the Aztecs were the ideal teachers of the education of the youth.

The youths in the *telpochcalli* were prohibited from drinking pulque, and if some were caught doing so, they would be punished by death, either from public beating or hanging. They were not allowed to marry during their training, they were, however, permitted to have mistresses.¹⁵³ While the significance of pulque is outlined during the gladiatorial sacrifice, the restriction on marriage demonstrates adherence to the schools teaching by reducing outside interference and distractions.

The leaders would also take the youths on campaigns as shield-bearers to test their capabilities in acts of war. The personalised training would be overseen by the youth’s assigned warrior, with duel like sparring. This would make particular sense, since battles in Mesoamerica usually always ended with individual combats due to the weapons utilised. The war leaders would instruct the youth in the handling of weapons, and the inevitable reliance on single combat would be taught to the youth, so that he could stand on his own when circumstances called for it, which will be explored later in the section on warfare. Once the young warrior was old enough, the youth would accompany a senior warrior to war, as the equivalent of a squire.¹⁵⁴ Sahagún describes the tutorship in the *calmecac*, it is not known whether this would differ in the *telpochcalli*:

¹⁵¹ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 2): 79.

¹⁵² The number of captives that the offering priests had captured is given in the corresponding Spanish text by Sahagún; Anderson & Dibble in the notations of the Florentine Codex (Book 2): 79.

¹⁵³ Hassig (1988): 34.

¹⁵⁴ Hassig (1988): 33.

“... reaching twenty years of age, then he went forth to war. First [his parents] summoned those who were seasoned warriors. They gave them to eat and to drink, and they gave gifts to all the seasoned warriors ... And then they took him to the wars. The seasoned warriors went taking great care of him, lest somewhere he might be lost. And they taught him well how to guard himself with a shield; how one fought; how a spear was fended off with a shield. And when a battle was joined, when already there was fighting and perhaps already captives were being taken, they taught him well and made him see how he might take a captive. Perhaps then he took a captive with the aid of others, or he [alone] could take one. For truly it was well seen to that many men become brave warriors”¹⁵⁵

Already on his first encounter with war, it is stressed that taking captives were especially important during battles. The importance of taking captives was crucial to their success and emphasised in their training early on, just as it would be vital when they grew older and was to advance in the military hierarchy. As mentioned above, the youth's hair was shorn, except a small tuft that was allowed to grow until they captured their first enemy. Sahagún outlines how this practice continued for the children of the pipiltin in the calmecac, but does not give any mention of the macehualtin children:¹⁵⁶

“And if he took a captive with the help of others ... then the lock of hair was removed ... And when the tuft on the back of his head was removed, he was shorn so that he was left [another] lock: his hair dress kept, on the right side, the hair hanging low, reaching the bottom of his ear; to one side [only] was his lock of hair set ... so that it might be seen that he had made a captive with the help of others ... And he who took no captive with others' help, when perchance, he had returned three or four times to the wars, they called “Big tuft of hair over the back of the head.” And if this was so said of him, he was much ashamed of it. Wherefore he cast himself [into the fray] in order to take a captive with others' aid. And if he made a captive with the help of others, then his head was pasted with feathers. And he who then did not take a captive with the aid of others might not remove his lock of hair; neither was his head pasted with feathers ... And for this one, perhaps worldly goods

¹⁵⁵ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 8): 72.

¹⁵⁶ Prior to the children joining either school, their hair would be shaven in the same manner therefore it is unlikely that this tradition would be exclusive to the pipiltin, given the importance of taking captives in Aztec society. There might have been different styles of haircuts to differentiate the macehualtin warriors from the pipiltin, but this is unlikely as their access to military equipment already accomplished this. Hassig (1988): 31, 63, 88-90.

and riches were his lot or he was only poor ... this one never took and never did they place upon him, and embroidered cape”¹⁵⁷

It is clear, that the reality and necessity of taking captives were instilled quite early and vigorously within the young warriors. Their future career depended on it, but also in their current role as learners. If they succeeded in taking a captive with help, their hair would be shorn so that it was clear for their peers, teachers, and the rest of society to see. However, if they failed to procure any captives, they would be shamed, and have to work harder, casting themselves, seemingly reckless, into the fray to acquire a captive. Should they succeed this time, they would be left with the fear of failure and continue to better themselves. If it seemed all but impossible for them to achieve their goal, they would be thoroughly shamed. It would be visible to everyone, that they failed in procuring captives for the gods, thus relinquishing any hope of achieving martial fame. The intense social pressure, fear of ridicule, and public shame, would influence the youth well into adulthood. However, should a youth manage to capture an opponent single handily, the glory was immense:

“And he who had acted alone and had taken captives, if he took one, was therefore named a leading youth and a captor. And when this came to pass, then they took him before Moctezuma, there at the palace ... And the majordomos of Moctezuma anointed his temples with yellow ochre ... And when he had taken two, likewise they took him before Moctezuma ... And when he captured three, likewise his gifts were provided, and he took [the office] of, and they established him as, a master of the youths, a leading youth ... And when he took four, Moctezuma then let his hair be cut like that of a seasoned warrior. He was named a seasoned warrior.”¹⁵⁸

Upon securing a captive on his own, the youth would be given the honour of a personal audience with the huey tlatoani of Tenochtitlan, who in turn held a celebration for the youth and gifted the title of leading youth and captor. Capturing three would provide the title master of youth. Yet again the importance of the act of capturing enemies is exemplified. However, the youth would have to capture four opponents before he would be considered a seasoned warrior. It is unclear however, if reaching the rank of a seasoned warrior also meant induction into the ranks of either the jaguar or eagle warrior casts. Considering that Sahagún differentiate between them, I do not reason that is the case. Hence, to reach the elite ranks, one had to capture an additional four captives, taking the number up to eight. Indeed, Sahagún describes the good valiant man (warrior) as: “... *one who*

¹⁵⁷ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 8): 75-76.

¹⁵⁸ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 8): 76-77.

excelts others – a victor, a conqueror, a taker of captives.”, and the bad as “... *vainglorious, a boaster that he is an eagle warrior, an ocelot warrior, a brave warrior*”.¹⁵⁹ A good warrior would take captives, and a bad one would boast that he was of the elite, implying that he has taken many captives with no proof. Evidently, everything relating to the career of a warrior, from the very beginning of training to adulthood and fully-fledged member of the warrior caste, would depend on his ability and success rate in capturing opponents. The Flower Wars would provide an excellent opportunity for the young warriors to further their military career, and play a significant part in the continuing survival of the cosmos. The importance of taking captives, however, does not mean that slaying the enemy was not important, as that is customary to war. But it does support the notion that a system had been established, that would entice warriors to prove themselves by taking captives. The intermingled system of religion and warfare provided the ultimate foundation to uphold the *do ut des* relationship between the Aztecs and the gods. The warriors would achieve glory both in the physical world, by advancing in the military hierarchy, but also in the metaphysical world where they would provide nurture for the gods, and in the end live with Huitzilopochtli when they die. Thus the warriors would receive the highest honour of becoming defenders of the cosmos and Aztecs, and the harbingers of the gods. Taking this into consideration, the battleground of the Flower Wars seems to provide the perfect conditions to satisfy these intrinsic needs.

Warfare

It is evident that the emphasis on acquiring captives was a central part to the education of the Aztec military, and by extension, the way they conducted warfare. While the act of taking captives was particularly important at every battlefield, it was not the prime motivator for engaging in general warfare, Flower Wars exempted. Political, expansion, and dealing with local rebellions, was all important motivations of the Aztecs. The way the Aztecs dealt with these affairs, will provide insight into how the Flower Wars was conducted, and how the motivations for them relates to conventional warfare.

In decoding the political basis of Aztec warfare, Hassig gives a concise analysis of the political system that laid the foundation for their imperialistic incentive. The imperialistic system of the Aztecs was based on dominating influence instead of territorial control (e.g., military occupation), which by large can be attributed to their accessible technology. Transportation in Mesoamerica was limited to what the human body was capable of, as they had neither wheels nor draft animals.

¹⁵⁹ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 10): 23.

Hence, resources would be limited to areas where goods could be drawn efficiently, and as such, reduced the need for politically incorporating vast regions into the empire. This would mean that economic benefits would rely on exercising political control and moving goods at local expense, by instilling tributaries to produce and transport them. This presents two options for the Aztecs as they expanded their influence. Firstly, they could replace local leaders in conquered altepetls with their own and leave a garrison of their own soldiers. This would result in the ability to extract large quantities of goods from the conquered altepetls, but on the other hand, it would prove costly in terms of administration, security, and the threat of rebellion. Secondly, they could leave the government in local hands, which would reduce the extraction of goods, but the administrative cost would be lower. The Aztecs chose the second option.¹⁶⁰ This would mean that the Aztec army did not have to maintain a presence in conquered areas, but instead relied on local security to uphold order. The Aztec army would only be rallied in matters of further conquests or to deal with rebellions.¹⁶¹ The most efficient way for the Aztecs to increase its power would be to demonstrate it through force, which was accomplished by war. For the Aztecs, war was not just a fulfilment of religious ideals, but also the best way to expand their empire, and quell rebellions. As Hassig states it “*War was the empire*”, and to halt actions of war would undermine their imperial power, encourage resistance to further expansions, and loosening the grip of conquered areas.¹⁶² The elite warrior’s main occupation was warfare, hence it would be favourable for the political body to keep wars plenty to keep the warriors engaged, at the same time serving the religious demands.

A rebellion was most likely to succeed if the Aztecs were temporarily weakened, and the rebellious faction could ally with another nearby power.¹⁶³ Cities located near Tenochtitlan were less likely to cause a rebellion, even if they were oppressed considerably, due to the close proximity and the ease of mobilisation for the Aztec army. Hassig argues that cities that were located far away from Tenochtitlan, but willingly joined the empire, were less reliable allies than those that had been subjugated by force, since they had never been exposed the full might and ruthlessness of the Aztec military. In other words, conquered states were fully aware what to expect from the Aztec army, willingly joined altepetls was not. While the military might would be a considerable deterrence for any that would consider to rebel, if a rebellion happened far away from Tenochtitlan, it would be harder to put it down, due to logistics. However, when rebellions occurred, they were not taken

¹⁶⁰ Hassig (1988): 17-18.

¹⁶¹ Hassig (1988): 19.

¹⁶² Hassig (1988): 20.

¹⁶³ A weakened state could be the result of a campaign gone array, or the death of the huey tlatoani.

lightly, extraordinary action were taken to put them down. If the Aztecs were weakened, they would ignore lesser affronts, but would not forget them.¹⁶⁴ As such, if a rebellion happened at a time where quelling it would prove unfavourable, due to a time of relative weakness or logistics, they would return at a later time, making sure future transgressions was avoided.

The majority of the wars of the Aztecs were fought for conquest and to put down rebellions. Due to the limiting nature of the Aztec transportation systems, delegating forces to participate in a Flower War in times of regular warfare, depending on the size of the army, could pose a logistical problem. According to Hassig, continuous Flower Wars were fought against Chalco instead of subduing it, and a Flower War was fought with Huexotzinco, while other regular wars were conducted. Hassig argues that the latter was well in the scope of the Triple Alliances' capacity, yet it is unsure whether this was always the case.¹⁶⁵ Nonetheless, the conceptions of Flower Wars alongside regular war for conquest, attribute it as an important military concept for the Aztecs, and thus, must have yielded important results for it to be of value. The festival of Panquetzaliztli marked the end of the harvest season, which in turn signalled the beginning of the war season. However, this was a restriction of practicality, not one of ritual. During the harvest seasons small armies, that required fewer men and logistical support, could still be dispatched, as were the case with Flower Wars.¹⁶⁶

When the Aztecs went to war, they did so, armed with an array of weaponry, both projectile and melee weapons to be used in hand-to-hand combat. The weapons wielded by the Aztecs, especially the melee weapons, were extremely efficient in incapacitating the opponent for capture. Thus, only melee weapons were utilised in fighting in the Flower Wars, foregoing projectile weapons altogether. But for the sake of clarity, I will give an outline of the typical types of weapons that the Aztecs used, and how they would be implemented in combat. In doing so, the disparity between an ordinary war and a Flower War become all the more evident.

The beginning of an engagement would see the Aztec using projectile weapons, the atlatl, bows, and slings. The atlatl was a spear-thrower, that utilised long 'darts' made from oak with feathered butts, but were likely made with other materials as well. The dart tip was single-pointed, many fire-hardened, while others had tips made from obsidian, fishbone, copper, or flint points. The atlatl allowed for the darts to be thrown with greater force and for longer distances than a spear, without

¹⁶⁴ Hassig (1988): 25-26.

¹⁶⁵ Hassig: (1988): 156, 213.

¹⁶⁶ Hassig: (1988): 54.

trading accuracy for power. The atlatl as a weapon type predated the Aztecs, but more so than others, the atlatl was associated with the gods. Huitzilopochtli, by example, was attributed an atlatl in his war attire. Duran described the dangerous nature of the darts:

*“The men began to throw darts, which are dangerous weapons because once these darts have entered the flesh they cannot be pulled out. This is due to their barbs, which make them like harpoons. In order to remove a dart it is necessary to make a large opening or to push it out the other side.”*¹⁶⁷

The Aztec bows, or tlauhuitolli were made from wood, with animal-sinew or deerskin-thong bowstrings. They were simple, yet effective, but they did not wield the same stopping power as the atlatl.¹⁶⁸ The Aztec sling was made from maguey-fiber and was called tematlatl. It was used to hurl stones at the enemy, which the Aztecs used to great effect. The stones were shaped rounded stones that were stockpiled in advance, or send to Tenochtitlan as tributes.¹⁶⁹ The atlatl darts and arrows were made during the festival called Quecholli, taking place in the fourteenth month of the Aztec calendar. The warriors would bring the materials needed before the temple of Huitzilopochtli. All the youths, warriors, and men of marriageable age would ascend the pyramid where:

*“... they each sat blowing shell trumpets, and they sat bleeding themselves. They cut their ears; they pressed out their blood; they anointed the temples [with it] ... Thereupon spears were made. It was said: “Spears are born, or their [points] of oak.”*¹⁷⁰

The arrows were made secondly in the ritual. After the darts and arrows were made, a demonstration of skill was performed, where warriors would utilise the weapons in a test of accuracy. Throughout the festival, captives would be sacrificed continuously.¹⁷¹ Once more, the religious festival is combined with warfare. Combining a religious event with crafting of military supplies was an effective way to ensure resources for upcoming wars. The festival would take place at the same time each calendar year, and thus ensure that material would be replaced regularly. Supplies was not limited to this event however, as they also received materials through tributes. In

¹⁶⁷ Durán (1964): 120.

¹⁶⁸ Hassig (1988): 75-80.

¹⁶⁹ Hassig (1988): 80.

¹⁷⁰ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 2): 134-135.

¹⁷¹ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 2): 135-140.

the case of a Flower War, projectile weapons would be avoided as they would provide substantial damage upon the enemy before melee was engaged. This would be detrimental, as it would be difficult to control whether the opponent died or not, for in the end, the purpose was to achieve the opportune amount of captives. Instead, the Aztecs would rely on their shock weapons, such as the tepoztopilli which was a thrusting spear, the macuahuitl, or the cuauhlolli club.¹⁷² According to Hassig, the outcome of a battle would depend on these weapons, as they were used to cut, crush, and puncture in hand-to-hand combat.¹⁷³ The tepoztopilli was longer than the Spanish spears and the tip was made of multiple stone blades placed side by side in a teardrop shape. Designating them as spears or lances, as the Spanish often did, distorts the actual function of the weapon. While they could be used for thrusting, it also functioned as for slashing, taking on a similar role of a halberd. If thrusting was the purpose, a single point would have sufficed.¹⁷⁴ The ability to slash at an opponent is something that we will observe in the macuahuitl as well, it served an important purpose in the goal for taking captives. Slashing at an opponent's arms, legs, or torso was effective in incapacitating the opponent, making them easier for capture. The Aztec swords/clubs, as they are often described, was the macuahuitl, which translates to 'hand-wood'. It is probably the most recognisable weapon used by the Aztecs, due to its unusual appearance which vaguely resembles a sword. They were made of wood, most commonly of oak. A groove was carved down the sides of the wood, where obsidian or flint blades were fitted and secured with glue. They have been depicted in various shapes, rectangular being the most common, but also ovoid and pointed designs. The Aztecs also wielded macuahuitls in a two-handed design, which was longer, but included the same design philosophy.¹⁷⁵ Like the tepoztopilli, the macuahuitl was intended for slashing and cutting, the jagged edge of the obsidian or stone flint capable of inflicting devastating wounds on the opponent. This would make it an ideal weapon to wound and capture the enemy. Obsidian is by nature quite brittle, thus the blades would often need replacing. Should the blades splinter during combat, the wooden structure could be used as a club instead.¹⁷⁶ Díaz would describe the damage of the macuahuitl in an attack on a mounted conquistador:

¹⁷² Due to an important part of the opening stages of combat, which I will delve further into later, it is likely that some warriors carried a tecpatl sacrificial knife.

¹⁷³ Hassig (1988): 81.

¹⁷⁴ Hassig (1988): 81-82.

¹⁷⁵ Hassig (1988): 83.

¹⁷⁶ Hassig (1988): 83-85.

*“While we were at grips with this great army and their dreadful broadswords, many of the most powerful among the enemy seem to have decided to capture a horse ... Then they slashed at his mare, cutting her head at the neck so that it only hung by the skin. The mare fell dead, and if his mounted comrades had not come to Moron’s rescue, he would probably have been killed also.”*¹⁷⁷

While Díaz’ description might be exaggerated, the macuahuitl was capable of inflicting tremendous damage should the situation demand it. The cuauhlolli club was more in line with the modern interpretation of a club. It was a simple wooden club with a balled head, ideal for inflicting blunt force trauma to the opponent, rendering them unable to fight, and in extension ideal for capture.¹⁷⁸ The melee weaponry of the Aztecs was dual purpose. On one hand, they were extremely effective at slaying the enemy. On the other hand, they seem almost tailor made to incapacitate or maim the opponents, leaving them incapable of fighting and thus, ripe for the taking as captives.

Combat fought in Mesoamerica involved an orderly and recognised sequence of weapons use and tactics, which would usually start with projectile weapons. The ranged fire would continue until ammunition was depleted, which would signal the advance of the armies. The armies would start advancing in the waning moments of the initial fusillade, as it provided covering fire.¹⁷⁹ Once the armies clashed, the melee weapons ruled the battlefield with the exception of those that still had ammunition, who harassed enemy projectile weapons, reinforcements, and prevent encirclement. The most experienced warriors would initiate the clash between the armies, in the hopes of achieving a quick victory. Occasionally they would be led by the tlatoani, but usually the warriors of the military orders preceded others. Sahagún reports a ritual conducted during battle, where the first captive would be sacrificed on the battlefield:

*“And when they first took a captive, one fated to die, forthwith they slew him before the gods; they slashed his breast open with a flint knife”.*¹⁸⁰

It is likely that the warrior performing the sacrifice was a priest, wielding a tecpatl, but since warriors had knowledge on sacrificial rites, it could also be carried out by warriors. Nonetheless, it

¹⁷⁷ Díaz (1963): 145.

¹⁷⁸ Hassig (1988): 85.

¹⁷⁹ Hassig (1988): 99.

¹⁸⁰ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 8): 53.

brings the gods to the forefront of the battle. Order was maintained in the battle, and anyone who broke ranks or caused confusion were slain on the battlefield, the same for anyone engaging without given the order to do so. When the frontline was established and a broad front was formed, skirmishing occurred by units as wholes. However, due to the weapons employed by the Aztecs, combat was inevitable, and resulted in an individual affair. In the case of the Aztecs, surrounding the enemy army was the usual strategy, due to their numerical advantages. However, battles were restricted to the frontline due to the weapons they used, as they were the only ones that could reach the enemy, therefore extending the front as much as possible was important to the Aztecs.¹⁸¹ Captives would be taken in combat and ensuing aftermath. When an enemy was weakened on the battlefield, he would be dragged from the battleground, away from the frontlines. Warriors behind the front lines would then bind the wounded warriors, their hands tied behind their backs, and in some cases the feet were bound as well. Cuauhcozcatl, or wooden collars were placed around their necks.¹⁸² Sahagún describes that they were then taken to wooden cages:

*“And there in battle was when captives were taken. When it had come to pass that they went against and conquered the city, then the captives were counted, there, in wooden cages ...”*¹⁸³

It is unclear whether cages were utilised when wars were fought on a regular battlefield, but it seems unlikely as the captives were already weakened and guarded by warriors. Constructing cages before a battle would be peculiar, since no one would know how many captives they would acquire. In extension of this, the cages would probably be left or torn down, wasting resources. With a conventional battle explored, how would that compare to one fought during the Flower Wars?

¹⁸¹ Hassig (1988): 99-101.

¹⁸² Hassig (1988): 115.

¹⁸³ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 8): 73.

The Flower Wars

The Aztec concept of the Flower Wars, or *xochiyaoyotl* in nahuatl, is perhaps one of the noteworthy and peculiar aspects of Mesoamerican society, yet one of the aspects we know the least of. Indeed, the Flower Wars are particularly elusive in the sources, often leaving more questions than answers. The Flower Wars were characterised by the formality and conventions surrounding the battles. The two factions would appoint a date where the battle were to take place, which would take place in a space purposely left as neutral ground between the two faction's territories. This space was called the *cuauhtlalli* or *yaotlalli* and was viewed as sacred ground. The battle would be formally initiated by the burning of a large pyre of paper and incense between the two armies.¹⁸⁴ According to Durán, death in a Flower War was called *xuchimiquitzli*, which appropriately translates to flowery, rose-coloured death, happy and blissful. Durán directly correlates the concept of *xuchimiquitzli* with the reason for many to choose life as a warrior.¹⁸⁵ The *xuchimiquitzli* is mentioned in the Aztec prayer to Tezcatlipoca: "*May he [the warrior] desire, may he long for the flowery death by the obsidian knife.*"¹⁸⁶ The ramifications of the *xuchimiquitzli* are quite clear, death in a Flower War was honourable, even desired. The prayer urges the warriors to seek the flowery death, which was only found in the Flower Wars, further emphasising the importance of these wars towards the warriors. Yet this poses an interesting paradox, for the Flower Wars was not fought with the goal of winning by killing.¹⁸⁷ However, it does encapsulate the religious importance of doing battle in the Flower Wars, since this particular kind of death was valued to Tezcatlipoca who: "*sometimes bestowed riches ... heroism, valor, position of dignity, rulership, nobility, honor.*"¹⁸⁸ All are aspects sought by a warrior on the battlefield. We do not know exactly how a battle in a Flower War was fought, but taking a conventional battle into consideration we can extrapolate a few things. The Flower Wars were usually fought by smaller armies compared to those in conventional warfare.¹⁸⁹ This would mean that the Flower Wars could be fought throughout the whole year, due to the relative logistical ease of sending a smaller army, rather than only in the ordained period of wartime following Panquetzalitzli festival. The army would be drawn predominantly from the nobility, ensuring the best warriors for the battles.¹⁹⁰ The warriors would forgo using projectile weapons, instead wielding melee weapons like the *macuahitl*, *tepoztopilli*, or *cuauhololli* likely paled with a

¹⁸⁴ Hassig (1988): 10.

¹⁸⁵ Durán (1964): 410.

¹⁸⁶ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 6): 14.

¹⁸⁷ Harner (1977): 131; Hicks (1979): 87-88; Isaac (1983): 415-417; Hassig (1988): 256; Pennock (2022): 113.

¹⁸⁸ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 1): 5.

¹⁸⁹ Hassig (1988): 54.

¹⁹⁰ Hassig (1988): 54.

yaochimalli (war shield).¹⁹¹ When the armies met at the cuauhtlalli/yaotlalli, and ritual pyres were burned, signalling the battles beginning, two options present itself. Either they made use of similar military strategies they did in ordinary battle, or they resorted to individual style duels. Considering the nature of Aztec militaristic and social progression, clarity on who claimed a captive during a battle was important, otherwise confusion and fights could erupt between two warriors, both claiming the captive. Sahagún outlines this in a case where two warriors both claim the same captive during a battle:

*“And if several claimed one captive, and one man said, “He is my captive,” and another man also said, “He is my captive”: if no man verified it, and also if no one saw how they had taken the captive, the lord of the sun decided between them. If neither had an advantage of the two who had claimed the captive, then those who had taken four captives, the masters of the captives, decided that to neither one would the captive belong.”*¹⁹²

As the individual warrior relies on taking captives to further rise in the social and military hierarchy, it would be favourable to avoid any confusion. Hassig argues that Flower Wars were largely a demonstration of martial prowess, drawing most of the army from the elite. Hence, killing by means that did not demonstrate individual combat prowess was not ideal in the Flower Wars.¹⁹³ As such, military strategy commonly used in conventional warfare is not necessarily reflected in the Flower Wars. While demonstrating martial prowess was an aspect in the Flower Wars, it undermines the religious aspect. With that in mind and reliance for the warriors to capture prisoners, it is likely that the battles were fought in the style of duels between the warriors of both armies. This would infer a reduced sense of chaos on the battlefield, which in turn means reducing accidental killing, easing the act of capturing opponents, and delegating the captives to the correct warriors.

¹⁹¹ Hassig (1988): 87.

¹⁹² Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 8): 53.

¹⁹³ Hassig (1988): 129-130, 264.

Early Flower Wars

Chimalpahin provides a clue on how Flower Wars would differentiate from cocoltic yaoyotl (angry war), in other words, conventional war. In 1376, what must have been an early iteration of the Flower War was fought between the Aztecs of Tenochtitlan and the Chalca of Chalco Atenco, during this, Chimalpahin describes that: “*the noble Mexica who captured Chalca let them go, and the noble Chalca who captured Mexica let them go, and only some of the commoners got killed*”, however, after some years the war changed character: “*turned at last into one based on anger, it was angry war, thus the flowery war was destroyed*”.¹⁹⁴ This implies that the Flower Wars started as a relative peaceful one, at least in terms of warfare. At first only pipiltin were captured and subsequently released, while some of the macehualtin were killed. The act of capturing the pipiltin, and their release indicates that this early type of Flower War was more a show of strength between the two factions, rather than a ritualistic conduction of war. It provided an avenue for the Aztecs and Chalca to settle disputes in a low-struggle, suffering minimal casualties and thus still able to pursue other military ventures.¹⁹⁵ The death of the macehualtin could either have been accidental killings from overeager warriors, or sacrifices carried out post-battle. Over the span of years where these wars were fought, the Flower War changed character turning into ‘angry wars’.¹⁹⁶ This can imply two things. Either they changed from Flower Wars into conventional warfare for conquest, or the ramifications of this particular Flower War were changed. The Chalca remained unconquered, and the strife between the two altepetls continued, until finally escalating into a conventional war around 1452, with the subsequent defeat of the Chalca.¹⁹⁷ This indicates that the Flower Wars between Tenochtitlan and the Chalca continued intermittently until that point. Chimalpahin’s idea of the Flower Wars was based on the none-lethal version, thus he concludes that the Flower Wars was destroyed, turning into a conventional war, and not changed. However, at the time of the start of the Tenochtitlan-Chalco Flower Wars, both altepetls were still small in the greater picture of the valley of Mexico. This suggests that the smaller altepetls developed a kind of warfare free of death as to settle disputes while not losing essential warriors for ‘angry wars’ with superior enemies. According to Durán the Aztecs began the construction of Tenochtitlan in 1318, and their first tlatoni, Acamapichtli, ascended the throne in 1372.¹⁹⁸ Purposefully resorting to war for conquest at

¹⁹⁴ Hicks (1979): 88.

¹⁹⁵ Hassig (1988): 130.

¹⁹⁶ Twelve years according to Hassig, between eight and forty according to Hicks; Hassig (1988): 128; Hicks (1979): 88.

¹⁹⁷ Hassig (1988): 163-171.

¹⁹⁸ Durán (1964): 51; Hassig (1988): 128.

this point in time, would be too risky for both altepetls, thus the Flower Wars would continue, changing and adapting to the growing altepetls power.

In 1427 the Flower Wars between the Aztecs and Chalca changed again. Both sides seized to release the pipiltin captured during the battles, resulting in the increased cost of the war effort. Notably, it also changes the implication that social status had an impact on who were to be sacrificed during a Flower War, everyone was a target now.¹⁹⁹

Later Flower Wars

The Aztec Triple Alliance would be formed the following year in 1428, which would elevate Tenochtitlan to the dominant power in the valley. The change in the Aztec Chalca Flower Wars seems to escalate in line with the individual faction's power. With more resources available to spend, and the increasing capability and necessity to conduct sacrifices in Tenochtitlan, it is no surprise that regulations of the Flower Wars expand. This was evident in what was seemingly a battle during the Flower Wars between Tenochtitlan and Chalco. The nature surrounding the battle described below, could also be a way to end a prolonged war effort, turning it from ordinary war into a Flower War. After five days of continuously fighting, the Chalcas asked the Aztecs for a truce, in order to communicate a message to the Aztecs:

*“O brothers, know that five days from now we shall celebrate the festival of our god Camaxtli and we wish to celebrate it with the blood of Aztecs so that our god will be more honored and glorified. Therefore, we ask that on that our god's day you come into the field, in this very place, to join us in battle, because we wish to solemnize our feast with your flesh. Let us offer supplications and sacrifices to Camaxtli and we shall see if he is well honored with these.”*²⁰⁰

Durán describes the response of the Aztec tlatoani, Moctezuma I:

*“When Motecuhzoma saw that the war against the Chalcas dragged on and that the enemy could not be vanquished, and that the Chalcas had promised their deity Camaxtli to celebrate his feast with Aztec blood, he vowed to his own god to honor his festival with the death of many Chalcas. He swore that the Chalcas alone would build the temple of Huitzilopochtli and that he would make a great and solemn fire sacrifice with the bodies of men from Chalco.”*²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Hassig (1988): 139.

²⁰⁰ Durán (1964): 138.

²⁰¹ Durán (1964): 139.

The armies would meet up on the arranged day to do battle. Instructions were given to the soldiers to take prisoners alive, in order to fulfil the sacrificial oath to Huitzilopochtli. Moctezuma I came up with a cunning plan however, which, however, puts the validity of this battle as part of the Flower Wars into question. Boys up to the age of twelve would be equipped with bows and melee weapons, and captains would be attached to the company. They were arranged to wait until battle was joined, showing up on the horizon as a third army, scaring the Chalca into submission. This had the intended effect, and the Chalcas started to retreat.²⁰² The Aztecs captured 500 warriors that day, 300 seasoned warriors and 200 of the macehualtin according to Durán.²⁰³ The numbers in question, cannot accurately be discerned, and is in some regards not relevant, the insistence on capturing rather than killing is however. The unusual nature of the mock army presented by Moctezuma I is interesting, since it seems to breach the decorum of the Flower Wars, however, in a non-lethal way. What does support the notion that this was a battle in the Flower Wars is the arranged nature surrounding the battle, and the dedication of the captives to the respective faction's gods.

Hassig explain this societal change brilliantly:

*“Another change in the system of social status that emerged (probably during Itzcoatl's reign) was the increased stress on taking war captives for sacrifice. This practice was part of the Mesoamerican tradition and predated the Aztecs, but as practiced by the pre-imperial Aztecs it was a matter of individual achievement. Taking captives now served the state in a direct way, by emphasizing its power and thus helping achieve Aztec ascendancy in the hegemonic political world of fifteenth-century Mesoamerica”*²⁰⁴

With the consolidation of the Aztec empire, the emphasis on taking captives for sacrifice reaches its intentional role in the society. Hassig argues that this would affect the political status of Tenochtitlan directly. While this was certainly the case, he leaves out the religious implications and the impact thereof. As I argued in the section on religion, the sacrificial body of the Aztec religion was paramount in Tenochtitlan, not only for the priests, but the inhabitants, warrior caste, and tlatoani as well. This becomes evident during the construction of the huey teocalli in Tenochtitlan,

²⁰² Durán (1964): 139.

²⁰³ Durán (1964): 140.

²⁰⁴ Hassig (1988): 147.

where Moctezuma I wished to inaugurate the temple before its completion. Tlaclel, the Cihuacoatl to Moctezuma I, believed this to be a bad decision, but does offer a solution:²⁰⁵

“Lord, the dedication of the temple cannot take place soon because many details are not yet finished. The pointed stone on which the sacrificial victims are to be thrown to have their hearts cut out is unfinished, and so are many statues that will adorn the building and give significance to our rites. Nor is the shining mirror ready, which is to represent the sun. Do not sorrow, O lord, let the temple be finished. There is time for everything. However, if this is your wish, let these Children of the Sun be sacrificed, for we shall not lack victims for the dedication when the temple is completely finished. I have thought of many things that must still be done and it is better to complete these details now than later.

Our god will not be made to wait until new wars appear. He will find a way, a marketplace where we will go with his army to buy victims, men for him to eat ... Let our people, let our army, go to this marketplace to buy with our blood, with our heads and hearts, and with our lives the precious stones, jades, and rubies, and splendid long shining feathers for our wondrous Huitzilopochtli.

I, Tlaclel, state that this marketplace will be situated in Tlaxcala, Huetxotzinco, Cholula, Atlixco, Tliluhquitepec, and Tecoaac ... I repeat that these cities are near, they are accessible. No sooner will our soldiers have gone there than they will be returning with captives. Not only will they arrive warm, delicious [for Huitzilopochtli], but this will be a relaxation for our soldiers, as if they were just going hunting. And this must not be a real war: we must not destroy those people but they must be left standing so that each time our god wishes to enjoy himself and to eat warm tortillas, we can go to those cities, as one goes to the market to obtain foodstuffs.”²⁰⁶

Tlaclel's plan solidifies the post-Triple Alliance rationale for conducting Flower Wars, which would serve its purpose until the Spanish conquest in 1521. As the Aztec empire's military might and political influence reached its height, focus was drawn to appease the *do ut des* relationship that had followed them from their humble beginnings. The reliance of enemies in close proximity to Tenochtitlan, and the reliance on not conquering them, was particularly important. Wars were usually fought outside of the harvest season. The opportunity to send out small armies, to secure sacrificial captives in time for ordained festivals all around the calendar year, without putting strain

²⁰⁵ Cihuacoatl was the name of a goddess and had become a title reserved for the most trusted adviser of the tlatoani, and the second-in-command after the tlatoani; Townsend (2019): 54.

²⁰⁶ Durán (1964): 231-232.

on logistics and the Aztec military would provide several benefits. Armies for Flower Wars could easily be raised, and with the close proximity to the target area, the armies could also act as peacekeepers should a rebellion rise. It also provided an avenue for the warriors to actively provide and worship the gods, all the while having ample opportunity to advance on the hierarchal ladder.

A series of Flower Wars began in 1450, between the Aztec Triple Alliance and the Tlaxcala-Pueblan Alliance, lasting until the Spanish conquest in 1521.²⁰⁷ The Tlaxcala-Pueblan altepetls were all targets that Tlacaelel described. At this point of time, there was not any real animosity between the two factions. The Tlaxcala-Pueblan tlatoanies were invited to the feast celebrating Moctezuma II:

*“They were assured of safety measures and a truce during the time the festivities would last. It was stated that wars have their time and place and that between the Aztecs and these other cities there was no real enmity. But that the flower war that did exist had as its purpose recreation for the army, on the one hand, and, on the other, pleasure and food for the gods.”*²⁰⁸

The relative peace between the two factions would not last, however, and the Flower Wars would escalate, in time becoming wars for conquest. Durán provides us with some insight to these Flower Wars and how they developed and escalated. Sometime around 1505-1506, Moctezuma II conferred with his allies in the Triple Alliance following the conquering of Tototepec and Quetzaltepec:

*“He [Moctezuma II] became weary of so much idleness and of the fact there was no war in which his soldiers could practice their arts. Therefore, he decided to provoke the people of Huexotzinco, and he called the two neighboring kings and their chieftains to the city ... He was desirous of waging war against Huexotzinco and testing its strength ... since for that very reason the cities of Huexotzinco, Tlaxcala, Cholula, and Tliluhquitepec had been exempt [from conquest or tribute].”*²⁰⁹

The Aztecs had envoys sent to challenge Huexotzinco, to meet them on the plains of Atlixcco, where they would, after three days, meet and do battle. The brother of Moctezuma II, Tlacahuepan, would be in charge of leading the armies, and was presented with *“the device of the god [Xipe] Totec, and with splendid weapons and a shield of gold”*.²¹⁰ The Aztecs gathered one hundred

²⁰⁷ Isaac (1983): 416 (Table 1); The Tlaxcala-Pueblan Valley allied kingdoms consisted of the altepetls: Tlaxcala, Huexotzinco, and Cholula.

²⁰⁸ Durán (1964): 402.

²⁰⁹ Durán (1964): 425.

²¹⁰ Durán (1964): 425.

thousand soldiers from the three kingdoms of the Triple Alliance, to meet the Huexotzincas in battle. When the armies met at the arranged location, two hundred soldiers of each side were put forward and subsequently began to do skirmish. The battle progressed, with warriors dying and both sides, with reinforcement being sent forth as required, but the Huexotzincas had the overhand. Finally, Tlacahuepan engaged in the battle himself, fighting valiantly, killing fifty warriors by his own hand.²¹¹ He, however, would succumb to a wound and the Huexotzincas:

“... planning to carry him off alive to their city, but Tlacahuepan took hold of the fallen bodies, shouting that he would not go, that he would die there! His sacrifice was to be on the battlefield, upon those corpses! And so it was that since they could not pull him away they killed him, tore him apart, and carried away his body in little pieces, which were then saved as relics.”²¹²

Following the death of Tlacahuepan, the Aztec army withdrew. The Huexotzinco thus achieved a major victory over the Aztecs, killing two other unnamed brothers of Moctezuma II and capturing many lords and chieftains from the Triple Alliance. Moctezuma II decided that the returning Aztecs would be received in a manner suitable of their defeat. As such, no victory celebrations were held:

“... instead of prayers and thanks, there were long lamentations and complaint against the gods, to whom no sacrifice was offered.”²¹³

Moctezuma II, stricken with grief, had the returning warriors hand over their weapons, destroying them. Following this, funeral rights would be held accompanied with sacrifices to Huitzilopochtli.²¹⁴

The Flower War described is quite different to what we have encountered so far. Moctezuma II's reasoning for engaging with Huexotzinco seems to be in order to be for training purposes with religious significance apparently void. The army strength posed by both sides was not small in any sense of the word, and implicates that both sides were interested parading their power. When battle was joined, however, only two hundred warriors would fight, likely to keep in tradition of the duel style fighting. Whether this escalated as the battle drew on, or was limited to that specific number is not know. Considering the difficulty of replenishing troops in order to fulfil a designated maximum army size, it seems unlikely that the battle would be limited to two hundred warriors on each side.

²¹¹ Durán: (1964): 426.

²¹² Durán (1964): 427.

²¹³ Durán (1964): 427.

²¹⁴ Durán (1964): 427-428.

The test of strength thus, escalated to something that was more regular in an ordinary battle. The religious aspect, while seemingly less important in this battle, was certainly present before, during, and after the battle. Tlacahuepan was chosen to carry the ‘device of Xipe Totec’, the Flayed god. Xipe Totec was associated with life and rebirth, but also disease. The Aztecs would perform gladiatorial sacrifices in his honour, along with regular sacrifices, thus signifying his importance for the warrior caste.²¹⁵ The device mentioned, might be a cape, or outfit of human skin due to its association with Xipe Totec. After the captives were sacrificed in his honour, their bodies would be flayed and wore their skin in imitations of the god.²¹⁶ During the battle, as Tlacahuepan realised that his death was imminent, he fought for a *xuchimiquitzli*, forcing the Huexotzincans to kill him on the battlefield, rather than being sacrificed later. This poses an interesting question, as we saw during the Flower War with Chalco, they worshipped different gods. This would likely have been the same case with the people of Huexotzinco, thus forcing Tlacahuepan to seek the death that would benefit the Aztec gods the most. Following the battle, and the subsequent return of the defeated Aztecs, Durán makes it a point to address that no captives were taken, which brought the Aztecs distress. The validity of this claim, however, seem unlikely, as the battle seemed to escalate into something more akin to regular warfare, thus captives would likely have been acquired. Rather, sacrifices were probably held off in the immediate aftermath, saving them for the funeral rites of Moctezuma II brothers.

Following the Flower War with Huexotzinco, news broke about the Aztecs defeat. The Aztecs were approached by the Mixtecs of Yancuitlan and Zozola, who were subjects of the empire, challenging Moctezuma II, as the Triple Alliance would be in a state of relative weakness. Moctezuma II denied the challenge, which emphasises, that the Mixtecs sought to engage the Aztecs in a Flower War:

*“Motechuzoma sent couriers to Yancuitlan and Zozola with the message that the obsequies for his men killed in the war had just taken place and that the soldiers’ wounds were not yet healed ... The war with Huexotzinco, he stated, was different from the hostilities the Mixtecs sought because one was a means of exercise for the soldiers with the aim of the other was to try to convert the Aztecs into perpetual vassals and payers of tribute. The Mixtecs were to consider these things carefully.”*²¹⁷

²¹⁵ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 1): 39-40; Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 2): 3-4.

²¹⁶ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 1): 4.

²¹⁷ Durán (1964): 428.

Moctezuma II rather blatantly claims that Huexotzinco broke the rules were usually placed on Flower Wars, and that it indeed, escalated into ordinary warfare. It is likely that he conveyed this to the Mixtecs, in order to either save the reputation of the empire, while giving their armies enough time to recuperate. The Mixtecs would subsequently cause a rebellion, closing the roads leading to the Aztecs, and attack merchants of the Aztecs and their allies on the roads. When Moctezuma II heard this, his opinion on the matter of engaging the Mixtecs would change.

*“... Motecuhzoma called his advisers and reminded them that the solemn feast of the Flaying of Men was near. He told them to prepare for war with Yancuitlan and Zozola so that captives from these places could be sacrificed in the Tlacaxipehualiztli festival.”*²¹⁸

Considering that the Tlacaxipehualiztli festival (honouring Xipe Totec) was to take place shortly after the Flower Wars with Huexotzinco, and Tlacahuepan representing Xipe Totec on the battlefield. The implications suggest that the Flower War against Huexotzinco was actually fought by the Aztecs to procure captives for this festival in particular, rather than as a focus on combat training. The Aztecs would put down the rebellion raised by the Mixtecs, with sacrifices following the victory. During the Tlacaxipehualiztli festival, more from the campaign would have been sacrificed over the course of the month relegated to it.²¹⁹ Reaching the end of the festival, leaders from all over the valley, including those of the Tlaxcala-pueblan Alliance were invited to take place in the main feast, where over a thousand captives from Yanicuitlan were sacrificed.²²⁰ The amount of captives sacrificed and the inclusion of enemy state leaders, exemplify the importance of the festival, religiously and politically. Moctezuma II's initial answer to the Mixtec challenge is thus called into question. While the defeat at the hands of the Huexotzincans inflicted Moctezuma II's reputation as a military leader without a doubt, not being able to procure a significant festival honouring Xipe Totec, would have been detrimental. The rebellious actions of the Mixtecs, would end up serving the goal that the initial Flower War against Huexotzinco was supposed to.

Another Flower War was fought (probably around 1515-1517) between the Aztecs and the Tlaxcala-Pueblan altepetl of Cholula. The warriors of Cholula had until this point not done battle

²¹⁸ Durán (1964): 429.

²¹⁹ Sahagún: Florentine Codex (Book 2): 3.

²²⁰ Durán (1964): 429-430.

with the Aztecs, and wished to do so. Thus, the invitation to a Flower War was received in Tenochtitlan. The Cholulan wished to:²²¹

*“have the pleasurable experience of skirmishing with the Aztecs in battle. In this way they would please the Lord of the Earth, the Lord of the Battles, and the sun. They asked him to send his men because in three days they would be waiting for them there.”*²²²

Moctezuma II accepted the invitation, and the Triple Alliance marshalled an army to fight the Cholulans. The battle took place in the valley of Atlixco. Once the battle began the:

*“Cholulans soon started to fight seriously, with great courage, and the Aztecs and their allies did the same ... Both sides took captives and some soldiers were killed. Then the armies attacked each other with terrible fury and the battle lasted the entire day. It was fought with such rage that when the Aztecs withdrew that night, they found that they had lost eight thousand two hundred soldiers including men from the allied nations. Among the fallen were three most valorous captains, close relatives of King Motecuhzoma. However, the Aztecs had performed similar feats ... and many prisoners had been taken.”*²²³

The armies in this battle, as the one with Huexotzinco, were not small, and the battle escalated once the initial skirmishes had taken place, however, not to the point of ordinary warfare. The Aztecs suffered defeat, however, still managing to take captives for sacrifices. Once the battle was over, the Aztecs waited until the next day, to once again engage in battle with the Cholulans. The Aztecs received a message from the Cholulans the day after stating: *“that they had had enough practice and recreation. They bade the Aztecs go home in peace.”*²²⁴ The Aztecs could easily have engaged the Cholulans in force, but instead chose to go back to Tenochtitlan. Even though the Flower Wars seem to escalate, rules are still adhered to, to some extent. When the warriors returned, Moctezuma II greeted them, lifting their spirits, saying that:

“They should not be upset at this loss, although they grieved due to the death of their brothers, for having lost such valiant men ... That kind of death was the end they and all others should desire ...

²²¹ Hassig (1988): 234.

²²² Durán (1964): 438.

²²³ Durán (1964): 439.

²²⁴ Durán (1964): 439.

*glorifying in the flowers of the field and the rays of the sun. They were proud of this, they gloried in it.*²²⁵

Moctezuma II refers to the xuchimiquitzli, which all warriors should be proud of, even in defeat. Even though the Aztecs suffered defeat, Moctezuma II reacts differently than after the Huexotzinco Flower War. He seems to be at peace with the outcome, implying that this was how a Flower War should normally be waged, without it escalating to a point of no return. Training were done, captives were taken, thus pleasing the religious purpose that the Cholulan messengers mentioned in the invitation. The Tlatelolcan army that had participated in the Flower War would, however, breach decorum by not propagating funeral rites for the Aztecs killed during the war. This enraged Moctezuma II, shaming the Tlatelolcans and symbolically exiling their leaders from entering the Aztec court room. The Tlatelolcans would then, in attempt to appease the Aztec huey tlatoani, by bringing him luxurious gifts, which in turn infuriated him further. While the Tlatelolcans fell out of favour with Moctezuma II, war between the Teuctepec and the Triple Alliance occurred. Seeing this as an opportunity, the Tlatelolcans decided to pursue a Flower War, engaging the Teuctepec before the Aztecs arrived.²²⁶ The Tlatelolcans would be victorious, and upon entering:²²⁷

*“the city, the Tlatelolcas came first, with five hundred captives that they presented to Motecuhzoma. The king, in agreement with his principal lords, welcomed them courteously and accepted their gifts of the prisoners. They then were reconciled with the royal crown and Motecuhzoma lifted their banishment from the court ...”*²²⁸

In the effort to regain their honour, the Tlatelolcans procured captives that were gifted to Moctezuma II. In light of the previous efforts they made, it is clear how valued the captives were to the society. The Tlatelolcans had offended the Aztec king considerably, seemingly only accepting the gift of captives for sacrifices and military accomplishments.

Following the Flower Wars between the Triple Alliance and the Tlaxcala-Pueblan Alliance, one thing is clear. The Aztecs did not conquer Tlaxcala or Cholula in this period, while Huexotzinco was accepted into the Aztec empire in 1512.²²⁹ The reason behind Huexotzinco’s induction into the

²²⁵ Durán (1964): 440-441.

²²⁶ Hassig (1988): 235.

²²⁷ Durán (1964): 441-443.

²²⁸ Durán (1964): 443-444.

²²⁹ Isaac (1983): 424.

Aztec empire is unknown, but as to why Tlaxcala and Cholula were left conquered, a clue is provided by Andrés de Tapia who:

*“asked Mutezuma and other his captains, why, having those enemies surrounded, they did not finish them off once and for all, and they replied: “We could easily do so; but then there would remain nowhere for the young men to train [militarily], except far from here; and, also, we wanted there to always be [nearby] people to sacrifice to our gods.”*²³⁰

The conversation between de Tapia and Moctezuma II clearly mirrors what Tlacaelel had said, some 70 years prior. Tlaxcala and its allies, was allowed independence, to ensure ample opportunity for Flower Wars between them and the Aztec empire. This would provide captives for sacrifice to nurture the gods, securing the continued existence of the cosmos, and confer training and opportunity for the warriors. Moctezuma II's decision, however, to avoid conquering Tlaxcala would in the end prove detrimental. The Tlaxcalans would supply Cortés and his Conquistadors 20,000 warriors for their siege on Tenochtitlan, sealing the Aztec's destiny.²³¹

²³⁰ Isaac (1983): 416.

²³¹ Díaz (1963): 353.

Deciphering the Aztec motivations for conducting Flower Wars

Research conducted into the concept of the Aztec Flower War has through the years has yielded an array of different possible motivations for the Aztec to wage these wars. I have argued that the religious aspect of the Aztec society plays an integral part in the rationale for partaking in these wars. The Aztec religious thought, placed the cosmos in a constant flux, with the end of everything ever impending, should the gods not be sufficiently nurtured to be able to avoid this from happening. This *do ut des* relationship with the gods played a central part of the Aztec culture, permeating every aspect of their society, but it was not exclusive to them. Townsend perfectly encapsulates this:

*“The Mexica, like all their Nahua neighbors, believed they owed everything to the gods. “They are the ones who taught us everything”, their priests would later explain to the Spanish. “Before them, we kiss the ground, we bleed. We pay our debts to the gods, offer incense, make sacrifices.... We live by the grace of the gods.”*²³²

The Flower Wars enabled an avenue for the Aztecs, allies, and enemies, to fulfil their purpose in the eyes of the gods. Taking the above into consideration how does this compare with the other scholarly work on the concept?

Harner contributed that Flower Wars was fought, to procure captives for sacrificial rituals, but also to procure meat for cannibalistic purposes, providing protein in the Aztec diet.²³³ Price, contrary to Harner, argued a non-religious approach to the conduction of Flower Wars. Fighting in the Flower Wars would provide armies significant morale in times of war, due to stalemates. Ritualising the drawn-out process with Flower Wars, would give the indication to the warriors that things were in motion and not a standstill.²³⁴ Hicks would follow in the footsteps of Price, concluding that the Flower Wars were fought for sport and training for the warriors.²³⁵ Isaac took a different approach, focusing on the political relationship between the Aztec Triple-Alliance and the Tlaxcalan-Pueblan Alliance, and the Flower Wars they fought, concluding that the goal of the wars for the Aztecs, were to eventually conquer Tlaxcala.²³⁶ Hassig would provide the most thorough analysis on the Flower Wars. According to him, the Flower Wars was an important military strategy that served

²³² Townsend (2019): 49.

²³³ See Harner (1977).

²³⁴ See Price (1978).

²³⁵ Hicks (1979).

²³⁶ See Isaac (1983).

multiple purposes. The Flower Wars would serve as an escalating conquest strategy, demonstration of martial skill, initiate attrition on the enemy, allowing continued low-intensity hostilities, and war propaganda. It also incentivised warriors to participate in order to further their military career.²³⁷ Pennock argued towards a religious incentive, as its evident importance in the Aztec culture, is undeniable.²³⁸

While I agree with Harner's initial motivation for conducting Flower Wars as a religious incentive, I disregard his following argument of cannibalism, as mentioned in my literature review. For the sake of clarity, however, cannibalism was practiced by the Aztecs, their allies, and enemies, but it was strictly for ritual and ceremonious purposes, and reserved for the elite.²³⁹ Price, Hicks, and Isaac all disregard the religious importance to the Aztecs, arguing that it was used as a political smokescreen, in the search for conquest. Price and Hicks both argue that the Flower Wars would have a positive impact on the warriors. Price suggests that the Flower Wars provided a boost in military morale, during stalemate in conventional wars. Hicks argue that the Flower Wars were fought strictly for sport and training purpose. Since both of them leave out the religious implications, their theories become incomplete. There is no doubt that victory in a Flower War would provide a boost in morale for the participating warriors, and the leadership of the Aztec Triple Alliance, however, not for the reasons proposed by Price. Considering the system practiced by the warriors, morale was not gained from simply fighting; large parts of it came from the possibility of providing captives for the gods and advancing ones military career. A similar argument is posed towards Hicks. The majority of the warriors fighting in the Flower Wars were of the elite, thus the incentive on training become less valuable. However, seeking personal glory, advancement, in both the eyes of their peers, but more importantly their gods, becomes very relevant. Isaac argues that the Flower Wars between the Aztec Triple-Alliance and the Tlaxcalan-Pueblan Alliance was an effort from the Aztecs to conquer them. He points out the disparity between the statements of de Tapia and Tlacaelel, incentivising Flower Wars against Tlaxcala to procure captives for sacrifices, with the Tlaxcalan historian Muñoz Camargo. Camargo claimed that the Aztecs tried to conquer them, but proved unable to. Hassig argued against Isaacs' theory, stating:

²³⁷ Hassig (1988): 255-256.

²³⁸ See Pennock (2022).

²³⁹ Pennock (2008): 17, 20, 35.

“The Aztecs did not undertake the outright conquest of Tlaxcalan (or of their other xochiyaoyotl [Flower War] opponents) because they did not want to divert the necessary men and resources for a variety of reasons. The troops were needed elsewhere in the empire; to divert these for an all-out push against Tlaxcallan would have been risky.”²⁴⁰

Thus, the statements made by de Tapia and Tlacaelel still carry merit. Hassig’s analysis on the Flower Wars does not discredit the role that religion had in the Aztec society or on the battlefield, but he does not give it the sufficient credit, as it is not his focus. Pennock’s view on the matter is similar to my own, placing the significance of the *du ut des* relationship between the gods and the Aztecs at the forefront.

²⁴⁰ Hassig (1988): 246.

Conclusion

Reaching a fulfilling conclusion on a topic as elusive as the Flower Wars is a hard task, as is seen by the multiple motivations provided in the section above. However, on the basis of my analysis, I suggest a pseudo-hierarchical system to explain the rationale for the Flower Wars. The Aztec belief system, and by extension, their gods are placed in the top of this system. From the humble beginnings of the Aztec society, utmost respect was placed on the gods. Nanahuatzin and Tecuciztecatl had sacrificed themselves in order for the world to survive, and the humans to live. Huitzilopochtli had taken it upon himself to lead the Aztecs from Aztlan to Lake Texcoco where the Aztecs would construct Tenochtitlan. The importance of these events was not lost on the Aztecs or their huey tlatoani, and as such, it would spread to every aspect of the culture in one form or another. As such, the ramifications of acquiring captives in warfare was particularly important, both in conventional warfare, but also outside war season in the Flower Wars. The warrior caste of the Aztecs understood this, willingly seeking the flowery death in Flower Wars, in the chance to procure captives, honouring the gods and thus successfully upholding the *du ut des* relationship. Beneath the religious incentives, we see the hierarchical system of progression that was put in place for the warriors. The young warriors, would from the day they entered the calmecac or telpochcalli, be made aware of the significance of procuring captives in battle. This would not only honour the gods, drawing their eyes to the warriors, it would also yield personal glory and advancing to higher levels of social and military status. Lastly, is the materialistic and militaristically advantages that could be gained through the Flower Wars. This would not only serve the Aztec empire's sphere of influence, but also create a seemingly never-ending loop that would serve the gods, the warrior caste, and the Aztec empire, thus upholding the cosmic survival and the world inhabited by the Aztecs.

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