
Nourishing Gods: Birth and Personhood in Highland Mexican Codices

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Humans define themselves through personhood as agents in society. To become persons, children differentiate their self from others. They take, as George Mead (1934) says, the other and self-objectify by predicating a sign-image or trope upon themselves. Birth rituals realize these tropes with the child's body as tool and raw material. Birth almanacs in Highland Mexican codices depict, as I argue, the transformation of a child into a person. Patron gods pierce the child, display it, manipulate its umbilical cord and nurse it. Gods provide the child with vital life forces while the child and future adult nourishes the gods through sacrifice. The birth almanacs situate Aztec personhood in a covenant of humans with gods. As children mature, bodily changes metonymically express the metaphoric relationship of the children with their patron gods. In the bathing ceremony, fellow humans — especially the child's parents and the midwife — step into the roles of the patron gods and perform the above activities on the child. Aztec children other themselves in gods through ritual practices. By connecting the ideology and practice of personhood, the birth almanacs are a theory of social action.

Tlapitzalli tlamamalli tlapetlaualli ('Blown, drilled, polished'), begins the proverb in Andrés de Olmos's Nahuatl grammar from 1547. It continues, *in opitzaloc in omamalihuac in opetlualoc* ('What was blown, what was drilled, what was polished'), before revealing: *In otlachialtiloc iuhqui inteocuitla cozcatl* ('What was awaited: it was the divine jewel') — a newborn child in the eyes and words of the Aztecs (my translation after Maxwell & Hanson 1992, 83, 172).¹ This proverb compares the birth of a child to the transformation of a rock into a gem.

For the Aztecs, biological birth creates a body devoid of essential human characteristics. I argue that the birth almanacs in Highland Mexican codices depict the gradual process through which a child becomes a person (Fig. 1). Social birth requires 'shaping and polishing'. The birth almanacs show how gods pierce a child, how they display it, how they manipulate its umbilical cord and how they nurse it. Patron gods transform a child into a socially and morally responsible human being. Aztec personhood rests on the intimate relationship between humans and gods.

Defining personhood

A person has free will, meaning that a person can act even against external constraints. 'If we choose to remain at rest, we may,' says philosopher David Hume (1894 [1777], 95). 'If we choose to move, we also may.' A person is aware of the surroundings and acts accordingly. Further, a person reacts by considering personal behaviour and the behaviour of others. Reflective self-evaluation enables a person to claim rights and fulfil obligations in society. Acting and being acted upon links a person to others; practices constitute social relations and, in turn, form the actors who engage in them. For example, in Gawan gift-giving the host provides food to his overseas visitor and hopes to receive a comparable gift from him in the future (Munn 1986). The exchange requires mutual but often tacit consent about the two dimensions of personhood: rights and duties, which imply the status of participants, and the social other to which they apply (Fortes 1973, 287; Goodenough 1965, 3, 7; Linton 1936, 113). Here, observable behaviours rather than

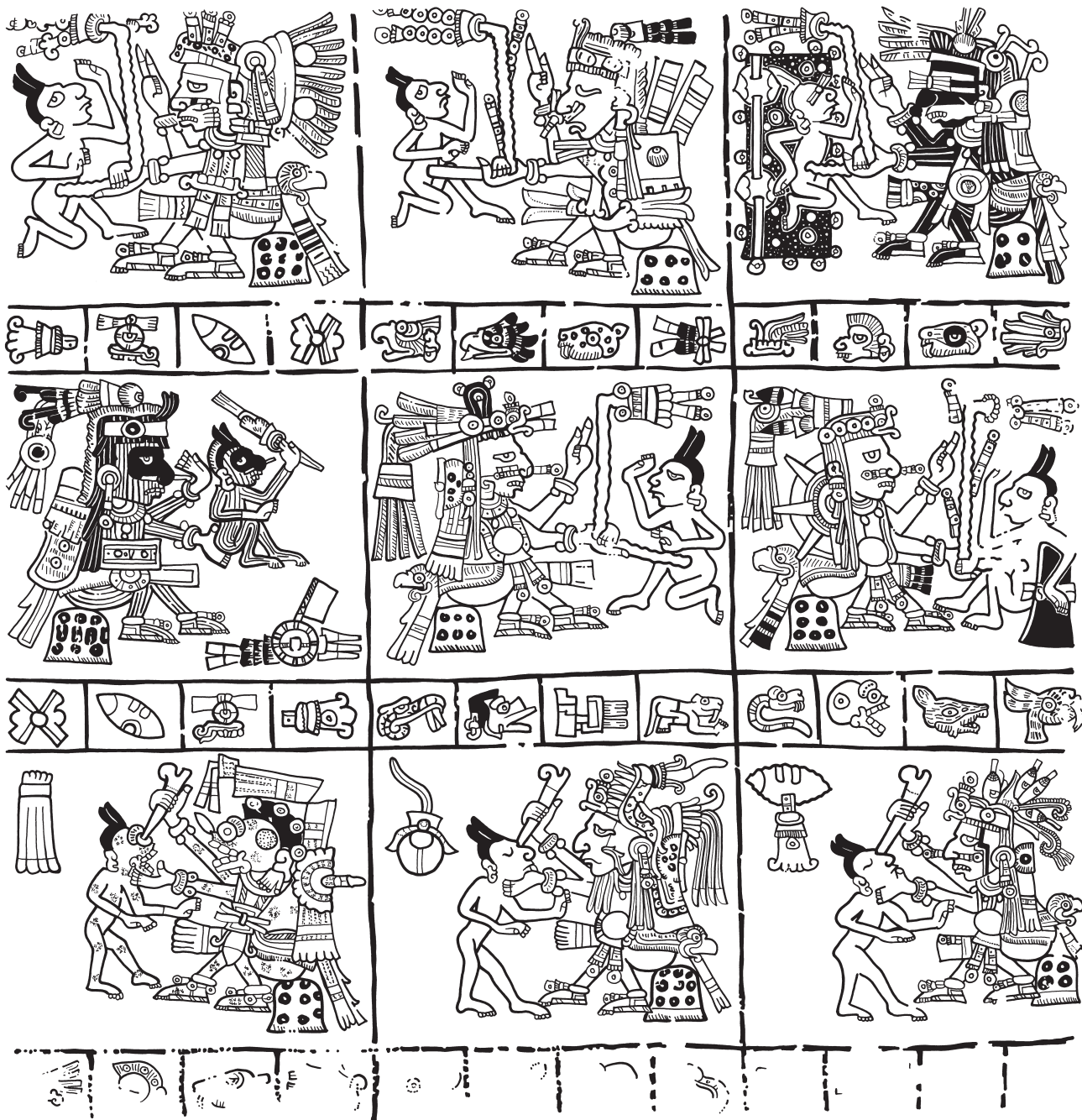


Figure 1. The birth almanac on Codex Borgia page 15. This page is part of the three-page-long birth almanac that reads as a boustrophedon, starting on this page at the lower right (see top of Fig. 4 for reading order and Figs. 7a–10a for the complete almanac). The three cells at the bottom belong to the almanacs' first section in which patron gods pierce the child (Table 1 identifies the individual gods); the second section — the presentation of the child — ends in the left cell of the middle row while the remaining five cells show the third section in which patron gods handle the child's umbilical cord (drawing by the author).

essential characteristics define personhood (Frankfurt 1971; Giddens 1984; Touraine 1977; for a critique see Taylor 1985, 97–114; for anthropological discussions see Fowler 2004 and Harris 1989).

Personhood is exclusive. Cultures differ widely as to whom personhood is ascribed and how biological body, human individual and person overlap (Csordas 1994, 5; Leenhardt 1979, 153–69). Ancient Roman slaves were legally things and not *personae*; they could not marry or own property (Berger 1953, 628; Shumway 1901; also Fortes 1973, 304; Kan 1989, 64). In other cultures things can be persons. *Vinik* ('person') included animals among Colonial Tzotzil Maya and statues made of the ashes of nobles among Colonial Kaqchikel Maya (Monaghan 1998, 137 n. 1). Many people treat domestic pets as persons, assigning them human names and ascribing human emotions or qualities to them. Personhood can be understood even more broadly. If a Christian says 'God wants me to do this' and proceeds to act upon this belief, he or she is responding socially to an immaterial entity. Personhood involves, in other words, the ability to elicit a response and to be a social other (Gell 1998, 17–19; Mead 1934, 154 n. 7).

Personhood is dynamic. Individuals can gain or lose their personhood. For example, Christian baptism incorporates individuals into the community of believers (Zizioulas 1985, 113). Severe sicknesses, on the other hand, impede a person's ability to act and to react. Comatose patients, and especially those in persistent vegetative states, pose moral dilemmas regarding their personhood (e.g. Martensen 2008). Personhood changes are especially evident among children who become persons by learning to identify themselves as subjects (Aijmer 1992; Fortes 1973, 296; Poole 1981, 136–9). This requires them to take the perspective of the other and to self-objectify (Mead 1934; Schütz 1967). Children's games exemplify this learning process. In the Spanish children's game *Lobos* ('Wolves'), one boy plays a hunter while other boys are his horse or wolves (Fernandez 1986, 33–5). The mounted hunter drives the wolves through village streets. The boys switch roles as part of the game and learn in this way to differentiate between self and other. Biological birth brings forth a human being; social birth is the process of becoming a person.

As persons, individuals occupy roles in society (Durkheim 1982, 39–40; Mauss 1938; 1985; Radcliffe-Brown 1965, 193). In the Durkheimian tradition, society is a staged play with a limited number of fixed roles (Durkheim 1982, 53; Mauss 1985, 4). Mauss distils from Pueblo Indian rituals the 'characters' or *personnages* who act out 'the prefigured totality of the life of the clan' (Mauss 1985, 5; also Boas 1966,

50; Gillespie 2001, 81–5; Houston & McAnany 2003, 30–32). Here I adopt the emphasis of more recent social theories that societies not only constrain but also enable social action (Giddens 1984, 41–92). As knowledgeable actors, individuals contest, negotiate and transform their social roles (Harrison 1985, 128; Leach 1962, 133; Willis 1977, 175).

Individuals hold different visions about personhood, as the discussion of pets as persons exemplifies; their behaviour expresses personal convictions and broadcasts them publicly (for example, others see and reflect on how people treat their pets). Social interaction allows individuals to define what personhood means and to arrive at an intersubjective agreement (Mead 1964, 142; Strathern 1992, 21). When society negotiates competing concepts of personhood, though, powerful institutions and individuals exert their influence (Conklin & Morgan 1996, 658). For example, lay-people submit to doctors to assess comatose patients in modern Western cultures (e.g. Martensen 2008) while during the Aztec bathing ceremony (see below), parents ask diviners to foretell the newborn's destiny in life. The culture-specific definition of personhood is, in other words, not natural but the outcome of authorizing processes in society.

Becoming a person

Children turn into members of society through birth rituals. Traditionally, the latter are seen as rites of passage that guide children to their future social roles through separation, transition and incorporation (van Genep 1909, 71–92; 1960, 50–64; Turner 1967, 93–111; also Turnbull 1983, 23–77). In this model, society is balanced and its members move in predictable ways from one social role to the next. The rite-of-passage model privileges the outside observer and the cyclical nature of birth rituals.

In keeping with my agent-based definition of personhood, I take a phenomenological approach. Instead of assuming assured outcomes, I emphasize the process of becoming a person. Potentiality then forms the key aspect of birth rituals. Individuals plan their actions but they may not achieve the desired outcome (Schütz 1967, 59–61). As Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 4–9) shows in his analysis of gift exchange, social action is context-dependent and irreversible. Birth rituals foreground the context of social action and induce self-consciousness in participants (Bateson 1955). 'They provoke people', Webb Keane (1997, 17) observes, 'to be aware of rules to be followed (and thus of the repeatability of past acts), of behavior to avoid (and thus of possible consequences), and of the disjunction between representation and represented'.

Participants, spatial setting and ritual practices define a formal frame and set up a tension between what is included and what is excluded. While being anchored in the present, birth rituals anticipate children's future roles and relationships.

Sign images or tropes express the differentiation of the children's self from others. 'In the growth of human identity', James Fernandez (1986, 35) asserts, 'the inchoate pronouns of social life — the "I", "you", "he", "it" — gain identity by predicating some sign-image, some metaphor upon themselves'. Metaphors and other tropes are a strategy to reveal dormant potentialities (Fernandez 1986, 8–11; also Ricœur 1977, 43). For example, Christian baptism makes a child a member of the church and incorporates it into the 'living body of Christ' (1 Corinthians 12:12–14). To become part of the 'we' of the Christian community, the child has to emerge as an 'I'. The phrase 'living body of Christ' combines metaphor and metonymy. It links the child to Christ (a metaphor) and it expresses the relationship in bodily terms (a metonymy). A metaphor relates elements from separate semantic fields and a metonymy elements of the same domain. In the context of birth rituals, tropes like 'the living body of Christ' reflect the emergence of self and other.

Ritual practices realize tropes. Among the Yaka in southwestern Zaire, a diviner-to-be embodies a water shrew (Devisch 1993, 44). Its keen sense of smell allows the water shrew, which maintains a hole with one entrance under and another above water, to hunt fish and insects at night. In trance, the diviner digs a tunnel with his bare hands and crawls through it; his reappearance concludes his initiation into the *ngoombu* cult. The underground journey serves as a metaphor for death and rebirth while also metonymically providing the diviner with the shrew's keen sense of smell. Through olfactory, visual, tactile and verbal stimuli, rituals create multilayered experiences and draw new fields of meaning together. In this way rituals represent the meaning of tropes and endow them with new meaning (Devisch 1993, 43).

Concrete bodily experience constrains which tropes are expressed and how they are enacted (Johnson 1987, xv). Similar to the patient's body in Yaka healing rituals, the child's body is tool and raw material in birth rituals. The Aztecs, whose concept of personhood I examine below, compared a child to a rock that needs to be blown, drilled and polished to become a gem (Maxwell & Hanson 1992, 83, 172). For modern Huicholes in northern Mexico whose language relates to the Aztecs's Nahuatl, children are born without the essential characteristics of human beings. They are flesh and nothing but empty shell (Furst & Nahmad 1972, 16–17). The supreme god Tatéi

Niwetúkame animates children by supplying life, soul and conscience. This in turn allows the children to become morally responsible human beings or complete Huicholes. Two processes intersect in children. Biologically, they mature as they grow up; socially, they become persons. The social and the physical body imply each other (Csordas 1994; Strathern 1992; Turner 1995). Social categories constrain how the physical body is perceived while physical experience sustains a particular view of society (Douglas 1996, 69). Birth rituals embed and embody the biological and social maturation of children.

Aztec personhood

Among the Aztecs in Highland Mexico, personhood rests on the possession of a destiny (Monaghan 1998). The corresponding Aztec term *tonalli* refers literally to a life force or soul. *Tonalli* comes from *tōna* 'to be warm, for the sun to shine' and provides vital energy not only for humans but also for animals, plants and objects such as mountains (Furst 1995, 63–130; Karttunen 1983, 245). This life force is not constant. Newborns have a weak *tonalli* and birth rituals are necessary to strengthen it. The amount and composition of *tonalli* also depends on the day on which they are born and dictates who they are and who they will be, that is, their destiny.

The count of twenty days (*cempohualli* or 'one count') is the fundamental Aztec calendar (Boone 2007, 13–18). According to Aztec cosmogonies, its appearance enabled the dawn of time and space and ordered the creation of the world (Boone 2007, 181, 183; Garibay Kintana 1979, 24–6). The *cempohualli* consists of twenty day signs that begin with Cipactli or Crocodile and end with Xochitl or Flower (Boone 2007, 36–8). Each day sign signalled a specific destiny. For example, a child born on the day sign Water could expect a life of comfort but also loss:

For he who was born on it, so it was said, would prosper. All his wealth would come easily. He would be successful in gaining a living. But, on the other hand, quickly would vanish that which had come to him. Like water it would pass away — as if carried off by the river, as if engulfed by the water (Sahagún 1950–82, book 4, 19).

The destiny of individuals was not fixed. Its bearer had to cultivate positive prognostications and could remedy bad ones. For example, if their child was born on a bad day, parents were advised to conduct the birth rituals on a good day to improve the child's fortunes (Sahagún 1950–82, book 4, 113). On the other hand, laziness kept those who were born on an auspicious day from realizing the promised fame in

life (Sahagún 1950–82, book 4, 9). The Aztec notion of destiny emphasizes potential over finality.

Tonalli links personhood to calendar, human fate and life forces. The count of twenty days covers every possible birthday and thus anchors Aztecs in time and, through the daily course of the sun, also in space. It defines the shared spatiotemporal orientation that is the basis for social interaction. The twenty-day count distills the emotional, intellectual and psychological characteristics of humans into a set of twenty social identities and personality types. The calendar serves as a social charter (Monaghan 1998, 140, 144).

The Aztec bathing ceremony

After the birth of their child, the parents called soothsayers (*tlapouhque*, ‘counters of something’) or diviners (*tonalpouhque*, ‘counters of day signs’) with their books. They told them when the child had been born and asked them to read the child’s destiny (Fig. 2): ‘And then [the diviners] looked at their books; there they saw the sort of merit of the baby, perhaps good, or perhaps not, according as was the mandate of the day sign on which he was born’ (Sahagún 1950–82, book 6, 197). The diviners then determined when the newborn was to be bathed. They selected an auspicious day up to four days after the birth (Clavijero 1971, 18; Hernández 1945, 18; Motolinía 1996, 163; Pomar 1975, 27; Sahagún 1950–82, book 4, 131, book 6, 198; Serna 1953, 77, 251; Torquemada 1943–44, book 2, 450). A midwife conducted the bathing ceremony (Fig. 3). The child received tools or weapons and a name (see below). The midwife also bathed the child and poured water on it.

The Aztec bathing ceremony fascinated Spanish chroniclers in its resemblance to Christian baptism (Burrus 1973 and Warren 1973 describe the chroniclers and how their accounts relate to each other). In the 1540s, Motolinía (1969, 30; 1996, 163) was the first to write about the bathing ceremony. Slightly later, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún gathered an extensive description for the Florentine Codex (1950–82, books 6 and 10). Francisco Hernández (1945, 18–21) and Juan de Torquemada (1943–44, vol. 2, 445–51) borrowed from him. Sahagún’s contemporary Fray Diego Durán (1971, 423–4) left an account of the bathing ceremony that echoes in the writings of José de Acosta (1977, book 1, 373–4) and Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas (1934–57, book VI, 236). Gerónimo de Mendieta (1945, 117), Pedro de Ponce (1953, 373), Jacinto de la Serna (1953, 77), and Francisco Clavijero (1971, 193–5) left additional and largely independent descriptions.



Figure 2. For a child born on the day 10 Rabbit, the diviner, reads its destiny in his book and predicts riches (represented by feathers and jade on the mat; after Litterscheid 1985, 88).

These Colonial accounts are the principal sources on the Aztec bathing ceremony. I make two qualifications. While the outlines of the ceremony coincide, details often vary. For example, Diego Durán, but not Bernardino de Sahagún, mentions that priests prick newborns to let blood. References to specific local customs reveal regional variations of the bathing ceremony (e.g. Toluca, in Ponce 1953, 373). The accounts also date from the conquest to Late Colonial times, that is, from the early sixteenth to the eighteenth century. Thus, the Aztec bathing ceremony was not uniform but varied regionally and over time.

Second, the Christian education of the authors shines through in their accounts. Motolinía describes, for example, how Aztec parents addressed their newborn with the words: ‘You have come to suffer!’ and goes on to explain: ‘They conform with this greeting to the prophet [Job 5:7] who says *Homo nascitur ad lauorem et auis ad volatum* “The bird is born to fly, man to labour”’ (my translation after Motolinía 1996, 163).²

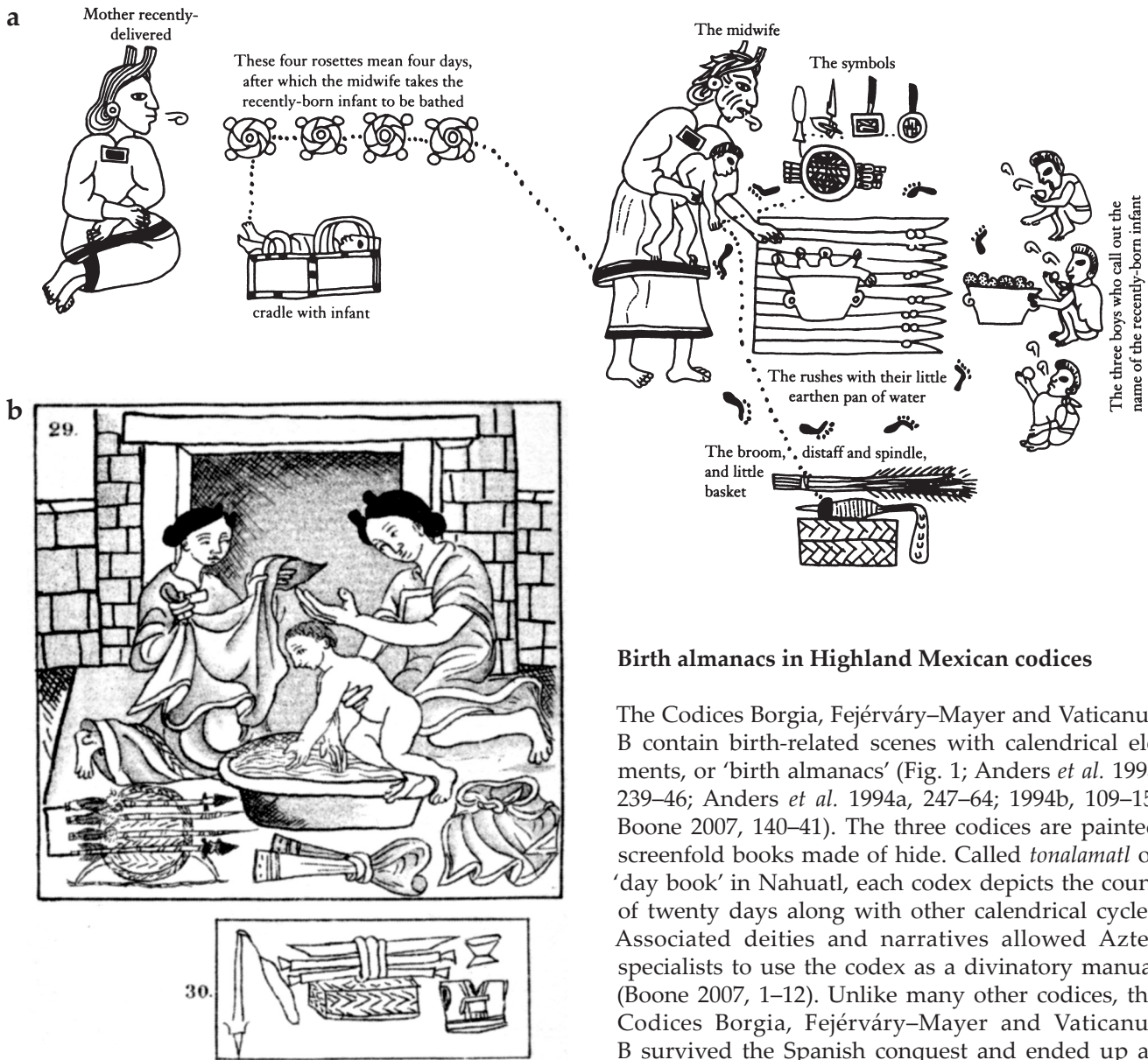


Figure 3. Birth ceremonies. a. A midwife bathes and names the newborn four days after its birth (*Codex Mendoza folio 57r* after Berdan & Anawalt 1997, vol. 4, 119); b. The bathing ceremony (*Sahagún 1950–82, book 6, ills. 29 & 30 from between pp. 160 & 161*).

Motolinía and other Colonial chroniclers understood what they were seeing through the lens of their Christian faith (e.g. Kellogg 1995, 107–8, n. 26; also Joyce 2000, 475). Spanish concepts also influenced even intimate Aztec beliefs (e.g. Knowlton 2010, 132–5). One therefore has to be careful about syncretism. For a native perspective on Aztec birth rituals, I turn to prehispanic codices.

Birth almanacs in Highland Mexican codices

The *Codices Borgia*, *Fejérváry–Mayer* and *Vaticanus B* contain birth-related scenes with calendrical elements, or ‘birth almanacs’ (Fig. 1; Anders *et al.* 1993, 239–46; Anders *et al.* 1994a, 247–64; 1994b, 109–15; Boone 2007, 140–41). The three codices are painted screenfold books made of hide. Called *tonalamatl* or ‘day book’ in Nahuatl, each codex depicts the count of twenty days along with other calendrical cycles. Associated deities and narratives allowed Aztec specialists to use the codex as a divinatory manual (Boone 2007, 1–12). Unlike many other codices, the *Codices Borgia*, *Fejérváry–Mayer* and *Vaticanus B* survived the Spanish conquest and ended up as curiosities in European collections. Their exact origin is unknown, but their shared style and iconography led art historians to assign them to the Borgia Group of pictorial manuscripts (Nicholson 2006). Painters in the greater Mixteca-Puebla-Tlaxcala region of central Mexico created them in prehispanic times (Boone 2006b; Jansen 2006a,b).

The three birth almanacs are closely related in style, structure and content.³ They are divided into four sections (Fig. 4). The first section shows the piercing of a child, the second its presentation, the third the handling of the umbilical cord, and the fourth the nursing of the child (Hagar 1911, 231; Seler 1898, 358–61). A count of twenty days covers every section with individual day signs below the corresponding images. Each section is divided into five cells (with

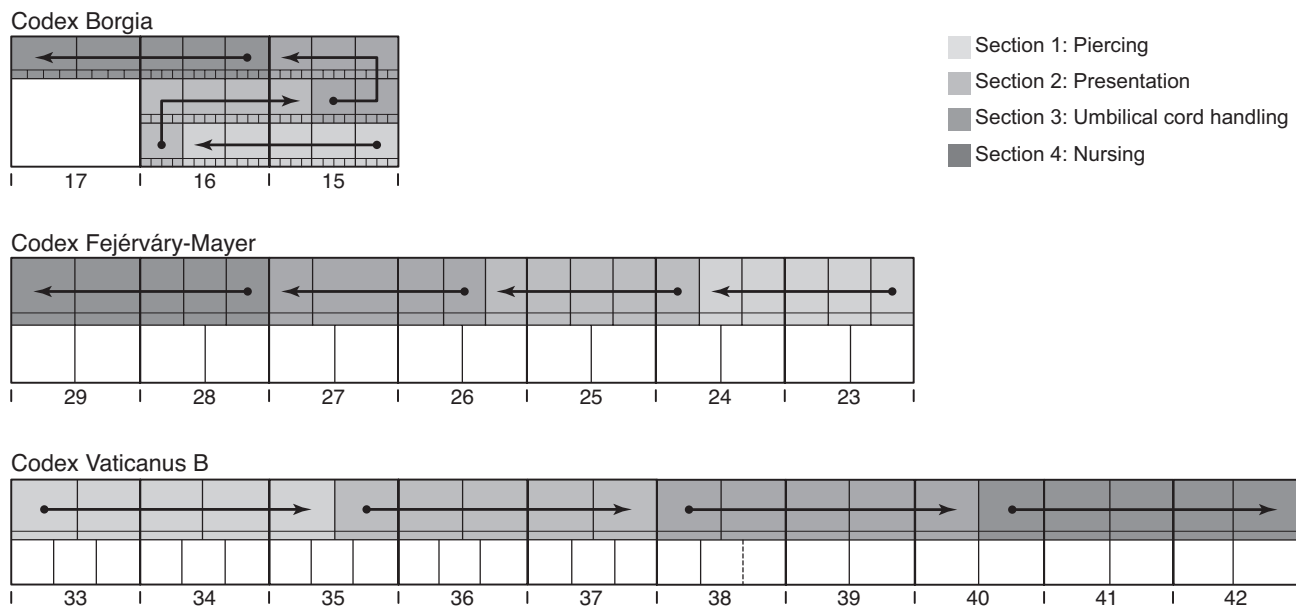


Figure 4. Schemata of the birth almanacs in the *Codices Borgia* (pages 15–17 top), *Fejérváry–Mayer* (pages 23a–29a), and *Vaticanus B* (pages 33a–42a; grey tones identify the four sections and arrows indicate the beginning, end, and reading direction of each section; diagram by the author).

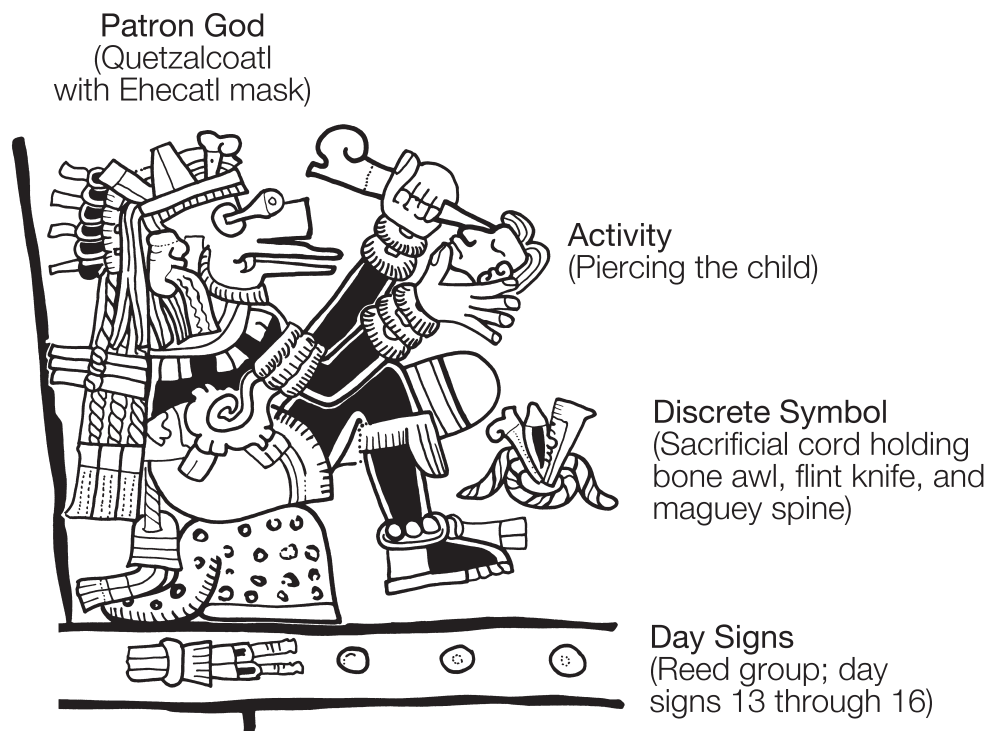


Figure 5. The different elements of a cell in the birth almanacs (example from *Codex Vaticanus B* 34a right; drawing and diagram by the author).

four day signs each) in which patron gods engage with the child (Fig. 5; I use numbers 1–5 to refer in the following to individual cells in a section). The visual format of the birth almanacs is sparse and mostly limited to the patron god and the child. Bone awls, spears, shields and other objects appear in some cells as discrete symbols but backgrounds are otherwise empty. In this way the almanacs contrast with the visually rich depictions of the bathing ceremony in the Codex Mendoza (Fig. 3a) and the Florentine Codex (Fig. 3b).

In 1899, José Fábrega compared the Codex Borgia almanac with the Aztec bathing ceremony and interpreted it as a representation of birth rituals (Fábrega Bustamante 1899, 94–101). Around the same time, Eduard Seler recognized the similarity between the almanacs in the Codices Borgia, Fejérváry–Mayer and Vaticanus B. However, he linked them to the Venus cycle and its guardian deities (Seler 1898, 361–2). Seler’s astral interpretation prevailed until Karl Nowotny (1961) stressed the prophetic and ritual character of the Borgia Group codices. Fábrega’s interpretation is now widely accepted (Anders *et al.* 1993, 239–46; Anders *et al.* 1994a, 247–64; 1994b, 109–15; Boone 2007, 140–41). Here I argue that the birth almanacs provide insights into the Aztec concepts of personhood. I analyse the codices based on Boone (2007) and interpret their symbolism principally with ethnohistoric sources, that is the Colonial chroniclers mentioned above and the Codex Mendoza (Berdan & Anawalt 1997, 145–52; Calnek 1992, 81–2). I refer in addition to ethnographies from the area where the Borgia Group codices originated (modern Nahuatl-speakers in Veracruz: Kelly 1955; and Oaxaca’s Chatino: Greenberg 1981) and from Uto-Aztecan speakers (the Huichol: Furst & Nahmad 1972; Zingg 1998; and the Tarahumares: Lumholtz 1973).

Divining a child’s destiny at birth

After birth, parents, elders, midwife and diviner set the newborn on its course for life. Aztec diviners interpreted the child’s birthday based on their day sign in the twenty-day count and other calendrical cycles. Each component had multiple meanings and associations that ranged from good to indifferent and evil (López Austin 1994, 28–9; Sahagún 1997, book 4, 131). Diviners studied the importance of, and links among, individual influences. They also considered the child’s milieu (Fig. 2). If born into a noble family, a child might become a ruler, while a commoner’s child could grow into a valiant warrior. Due to the manifold possibilities for interpretation, forecasts diverged so widely that Aztec diviners quarrelled among themselves about

the proper ways of interpreting the codex almanacs (Sahagún 1997, book 4, 132).

The birth almanacs list the twenty day signs in sets of four. The diviner consulted additional almanacs — especially those listing the thirteen numbers that combined with the day signs to form a date in the 260-day ritual calendar and the *trecena* or thirteen-day period in which the birthday fell — to identify the different forces that would pull the child into a particular direction in life. The birth almanacs therefore need to be understood in the context of the entire codex. The Codex Borgia birth almanac is placed near the beginning of the codex as the first specialized almanac after general almanacs devoted to the 260-day calendar, the patrons of the twenty day signs, and the nine lords of the night (see Boone 2007, 240–43). The birth almanac opens the verso side of Codex Fejérváry–Mayer. It is shown above and is followed by specialized almanacs (see Boone 2007, 244–6). Lastly, the birth almanac in the Codex Vaticanus B is towards the end of its recto side, above a marriage almanac and between the day sign patrons and a rain almanac (see Boone 2007, 249–52). The position of the birth almanac varies in the three codices but it tends to be at the beginning or is the first specialized almanac, reflecting the importance of birth and birth prognostication. The implicit links of birth almanacs to the rest of a codex are evident in the Vaticanus B where the birth almanac runs counter to the marriage almanac (Anders *et al.* 1993, 239). The diviner reads in a loop from marriage to birth, thus tracing the cycle of life and placing it in the cycle of times.

The divination of the child’s future rested on the twenty day signs, patron gods, activities and discrete symbols. These elements are shown differently and in sometimes complementary ways in the birth almanacs. For example, in the first section, where patron gods pierce the child, the Codex Borgia shows the child’s entire body and the Codex Vaticanus B only the child’s head (Fig. 7) while both alternate in the Codex Fejérváry–Mayer (Fig. 6a). Head and body substitute for each other. In the second section, patron gods hold up the child while holding flint knife and bone awl in one codex (Fig. 6b). The other two codices replace the hand-held objects with discrete symbols and show the sacrificial cord with flower, flint knife and bone awl in the background. These substitutions demonstrate that the different elements of a cell are conventionalized and relate to each other in structured ways. Many of them can be understood as tropes. The substitution of the head for the full body associates, for example, two related concepts similar to a metonymy. Replacing the umbilical cord for the sacrificial cord draws a similarity between two unrelated concepts as in a metaphor

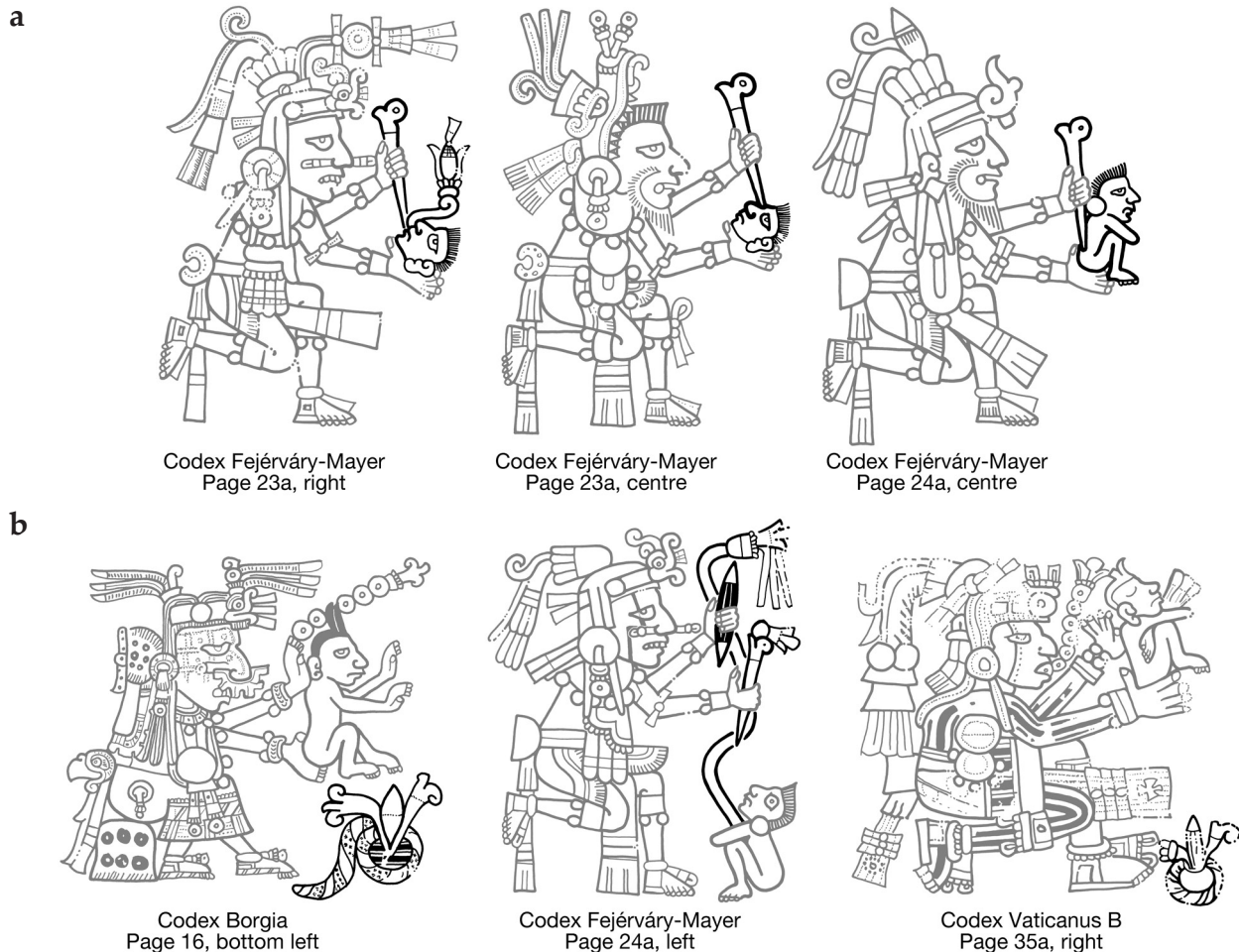


Figure 6. Substitutions and structured relationships in the birth almanacs (the Borgia and Fejérváry–Mayer drawings are mirrored; diagrams and drawings by the author); a. Patron gods pierce the child’s eye, mouth, or body (note that the child is reduced to its head in two examples); b. The sacrificial cord with flower, flint knife, and bone awl appears as a discrete symbol in the Codices Borgia and Vaticanus B; in the Fejérváry–Mayer, a umbilical cord substitutes for the sacrificial cord and Centeotl, the patron god, holds a flint knife and a bone awl with an attached flower (first cell of the second section of the birth almanacs: see Fig. 8; sacrificial cords normally contain a maguey spine instead of a flower, e.g. Fig. 7a4, c4).

(compare to King 1990 who discusses metaphors in Mixtec codices). Metonyms and metaphors are two fundamental aspects of human discourse (Grigg 2008, 151–69; Jakobson & Halle 1971, 90–96) and the birth almanacs represent these tropes visually. Highland Mexican codices are not picture books; they must be read and interpreted.

Patron gods

In the birth almanacs, the patron gods interact with children by piercing their eyes, by holding them up, by handling their umbilical cords and by nursing them. The deities differ on three levels: among the codices,

for the four activities, and for each set of four day signs (Table 1). The three codices feature the same patron gods in 15 of the 20 cells and in the other cases they often present related deities. For example, the first cell in Codex Borgia and Vaticanus B shows Centeotl, the god of maize, while in Codex Fejérváry–Mayer the first cell shows Xochipilli, the god of young corn.

Related patron gods preside over each set of four day signs (Table 1). For example, Mictlantecuhtli ‘Death Lord’ alternates with Mictlancihuatl ‘Death Lady’. In other cases, aspects of the same god appear. In the Reed group (day signs 13–16), Quetzalcoatl pierces the eye while Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli – Quetzalcoatl as the planet Venus – presents the child.

Table 1. Patron gods of the birth almanacs in the Codex Borgia (top row of each activity), Fejérváry–Mayer (middle row), and Vaticanus B (bottom row; deity classification after Anders et al. 1994b, 109–15; Anders et al. 1993, 240–46; 1994a, 253–64; Boone 2007, 143 table 11; Nowotny 1961, 208; roman numerals and letters indicate Nicholson’s deity cluster: see Table 2).

	Codex	Day signs 1–4 (Crocodile group)	Day signs 5–8 (Serpent group)	Day signs 9–12 (Water group)	Day signs 13–16 (Reed group)	Day signs 17–20 (Movement group)
1. Piercing	Borgia	Centeotl (IIB)	Cipactonal (IA)	Mictlantecuhtli (IIID)	Quetzalcoatl (with Ehecatl mask)	Macuilxochitl-Xochipilli (IIB)
	Fejérváry–Mayer	Xochipilli (IIB)	Cipactonal (IA)	Mictlantecuhtli (IIID)	Quetzalcoatl (with Ehecatl mask)	Tecciztecatl (IB)
	Vaticanus B	Centeotl (IIB)	Cipactonal (IA)	Mictlantecuhtli (IIID)	Quetzalcoatl (with Ehecatl mask)	Tonacatecuhtli (IA)
2. Presentation	Borgia	Xochiquetzal-Macuilxochitl (IIB)	Tlaloc (IIA)	Mictlantecuhtli (IIID)	Tlahuizcalpan-tecuhtli (IIIC)	Mixcoatl (IIIC)
	Fejérváry–Mayer	Centeotl (IIB)	Tlaloc (IIA)	Mictlantecuhtli (IIID)	Tlahuizcalpan-tecuhtli (IIIC)	Mixcoatl (IIIC)
	Vaticanus B	Xochipilli-Macuilxochitl (IIB)	Tlaloc (IIA)	Mictlantecuhtli (IIID)	Tlahuizcalpan-tecuhtli (IIIC)	Mixcoatl (IIIC)
3. Cord-handling	Borgia	Macuilxochitl (IIB)	Tonatiuh (IIIA)	Ixquimilli (IB)	Xipe Totec (IIE)	Macuiltonalequi (IIB)
	Fejérváry–Mayer	Xochipilli-Macuilxochitl (IIB)	Tonatiuh (IIIA)	Ixquimilli (IB)	Xipe Totec (IIE)	Tezcatlipoca (IB)
	Vaticanus B	Xochipilli (IIB)	Tonatiuh (IIIA)	Ixquimilli (IB)	Xipe Totec (IIE)	Macuiltonalequi (IIB)
4. Nursing	Borgia	Mayahuel (IIC)	Tlazolteotl (IID)	Mictlancihuatl (IIID)	Chalchiuhtlicue (IIA)	Xochiquetzal (IID)
	Fejérváry–Mayer	Mayahuel (IIC)	Tlazolteotl (IID)	Mictlancihuatl (IIID)	Chalchiuhtlicue (IIA)	Xochiquetzal (IID)
	Vaticanus B	Mayahuel (IIC)	Tlazolteotl (IID)	Mictlancihuatl (IIID)	Chalchiuhtlicue (IIA)	Xochiquetzal (IID)

Table 2. The Aztec gods of the birth almanacs grouped by deity cluster (roman numeral) and deity complex (capital letter; based on Nicholson 1971, table 3, only relevant clusters and complexes are shown; spellings based on Boone 2007).

Deity cluster and complex	Theme (corresponding birth almanac deity)
I. Celestial creativity–Divine paternalism	
A. Ometeotl Complex	Creation, primordial parents of gods and humans (Tonacatecuhtli, Cipactonal)
B. Tezcatlipoca Complex	Omnipotent universal power; feasting, revelry, justice, punishment (Tezcatlipoca, Tecciztecatl, Ixquimilli)
II. Rain–Moisture–Agricultural fertility	
A. Tlaloc Complex	Rain and water (Tlaloc, Chalchiuhtlicue)
B. Centeotl-Xochipilli Complex	Maize, solar warmth, flowers, feasting, pleasure (Centeotl, Xochipilli, Xochiquetzal, Macuilxochitl, Macuiltonalequi)
C. Ometochtli Complex	Fertility (Mayahuel)
D. Teteoinnan Complex	Birth, fertility, earth, lust (Tlazolteotl, Xochiquetzal)
E. Xipe Totec Complex	Agricultural fertility, flaying (Xipe Totec)
III. War–Sacrifice–Sanguinary nourishment of the sun and earth	
A. Tonatiuh Complex	Sun (Tonatiuh)
C. Mixcoatl-Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli Complex	War, sacrifice, Venus (Mixcoatl, Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli)
D. Mictlantecuhtli Complex	Death, underworld, darkness (Mictlantecuhtli, Mictlancihuatl)
Quetzalcoatl	Creativity, fertility, Venus, wind, priesthood (Quetzalcoatl)

Xochipilli ‘Flower Prince’ and Macuilxochitl ‘Five Flower,’ who are both associated with feasting, appear by themselves and in representations that conflate both deities. Some gods also overlap calendrically. Mayahuel, maguey goddess, is, for example, patron god in the Crocodile group together with Xochipilli and Centeotl; all three are also patron gods of the Grass *trecena*, that is the thirteen-day period that

begins with the day sign Grass (Boone 2007, 48). Henry Nicholson formalized these similarities and grouped the Aztec gods into three deity clusters and various complexes according to shared themes (Table 2; Nicholson 1971, 410–30). Of the twenty-one patron gods in the birth almanacs, five are creator deities (cluster I), ten relate to agricultural fertility (cluster II) and five call for sacrifice (cluster III; Quetzalcoatl

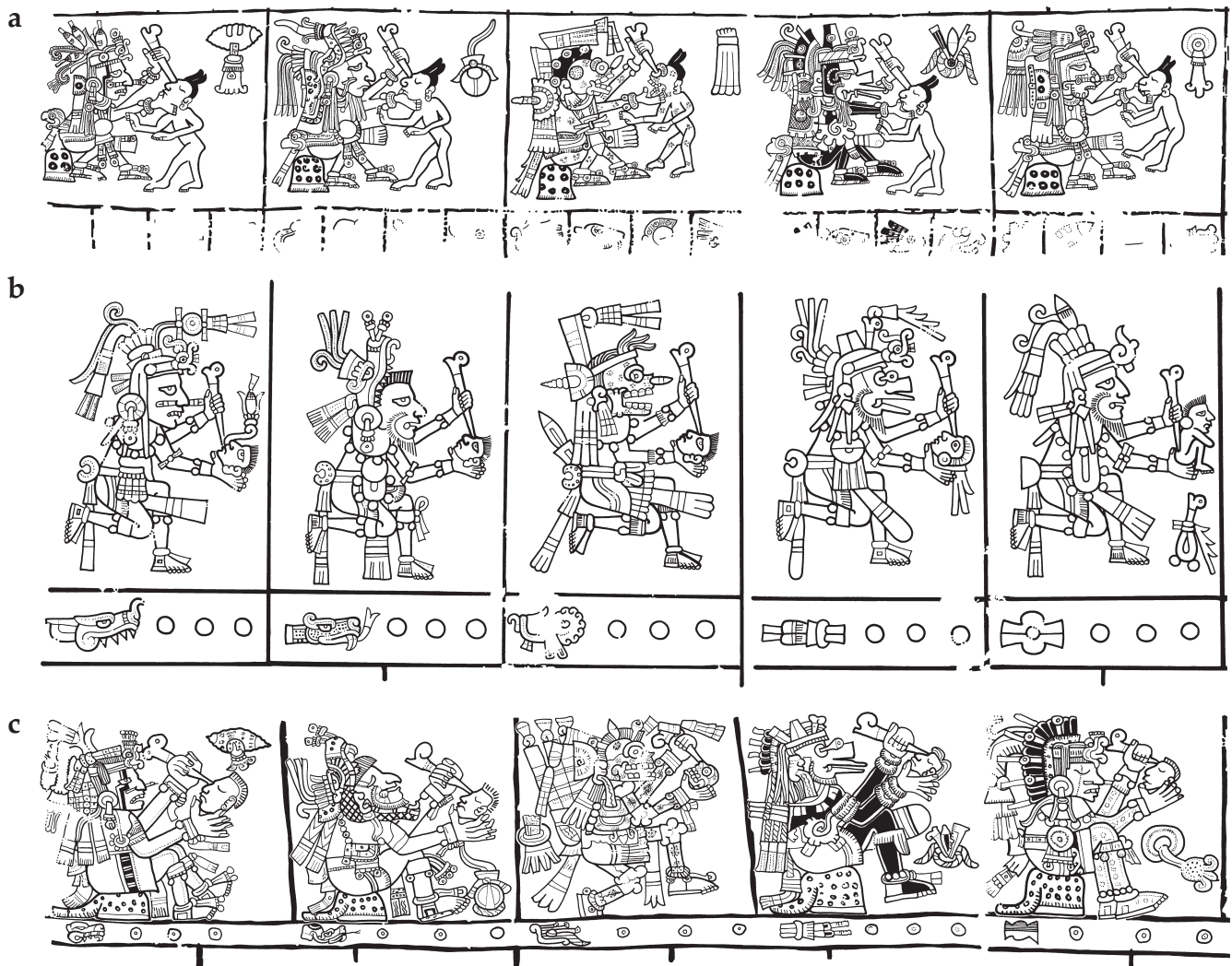


Figure 7. *The piercing of the child in the Codices Borgia (a), Fejérváry–Mayer (b), and Vaticanus B (c) (drawings by the author; to facilitate comparisons, each section was re-arranged into a left-to-right reading order; drawings were mirrored if necessary).*

who appears in all three clusters is the twenty-first deity). The Crocodile group (day signs 1–4) contains exclusively Cluster II deities who relate to flowers, pleasure and warmth within the overarching theme of fertility. Gods and goddesses of death and sacrifice hold sway over anyone born in the Water group (day signs 9–12).

Aztec soothsayers based their divination in part on the association of the child with specific deities. Patron gods who share deity classification and themes provide depth. For example, Centeotl, the god of maize but also feasting, pierces the eyes of children born during the Crocodile group (day signs 1–4). Flower gods and goddesses like Xochiquetzal and Macuilxochitl that associate with fertility, feast-

ing and the sun oversee their presentation and cord-cutting. As wet nurse in the last section, Mayahuel, goddess of the maguey plant that provides pulque and spines for bloodletting, hints at pleasure and sacrifice. The theme of fertility binds the patron gods of the Crocodile group together and extends to related aspects like flowering and pleasure. Other sets of day signs contain a contrasting cast of patron gods. In the Serpent group (day signs 5–8), the creator deity Cipactonal pierces, the storm god Tlaloc presents, the sun god Tonatiuh handles the cord, and the birth goddess Tlazolteotl nurses. Other almanacs expanded the possibilities even further. Who was god of the specific day sign and the numerical coefficient of a child's birthday? Which god presided over the

corresponding thirteen-day period or *trecena*? The soothsayer then explored the different deities for a unifying meaning.

The patron gods exemplify the tropic structure of the birth almanacs. Diviners identified the various patron gods for a child born on a specific day. Similar gods deepen the mantic or prophetic field like metonyms, while different gods widen it like metaphors. Together with activities and discrete symbols, the patron gods form the conceptual building blocks for divination. Through them, Aztec soothsayers traced forces invisible to the untrained eye. A child's fate emerged from their careful observations like a spider web glistening with dew in the dawn.

Piercing the child

The birth almanacs open with the unsettling scene of a god piercing the child with a bone awl, the tool of personal bloodletting (Fig. 7; Klein 1987; Seler 1890; 1960 [1902–23], book 1, 637). The children in the Vaticanus B and the Fejérváry–Mayer are reduced to their heads, the seat of the life force *tonalli*, while they are shown fully bodied in all other sections. Most patron gods pierce the child's eye that is not visible in the drawing (the exception is Fig. 7a3) while a few stab the child in the mouth, through the head, and in the back or buttock (Figs. 7b1, 4 & 5).

Insights into the meaning of this scene come from ethnohistoric descriptions of Huey Tozoztli, the fourth monthly feast of the Aztec ritual calendar, when parents brought their newborn children to the Great Temple of Huitzilopochtli. There, a priest 'took the child and with a stone blade brought by the mother made an incision in his ear and the bud of his virile member', if a baby boy, and in the ears of baby girls (Durán 1971, 423–4; also Acosta 1977 [1590], 373–4; Herrera y Tordesillas 1934–57, book VI, 236; Orozco y Berra 1985, 154). The cut was slight — 'so delicate that blood barely came to the surface' (Durán 1971, 424) — and alluded to future blood sacrifice. During new fire ceremonies, the ears of toddlers and children were cut and their blood spattered towards the fire (Sahagún 1950–82, book 7, 28). Children under twelve let blood from their ears, tongues and shins during Tozozontli, the third monthly feast (Durán 1971, 419), and as part of the Izcalli ritual (Joyce 2000, 477). In the piercing scene, the birth almanacs point to the blood sacrifices that were expected from every Aztec.

In the huehuetlatolli, the speeches given to the newborn, relatives, elders and midwives told the child that it descended from the heavens to earth where little but agony could be expected. They admonished, 'You came to endure pain. Suffer and

endure pain!' (Motolinía 1969, 30; also Motolinía 1996, 163; Sahagún 1950–82, book 6, 168, 171). The blood that squirts from the child in the fourth cell of the Fejérváry–Mayer dramatizes this exhortation (Fig. 7b4). The discrete symbols in this section reinforce the theme of sacrifice and pain. A sacrificial cord holds a maguey spine, a flint knife and a bone awl, the three tools for personal bloodletting (last cell in Fig. 7); flint knives are flowering because humans use them to draw their precious blood (cell 1 in Fig. 7a and c); rubber balls are shown because they are offerings made during self-sacrifice (cell 2 in Fig. 7a and b); blood splatters next to Mictlantecuhtli, the death lord (Fig. 7a3). For the Aztecs, suffering was the destiny of humankind (López Austin 1980, 275–80). However, pain was not an end to itself but necessary to achieve transformation. Aztecs understood piercing as an act of creation. As part of the cosmogony in the Codex Borgia, supernatural spirits pierce day signs to force them into existence (Boone 2006a; 2007, 181–3). Similarly, a flowering jewel (cell 5 in Fig. 7a and c) recalls the Aztec proverb that compares children to divine jewels who arrive raw and have to be 'blown, drilled, polished' into gems (Maxwell & Hanson 1992, 83; see also León 1949, §§146–8f.).

The third theme is seeing as the Aztec's principal sense to perceive reality and to understand. The eye was called a mirror (*tezcatli*): '[I]t illuminates one, it enlightens one, it leads one, it guides one, it sustains one' (Sahagún 1950–82, book 10, 103). A newborn child was not yet enlightened because its eyes often become sore and get clouded (Redfield 1928, 106). The Aztecs identified this condition as *Ixtlazolcocoliztli*, or 'cloud-in-the-eyes sickness', and had recipes on how to cure it (Cruz 1940, 268; Hernández 1888, 96; León 1910, 34). The child's physical condition represents its social status. To become a person, a child has to be able to see literally and metaphorically. The almanacs express this transformation visually. With the exception of the Fejérváry–Mayer, the children's eyes are shown closed in the first section and they are wide open in the subsequent sections. The metaphorical implications are evident in a scene in which Xochipilli pierces the child's mouth and produces a flowery speech scroll (Fig. 7b1). The god enables the child to speak properly. Newborn children await a world full of sadness and sacrifice but pain also initiates change. Piercing transforms children into human beings who can be enlightened.

Presenting the child

In the second section of the birth almanacs, the patron god holds up the child (Fig. 8). In most cells, the children are no longer naked but hold artefacts and take

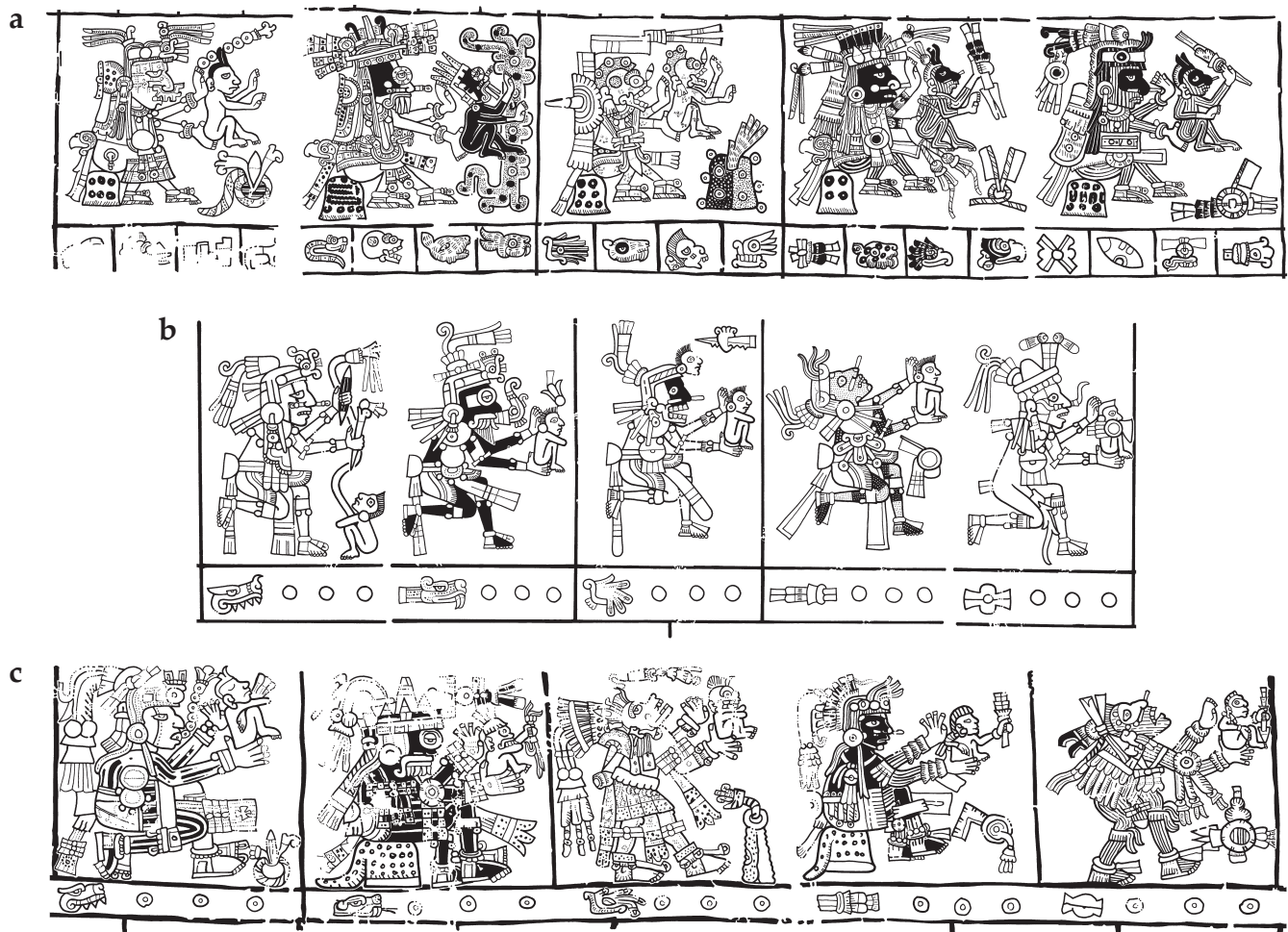


Figure 8. The presentation of the child in the Codices Borgia (a), Fejérváry-Mayer (b), and Vaticanus B (c) (drawings by the author; to facilitate comparisons, each section was re-arranged into a left-to-right reading order; drawings were mirrored if necessary).

on characteristics of their patron god. The artefacts recall the bathing ceremony during which baby boys received miniature bows, arrows and shields to indicate that they were to become warriors, while baby girls received spinning whorls, battens and brooms as symbols of typical female activities (Fig. 3). The Codex Mendoza (Fig. 3a) adds the tools of representative occupations — the awl of the carpenter, the obsidian knife of featherworker, the brush of the scribe and the tool of the goldsmith — to outline alternative life paths. In addition to the tools and implements, the child also received gender-specific clothing and food offerings (Sahagún 1950–82, book 6, 201). The birth almanacs show either weapons and other features of the warrior outfit or sacrificial items in the children's hands or as discrete symbols. Female tools are notably absent. The weaponry appears with Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli, a Quetzalcoatl deity who shoots darts, and Mixcoatl,

god of the hunt (cells 4 and 5 in Fig. 8). The maize- and feasting-related deities in the first cell are associated with flint, bone awl and sacrificial cord. Unlike the gendered and professional gifts given to children in the bathing ceremony, the birth almanacs emphasize the theme of sacrifice — professionally as warrior and through personal bloodletting — and point again to sacrifice as the destiny of human beings.

The bathing ceremony began at dawn. When the sun was about to appear on the horizon, the midwife took the newborn to the middle of the courtyard (Fig. 3). Scooping up water from a jar or basin, the midwife gave the baby some water to drink and sprinkled water on its chest and on the crown of its head. She then washed the baby completely and declared that it had become clean and was born again (Sahagún 1950–82, book 6, 202). The midwife proceeded to raise the newborn skyward and offered it first to creator

deities, then to water goddesses, thirdly to heavenly deities in general and lastly to the sun god, Tonatiuh. She asked the deities every time to accept the newborn as an offering, to raise it so that it would live up to expectations, and to inspire the child: 'Whatsoever is your spirit, give it to him' (Sahagún 1950–82, book 6, 202, 203; also Hernández 1945, 19). The midwife then asked the parents what name should be given and bestowed the name on the child. A fire kept burning throughout the bathing ceremony and the midwife passed the newborn four times over the flames (Ponce 1953, 373; Serna 1953, 77). Finally, the child was brought back into the house while young children were sent out to spread the name of the newborn in the neighbourhood (shown at the right edge of Fig. 3a; Sahagún 1950–82, book 4, 113).

The patron god rather than the midwife plays the central role in the second section of the birth almanacs. The child receives weapons or implements related to the patron god and it takes on divine attributes. Tlaloc bestows his fanged mouth, Mictlantecuhtli his skeletal appearance, and Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli and Mixcoatl their black eye-mask and striped body. By replicating the god, the child becomes its *ixiptla*, or image, and impersonates him (Hvidtfeldt 1958). The deity impersonation in the birth almanacs complements the better-known Aztec custom of cladding sacrificial victims like the deity to whom they were subsequently offered (Smith 2003, 217–18). In the birth context, deities supplied the newborn with vital animistic forces. Tonatiuh, the sun god, provided *tonalli*, the 'heat of life' and the midwife correspondingly passes the child over a fire. The Aztecs therefore called the bathing ceremony *itleuh quiçaz in piltzintli*, or 'fire emerges from the child' (Ponce 1953, 373) and *Ceremonia de Tlecuixtliztli* 'the child passes through the fire' (Serna 1953, 77). This concept of animation reverberates among modern Tarahumares where the shaman 'may, too, anoint the child with the fat of the rattlesnake mixed with herbs, and leave it in the sun, that the life may enter its heart' (Lumholtz 1973, 272).

In various Mesoamerican cultures, the newborn is held up to the sky so that the gods can see and acknowledge it (Greenberg 1981, 100; Hernández Cuellar 1982, 52–3; Lumholtz 1973, 273). Modern Huichol tell the story of TumuSaúwi, the first human, who fathers a child who becomes sick (Zingg 1998, 178). Komatéame, the midwife, tells TumuSaúwi to present his son to the Great Gods because as soon as the gods know his son personally, they would be soft and cure him. The presentation of the child sets up a reciprocal exchange between humans and gods (Monaghan 2000, 36–9).

Grasping the umbilical cord

In the third section, the patron gods grasp the umbilical cord of the child with one hand (Fig. 9), while they admonish the child with the other hand (esp. in the Borgia) or they wield flint knife, axe or rattle-staff (esp. in the Fejérváry–Mayer: Fig. 9b1–3, c5).⁴ The children of Tonatiuh lean against the sacrificial stone or undergo heart sacrifice (second cell in Fig. 9).

The Aztecs saw birth as a battle. The midwife compared the mother after successful delivery to a warrior: 'Thou hast returned exhausted from battle, my beloved maiden, brave woman; be welcome' (Sahagún 1950–82, book 6, 179). Just like a warrior who leads his captive home and then to sacrifice by the sacrificial cord, a mother holds onto her child through the umbilical cord. In the birth almanacs, the sacrificial cord substitutes for the umbilical cord (first cell of Fig. 8). Tezcatlipoca also holds the umbilical cord in one hand and the sacrificial rope slung around the neck of the newborn in the other (Fig. 9b5). The substitution of the cords establishes a metaphor that expands the theme of sacrifice to war and capture.

The umbilical cord connected the newborn not only to its mother but also to the gods. The midwife said to the newborn when she cut the umbilical cord, 'And this which is lifted from thy side, which cometh from thy middle, I take from thee: the gift, the property of Tlaltecutili [Earth Lord], Tonatiuh [Sun]' (Sahagún 1950–82, book 6, 172). In the third section, all umbilical cords point skywards and end in flowers or an attribute of the patron god. It can be a flower as the symbol of Xochipilli, 'the flower prince' (Fig. 9b1) or the sun as symbol of Tonatiuh (Fig. 9b2). In the third cell, the umbilical cord connects to the night sky as a hint at patron god Ixquimilli, god of punishment, misery and coldness. The umbilical cord links newborn and patron deity and manifests the mutual dependency of humans and gods metonymically. Several children also take on attributes of the patron god. For example, knots cover the face of Ixquimilli and its child in the Borgia (Fig. 9a3) and Tezcatlipoca who is associated with the night sky holds a dark-skinned child (Fig. 9b5).

According to colonial descriptions of the bathing ceremony, the umbilical cord indicated the newborn's professional destiny. The umbilical cord of a baby boy was buried near a battlefield to ensure that he would become a successful warrior while that of baby girl was buried beneath the hearth to indicate her future as mother at home (Sahagún 1950–82, book 5, 186). The birth almanacs, on the other hand, employ the umbilical cord to emphasize the relationship between child and patron god. The god nourishes the child and

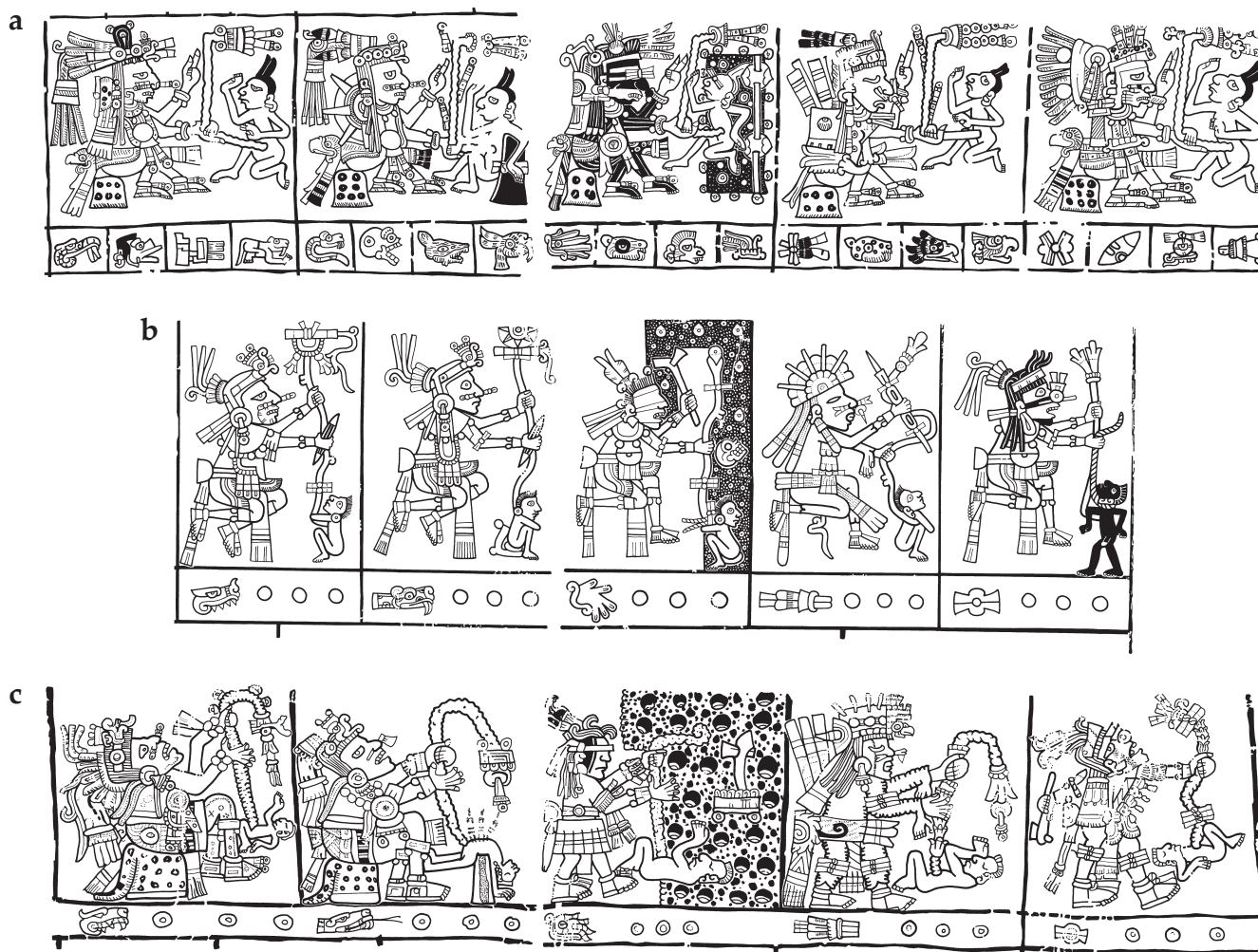


Figure 9. The handling of the child's umbilical cord in the Codices Borgia (a), Fejérváry-Mayer (b), and Vaticanus B (c) (drawings by the author; to facilitate comparisons, each section was re-arranged into a left-to-right reading order; drawings were mirrored if necessary).

provides him or her with his attributes while the child nourishes the god through sacrifice to fulfil the obligation that '[t]hou shalt give drink, nourishment, food to the sun [Tonatiuh], the lord of the earth' (Sahagún 1950–82, book 6, 171). Vestiges of this belief survive in the birth rituals among modern Chatino (Greenberg 1981, 99). There, the umbilical cord is buried to 'plant' the child and to establish its ritual matrix for the journey through life.

Nursing the child

In the last section of the birth almanacs, female deities offer their breasts to infants (Fig. 10). Unlike the other goddesses who nurse their child, Mictlancihuatl, Lady of the Underworld, devours hers (third cell in Fig. 10) while Tlazolteotl, the goddess of filth and childbirth,

holds her infant captive with a serpent slung around the neck (Fig. 10b2). Mayahuel, the goddess of the maguey plant, nurses a fish instead of an infant (Fig. 10a1 and c1). This image relates to the five ages of Aztec cosmogony. The first of the five ages ended with a great flood, and only those beings whom gods transformed into *tlācamichin*, or 'fish-people' survived (e.g. Codex Vaticanus A folio 4v; Anders *et al.* 1996, 55–61). The fish in the first cell of the birth almanacs alludes to these 'fish-people' and to the necessity of divine intervention for survival (Fábrega Bustamante 1899, 99–100).

The discrete symbols — blood, flint knives, speared hearts and axes with sacrificial cords — reiterate the theme of sacrifice. Flowering plants in the Fejérváry-Mayer bring out the theme of growth (Fig. 10b4 and 5). Since they are potted plants, they rely

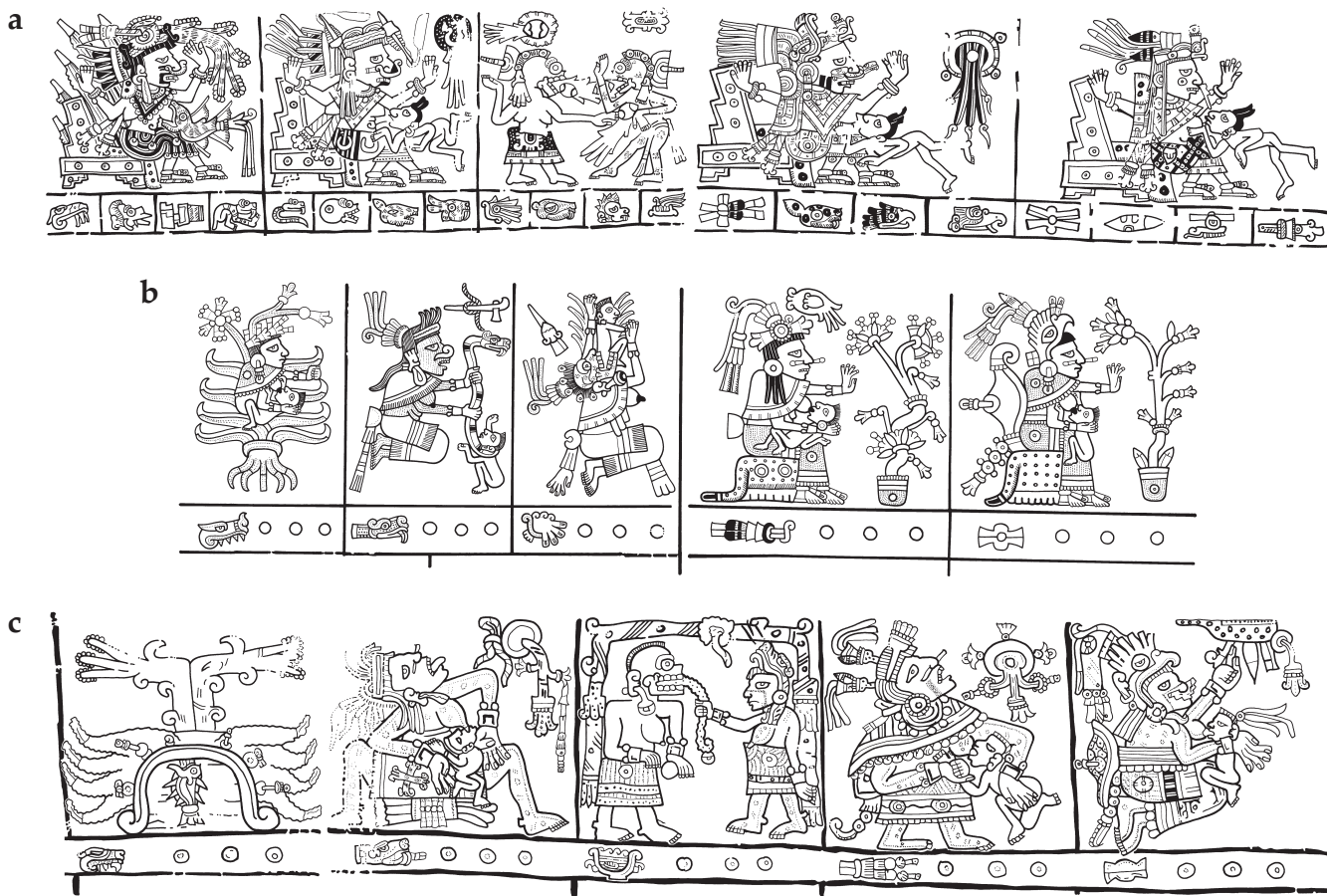


Figure 10. The nursing of the child in the *Codices Borgia* (a), *Fejérváry–Mayer* (b), and *Vaticanus B* (c) (drawings by the author; to facilitate comparisons, each section was re-arranged into a left-to-right reading order; drawings were mirrored if necessary).

on humans to maintain them, just like infants who depend on wet nurses. Nourishment and sacrifice counterbalance each other.

The final ritual of the bathing ceremony focuses on the theme of divine nourishment. After bathing it in the patio, the midwife dresses the newborn, brings it back into the house, and prepares to put it in the cradle for the first time. The midwife addresses the cradle as *Yoalticitl*, goddess of childbirth and mother of gods, ‘thou who possessest cradling arms, thou who possessest a lap, the baby hath arrived’ (Sahagún 1950–82, book 6, 205). The creator gods send the newborn to earth to undergo trial and to endure fatigue but *Yoalticitl* is expected to protect and strengthen it. The midwife binds the newborn on the cradleboard and the bathing ceremony ends with rejoicing, drinking and eating (Sahagún 1950–82, book 6, 207). The child is wrapped so tightly to the cradle that it could only move its head. With its boards and cambered rods the cradle offers both literal and divine protec-

tion. A newborn needs to be nourished and it needs to be protected. Both aspects resonate in the Nahuatl word *chīchī* or ‘to suckle’ (Karttunen 1983, 47) which modern Mexican Spanish adopted as *pedir chichi* ‘to ask for protection’ (Mejía Prieto 1984, 48).

Birth almanacs as a theory of social action

Diviners consulted the birth almanacs to determine the newborn’s destiny. The birth almanacs correspondingly foreground the calendar in the form of the twenty-day count and correlate it with activities, patron gods, and discrete symbols. This enabled the diviner to interpret the supernatural forces that acted on a child born on a specific day. The twenty day signs spell out a defined set of social identities and personality types (Monaghan 1998, 140, 144). Together with additional calendar cycles, they weave a dense web that contextualizes every person. No one can escape destiny and there is no place for outsiders, neither in

society nor in the belief system. The Aztec diviners created the interpretive account of the twenty day signs like a 'well joined, constructed, and levelled off' wall (Sahagún 1950–82, book 4, 132). By assigning each individual a *personnage* or 'character' with a clearly defined role in life (Mauss 1985, 4–5), the diviners created an encompassing ideology. Yet, the ideology is incomplete. The diviners admitted that the wall contained non-fitting pieces, fragments, and interruptions (Sahagún 1950–82, book 4, 132). The count of twenty days is a project of totalization and its authorizing discourse has to be understood critically (Keane 2003, 420). Unfortunately, colonial documents preserve little of the daily praxis of the diviners, how they patched over different interpretations and how they dealt with prognostications that failed to come true. It remains unclear what happened to children who deviated from the assigned path. By excluding aberration, the birth almanacs depict the ideology of Aztec personhood.

The four activities shown in the birth almanacs correspond to actual practices as recorded by colonial chroniclers. The priest castigated the child, the midwife presented the child and handled the umbilical cord and the mother nursed. A child received not only a birth name (which reflected its *tonalli* and therefore its destiny) but also an additional name three months after the bathing ceremony (Motolinía 1996, 163). The parents chose the name of an uncle or of an ancestor to express social continuity and the desire that the name-giver would imbue the child with vital forces (López Austin 1980, 232). During birth rituals, humans replicated the activities that the birth almanacs ascribe to patron gods. In this way, the almanacs serve as blueprints for action.

The birth almanacs establish the relationship with gods as the context for the child's life, they outline the activities that transform the child into a person, and they define through the calendar the child's specific journey through life. They articulate the cultural logic of Aztec personhood and can therefore be seen as a theory of social action (Harris 1978, 76; La Fontaine 1985, 132; Strathern 1988, 16, 357 n. 19). The birth almanacs define the key characteristics of Aztec personhood and how to become a person. By combining ideology and practice, the birth almanacs sketch a roadmap for Aztec life.

Physical and social transformation

The Nahuatl couplet *tetzicueuhca tetlapanca* translates as 'for children to be born' (Sahagún 1950–82, book 6, 254). The abstract meaning derives from two concrete verbs. The first verb probably means 'to chip or

splinter off' while the second verb comes from *tlapān(i)* 'for eggs to hatch' (Karttunen 1983, 312). The couplet portrays children as unripe and who need to mature into human beings. It needs to be understood literally because Aztecs deduced the social status of humans from bodily characteristics. For example, a man is worthy of impersonating the god Quetzalcoatl (and then to be sacrificed) only if he is 'flawless of hands and feet, without stain or blemish, nor one-eyed, nor with a cloud in his eye, nor lame, nor lacking one hand, nor crippled' (Durán 1971, 131). The sutures of his skull have to be closed. Newborns, on the other hand, often suffer from *Ixtlazolcocoliztli*, a sickness that causes cloudy eyes, and their skulls are soft because their cranial bones have yet to fuse.⁵ They are socially and physically incomplete. As children grow into adults, so their physical changes correlate with their transformation into a person.

The Aztec differentiate between three different souls or life forces: *tonalli*, *teyolía* and *ihíyotl* (López Austin 1980, 221–62; see also Furst 1995). *Tonalli* as the most prominent force means heat and warmth and provides the vital energy for humans, animals, plants and other objects. It has its seat in the head of humans and provides consciousness (Furst 1998, 214–15). The amount and composition of *tonalli* determines a human's destiny. The second animistic force, *teyolía*, has its seat in the heart and governed cognition and affect. It relates to *yōli* 'to live' and *yōlli* 'heart' (Karttunen 1983, 341, 342). The *ihíyotl* is the breath of life and is recognizable by a faint glow and a foul smell. It translates as 'breath, respiration, hence one's life, sustenance' (Karttunen 1983, 98). It has its seat in the liver and determines passions and feelings. The three life forces provide an Aztec with consciousness, cognition and feelings.

A child receives the three life forces in the womb but they are weak; the newborn can lose them and evil forces can rob them (for modern examples of soul loss see Ichon 1969, 286 and Montoya Briones 1964, 102–3). During birth rituals, the participants therefore rub ashes on themselves and the newborn for protection (Motolinía 1969, 30, 1996, 163; Sahagún 1950–82, book 4, 111). The ash layer (the body painting in the birth almanacs may serve similar purposes) impedes the escape of life forces.

During the bathing ceremony, the midwife baptizes the infant (Torquemada 1943–44, book 2, 451; also Sahagún 1950–82, book 6, 205–6). She pours water into the newborn's mouth (from which *ihíyotl*, the life breath, emerges) and says, 'Open your mouth and receive Chalchiuhtlicue (the water goddess) who gives life to live in this world' (my translation after Torquemada 1943–44, book 2, 451). She then pours water on

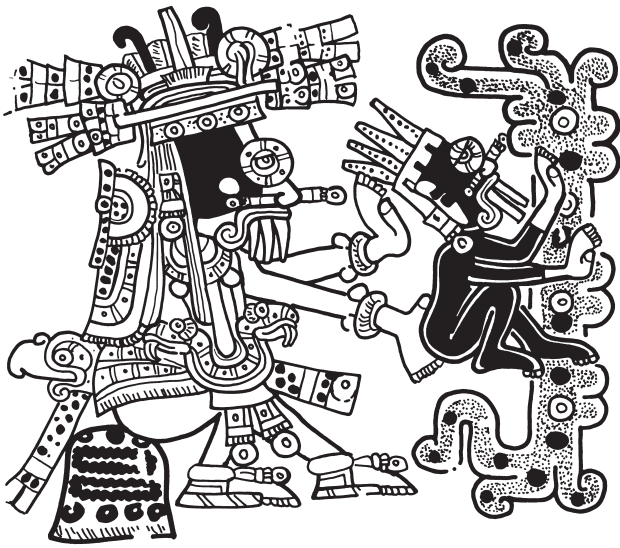


Figure 11. *Tlaloc presents his child (Codex Borgia 16; drawing by the author).*

the newborn's chest where *teyolia* is located, saying, 'Drink the clear water; it cleanses, it fortifies and it wakes up the heart' (my translation after Torquemada 1943–44, book 2, 451). Last, she pours water on the newborn's head, the seat of the *tonalli*, with the plea, 'Drink and receive the water and Chalchiuhtlicue; she will make you alert so that too much sleep will never overcome you; she shall embrace and advice you so that you are alert and not sleepy in this world' (my translation after Torquemada 1943–44, book 2, 451). Unlike the idea of cleansing that underlies Christian baptism, the Aztec midwife pours water over mouth, chest, and head to awaken the newborn's life forces.

Children's bodies are the tool and raw material for creating personhood. The midwife lifts children skywards to present them to the gods and have them supply life forces. The sun god Tonatiuh in particular soaks children with his rays in *tonalli*. The midwife asks the goddess Chalchiuhtlicue: *qujpitza, qujmamali in tonal* 'to cast and to perforate [the child] with the sun's rays' (Sahagún 1950–82, book 6, 202). After birth, the skull is still soft and *tonalli* can therefore enter and leave newborns freely (Ortiz de Montellano 1990, 153–4). As they mature, the children's *tonalli* and consciousness solidifies along with their skulls. Ethnohistorical and archaeological examples suggest that children literally became gods. For example, an ethnohistorical account from 1659 preserves the encounter with a child-god whose skin is painted dark blue, his face white, and his hair dyed saffron yellow (Gruzinski 1989, 65). Actual children's skulls are also shaped to the likeness of particular gods and goddesses (Romano 1977; 1980,

300; Tiesler Blos & Romano 2008, 24–5; for comparable Maya examples see Houston *et al.* 2006, 45; Taube 1992, 46–50; Tiesler Blos 2010, 302–3, 305–7). These examples lend credence to the birth almanacs where children copy the attributes of their patron gods (Fig. 11). Their bodies mediate the relationship between the children and their patron gods.

The Aztec and Western concept of the body differ. In the West, the body is the stage for an individualized self and discipline is imposed on it to differentiate individuals (Foucault 1977). On the other hand, the Aztec body expresses socio-cosmic relationships similar to the Fijian body (Becker 1995, 129). For the Aztecs, the physical and the social, being human and being a person are linked. They therefore call the bathing ceremony *oc ceppa yoli*, or 'rebirth' (López Austin 1980, 254). During the process of becoming a person, individuals impose sign-images or tropes upon themselves (Fernandez 1986, 35). On a metaphorical level, children become their patron god because the gods provide consciousness, cognition and feelings. These essences of Aztec personhood materialize in the form of life forces. As children grow up, the life forces are inscribed on their bodies. Breath, heartbeat and stout head manifest the metaphorical relationship between children and gods metonymically. Aztec birth rituals have a tropic structure (Turner 1991, 152), that is they interweave metaphor and metonymy to create personhood.

Covenant of humans with gods

Personhood hinges on the differentiation of self and other. Among the Aztecs, children become persons through their relationship with patron gods. In the Highland Mexican birth almanacs, deities interact in four ways with children. The gods pierce the child, they present it, they grasp its umbilical cord and they nurse it. Activities, gods and accompanying discrete symbols paint a nuanced picture of mutual dependency. The gods imbue the child with life and vital forces while the child and future adult nourishes the gods through sacrifice. Humans and gods are bound together by a covenant that the Aztecs call *tlatlatlaqualiztli*, or 'the nourishment of the gods with the blood of sacrifice' (Seler 1990–98, vol. 1, 57).

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Notes

1. I refer to the Precolumbian speakers of a Nahuatl language in Central Mexico as Aztecs and to their Colonial descendants as Nahua (Gibson 1971, 376; Lockhart 1992, 1; Smith 2003, 3–4). Aztecs included not only the Mexica who lived in Tenochtitlán and much of the Valley of Mexico at the time of the Spanish Conquest but also Tepanecs and other people in neighbouring valleys.
2. Motolinía cites and translates the Vulgate imprecisely. The Latin version of Job 5:7 is *homo ad laborem nascitur et avis ad volatum* 'Man is born to labour, and the bird to fly.' The original Hebrew text, which was not available in Motolinía's lifetime, refers to coal sparks and not birds (עוף יגביהו רשף ובני יולד לעמל אדם כי) 'man bourn to trouble, (as) sparks fly up'; courtesy Maria Mayo).
3. The reading order of the birth almanacs varies. The one in Codex Borgia has to be read as a boustrophedon, whereas the ones in Codices Fejérváry–Mayer and Vaticanus B appear linearly in the upper register of the respective pages (Fig. 4).
4. Double knots are tied to the umbilical cords far from the navel. Unlike Western doctors who cut the cord off close to the navel, modern Aztec midwives leave a stump of about four inches (Kelly 1955, 113; Redfield 1928, 101–3). They tie cotton thread around its end and drip candle tallow on the stump's end so that it doesn't bleed. More tallow is put on daily until the stump falls off after several days (Montoya Briones 1964, 102). Veracruz Nahua believe that the length of the stump predicts for baby boys the size of their genitals when they reach adulthood. Nahua mothers who give birth in modern Mexican hospitals become furious because doctors cut off the umbilical cord cleanly, thus leaving them concerned for the procreative future of their newborn boys (Kelly 1955, 113). The modern Nahua custom seems to reflect ancient Aztec practices with the double knots representing the cotton thread with which the umbilical cord was tied off (Fig. 9b1, b3 & c5; for indirect evidence also Pomar 1975, 27).
5. The difference between Aztec children and adults extended to social practices as well. Unlike adults, children were allowed and even expected to play with dirt and refuse (Hamann 2008, 807). Aztecs treated physical and moral pollution as a metonym (Burkhart 1989, 99).

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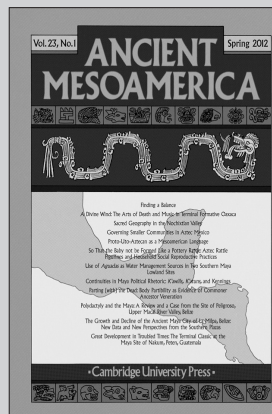
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