

‘DEBT-PAYMENT’ TO THE GODS AMONG THE AZTEC:
THE MISRENDERING OF A SPANISH EXPRESSION
AND ITS EFFECTS

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During the last two decades the concept of an Aztec debt-payment to the gods has become notorious in anthropological writings, particularly in the USA. The author was bewildered when he first took notice of this concept, in February 2000, in the second edition of Book 2 of Sahagún’s *Florentine Codex*, translated and edited by Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (1981). Being somehow acquainted with Aztec and Mesoamerican religion for decades, this alleged kind of relation between humans and gods appeared to him to be completely alien to the cultural pattern of the people and area in question.

The author’s doubts were fostered when he investigated how Bernardino de Sahagún himself translated the respective Aztec expression, because he does not translate it as “debt-payment” but simply as “sacrificio”, that is “sacrifice”. The respective Aztec word is *nextlaoaliztli*. It appears in Anderson and Dibble (1981) on pages 42, 47, 57, 96, 111, 127, 131, 134, 141, 155, and is translated invariably as “debt-payment”, whereas in Sahagún’s *Historia General* 1969, II:139, 142, 148, 174, 184, 196, 199, 201, 206, 216 it is rendered in each case as “sacrificio(s)”. Those readers who have access to the facsimile edition of Sahagún’s “Códice florentino” (1979) can appreciate the direct correspondance of *nextlaoaliztli* and “sacrificio”.

What had happened? How could a word which was translated as “sacrifice” by such a distinguished scholar of the Aztec language as Sahagún have changed its meaning into that of “debt-payment”? Further research revealed that it is simply due to a mistake in translation which occurred 125 years ago, and furthermore, that it is gaining wide acceptance only during the last twenty years.

In his famous dictionary, first published in 1885, Rémi Siméon presents the entry “*nextlaualli* - sacrifice de sang qu’on offrait aux idoles” (p. 308) - “sacrifice of blood which one offered to the idols”. This is a literal translation of Molina’s “sacrificio de sangre, que ofrecian a los

ydolos" (1571: 70v). Siméon indicates that this word is derived from *ixtlaua*. And there we find: "*ixtlaua* - s'aquitter, payer une dette" (p. 205) - "to free oneself/to get rid of, pay a debt". Here, for the first time, the idea of paying a debt is introduced. Giving this translation, Siméon again referred to Molinas dictionary. There, however, no translation of this type can be found. What Molina wrote is something quite different: "*ixtlaua. nitla* - pagar lo que se deve" (1571: 48v) - "pay what is due/correct". Although the Spanish expression "lo que se debe", has a far etymological relation to "deuda", its meaning is different.

Its general meaning relates to a moral obligation, like "what behoves", "what is proper", "what is correct", "what is adequate". It does not imply the idea that a person who acts in accordance with such rules is in debt of someone. On the other hand, in case someone has a debt then it is obviously proper to pay it back, and therefore such a kind of reciprocal relation could also be covered by the expression "lo que se debe". Yet its inclusion would not be based on the semantic common denominator of a debt, but on that of an adequate or correct exchange of goods and services.

Alonso de Molina wrote towards the end of the sixteenth century, and precisely for that period the etymological dictionary of the Castilian language by Corominas (1954, II:112) gives the meaning of "deber" as "obligación moral". With regard to the question, whether Molina's "lo que se deve" refers to this general meaning or specifically to a debt or debts, he himself gives a clear answer. A check in the Spanish-Aztec part of the dictionary demonstrates that all words related to debt (Deuer, Deuda, Deuer algo a otro) do not lead to *ixtlaua*, but to completely different Aztec roots (p. 44v). And these roots are not present in the respective passages of Book 2 of the *Florentine Codex*.

We may thus conclude that Siméon's rendering of *ixtlaua* as "paying a debt" is a blunt mistake in translation. Ironically, this misrendering did not occur on the far and difficult way between Aztec and a European language, but between Spanish and French, which are closely related to each other.

The effects of the wrong translation did not show up immediately, but in the long run they led to a distorted image of Aztec relations to their gods in which the reciprocal character of offering or sacrifice is lost. Mankind appears now as weighed down by debts, just as in the Christian concept of "original sin" (cf. Cross and Livingstone 1997:1195). This is a serious distortion of the relations the Aztec had to their gods. Sure enough, the gods were more powerful, and the reciprocal exchange of giving and taking was possibly not always symmetrical, but people could approach the gods without feeling themselves as morally inferior

or ended. - It was probably the Christian concept of original sin which made the invented "debt-payment" so attractive to scholars who had grown up in that particular cultural tradition.

In the following, the paths will be traced along which the notion of "debt-payment" diffused in time and space and how certain scholars invented arguments to sustain this erroneous idea. It took almost twenty years till someone fell into the trap set by Siméon in 1885. Writing about Aztec songs to the gods, Eduard Seler repeated the concept of debt-payment: "Die Kinderopfer an die Regengötter wurden geradezu *nextlaualli*, die bezahlte Schuld' genannt". (1904:983) - "The offerings of children to the rain gods were called simply, the debt paid". In his later writings, however, when translating sections of the work of Sahagún, Seler translated words derived from this root mostly as "offering" or "sacrifice", like "*nextlualoya* —wurden Opfer dargebracht" (1927: 218)— "offerings/sacrifices were presented".

Decades later, Walter Lehmann picked up Seler's idea of 1904 and wrote in his edition of the History of the Kingdoms of Colhuacan and Mexico: "...*inic yca moxtlahuato pipiltzintin* - so bezahlte mit den kleinen Kindern seine Schuld (dem Regengotte)" (1938:99) - "... thus paid his debt (to the rain god) with the little children". And a few pages later there is the notion "*moxtlahuh* - bezahlte er seine Schuld" (1938:105) - "he paid his debt". Lehmann, a disciple of Seler, did not comment these translations.

In 1950, in his dictionary to Wahrsagerei, Himmelskunde und Kalender der Alten Azteken, Leonhard Schultze-Jena lists the entry "*ne-lijxtlaua-lli* -, Schuldabtragung', insbesondere die Entziehung des Blutes aus dem eigenen Körper, Opfergabe". (p. 314) - "liquidation of debt', especially the extraction of blood from one's own body, offering". With the first expression he follows Seler, with the second Molina, and he adds at the end the neutral general term for offerings.

We can resume, during the first half of the twentieth century, the concept of a debt-payment to the gods was limited to German scholars. This Situation began to change in 1951 when Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble published their first edition of Book 2 of the *Florentine Codex* by Sahagún. In the context of the first "veintena" *Quauilt eua* the word of *nextlaoaloia* is commented in footnote 2 (1951: 42): "Seler rather consistently renders forms of this word in terms of payment of a debt rather than of sacrifice". For this no reference is given. They indicate that the word is derived from *ixtlaua* and they refer to the dictionaries of Molina and Siméon. And they add: In *Collected Works* (Cambridge, Mass.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1939), Vol. II, Pt. 4, p. 13) Seler says: "The child sacrifices to the rain

god were called *nextlaualli*, the debt paid'.” Anderson and Dibble, however, translate the word *nextlaoaloia* as “blood sacrifices were made” and *nextlaoaloztli* as “blood sacrifices”. This word is also employed throughout the table of contents of Book 2. The addition of “blood” is due to Molinas explanation of *nextlaualli*, for Sahagún simply “sacrificio” was adequate. In only one instance, towards the end of the book, Anderson and Dibble translate the respective word as “payment of a debt” (1951:185).

This first appearance of the concept of debt-paying in a book written in English did not have immediate consequences, and fortunately no traces of it can be found in the important articles of Henry B. Nicholson on religion and of Miguel León-Portilla on philosophy in volume 10 of the Handbook of Middle American Indians (1971).

In that year of 1971, however, the concept entered Spain through an article in Spanish, published in Madrid. In her study on the Aztec rain gods, Johanna Broda (1991) mentions on pages 276f. three times “pagar su deuda” or “la deuda pagada”. In footnote 24 she refers to Seler, Schultze-Jena and Lehmann and admonishes that this interpretation of *nextlaualli* as debt-payment, first given by Seler, was not entirely sure (no es completamente cierta). After drawing attention to the neutral translations of the word as “sacrifice” by Anderson and Dibble as well as Garibay she concludes: “Por otra parte, parece que todos los sacrificios se consideraban como una, deuda pagada’.” - “On the other hand, it seems that all sacrifices were considered as a, paid debt’”. As it appears, her genuine doubts were finally pushed aside by the interpretation of renowned forerunners.

A quarter of a century later, this article of Broda became the starting point from which the idea of a debt-payment to the gods reached Mexico. In his important book on Quetzalcoatl, Ivan Šprajc wrote: “Los aztecas concebían los sacrificios humanos como la deuda que se pagaba a los dioses, para que mantuvieran el orden natural que hacía posible la vida en la Tierra.” (1996: 135). He refers directly to Broda’s article. Thus the idea of debt-payment has come to Mexico not by the way of the abundant writings in English, but directly from German speaking scholars, although by an article written in Spanish.

In the English speaking world the door was thrown wide open for the entry of the concept of debt-payment in 1981, when Anderson and Dibble published their second edition of Book 2 of the *Florentine Codex* by Sahagún. Without giving any explanation, they now translated all words related to *nextlaualli* as “debt-payment”. The fact that this word appears also more than ten times in the table of contents makes it all the more suggestive. And before long this began to bear fruits.

In 1983, in her excellent *Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl*, Frances Karttunen gives for (*i*)*xtilahu(a)* apart from correct translations as “for payment to take place” and “to pay for something” the mistaken “to repay a debt” (p. 120).

The next to follow is Cecelia Klein. In her article on the ideology of autosacrifice she first refers to a passage in the *Florentine Codex*: “Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (1950-82, bk. 2: 185-186), writing on Aztec blood sacrifice, bluntly refers to the act as, payment of a debt’.” (Klein 1987:294). Her reference to blood sacrifice is not correct, however, because in that specific ritual only copal and paper were offered to the gods. Apparently, she had the first edition of Anderson and Dibble of 1951 at hand, since in that one they translated *nextlahualli* only once as “payment of a debt”, precisely in the passage quoted by her. In contrast, the 1981 edition contains dozens of translations of this kind. Thus her affiliation to the idea of debt-payment is not due to the massive advertising of this idea in 1981, but rather the brief mention in the edition of 1951 had a late effect. A few pages later Klein summarizes: “It is clear, then, that autosacrifice from the beginning was viewed as a symbolic death substituted for the real thing and, as such, as a debt payment made in return for continued life.” (1987:297). This passage is quoted by Smith and Wolf whose ideas will be treated below. As we can see, Klein does not simply adopt the word of debt-payment, she tries to fill it with meaning. In her case, as an art historian, it is not astonishing that she seeks an interpretation in the symbolic field.

Inga Clendinnen (1991) had a different approach. Her summary of three types of sacrifices begins with the sentence: “The first concerned the drawing forth of blood from one’s own body in the presence of the sacred images, and centered around the notions of debt, levy, tribute, or obligation, probably derived from the word, to cut’.” (p. 74). She clearly allies with the idea of debt, yet unfortunately without giving any terms in Aztec. Then, in a second step, she tries to explain the foundations of this debt: “... the Mexica knew that all humans, unequal as they might be in human arrangements, participated in the same desperate plight: an involuntary debt to the earth deities, contracted through the ingestion of the (p. 74) fruits of the earth. That debt could be acknowledged by the payment of a regular token levy - those offerings of one’s blood - but it could be fully extinguished only by death, when the earth lords would feed upon the bodies of men, as men has perforce fed upon them. It is this devine hunger which appears to underly the gross feedings of undifferentiated mass killings.” (p. 75). Trying to explain the alleged debt she even invented a theol-

ogy which looks quite consistent at first sight. But it has nothing in common with data from Aztec primary sources.

In their *Dictionary of Mesoamerican Religion*, Mary Miller and Karl Taube (1993) fully subscribe to the idea of debt-payment to the gods. Under the heading "human sacrifice" they write: "According to most native world views, the gods had offered their own blood, in order to generate humankind (sic!), and the sacrifice most sought by the gods in return was human flesh and blood." And: "Humanity lived in the thrall of this blood debt, and human sacrificial victims were offered repeatedly to forestall the demise of the world and to seal the compact made with the gods". (p. 96) The debt, by now, has become a "blood debt". And under the heading "sacrifice" we can read: "At the time of the conquest, human sacrifice was seen as a fair exchange for the sacrifices that the gods had made to create the earth and humanity". (p. 145). Speaking of a fair exchange they give a correct description, but they spoil it by linking the human obligation to a debt which allegedly was established at the origin of the world. Thus all dynamic exchanges between humans and gods which occurred continuously for the benefit of both are discarded. Christian concepts related to the original sin are also present in the following sentence: "Humans lived in the debt of, and at the grace of, the gods" (p. 145).

The reasoning of Michael Smith (1996) is on similar grounds: "A fundamental idea of Aztec religion was that the gods sacrificed themselves in order to benefit humankind. In one myth, the gods threw themselves into a huge fire to create the sun; in another they spilled their own blood in order to create people. These myths established a debtor relationship between humankind and the gods - a debt that could be repaid only through offerings of human blood and life". (p. 204). And he continues: "Humankind owed a tremendous debt to the gods, and this debt could only be discharged through frequent offerings of human blood". (p. 221) - "... paid their debt to the gods" (p. 226) - "Just as commoners paid tribute in goods and services to nobles, so humans paid sacred tribute in blood to the gods. Both practices were obligatory debt payments..." (p. 227). As a result of these massive repetitions of the doctrine of a "debt to the gods" in a textbook for students, accelerated diffusion of this erroneous idea can be anticipated. By equating offering and sacrifice with tribute paying, Smith, just like Miller and Taube, excludes the dynamic aspects of the relationship between humans and gods. His argument, however, is a different one.

The most recent reference to human debt-paying has been found in the last book of Eric Wolf (1999). Commenting on autosacrifice he writes: "Autosacrifice thus reminded the common people of the debt

owed to the creator gods, and it underlined the special qualifications of the nobility in upholding the political-cosmic order". (1999:167). A few lines later he quotes a passage by Cecelia Klein (1987:297) in which she sustains the idea of debt payment. Although he adopted the erroneous concept of debt, Wolf is still close to the Aztec point of view in drawing attention to special qualifications of humans (and especially the nobility) in upholding the cosmic order.

A balanced and competent description of the relation between humans and gods among the Aztec is given by Miguel León-Portilla (1997: 43f.): "The key concept of *tlamacehua* denotes the primary and essential relation human beings have with their gods. These, through their own penance and sacrifice, deserved - brought in existence - human beings. The gods did this because they were in need of someone who would worship them, someone who would provide them, the gods, with sustenance so that they could continue foster life on earth. They could not, however, do this without human cooperation. There was to be a reciprocal obligation between the gods and humanity. People also had to perform *tlamacehualiztli* (penance, the act of deserving through sacrifice'), including the bloody sacrifice of offering human beings".

Precisely because of this divine endowment of being responsible for the maintenance of the cosmic order, the Aztec had a strong feeling of self-esteem, "Selbstwertgefühl" (Köhler 1990: 238). They needed the gods, but the gods needed them as well.

Although the author prefers to write in Spanish, this article is written in English, because most of the erroneous recent statements on an alleged Aztec debt-payment to their gods have been published in that language. Hopefully, further diffusion of this nonsense can still be stopped.

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