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TEXTILES OF SACRIFICE: AZTEC RITUAL CAPES
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This presentation analyzes three long-gone prehispanic textiles, a feat made possible due to the peculiarities of the Aztec language, Nahuatl, and the sixteenth-century Spaniards' dedication to detailed recordkeeping. From Columbus' first voyage in 1492 to Spain's final expulsion from the Americas in the nineteenth century, the Spaniards were exemplary recorders. Fortunately, this trait was particularly evident in the decades following the 1519-1521 conquest of Mexico, a period that yielded invaluable conquistador eye-witness accounts, administrative records and missionary chronicles. It is to the latter genre that we owe the data presented in this paper.

Of all the newly-discovered peoples in the Age of Discovery, the Aztecs of Central Mexico were the most fully documented, thanks in good part to the dedicated work of a remarkable Franciscan friar, Bernardino de Sahagún (1499-1590), the Aztec's most encyclopedic chronicler. In order to convert the Indians, the early Spanish missionaries had to preach in the indigenous tongues. Fray Sahagún not only mastered Nahuatl, the Aztec language, but went on to compile an extensive account of their culture. When Sahagún died at age 91, his *magnum opus* was contained in twelve books that we now know as the *Florentine Codex*, named for the city where the sixteenth-century manuscript presently resides. This Sahagúntine corpus encompasses detailed information on a kaleidoscope of topics covering natural history, religion, secular life, and the stratified levels of Aztec society. Scattered throughout these books are long lists of names of Aztec apparel for various social classes and occasions, all presented in parallel columns of Spanish and Nahuatl.

Sahagún collected his Nahuatl data between 1559-1568, forty years after the Spanish Conquest. To do this, the friar sought out and interviewed aging natives who had lived the best years of their lives under Aztec rule. The responses to Sahagún's questions were, of course, in Nahuatl, which was carefully recorded by the friar's specially-trained assistants. The early missionaries taught the sons of Aztec nobles Latin script so they could use the characters to write phonetically in Nahuatl, an agglutinative language that combines basic terms with various appendages: prefixes, infixes, or affixes. As a result, Nahuatl's compound words are often the equivalent of a short English sentence. Thanks to a Spanish-Nahuatl/Nahuatl-Spanish dictionary compiled by Fray Francisco Molina (1977) in 1555-1571, and a grammar written by El Padre Horatio Carocho (1983) in 1645, it is possible to directly translate most of the Sahagúntine corpus.

With the support of a 1988 John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship, I have compiled a database that makes it possible to correlate Sahagún's lists of the Nahuatl names for Aztec clothing with the social context in which these garments were worn. Based on my ethnohistorical research with sixteenth-century texts and my ethnographic work among present-day Nahuatl-speaking textile artisans, I have discovered that certain prehispanic and modern textile motifs describe the technology used to create the surface designs that decorate a garment. This phenomenon of naming a textile motif by describing its means of production was not unusual in prehispanic Mesoamerica. An example of

technology naming appears in a gloss--a brief explanatory statement--that identifies a richly-decorated cape, the *ixnextlacuilolli tilmatli* (*Matricula de Tributos* 1980:folio 7v) (Figure 1). Rather than referring to the textile's distinctive pattern, this compound Nahuatl word describes the technological process used to produce the cloth's design: *ix(co)* ("on the face or surface [Molina 1977:45r]") + *nex(tli)* ("ash [used for ink] [ibid:71v]") + *tlacuilolli* ("writing or painting [ibid:120r]"). The *ixnextlacuilolli* was a painted cloak (personal communication: Frances Berdan, 1990).

Multiple examples of technology naming also occur in a group of Aztec cape names that all contain the word *tlalpilli*: "a thing tied or knotted or a prisoner of another (Molina 1977:159v)." In the context of these capes, this term refers to resist-dye techniques, both *plangi*--portions of already-woven cloth are tied-off so these reserved sections will resist the dye--and *ikat*: unwoven yarn is knotted off to reserve it from the dye bath (Anawalt 1996:Tables 1, 4).

The hallmark of the *plangi* technique is the distinctive design left on cloth after it has been dyed. The Japanese call the motif *yokobiki kanoko*, "square ring dot (Wada, Rice, Barton 1983:62-63, 142-143)." This is the repeating design that appears on a *xiuhtlalpilli* cape (Sahagún 1950-1982 Bk.1:44), worn only by rulers or deity impersonators (Figure 2). The *xiuh* element translates blue (Molina 1977:159v) and refers to the type of dye used, indigo (*Indigofera suffruticosa*), the most prominent prehispanic source for the esteemed blue color. Textile fragments bearing *plangi*-created designs have been found archaeologically (Mastache de Escobar 1975).

Evidence for the *ikat* resist-dye technique appears in the Aztec cloak name *netlalpilli ixtlapaltimatli* (Sahagún 1950-1982 Bk.10:75): *netlalpilli*, a reflexive verb form, ("to be tied [Molina 1977:124v]") + (*ix[co]*, "on the surface [ibid:45r]") + (*tlapal[ia]* "to dye something for someone [Karttunen 1992:289]") + *tilmatli* ("cape [Molina 1977:113r]"): cape with an *ikat*-created design. Fray Sahagún, in the Spanish paraphrase (1979 Bk. 8:16r-16v) of his earlier Nahuatl text, describes the weaving of an *ikat* textile (Anawalt 1996:7). Examples of cloaks with *ikat*-created designs (Figure 3) appear in the sixteenth-century Aztec pictorial, *Codex Mendoza* (1992 III:folios 33r, 34r, 35r).

In addition to painted and resist-dyed textile motif names, the process of producing netting also is described in the Nahuatl term for a net cloak worn by warriors (Figure 4) to honor their patron god, Tezcatlipoca (Anawalt 1996:Tables 2, 3). The word *cuechintli* (Sahagún 1950-1982 Bk.12:53), the most prominent translation for net cape, is a term that appears in no Nahuatl dictionary but may derive from the verb *cuechinia* found both in Molina (1977:25v) and in the Nahuatl dictionary of the nineteenth-century French lexicographer, Rémi Siméon (1963:116). *Cuechinia* means to stir or to move in a particular manner, as one swirls sugar into coffee with a spoon, or manipulates a needle to loop a single strand of yarn into netting. Examples of knotted netting have been found archaeologically (Johnson 1967 Vol.2:197).

Having briefly discussed Fray Sahagún's lists of cape terms--as well as the compound nature of Nahuatl words and the language's penchant for bestowing production-technique names on prestigious cloaks--I now would like to consider a pair of particularly intriguing capes worn in connection with ceremonies held on the election of a ruler. Both the new emperor (Figure 5) and his principal lords (Figure 6) wore these

cloaks while doing penance in specific temples. Anderson and Dibble (1982-1990), translators of the magnificent English edition of the *Florentine Codex*, render the cape of the ruler, the *neçaoalquachtli xoxoctic omicallo tilmatl*, as “green fasting cape designed with bones (Sahagún 1952-1980 Bk. 8:62)” and the lords’ cape, *neçaoalquachtli tilitic omicallo tilmatl*, as “black fasting cape designed with bones (*ibid*:63).” Since, in many cases, Nahuatl cape names incorporate technological details, a further analysis may be revealing. We will begin with the textile reference.

The word *quachtli* refers to a large, undecorated, white cotton mantle (Molina 1977:84r) that *Codex Mendoza* (1992:II:35), a sixteenth century document, describes as *tela torcida*, “twisted cloth.” The ethnohistorian Frederic Hicks (1994:105n5) suggests that Aztec *quachtli* were made of heavy, tent-like material. Given this clue, “twisted cloth” most likely refers to fabric woven with tight, firmly-twisted cotton yarn that was worked in a plain weave to produce a dense, firm, slightly stiff, weighty textile, much like present-day canvas or sailcloth.

Next, let us analyze the Nahuatl words for the capes’ green and black colors: *xoxoctic* is a combining of the terms *xoxo(uilia)*, (“to make something green [Molina 1977:161v]”) and (*quil*)*tic*, (“a green-colored thing [*ibid*:117r]”). Although no one specific prehispanic dye is known that produced green, that color can be created by combining blue dye made of indigo with yellow dye produced from *zacatlaxcalli* (*Cuscuta americana* L.), a parasitic plant that appears throughout central Mexico during the rainy season (personal communication: Irmgard W. Johnson, August, 1996). The Nahuatl term *tilitic*, that appears in the name of the lords’ fasting cape, translates “to make something black (Molina 1977:148r).”

Having considered the capes’ thread, weave, texture and colors, let us now turn to the cloaks’ repeating motif, the bones. The word *omicallo* is made up of *omi(tl)*, (“bone [Molina 1977:76v]”) and *callo(tia)*, (“to make something fit into a setting [*ibid*:11v]”). Although Anderson and Dibble translate *omicallo* as “designed with bones,” their work was done prior to documentation of the textile technology-naming phenomenon (Anawalt, 1990, 1992, 1993, 1996). As already noted in the cases of painted, resist-dyed and netted capes, the Nahuatl language sometimes describes technological processes in cloak names. Given this propensity, let us take Molina’s (1977:76r) definition of the word *omicalli* at face value: “to place bones.” I do not mean to imply that actual bones were attached to these capes, but rather to suggest that impressions of bones were being “placed” on the cloth by wood, bone or ceramic stamps incised with bone designs. There is a further cape description and depiction that supports this hypothesis.

Sahagún (1950-1982 Bk. 12:52) lists the name of a third cloak with a bone motif (Figure 7), the *tzotzotecomayo oomicallo tilmatl*: *tzontecomatl* (“head cut and separated from the body [Molina 1977:153v]”); *omicalli*: (“to place bones [*ibid*:76f]”). The duplication of the *tzo* and *o* elements equate to plurals, hence: “cape with severed heads and bones;” note that the cape name does not include clues to the cloak’s fiber, weave or dye. The colonial pictorial *Codex Tovar* (Figure 7) contains a picture of a cloak that meets Sahagún’s description of the “cape with severed heads and bones.” This cloak also appears to be a stamped textile. Although it is possible that the cape’s designs, like the bones on the green and black capes, were painted on the cloth, it seems likely--given the subtleties of the Nahuatl language and the uniformity of the images on all three capes--that

these motifs were created by repeatedly placing textile-stamp impressions on the cloth to form regular, over-all patterns. Many ceramic stamps have been found archaeologically, although none that have the exact designs shown on these capes. Nonetheless, the common use of prehispanic stamps to decorate bodies, paper and cloth has been clearly demonstrated by the number of these clay objects that have found their way into museums and archaeological collections.

Let us now turn back to the initial Nahuatl term in both the green and black capes' names, *neçaoal*, "fasting," and the implications of this word in relation to the cloaks' motif of bones. From Sahagún's accounts, we know the Aztecs did indeed fast, abstaining from eating altogether during certain ceremonial periods, at other times giving up such favorite condiments as chili and salt as well as their staff of life, maize. But note that it is not images of salt blocks, chili peppers or toasted tortillas that decorate the green and black fasting capes; it is bones, big bones (see Figures 5,6). What kind of bones could these be? What is certain is that they did not come from such big creatures as horses or cows because there were no large domesticated animals in Mesoamerica prior to the Spaniards' arrival. Perhaps the proper question is not What bones? but rather Whose? To answer that disconcerting query we must turn to Aztec ideology.

The Aztecs believed that they, as the chosen people of the sun, bore the heavy responsibility of sustaining the universe. This necessitated providing sustenance to the gods of the natural world: for the sun to rise, the winds to blow, the rain to fall and the earth to be fruitful, the deities responsible for those forces had to be fed. But gods cannot subsist on chili and tortillas; they can only be given the most sacred of foods, the blood and hearts of humans. In the course of continually meeting their sacred obligations, the Aztecs became masters of large-scale human sacrifice.

In recent years, the Aztecs all too often have been associated in the press with wholesale rites of blood lust, sadistic torture and insatiable cannibalism. The reality was quite different: human sacrifice was actually the most holy of Aztec sacred religious acts, one that entailed ritualized, ceremonial behavior from its outset, which usually began with the taking of a warrior in battle. The purpose of Aztec warfare was not the killing of an enemy but rather his capture; the great majority of Aztec sacrificial victims were prisoners of war (Figure 8). Many of these captives were sacrificed during the dramatic ceremonies connected with each of the monthly festivals. Most prisoners died on the sacrificial stone, chests cut open and pulsating hearts immediately extracted to offer to the gods. It was believed that at the moment of sacrifice the victim was transformed into the deity to whom he was offered, thus forging the necessary bond between those on earth and the life-sustaining gods beyond. The sacrificial warriors thus were believed to play a vital role in the maintenance of the culture: theirs were noble deaths. This attitude of reverence was reflected in every aspect of the ritualized behavior between captor and captive.

Of the 18 annual ceremonies where particularly important captives were sacrificed, the one that sheds light on the mystery of the fasting capes' bones was the harvest festival, *Tlacaxipehualiztli*, "the Flaying of Men," which honored the fertility god *Xipe Totec*, Our Lord the Flayed One. During this celebration, the sacrificed body of the captive warrior was flayed and his skin was set aside, to be worn subsequently by a priest or the victorious captor. Following the captive's flaying, his corpse was carried to the captor's courtyard by the old men of his kin group. Once in the courtyard, the body was cut up. After one

thigh had been sent by the captor to the emperor (Sahagún 1950-1982 Bk.2:54), the remaining one was prepared as part of the captor's ritual feast featuring *tlacatlaolli*, "dried maize kernels with man," (Molina 1977:115v), a dish of dried maize to which were added strips of the dead captive's flesh. Only the immediate relatives of the captor were invited to partake of this sacred meal, an act Sahagún (1950-1982 Bk.2:54) reports caused the participants themselves to be considered gods during the feast. The captor, however, did not consume his captive's flesh saying, "Shall I perchance eat my very self?"

Following the sacred ritual, the captor had the right to set up a "Pole of the Flaying of Men" in his courtyard, indicating that he had flayed a captive (*ibid* Bk.8:66). From this pole the captor suspended the captive's thigh bone, after he had removed all of its remaining flesh. But before attaching the bone to the pole, the captor first wrapped his sacred trophy thoroughly in paper, thus providing it with a mask; Sahagún (*ibid*) states that the embellished thigh bone was called the god captive (Figure 9). In the sixteenth-century colonial period, a cache of paper-wrapped thigh bones was recovered from the rafters of a prehispanic house, implying that such trophies continued to be valued in the culture long after their courtyard display (personal communication: Susan Schroeder, August, 1996).

Returning to the question of what or whose bones are represented by the designs on the green and black fasting capes--as well as the long bones on the severed-heads-and-bones cloak (see Figures 5, 6,7)--I suggest that these images depict human femurs, sacred trophies honoring valiant, sacrificed warriors (see Figure 9). This is certainly a sobering--nay, even shocking--choice of design motifs to us, living as we do in the "civilized" Western world at the end of the 20th century. Yet this ancient Mexican tradition of depicting human bones in artistic expressions has continued into modern times. Nowhere is this genre better exemplified than in the well-known workshop of the Linares family, located in Mexico City.

The Linares father, Don Pedro, and his sons, Enrique, Felipe and Miguel, are famous for their production of papier mâché *calaveras*, skeletal figures engaged in a variety of activities, but these animated, often-dressed creatures are quite unlike their medieval European counterparts, who were viewed as threatening or penitent. The Mexican *calaveras* often appear in humorous contexts: enjoying lively sports (Figure 10), eating tacos (Masuoka 1994:65) or playing cards (*ibid*:66). What are we to make of these macabre Mexican skeletons whose cheerful behavior belies their deathly visage? Since the mood of their activities does not indicate a European heritage, from whence could this disquieting tradition have come? Is there a distant echo of prehispanic times reflected here?

It must be remembered that in the Aztec world--where existence continued on in one of many forms after death--the sacrificial victim became a god at the time of his sacrifice and his remains--exemplified by the venerated thigh bone (see Figure 9)--continued to have a cultural involvement in its deified guise. The *calaveras* figures also are sometimes depicted playing a socially-supportive modern role. In the aftermath of the devastating 8.1 Mexico City earthquake in 1985, the Linares made a pointed political statement regarding the government's lack of immediate response to the catastrophe by creating a scene of *calaveras* figures providing neighborhood aid to the afflicted (Masuoka 1994:Fig. 81).

In summary, through pictorial, linguistic, technological and ethnographic analyses, this paper has interpreted three sixteenth-century drawings of Aztec ritual capes displaying designs of bones (see Figures 5, 6, 7). As a result of using a multiple approach, it has been possible to come to plausible conclusions about the green and black capes' yarn, weave, dyes and, particularly, a strong suggestion that the repeating-bones motif on all three of the cloaks was applied through the use of textile stamps.

The ritual implication of these sacred capes' design of human thigh bones also has been traced to its prehispanic source. Obviously, the Aztecs had an acceptance of death as a natural part of life (Figure 11), a view still reflected in present-day folk art that conveys an unflinching, albeit humorous, treatment of the final judgment. Octavia Paz (1961:58), the Nobel-winning historian, has noted that Mexican death is a mirror of Mexican life. Death is present in their fiestas, games, loves and thoughts.. Indeed, when one considers the parallel existence that the *calaveras* bones carry on from beyond the grave--a vital "life of their own"--it would appear that the Aztec's descendants continue to hold an accepting, sanguine view of mortal man's demise (Figure 12).

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Figure 1: The notation *ixnextlacuilloli* written above this sixteenth-century depiction of an Aztec tribute textile describes the technology used to create the cloth's surface design: it is a painted textile (*Matrícula de Tributos* 1980:folio 7v).



Figure 3: An example of an Aztec tribute textile whose surface design was created through the use of the *ikat* resist-dye technique, as is implied by the technologically-descriptive term *netlalpilli ixtlapaltimatli* "something knotted and dyed on the surface" (*Codex Mendoza* 1992 III:folio 35r).



Figure 2: A sixteenth-century depiction of King Nezahualpilli wearing the official blue cape restricted to Aztec rulers and deities. The cloak's surface design was created through the use of resist-dye techniques, as its name implies: *xiuhtlalpilli tilmatl*, "blue-knotted cape" (*Codex Ixtlilxochitl* 1976:folio 108r).



Figure 4: An Aztec warrior arrayed in his net cape, the *cuechintli*, a technologically-descriptive term; the Nahuatl verb *cuechinia* means to move the hand in a particular manner (e.g.manipulating a needle to loop a single strand of yarn into netting [*Codex Mendoza* 1992 III:folio 57r]).



Figure 5: The *neçoalquachtli xoxoctic omicallo tilmatl*, “the green fasting cape stamped with of bones.” This penitential cloak was worn during ceremonies held on the election of a ruler (Sahagún 1979: Bk.8:folio 46r).



Figure 7: The *tzotzotecomayo oomicallo tilmatl*, “the cape with severed heads and bones” was worn by an idol of the Aztec sun god, Huitzilopochtli. Like the green and black fasting capes, this cloak also displays stamped surface designs (Tovar 1972: Pl.XXII).



Figure 6: The *neçoalquachtli tilitic omicallo tilmatl*, “the black fasting cape stamped with bones.” This penitential cloak was worn by principal lords during ceremonies held on the election of a ruler (Sahagún 1979 Bk.8:folio 46v).



Figure 8: A victorious Aztec warrior holds his subjugated battlefield captive, who is destined for the sacrificial stone. The majority of Aztec sacrificial victims were prisoners of war (Codex Mendoza 1992 III:64r).



Figure 9: A sacrificial victim's thigh bone wrapped in paper prior to being displayed as a sacred trophy atop the Pole of the Flaying of Men (Sahagún 1979 Bk.2:folio 26v).

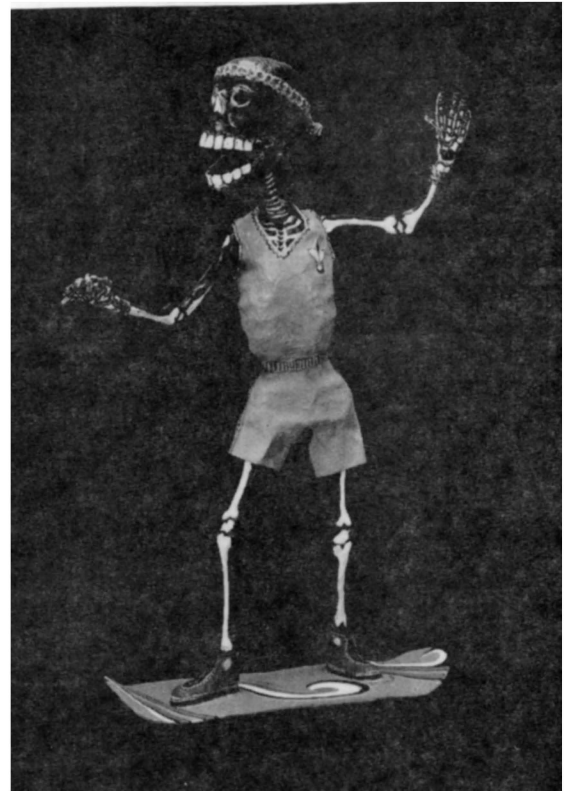


Figure 10: A papier mâché *calaveras* figure from the Mexico City workshop of the Linares family (Masuoka 1994:fig.160).

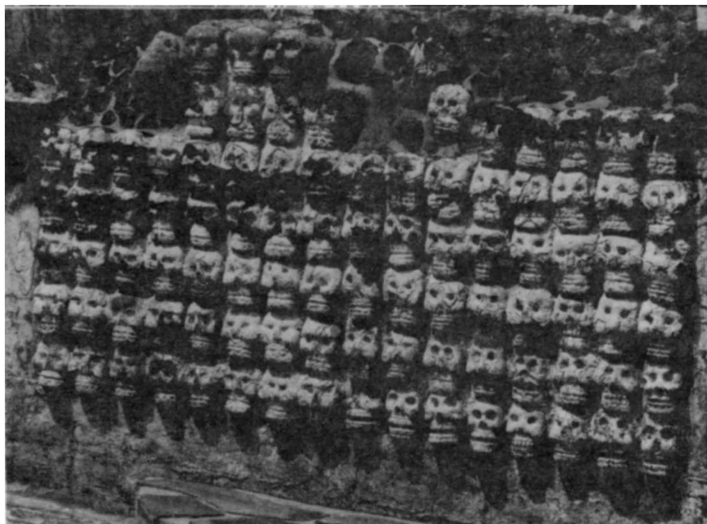


Figure 11: A prehispanic stone sculpture depicting a *tzompantli*, "skull rack," commemorating departed sacrificial victims (Boone 1994:131).

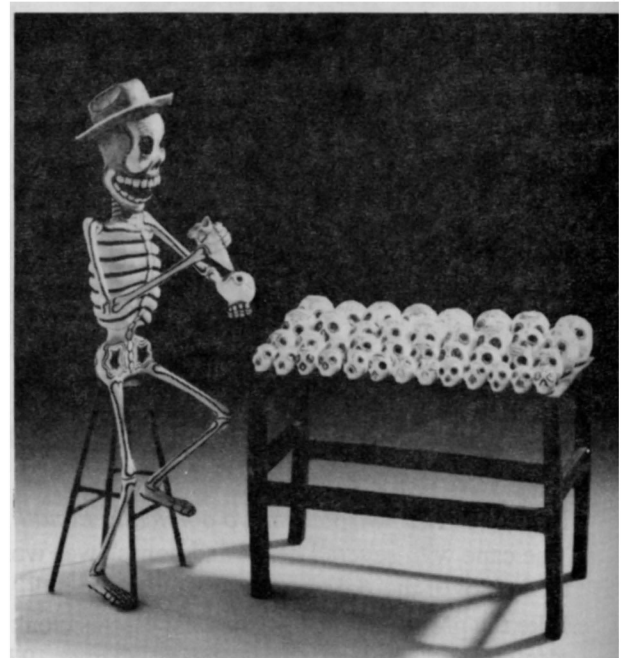


Figure 12: A papier mâché *calaveras* figure ornamenting a group of skulls arranged in a manner reminiscent of a prehispanic skull rack (photo S. Einstein).