Teteo Innan, Her Song, from the Florentine Codex

Willard Gingerich

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THE FLAYED GOD

THE MYTHOLOGY OF MESOAMERICA

SACRED TEXTS & IMAGES FROM PRE-COLUMBIAN MEXICO & CENTRAL AMERICA

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virgin and said to her: “I have come to get you to take you to the world.” To which she immediately agreed and so the two of them went down, he bearing her upon his shoulders; and as soon as they arrived on earth, they transformed themselves into a tree with two branches, of which one was called Quetzalhuexotl, which was the one of Ehecatl, and the other Xochicuahuitl, which was the one of the virgin.

Now, when her grandmother, who was sleeping, awoke and did not find her niece, she immediately summoned the other goddesses, who are called Cicime, and they all came down to earth to search for Ehecatl. At this point, the two tree branches separated from each other and the one of the virgin was immediately recognized by the old goddess who took it and broke it and offered a piece of it to each of the other goddesses who ate it; but the branch of Ehecatl they did not break, but left it there; which, as soon as the goddesses had gone back up to heaven, turned back into its first form of Ehecatl, who gathered up the bones of the virgin whom the goddesses had eaten and buried them, and from there a tree arose, which they call metl, from which the Indians make the wine that they drink and in which they rejoice; but this is not because of the wine, but for some roots that they call ucpatli which they put into it.

**Teteo Innan, Her Song, from the Florentine Codex**

This is another in the series of the sacred hymns recorded by Sahagún in both the *Codex Mattritensis* and the *Florentine Codex*, a series that includes the “Song of Xipe Totec Ioallaua” presented above. Willard Gingerich, translator of this poem and a distinguished interpreter of Nahuatl poetry, indicates that “by Aztec times Teteo Innan represented a mother and earth numen of considerable antiquity and authority in the Valley of Mexico. Toci, ‘Our Grandmother’ is the name of her specifically Mexica hierophany,” who by the time of the Aztecs can be seen as reflecting their “sacrificial concerns and imperial preoccupations.”64 The ritual context of the hymn, however, described in detail by Sahagún65 and discussed briefly below in connection with Toci, certainly demonstrates the hymn’s concern with earthly fertility as well as
those “imperial preoccupations.” It is for that reason that Teteo Innan was addressed as “Our Mother, Lord of the Earth.”

Gingerich contends that “the identification of Tamoanchan [an earthly paradise] as the goddess’s place of origin ... affirms that god and man have a common place of origin, since it was to Tamoanchan that Quetzalcoatl brought the ‘precious bones’ from which the first men were made by Quetzalcoatl and the goddess Quilatzli [‘she who makes things grow,’ an aspect of Coatlicue].” The line “you emerge from Tamoanchan” suggests, then, that “the goddess appeared first among men from that chthonic womb” and that Teteo Innan links humanity back to the “venerable legitimate mother numen,” Quilatzli. Thus “Teteo Innan, Her Song,” is concerned with fertility on the deepest of levels.

This fundamental concern is suggested by the first stanzas in at least two ways. First, the mask referred to “is the mask of human thighskin donned in the ritual by Teteo Innan’s ‘son’ Cinteotl, a god of corn who seems to have represented the ripe ear.” Second, the hymn’s opening is marked “by the flower symbolism so pervasive in Nahuatl lyrical poetry. The yellow and white flowers which ‘had opened the blossom’ evoke the creative, fecundive powers of the mother earth-spirit throughout the world. . . . They are first the literal flowers of spring which festoon the earth to announce the rebirth of life. They are also the ‘flowers of our flesh,’ and sacred, therefore to Chicomecoatl, ‘Seven Serpent,’ goddess of the vegetables on which our flesh depends—maize most specifically.”

The hymn’s second section refers to a complex mythic tale, one neither wholly preserved nor fully understood, in which the goddess Itzpapalotl, “Obsidian Butterfly,” as an aspect of Teteo Innan, is involved with the initiation of sacrifice among the desert peoples who were to become the Aztecs. “With new chalk and new plumage she is anointed as in our first sacrifice of her on the desert . . . . She herself becomes the deer, the two-headed or paired were-deer who seduced Xiuhnel and consumed him, and who pursued Mimich through the fire until she fell into the barrel cactus and became our sacrifice.” This myth of Xiuhnel and Mimich to which the last line of the hymn refers is presented in the myths of creation above as section VII of the Leyenda de los Soles. It involves the transformation of Itzpapalotl into a two-headed were-deer who seduces and consumes Xiuhnel, a cloud serpent, and then, in the process of chasing the other cloud serpent, Mimich, is caught in the barrel cactus and sacrificed.

Interestingly, “the rituals of Toci blending fertility, growth, harvest, parturition, and patriotic warfare all grow (mytho)logically from the elements found initially together in the little charter narrative of Xiuhnel, Mimich and the goddess Itzpapalotl.” And that narrative strikes the deepest of the chords relating to fertility in Mesoamerica: the necessity of sacrifice in reciprocation for the bounty of the earth.
Ahuiya! Yellow flowers open the blossom;
She, Our Mother with the sacred thigh-mask;
You emerge from Tamoanchan.

Ahuiya! Yellow flower is your flower:
She, Our Mother with the sacred thigh-mask
You emerge from Tamoanchan.
Ahuiya! White flowers open the blossom;
She, Our Mother with the sacred thigh-mask;
You emerge from Tamoanchan.

Ahuiya! White flower is your flower;
She, Our Mother with the sacred thigh-mask;
You emerge from Tamoanchan.
Ahuiya! Goddess upon the barrel cactus,
Our Mother, Aya, Itzpapalotl.
Ao, We had seen her;
on the Nine Plains
With hearts of deer she will nurture herself.
Our Mother, Aya, Lord of the Earth.
Ao, ye, With new chalk, new plumes,
She is anointed;
in the four directions arrows are broken.

Ao, To the deer transformed.
across the Divine Land to behold You
come Xiuhnel and Mimich.