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"Smoke and Mirrors" Tezcatlipoca, The Nature of an Aztec Deity

Research Year: 1997

Culture: Aztec

Chronology: Post Classic

Location: México

Site: Tenochtitlan and Aztec Area

This fellowship was awarded for library research into the nature of the Aztec deity **Tezcatlipoca**. The research can be broken down into four separate themes: (1) the nature of Tezcatlipoca, (2) Tezcatlipoca and the Spanish conquest, (3) Tezcatlipoca and obsidian mirrors, and (4) Tezcatlipoca and the Amerindian metaphysics of light.

The central focus of this work concerned ascertaining how Tezcatlipoca was perceived by the Aztecs in terms of Náhuatl mythical reality - his associations with creation, fertility-based calendrical rituals, sacrifice and death, his alter-ego as the jaguar Tepeyollotli, and his role as the omnipotent but mercurial patron of royalty.

In particular, it deals with identifying and sourcing the deity's shamanic nature, and the investigation into ways in which wider, more ancient shamanic features manifested themselves within a state-level hierarchical pantheon.

The contextualization of Tezcatlipoca's wider associations led to a re-evaluation of the god's largely 'hidden' role in the events surrounding the Spanish conquest of México. A careful reading of the relevant sources, alongside accounts of Aztec cosmogony and cosmology, revealed a complex but coherent alternative interpretation of the conquest - one in which **Tezcatlipoca** rather than **Quetzalcoatl** played the ultimately more significant and enduring role. (*This aspect is currently in preparation as a forthcoming article.*)

The third aspect of this work arose from the foregoing combined with a viewing of undisplayed objects in the **Dumbarton Oaks Collections**. It concerns the cataloguing and function of rectangular obsidian mirrors - many of which are in Mexican museums, though a significant number also in European museums which have subsequently been located. Universally labeled either as of "*unknown use*" or "*obsidian mirrors*", these objects may in fact have been a previously unsuspected material culture manifestation of religious syncretism. (*This aspect is currently in preparation as a forthcoming monograph.*)

The above suggested also a wider perspective, that in which Tezcatlipoca functioned as a culture-specific **Náhuatl** manifestation of a pan-Amerindian metaphysics of light. In particular, the ideological significance of the god's ascriptive qualities appear associated with metaphors of brilliance, correlated with the shamanic nature of sacred and royal power. (*This aspect appears as an article entitled, "Stealers of light, traders in brilliance: Amerindian metaphysics in the mirror of conquest", and appears in a forthcoming issue of RES: Art & Aesthetics, 1998.*)

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