

teyolia depended on the manner of death. The *teyolia* of a person who was sacrificed to the gods enjoyed the best fate of all. It shot straight up to a magnificent heaven. Next best was the fate of the *teyolia* of a warrior who bravely died in battle. His *teyolia* accompanied the sun on its journey from daybreak to noon for four years, after which it was reincarnated as a butterfly or a hummingbird. The *teyolia* of a woman who died during the birth of her first child was also honored. Her *teyolia* accompanied the sun from noon to sunset for four years, after which she became a powerful ghost who haunted the earth on certain days.

The *teyolia* of those people whose death was caused by the water god Tláloc—by accidents such as drowning or being struck by lightning, or through diseases related to excess water in the body such as rheumatism and dropsy—were sent on an arduous journey to the watery paradise of Tláloc and his female counterpart Chalchiuhtlicue. The *teyolia* of an infant who died while still nursing was returned to the heavens where it awaited another chance at life on earth. The *teyolia* of everybody else went to Mictlán, the underworld.

The third energy center was the *ihiyotl*, located in the liver, corresponding to the lower plane of the underworld. It was the center of vigor, of the breath, of all sorts of passions—envy, anger, carnal desire. An ill or damaged liver exuded a dangerous gas that spread disease. Laziness was associated with a weakened *ihiyotl*. Just as we say of a cowardly person, “Oh, he doesn’t have the guts,” the Aztecs would say of a lazy person, “Oh, he doesn’t have the liver.”

Since these three centers of the spirit were located in the body, diagnosis of an illness was spiritual as well as physical. A head injury or a chill could result in loss of precious *tonalli*. Certain emotional traumas could result in damage to the *ihiyotl*, causing liver problems. A Nahuatl definition of rage was “swollen liver,” which could explain the Mexican-American folk disease *bilis*, a liver-related ailment caused by *coraje*, excessive anger.

MAGIC AND MEDICINE

The Aztecs believed that just as the balance of the opposing forces in the cosmos must be maintained, imbalances in the human body led to disease. Since human beings were created from the opposing elements of heaven and

earth—the blood of the gods and the crushed bones of a former race—it was essential to maintain balance in the body. Bodily imbalance could be caused by excessive behavior, by infractions of the strict Aztec moral code, or by poor eating habits. An accident of any kind could unbalance the body, resulting in illness.

Disease could be inflicted by one of the many gods, as punishment for bad behavior, or it could be inflicted by a person with special powers. It was believed that some people, through no fault of their own, could involuntarily cause disease simply by looking at someone. Disease could also be caused by the malicious machinations of mortal sorcerers and witches.

These ideas have persisted over the centuries. Many people still believe that immoral or excessive behavior can lead to illness. Markets and *botánicas* still sell amulets to protect against the *ojo fuerte* or *mal de ojo*, the strong or evil eye. To this day in some Mexican-American neighborhoods it is commonly believed that anyone who looks admiringly at a child must also immediately touch that child, to negate the risk of accidentally inflicting the *mal de ojo*. And there still are professional *bruja*s, good witches, who are hired to undo the evil spells of sorcerers.

The Aztecs knew that disease could also be caused by uncleanness. Long before the invention of the microscope revealed the existence of microbes, they realized that disease could be passed invisibly from one person to another, by touch or through the air.

Aztec doctors were highly trained professionals. Like other trades, the practice of medicine was passed from father to son, mother to daughter, just as this gift of healing is handed down among generations of *curanderos* today. There were two kinds of Aztec doctors; all were specialists, each with an area of expertise patronized by one or more of the gods. The *tepatl* treated illness on the physical level. The *ticitl* treated illness on the spiritual level and were often trained in schools maintained by the priests. The services of both types of doctors might be required to remedy an illness.

The *tlamatepatli* were herbalists who treated gastrointestinal illnesses, respiratory and genito-urinary infections, and cardiac problems. Aztec dentists used herbs to treat inflamed gums, pulled teeth, and also did their share of cosmetic dentistry, setting precious gems into the teeth of the wealthy.

The midwives, forerunners of the *parteras* of today, were known as *tla-matquiticitl*, meaning doctors who tap with their hands, because of their skill at palpating the bellies of their pregnant patients. They provided an excellent

level of prenatal care, and partly because of their insistence on absolute cleanliness, the Aztec rate of survival in childbirth substantially exceeded that which prevailed in Europe where women routinely died from infections.

Aztec military surgeons were far more advanced than their European counterparts. Amazingly, Cortés and his men arrived in Mexico with a friar on board but no professional physician. The conquistadors dressed their battle wounds by searing them with hot oil. When they had no oil available, they cut the fat from the body of a slain opponent and melted it down to use as a dressing. If the wound began to ooze pus, they considered it a sign of healing.

The Aztec military surgeons first cleaned battle wounds with some sterile liquid; if nothing else was available, the urine of a healthy warrior would do fine for this purpose. Then they dressed the wound with maguey sap or pine oil, which discouraged infection. They stanching the bleeding with the herb *coapatli* (*Commelina pallida*), an effective styptic. They reduced swelling by applying the juice of the papaya or the prickly pear.

While European surgeons had no anesthetics to ease the suffering of their patients, the Aztec surgeon could choose from a selection of narcotic plants. They made their incisions with razor-thin obsidian knives and sutured them with human hair. Some Aztec doctors were highly skilled at setting bones, using feathers and the sap of a tree called *liquidámbar* to make a plaster.

But perhaps the most important of these specialists were the *papiani* or *panamacani*, the pharmacists who dispensed herbs and advice from their stalls in the *tianguis*, the great marketplaces. Cortés wrote to the king of Spain that in the great market at Tlateloco he had seen "herbalists selling all the many roots and medicinal plants that are found in the land. The apothecaries have houses of a sort there, where they sell medicines made from these herbs, for drinking and for ointments and salves." He could have been describing Mexico City's Sonora Market today.

BODY AND SOUL

Since the Aztecs treated the body and spirit as one inseparable entity, they were, in a sense, holistic healers. In making a diagnosis, the Aztec doctor looked for the spiritual as well as the physical source of an illness. For example, if a man were to fall ill after having been exposed to a cold wind, the

Aztec doctor, the *teopati*, might treat the symptoms caused by the chill. The spiritualist, the *tictli*, might try to discover which of the gods had inflicted the cold wind. He might divine the source of the illness by tossing corn kernels on a mat or into a vessel of water. Or he might ingest a hallucinogenic plant to put himself in an altered state so that his spirit, his *tonalli*, could travel through time and space to find the root of the illness.

In accordance with the Aztec dualistic worldview, the same god who caused an illness had the power to cure it. The doctors would treat the patient's physical symptoms, but they might also find it necessary to appease the god who caused them. In this way doctors and patient worked complicitously to remedy the illness through their shared belief system. The patient, believing that the appeased god would remove his illness, was psychologically primed to aid in his own recovery. This combination of the pharmaceutical and the spiritual added up to very effective medicine.

But these were no mere psychosomatic cures. We know this because the physical aspects of the treatment worked on the Spanish, who were firm non-believers. The sixteenth-century Spanish chronicles abound with tales of the Aztecs' medical superiority. The Franciscan friar Toribio Motolón wrote, "Some of the Indians are so experienced that they have cured many old and serious infirmities which the Spaniards have suffered many days without finding a remedy." And Cortés reputedly wrote to King Carlos I telling him not to bother sending any physicians to New Spain, as the native ones there were far better than those he knew at home.

THE GODS MUST BE DEAD

The Aztecs feared that their gods had abandoned them. Huitzilopochtli, the sun god who had led them to victory after victory, now permitted them to be defeated and humiliated by the Spanish. Nanáhuatl, who had protected them from loathsome diseases, now allowed them to suffer the horrors of a lethal and disfiguring scourge, as smallpox swept through every household in the capital of Tenochtitlán. Tonantzin, the grandmother, the earth goddess, goddess of medicine, who had watched over and nurtured them, now allowed them to be impoverished and enslaved. Still, they were unwilling to relinquish their will and their lives to the god of the Spaniards.