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Zelia Nuttall:
Ancient Mexican Superstitions.



ANCIENT MEXICAN SUPERSTITIONS

BY

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ANCIENT MEXICAN SUPERSTITIONS.

ANY one who has had occasion, as I have, to converse about ancient Mexico with a large number of persons of various nationalities, will have learned that in the mind of the average public there exist two dominant impressions concerning the Aztec race. It is in order to ask you to aid in rectifying these that I venture to bring them to your notice on this occasion. The first is the result of the unscrupulous exhibition, by a series of showmen, of certain microcephalous idiots, natives of Central America, who were rendered interesting and attractive by being advertised as the last living representatives of the Aztec race, now become extinct. If, instead of Aztecs, they had even been designated as Mayas, there might have been a shadow of an excuse, for the receding foreheads of these ugly and unfortunate dwarfs offered a certain resemblance to the artificially deformed heads of some of the personages carved in stone on the walls of the ruined temples of Yucatan. The erroneous idea that the Aztec race was a hideous one and is now extinct, has been widely disseminated, and become deeply rooted in the public mind, where it flourishes with the remarkable persistency that has been recognized as the special characteristic of scientific errors. Thus, it is not surprising to find, in George Du Maurier's last novel, "The Martian," an individual spoken of as being "as hideous as an Esquimaux or Aztec," and this combination of ideas is likely to linger on indefinitely in European countries, although the fraudulency of the showman's announcement has been exposed by leading anthropologists of various nationalities, for instance, by Professor Virchow in Berlin and by Dr. Ernest Hamy, the Director of the Trocadero Museum in Paris. Owing to our proximity to Mexico and the increasing intercourse with its inhabitants, there are probably few people of the United States who do not know that four sevenths of its population are pure Indians, belonging to different tribes, and that the Aztec race is represented by thousands of individuals, endowed with fine physiques and intelligence, who speak, with more or less purity, the language of Montezuma.

The second general impression, which often takes such a hold upon the imagination that it effaces all other knowledge about the ancient civilization of Mexico, is the natural horror awakened by the revolting mode of human sacrifice that was practised by the Aztec priesthood. The feeling of aversion thus awakened is so strong in some cases, especially when combined with the disagreeable impression received on viewing the miserable specimens of humanity believed to be "the last of the Aztecs," that one frequently finds the

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ancient Mexicans regarded as ugly, dwarfish, and bloodthirsty savages, having nothing in common with civilized humanity.

I must postpone the presentation of the full data I have collected concerning the Mexican rite of human sacrifice and other ceremonies connected with it, but I will at present draw attention to the extenuating circumstance that it was a religious ceremony, deemed so solemn and holy that it could be worthily performed by a high-priest only, in the presence of an awe-stricken community. As to the extent it was practised, it has long been recognized, by students of ancient Mexico, that the current accounts, based on the reports of certain Spanish writers, are grossly exaggerated, some say purposely, in order to justify, in the eyes of the civilized world, the cruel extermination of the native civilization. One thing is certain, that the Mexican mode of fulfilling what was believed to be a religious obligation, connected with their ancient doctrines of immortality, is the only blot or defect which the Spaniards were able to detect in a civilization which was so admirably organized in every other way. It is therefore a singular piece of injustice that, even in our times, an entire race of fellow-creatures should be condemned as naturally bloodthirsty and barbarous, because in ages gone by their priesthood had adopted the horrible and impressive but speedy method of taking the lives of the sacred victims which was extant at the time of the Conquest. I am tempted to quote here the words of a Spanish monk, named Fray Diego Duran, who spent his life amongst the Indians and towards the end of the sixteenth century wrote a valuable work for the benefit of his fellow missionaries. This enlightened and scholarly Spaniard, whose writings reveal his deep knowledge of human nature and his powers of insight, sympathy, and observation, obtained a clearer perception of the Indian character and entered more deeply into their inner lives than any other writer I know of. At the same time, considering that he was laboring with fanatical zeal to exterminate the ancient religion, which he looked upon as an invention of Satan to obtain possession of the souls of the natives, this Spanish friar cannot be charged with a sentimental tendency to idealize the native race or exaggerate their merits. For he even goes so far, in his exasperation against the aged Indians, who, at the time he wrote, sixty years after the Conquest, still kept alive the memory of their former religion and hindered the introduction of the Christian faith, as to exclaim, that "it would have been a more pardonable sin, on the part of his countrymen, if they had killed off all of these inveterate heathen instead of committing cruelties and atrocities against inoffensive men, women, and children, who were," he says, "slaughtered, hanged, empaled, or torn to pieces by the bloodhounds of the Spaniards,

whenever the latter wished to obtain possession of any gold, silver, or precious personal ornaments the natives happened to be wearing." Yet this same monk, who considered that the wholesale extermination of the aged persons who hindered the introduction of the Catholic religion might be almost justifiable, wrote the following comments upon the civilization of ancient Mexico, from the depth of his convictions, which were based on the most thorough and intimate knowledge and understanding of the native language and people. The friar's words, literally translated, are as follows:—

I have, many a time, entered into obstinate dispute with individuals belonging to our Spanish nation, who like to set down and abase this Indian race to such a low and vile level, that they only stop short at denying them the possession of reasoning faculties.

They consider and treat them as beasts and brutes, and, not content with these false opinions, they like to insist that the natives never possessed any former culture and had lived like animals, without any kind of accord, rule, or government. A greater error than this cannot be imagined, and I can affirm that, considering the isolation and remoteness of these people from intercourse with the Spanish and other cultured nations, there has never been a race in the world that lived in such accord or union and with so much order and culture as the Mexicans at the time of their infidelity.

I speak of the upper and cultivated class (Friar Duran continues), for I must confess that amongst the lowest there are many who are as rustic, dirty, and brutal as many persons of the same class in Spain, only our country-people are worse, for, however beastly such Indians may have been, they at least observed the laws of their country and their religion with as great decorum as their superiors.

In what country on earth (he exclaims), was there so much republican method, such just laws, and such excellent regulations? Where were rulers so feared and obeyed and their laws and commandments so faithfully kept? Where were the great, the brave, and the chieftains so respected and honored, their heroic achievements so enumerated? In what country were there so many cavaliers of noble descent, or so many valorous men who strove to exalt their names in warfare and to distinguish themselves in the service of their ruler, with the sole purpose of earning his approbation and regard? Where has there ever been or is there at present such reverence, esteem, and fear, as were shown towards the priests and ministers of their false gods, not only by the lowly, but also by the rulers, princes, and great lords, who prostrated themselves humbly at their feet, with a reverence approaching adoration?

If we descend (the friar continues), to consider their ancient religion, we may well inquire what people have there been who so faithfully observed their religious laws, precepts, rights, and ceremonies as these Indians? Certainly I, for one, do not know of any nation which was their superior in all of these respects, and I maintain that those who deny their merits are totally ignorant of the first principles requisite to obtain an idea of the

great state of culture or accord in which these people lived under their ancient laws and rule. This is, however, well known to us who understand the natives and their language and cultivate intercourse with them.

Nought but a shadow remains now (sixty years after the Conquest) of that good order, and all concerning their ancient laws and mode of living is mutilated or lost. But it awakens admiration to know how the entire population was kept count of and looked after and trained for any kind of work or business they might be needed for. In each branch there were teachers, guides, or governors, who respectively looked after the aged, the married, and the young, with such system and strict superintendence that not even a newly born babe could escape their notice. There were also surveyors of public works who watched that those who had worked during one week should be released the next, so that all should labor in turn and no one should feel aggrieved.

In another portion of his "Historia" Friar Duran again speaks of the Indians as belonging to a most courteous and polished or cultured race and reiterates his assertion "that they were not barbarous, as some of us Spaniards try to make them appear."

He likewise observes that Indian parents showed a tender love for their offspring which surpassed anything he had ever seen or heard of, and he used the expression that they would "give their very heart's-blood away" for their children. He tells us that married couples who raised large families "were praised and honored," that parents were held directly responsible for the conduct of their children, and that the accusation of having brought them up badly was felt as "an affront which was worse than death."

From his writings we also learn to realize with what an earnestness and steadfastness of purpose these Indians braved indescribable pain and suffering in order to obtain, for their souls, immortality and eternal happiness in the heavenly Mansion of the Sun. We find that if the Mexican priests seem cruel, inasmuch as they immolated individual enemies taken in warfare, or criminals who were degraded to the rank of slaves, the sufferings of the human victims, who were usually rendered unconscious by means of strong drugs and were speedily dispatched upon the sacrificial stone, were not to be compared to the excruciating tortures voluntarily inflicted by the priests upon themselves from conscientious motives. Frequently, as a penance, they pierced, with their own hands, their tongues, ears, forearm, or other parts of their bodies, and then passed a number of sharp agave thorns, sticks, or twisted ropes through the openings in the living flesh. They practised a rigorous asceticism, and the entire population, including the sick and the young, often underwent the same penitential ordeals and periods of fasting which even Friar Duran designates as "excessive." To cite an instance of what the priests underwent for their religious faith:—

Once a year, during the festival held in honor of the God of Fire, they assembled around a large open fire, all carrying, in each hand, two sticks composed of the resinous gum called copal. After removing their clothing, they squatted around the fire, and, lighting these sticks, allowed the liquid gum to run and spatter over their bare hands, arms, and bodies; thus, as Friar Duran says, "burning or sacrificing themselves alive to their god." Subsequently, they threw the burnt-down ends of the sticks into the fire, as well as the drops they removed from their bodies, and, adding great quantities of fresh copal as fuel, performed a solemn religious dance around the fire, chanting songs relating to the God of Fire and to their penance.

Another "unheard of and horrible sacrifice," as Friar Geronimo de Mendieta terms it, was as follows: "On a certain day, all the priests being assembled, a high-priest perforated the tongue of each one with a sharp obsidian knife. Then, setting them the example, he passed through the opening in his own tongue four hundred sticks, of the size of a man's wrist. The oldest and most strong-minded, who were accustomed to this form of torture, imitated him, others only passed three hundred through their tongues, and others less, according to their powers of endurance; none of the sticks employed being thinner than a man's thumb." This penance was repeated four times during the ensuing period of eighty days during which a most rigorous fast was observed.

Instances like these explain why Friar Duran also wrote: "It cannot but awaken our admiration . . . to note the fear, the reverence, and the fidelity with which the natives carried out the precepts and ceremonies of their false religion, especially if we contrast it with the laxity and the lack of fear and reverence with which we (friars) keep and cause others to observe the divine and true laws of our holy Catholic Church." It is indeed well that the foregoing eulogies, comments, and testimony were penned in the sixteenth century, by a Spaniard, and not by a so-called Mexicanist of the present day; for it must be admitted that the latter would scarcely escape being charged with undue sentimentalism and a conscious or unconscious desire to idealize the virtues and exalt the past history of the native race. For nowadays, as in the time of Duran, there are persons who are lacking in elementary knowledge concerning their past history, but who like to abase the native races of America to the lowest level possible and to deny the great antiquity and merits and attainments of the ancient American civilizations, from which, if the truth concerning them were better known and appreciated, many a useful lesson could be learned by the present generation.

The charges of ignorance and of exaggeration can certainly not be imputed to the obscure predicant friar who wrote the results of his

observation and study of the native race for the benefit and enlightenment of his fellow-missionaries alone. It would seem as though his open condemnation of the current views of his countrymen caused his writings to be viewed with disfavor in Spain, for the manuscript copy of his "Historia" was consigned to oblivion, and lay forgotten in a Spanish library until brought to light and published by the most distinguished of Mexican scholars, Don José F. Ramirez, in 1867. The Spaniards of the present day, however, can well be proud of the high-minded and enlightened monk who so nobly represented their race at a time and in a country where others discredited it.

Having gained from Friar Duran an idea of the true vastness and greatness of the ancient Mexican civilization, we shall now be better fitted to study the following native superstitions, and to relegate them to their proper sphere, as being only one of many factors in the complex lives of an industrious and intelligent people.

The following accounts are mostly derived from the writings of Friar Duran, Friar Mendieta, and of the learned Franciscan monk Fray Bernardino de Sahagun, who filled a whole chapter of his "Historia" with a collection of native superstitions. It may be as well to mention here that his purpose in doing so was to enable his fellow-missionaries to detect, in the natives, any lingering traces of their ancient beliefs, so that these could be fought against and extirpated. It is interesting to find that the majority of these superstitions centre about the home, the hearth, the preparation of food, and the bringing up of children, and afford us occasional glimpses of every-day life in a Mexican household before the arrival of the Spaniards, and that they are often pleasing and always replete with human interest.

When a man finished building a new house for himself and family, he assembled all his relatives and neighbors and kindled a new fire in their presence, on the hearth, with a fire drill. If the fire kindled rapidly, they said that the home would be happy and peaceful; if it delayed in kindling, it was believed that the dwelling would be unfortunate and full of grief.

A ceremony named *Tlaçaliztli* was likewise performed on such occasions, in honor of the God of Fire and of the Sun. The owner of the new house drew a drop of blood from his ear, received it on the nail of his index or middle finger, and flung it towards the Sun or into the fire. This offering to the fire was but a more reverential form of the common, every-day custom named *Tlatlaçaliztli*, meaning "the throwing," which consisted in throwing a mouthful into the fire before partaking of any kind of food. No one ever drank of the national drink, pulque, without spilling some of it upon the

hearth. When one of the large earthen jars in which this beverage was kept was first opened, some of its contents was poured into a bowl and placed near the fire. Then four cupfuls of the liquid were taken from the bowl and poured out consecutively, at the four corners of the hearth. It was customary for none of the guests to partake of the drink until this rite had been performed. It was called *Tlatoiaoztli*, literally "the libation or the tasting."

Although it belongs, more strictly speaking, to the category of religious observances, I am tempted to mention here another peculiar every-day custom which was observed, as Sahagun states, by every man, woman, and child throughout ancient Mexico.

When any one entered any building in which images of the gods were kept, he bent low, touched the ground with the index or middle finger, carried it to his tongue, and licked it. They called this act "the eating of earth in honor of the gods." They performed it also on reëntering their own house, even after a short absence, on passing by temples and oratories, and as an act of homage towards a superior. They employed it as an asseveration of the truth of a statement, and their manner of taking an oath was as follows: "By the life of the Sun and of our lady the Earth, there is no error in my statement, and in proof of this I eat this earth." Upon this the speaker stooped and carried the earth to his tongue. The Spanish chronicler records, with a touch of scorn, that "the natives eat earth when they take an oath," but also remarks that this rite was a safe and reliable test of the truth of an Indian's assertion.

The veneration shown for the maize indicates the great antiquity of its use and its position as the most highly-esteemed native food-product. If a person came across grains of maize which had fallen to the ground, he was obliged to pick them up, for he who did not do so offended the maize, and it complained about him to God, saying: "Lord, punish this person who saw me lying upon the ground and did not pick me up; let him feel the pangs of hunger, so that he will learn not to despise me."

According to what Sahagun terms an ancient and deeply-rooted superstition, it was necessary to breathe strongly upon maize which was about to be put into the pot to be boiled, the idea being that this gave it courage, and removed its dread of being cooked.

In a house in which a birth had recently taken place, corn-cobs were not thrown into the fire to be burned as usual. It was said that if this was done the face of the new-born babe would become pitted and pocked, like the corn-cob, unless the precaution was taken to pass the cobs, before burning them, over the face of the child without touching it.

A current belief was that if persons ate green corn at night they

would suffer from toothache. In order to prevent this evil it was customary to warm the ears of corn before eating them after dark, — which was undoubtedly the pleasantest method, quite apart from superstitious reasons.

If a maize-cake or tortilla doubled over when thrown upon the comal or clay-pan to bake, it was considered a sure sign that some one was coming towards the house. If her husband happened to be out, the woman to whom this happened whilst cooking believed it to be a sign that he was on his way home, and said "it was he who had kicked the tortilla and made it double up."

When sparks flew out of the fire, the persons close to it said in fear: "Aquin yeuitz?" which means, "Who is it that is coming?" for a shower of sparks announced a disturber, or unwelcome visitor. There is an amusing affinity between this and the omens betokening approaching visitors that are familiar to us all, and the sense of familiarity increases when we learn that when a person sneezed in ancient Mexico, it was considered a sign that some one was speaking evil about him, or that one or more persons were talking about him.

Returning to the superstitions connected with the preparation of food, we find that when tamales stuck fast to the pot in which they were being boiled, they exerted an unlucky influence on those who ate them. A man would not be able to shoot his arrows well in warfare; a woman would never have children, or would bear them with great difficulty. It is interesting to note that a properly constituted tamale should be so closely tied in its wrapper made of corn-husks, that none of it should be able to ooze out and cause the little bundle to adhere to the pot; therefore it is probable that the above was a saying which was most frequently employed as an awful warning to the careless cook. Indeed, several of the sayings gravely recorded by the Franciscan friar as diabolical superstitions resolve themselves into harmless threats or warnings, none of which are calculated to inspire such terror as some of those in daily use in many nurseries in this and other highly-civilized countries. When an Aztec mother told her boy that if he served himself with his hands from the olla or earthen pot containing food for the whole family, or if he dipped sops of bread into it, he would be unlucky in warfare when he grew up, and would probably fall into the hands of his enemies, I imagine that the remoteness of the retribution somewhat counteracted the effect of the threat, which seems to have been a habitual one, since it was also uttered when children stepped over the hearth, and thus exposed themselves to the danger of falling and hurting themselves on the hearthstones. Its employment certainly reveals at what an early age the desire for success

in warfare was awakened and developed in the minds of Mexican youths.

It is difficult not to smile on recognizing the playful banter contained in the paragraph of Sahagun's "Historia" bearing the pompous superscription: "About eating whilst standing." It merely informs us that mothers forbade their daughters to eat whilst standing, because a young girl who did so would not marry in her native village, but would settle in a neighboring locality. Since the habitual preference for standing betokens a restless disposition, it seems that this saying may have been the result of a long course of observation of the result of roaming tendencies in village maidens. The fact that the separation from her family was uttered as a kind of playful threat throws a pleasant light on the closeness of home ties.

The existence of a peculiar etiquette observed in the family is shown by the record, that if brothers and sisters were drinking together and the youngest drank first, the oldest exclaimed: "Do not drink before me, for if you do so you will stop growing."

It was also the custom when persons ate or drank in the presence of an infant in its cradle, to place a particle of their food or drink in its mouth, saying that this would prevent its having the hiccough.

A recognition of the dangers of idleness underlies the curious statement that parents forbade their children to lean against posts, because persons who did so habitually became liars, "for the posts themselves were untruthful."

It was said that naughty children who licked the grinding-stone on which their mothers prepared the maize for food would quickly lose their front and back teeth.

The breaking of this metlatl or grinding-stone corresponded to the breaking of a looking-glass in our times, and was an omen of the death of its owner or of some member of the household, just as the displacement or breaking of one of the beams of a house also betokened illness or death.

The metlatl, indeed, played a prominent rôle in household superstitions. When a man was about to take part in the national game of ball, he took care to place on the floor, upside-down, the metlatl and the comal or earthen pan on which the tortillas were baked. He also took the metlapil or pestle and hung it in a corner of the room. Having done this, he felt convinced that he would win instead of being beaten. As this precautionary measure meant the suspension of the confining and arduous labor of making the native bread, the tortilla, it may be surmised that this superstition was warmly encouraged by the women of the household, who were thus left free to enjoy a look at the game, which was played in large

courts specially built for this form of pastime and was the favorite national sport. A strange relationship was believed to exist between the metlapil, or stone pestle, and the race of rats. Whenever a house was infested by these creatures, and attempts were being made to exterminate them, it was customary to place the pestle outside of the dwelling, for if kept within it had a way of warning rats not to fall or trip, and thus run the risk of being caught and killed.

The presence of rats was viewed with much awe and dread, for it was believed that they possessed the faculty of knowing whenever a member of the household had been guilty of immorality, in which case they immediately put in an appearance and gnawed at the mats, baskets, etc. They denounced marital infidelity by gnawing holes in the petticoat of the wife, or in the cloak of the guilty husband.

It was believed that if a person ate a piece of any food which had been gnawed at or been left over by rats, he would be falsely accused of theft or of some other crime, — a serious misfortune, considering that theft was punished by death.

When a child lost a milk-tooth, its parents took care to throw the tooth into a rat-hole, for if this was not attended to, the child would not grow any second teeth, and remain toothless.

It was likewise customary to carefully cast the parings of one's nails into the water as an offering to the Ahuizotl, the fabulous aquatic monster which plays such an important rôle in Mexican folklore. As a reward for this acceptable offering, which formed one of its favorite articles of food, the Ahuizotl caused the donor's nails to grow satisfactorily.

The views held by the Mexicans concerning the phenomenon of growth or development seem to have been very peculiar, although I believe that they are not unique. It is evident that parents believed that the growth of their children could be suddenly arrested by a variety of external causes or accidents. A dread of these formed one of the chief cares of their lives, and innumerable precautions were taken against them.

At the beginning of the native year a festival was held, in which certain ceremonies were performed for the purpose of furthering the growth of food-plants, and also of children. The people went out into the fields at daybreak, and lightly pulled at some of the young shoots in their plantations, or plucked them, with their roots, and offered them, in bunches, in certain temples. At the conclusion of this ceremony, and before the children had partaken of any food, "their parents pulled at, or stretched their limbs and all parts of their body separately, and also lifted it several times from the ground, holding them by the sides of their heads, above their ears." It was believed that this ceremony, which was named "Teizcalanal-

iztli," was indispensable, as it alone endowed the children with the power to grow during the new year. It was also performed after or during an earthquake, so as to prevent the sudden stoppage of a child's growth, or its "being carried away (or killed) by the earthquake." Another ancient superstition taught that any person who stepped over a child which was lying or sitting on the ground deprived it at once of its power to grow, and condemned it to remain small always. Fortunately there was a possibility of counteracting this disaster by stepping over the child a second time, in the reverse direction.

Other superstitious observances show us with what tender and constant solicitude Aztec mothers watched over their little ones, and thus we gain an idea of the parental virtues of the natives which caused Friar Duran to make the observation that the Indians "showed a greater love for their children than any other people in the world."

The superstitious observance called Neelpilztlī, which means, "the care about a child," was resorted to when a child was ill or delicate, and it had to be repeated four times in order to insure a recovery. The parents consulted an astrologer, as he is termed in the text, who, choosing a day of a special sign, tied certain cords, made of loose cotton thread, around the child's neck, wrists, and ankles. A small ball of copal gum was also attached to the cord worn about the neck. When the cords had been worn for the number of days, determined in advance by the astrologer, he removed and burned them in the capulco, a small temple where only such minor ceremonies were performed.

When a woman went to visit a friend who had been recently confined, and happened to take her children with her, she immediately, upon entering the house, went to the hearth, and with a handful of ashes rubbed all their joints and their temples. It was believed that if this observance was omitted, the children would become maimed, and that when they moved all their joints would crackle. Custom demanded, however, that no one should carry away embers from the fire, which was kept continually burning for four days and nights after the occurrence of a birth, for this would "take away from the good fortune of the infant."

Another source of parental anxiety was the belief that the souls of the women who died in childbirth descended to earth on four particular days of the year, and inflicted sudden and dangerous diseases, especially paralysis, upon any children which happened to come in their way. For this reason parents took care to keep their children in-doors on such days, and propitiated the "goddesses" by decorating, with rushes and flowers, their oratories, which were

always built at the crossings of roads, being the favorite haunts of the goddesses. Some anxious parents, in accordance with a vow, decked the images in these oratories with sacrificial papers covered with drops of sacred gum, whilst others offered food and drink, which as recorded by Sahagun were always confiscated by the priests of these oratories, who, after consuming the food in each other's company, carried the favorite native drink, the pulque, to their respective homes, distributed some of it to the aged men and women, and then spent the day in paying each other visits. The latter circumstances throw a flood of light upon the influences which may have created and cultivated the parental dread of the malignant goddesses, and the advisability of propitiating them by bountiful and dainty offerings.

When twins were born, which, according to Mendieta, happened frequently in Mexico, it was considered a sign of the approaching death of one of the parents. In order to avert this one of the twins was immediately put to death. The name for twins was cocoua, which is also the name for serpents. According to an ancient tradition the first woman who bore twins was named Coatl or Serpent, and therefore twins were also named serpents. When both were allowed to live, one of them surely killed or devoured one of its parents.

The surviving twin was supposed to exert a series of strange and powerful influences by his mere presence. For instance, if he approached the temazcalli or sweat-house while it was being heated, its temperature grew cold, even if it had been quite hot previously. This was especially the case when a twin happened to be amongst the bathers. To remedy this it was imperative that the twin should dip his hands into water and sprinkle the interior of the sweat-house four times, after which it ceased to grow cold and became even hotter than before.

If a twin entered a house where tochimiltl or rabbit's wool was being dyed, the dye became spoiled at once and the stuff covered with spots, especially if the dye was red in color.

It was also said that when a twin entered a dwelling where tamales or maize-cakes were being cooked, he cast an evil spell upon them and on the olla or pot. This prevented their cooking, even if they remained over the fire all day long, and they became brass-colored or half cooked and half burned.

Fortunately, in each case the twin was equal to the emergency, and promptly remedied the evils caused by his presence. In this case it sufficed that he should kindle a fresh fire under the pot. If it happened, however, that tamales were put into the pot in his presence, he was obliged to throw one of them in also, or else none of them could be made to cook.

If we infer from the above that twins were not welcome visitors, we must admit that their presence must have been less dreaded than that of a person leading an immoral life and contemptuously termed a "tlaçolli." If such a person approached a yard in which chickens were just creeping out of their egg-shells, these immediately fell upon their backs, stretched their legs upwards, and died of the tlaçolmiqui or "death caused by a tlaçolli." If chickens died in this remarkable way, in a household, it was considered a sure sign of the infidelity of the husband or wife.

Beside being betrayed by rats, as we have already seen, guilty persons could also be detected by the warping of the woof which inevitably appeared in any piece of stuff that was woven for his or her use. It may be as well to record here that, in ancient Mexico, the above offence was mercilessly punished by the death of both guilty parties.

An obscure and curious superstition connected with the native turkey, which was domesticated by the Indians long before the Conquest, is as follows :—

When a hen was hatching, no person wearing sandals on his feet was allowed to approach her, for if he did so the eggs produced no chickens ; or, if any were hatched, they sickened and died immediately. The remedy resorted to was to place an old pair of sandals close to the hen's nest.

It was comparatively easy to guard a house from the visitations of a sorcerer : it sufficed to place a bowl of water containing an obsidian knife behind the door, or in the courtyard, at night-time. It was said that when a wizard gazed into the bowl and saw his own reflection in it, traversed by the obsidian knife, he turned and fled and never ventured to return.

Carlos de Bustamante records that, as recently as in 1829, the natives believed that they could guard themselves against sorcerers by means of a circle composed of mustard-seed or a line drawn with charcoal, possibly imported Spanish methods.

In order to preserve their crops from destruction, owners of maize or bean fields scattered ashes in the courtyards of their houses during hailstorms.

During earthquakes, besides protecting their children's growth, the Indians sprinkled with water (taken into the mouth and blown out) all their valuable possessions, as well as the thresholds and lintels of their houses, in order to prevent their being "carried away." Those who neglected this usage were reproved by their neighbors. It was customary to give warning to all of the approach, or presence, of an earthquake by uttering loud cries, whilst slapping one's mouth with the palm of one's hand.

Eclipses were particularly disquieting to pregnant women, especially if they gazed at the sun or moon, in which, by the way, the Mexicans saw the figure of a rabbit. In such a case her child was liable to be metamorphosed into a rat or to be afflicted with some physical defect, such as a so-called hare-lip. According to Bustamante, this superstition still existed in Mexico in the first quarter of this century, when it was still customary to say of a child thus afflicted: "It was devoured by the eclipse." Sahagun relates, however, that a pregnant woman ventured to observe an eclipse when she had taken the precaution to wear a small obsidian knife over her bare bosom. In order to guard herself against seeing phantoms, when she went out at night-time, she usually carried some ashes in the same way. She avoided seeing criminals executed by hanging or strangulation, lest her child should be born with a cord of flesh around its neck. She also gave up the habit of chewing the gum named *tzictli*, a native invention which has been adopted in other countries, with the use of tobacco. It was believed that if she persisted in this national habit, her child would suffer from shortness of breath and die soon after birth. If she went out often after dark, her child would be inclined to cry or weep much, and if its father happened to see a phantom while out at night-time, the child developed heart disease; in order to avert these and other calamities, the mother placed some ashes, pebbles, or copal in her bosom, and the father carried likewise pebbles or a few leaves of wild tobacco.

Concerning dreams and their interpretations, I have only been able to find the following record in Friar Duran's "*Historia*."

In ancient times the natives looked upon dreams as divine revelations, and if they dreamed that they had lost one or more teeth, it was considered a sign of an impending death in their family. If a person dreamed of eating meat, it meant the death of one's husband or wife; if of being carried away by water, it meant that one's property would be stolen. Finally, to dream of flying in the air caused fear of one's approaching death.

Duran likewise records that the origin of a certain deity and of the outward appearance of its image or idol dated from the dream of a priest, who proclaimed it as a divine revelation, painted a picture of the god of his vision, and caused it to be adored. This instance throws an interesting light on the importance attached to visions by the priesthood, who resorted to fasting and certain vegetable drugs in order to induce them.

A strange practice was observed by the venders of Indian blankets who had been unable to dispose of their merchandise during the day. They laid two pods of chile or red pepper between the blankets at night-time, saying that they "fed the blankets with chile

in order to make sure that they would sell on the following day." These merchants also constantly carried about with them as a talisman the dried hand of a monkey, saying that its presence insured an immediate sale of their merchandise. This practice seems to have been ancient and deeply rooted, since Sahagun states that it was still followed in his time.

In conclusion, I shall describe the use and reputed powers of certain strange talismans, without entering into a discussion of their origin, since this would carry us beyond the scope of the present paper, into the domain of religious belief. Suffice it to state at present, that according to a lofty and touching idea, the ancient Mexicans considered that a woman who endured the sufferings of childbirth courageously, but succumbed to them, was entitled to receive the supreme reward of immortality and eternal happiness, which was otherwise bestowed only upon the heroes of the nation who had distinguished themselves or had died on the battlefield in the service of his country. The women who had died in childbirth were, as Sahagun tells us, "canonized as goddesses and adored as such," and their left arm and hand, or merely their finger and hair, were regarded as sacred talismans.

Such a talisman was specially coveted by warriors, because they believed that if their leader carried it in his shield in warfare, they would become supernaturally daring and invincible. In the words of the chronicler, "they were thereby rendered so strong, courageous, and fearless, that no one dared face them; thus they trampled upon their enemies and seized them as captives."

Quite apart from anything supernatural, it is easy to realize what an influence such a talisman may have exerted over the minds of the warriors who possessed it and on the imagination of their enemies, who perhaps dreaded its reputed power and succumbed by mere suggestion. In connection with these talismans, it is an interesting fact that there exists in the Royal Ethnographical Museum in Berlin a small, finely-worked terra-cotta jar with a lid, which, when taken from a grave in Coban, Guatemala, by Herr Diesseldorf, was found to contain a dried human finger and an obsidian knife. When I visited the museum with my friend Miss Alice Fletcher in 1895, we examined with much interest the curious little jar, which is decorated with a human figure and was evidently planned for the purpose of holding its strange and well-preserved contents. When it is realized that an obsidian knife was, as we have seen, employed as a charm against phantoms and sorcerers, and that certain human fingers were much prized talismans, their presence in a grave is accounted for, and they furnish interesting testimony that the ideas concerning their value may have been widely spread in Central America as well as in Mexico.

Another class of men vied with the warriors in attempting to obtain possession of the celestial woman's dead body, for the purpose of securing one of its arms and hands. These were the sorcerer-thieves, the *tomamacpalitotique*, a name which is recorded, in the singular, in Molina's dictionary, as meaning "a thief who steals and robs by means of enchantments or sorcery." The individuals who exercised this extraordinary profession did not choose it of their own free will, but had been predestined to become sorcerers by the mere fact that they had been born on the day of the native calendar-year bearing the sign *Ce Acatl* or one cane. This detail affords an insight into the enormous influence attributed to the day-signs by the ancient Mexicans, who consulted their astrologers upon every occasion, and were thus completely in their power.

The description given by Sahagun of the mode of procedure adopted by the sorcerer-thieves is so curious that it merits translation.

They always chose for the exercise of their calling a day bearing the numeral nine, united to certain calendar signs which were considered particularly auspicious. Having decided to rob and plunder a certain house, they formed a band consisting of 15 to 20 fellow-sorcerers, and manufactured an image of a serpent or of the patron of necromancy, *Quetzalcoatl*, the "Feathered Serpent." They then set out and "danced towards the house," that is to say, they advanced in unison, with measured steps, such as were executed in some of the old sacred dances. One of the leaders carried the aforesaid effigy, whilst a second carried over his shoulder the left forearm and hand of a woman who had died in childbirth, which possessed the magical power of depriving persons of their senses. In order to employ this against the inmates of the house, the thieves first halted in its courtyard and struck blows upon the ground with the dead hand and then knocked with it at the threshold or lintels of the entrances. It was said that the effect of these ominous sounds caused the inmates of the house to fall into a profound sleep or swoon, and that they could not move or speak and seemed lifeless, although they saw and heard all that was going on. Some, however, actually slept, and even snored; whereupon the thieves lighted their torches and first searched the house for provisions, and proceeded to enjoy a tranquil repast, the rightful owners observing them, spellbound. The robbers then ransacked the dwelling, took possession of every article of value it contained, tied these in bundles, and after committing other misdeeds, decamped and ran to their respective homes, laden with their booty. None of them rested on their way home; for it was said that if they did so they lost their power to rise again, and, being held spellbound until morning, were seized with their spoil and forced to betray their accomplices. In Dr. Otto Stoll's

valuable and suggestive work on the rôle of suggestion and hypnotism in the history of psychology, he points out that the symptoms described above as produced by the talismanic knocks are identical with those of suggestive catalepsy, aphasia, and hypnotism by suggestion. It can well be imagined that the mere fact of being aroused, under such terrifying circumstances, by sounds proceeding from a talisman reputed to rob persons of the power of motion, may well have induced the conditions indicated by Dr. Stoll. At all events, his work has the merit of affording natural explanations of many of the effects produced upon various primitive people by their necromancers and medicine-men, and of proving the immense influence and power that mental suggestion has ever exerted over the human mind, in every country and in all times.

If we now review the foregoing superstitions, we find that with a few exceptions they were simple and harmless, and evidently arose from the essentially human tendencies and weaknesses which cause similar superstitious practices to be observed even in all the most highly civilized countries at the present time.

The cruel practice of putting one twin-child to death immediately after birth points to a period in tribal history when life was extremely difficult, and parents may have literally had to starve themselves in order to bring up their families. The historical records of terrible famines which threatened the very existence of the nation, as well as innumerable references to the sufferings caused by starvation, in the native harangues which have been handed down to us, testify that, far back in their history, before the conquest of the southern provinces with their wealth of vegetable food-products, the inhabitants of the central plateau of Mexico had frequently to fight with actual starvation.

In conclusion, I trust that the foregoing material, now collected and presented for the first time, may prove of interest and use to students of American folk-lore, and aid in establishing the limits of the influences of the ancient Mexican culture in olden times.

I also hope that it may lead to a growing recognition of the bonds of universal brotherhood which unite the present inhabitants of this great and ancient continent to their not unworthy predecessors, who, during untold centuries, labored, suffered, and strove with terrible earnestness to solve, as best they could, the great problem of human life.

Zelia Nuttall.

NOTE. — Works referred to: Fray Bernardino de Sahagun, *Historia General de las cosas de Nueva-España*, ed. Bustamante, Mexico, 1830. Fray Diego Duran, *Historia de las Indias de Nueva-España*, ed. Ramirez, Mexico, 1867. Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta, *Historia Eclesiastica Indiana*, ed. Icazbalceta, Mexico, 1870.









