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**Ethical issues in náhuatl pre-Columbian thought:
a genealogical approach**

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We were born in American continent, however our hegemonic worldvision was built with Europeans languages like spanish, portuguese, english and french. In the surface, this paradoxical situation could be not important, but since genealogic point of view represents a relevant topic. In this way, the social use of the language is a very important tool in the development of human sensibility, cultural values and moral costumes.

For this reason my task —at this time— is to shown, some of the main ethical issues of Mesoamerican cultures, especially from the Mexica culture or Aztecs, related with rhetorical skills, but since a genealogical point of view. To reach a deeply understanding of genealogical approach, in a philosophical sense, I consider very important to recognize different types of buried wisdom. Secondly in every culture, we can see daily struggles to determine who is the owner of truth, a consequence is the existence of buried wisdom by the effects of hegemonic worldvision or knowledge.

In this way I consider that a genealogical approach is very useful, to make a critical study of the culture and the systems to produce the truth. In this case my objectives are focus on a briefly study of ethical issues in pre-Columbian náhuatl thought. For example I believe that some concepts like origin or essence, could be replaced with complementary ones like to come from (*Herkunft*) and to emerge (*Entstehung*).

The philosophical meaning of to come from, focus on broken immobile theoretical horizons, with its dynamism is been able to separate facts and discourses that seems together to our common sense, and for this reason show

us diversity and heterogenic. This use of *Herkunft* does not reduce to a theoretical speculation, also is closely related with human body.

The philosophical meaning of the second theoretical tool makes evident when a variety of discourses are transformed in a force or power. *Entstehung* represents the points to emerge, and for this reason we can understand it like a driving force, that allows us to reach the surface of a fact. *Entstehung* represents a place of confrontation but also, a moment when a discourse is capable to transform reality.

With these ideas in mind, my objective in this essay is to shown the functions of this concepts related with some ethical issues in nahuatl pre-Columbian thought. After of this theoretical introduction, I will analyze briefly some moral concepts in Mesoamerican Aztec thought, like ethical tradition, the concept of human being, evil and good.

The study of some manuscripts and chronicles written during sixteen century can give us enough information to analyze some moral topics developed by *tlamatinimeh*¹. The historical sources, to do it this work, were the compilations of texts made by Andres de Olmos and Bernardino de Sahagún, specially all of those included in the sixth book of *Florentine Codex*.

In Aztec culture ethical traditions were expressed by at least two types of moral discourses: 1) *machiotlahtolli*, the model word and 2) *huehuetlahtolli*, the word of the ancestors. The Aztecs were very famous in Mesoamerica by their rhetoric abilities, they developed their language in a high level, and for this

¹ A detail explanation about the historical sources, to research about nahuatl pre-Columbian thought, can be found it in the work of Miguel León-Portilla. *La filosofía náhuatl*, specially. The main documents are náhuatl testimonies of Sahagun`s informants. This testimonies were compiled in the *Codex Florentine* and *Codice Matritense*. Another important source is "The book of the twelve" because is able to show some arguments developed in a very interesting debate between aztec wise men and the first 12 Franciscans friars that arrived to México in 1524. See Miguel León-Portilla (1997:7-27).

reason the word was related with political and magical powers. Two examples are enough to complete my explanation, first the meaning of the word *nahuatl* is “sounds good”, second the meaning of the word *tlatoani* —that was the main religious and political charge— is “ who speaks”.

The *machiotlahtolli* is a type of discourse characterized by its lapidary briefly, ethical topics and categorical style; however the most important goal, to get an adequate comprehension of their meaning implies an active participation of the subject. *Machiotlahtolli* has a vital sense because also can explain, justify or condemned human actions, in the context of ordinary life, but always in a metaphorical way expressed many times by enigmas and proverbs.

The *huehuetlahtolli* were related with “disciplinary mechanisms” that ensure the continuity of cultural values, moral rules and educational institutions. Most of times were reserved for special occasions like births, religious rituals, weddings, war speeches, and funerals. A great example is the *huehuetlahtolli* A recompiled by Andres de Olmos, because is able to show us the importance attributed to education, in the moral formation of the Mesoamerican people:

- 1.-Start to teach them
- 2.-how they have to live
- 3.-how they must respect persons
- 4.-how they to hand to convenient and rectitude
- 5.-how to avoid evil
- 6.-runaway with force from evil
- 7.-wickedness and eagerness.²

In this text are evident some moral questions about how human beings have to live, but in my opinion is better to concentrate our efforts, in the study of moral values like respect. Moreover, in Aztec thought the main question about the moral feature of human actions have to resolve in relationship with the

² See Ángel María Garibay. “*Huehuetlahtolli*, Documento A”, en *Tlalocan*, t. I, pp31-53 y 87-107.

tlamatiniliztli or ancient rule of life, the moral sense of this word could meaning “all those things that must stand”.

Ethical traditions in nahuatl pre-Columbian thought

In this field we can recognize an ancient tradition in all Mesoamerican territory before the period of contact with the Spaniards, however to avoid from speculations I will only study ethical traditions in nahuatl pre-Columbian thought, because we have some historical sources, that are very helpful in this effort. Before start, I want to clarify that Aztec culture was the result of the fusion of cultural features, to come from nomad tribes who's lived in the north of Mexico, with cultural features to come from sedentary groups of the center whose built cities like: Xochicalco, Tula, Azcapotzalco and Texcoco.

The main ethical tradition from the Aztecs was considered a heritage to come from “Toltecas”, a culture closely related with the wisdom of Quetzalcoatl (the plumed serpent). The word *tolteca** was consider like a synonym for artist and literally refers to the presence of deity in human hearts. This way of life was called *Toltecatoytl*. The historical source, that refers this cultural heritage, is a briefly nahuatl text know it like *Libro de los Coloquios*.

In this document are available the main topics of a debate occurred in 1524 between de Spanish friars and *tlamatinimeh*; specially in chapter seven we can found the answer to come from Mexica wise men. The full text was edited in 1564 by Bernardino de Sahagún, however is possible to follow the paths of pre-Columbian ethical traditions. The *tlamatinime* were very surprised, suddenly their culture started to disappear in front of their eyes, all the rules and

moral values changed, a new political order —supported in a different culture— was created. An example of their amazing is the next fragment of their answer:

“New word is this, the word that you talk, and by its cause we are disturbed, we are afraid, because our ancestors, those who came to exist, to live on the earth did not talk in this way. Truly they gave us their rule of life”. León-Portilla, Miguel. (1986. 151)

Tlamatinimeh had to resolve a big moral dilemma, if they accepted individually the new religious beliefs; they have to leave the rule of life to come from ancestors, their cultural heritage. Moreover they were forced constantly to change their point of view. In a hostile environment, under pressure it's clearly their reject to the beliefs established against their will. The philosophical value of the *Libro de los Coloquios* is that allows us the identification of many Mesoamerican ethical traditions that converge in the *tlamatinimeh* answer.

And now, ¿ are we destroy the ancient rule of life? ¿the rule of life of the chichimecas?, ¿the rule of life of the toltecas?, ¿the rule of life of the colhuacas?, ¿the rule of life of the tecpanecas? Because in our heart, we understand whom to owe the life, whom to owe the birth, whom to owe the grow, whom to owe the development. For this our gods are invoked, are supplicated. León-Portilla, Miguel. (1986. 153)

This part of chapter seven is very important, since a genealogical point of view, because show us the different sources to come from Aztec ethical tradition. This rule of life was not support only in theoretical concepts; this rule of life implies a way of life, a development of human faculties like wisdom, respect, bravery and responsibility. These human faculties were not conceived by separate, all of them form part of the moral sense of this cultural heritage.

The concept of human being

The principal task of the Aztec ethical tradition —with the help of education and disciplinary mechanisms— was the configuration of personality, this process

implies an abstraction effort expressed by “parallelism” *In ixtli in yollotl*, its literally meaning is: face and heart, and was used to characterized the moral features from human being. 1) a well and defined personality with particular features expressed by the word *ixtli*-face and 2) a dynamic center expressed by the word *yollotl*-heart; the moral sense of this word can be understand if we consider capable to transfer dynamism and vitality to the human being, in other words, is a vital force generated inside each subject.

About this question, Miguel León-Portilla believes that the parallelism *in ixtli in yollotl* expressed the nahuatl concept of human being, and also represents a moral physiognomy and a dynamic principle. The moral meaning of the word *ixtli* is based on a very useful metaphor to explain the development of a personality acquired by education, in this way the possibility to get a face was one of the principal objectives of educational institutions.

In consequence, the ethical meaning of the parallelism could be to interpret like: “a walk in the world in permanent movement”. The word *yollotl* is related with the word *ollin* that means movement and is one of the main cosmological categories in Aztec worldvision. In a metaphorical sense, the heart represented the creative will and the face gave the sense of all concepts and moral values generated by the will. The conceptual unit in *ixtli in yollotl* has been understood like the process to development a concrete personality. In Mesoamerican thought, human life can understand like a permanent search for, the concept used to refer human life was *yoliztli*. And example of this permanent search for is the next fragment of a poem compiled and translated by Miguel León-Portilla(1997:57)

¿What was that you remembered?
¿Where were your heart?
for this you give it everything,
you carried without course: you are destroying it
on earth ¿ can you go in search for something?

In fact, inside de Aztec thought human existence has sense because is capable to stimulate creation and strengthen our human faculties like sensibility, imagination and understanding. Human being had been born from the “mother earth” and become to exist in the world. *Tlamatinimeh* were concern to known their cultural origins and the heritage they came from. This concern was closely related with the necessity to make questions like ¿ what is human being? ¿where we came from? ¿what is the sense of human life?

The emerge of Aztec forms of subjectivity

The configuration of personality is not only an abstract issue, since a genealogical approach, we have to analyze how and when were developed, the hegemonic forms of subjectivity in Aztec worldvision; the principal ones were priests, warriors, wise men, traders and rethorics. The development of those forms of subjectivity were related with ancient cultural values and disciplinary mechanisms, but all of them flourished since the military victory of Aztecs against Tepanecas in the year one flint (1428) under the government of Izcoatl. Fernando Alvarado Tezozomoc, in his work *Crónica Mexicayotl* written in XVI century, told us :

” In the year 13 reed, Izcoatl was made king, in the day 13 water (22 of June), he was son of Acamapichtli. Then he attacked Tepanecas inmediately, when their king was Maxtlatzin”(...) In the year one flint, Aztecs won their war against Tepanecas”. (Alvarado Tezozomoc 1998:108)

Since of this date, cultural values of Aztec worldvision turn into a hegemonic political power, two examples were the increasing of “florid wars” and the practice of human sacrifices. Both were related with a fusion of mysticism and military arts developed by Tlacaelel. To get a basic knowledge, about aztec worldvision, is very important do not forget that, in nahuatl pre-Columbian though, human life can be understand in reference with the struggle and game of cosmic forces.

At his point, I want to focus on the difference, between ancient moral wisdom, developed by Mesoamerican cultures like *toltecas*, and the new values derivated from the rise of aztec political power, in the beginnings of fifteen century until the arrival of Spaniards. In others words, Aztec culture is not a synonym of nahuatl culture, and for this reason is very important separate them, to avoid unnecessary confusions and understand different kinds of ethical issues.

The emerge of Aztec political power, were nor related only with military practice, also were related with the ordinary struggles to determine who is the owner of truth. Since a genealogical approach, we can see the effect powers and disciplinary mechanisms related with specific types of discourses like *machiotlahtolli* and *huehuetlahtolli*. Specifically *huehuetlatolli* were involved in the configuration of a variety of subjectivity forms.

Good and Evil

We have to consider some significant differences between Mesoamerican thought and western tradition, this in very important before study the moral concepts of good and evil. This is a hard topic because is very easy to fall in the

temptation of hastily generalizations. For this reason, I will concentrate my efforts in the study of two moral concepts related. In nahuatl language, the word related with good is *cualli*, on the other side its opposite is the composition *ahmo cualli*, *ahmo* is a particle of negation, and the fusion of both words literally means no good. The evil does not exist by itself, like theoretical concept, however in ordinary life individual actions were capable to damage other people. This feature is relevant to understand the sense of punishment or disciplinary actions.

We can understand the concept of moral goodness by the “parallelism” *in quallotl in yecyotl*, that means, the convenient, the rectitude. The concept *in quallotl* could understand better if we show evident that good “*cualli*” is derivate substantive of the verb *qua*, than means eat. Then good is all that is convenient to the organism, in other words, that could be eat it, convenient. The concept *in yecyotl* to come from the word *yectli*, and its meaning is straight. In a moral sense, the straight is directly related with the *tlamatiniliztli*, in other words” all of those that are not crooked or deviant.

On the other side the wrong in morals can be understand by the “parallelism” *in a-quallotl in a-yecyotl*, which means, (the inconvenient, the rectitude). So in those cultural context to know if a human actions was realized related with the moral rules, it was very important to precise if that actions had contribute to strengthen or to weaken human being. Like we saw wickedness and eagerness were consider synonyms of moral corruption. The first one is capable to deviate from its straightness human actions, and the second one stimulate a enormous desire of possession identified with avarice and arrogance.

In addition I want to say that “moral goodness” was related with disciplinary mechanisms based en costumes and traditions, that were consider like and heritage from the ancestors. Those mechanisms were improved during centuries by *tlamatinimeh* in educational institutions, their social impact was significant because in Aztec culture the education was compulsory.

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