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Drum of Poetry, Drum of War

Willard Gingerich

THE AZTEC UPRIGHT DRUM, *tlalpan huehuetl*, stood totally silent in the Metropolitan exhibit from Mexico, headless, covered with a swirling visual text which includes two carved eagles and three jaguars, each uttering the sign of holy conflagration in war, "blazing water"; on one side a transfigured warrior rising up in eagle attire — *quauhtlehuanitl* "eagle rising," a figure of the sun from dawn to midday — and opposite him a drooping eye at the axis of a quincunx, pierced south to north by a short, angular dart — the calendrical sign 4 Motion, the name of this fifth age of the world, destined to collapse in earthquake, pestilence and fire.

*Niquetza in tohuehueuh niquinnechicoa in tocnihuan ymellel quiza niquin-
cuicatia tiazque ye ichan ximotlamachtican ximocuiltonocan in antocnihuan
ahuaya*

"I erect our drum; I collect our friends, driving out their griefs; for them I make music. We go to fill that House of Death. O friends! Live in plenty, rejoice in happiness, *ahuaya*" (Cantares mexicanos, f. 52v.)

Huehuetitlan — "Drumming place," where whistles, clay flutes, gourd and turtle-shell rattles, gold bells, bone rasps all harmonized with dances of exquisite order and songs of a baroque melancholy almost unimaginable now. The performance context in the cities of Azcapotzalco, Coyoacan, Tetzaco, or Tenochtitlan-Mexico of which this one-meter-high drum, now referred to as the Malinalco drum, was once the living center is still accessible in fragments of memory.

One of the principal things found throughout this land were the songs and dances, both for solemnizing the festival of the demons they honored as gods, with which they thought to render them great service, and for enjoyment and private solace . . . , and every lord had in his house a 'chapel' with singers who composed dances and songs; and these worked to become ingenious in the composition of songs according to the method of meter or stanzas which they had, and when these were good basses they were held in much esteem, because the lords had them sing daily in low voices.

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Ordinarily they sang and danced in the principal festivals which were every twenty days, and in others less important. The principal dances were held in the plazas; other times in the patio of the lord's house, as all the lords had great patios: they also danced in the houses of lords and men of distinction.

Whenever there had been some victory in war, or a new lord had been installed, or married to a noblewoman, or for some other occasion, the song-masters composed a new song, in addition to those general songs they already had for the festivals of the demons and of great ancient deeds and of the lords long dead.

They rehearsed the song material several days before the festivals; in the large pueblos the singers were numerous and if there were new songs or dances others joined them so there would be no defect on the day of the festival. On the day appointed for the dance they put out in the morning a great mat in the center of the plaza where the drums were to stand and everyone gathered and adorned themselves in the house of the lord, and from there emerged dancing and singing. At times the dances began in the morning and other times at the hour of Great Mass. At night they returned singing to the palace, and there finished the song at the first hour of evening or late at night and at midnight.

The drums were of two types: the first was tall and round, thicker than a man, of five hands height, of very fine wood, hollowed out inside and carved and painted without; over the mouth they placed a deerskin, tanned and well stretched. From the border to the center it played a perfect fifth [*diapente*] and they play it from one point and note to another, rising and falling, harmonizing and inclining the drum to their songs. The other drum is [made of wood with two tongues over a resonance chamber]; this serves as a bass and both have a fine sound and can be heard at a distance. When the dancers have arrived at their positions, they place themselves in order to play the drums: two singers, the best, come forward as choir directors who begin from there the songs. The great leather drum is played with the hands and is called the *huehuetl*, and the other, as the drums of Spain, with sticks, although it is of a distinct fashion, and is called the *teponaztli*. The lord with other principal persons and old men goes dancing before the drums; these parade for four or five meters about the drums and then with these comes a multitude filling and swelling the chorus. The number of those who pass in this fashion in the large pueblos is more than a thousand and sometimes more than two thousand. In addition to these and around them goes a procession of two orders of dancing young men, fine dancers; the two leaders are two men detached from the principal dancers, who go leading the dance. In these two wheels, with certain turns and pirouettes which they do, sometimes they have as partner the dancer in front and in some dances the one in the rear. . . . Before the wars, when they celebrated the festivals freely, in the large pueblos three or four thousand and more gathered to dance. After the conquest, half that number, which has continued to diminish and decline.

. . . [In the dance] their entire bodies, heads as well as arms and hands, move in such concert, measured and ordered, that they do not disagree nor differ from one another even a half beat, but what one does with the right foot, also

the left, the same do all and in the same measure and beat; when one lowers the left arm and raises the right, so at the same time and in the same beat do all, in such manner that the drums and the song and the dancers all carry their measure in concert: all are in harmony, one differs from another not a jot, by which those dancers of Spain who have seen it are greatly amazed, and hold in great esteem the dances of these natives, and the great accord and feeling which they have and preserve for them. (Fr. Toribio de Benavente "Motolinía, *Memoriales*, ca. 1540; edition of O'Gorman, 1971)

And here is told how the lords arrayed themselves when they danced:

Headband with quetzal feather tassels set in gold which bound up the hair;
Quetzal feather crest device set in gold and worn on the back; A worked head-dress of red spoonbill feathers with a fan of quetzal feathers and a small *huehuetl* drum of yellow gold, a device worn on the back while dancing;
A gold arm band, yellow;
Yellow gold ear plugs inserted;
A leather wrist band with a great, smooth jade or perhaps turquoise worn on his wrist and treated with Peru balsam so that it would gleam and shine;
A jade lip plug set in yellow gold;
A long, white labret of crystal set in yellow gold and pierced through with blue cotinga feathers, inserted in the lip;
A turquoise nose ornament;
A necklace of radiating yellow gold shells with a thin jade stone set in it;
Quetzal feather horns;
A quetzal feather fan set in gold;
Flowers, tobacco only for the ruler;
Jaguar-skin sandals, embroidered leather sandals.

...
Flowering trees were erected in the courtyard when the Speaker himself would dance.

(Informants of Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, Book 8, Chapter 9; ca. 1540–65; edition of Dibble & Anderson)

It is war that adorns the Malinalco drum; the eagles and jaguars are figures of the two principal knightly orders which occupied a palace and armory next to the central pyramid of the Templo Mayor inside the temple precinct of Tenochtitlan. The transfigured warrior on the drum is the finest image we have of the war-frenzy, a sacred state of transcendence, described often in the *cuauhcuicatl* or *yaocuicatl* "eagle songs, war songs" of the *Cantares mexicanos* manuscript, a state which could be invoked and mimicked by the hypnosis of the drum and the chant but could only be consummated in *yaoxochimiquiztli* "the flowering war death" itself, on the battlefield or face-up across the sacrificial altar. Both Itzcoatl, founding "emperor" of the Aztec Alliance, and Nezahualcoyotl,

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poet-ruler of Tetzaco, are reported to have carried small *huehuetl* drums into combat, using them as a call to valor and exertion.

A shield-roaring, a smoking blaze rises up, Ah, and rising up as bell dust it becomes your flowers, Yaotzin, Beloved Enemy; there on all sides sound the eagles, the jaguars, *ohuaya*.

He shows men only mercy, he gives only friendship in the whirling dust of conflagration; reed flowers turn gold, a mist of obsidian rains down and blossoms, *ohuaya*.

Fertile land of war-flowers, *aya*, the butterfly-shield house, there with lances Motecuzoma recounts, he paints his flower-books of bloody fire, and back in Mexico he barter sun-chalk [on the sacrificial bodies].

(Cantares mexicanos, f. 61v.; Bierhorst, p. 349)

But now the drum is mute. No transcription of Aztec music survives and no contemporary Nahuatl-speaking people retain their traditional music. Scattered throughout the Cantares manuscript, however, are the infamous drumming notations made of combinations of four syllables: *ti*, *to*, *qui*, and *co*. On folio 27, for example, a song is introduced with "TICO TOCO TOCO TIQUITIQUITI QUITI QUITO. And just this way it turns and and comes back." On folio 28v: "TICO TOCO TOCOTO. When it ends: TICOTO TICOTO." And a 6-page song begins on folio 50 with instruction for one drum – "the tone: COTOTIQUITITI TOTOCOTO" – going on to add ten more drums, each with a new notation for cadence. Most of these notations specify the *teponaztli* wooden drum, but this latter set refers specifically to the standing *huehuetl* so they cannot, in their four-part TI-TO-QUI-CO formulation correspond to specific notes, since the two drums played at different harmonic intervals (minor third and perfect fifth, respectively), and, as Bierhorst points out, this one set of verbal notations must account for both pitch and rhythm. Then on folio 7 of the Cantares manuscript there is a brief paragraph which attempts to describe a *huehuetl* drumming technique. Its translation has been the cause of much imaginative argument among ethno-poetic readers.

Auh inic motzotzona huehuetl: cencamatl mocauhtih, auh yn occencamatl ipan huetzi yetel ti: auh in huel ic ompehua ca centel ti, Auh inic mocuepa quinyquac yticpa huetzi y huehuetl zan mocemana in mail, auh quiniquac i ye inepantla occeppa itenco hualcholoa in huehuetl: tel yehuatl itech mottaz, in ima yn aquin cuicani quimati in iuh motzotzona.

(Cantares mexicanos, f. 7; Bierhorst, p. 152)

The several translations and discussions of this passage which have appeared in English recently have pretty much abandoned

previous work on the question by Garibay (1953), Schultze Jena (1957), Nowotny (1956), and Stevenson (1968). First, Bierhorst, from his 1985 edition and translation of the *Cantares*:

And the drum is beaten thus: when a stanza ends and another stanza is to follow, it's three-beat. And when it actually begins, it's one-beat. But as it comes back in, then the drum falls beneath it, and the hand just keeps on going. But when it is in the middle, again the voice of the drum emerges. This, however, must be seen from the hand of the singer who knows how it is beaten.

Next, Richard Haly, whose analysis in "Poetics of the Aztecs," *New Scholar* 10 (1986), is the most detailed theory of Aztec drumming technique available in English:

And in the following manner is the *huehuetl* played: a *cencamatl* runs to its end and [in the meantime] on it three TI [drum tones] fall and just as it [the *cencamatl*] begins there is one TI and in order for it [the hand] to return to where it was, it then rises from within the *huehuetl*. The hand just continues and then when there are three [drumbeats] in the middle, once again it [the hand] jumps to the edge of the drum. Nonetheless, one will see this in the hand of a singer who knows how it is played.

Haly points out that *cencamatl*, which means "a mouthful of food," "a word," or "a few words," is here employed in a precise structural sense. Using Dow Robinson's classification of micro-, meso-, and macro-segments within Nahuatl clause structure, Haly identifies the macro-segment, a semantic clustering of one to eight words and sentence-words with a single strong accent on the penultimate syllable, as the basic unit of Nahuatl verse, a *cencamatl*. Then, by setting the TI of the drum notations in correspondence with the stressed syllables of the macro-segment clause in the songs, Haly claims that "the drumbeat and linguistic stress coincide," the length of the poetic line may be established, and poetry divided cleanly from prose.

Bierhorst is less sure of the correspondences between linguistic stress and drum notation. He sets forth only two propositions about the notations: 1) "the syllables TI, TO, CO and QUI form a kind of solfège, or vocalise, that corresponds to the cadence of the drum," and 2) "this vocalise must account for both pitch and rhythm." He then postulates that the vowels *i* and *o* represent the two pitches of the *teponaztli* drum and the consonants *t* and *k* indicate the rhythm in something like the pattern of single-, double-, and triple-tonguing used by woodwind players. As for correspondence between drumming and voice, Bierhorst believes "little or nothing can be

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stated with certainty. . . . It would certainly be difficult, if not impossible, to recite a heterorhythmic chant while beating out one of the metrical cadences described," and "of the drumming instructions connected with actual songs in the manuscript, none can be safely recommended for self-accompaniment." His final judgment is that the chant itself was nonmetrical in any stress- or syllable-counting sense, even though the drum cadences are metrical, and any one-to-one correspondence between drumbeat and linguistic stress is therefore impossible.

My own version of the Cantares paragraph is as follows:

And thus is the huehuetl played: As a *cencamatl* is ending, and during the *cencamatl*, three TIs fall. In its beginning it is just one TI. And so it repeats, then it falls in the center of the drum, the hand just continues [playing in the center]. And then three [beats] in the middle [half-way between center and edge of the drumhead] and again [the hand] comes quickly out to the edge of the drum. Nevertheless, one must see the hands of a singer who knows how to play in this fashion.

Without attempting to erect a musical scaffold which would threaten to collapse the text, I will only suggest that the TI mentioned seems to refer to the drum's high note, played at the margin of the drumhead. Each strophe or verse unit – Haly is right in insisting that the "mouthful" here, the *cencamatl*, is a prosodic term – begins with one high beat on the margin, moves to the lowest note a fifth below at the center of the drumhead where it plays for the body of the verse (which seems to me necessarily much longer than the macro-segment Haly describes) and then closes with three intermediate beats and a final, higher TI again, where it started, at the margin of the drumhead. Lacking a tape recorder, as Dell Hymes has pointed out, one needs a good theory; but in Nahuatl studies, even with the tightest theory, one must struggle for a perceptive translation.

Between the shrill echoes of war and the silence of the drum, poetry calls us back to the old theme of Homer: Wars are fought so that poets will have matter to write about, a pretext to imagine their own voices still sweet and singing a thousand years off.

An quaauhnenuhuh oceloihcuihuhtimanique in tepilhuan ayahue maza yixochiuh onchichinalo yehua oc achica ye nica ohuaya.

O ahquenman aya ahquenman polihuiz in ihuehueh in icuic o yn ipalnemoa xonahuia nopiltzi tehuatzih ohiya a'nochipa tlalticpac, ohuaya.

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As eagles they are scattered and gone, as jaguars painted in memory, the
princes, *ayahue*; His flowers, they are inhaled but for a moment here,
ohuaya.

O never, *aya*, never will they be lost, the drum, the songs of He Who Gives
Life; my prince, venerable lord, take your ease, *ohuiya*; such a brief time,
this earth, *ohuaya*. (Cantares mexicanos, f. Bierhorst, 242.)

NOTE. All translations are by the author.

