

# *Weaving the Past*

*A History of Latin America's Indigenous Women  
from the Prehispanic Period to the Present*

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*2005*

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2005

## 2

*Of Warriors and Working Women**Gender in Later Prehispanic Mesoamerica  
and the Andes*

The visual imagery of female deities (such as the decapitated Mexica goddess Coyolxauhqui; see fig. 2.1) is captivating and has drawn much attention from those interested in the later prehistory of indigenous women before the arrival of Europeans. Such complex, often contradictory, images offer scholars rich but often puzzling materials for interpreting and understanding women's lives, their statuses, and gender ideologies in the complex cultures and civilizations of Mesoamerica and the Andes. In many cultures, such as those of the pre-Inka Andes, visual materials constitute some of the few pieces of information available about women in the prehistoric past, and finding voices, reconstructing individual identities, or reading agency from representations and remains presents interpretive challenges. Nevertheless, such images, often dramatic in nature, offer a window onto the gendered worlds of the Latin American prehispanic past, especially those of the Classic and Postclassic periods for Mesoamerica and the Middle Horizon through late Horizon periods for the Andes, when urban, class-based societies developed.

Mesoamerica alone can serve almost as a laboratory for examining women's lives, social patterns, and statuses because the cultures of the Classic (c.E. 150–900) and Postclassic (c.E. 900–1521) offer a surprisingly broad spectrum of gendered arrangements and social valuations of women.<sup>1</sup> They include the gender arrangements of peoples ranging from the hunting, gathering, and cultivating groups of Mesoamerica's far north to the more urban and hierarchically organized Nahuas, to the Nudzahui people of Oaxaca (also known as the Mixtec), who developed the most seemingly egalitarian gender arrangements of any Mesoamerican cultural group. While the Maya of southern Mesoamerica, a broad and enduring cluster of linguistically and culturally related groups, developed gender patterns characterized by more gender asym-



FIGURE 2.1. Coyolxauhqui image from the Templo Mayor area of Mexico City (photo courtesy of Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Historia).

metry than other Mesoamerican peoples, even among them, both the images and realities of women varied. Further south in the Andean region, images of female supernaturals have a particularly ancient history, and later prehispanic groups show significant degrees of gender complementarity, although this pattern would change somewhat with the rise of the Inka empire. Touching lightly on the lowland cultures of South America and the peoples of the Circum-Caribbean, who will be dealt with in later chapters, we begin in the north, where later central Mexican peoples thought their origins lay.

### Women and Gender among Northern and Central Mexican Peoples: Parallel Organizations, Hierarchical Ideologies

Numerous late Postclassic central Mexican peoples described themselves as latecomers to this region, arriving after the fall of the city of Tula and its people, the Toltecs, in the mid–twelfth century. After Tula's decline as a dominating power, a series of migrations from the north led to the develop-

ment of new ethnic identities and cultural traditions, shaped by the cultures of the northern migrants combined with cultural patterns of the center, as these developed from the Preclassic period on.

Because it is not clear exactly from which part of the vast northern region such migrations originated, archaeologists cannot say with any certainty from which northern cultural traditions later central Mexican groups descend. Northern peoples were part of what Linda Cordell has called the "Southwest heartland," encompassing parts of today's borderland region, including the states of Arizona and New Mexico in the United States and Chihuahua and Sonora in Mexico, and they fall into several archaeological, linguistic, and cultural groupings. Many of these groups were characterized by agriculture, permanent settlements, and matrilineal or bilateral kinship structures (with membership in households and kin groups flowing through women or through both parents, respectively).<sup>2</sup> Northern cultural groups seem to have been characterized by a relative degree of gender egalitarianism in work, worship, and household and community decision-making that persisted over a long period of time, a pattern that began in the distant past. While the arrival of the Spanish probably led to the emergence of more asymmetric gender patterns, contemporary Borderlands Native American gender patterns emphasize complementarity, and women have access to roles carrying authority.<sup>3</sup> Other important influences that helped to shape later central Mexican indigenous groups and their gender arrangements included the development of urbanism, market economies, and empire in the central region itself.

While archaeologists have made incredible strides in learning how to analyze the social relations and gender patterns of people from their bones, pots, art, and buildings, challenges remain. This is certainly the case for the huge, significant, yet often puzzling Classic-period site of Teotihuacan. Located north of what is today Mexico City, Teotihuacan anchored the central region, one of the two most populous and culturally dynamic regions of Classic Mesoamerica. Teotihuacan is known for its massive buildings, its clear and distinctive urban planning, and its influential art style, evident in sculpture, murals, and ceramics. What is less well known about Teotihuacan is that one of its most important deities was female.

The murals and large sculptures of Teotihuacan often focus on two main deities, a female deity, referred to by contemporary scholars as either the Great Goddess or the Goddess (see fig. 2.2), and a male deity, usually called Tlaloc, for the later Aztec water deity, but named the Storm God by some scholars. The primary associations of the Goddess were extensive, as she was known as "a goddess of earthly waters, a patroness of warfare who requires sacrifices, mother of the gods, and the fertile mountain from which all things come." She may also have represented the collective well-being of the city of Teotihuacan, a notion that Teotihuacan's rulers and artists often went to great pains to portray. The Storm God's associations were with rain, astrology, the sky, and perhaps science, commerce, foreign relations, even dynastic values. Why did

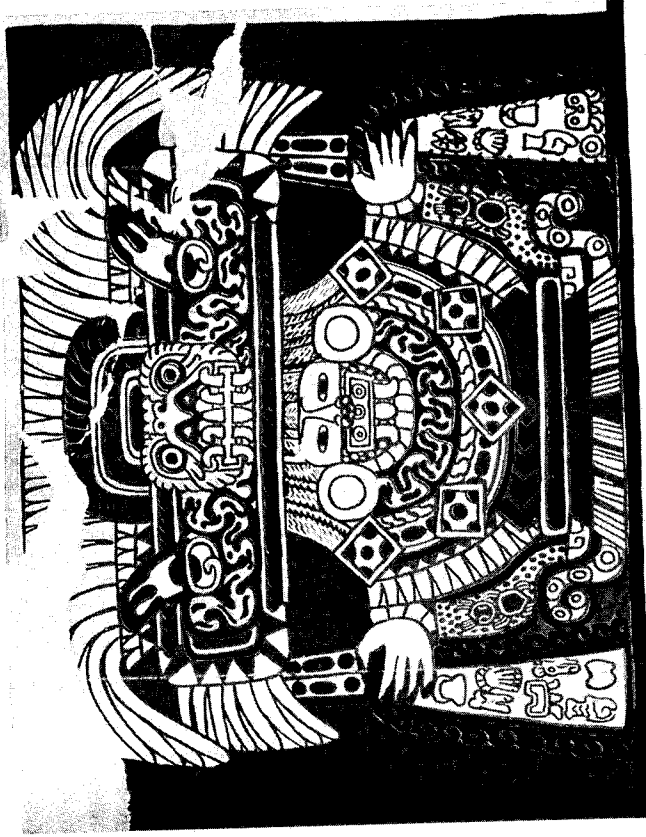


FIGURE 2.2. Image of Teotihuacan's Goddess. (From "Mural Painting West of Portico of the Patio, Tetitla, Teotihuacan," by Agustín Villagra Caletí, in *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 10, *Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica*, pt. 1, edited by Gordon F. Ekholm and Ignacio Bernal, series editor Robert Wauchope, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1971, fig. no. II. Copyright © 1971, by permission of the University of Texas Press.)

Teotihuacan have a female deity at the heart of its religious imagery? In her reconstruction of the values and beliefs of Teotihuacan, leading art historian Esther Pasztory views the Goddess as Teotihuacan's supreme deity and argues that she probably evolved from an older female cave deity. Her connection to both fertility and the collective values that united Teotihuacanos may help explain the more prominent visual importance and placement of the Goddess over the Storm God.<sup>4</sup>

What might her image communicate about the experience of women living at Teotihuacan during the site's more than 500 years of existence? Certainly, Teotihuacan was no matriarchy. A strong and very centralized government ruled this city of some eight square miles in size and with a population of at least 125,000 at its height. The ruling group expressed its power through both sacred images, images that probably attracted many pilgrims, and warfare, which expanded the city's resource base. While its domain was not huge

compared to other ancient empires, the site had significant wealth and power, and a male ruler-priest probably headed its "sacralized polity."<sup>5</sup>

One way in which this governing system displayed its power was through the building of the famous Teotihuacan apartment compounds, many of which were built between C.E. 300 and 400. Most of the city's populace lived in these similar (but never identical) one-story, high-walled, and windowless structures. They served as Teotihuacan's basic social and economic units. Family life, craft production, and religious ritual took place in the compounds, and they probably served as the foundation upon which labor for public works and the military was organized. Skeletal evidence from one apartment compound indicates that biologically related men occupied it, with the compound's women being more genetically diverse. This pattern is consistent with either a patrilineal or cognatic kinship system (systems in which genealogical links are traced and used to form households and larger groups, either through men or men and women, respectively).<sup>6</sup> The labor of women born or married into the compounds—especially in food preparation and craft production—would have been essential for the survival of family and kin groups, especially in periods when male residents left the city on missions of war, diplomacy, or trade. The possibility also exists that priestesses served the Goddess, though images of religious functionaries dressed in female garb in a mural painting from the Tepantitla apartment compound at Teotihuacan could be either women or men dressed in the skirts and women's shift-like shirts known as *huipiles*.<sup>7</sup>

Teotihuacan's burial practices and mortuary goods, relevant for assessing degrees of gender hierarchy, do not show great differences in the overall treatment of deceased women and men. While males more often had more complex grave offerings than did women, these differences were not pronounced, and women's burials were occasionally of greater complexity than men's.<sup>8</sup> This evidence, as well as the Goddess imagery discussed, implies that while Teotihuacanos and their leaders valued the subordination of the individual person and smaller social units to the Teotihuacan collective or united whole, they did not use images of gender subordination to express or reinforce this message.

For the central Mexican region, the post-Teotihuacan legacy of cultural development was centered in and around the Valley of Mexico, first with the rise and fall of Tula and the Toltecs. Later, in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries, the Mexica, with their allies, came to dominate a broad area known as the Aztec empire. War and military values permeated Mexica culture, and they became what might be called a "martialized polity" (in contrast to the sacralized polity of Teotihuacan). These martial values would shape gender roles, though not determine them completely.

At its height, the Aztec empire claimed to control many parts of central and southern Mesoamerica, but its focal region centered on the Mexica island capital city of Tenochtitlan (underlying today's Mexico City) and the surrounding mainland area. This region included both urban and rural com-

munities, formed the core of the Triple Alliance empire, and was highly influential during the late Postclassic period. It also generated the most historical documentation of all Mesoamerican regions in the early colonial period, allowing scholars to understand it relatively well.<sup>9</sup>

While Mexica origins remain shrouded in some mystery, their myths tell of how they migrated from a place known as Aztlan (Place of the Herons), probably an area to the north of their eventual home, the Valley of Mexico. Arriving first at Chicomoztoc (Seven Caves), the Mexica then left and travelled in a southeasterly direction, finally settling around C.E. 1325 on a swampy island in the center of what is today the modern Mexican nation. This settlement occurred after they saw an eagle perched on a prickly pear cactus, the sign prophesied by their patron and solar deity, Huitzilopochtli (Hummingbird on the Left). As he led their journey, Huitzilopochtli was accompanied by four priests, three male and one female. The woman was named Chimalma (Shield Lying or Resting), and her presence hints that during this early period of Mexica history, women were active participants in important religious rituals.<sup>10</sup>

Once the Mexica settled on this island and began to build what became the city of Tenochtitlan, they created an intricate economic and political system through diplomacy, warfare, and marital alliances. The martial nature of Mexica society influenced every aspect of life, including their forms of gender organization. When a boy was born, his umbilical cord was buried on a battlefield, and soon after birth, in a naming ceremony, he was given male clothing and implements for either fighting, if he came from a military family, or a future occupation, if he did not. The umbilical cord of a daughter was buried by the household hearth, and she was given female clothing and weaving implements. The Mexica also placed or burned gendered objects with bodies they buried or cremated at death. The most privileged Mexica afterlife went to men who died in battle, as well as women who died in childbirth.<sup>11</sup> Parallel birth and death rituals for males and females represent the ways that gender identities were defined as different, even opposite, yet at the same time complementary and thus interdependent. Military organization and the *tlatoani's* (supreme leader) skills in conquest and war, nevertheless, were critical parts of the political organization of this expansive society.

Warfare was also deeply intertwined with, indeed sanctified by, religious beliefs in which Huitzilopochtli and other warrior deities encouraged and even depended upon Mexica success on the battlefield. This success helped support their economy by expanding areas for tribute and trade. It also helped supply captives and human blood that kept the sun in motion and nourished Huitzilopochtli, thereby sustaining the earth and human life. The Mexica also worshiped female earth deities, often fierce in nature, symbolic of the fertility and food production that sustained life.

Most Mexica men participated in warfare at some time during their lives, having been trained for it in the schools attended by male children. The *tehpochtalli*, the schools primarily for the sons of commoners, trained adolescents

for fighting and employed students in public works projects such as constructing or repairing roads, buildings, or bridges. The *calmecac*, attended by sons of the nobility and a smaller number of commoners, prepared them for either the priesthood or military leadership. After their schooling, the young men of Mexico, as well as the other ethnic groups of the central region, could expect to devote some time to armies of either offense or defense as the Aztec empire expanded its domain during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.<sup>12</sup>

Women could and did attend the *calmecac* and *telpochcalli*, but their attendance appears to have been largely a familial decision, and was not compulsory.<sup>13</sup> The organized armies of imperial conquest largely excluded women, though there are some examples of women fighting, almost always defensively, in the chronicles detailing the late postconquest era. There is the oft-cited example of the desperate Tlatelolcans using women (and young boys) in 1473 in a last ditch effort to ward off their Tenochcan neighbors. The women attempted to do this by exposing their genitalia and stomachs and squeezing their breasts to produce milk, which they threw on their enemies. But other examples of women fighting in military contexts can be found. Tolttec women were said, for example, to have fought alongside men during a civil war (C.E. 1008) and to have even taken captives. Two Tepanec women fought beside Tepanec soldiers as they were defeated by a Tenochcan army in 1428. Fray Diego Durán's historical chronicle also mentions a woman, presumably indigenous, who accompanied Cortés's army to Morelos, where she rode on horseback, helped lead the Spanish to victory over the community of Ocuilco, and was awarded an *encomienda* grant of the labor and tribute of two communities by Cortés.<sup>14</sup>

While women fought, not only was it somewhat unusual for them to do so but their participation was neither highly structured nor part of the highly organized military organization of the late Postclassic period. Thus women generally lacked access to what both indigenous and Spanish chronicles uniformly depict as the highest prestige activity among the Nahuas. As Mexico society became increasingly warlike and expanded its sphere of influence, gender symbolism increasingly associated maleness with strength and victory, and femaleness with defeat and subjugation.<sup>15</sup> Paradoxically, while Mexico warfare increasingly resulted in the celebration of maleness and masculine values (which has led some scholars to see the Mexico as the paradigm for a male-dominated, patriarchal society), the increasing militarization of Mexico society opened up social space for women to play important, often parallel and complementary, social roles. Mexico ideology, while using a gendered discourse to describe victory as masculine and defeat as feminine, also used a discourse rooted in a notion of the complementarity of maleness and femaleness.<sup>16</sup>

One area where parallel roles are evident is in the world of work. There is no question that women worked hard in Mexico society, whether they came from the noble or commoner stratum. The implements that female newborns

were given soon after birth included the tools for spinning and weaving, a central part of *all* women's work. Both girls and boys received training in future work tasks beginning at age five or six. While men were responsible for farming and fighting, as well as hunting, fishing, production of many crafts items, and the long-distance trading of those items, women performed vital household labor, including cooking, cleaning, spinning, and weaving, as well as rearing and socializing the much-prized Mexica infants and children. They also participated in household-based crafts production. Outside the home, commoner women, especially, provided labor in market exchange, worked as midwives, healers, and marriage brokers, and served as teachers and priestesses in temples and song houses (the *cuitacalli*). Rather than being laboring drudges whose productive efforts were socially necessary but not valued, the weight of evidence shows that Mexica women had some control over the conditions and fruits of their labor and that, through work (even when household based), they achieved authority and prestige.<sup>17</sup>

Each Mexica home, or *calli*, contained rooms centered around a patio and hearth area, with three stones "conceptualized as female deities" surrounding the hearth. The *calli*, often the locus of multifamily households, was the female space par excellence, where labor, often under female control, took place. Mothers, especially the "good mother," as described in the *Florentine Codex*, were thought to be energetic workers, careful and thrifty, who would teach and serve others.<sup>18</sup> This source, consisting of texts written down in the mid-sixteenth century by Nahuatl scribes and elders in response to questions from the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún, often depicts what these male elders viewed as ideal social types. For them, good grandmothers and great-grandmothers merited praise and could correct others, and in a discussion of the roles of family and kin group members, the text says that the Mexica valued great-grandmothers as founders of kin groups as well. As Sahagún's Nahuatl informants themselves said of the role of the great-grandmother: "She is the founder, the beginner [of her lineage]."<sup>19</sup>

Why would women be seen as the founders of kin groups? The notion of women as, ultimately, the originators of kin relations (either by themselves or with their husbands) was rooted in two features of Mexica life, one mythical and historic, the other reflecting the nature of the kinship system. Mexica nobility flowed from female as well as male sources. The first Mexica tlatoani, Acamapichtli, was ennobled through his marriage to Ilancueitl, daughter of a Culhuacan king. More generally, the birthplace and status of a nobleman's mother or wife could enhance or weaken his status in the hierarchy of status among the nobility. In the mythical realm, Chimalma helped lead the Mexica to their eventual settling place, thereby acting as a founding ancestress of the Mexica as a people.<sup>20</sup>

Likewise, in the realm of kinship as conceptualized in everyday life, a child was seen as connected to ancestors by his or her mother's blood and father's semen.<sup>21</sup> This bilateral conceptualization of kinship provided the basis for the Mexica kinship system, one in which household members and mem-

bers of larger descent units could use ties through mothers or fathers, or other female or male kin, to claim ties or activate rights. Their cognatic kinship structure was neither completely bilateral nor egalitarian in practice, however. Early colonial legal and genealogical evidence shows that men gained greater access to rights over land, and that ties through men were mentioned more often in genealogies. The Mexica also gave more individualizing and varied names to boys than girls, who often bore names referring to birth order. But genealogies frequently included women as links through whom kin connections could be traced and as ancestors, especially as one member of a founding couple, from whom kinship and property flowed.<sup>22</sup>

Women's authority, rooted in both their work and the cognatic kinship system, extended beyond the Mexica household as well. In the marketplace, for example, women were not only buyers but also vendors. They served as marketplace judges or administrators (*tianquizpan tlacaque*), a position held by both men and women. Women also held supervisory positions within guilds associated with craft production, though whether they oversaw women's guilds within or parallel to those of men is not known. References to a ceremony involving "the most important *joyera*" (female jewelry maker) and "the most important merchant woman," suggest that female crafts workers might have been hierarchically ranked.<sup>23</sup>

In the realm of religion, an arena of immense importance in Mexica life both because of the complexity of their beliefs and the time they devoted to religious activities, women also held positions of religious and political authority. In the song houses that young adolescent girls and boys attended to learn the songs, dances, and moral codes that were part of the Mexica belief system, male officials called *tiachahuan* and *tepochtilloque* (older brothers and leaders of youths, respectively) judged young men who misbehaved. Parallel female officials called *chihuatiachahuan* (a term that could be translated literally as female older brothers, with *chihua* coming from the Nahuatl word for "woman," *chihuatl*) judged young women. Like their male counterparts, they could expel those who misbehaved, and the female officials were similarly referred to in hierarchical fashion either as *chihuatiachahuan* or as *ichpochtilyacaque* (administrators or directors of young women). In temples (sometimes though not always for female deities) priestesses known as *chihuatlamacazque* (lower level priestesses) and *chihuacuauhtin* (higher level priestesses) helped care for the buildings, carry out calendrical and other ceremonies, and train other priestesses.<sup>24</sup>

In the neighborhoods and local subdivisions of Tenochtitlan and other cities, women, like men, served as neighborhood leaders who had responsibilities for seeing to daily affairs within these lower level political units. Males holding these positions were referred to as *tepixque* and *tlaxilacaleque* (guards, leaders, and elders of local neighborhoods), and women holding these positions were called either *chuatepixque* or *chihuatlaxilacaleque*.<sup>25</sup> At higher levels of governance, Nahua women rarely served as rulers, though on occasion they did so briefly, generally when there was no male successor

to a rulership. Yet there are also clues that high officials and their wives shared responsibilities. The *tlatoacihuatl* (female supreme ruler) was a "woman ruler, governor, leader—a provider, an administrator." The *chihuatcutli* (high-ranking noblewoman) "governs, leads, provides for one, arranges well, administers peacefully."<sup>26</sup>

Nahua women thus held positions of authority, positions that were hierarchically organized and parallel to those of men and that afforded women prestige on the basis of their own activities and achievements. This shadowy hierarchy, difficult to tease out of early colonial Nahuatl and Spanish sources, is clearly there, yet it does not appear to have been as highly elaborated as the politico-military hierarchies of men. In addition to holding these positions, women gained both respect and access to material goods through their activities in homes, markets, neighborhoods, song houses, and temples. These material items and the property rights attached to or expressed through them, by bequeathal, gifting, or investment, afforded Mexica women a degree of independence.

While there are few statements that clarify how rights of inheritance were passed along in early colonial chronicles, there are several reasons to think that women customarily bequeathed and inherited property. First, the earliest colonial Nahua wills from a variety of communities illustrate women's ownership of houses, land, and a variety of smaller items.<sup>27</sup> Reading such testaments suggests that female control over property reflected prehispanic practice. Second, women's property, gained through dowry and inheritance, was kept separate from men's at marriage, and the Mexica made distinctions between those household goods belonging to women and to men.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, if women managed their resources skillfully, others saw them as successful. The woman who was not as skillful risked falling into poverty. According to the *Florentine Codex*, a woman merchant, if born under a fortunate day sign, could become "quite rich, she would be a good provider, she would be well-born. She would look to and guard the services and the property of our lord. She would be a guardian and administrator. Much would she gather, collect, save, and justly distribute among her children."<sup>29</sup> But another kind of woman worker, the embroiderer, who did not properly perform her religious obligations would be punished with "complete poverty and misery."<sup>30</sup>

Just as Mexica women could achieve economic well-being and leave property to children and others, so too were they held responsible for their behavior. Mexica women, particularly the daughters of the nobility, were taught to be chaste, circumspect, and dutiful in fulfilling their wifely and maternal obligations. Those women who transgressed social and legal responsibilities could be punished for their misbehavior or crimes. Willful female children, prostitutes, female adulterers, and women who had abortions were subject to strong social sanctions and punishments, including death. Nahua might punish adulterers and adulteresses, for example, with death by stoning or strangulation, indicating the importance they attached to marriage for both partners.<sup>31</sup>

Male sexuality and expressions of violence were given somewhat freer rein, though such behavior could be seen as socially controlled, since sexuality outside of marriage and violent action most often took place in war or through institutions associated with war. Yet women were also on occasion known to engage in violent, aggressive, or assertive behavior. Marketwomen's fighting, for example, was said to have worsened relations between Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco prior to the war they fought in 1473.<sup>32</sup> Women who were too aggressive physically or verbally were not admired, such as those born on the day One Eagle, who were fated to be "of evil tongue, vile-mouthed, inhuman in speech" as well as physically aggressive.<sup>33</sup> Women's words, especially taunting and freely spoken words (so very different from the seemingly measured, often highly ritualistic speech of men, especially those holding high governing positions), could mock men and even provoke warfare. But Nahuas also believed that women could speak well, like the women born on the day One Flint Knife, who could be courageous and would have a gift for speaking and leadership, paralleling the men born on this day, who would be brave and successful in war. Not only would such a woman be successful in providing sustenance, becoming wealthy as a result of her own labor, but also she would be "courageous, strong, reckoned as a man, and hardy. She would give honor as a man. And, [among] all her gifts, she would speak well, be eloquent, give good counsel, and arrange her conversation and manner of speaking well in her home."<sup>34</sup>

Women wielded both formal and informal political influence and, while their sexuality was under tighter social control than men's (especially true of the daughters of the nobility), sexuality was associated with pleasure for both sexes and not viewed as inherently sinful. The Mexica thought of heterosexual sex as a natural and healthy part of daily life, though they believed that engaging in too much sex could be harmful and might lead to chaos, a state they feared. Sex carried with it the obligation for men and women to please each other and behave responsibly both toward one another and the children they jointly created.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, in addition to compelling evidence of parallelism in the socio-political hierarchy and the mutual enjoyment and responsibilities of sexual relations, both commoner and elite Mexica women held property rights and produced socially valued goods and services. They held positions of authority across a variety of realms of daily life, were liable for their transgressions of rules and laws, and perhaps, as scribes, kept records of matters of concern to women, especially women in positions of authority. Were women, then, under the patriarchal authority of fathers and husbands, as others have argued?<sup>36</sup> Before answering this question, another realm of Mexica life needs to be considered. This is the realm of religion, especially as it is revealed through the iconography of Mexica visual images, particularly those of female deities.

The Mexica pantheon was complex in structure because the deities cannot simply be understood as representing a single (or simple) idea, substance, or social group, nor do they relate neatly to each other through family or kin

relations. The gendering of deities also presents a challenge to the deconstruction of their meanings, because many deities have both female and male versions or identities (with the female aspect sometimes labeled as a sister or wife), some are androgynous, and some are either solely male or female. But even those deities who are clearly female have complicated images and associations that are both life giving and life enhancing yet also are powerfully war-like, with negative images and associations.<sup>37</sup> Sometimes these powerful and war-like female images are also demeaning.

The most important deities of sustenance were all female. The deities associated with maize (Xilonen, Iztac Cinteotl, and Chicomecoatl), magney (also known as the agave plant, *Mayahuel*), and salt (*Uixtocihuatl*) were joined by Chalchiuhtlicue, the water goddess and wife of Tlaloc. Toci (Our Grandmother), Cihuacoatl (Snake Woman), Xochiquetzal (Flowerly Feather or Plume), and Tlazolteotl (Deity of Filth) were important earth deities, with both fertility and military associations, whose images and ceremonies were common. These rituals expressed the way that central Mexican peoples prized and conceptually linked agricultural and human fertility.<sup>38</sup> The particularly fierce Cihuacoatl had a lusty appetite for both human hearts and blood. Tlazolteotl was a goddess of sexuality to whom people's sins could be confessed in her guise as Tlaelcuani, or "Eater of foul things."<sup>39</sup> While these earth, fertility, and warrior goddesses were perhaps the most prominent of female deities in this seemingly constantly evolving pantheon, no single female deity stood as supreme (as was also true for male deities). Instead, these goddesses express the multiple complementary oppositions that shaped and formed Nahua worldviews, of which the central ideas and oppositions were male/female, earth/moon, sun/moon, and war (death)/sustenance (life). Such oppositions, with their inherent ambiguities, can be seen even in the famous Coyolxauhqui image, often cited as strong evidence for women's subordination among the Mexica.<sup>40</sup>

Coyolxauhqui (Bells on Cheek or Face) was the sister and adversary of the Mexica patron and war deity, Huitzilopochtli. After she led her brothers in an attempted matricide (against their mother, Coatlicue, Snake Skirt, because she had become pregnant in a shameful way), Huitzilopochtli attacked, defeated, and killed her. Should this myth and Coyolxauhqui's famous bas-relief sculpture (at the foot of Huitzilopochtli's temple in Tenochtitlan's ceremonial precinct) be interpreted solely as evidence of the negation of female power and authority, perhaps perceived and portrayed by male leaders as threatening "the power and legitimacy of the state itself"?<sup>41</sup>

Because the control of women can be both a means through which the state controls households and a metaphor for that control, we could readily conclude that Coyolxauhqui's image tells only the story of increasing Mexica male power rooted partly in violence against women. Yet her image haunts the contemporary viewer, not only because she suggests defeat and subordination but also because even in this image of defeat and death, Coyolxauhqui is powerful, sexual, and even faintly maternal, with her pendulous breasts at the



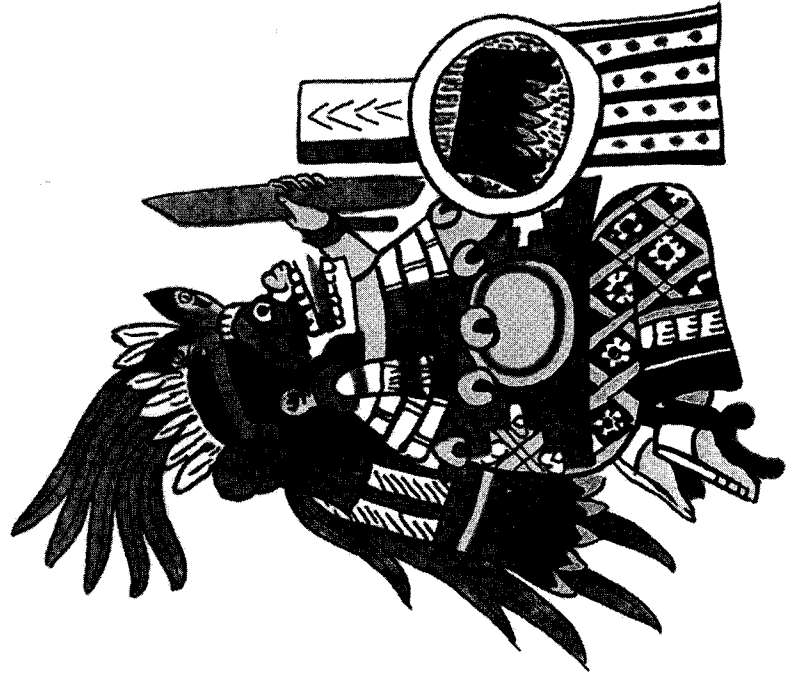
very center of the image.<sup>42</sup> The violence inherent in this stone figure is striking, but the ambiguity of Coyolxauhqui's portrayal speaks to its meaning as well. The image implies that just as Mexica men could never control women to the extent they might like (because men needed women for food, clothing, sex and affection, and child-bearing and rearing, and many men simply were absent at least some of the time), the Mexica could not control every people they conquered. Thus her image speaks of fear as well as conquest. The fear and power articulated by this image expresses and also reinforces a Mexica worldview that celebrated their hegemony but also acknowledged it as fleeting and impermanent.

Did Mexica men use images of female subordination to bolster a growing state's imperial governing apparatus and ideology? Yes, they did, but Mexica women were not the subordinated, passive, and silent beings dominated by patriarchal fathers and husbands that have been inferred from stone and paper portrayals. Their reality was far more varied, and the gender parallelism of Mexica thought and social institutions formed, expressed, and reinforced the integration of complementary oppositions. For the Mexica, these oppositions, so often symbolized through gender, constituted that fleeting wholeness, the fragile balancing of celestial and human forces, that lay at the root of their philosophy, their worldview, and the conceptual and social patterns that constituted basic parts of their everyday life.

### The Postclassic Nudzahui: Elite Gender Complementarity

Just to the south of the Nahua region existed a rather different gender organization, one in which women were apparently more socially valued than among the Mexica. Again an image, one that is common across both the Nahua and Nudzahui codices, alerts us, as we shift our focus away from the Nahuas, whose parallel gender structures must be weighed against their bellicose warrior ideology and practices, to the fact that gender relations were not uniform across either space or time. When Nahua women are shown seated in codices, they kneel with their legs placed under their torsos (see fig. 2.3);

FIGURE 2.3. Opposite top: Nahua woman weaving with legs tucked under her. (From *Florentine Codex*, General History of the Things of New Spain, 1950–82, translated by Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, bk. 10, image no. 58. Courtesy of University of Utah Press.) Opposite bottom: The fierce goddess Cihuacoatl is shown with a weaving implement and also is posed in a submissive fashion. (From *The Book of the Life of the Ancient Mexicans*, translated by Zelia Nuttall, edited by Elizabeth Hill Boone, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1983, 45. Courtesy of University of California Press.)





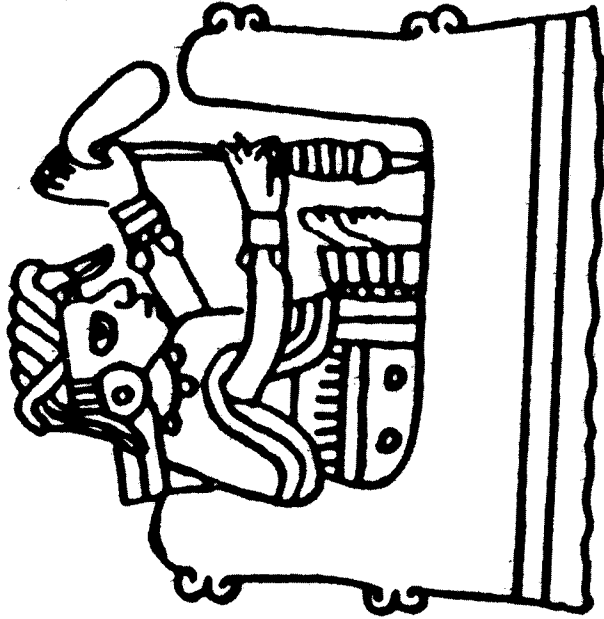


FIGURE 2.4. A Nudzahui woman shown spinning, with legs placed to the front. (From *Codex Vindobonensis Mexicanus I*, Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt, Graz, 1974, 9v. Courtesy of the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek.)

Nudzahui women are often shown, on the other hand, seated with their legs placed in front of them, with no visible sign of subordination (see fig. 2.4).<sup>43</sup> This simple visual depiction, as well as the prominent attention given to noble women in the Nudzahui codices, hints that the Nudzahui of western Oaxaca accorded women a higher status than did Nahuas. An array of evidence supports this conclusion, though much of it pertains to women of the noble and ruling stratum.

Murals of the late Classic or early Postclassic period from the nearby Puebla-Tlaxcala Valley, particularly the Battle Mural from Cacaxtla, contain possible depictions of women as warriors, reminiscent of Teotihuacan's Goddess. The nearby late Classic site of Xochitecatl featured abundant images of goddesses, female rulers, and women at all stages of the female life cycle in sculpture and figurines and may have housed a female-centered cult.<sup>44</sup> Such images suggest that Nahua depictions of fierce women, as well as the shared Nahua and Nudzahui tradition that marriage to women of ruling groups was ennobling, even when these groups had been defeated, had roots in both the Classic and early Postclassic periods.<sup>45</sup> The Nudzahui rarely used gendered images to signify subordination in gender, military, or class relations. Instead, such images usually signified gender complementarity. However, Nudzahui

hui society does not appear to have fostered the gender parallel institutions (which included participation by both elite and commoner women) found among Nahua groups, especially the Mexica.

Evidence of elite women's high status among the Nudzahui comes from an array of sources and types of data, including chronicles, notarial texts, codices, and material remains.<sup>46</sup> These show that, while elite women were probably not the social equals of men, gender complementarity was culturally valued and that ruling and noble women played important social roles. Examples of complementarity in worldview and social roles can be found across an array of activities and domains of Nudzahui social life and extend to commoner women as well.

The equivalence and mutuality of the male and female genders can be seen most clearly in the conceptualization of the religious and political realms. Nudzahui religion focused primarily on using ritual to maintain the balance among natural, human, and supernatural forces. While deities and natural forces could be associated with specific genders, and some had features of both, their complex of deities was not as elaborated or highly structured as that of the Mexica. The Nudzahui believed that the male sky and the female earth gave rise to life through rain, which connected the two. Just as these male and female elements were equally necessary to create and sustain life on earth, so too were they necessary to the conceptualization of leadership and rulership in the Nudzahui region. The Nudzahui term for rulership (*yuhuitayui*) combines elements referring to the reed mat (*yuhui*) and the married couple (*tayui*, who are consistently depicted sitting on such mats) and visually and etymologically suggests the equivalence of the male and female partners (see fig. 2.5). The Nudzahui referred to male rulers as *yya toniñe*



FIGURE 2.5. The ruling couple and mat together symbolize the *yuhuitayui*; both partners are shown seated with legs to the front. (From *Codex Nuttalli: A Picture Manuscript from Ancient Mexico*, edited by Zelia Nuttall, Dover, New York, 1975, 24.)

("lord ruler") and to female rulers as *yya dzehe toniite* ("lady ruler").<sup>47</sup> Does the consistent imagery tying leadership and rulership to the married ruling couple imply that women as well as men could rule among the Nudzahui kingdoms?

The answer is an unequivocal yes. While some Nudzahui preference for male succession to rulership can be detected, female succession to positions of rulership was both possible and relatively common.<sup>48</sup> But it would be more correct to emphasize that when a couple from the ruling stratum married, they jointly ruled the politics that were the patrimony of each, and they could live in the capital of either, or sometimes both. After the couple had children, two of them were chosen to succeed to positions and estates of the parents, with the eldest child often succeeding to the rulership of the kingdom of the father, and a younger child succeeding to the rulership of the mother, though variations, often regional, also existed.<sup>49</sup> While sons were preferred, Nudzahui codices depict daughters succeeding their fathers or mothers as rulers, and examples can be found of early colonial female Nudzahui rulers seeking to assert, justify, and legally protect their succession and rights to pass on their ruling positions and associated holdings. But because prehispanic rulership was truly joint, Nudzahui women sovereigns were far more than occasional rulers in place of men or even simply consorts. They represented their communities, participated in these marital alliances, and helped build estates that could be passed on to their children.<sup>50</sup>

Even women of the Nudzahui nobility (or *yya*) who did not hold ruling positions also played important social roles. These included the exercise of both political and religious responsibilities and authority at lower levels of sociopolitical organization than the *yuhuitayu*. Priestesses as well as priests are shown in the Nudzahui codices as active in ceremonies that also depict "women's participation in Mixtec religion as producers of sacred and symbolic food."<sup>51</sup> Both nobles and commoners could serve in the hereditary position of religious practitioner. But their services did not set them apart as a separate group or class within Nudzahui society, nor did such individuals necessarily serve continuously through their adult lives, because full-time occupational specialization and hierarchies did not exist within this group. In the realm of work, noblewomen supervised the production and exchange of craft goods, reserving the production of the most prized goods—especially high-quality, semi-finished cloth—for themselves.<sup>52</sup> While women of the ruling and noble class played a variety of social roles that afforded them prestige and authority, neither secular nor religious roles were linked to hierarchically organized, parallel structures of institutions or organizations like those of the Nahuas. Nonetheless, the complementarity of Nudzahui noblemen's and women's political roles is repeated among commoners (or *ñandahit*) in the organization and activities of everyday life.

From personal names and the structuring of labor and work, to the passing on of property and rights to it, the Nudzahui emphasized gender complementarity, not gender hierarchy. For girls and boys, men and women,

individual identity was rooted in the divinatory calendar from which one's name came, names that were not gender differentiated, unlike the Nahuas. As with rights of succession among the nobility, noble and commoner men and women owned property separately, inheriting it from their parents and passing it on to their children without pooling it under any male authority figure's control.<sup>53</sup> Labor patterns show more gender differentiation, but here complementarity linked to reciprocity shaped the way work was performed.

The Nudzahui prehispanic gender division of labor, especially for non-elites, was structured around men planting and tending crops, undertaking communal labor projects, and transporting goods, and women spinning and weaving, preparing food and drink, gathering and preparing wild plants for food and medicines, and caring for young children.<sup>54</sup> While field and home each represented a base for the gendered division of labor, both men and women worked in a variety of settings with little indication of any distinction or ranking of public and private space. Fields and markets were sites of labor and exchange for both men and women. Domestic settings provided the arena for midwifery and healing, which involved women practitioners in cross-household exchanges of goods and services. While Nudzahui men, especially noblemen, more frequently served as military and ritual leaders, or at least in the public performance of such roles, the Nudzahui preferred a complementary organization of tasks that depended upon gender-based reciprocity and left less room for gender hierarchy to develop or flourish than among Nahuas.<sup>55</sup> It was not until after Spanish conquest that gender hierarchy became more pronounced. But among the Maya, forms of gender hierarchy had deeper prehispanic roots.

### The Maya of the Classic and Postclassic Periods: The Flexible Patriarchy

Visual images of prehispanic Maya women come less from texts drawn or written on paper, such as the codices that Nahua and Nudzahui scholars rely upon, and more from archaeological evidence. From the prehispanic Maya of the Yucatan and points south, from Guatemala to Honduras, the stone columns, known as stelae, that memorialize the histories of rulers of Maya cities and city-states, bas-relief carvings on buildings, figurines, murals, and painted pottery vessels show scenes of ritual and everyday life. While images of men predominate in Maya art, female images abound in sculpture, murals, painted ceramics, and figurines. These depictions suggest their importance to Maya courtly life.<sup>56</sup> But such depictions also suggest that their roles, while meaningful, were also secondary, even though gendered images sometimes expressed and even emphasized gender complementarity and interdependence rather than male dominance. How does the sumptuous, naturalistic, and highly expressive realm of Maya art portray women?

Much of this art, especially from the Classic period (ca. C.E. 250–900, for the Maya region specifically), treats Maya kings and nobles as the visual representation of Maya society. Such a style creates several interpretive problems for the modern viewer. Do such representations show Maya elites as they were, or do they show them as they wished to be shown? In either case, do these figures shed any light on everyday life and the lives of the vast majority of the Maya—the urban and rural inhabitants of the large, culturally complex, and varied Maya world? Through persistent and painstaking epigraphic study of these elite-centered images, scholars of the Maya have teased out a great deal of information about the prehispanic Maya world, a world of warrior kings, observant astronomers, and productive farmers and craftspeople. To discover what women's lives were like among the Maya, we begin by examining the images of noblewomen depicted on monuments and buildings.

Most human figures depicted in Classic period monumental or public Maya art are men, usually rulers, warriors, ritual leaders, or deities. Women's images are less numerous, appearing most frequently paired with men as mothers or as queen-consorts, with the maternal relationship often the one emphasized. Relatively rare early in the Classic, such images became more common later, after about C.E. 600.<sup>57</sup> But Maya visual designations of gender are relatively muted and shown primarily through clothing, rather than through sexually differentiated bodies, and such images appear more frequently at secondary centers rather than at the largest and most important cities. Noblewomen from cities such as Palenque probably served as a marriage pool from which the kings and high nobles of these more important centers sent wives to create or maintain political alliances with lesser cities or important kin groups. While some women may have ruled in their own right at sites such as Palenque, Yaxchilán, and Copán, images of women are fewer in number and do not depict them as equal partners in leadership.<sup>58</sup>

While the essence of Maya public art, in its gendered aspects, is androcentric, the repetitive use of male-female paired couples communicates a kind of complementarity or interdependence of men and women. Such images imply the necessary interdependence of both production and reproduction for individual, kin group, and community survival.<sup>59</sup> Yet the range of activities shown for women is much narrower than that of men and does not reflect their actual productive contribution. In addition, men often shed blood in this art, seemingly symbolically appropriating women's role in fertility.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps the Maya intended this gendered image to communicate interdependence *and* hierarchy (of both gender and class) at the same time. While the Maya ideological realm used, even emphasized, images conveying both gender complementarity and asymmetry and thus downplayed women's roles, the idea of complementarity appears in a narrower range of contexts, and the parallelism evident in Nahua institutions does not seem to have existed among the Maya. But what of women in everyday life—what kinds of roles of authority did they play? What kinds of work did they do, and how did they function in households and kin groups?

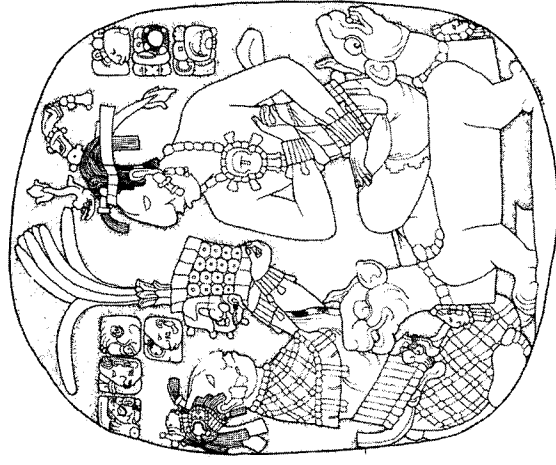


FIGURE 2.6. Pacal, the ruler of Palenque, is helped by his mother at his accession to the throne. Note the position of subordination she assumes. (From Linda Schele and David Friedel, *A Forest of Kings*, Morrow, New York, 1990, 227. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.)

Though women served as rulers at several Classic-period sites, holding such a position was unusual, probably a function of dynastic weakness, given the Maya preference for both patrilineal succession and primogeniture, especially at the largest and oldest Classic-period cities.<sup>61</sup> For example, when the ruler of Palenque, Pacal, inherited the throne from his mother, he created a dynastic history that his palace artists carved into his sarcophagus and the walls of the Temple of Inscriptions (his funerary building; see fig. 2.6). This self-fashioned dynastic history justified the break with the customary patrilineal succession pattern and at the same time demonstrated how unusual this break with customary practice was. A different pattern may have existed in smaller, more peripheral sites, like Cobá or Naranjo, where in-marrying elite women from major centers like Tikal are shown standing over captives or even carrying “military paraphernalia associated with male warriors or rulers.”<sup>62</sup> Yet little other evidence suggests that Maya noblewomen, of either the Classic or Postclassic periods, customarily held offices, whether political, military, or ritual.

As war became an increasingly important part of mid- and late-Classic-period Maya culture, the public art produced typically does not associate women with war, either in the form of warrior goddesses, as did the Mexica,

or women warriors, though there are a few exceptions. Two stelae from the sites of Cobá and Calakmul depict women standing on or over captives, and three stelae, two from Calakmul, the other from Usumacinta, show women with a scepter, a shield, or both.<sup>63</sup> At Yaxchilán (ca. 760), a bas-relief carving shows a noblewoman wearing a warrior's headdress, perhaps helping the ruler, Bird Jaguar, to dress for battle, and at Chichén Itzá, a female figure—an “old matriarch”—stands among the carved stone warrior columns of the Temple of the Warriors, which date from the late ninth century. This unusual female figure could represent the matriarch of the leading kin group of the city-state, or she could represent the Maya moon goddess, Ixchel (Lady or Woman Rainbow), patroness of weaving, childbirth, magic, and medicine, and consort of the important deity Itzamná, whose name means Lizard House, inventor of writing and patron of science and learning.<sup>64</sup> Women are never shown taking captives, though the famous late Classic Bonampak murals show them helping to arraign prisoners. Thus Maya sculptors and painters depicted war and politics as almost solely the preserve of Maya men. Yet in-marrying high-elite women, leaving major Maya centers to marry into secondary centers, as earlier described, may have held political offices, even controlling military power on occasion. Likewise, male leaders dominated the religious realm, but occasionally women were included.

Among Maya deities, the Moon Goddess, consort of the sun and sky deities, was the primary representation of women.<sup>65</sup> She is shown in a variety of forms during the Classic and Postclassic periods. Unquestionably, she was the most significant female deity, with archaeologists identifying most goddess images as this deity. During the Classic period, the Moon Goddess on public monuments is often shown seated in a crescent moon holding a rabbit (see fig. 2-7). She can be seen on figurines weaving, appearing either as a shy, youthful weaver or as a more overtly sexual figure, perhaps a courtesan. In the Postclassic period, Ixchel (as she was then known) is also shown in a dualistic style, but age, young versus old, becomes the primary differentiating feature. Apart from her association with weaving, she was identified with fertility, curing, and the earth. The Itzá Maya particularly worshiped Ixchel at her shrine site on Cozumel Island.<sup>66</sup>

In addition to the Moon Goddess, represented as “Woman, first woman, and mother of mankind,” other, though lesser, female deities existed.<sup>67</sup> Goddesses associated with Venus and the sun appear on Classic painted ceramic vessels and may be female versions of the Maya ancestral twins, who represent the Sun and Venus and who originated ruling dynasties. While one or more female deities often appear with a male figure in these images, they do not depict a gendered duality underlying creation. Instead the pottery displays female figures with motifs or images that repeat and reinforce masculine solar and Venutian design elements.<sup>68</sup> Other ceramic vessels contain images of primordial earth goddesses associated with death, a possible *pulque* goddess (pulque being a fermented drink made from the maguey plant), and female attendants to the *pauahutuns*, or gods who held up the four corners of

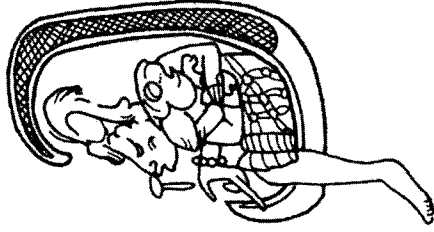


FIGURE 2.7. The Moon Goddess shown inside a moon glyph. (From Linda Schele and David Friedel, *A Forest of Kings*, Morrow, New York, 1990, 412. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.)

the earth. Shown actively assisting in rituals of purification associated with the *pauahutuns*, yet clearly the consorts of them, these images imply a female role in religious ritual.<sup>69</sup>

Maya women participated in a variety of rituals, from the self-sacrifice associated with accession to a throne to more mundane birth rituals, but there is little evidence to indicate female religious functionaries, at least in temples. Chronicles from the early colonial period observe that during the late Postclassic period, Maya women helped prepare ritual offerings of food, textiles, and incense. On the rare occasions they entered temples, only older women were permitted to do so, though a woman known as the Ix Mol helped initiate girls into the practice of becoming good workers during the month of Yaxkin. Active participants in household rituals, some focused on fertility and pregnancy, as well as producers of ritual items, the women of Maya Classic and Postclassic societies probably did not participate in a true hierarchy of priestesses as did Mexica women.<sup>70</sup> But greater similarity in women's activities can be found in the realm of everyday life where, like Nahua and Nudzahui women, Maya women, noble and commoner, actively participated in household and community economies.

Maya women of the Classic period labored at a variety of tasks. Painted ceramics show their primary responsibilities to have been the preparation of food, which included grinding maize and cooking it and other food items, and the production of woven textiles. Men provided many of the necessary raw materials by farming and hunting, and they also labored as ritual specialists and soldiers (with the latter roles perhaps limited to the nobility). The first Spanish observers of the late Postclassic Maya recorded a more extensive list of tasks performed by women, many of which also probably applied to the earlier Classic period. Household lands, for example, were worked in cooperation with other community members, and women may well have

participated in such agricultural work. Known to be especially active in working the gardens adjacent to their households, they also raised small animals such as dogs, pigs, bees, fowl, and other birds. Necessary for household survival, such labor also would have provided the food and other goods needed for intra- and intercommunity exchange and tribute payments, and even noblewomen may have produced the textiles used in rituals and elite exchanges of goods.<sup>71</sup>

Women did not perform their labors alone. Instead their work was often carried out in large households that relied upon the labor of wives, daughters, daughters-in-law, servants, and sometimes even orphans or slaves, who wove and spun in large work groups.<sup>72</sup> Kinship structures—which emphasized men over women—probably provided the basis for organizing this household labor. The Classic and Postclassic kinship systems highlighted ties among and through men as the primary basis for kin group membership and transmission of more valued property, especially land, yet recognized women as mothers and progenitors.

Many scholars of Maya prehistory believe that patrilineality is a deeply rooted, ancient feature of Maya society. They note that in contemporary Maya communities, lowland and highland, kin groups and households are structured by both patrilineal descent and patrilocal patterns of postmarital residence, where brides move into the household of their husbands' fathers. Other evidence of patrilineality includes the many indications that primogeniture was the primary means of succession for Maya Classic and Postclassic rulers and the emphasis in Maya languages on kin terminologies that reflect patrilineal descent.<sup>73</sup>

Although patriliney is often associated with gender asymmetry, prehistoric Maya households and kin groups may have been characterized by a flexible, rather than strict, system that recognized women's contributions to households of their reproductive capacities and productive labor.<sup>74</sup> While the Maya Classic and Postclassic elite emphasized male leadership and patrilineal chains of success to ruling positions, they also accorded some recognition to bilateral kinship. Like the Mexica and Nudzahui, Maya rulers were ennobled by both their fathers *and* their mothers. Indeed, the word for "noble," *almehen*, was a word compounded of elements referring to a woman's offspring (*al*) and a man's sons (*mehen*). Women were primarily responsible for the worship of household ancestors, and worship in the late Postclassic often included reverence for female ancestors.<sup>75</sup>

The late Classic period might have been the time when two related but contradictory and persistent elements of Maya gender relations emerged. On the one hand, the growth of Maya urban centers, intensifying warfare, and the increasing importance and power of kings and nobles reinforced male dominance as both ideology and lived experience. On the other, women from the most powerful centers were prized as wives, some women may well have held leadership positions in smaller centers, and the household labor of noble and

non-noble women became more valuable for exchange and tribute in the growing and more warlike Maya city-states. The "active but circumscribed" roles played by Maya women are reminiscent of Nahua gender concepts and practices, but the Maya apparently confined women's roles to a narrower range of contexts, and the parallelism evident in Nahua institutions did not exist among this other important Mesoamerican indigenous group.<sup>76</sup>

### The Andes: Women and Supernatural and State Power

South America as a whole encompassed great variability in the types of cultures and economies that arose during the thousands of years of indigenous cultural development and florescence. Yet a fundamental cultural division in South America existed between highland cultures, located along the western side of the Andes, and the lowland cultures of central and eastern South America. The former experienced the development of complex civilizations and empires, with their large, dense populations, several times in that region. Among South America's Andean cultures, archaeologists have discovered an ancient tradition of female supernaturals, perhaps older than in Mesoamerica. Another contrast between Mesoamerica and highland South America is that in Mesoamerica work patterns were highly gendered and broadly similar across the regions described in this book, yet women's other roles varied, depending especially on the elaboration of markets and full-time specialization as well as military organization. As we move further south into the Andean region, we find more overlap in men's and women's work patterns and an ancient history of women holding institutionalized roles of authority.<sup>77</sup>

Gender roles in everyday life in the earliest cultures and first civilizations of the Andes prior to the rise and expansion of the Inka appear to have been relatively egalitarian. The discovery that images of female supernaturals, especially the Staff Goddess (see fig. 2.8), are very old in this part of Latin America, with the earliest image perhaps dating to 2250 B.C.E. (or more than 4,000 years ago, during the Peruvian Preceramic period) provides important evidence.

Associated also with such early cultures and art styles as Chavin and Yaya-Mama that date to about 1500 B.C.E., Andean peoples early on conceived of supernatural power as both male and female. For later periods, scholars must often contend with art styles, whether ceramic, textile, or sculptural, that are often rather abstract and highly stylized, even geometrical, in design (see figs. 2.9 and 2.10). Later cultures discussed in this chapter date to the Middle Horizon, beginning about C.E. 600, the late Intermediate (C.E. 1000–1476), and the late Horizon, ending in the early 1530s with the arrival of Francisco Pizarro and his band of fellow conquerors.<sup>78</sup>

One of the Andean cultures with a more naturalistic art style is the Moché culture of northern Peru (ca. C.E. 100–800). Well known in part because of its

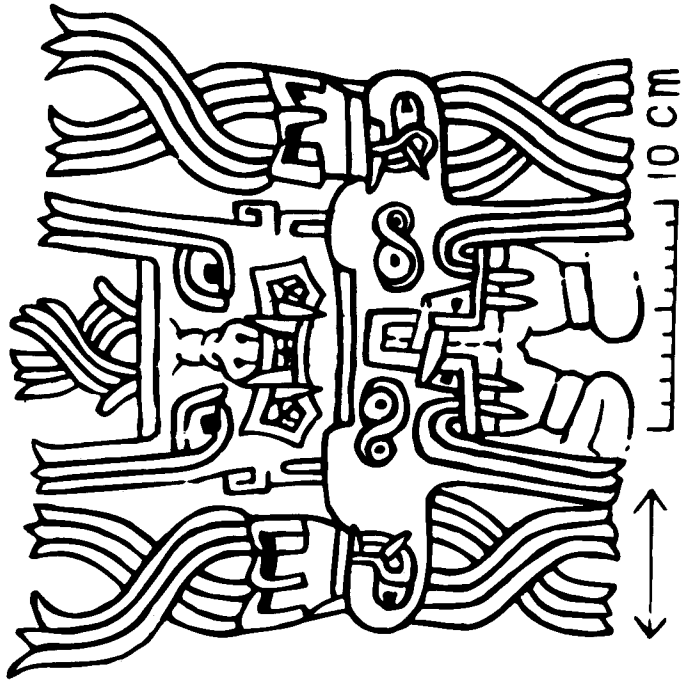


FIGURE 2.8. A Chavín Staff Goddess image from the southern Peruvian coastal site of Carhuá. (Drawing by Dwight T. Wallace, from *Paracas Art and Architecture*, edited by Ann Paul, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 1991, 76. Courtesy of University of Iowa Press.)

engaging and realistic art style, it is also renowned because this early complex culture, while not fully urban, featured several ceremonial centers, as well as a regional polity created through both warfare and the spread of an identifiable ideology and art style. Moche-style burials suggest the existence of two social strata, with elites interred in more elaborate burial sites than commoners. The Moche gave such burials to royal males who were accompanied by human sacrifices, as well as, perhaps, by the remains of their female ancestors. Some elite females, perhaps either priestesses or impersonators of an important female supernatural, also received special burials.<sup>79</sup>

Other images come from Moche ceramics, which offer literally thousands of depictions of people, rituals, deities, animals, and plants. Some of these images relate clearly to the everyday world, some to the supernatural world, and some to a domain of ancestors who appear to mediate between the two.<sup>80</sup> In scenes of the everyday, women are shown either working—making textiles or preparing food—or in depictions of childbirth and motherhood. They do not appear in battle scenes, and their depictions are generally less varied than

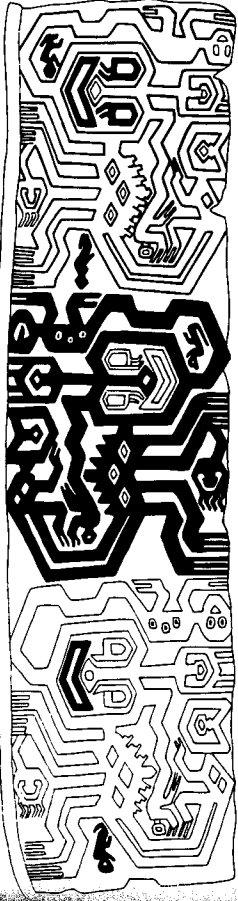


FIGURE 2.9. A Paracas textile from coastal Peru with mythical creature design, probably produced after 500 B.C. (From Ferdinand Anton, *Altindianische Textilkunst aus Peru*, List/Seeman Verlag, Munich, 1984, 66. Courtesy of List/Seeman Verlag.)

those of men. In scenes of the ancestral and sacred worlds, images of women again are more limited. They are shown in peripheries of scenes, as helpmates to deities, for example, though some scenes feature female shamans as well as a female supernatural who is depicted in the context of prisoner sacrifice and the offering of blood (see fig. 2.11).<sup>81</sup>

A rather interesting aspect of Moche art is reflected in a subset of Moche ceramics, those taking sexuality as their theme. Many ceramics depict or are shaped as phalluses; others show couples engaged in sex. Moche craft producers portrayed a wide range of sexual practices, including same-sex male couplings. While fewer in number, there are also vaginal images. Although a phallic emphasis is discernible in Moche erotic art, the copulation scenes are very natural and are neither violent nor degrading to women.<sup>82</sup> What these images do evoke is a seeming emphasis on masculinity, with a secondary but possibly linked emphasis on fertility (see fig. 2.12).

Apart from the Moche culture, other contemporaneous local cultures and art styles, also in the northern region, offer images of prominent women, perhaps carrying out specific political and religious roles. The Recuay-style pottery of the Callejón de Huaylas region of north-central Peru features images showing both men and women, sometimes a central male figure surrounded by warriors and other attendants (who on occasion are female), and sometimes individual portrait-like depictions of men or women alone or in couples.<sup>83</sup> While men are generally shown with more ornate decorative accoutrements such as headgear or earpools, images like the “Prominent Woman” could indicate female authority (see fig. 2.13).

The site of Queyash Alto in the same area contains evidence of feasting by high-ranking families or kin groups. Artifacts such as spindle whorls and women’s clothing pins (called *tupui* pins) may indicate areas within households where women undertook work tasks such as weaving and food preparation for feasting. Archaeologist Joan Gero also found that families buried women under house floors, indicating their centrality in households and kin groups.

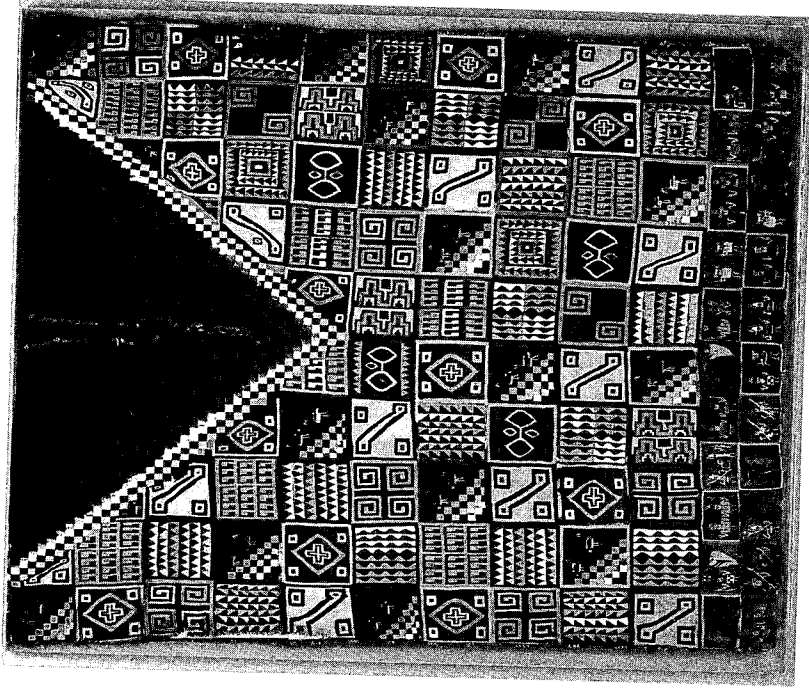
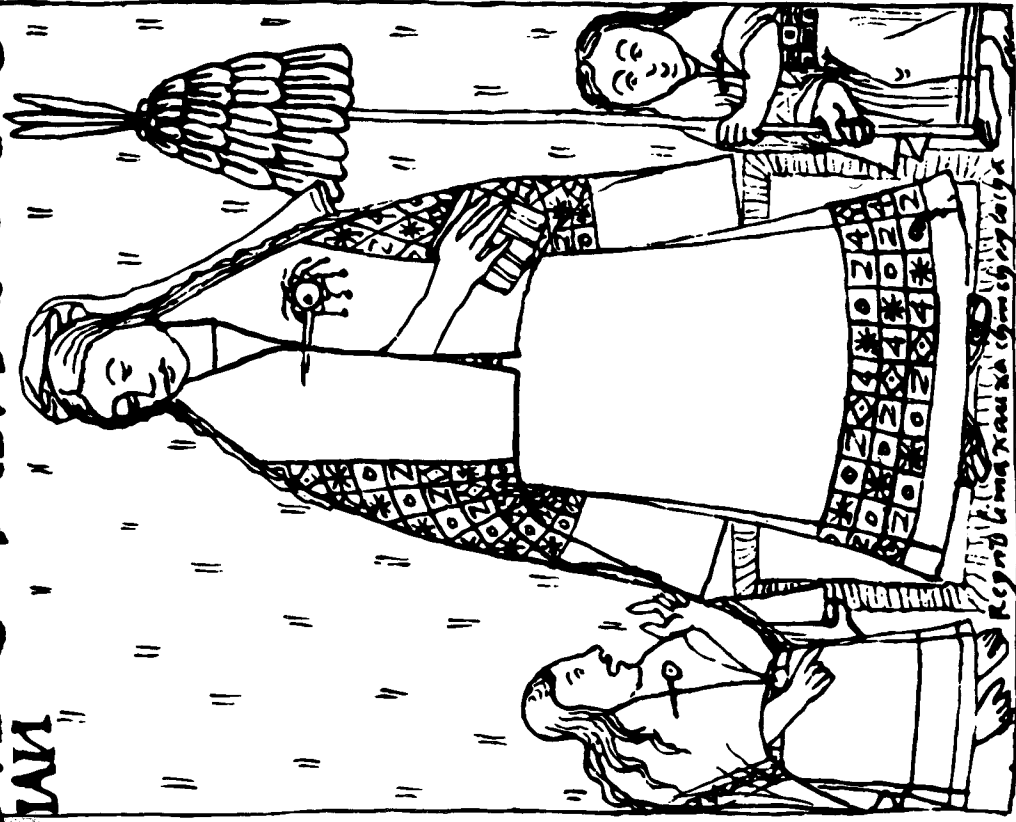


FIGURE 2.10. Above: An Inka textile, a shirt known as an *unicu*. (Neg. no. 2A23893, courtesy of Department of Library Services, American Museum of Natural History.) Facing page: A picture of a *quya* wearing a woven garment with a similar geometric design. (From Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, *La nueva crónica y buen gobierno*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico City, 1980, I:112.)

She speculates that even though images of female supernaturals are absent from the site, women held power connected to the political and administrative aspects of ritualized feasting. In Gero's view, such activities depended upon women's political as well as culinary skills, making women and men interdependent in the feasting context.<sup>84</sup>

Female deities, discernible in other later pre-Inka Andean cultures and archaeological sites such as Wari and Tiwanaku, provide further clues to the existence of Andean ideas of gender interdependence and female power. These sites were each the center of an important pre-Inka empire. The Tiwanaku civilization of central Peru began to develop during the third century C.E.

# LAOTAYA COÏA MAMAIMITOCA LAMI



mama

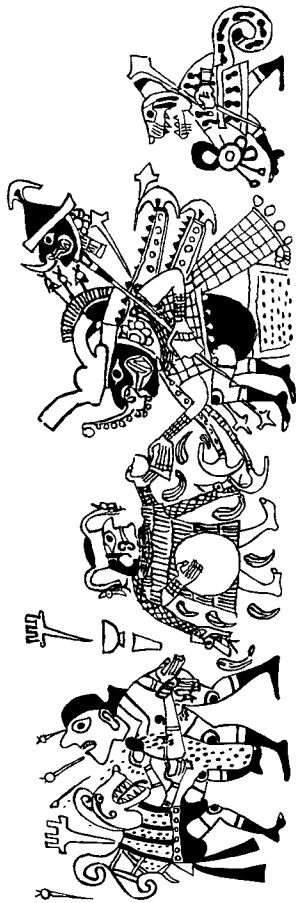


FIGURE 2.11. A Moche supernatural with long braids that are snakes presents a goblet of blood to a deity. (Drawing by Donna McClelland.)

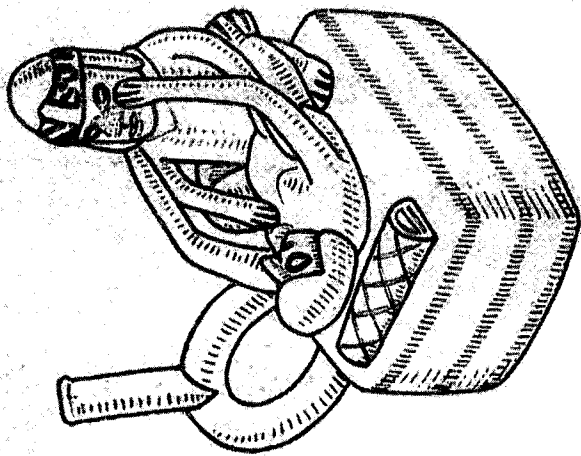


FIGURE 2.12. A Moche erotic figurine. (Redrawn from Federico Kaufmann Doig, *Comportamiento sexual en el antiguo Perú*, Kompactos, Lima, 1978, p. 113.)



FIGURE 2.13. The Recuy "Prominent Woman." She appears alone on this vessel, but on others she appears with a male of equal size. (From Karen Olsen Bruhns, *Ancient South America*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, 192. Reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press and Karen Olsen Bruhns.)



While its primary deity was male, similar to the Chavin Staff God, female supernaturals can be found among Tiwanaku images but do not seem as central to this civilization's iconography as do such images for the somewhat later, but overlapping, Wari civilization (ca. C.E. 500–800) to the north. While a male deity received emphasis in early Wari images, a female deity began to be depicted soon thereafter. She was shown on ceramics and in textiles associated with maize and may well have had lunar associations, paired with the probable solar associations of the primary male supernatural. The civilizations succeeding Tiwanaku and Wari do not offer as many female supernatural images, though the Andean north coast, a region with some geographic overlap with the later Inka state, featured many images of women in figurines and on pottery.<sup>85</sup> Although Inka iconography, as represented on textile, ceramic, or stone, does not offer many female supernatural images, written sources—Spanish and indigenous—provide us with descriptions of Inka goddesses, as well as descriptions of women's activities and roles.

The spiritual world of the Inka consisted of at least two realms, one of gods and goddesses, the other a realm of sacred objects and places known as *wak'as* that included “ancestor mummies, mountains, rocks, and springs.”<sup>86</sup> The most powerful deity, Wiracocha, was an androgynous creator deity whose place was at the top of the Inka cosmological order. Beneath Wiracocha, a series of gods existed, male and female, with Inti, the solar deity, and Illapa, the thunder deity, being the primary male gods. The Inka cosmology prominently featured female deities like Mamaquilla, the moon goddess (and wife of the sun), and Pachamama, the earth's mother. Pachamama's daughters, linked to specific crops and other valued goods, were also sacred: Saramama (tied to maize), Axomama (potatoes), Cocamama (coca), Coyamama (precious metals), and Sañumama (clay). Mamacocho, who was a sea deity, was also female. Andeans seem to have generally associated male gods with natural phenomena, placating them through sacrifices and offerings, and female deities with that which was necessary for human subsistence and survival, especially the earth, food, and water. The Inka grafted both their greater reverence for the Sun God, as well as a more hierarchical conceptualization of deities, onto a preexisting, cosmological structure. Because conquest had been an Andean reality for over a thousand years, this structure connected male deities (in particular, Illapa) and conquest. But until the Inka it did not feature the clearly organized male and female hierarchies that Inka rulers used as an ideological device to incorporate conquered peoples into their empire.<sup>87</sup>

Other Andean and Inka female supernaturals existed in the period prior to the Spanish conquest. Some were local goddesses connected to fertility, sexuality, the moon, and water, while others were *wak'as*, ancestral, sometimes mythical, women, who were worshiped as founding mothers.<sup>88</sup> One of these, Mama Huaco, daughter of the Sun and Moon, became the founding mother of the Inka dynasty. She was considered sower of the first corn and a fierce warrior implicated in the destruction of the Guallas, a group that opposed Inka conquest. Mama Huaco, as sister and wife of Manco Capac, the

first supreme ruler of Inka, became the first *quya*, or queen, and tied the Inka supernatural realm to the everyday realm of men, and especially women.<sup>89</sup>

Like the hierarchy embedded in the Inka cosmology, the Inka conquest state, with its capital city of Cuzco, had a hierarchically organized politico-administrative structure. A male supreme ruler and his consort headed this structure. The *quya*, always a sister of the Inka, presided over women's religious organizations, especially during the month that *Quya raymi* was celebrated. This imperial festival honored both the Moon and the queen and coincided with the September equinox, when both the new agricultural cycle and rainy season began again. The ethnohistorian Irene Silverblatt argues that this “was a time when female concerns, as Andean society so defined them, were given voice.”<sup>90</sup> Like other imperial rituals, *Quya raymi* included the parades of mummies of past Inkas and *quyas*, and the Inka people supported both the ancestral cults of deceased *quyas* and the living *quyas* through labor, lands, and offerings. These female leaders presided over female-centered rituals and a world of women that was parallel with, yet subordinate to, especially in political and military affairs, the world of men. While not paramount ruler, a *quya* could have authority over the king's domain in his absence. She also decided matters in cases when the Inka's highest council, composed of delegates from the four provincial divisions of the empire, was deadlocked. Local leaders known as *kurakas* replicated the more earthly, mundane powers of rulers. While often male, they were sometimes female, especially in the northern area of the Inka empire. Women called *capullanas*, who may have succeeded to their offices through their matriline, were known to lead northern coastal ethnic groups at times.<sup>91</sup>

Women's sacred and earthly roles of authority were rooted in a kinship system that featured parallel lines of descent, one through men, another through women, within the *ayllu*, the basic Andean kinship unit. This unit might consist of extended families, larger kin groups within *señorios* (seignorial domains), or ethnically defined communities as a whole, or even extend, “as the Incas would have it, to an empire.”<sup>92</sup> While early colonial chronicles, most written by Spaniards, provide little information describing the activities of female *kurakas* within Andean communities, it is clear that the Inka reinforced, perhaps even heightened, the power of local headmen as the communities and regions they represented became parts of the Inka empire. Male power and authority increased as the growing imperial domain absorbed local ethnic groups and *ayllu* communities. This imperial expansion affected everyone in domains incorporated by the Inka.

Local peoples felt this impact primarily through changing patterns of labor. While Andeans differentiated between the types of labor carried out by women and men, with women more focused on weaving, food preparation, preparing of fields for cultivation, and childcare, and men on plowing fields, harvesting crops, herding llamas and alpacas, and combat, there was in fact overlap of male and female tasks. Both men and women farmed, each doing a particular set of tasks.<sup>93</sup> Weaving was another area where there was

overlap. While weaving was considered a quintessentially female task, symbolized by the inclusion of cotton and spindles in shrines for female ancestors, boys and men could spin or weave rough cloth. Male specialist weavers, called *kumpi-kamayuy*, also produced fine cloth (*kumpi*), as did the *aqllas*, or Chosen Women. Even mining, in some areas, was carried out by families, with both men and women participating.<sup>94</sup>

Inka demands for labor appear, nevertheless, to have made the gender division of labor more rigid, with men being called on for labor or military service and women increasing their output of yarn, *awasqa* or coarse cloth, and *chicha*, the maize beer often consumed in community feasts throughout the Andes past and present.<sup>95</sup> While men throughout the Inka empire could regularly expect to be called upon to provide labor for state uses (*mit'a*) in the army, for public works projects or transportation of goods, or crafts production, some women, the *aqllas*, might also be called upon to provide special services for the Inka state.

Representatives of the Inka selected girls between the ages of eight and ten from all over the Inka realm to come to the capital or other cities to carry out a variety of tasks. Some *aqllas*, those of Inka blood, were considered sacred. As wives of the Sun, they were expected to remain virgins throughout their lives. Others were consecrated to other gods or were chosen by the Inka to be among the Sun's secondary wives. The supreme ruler could also give them to close associates or the kurakas of Inka-controlled provinces as wives. Those who were less prized worked hard for the Inka state, caring for shrines, participating in rituals, preparing *chicha* for the gods, and, most important, weaving the fine textiles that circulated through the empire to be used for gifts or in ceremonies. *Aqllas* trained, worked, and lived in special state-constructed housing, the *aqlla wasi*, found both in the Inka capital of Cuzco and regional capitals. Known as *mamaqunas*, some *aqllas* became priestesses who also served as the teachers of the young Chosen Women.<sup>96</sup>

The *aqllas* as a group represent the ability of Inka state power to control women's sexuality as well as their labor power, but this institution also contained within it a female leadership hierarchy. While *mamaqunas* did not marry, provincial priestesses did, apparently sometimes passing their positions on to their daughters.<sup>97</sup> Like Nahua patterns, this hierarchy was not as deep as male hierarchies of authority and leadership, yet women clearly served in leadership positions. While most scholars do not see Andean women, within their respective strata, as the equals in power or authority of either noble or commoner men, they nevertheless recognize Andean women of the late prehispanic era as capable, even powerful, in their own right.<sup>98</sup> Even the secondary wives of the Inka—whose positions surely depended upon provincial leaders' use of their daughters as political pawns—acted in political, even military, capacities.

The secondary wives and daughters of the penultimate ruler of the prehispanic era, Huayna Capac, illustrate the complexity of women's place. Undoubtedly privileged by receiving gifts of labor, houses, and perhaps lands

as well, they experienced little real contact with their husbands and would be punished severely for any adulterous relationships. This was true even of the lowliest of such wives, those given by lower ranked provincial leaders. Yet one of Huayna Capac's secondary wives, Contarguacho (from the kingdom of Hatun Jauja), led an army allied with the Spanish to ward off an Inka-led uprising against them.<sup>99</sup> Her daughter, Quispe Sisa, became a concubine of Francisco Pizarro, Spanish conqueror of the Inka, when she was twelve or thirteen. She was baptized and given the name *doña* Inés Yupanqui (using the Spanish title of respect). But Peruvian ethnohistorian Waldemar Espinosa Soriano observes that she was never truly Pizarro's wife nor even a lover treated with real affection. Instead she functioned more like a servant and bore Pizarro two children, *don* Gonzalo and *doña* Francisca Pizarro.

Quispe Sisa was far from the only indigenous woman to come into intimate contact with a Spanish conqueror. One noted historian goes so far as to refer to the Spanish conquests in the Americas of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries as "the conquest of women."<sup>100</sup> Why would these conquests be referred to this way? What did indigenous women, both noble and commoner, experience during and after this period of tremendous violence and culturally destructive consolidation of Iberian rule?

### Conclusion

The groups focused on in this chapter present us with a surprisingly varied picture of gender relations. The Mexica cognatic kinship system underlay a tendency toward parallel gender institutions, yet male dominance existed and was heightened by the militarism of their society. While warlike, the Ñudzahui had no empire and had less developed systems of hierarchy, labor specialization, and exchange, so that while their highest leaders were, in a very real sense, male and female coleaders, there is little evidence of parallel-structured political, economic, or religious institutions. Prehispanic Maya society demonstrated the greatest degree of male dominance, yet this was a flexible dominance, variably expressed. The Maya patrilineal kinship structures, which emphasized ties from and through men and in which daughters left their natal households at or after marriage, are ancient and probably date back to the increasing stratification and intensifying warfare of the Classic period. The Maya, too, while highly skilled in agriculture and crafts production, had fewer full-time occupational specialists than did Nahuas, resulting in fewer opportunities for parallel institutions and positions. While Andean cultures varied in their depictions of female supernaturals and everyday roles, images of female power are very old. The Inka, also empire builders, represent the closest parallel to Nahua gender relations. Blending complementarity and subordination, elite and commoner women made major economic contributions, fulfilled socially recognized roles of authority, and enjoyed some degree of autonomy from fathers and husbands.

In the Americas, Europeans encountered an array of gendered systems of power and authority. Among a number of Circum-Caribbean peoples who included the Tainos of the Caribbean, the late prehispanic Panamanian societies ancestral to, among others, the San Blas Kuna, and the Sinú of northern Colombia, the Europeans even found female rulers. The Sinú, for example, treated their *cacica* (one leader in an indigenous tripartite authority structure, whose other leaders were male, and whom we know only as the “señora” [lady or madam] or “cacica” of Finzenú), with great reverence.<sup>101</sup> But as Iberians brought a more patriarchal gender system to the Americas, female systems of authority became weakened. The next chapter examines the gendered impact of the intense clash of cultures that occurred, as well as the consequences of the imposition of colonial rule for native women.

## 3

## Colliding Worlds

Indigenous Women, Conquest,  
and Colonialism

That women played a variety of roles during the conquest and colonial periods almost goes without saying. However, one woman in particular has gone down in history as especially noteworthy during this period. She is Malinche, or doña Marina, or Malintzin, the variously named translator and sometime consort of the conqueror of the Nahuas of central Mexico, Hernán Cortés. Though no documents exist in which she narrates or interprets her life in her own voice, Spanish sources often refer to her somewhat ironically as *la lengua* (tongue). Her image and life illustrate in microcosm the ways that sexuality and gender were part of the process of conquest (see figs. 3.1 and 3.2). The illustrations, while different, recall some of the strength implicit in the Coyolxauhqui image discussed in the last chapter, but her life course tellingly foreshadows the conquerors’ treatment of the indigenous women on whom they depended and with whom they had intimate relations. While Malintzin herself played an important public role in the events of conquest, other women experienced diminished public roles. And she gave birth to children who were among the first mestizo children of mainland Spanish America, helping to set off the development of mixed ethno-racial identities whose existence would complicate both gender and racial hierarchies.

This chapter explores this decline at the same time that it highlights a historical counterpoint, one in which native women demonstrated an admirable capacity to survive, adjust to, or resist myriad changes, barriers, and problems. While multifaceted transformational influences, especially new forms of labor extraction and a new religious belief system that stressed women’s passivity, enclosure, purity, and honor, ended in a widespread dimi-