

The ruling class. Dignitaries, warriors, officials, priests: the Mexican 'nobility'—The rising class of traders. The monopoly of foreign trade: origin of the honours allowed to the merchant guilds: the traders' place in the social system—The craftsmen—The common people. Rights and duties of the ordinary citizen: the possibilities open to him: the case of the landless peasant—The slaves: the misleading nature of the word: how a man became a slave: manumission—Wealth and poverty. Standards of living. Ownership and usufruct of land: personal estate: taxes and tribute: wealth and expenditure of the rulers: public service and private fortune: luxury, comfort and frugality—The sovereign, the great dignitaries, the council. Beginnings of the Mexican dynasty: election of the emperor: the prerogatives and functions of the Ciuacoatl: other great dignitaries and high officials: the Tlatocan, or supreme council.

The only germ of a ruling class that existed at this period was to be found in the priests of Uitzilopochtli, the god-bearers, who joined some degree of military command and general authority to their priestly functions. But this rudimentary organisation was sufficient; and when the Mexicans, in an attempt to imitate their more developed neighbours and to raise themselves to the rank of the cities, provided their nation with a king, the result was catastrophic.² At the time of the foundation of their city they had the same social and political organisation as that which they had known throughout their wanderings.

How great a change there was between this and the beginning of the sixteenth century! The Mexican community had become differentiated, complex and stratified: the different sections had widely differing functions, and the authority of the ruling dignitaries was very great. The priesthood, high in honour and importance, no longer had its military and civil aspect. Trade now dealt with a great volume of valuable merchandise, and the influence of the traders was increasing. Wealth and luxury had made their appearance, and misery with them.

The old simple lines of tribal organisation had been overlaid by those of a state, with its ability to administer and to conceive and execute a foreign policy; and at the head of this stood a single man, the *tlatoani*, the emperor, with his counsellors and his officials about him, a man so high and splendid that the common people might not look upon him.

The change was very great, and it had come about in a very short time: tribal democracy had been replaced by an aristocratic and imperialistic monarchy.

THE RULING CLASS

The ruling class, the top level of the social stratification, was itself divided into several categories according to function, importance and standing. Thus a high-priest was the equal of a general, but both would look down upon a poor 'parish priest' or a village tax-gatherer. Yet all of them stood apart from what Spaniards called the plebeians, the

maceualtin (*maceualli* in the singular), who had neither authority nor office.

The word *tecuhtli* – ‘dignitary’, or ‘lord’ – was applied to the upper level of the ruling class when the army, administration or judiciary was concerned: it was used for the chief generals, officials of the highest rank in Mexico (the head of the exchequer, for example) and in the provinces, the chiefs of the districts of the capital, and the judges who dealt with the most important cases in the large towns. If the former ruler of a city that had been absorbed by the empire remained in his place under the authority of Tenochtitlan, he was a *tecuhtli*. The emperor himself was a *tecuhtli*; and the glorious title was often borne by the gods – Mictlantecuhtli, ‘the lord of the world that is under the ground’, for example, or Xiuhtecuhtli, ‘the turquoise lord’, the god of fire.

The priests, for their part, were only rarely distinguished in this way. As we shall see, they had their own hierarchy, which was no less splendid and respected than that of the other divisions.

In the early days, the *tecuhtli* was elected, or rather nominated, seeing that the choice of the electors nearly always fell on a member of the same family for any given appointment. The succession to the headship of a district, for example, came about ‘not by inheritance, but, at his death, by the election of the most honourable, wise, capable and aged man . . . If the dead man has left a son who is fit for the position, he is chosen: it is always a relation who is elected, providing that there is one and that he is suited for the post.’³

By the time of Motecuhzoma II, however, the only offices that were really filled by election were the very highest – those of the emperor and of the four ‘senators’ who attended him. In all other cases it was either a straightforward appointment of his own servant by the emperor or a nomination on the part of the districts or the cities – a nomination which held good only if it were confirmed by the central authority.

In practice it was generally a son or a nephew or even a brother of the local *tecuhtli* who succeeded him in his

village, town or district; but although the outward show of tradition was respected, in fact this was no longer an election but a presentation, and in the last resort it was the emperor who appointed the man of his choice. Power no longer came from below, but from above: the new machine of the state had absorbed the last traces of the democratic beginnings.

A *tecuhtli* was always a man of importance, whether he governed a village, a town or a city. It was the *tecuhtli* whom the Spaniards (bringing with them a Jamaican word) termed the 'cacique'. He had distinguishing clothes and jewels: his name carried the respectful termination *-tzin*: he lived in a *teccalli*, a palace modest or luxurious as the case might be, maintained by the people of the village or the town who owed him 'wood and water', as the expression went, and domestic service. Land was set aside for him and worked on his account; the income from it, which he received, might be called his salary. Apart from this, the emperor allowed him 'victuals and pay', stuff, clothes and provisions, in return for which he was obliged to present himself before the emperor whenever he was called for.

What were his functions? In the first place, he represented his people before the higher authorities: he was to 'speak for the people under his care'⁴ and to defend them, if it was necessary, against excessive taxation or any encroachment upon their land. Secondly, he judged law-suits, appeal lying to Mexico or Texcoco.² Then, as a military commander, he led the contingents that he was required to furnish in war. Finally, he was there to maintain order, to oversee the cultivation of the fields, particularly those which were set aside to produce the tribute, and to see that this tribute was paid to the *calpixque* of the imperial administration.

To accomplish all this, especially if his district were important, he in his turn had the right of appointing local officials, so long as he paid them himself out of the produce of his lands and his allowances. The *tecuhtli*, his family and his children, paid no taxes.

There used to be a great difference, in the France of earlier days, between the manner of life of the country

was sure of leaving his title to his descendants, the *tecuhtli* was not. He held it only for himself and for his lifetime, and at his death the double process of local nomination and central confirmation might give his office to a distant relative, or even to someone entirely outside his family. And in fact, many cities, particularly in the neighbourhood of Mexico, had had a *tecuhtli* directly appointed by the emperor.

Each district or *calpulli* in the capital had its own chief, the *calpullec*, who was elected for life, preferably from the same family, by the inhabitants, and confirmed by the emperor. He had a council of elders, the *ueuetque*, who were probably the oldest and best-known heads of families, and 'he never did anything without taking the opinion of the elders.'⁵ His duties were in every way like those of the *tecuhtli* of a village or a city: he was particularly required 'to protect and defend' his fellow-citizens. But his

There is no doubt that here we are in contact with a very old institution in the Mexican tribe: the *calpulli* is the true nucleus, and its chief and elders represent the earliest form of the Aztec territorial organisation. It is equally sure that at the time of which we are speaking the *calpullec*, although he was still a highly honoured figure, found his authority growing less and less real as it was nibbled away on all sides.

He was elected to his office by his fellow-citizens, but he only retained it by the sovereign's favour. In theory he was at the head of all local activities, but he had to yield the temple to the *quacuilli*, the district priest, who belonged to the ecclesiastical chain of command, and the 'house of the young men' to the military instructors appointed from above. Torquemada⁶ says that he was obliged to go to the palace every day to take his orders: 'he waited for the *Uey calpixqui*, who was the *mayordomo mayor*, to speak to him and tell him what the great lord (the emperor) ordered and commanded.' There were officials under him whose duty it was to oversee groups of twenty, forty or a hundred families for the payment of taxes and the organisation of collective labour, such as cleaning or public works. At least theoretically they were under him; but one has a distinct impression that they really belonged to what one may call a bureaucratic administrative system which was outside his control. 'The number of civil servants (*oficiales*) that this nation had for every little thing was so great and all the registers were so well kept that there was nothing wanting in either the accounts or the rolls (*padrones*); for there were clerks and minor officials (*mandoncillos*) for everything, even the sweepers. The whole city and its districts were divided up, for the man who was in charge of a hundred houses chose and appointed five or six other agents under him and shared the hundred houses between them so that each, looking after twenty or fifteen, could direct and command (the inhabitants) in order to provide the taxes and the men necessary for the public works: and so the officials of the city (*oficiales de la república*) were so many in number that it was impossible to count them.'⁷

This picture of Mexican officialdom, which is strangely

reminiscent of the administrative system of the Inca empire of Peru, leaves one little illusion as to the amount of independence that the *calpullec* could enjoy, with the *Uey calpixqui* above him and the bureaucracy below. He was a traditional chief, a survivor from a former day, and he now found himself incongruously attached to a centralised administration which belonged not to the local communities but to the state.

Finally, although it may be conceded that at the beginning he had some military powers, they had almost all been taken away. In practice the contingents from the various quarters were grouped in four corps, agreeing with the four great regions of the city, Teopan, Moyotlan, Aztacalco and Cuepopan; and these corps were under commanders far more imposing than the local chiefs. In a country that was perpetually at war the army offered brave and ambitious men a career particularly rich in honours and power.

It goes without saying that in Tenochtitlan every man, whatever his origin, either was a warrior or wished to be one. The officials had been, or were going to become, warriors: the priests, at least when they were young, went off to war in order to take a prisoner; and some of them, the *tlamacaztequiuaque*, were both priests and fighting-men:⁸ as for the traders, as we shall see, their calling had none of the tameness that it has with us, but was more like an armed reconnaissance or a colonial expedition.

A boy-child was dedicated to war at his birth. His umbilical cord was buried together with a shield and some little arrows, and in a set speech he was told that he had come into this world to fight.⁹ The god of the young men was Tezcatlipoca, who was also called Yaotl, 'the warrior', and Telpochtli, 'the youth'; and it was Tezcatlipoca who ruled over the *telpochcalli*, 'the houses of the young men', where the boys went when they were six or seven. There was one in each district, and the education that they gave was essentially an education for the war in which the Mexican boy longed to shine. When they were ten, the boys had their hair cut with a lock left on the napes of their necks; the lock was called a *piochtli*, and they were not allowed to cut it off

until they had managed to make a prisoner in battle, even if it meant two or three joining their efforts to do so.

The warrior who had accomplished this first exploit carried the title of *iyac* from then onwards. 'I am an *iyac*,' said Tezcatlipoca;¹⁰ so the young warrior already rivalled his god. He cut off his lock and let his hair grow so that it fell over his right ear. But he had still only risen a single rank, and if he did not do better in the two or three succeeding campaigns he would be obliged to retire and give up soldiering. He would have to devote himself to his piece of land and his family, a dismal fate; he would never be allowed to wear dyed and embroidered clothes, nor jewellery. He would only be a *maceualli*.

But if on the other hand he were favoured by the gods, if (as a Mexican would have said) he had been born under a fortunate sign, he would go on as a fighting-man. When he had taken or killed four of the enemy he would have the title of *tequiua*, 'one who has (a share of the) tribute'; that is to say, he would reach that upper category of men who participated in the allotment of the revenues. He would become a commander and he would join the councils of war: he would have the right to wear certain feather head-dresses, and bracelets made of leather. The higher ranks would be open to him and he might become a *quachic*,¹¹ a *quauhchichimecatl*, 'chichimec-eagle', or an *otomiltl*, so called from the old, rough, warlike tribe that lived in the mountains north of Mexico. Lastly, he might become a member of one of the two higher military orders, that of the 'jaguar-knights', Tezcatlipoca's soldiers,¹² who wore the skin of a jaguar in battle, and that of the 'eagle-knights', whose helmet was an eagle's head, and who were the soldiers of the sun.¹³

In the eleventh month of the year, *Ochpaniztli*, the emperor himself distributed the honours and rewards. 'They all stood in even ranks before Motecuhzoma, who was seated upon his eagle-matting (*quauhpetlapan*): indeed he sat upon eagle's feathers and the back of his seat was jaguar's skin . . . Everyone stood before him and saluted him: at his feet he had all kinds of weapons and badges of distinction,

shields, swords, cloaks, loin-cloths. They stood before him and saluted him: and each in turn received his gifts. Then they went aside to adorn themselves and put on their decorations. It was to the great chiefs that he (the emperor) gave these splendid ornaments . . . When they had all been equipped in this way they formed their ranks again in front of Motecuhzoma . . . And the decorations that they had received were their rewards, and they served to bind them (to the service) . . . And the women who watched, the old women, the beloved women, shed burning tears, and their hearts were filled with sorrow. They said, "Here are our beloved children: and if in five or six days the word *Water and burning* is said (that is to say, war) will they ever return? Will they ever find their way back? Indeed, they will be gone for ever." ' 14

But these lamentations, which were traditionally allowed, do not seem to have diverted the warriors from their no less traditionally honoured and glorified career. For them death in battle, or better still, death on the stone of sacrifice, was the promise of a happy eternity; for a warrior who was killed in the field or on the altar was sure of becoming one of the 'companions of the eagle', *quauhteca*, one of those who accompanied the sun from its rising to the zenith in a procession that blazed with light and was splendid with joy, and then of being reincarnated as a humming-bird, to live for ever among the flowers.

At the summit the military hierarchy merged with that of the state. One of the emperor's titles was *tlatecuhtli* 'lord of the men', that is to say 'of the warriors', and his primary function was that of commanding not only the Mexican armies but those of the allied cities. The most important of the great dignitaries who were about him had offices that were essentially military, at least to begin with: in time of war, four of them commanded the contingents that were supplied by the four regions of the capital.

Of these 'four great ones' two stand out by reason of the honours that they received; the *tlateccatl*, 'he who commands the warriors', and the *tlaochcalcatl*, 'the man of the javelin-house'. The titles seem to imply that the first had a

military command and that the second was responsible for the arsenals (*tlacochcalli*) in which the weapons were kept. Generally they were near relations of the sovereign, and it was often from them that the emperor was chosen: Itzcoatl, Axayacatl, Tizoc and Motecuhzoma II were *tlacochcalcatl* at the time of their election, and Auitzotl was *tlacateccatl*. They had a splendid and magnificent dress – embroidered cloaks, jewels, plumes. Their houses and their way of life were based on the emperor's. They were among the first to receive when presents were given and the spoil of subjected provinces shared out. They had both great standing and great wealth.

This was also the case according to their rank with all the soldiers who distinguished themselves. As they rose in the hierarchy their fame grew, and as they earned the right to wear more and more splendid ornaments and clothes so at the same time they received gifts in kind and the rents of various estates. They were not only free from the duty of farming their own shares of land as ordinary men had to do, but they were given other shares, mostly in conquered country, which were worked for them.

They were wealthy men, with their fine houses, many servants, brilliant clothes and jewels, well-filled store-houses and coffers. But it must be remembered that this was a wealth that came only after honourable achievements and as a consequence of them. A man was wealthy because he was honoured, not honoured because he was wealthy. Besides, honourable achievement was the only means to wealth, for a man of the ruling class.

The Spaniards believed these military chiefs to be a nobility that attended upon the emperor – the equivalent of the European nobles at the court of the king of Spain or of France. But they were clearly mistaken; for the court of the Aztec emperor was made up not of hereditary magnates with great estates or inherited wealth, but of military or civil officials who enjoyed privileges that were attached to their office.

This ruling class continually renewed itself, taking recruits from the general body of the people; and this was

its great strength. Any warrior who managed to capture his four prisoners became a *tequiuia* and thus a member of the upper classes, whatever his origin. Furthermore, the emperor filled the higher ranks by promotion according to merit, and often at the end of a battle or a war he would make a whole batch of superior officers: Motecuhzoma II made two hundred and sixty at once after his victory over the men of Tutotepec.¹⁵

Tezozomoc states that all the plebeians who had distinguished themselves in the war against Coyoacán were promoted to the highest ranks after the submission of the city, and that at the same time each was given the income of one estate or more.¹⁶ Moreover even those very important offices of *tlacochcalcatl* and *tlacateccatl*, which have already been mentioned, were so filled that one at least was held by a soldier who had risen from the ranks – *criado en las guerras*, as Sahagún has it.¹⁷

In a society that was so hungry for renown, a society in which renown based upon services rendered counted for so much to everybody (the remarkable exception of the business-men will be dealt with later), the fighting-men had an enviable and an envied position. When a father treated his son to one of those improving lectures that were so usual among the Aztecs he always proposed them as the model for imitation. Their superiority was continually made evident, not only by their clothes and marks of rank, but by their privileges on ritual and ceremonial occasions. In the eighth month of the year, which was called *Uey tecuilhuitl*, 'the high feast of the dignitaries', for example, only 'the captains and other brave men accustomed to the usages of war' were allowed to join in the great sacred dance that took place at night, at the foot of the pyramids in the holy city, by the light of huge braziers and torches held up by the young men. They danced by pairs, and each pair of warriors was joined by a woman (one of the *auianime*, the companions of the unmarried soldiers) with her hair loose on her shoulders, dressed in a fringed, embroidered skirt.

otomiltl to one shaped like the leaf of a water-plant. They all wore turquoise disks in their ears. The dance went on for several hours; and sometimes the emperor came to take part in it.¹⁸

In the following month, *Tlaxochimaco*, there was an equally solemn dance in honour of *Uitzilopochtli*, in front of his *teocalli*; but this dance was at noon, for *Uitzilopochtli* was the god of the sun at its height. Here the warriors were arranged according to their rank, first the *quaquachictin* and the *otomi*, then the *tequiuaque*,¹⁹ then the young men who had made one prisoner, then the 'elder brothers', the distinguished soldiers who acted as instructors, and lastly the youths from the district schools. 'And they held hands, one woman between two men and one man between two women, as in the dances of the common people in Old Castille; and as their dance wound about they sang. The most seasoned in war, who were in the first row, held their women by the waist, as if they were embracing them; but the others, the less distinguished (in military rank) were not allowed to go so far.'²⁰

There were many other occasions upon which the warriors were the centre of admiring public attention and honour: it was the case, for example, when, every four years, there was the celebration of the feast of the god of fire, and the emperor and his chief ministers, covered with ornaments of gems and feathers, danced the 'dance of the dignitaries'; or on the days that had the sign *ce xochitl*, 'one - flower', when the sovereign gave them rich presents, amid songs and dances; or, of course, every time the victorious army came home from an expedition, making its entry into the city by one of the raised causeways, with welcoming elders and the din of *teponaxtli* and trumpets attending them from as far out as the shore of the lake.

If it is true that these dignitaries did not form a nobility in the European sense of the word, it is equally true that at the time of which we are speaking there was an inclination to make distinctions hereditary - distinctions that were originally attached only to an office. The son of a *tecuhtli* did not fall to the level of a *maceualli*, of a plebeian; by the

right of his birth alone he had the title of *pilli*, whose primary meaning is 'child' or 'son', but which had acquired the sense of 'son (of a *tecuhthli*)', or, as the Spaniards would say, of *hidalgo*, 'son of somebody (of importance)'.

In theory the *pilli* had no privileges, and in order to rise in the army, the administration or in religion he was to work as hard as any *maceualli*. In fact he had many advantages from the beginning, derived from the standing of his father and a higher education in the *calmecac* instead of the local school. It was among the *pilli* that the emperor most readily found his officials, judges and ambassadors; and the *pilli* as a group may be placed half-way between the people and the ruling class, forming a reservoir that could be drawn upon to meet the constantly increasing needs of a constantly growing administration.

A nobility was therefore coming into being. But still it must not be forgotten that the *pilli* who did nothing outstanding during his lifetime left his children no distinction. The prestige of the *tecuhthli* scarcely lasted beyond one generation unless it were revived by fresh exertions.²¹

As the empire grew and the undertakings of the state became more and more varied so necessarily the duties of its servants became more specialised. It is very difficult to form an exact opinion of the functions of those officials whose titles have come down to us: it is likely that most of these titles no longer had any relation to their literal meaning, resembling in this the titles used in the Roman or Byzantine empire, or in France in the days of the kings. The *tlillancalqui* was probably no more 'the keeper of the dark house' than the Constable of France was the person in charge of the stables. But for all that, we can discern three classes of officials in the time of Motecuhzoma II.

In the first place there were the governors of certain cities or strongholds. Although they had the military title of *tlacochtecuhtli*, 'the lord of the spears', of *tlacateccatl* and even *tlacatecuhtli*, or more rarely *tezacoacatl*, 'he of the mirror-serpent', or *tlillancalqui*,²² their duties must to a large extent have been civil and administrative. Several towns had two governors at the same time -

example, and Zozolan and Uaxyacac (Oaxaca) – so it is likely that one of the governors looked after the administration and the other the command of the garrison.

The generic name for the officials occupied with administration and more particularly with the taxes was *calpixque*, ‘house-attendants’, translated by the conquering Spaniards and the chroniclers as ‘major-domos’.²³ They were chosen from among the *pilli*, and their principal duty was to organise the cultivation of the lands set aside for the payment of the tax, and to receive the grain, merchandise and provisions that each province was to furnish at fixed intervals and see to its transport as far as Mexico.

They were obliged to send the emperor reports upon the state of agriculture and commerce: if a famine should break out, it was for them to tell the emperor and under his orders to exempt the province from the payment of tax or even to open the public stores of corn and distribute it to the people. They were also responsible for the erection of public buildings, for the maintenance of the roads and for the supply of servants for the imperial palaces.

In each province the *calpixqui* lived in the chief town, together with his staff, which included a large number of scribes, able to keep the tribute-registers up to date and to draft reports: and no doubt he had deputies in the towns and principal villages of his province.

Bernal Díaz’ account gives some idea of the powers of these officials, and of their formidable authority. The first time the Spaniards met any *calpixque* was at Quiauiztlan, in the country of the Totonacs, a nation subject to the empire.²⁴ ‘Some Indians from the same village came running to tell all the caciques who were talking with Cortés that five Mexicans had been seen, the tax-gatherers of Motecuhzoma. On hearing this they went pale, and began to tremble with fear. They left Cortés to himself and went out to welcome them. In all haste they adorned a room with foliage, prepared some food and made a great deal of cocoa, which is the best drink that is to be found among them. When these five Indians came into the village they passed by the place where we were with so much confidence and

pride that they walked straight on, without speaking either to Cortés or any of the others of us. They wore rich embroidered cloaks, loin-cloths of the same nature, and their shining hair was raised in a knot on their heads: each had a bunch of flowers in his hand, and he smelt to it; and other Indians, like servants, fanned them with fly-whisks.' And these arrogant representatives of the central authority had no hesitation in calling the Totonac chiefs before them and violently reprimanding them for having presumed to negotiate with Cortés.

Lastly, the third category of appointed officials, the judges, were nominated by the sovereign either from the experienced and elderly dignitaries or from among the common people. At Texcoco half the higher judges were of noble family and the other half of plebeian origin.²⁵ All the chroniclers agree in praising the care with which the emperor and his fellow-kings chose the judges, 'taking particular care that they were not drunkards, nor apt to be bribed, nor influenced by personal considerations, nor impassioned in their judgments.'²⁶

Their office had an extraordinary respect and authority: at their disposition there was a kind of police-force which, upon their orders, could arrest even the highest officials, in any place whatsoever. Their messengers 'travelled with greatest speed, whether it was day or night, through rain, snow or hail.'²⁷ Their scribes recorded every case, with the claims of either side, the testimonies and the sentences. They were very much honoured: but woe to the judge who let himself be bought – from reproof it was but a short pace to dismissal, and sometimes to death. A king of Texcoco had a judge executed for favouring a grandee against a working-man.²⁸

All these people, military or civil officials, soldiers, administrators, judges, serving dignitaries or the sons of great men waiting for a post, together with the host of messengers, attendants, clerks and constables who surrounded them, depended upon the secular power. They depended upon the emperor, the head of the state; and they were so many cogs in the huge mechanism of the empire. Beside them,

intimately linked by family ties, by education and by the common depth of religious faith, but depending upon another power, was the clergy – beside the servants of the state there were the servants of the gods. The ruling class was divided into these two parallel hierarchies: the one side conquered, administered and judged; the other, by its faithful service in the temples, caused the kindness of the gods to rain down upon the earth.

Every young *pilli* was well acquainted with the priestly order from his childhood, since he was brought up in a *calmecac*, a monastery-school, where he had shared the life and the austerities of the priests. The sons of tradesmen could also go to the *calmecac*, but on something of a supernumerary or marginal footing.²⁹ It would seem, then, that the priesthood was only open to members of the ruling class, or at a push to traders' sons: yet Sahagún³⁰ insists upon the fact that sometimes the most venerated priests came from very humble families. It must therefore be granted that it was possible for a *maceualli* to enter the novitiate if he wished: perhaps if he showed an unusual vocation for the priesthood while he was still at the local school his masters could transfer him to the *calmecac*.

The novice, literally the 'little priest', was dedicated to Quetzalcoatl, who above all others was the god of the priests. When he was between twenty and twenty-two years old, if he decided not to marry and to enter fully into the clerical career, he became a *tlamacazqui*, a priest, and from then onwards he could assume this venerated title, which was in fact the attribute of Quetzacoatl,³¹ god, king and high-priest of the legendary Tula. It was also the title given to Tlaloc, the ancient god of rain and fecundity, to the lesser divinities who attended him, and to the splendid, beneficent young god of music and dancing.³² To be entitled *tlamacazqui* was, to some degree, to be already the equal of a god.

Most of the priests probably never went further than this stage. As they became old they would undertake some permanent but subsidiary duties, such as beating upon a drum or helping in the sacrifices; or else they would take

charge of a 'parish', and peaceably end their days conducting the services of the local temple. Their rank in the hierarchy was termed *quacuilli*.

Others, on the other hand, reached a higher level, and acquired the title of *tlenamacac*. They could be members of the electoral body that chose the emperor, and it was from among them that the highest dignitaries of the Mexican church were taken.

Two high-priests, equal in power, reigned jointly over this church. The one, *quetzalcoatl totec tlamacazqui*, 'the plumed serpent, priest of our lord', was in charge of the worship of Uitzilopochtli; the other, *quetzalcoatl Tlaloc tlamacazqui*, 'the plumed serpent, priest of Tlaloc', of that of Tlaloc. The two gods dominated the great *teocalli* together, as we have seen; and in the same manner their two high-priests dominated the religious hierarchy.

The title of 'plumed serpent' which they had in common sealed them with that sanctity which the myth recognised in the Toltec god-king Quetzalcoatl; and, in short, they were his representatives and successors. 'Among these priests,' says Sahagún,³³ 'the best were chosen to become the supreme pontiffs, who were called *quequetzalcoa*, which means successors of Quetzalcoatl . . . No heed was paid to birth in this choice, but only to morals and observance of religion, knowledge of doctrine and purity of life. Those were chosen who were humble, righteous and peaceable, earnest and reasonable, not given to levity, but sober, severe and scrupulous in morals, full of love and charity, compassion and friendship for all, god-fearing and devout.' This, it must be admitted, is uncommonly warm praise, coming from the pen of a Catholic monk.

These two high-priests were, according to the same authority, 'equal in status and in honour'; and they were surrounded by the deepest respect – the emperor himself went in person to visit them. Their double presence at the head of the religious world consecrated the union of the two basic ideologies of Mexico, which the Aztecs had brought together when they became the ruling nation. On the one side there was Uitzilopochtli, the solar god of

war and near relation of the hunting gods, the pattern of the soldier and the prototype of the sacrificed victim who is to be reborn for a carefree immortality as a bird: and on the other Tlaloc, the old rain-god and god of the farmer's plenty, who without fighting makes the maize spring up and all the plants that men eat, the benign wizard who keeps famine and drought away. On the one hand the religion of the warlike nomad and on the other that of the settled peasants, each with its own vision and its own paradise.

Under the two high-priests there were many 'prelates' who were responsible either for some given branch of religious activity or for the worship of some particular god.³⁴ The most important of them, the secretary-general of the church, as it were, had the title of *Mexicatl teohuatzin*, 'the venerable (-*tzin*) Mexican in charge of the gods'; he was chosen by the two *quequetzalcoa*, and 'he controlled other less important priests, somewhat like bishops, and he saw to it that everything to do with divine worship in all places and provinces was carried out diligently and perfectly, according to the laws and customs of the former pontiffs . . . he controlled all matters concerning the worship of the gods in the provinces subjected to Mexico.' His competence also included the discipline of the priestly body and the supervision of the education given in the *calmecac*. His assistants were the *uitznauac teohuatzin*, who was principally concerned with ritual, on the one hand, and on the other the *tapan teohuatzin*, who attended to questions that concerned education.

A treasurer, the *tlaquimiloltecuhtli*,³⁵ had care of the holy vessels and other religious objects, and of the temples' estates. The wealth of the gods was enormous: there were not only the buildings and their land, the statues, the countless implements of worship, which were of great value, and the offerings of provisions and clothes, continually brought by the faithful, but also the agricultural land which the ecclesiastical corporations let out or had worked for them, and their share of the tribute from the subjected provinces.

The piety of the emperors rained gifts upon the temples.

At Texcoco³⁶ fifteen important villages and their dependencies were set aside solely for their maintenance and repair and for supplying them with wood for their never-extinguished fires. At Mexico there was the same arrangement:³⁷ some villages furnished the temples with maize, wood, meat and incense, and paid no other kind of tax. The temples, therefore, had special granaries beside them; and these contained important reserves not only of the provisions for the priests but also of those which they gave to the poor and sick – they had hospitals at Mexico, Texcoco, Cholula and other places. The management of all these properties must have called for a very considerable staff of scribes in the treasurer's department.

There appear to have been an exceedingly large number of priests assigned to the various gods: no deity would have been satisfied with less than his own 'household', a chief priest, ministrants and novices. The four hundred gods of drink and drunkenness were served by an equal number of priests, under the guidance of the *Ometochtzin*, the 'venerable two-rabbit', whose name was the same as that of one of these gods. This was a very general practice; each priest bore the name of the god he served and whom, serving, he incarnated. The rites had proliferated to an enormous extent, and a host of priests busied themselves over the accomplishment of this or that particular task; for the division of labour had reached a very high pitch: for example, the *ixcozauhqui tzonmolco teohua* was responsible only for the supplying of wood to the temple of the fire-god, and the *pochtlan teohua yiacatecuhtli* for the organisation of the feast of the god of the merchants.

Clearly it was essential that the calendar of feasts should be kept up to date, and the sequence of ceremonies exactly followed: this very important duty was entrusted to the *epcoaquacuiltzin*, 'the venerable minister of the temple of the rain', who, in spite of his limiting title, had authority, under the *uitznuac teohuatzin*, over the entirety of the religious scene, at least in its material aspect.

Women were by no means excluded from the priesthood. Some twenty or forty days after her birth, a girl might be

brought to the temple by her mother; the woman would give the priest a censer and some *copal* (incense), and this would establish a reciprocal agreement. But it was only when she was a grown girl (*ichpochtli*) that the novice would go into religion, with the title of priestess – or literally ‘woman-priest’, *ciuatlamacazqui*. As long as she kept this title she was bound to celibacy: but it was quite possible for her to marry ‘if she were asked in marriage, if the words were properly said, if the fathers, the mothers and the notables agreed.’³⁸ An unusually solemn marriage service took place, and then she left the temple for her home. But it appears that many preferred to give themselves up entirely to religion.

One finds a great many priestesses ministering on various occasions in the traditional accounts. The feast of the great goddess Toci (our grandmother) was directed by a woman, a *ciuaquacuilli*: another priestess, called the *iztacciuatl*, ‘the white woman’, was in charge of the physical preparation of certain ceremonies, particularly the sweeping of the holy places³⁹ and the lighting of the fires.

During *Quecholli*, the fourteenth month, a great many women went to the temple of Mixcoatl, the hunter and warrior, to take their children to the old priestesses there: they took the children and danced with them in their arms. Then the mothers, having made the priestesses a present of sweetmeats or delicacies,⁴⁰ took their children away again. This ceremony lasted all the morning.

During the month of *Ochpaniztli* it was the young priestesses of the goddess of maize who played the most important part in the religious celebrations. Each of them represented the goddess, and each carried seven ears of maize wrapped in rich cloth⁴¹ on her back: their faces were painted, their arms and legs adorned with feathers. Singing, they went in procession with the priests of the same goddess; and at sunset they threw handfuls of coloured maize and calabash seeds to the crowd, who struggled and scrambled for them, because they were a token of wealth and plenty for the coming year.

Torquemada⁴² states that some of these young priestesses

took vows for one year or more to win some favour from heaven, such as the healing of an invalid or a happy marriage: but it seems that they never took vows for ever. They were guarded, supervised and taught by old women, and they looked after the temple, offering incense before the images of the gods at nightfall, at midnight and at dawn; they also wove cloaks for the priests and the idols.

From priesthood to divination, to medicine and at last to magic, so good shades into evil, respect into fear and hatred: on its shadowy frontiers the world of religion merged with that of the malignant warlock and the sorcerer.

Divination in the true sense of the word was not only permitted but practised, by a particular class of priests called *tonalpouhque*. They were educated in the monastery schools, for it was there that a knowledge of the characters used in the divinatory calendar was taught; and indeed this knowledge formed an integral part of the higher education. In this context it is worth remembering the importance of augury in the palmy days of Rome. But it seems that these soothsayers did not become members of a temple when they were qualified; they set up on their own account. Neither business nor income can have lacked, for every family necessarily went to a soothsayer whenever a child was born: furthermore, there was no important occasion in life, marriage, leaving for a journey or a military expedition, etc., whose date was not fixed by the soothsayers, either at the request of private persons or of officials. Each of these consultations was paid for by a meal, by presents, 'several cloaks, some turkeys and a load of victuals.'⁴³

The doctors, men and women, were officially recognised, although their sphere was not always far from that of the black magicians; and they openly took part in many ceremonies. The midwives should also be mentioned: these women helped at the birth of the child, but more than that, they harangued it with the necessary moral and religious speeches, and (the soothsayers having been duly consulted) endowed it with its 'baptismal' name. They had a highly

Finally, at the opposite pole of the religious world from the priests, there were the magicians, the sorcerers,⁴⁴ the formidable experts in spells, who were believed to have such wide and multifarious powers. They could change themselves into animals; they knew magic words 'that bewitch women and turn affections wherever they choose'; and their spells could kill from a great way off. There were men magicians and women magicians; and they kept their dark practices hidden. But for all that they were known well enough for people to come by night to buy their aid. It was said that their power came from their having been born under a malignant sign – 'one – rain', or 'one – wind' – and that for their purposes they always waited for a day that came under a sign favourable to them. The figure nine, which was the figure of the night-gods and of hell and of death, was particularly auspicious for them.

One of the most frequently-mentioned crimes of sorcery consisted of theft – fifteen or twenty magicians would combine to rob a family. They would come to the door by night, and by means of certain charms they would strike the people of the house motionless. 'It was as if they were all dead, and yet they heard and saw everything that happened . . . The thieves lit torches and looked through the house to find what there was to eat. They all ate quite calmly, and none of the people could hinder them, for they were all as who should say turned to stone and out of their senses. Then when the sorcerers had eaten and thoroughly satisfied themselves they went into the store-room and granaries and took everything they found there, clothes, gold, silver, precious stones and feathers . . . and it is even said that they did a great many foul things to the women of the house.'

The sorcerers, then, were severely condemned by public opinion and severely punished by the law. If they were caught they were either hanged or sacrificed before an altar, their hearts being torn out.⁴⁵ In the reign of Chimalpopoca a man of Cuauhtitlán and his wife were sentenced to death because they had stupefied a peasant from Tenayuca by charms, and had stolen his maize during

Apart from this minority of dangerous outcasts all the classes that have just been mentioned, warriors, officials and priests, had the common character of directors in society and state. Together they made up a ruling order: it was an order of recent origin, vigorous, and continually strengthened by the new blood brought in by the plebeians, who could accede to the highest offices, whether they were military, administrative or religious. Birth played its part, but it was still personal merit that raised a man, and lack of it that lowered him. The Mexican always bore in mind that honours were no more stable than running water, and that a man born noble might die a slave.⁴⁷

It appears that an aristocratic reaction took place at the beginning of the sixteenth century, under the reign of Motecuhzoma II, and that the reactionaries tried to expel the sons of plebeians from the higher places: according to the documents, however, this affected only the embassies that went abroad, for 'it was not decent that the *maceuales* should go into kings' palaces'.⁴⁸ It is possible that this reaction might have gone on to the point of bringing a purely hereditary nobility into existence: but there was a strong influence that worked in the other direction every day – the continual pressure of war and conquest, which brought brave and ambitious men up to the top.

When one reflects upon this ruling class's way of life one is much struck by the fact that one of its essential sections, the priests, lived in austere poverty, and that the others, the soldiers and the civil servants, only came by wealth, in the form of estates, houses, slaves, clothes, victuals, jewels, etc., as a consequence of their rank or office. Wealth was not pursued for itself; it came as a function of increasing power and official expenses. It was an income and not a capital. The only thing that really counted in the *tecuhтли's* eyes was reputation.

Another class existed, however, in which these values were reversed, a class preoccupied with wealth, not only indifferent to prestige but averse to it. It was a class below the level of the ruling class, but it was in the act of rising towards it—a class so different, with its own customs, its laws

and organisation, that it almost belonged to another world.

A RISING CLASS: THE TRADERS

A very great many Mexicans engaged in trade, some from time to time, and some continuously. There were the peasants who sold their maize, vegetables and poultry in the market; the women who sold all sorts of cooked meals in the streets; the merchants who sold cloth, shoes, drink, skins, pots, rope, pipes, and various useful objects; and the fishermen who daily brought in their fish from the lake, and frogs and shellfish. These small and medium traders did not form a distinct class of the population. The name of *pochteca*, traders, was kept for the members of the powerful corporations which were in charge of foreign trade and which had the monopoly of it.

They organised and guided the caravans of porters which went from the central valley to the remote, almost legendary provinces on the Pacific coast or on the Gulf. There they sold the produce of Mexico – cloth, rabbit's-hair blankets, embroidered clothes, golden jewels, obsidian and copper earrings, obsidian knives, cochineal dye, medicinal herbs and herbs for making scent, and they brought back such luxurious things as the translucent green jade, *chalchihuitl*, emeralds, *quetzalitzli*, sea-shells, tortoiseshell to make the stirring-spoons for cocoa, jaguar and puma skins, amber, parrot, *quetzal* and *xiuhtototl* plumes. Their trade, therefore, consisted in the export of manufactured goods and the import of luxurious foreign commodities.

It may be observed, in passing, that these exchanges are not in themselves enough to explain the economic relations between the Cold Lands of the centre and the Hot Lands of the coast. Large quantities of gold were exported, but cotton