

IB History HL History Internal Assessment

To what extent did gender parallelism exist in pre-Hispanic Aztec society?

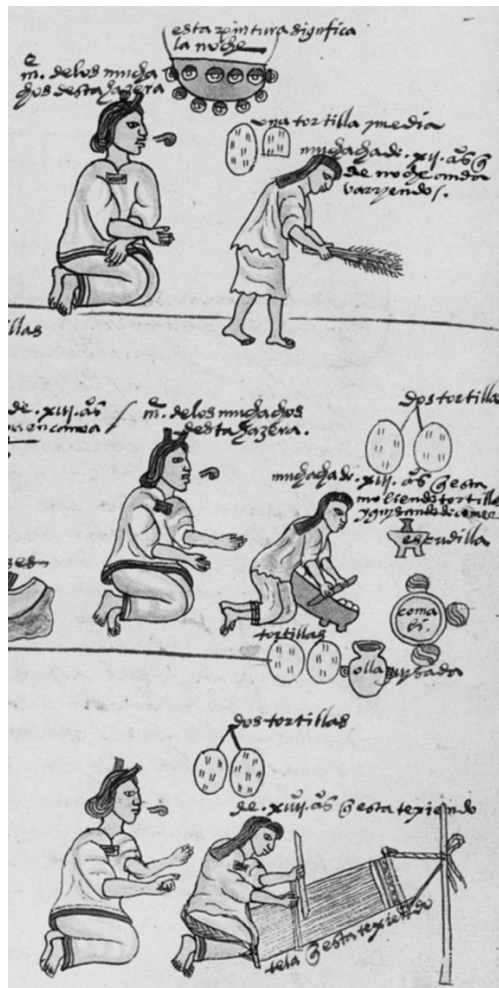


Fig. 1 Aztec mother teaching her daughter age-appropriate chores ¹

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Word count: 2200

¹ Carrasco, David. *The Aztecs: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Digital file. Page.81

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Section 1: Source Analysis

This investigation attempts to answer the question: To what extent did gender parallelism exist in pre-Hispanic Aztec society? An appropriate question has been chosen

The first source is *Florentine Codex, Book 10: The People* written by the Spanish Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún and translated by Charles E. Dibble and Arthur J. O.

Relevance

Anderson. The source is relevant because it documents the social roles of the Aztec people. Its **origin** is **valuable**, because Sahagún witnessed first-handedly the Aztec lives in Mesoamerica and can provide valuable primary information of the social roles played by Aztec people.

V-O

However, the origin has **limitation** because it is difficult to rid Sahagún's cultural background as a Spanish missionary, which could seep into his documentation of the Aztecs. As there is no distinctive alternative perspective, it implies a rather one-sided account that risks lacking the nuances of the Aztec culture.

L-O

The book's **purpose** is to document the Aztec social customs, so that Sahagún and other friars can understand the "idolatrous" religion and evangelize them thoroughly.² Such a purpose is **valuable** because historians can know of Sahagún's perception of the Aztec vices and virtues and understand the gender roles in the Aztec society that no longer exists. However, there is a **limitation** to the purpose. Historian Guilhem Olivier argues that as a missionary, Sahagún wants to possess thorough knowledge of the "'evil' they had to fight," and "put an end to them."³ To justify evangelism, Sahagún might manipulate or distort the representation of the Aztecs. For

V-P

L-P

² Alfredo López Austin. "The Research Method of Fray Bernardino De Sahagún: The Questionnaires," in *Sixteenth-Century Mexico: The Work of Sahagún*, ed. Munro S. Edmonson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974). Page 121.

³ Olivier, Guilhem. "Mythical and Royal Dimensions of the Feast of Tezcatlipoca in Toxcatl." In *Representing Aztec Ritual: Performance, Text, and Image in the Work of Sahagún*, edited by Eloise Quinones Keber, 106-42. Chicago: University Press of Colorado, 2020. PDF. Page 107.

example, Olivier claims that Sahagún “does not hesitate to call several indigenous rites childish and senseless.”⁴

V-C The **content** of this book is **valuable** because it encapsulates abundant aspects of Aztec identities, occupations, and Sahagun’s perception of vices and virtues, as well as informing historians on Aztec gender roles. Nevertheless, its content has **limitations**, because Sahagún mainly uses adjectives instead of concrete examples to present a person. For example, a “good robust woman” is “unblemished” and “not unclean.”⁵ The descriptiveness suggests subjectivity and does not inform historians of what actually constitutes of a “good robust woman” in the **L-C** Aztec context.

Partial relevance The second source is Michael E. Smith’s *The Aztecs* (2012). This book is relevant because it informs a general history of the Aztecs. The book’s **origin** is **valuable**, because as an **V-O** archaeologist, Smith did abundant fieldwork that contributed to new understandings of the Aztecs. Therefore, his arguments are supported by credible and comprehensive evidence. However, the origin has **limitation**. In the chapter *Family and Social Class*, Smith only uses **L-O** limited primary sources and based his work predominantly upon other historians’ secondary sources, which limits his potential to provide a more thorough, archeologically supported insight of Aztec gender relations.

V-P The **purpose** of its source makes it **valuable** because Smith aims to use an anthropological approach to frame people’s “emerging understanding of Aztec civilization.”⁶ Thus, his work would be informative of the Aztec society’s organization and contributes to historian’s understanding of gender dynamics. However, such purpose also has **limitations**.

⁴ Olivier, Guilhem. Page127.

⁵ Sahagun, Bernardino de. \. Translated by Charles E. Dibble and Arthur J. O. Anderson. 1961. Florentine Codex: Book 10 - The People.

⁶ Smith, Michael Ernest. "Preface." Preface to *The Aztecs*, 3rd ed. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. Digital file.

L-P Because Smith intends to provide information and knowledge, he does not explicitly address historical debates, such as how to classify Aztec gender dynamics.

V-C The book's **content** is also **valuable**. Since Smith aims to make scholarly discoveries "known to a wider audience"⁷, he covers a wide range of the cultural artifacts and discusses Aztec social organization in detail, enabling historians to understand Aztec gender roles and evaluate *gender parallelism*. However, the content also has **limitations**, because Smith usually does not discern amongst different Aztec cities. Thus, the book does not provide historians the distinct account of specific cities of the Aztec Empire. No

(Word count: 591)

⁷ Smith, Michael Ernest. "Preface." Preface to *The Aztecs*, 3rd ed.

Section 2: Investigation

From the 1990s onward, historians have described pre-Hispanic Aztec society's gender dynamics as gender parallel or gender complementary. Gender parallelism suggests that men and women are different and play complementary roles that are considered equally significant.⁸ This idea of different but equal gender roles challenged the image of a strongly patriarchal, warrior Aztec society supported by historians like June Nash and became the dominant paradigm in Mesoamerican gender relations studies.⁹ While historians such as Caroline Pennock and Susan Kellogg argue that gender parallelism is an appropriate term to describe the Aztec concept of gender and sexuality, historians like Lori Diel disagree by presenting Aztec women's secondary political positions to men. However, Diel overlooked the factor of social class; gender parallelism is largely valid in pre-Hispanic Aztec society, for commoners lived under a social structure constructed around gender parallelism.

Context

Conclusion present

Prior to the 1990s, the prevailing view as espoused by June Nash and others argues that the Aztec's religious glorification of male dominance makes it a patriarchal society. Nash argues that the "emergence of a single male god Tezcatlipoca," the Culhuacan god of war, "at the apex of a male hierarchy," followed by female deities who represent "fertility and nourishment," mirrors the hierarchy of Tenochtitlan's royal council.¹⁰ The Aztec culture's military focus and sacrificial ceremonies of the blood of war captives to the sun god Tonatiuh and the war god Huitziopochtli further support Nash's view of Aztec society's conquest "[glorifies] the cult of male dominance."¹¹ ¹² The Florentine Codex, friar Sahagún's encyclopedic book that documents

Argument

⁸ Pennock, Caroline Dodds. "A Remarkably Patterned Life': Domestic and Public in the Aztec Household City." In *Gender and the City before Modernity*, edited by Lin Foxhall and Gabriele Neher, 38-56. Chichester: Wiley, 2013. Digital file. Page 39.

⁹ Pennock, Caroline Dodds. "A Remarkably Patterned Life': Domestic and Public in the Aztec Household City." Page 49.

¹⁰ Nash, June. "The Aztecs and the Ideology of Male Dominance." *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 4, no. 21 (1978). PDF. Page 359.

¹¹ Nash, June. Page 359.

¹² Smith, Michael Ernest. *The Aztecs*, 3rd ed. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. Digital file.

Evidence the Aztec culture, notes that commoner women played the roles of “seamstress”, “weaver of designs”, “spinners”, “cooks” and “physicians”, and men were constantly described as “strong,” “powerful,” and “vigorous” leading figures who played the role of “warriors.”¹³ Their occupation seems to follow a conventional, patriarchal gendered division where women play the role of housekeepers and men warriors, signaling normative gender roles. Similarly, the hierarchy of Aztec gods puts a male deity at the top and shows “subordination of female deities.”¹⁴ Overall, the Aztec society seems to worship masculinity via a masculine manner of human sacrifice, as reflected also by their division of labor, which makes it ostensibly patriarchal.

Argument made

However, since the 1990s, historians began to argue that “patriarchal” is no longer the most apt description of Aztec gender relations; instead, they coined the idea of gender

Counter-argument parallelism. Historian Caroline Pennock argues that in Tenochtitlan, men and women “fulfilled highly distinctive roles in a parallel system of gender rooted in concepts of reciprocity and complementarity.”¹⁵ She argues that weaving implements were “a feminine substitute for weapons,” and women’s spindle whorls and weaving battens “should be directly paralleled to shields and swords.”¹⁶ Additionally, historian Dirk Tuerenhout and David Carrasco argue that

Perspectives women who died in childbirth receive equal religious treatment and go to the same heaven as men who died on the battlefield, because these women were considered equal to “warriors who died in battle or on the sacrificial stone.”¹⁷ ¹⁸ The *Florentine Codex* also demonstrates the importance of female deities along with male deities.¹⁹ There seems to be a constant balance between women and men that the word patriarchal fails to capture. Rather, the above evidence

Evidence

¹³ Sahagun, Bernardino de. \. Translated by Charles E. Dibble and Arthur J. O. Anderson. 1961. *Florentine Codex: Book 10 - The People*.

¹⁴ Nash, June. Page 361.

¹⁵ Pennock, Caroline Dodds. "A Remarkably Patterned Life": Domestic and Public in the Aztec Household City." Page 39.

¹⁶ Pennock, Caroline Dodds. *Bonds of Blood: Gender, Lifecycle and Sacrifice in Aztec Culture*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Digital file.

¹⁷ Tuerenhout, Dirk R. Van. *The Aztecs: New Perspectives*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2005. Digital file. Page 185.

¹⁸ Carrasco, David. *The Aztecs: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Digital file. Page 83.

¹⁹ Nash, June. Page 360.

suggests that women and men were considered equal albeit different counterparts of the society.

The idea that the Aztec society was entirely male dominating could be produced under European colonialists' influence, as gender complementarity only seemed to have died out after the

Argument
made

conquest fostered sex antagonism.²⁰ Viewing the Aztec's cultural perceptions of gender reveals a more equal and complementary gender relationship, making gender parallelism a more accurate description than patriarchy.

Nevertheless, 21st century historian Lori Diel supports Nash's argument, claiming that women's political positions and representations in the Aztec history were secondary to men, thus challenging gender parallelism. The Nahua pictorial histories of Tenochtitlan record the history of pre-Hispanic specific communities.²¹ These political documents "virtually exclude women from imperial history."²² Diel argues that women were "viewed as political assets," their job of

Argument

"[establishing] political alliances and strengthen the legitimacy of the local ruling line" finished once the polity achieved political supremacy.²³ Historian Elizabeth Boone speculates that

Perspectives

noblewomen "fade from imperial histories once genealogies lose importance."²⁴ However, in a genealogy-based political system, the political function of a noblewomen can be seen as a complementary than that of her husband's. Therefore, they were included in the histories of secondary city states, and removed from imperial histories as their gender roles were complete.²⁵

Gender parallelism does not equate simply equity; rather, it emphasizes the equal importance of both genders' roles. Although the exclusion of women from historical documents may seem dismissive of women's contributions, it is arguably caused by the differences between gender

²⁰ Nash, June. Page 359.

²¹ Diel, Lori Boornazian. "Women and Political Power: The Inclusion and Exclusion of Noblewomen in Aztec Pictorial Histories." *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, Spring 2005. PDF.

²² Diel, Lori Boornazian.

²³ Diel, Lori Boornazian.

²⁴ Diel, Lori Boornazian.

²⁵ Diel, Lori Boornazian.

roles instead of inferiority of women to men. Therefore, gender parallelism could still hold true under Diel and Boone's challenge. **Argument made**

Aside from noblewomen, gender parallelism is a key idea that the education and upbringing of Aztec commoners revolved around. The idea of women and men being equal,

Argument different, parallel and complementary genders can be evidenced in the Aztec law and economics.

Aztec childhood experience is highly determined by their sex. The ceremony after childbirth involved gender-specific objects which symbolizes their future life: boys were given something similar to their father's tools, and girls tools for domestic chores.²⁶ All Aztec children attended school between 10 and 20 years old to prepare them for "[fulfilling their] mission within the

Evidence culture."²⁷ Legally, women were "full citizens before the law" and had "the right to hold and

inherit property, divorce, and appeal to the courts."²⁸ They were held "equally culpable and punishable for crimes such as adultery."²⁹ Economically, Carrasco presents that women played the roles of "vendors, merchants, or administrators in the marketplaces and influenced pricing

Perspectives practices."³⁰ Rogers and Susan Kellogg argue that in a military culture like the Aztecs, where the

men were frequently away "because of warfare and long-distance trading", women established themselves in "significant positions of authority," allowing them to contribute "in both the public and private domains."³¹ ³² Therefore, "conceptually and practically organized and differentiated"

male and female domains are further reinforced.³³ It was after the conquest that the Spaniards forced women to leave non-domestic matters to men because they viewed these women as

²⁶ Tuerenhout, Dirk R. Van. *The Aztecs: New Perspectives*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2005. Digital file. Page. 130

²⁷ Smith, Michael Ernest. "Chapter 6: Family and Social Class." In *The Aztecs*, 3rd ed. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. Digital file.

²⁸ Pennock, Caroline Dodds. "'A Remarkably Patterned Life': Domestic and Public in the Aztec Household City." Page 39.

²⁹ Pennock, Caroline Dodds. "'A Remarkably Patterned Life': Domestic and Public in the Aztec Household City." Page 39.

³⁰ Carrasco, David. *The Aztecs: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Digital file. Page 80.

³¹ Rogers, Rhianna C. "The Spider Woman Rules No More?: The Transformation and Resilience of Aztec Female Roles." (master's thesis., Florida Atlantic University, December 2004). Page 102.

³² Kellogg, Susan. "The Woman's Room: Some Aspects of Gender Relations in Tenochtitlan in the Late Pre- Hispanic Period." *Ethnohistory* 42, no. 4 (Fall 1995). PDF.

³³ Kellogg, Susan. 1995.

“[unconforming] to the Spanish patriarchal schematic.”³⁴ Historian Rhianna Rogers argues that to “recreate a more inclusive understanding of women’s position,” it is an “imperative to **Perspective** dismantle the “Eurocentric ideological perceptions” that surround the pre-Hispanic roles of Aztec women.³⁵ From childhood to adulthood, pre-Hispanic Aztec women and men bore the same amounts of social responsibilities, playing complementary roles equally significant to **Argument made** society. Therefore, gender parallelism illustrates an accurate picture of Aztec gender relations.

In conclusion, despite the arguments of the Aztec society being patriarchal, gender parallelism should be seen as a central component of pre-Hispanic Aztec society. Women and men were born and raised to shoulder distinct, complementary gender roles. Gender parallelism is perhaps not a perfect description, but existing evidence has shown that it depicts the nuance and uniqueness of Aztec gender relations much more accurately than merely patriarchal. Illustrating Aztec gender roles using European gender qualifications, as those who argue for patriarchy did, failed to recognize women’s importance in the Aztec culture and Mesoamerican societal structures. On the other hand, those who support gender parallelism took into consideration women’s contributions to society, and viewed Aztec gender dynamics more holistically in context. Ultimately, gender parallelism should be seen as an adequate description of pre-Hispanic Aztec gender relations.

Conclusion is consistent with the rest of the investigation

(Word count: 1236)

³⁴ Rogers, Rhianna C. Page 103.

³⁵ Rogers, Rhianna C. Page 65.

Section 3: Reflection

This investigation allowed me to gain insights into the difficulties historians face when examining the social dynamics of a fallen civilization such as the Aztecs.

As a present-day history student, I was challenged by my own hindsight and biases which hindered me to understand major components of the Aztec society. For example, the Aztec people's perception of gender could be vastly different from what historians could conceive.

Challenge
identified

Nahua religion could also play an indispensable role in shaping Aztec worldview and social relationships. These remote cultural artefacts lead to the question of whether it is even possible to understand concepts that are so removed. Tackling this issue demands an Aztec historian to make use of archeological evidence such as the work of Michael E. Smith and evaluate the consistency of their argument. To understand the Aztecs as an independent civilization, historians should consult more primary sources and try to prevent their cultural background from affecting their reasoning.

However, this last method is not always practical. Another challenge an Aztec historian would inevitably face is the deficiency of primary sources. The indigenous population and its literature ceased to exist five centuries ago. It is thus very challenging, almost made impossible,

Challenge
identified

for present-day historians to construct an independent narrative of the Aztec gender dynamics. Pre-Hispanic libraries containing important Aztec literature, such as the ones in Texcoco and Tlaltelolco, were destroyed during the Spanish conquest.³⁶ Therefore, historians are left with very little native cultural artifacts to examine. For this investigation, I lacked alternatives other than the *Florentine Codex*, and even that is produced by a Spanish friar Sahagún, instead of the Aztecs. However, Aztec historians, through “excavation and salvage projects,” can still make

³⁶ Fernández de Zamora, Rosa Maria. "Mexican Library History: A Survey of the Literature of the Last Fifteen Years." *Libraries & Culture* 32, no. 2 (Spring 1997). PDF.

new findings of the Aztecs.³⁷ New archeological fieldwork can produce data that supplement 16th and 17th century documents, which generates new insights for comparative studies of the Aztec society.³⁸ Therefore, historians could still at least attempt to restore the Aztec culture by obtaining and analyzing archeological findings. I thus realized the importance of consulting a variety of sources, primary and secondary, during one's investigation. I was also made aware that a crucial part of a historian's job is to make up for the lack of certain information or materials by constantly seeking more evidence.

(Word count: 373)

³⁷ Nichols, Deborah L., and Susan Toby Evans. "Aztec Studies." *Ancient Mesoamerica* 20, no. 2 (Fall 2009). Digital file.

³⁸ Hodge, Mary G. "Archaeological Views of Aztec Culture." *Journal of Archaeological Research* 6, no. 3 (September 1998). PDF.

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