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Politics Make Strange Bedfellows: A Contextual Analysis of "The Song of the Women of Chalco"

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To Bierhorst (1985:502) "The Song of the Women of Chalco" is a post-Conquest Mexica satire of the Chalca's agony; to León-Portilla (1978; 1992:256, 258–259) it is a beautifully erotic, "delicately pornographic" poem that curries Axayacatl's favor by simultaneously flattering him sexually and challenging his military prowess in an entertaining fashion; to Quezada (1975) it is a political song attacking Axayacatl's virility as symbolic of his kingdom's strength; and to Garibay (1968:xlii-xliii) it simultaneously teases Axayacatl and shows the sacred connection among religion, warfare, and sex. However, León-Portilla also writes: "The song of Aquiauhtzin ["The Song of the Women of Chalco"] deserves, without a doubt, much more consideration from other points of view" (1992:265), and that is what I give it in this article. My interpretation is that this performance was meant to be an absurdly funny means of allegorically broaching a political coupling. In contrast to the aforementioned authors, I reach this conclusion by analyzing the song in both the immediate circumstances of its first performance and in its broader political and cultural context.

First, I present my own, heavily annotated narrative of the "Song of the Women of Chalco"—song included. This narrative places Chimalpahin's

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account in a historical context that contradicts earlier analyses by comparing textual references to historical accounts. Then I propose an explanation for how and why the Chalca embedded their diplomatic message in such a song. This essay, then, has a dual focus: understanding the Chalca song through historical and cultural analysis and understanding Aztec culture and history through examination of the song.

Chimalpahin

Seventeenth-century Nahua historian and self-proclaimed noble Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, from Chalco, wrote his account of the performance (translated to English in León-Portilla [1992:259–262]) in the early 1600s, or more than a century after he claims the song was first sung (Schroeder 1991). Thus, his story's accuracy is open to doubt. Indeed, Bierhorst (1985) contends that this song, like all those listed in *Cantares Mexicanos,* is in fact a post-Conquest composition and that Chimalpahin invented a history for the song based on his interpretation of its text.[1] Thus, given that I base my account largely but not uncritically on Chimalpahin's, I should specify my reasons. Chimalpahin doggedly researched his people's history, collecting "oral traditions" from Chalca elders and other evidence. We see an indication that his account draws on the expertise of others when he writes, "And it is recorded by the ancients . . ." (León-Portilla 1992:260).[2] Moreover, the density of detail—names, places, and narrative events of a long-past time—makes it unlikely that his account is a fabrication. Last, as I show below, the text of the song itself fits well with what is known of the politics of the time and, as I interpret it here, with Chimalpahin's account.

Given my acceptance of the general accuracy of this account, the question of its specific accuracy remains. At worst, it might be a fairly reliable tale with some amount of embellishment and distortion that Chimalpahin and earlier tellers added either in self-interest or to heighten the drama. Some of the elements seem "just-so": for example, Axayacatl staying in the women's quarters when these female impersonators begin their song. Other elements might reflect Chimalpahin's preferred reality: as Bierhorst points out, it is uncanny how the heroic drummer is from Chimalpahin's town and the failed one is from its rival. On the other hand, such elements would make the story all the more memorable and reportable for Chimal-

[1]Actually, Chimalpahin does not quote or discuss the lyrics, so it is possible, but highly unlikely, that he is referring to a different song by the same name.

[2]Schroeder's discussion (1991:13–19) leaves no doubt that, in general, Chimalpahin relied on a variety of sources, both textual and human. These latter he sometimes identified as "'elders' or 'ancients'" (1991:16).

pahin; perhaps he or his sources simply omit the aspects that have no dramatic appeal for them or that reflect more poorly on their perceived interests.

The Story

In 13-Reed, or 1479 by the Gregorian calendar, a group of Chalca noblemen traveled to Tenochtitlan to debut *In Chalca Cihuacuicatl*, or "The Song of the Women of Chalco."[3] This song's artistry was so great that the Mexica ruler Axayacatl asked to make it his own, and he passed it on to his son. It was performed for decades in important celebrations,[4] and its story was told among the Aztecs for a century.

These noble performers came from different cities in the Chalco realm, including Amecameca and Tlalmanaco.

> The purpose of their visit is not entirely clear. León-Portilla suggests that "we now have proof, thanks to the chronicler Chimalpahin, that the poem was originally conceived to be . . . sung as a sort of challenge in the presence of the lord of Mexico-Tenochtitlan" (1992:263). However, Chimalpahin's narrative only tells us that "[t]hey came to sing for the lord Axayacatzin" (translated in León-Portilla 1992:259); although Chimalpahin did chronicle other conflicts between the Mexica and the Chalca, he does not imply that this performance presented any sort of challenge. Thus, we do not know whether their visit was solely to perform this music or to perform some explicit diplomacy as well (or, for that matter, to trade in the market or tour Tenochtitlan). Perhaps the song accompanied a gift of Chalca courtesans to Axayacatl as symbols of alliance. Also, one section of the lyric suggests that Axayacatl summoned the Chalca, but other parts suggest that the Chalca are the instigators.

Under Axayacatl's predecessor, Moteucçoma Ilhuicamina, Tenochtitlan had conquered Chalco in a four-year war, which had ended seventeen years earlier, in 9-Rabbit (1462). This defeat caused considerable consternation among the Chalca, whose expressions of self-doubt and confusion survive in their songs (cf. León-Portilla 1992:249–254). The conquering Mexica, as the people of Tenochtitlan are

[3]I want to emphasize the importance of a holistic, empathetic understanding of the phenomena I discuss. To help the narrative flow, the regular (full-measure) text contains my guesses of "what actually happened," and the indented text contains the support for these guesses and the discussions of lacunae and of other interpretations. My hope is that the reader will go over the main narrative twice, ignoring the indented text and footnotes one of these times.

[4]According to Chimalpahin, the people of Amecameca (a subgroup of Chalca) traveled to meet the new viceroy, Luis de Velasco, on November 12, 1550; they sang and danced "The Song of the Women of Chalco" for him (1965:263). They may have selected this song both for its fame and for its implicit proposal of alliance. Bierhorst cites another source that reports its performance in Mexico City (formerly Tenochtitlan) on July 16, 1564 (1985:504). Although perhaps by chance, this occasion would coincide roughly with the date of Velasco's death: July 21, 1564 (Chimalpahin 1965:268).

called, imposed their own governors on the Chalca and chose which Chalca nobles would serve as the local authorities (Schroeder 1991). All of the local Chalca "kings" had traveled to exile in Huexotzinco, but many of the local leaders under the Aztecs were their relations. Both Chimalpahin's account and the song's text contain indications that the performance represented a message to Axayacatl from one of the highest of the deposed Chalca leaders, the *chichimeca teuhctli,* Ayocuan (on his rank: Schroeder 1991).

This was not the first time that Ayocuan and other Chalca leaders had opted to accommodate the Mexica instead of confronting them. Ayocuan had betrayed anti-Mexica nobles to Tenochtitlan before Chalco's final defeat (Chimalpahin 1965: 204). Later, under Mexica rule, the local Chalca rulers, including Ayocuan's son, captured Tlatelolca elements who had come to urge them to rebel (Chimalpahin 1965:206–207).

> An anonymous reviewer of this article commented that the song was unlikely to be a proposal of alliance, given Chalco's ready cooperation with the Spanish against the Mexica. However, both the historical record cited above and the song's text (which likens the Chalca nobles to a "concubine") suggest that some Chalca and specifically Ayocuan were willing to make tactical political alliances with the Mexica. Indeed, the Mexica's allies had done likewise. Moreover, these events took place forty years before the arrival of the Spanish and before the Mexica destituted the Chalca nobles of their lands. Last, this song possibly was the production of a particular Chalca faction, and other Chalca might have been opposed.

For his part, Axayacatl had ascended to the role of *huey tlatoani* (supreme ruler of the Mexica) in either 1468 (León-Portilla 1992:156) or 1469 (León-Portilla 1988:99) at approximately the age of twenty (León-Portilla 1992:156). Although actively involved in the arts, science, womanizing (Códice Mendocino 1951:42–43), and theology, he also continued the Mexica's long-standing practice of aggressive warfare, meeting with early success. However, in 1478 the Tarascans slaughtered his invading army, and he returned to Tenochtitlan in desolation, which he expressed in the poem *Huehuecuicatl*, "Song of the Elders." This poem says, in part, "I am overthrown. I am scorned. I am ashamed—I, your grandfather Axayacatl" (León-Portilla 1992:173). Although he continued to fight and win wars, this huge defeat against the Tarascans cast a pall over his few remaining years and intensified the internal "grumblings and intrigues" against him (León-Portilla 1992:156–164).

The Chalca were to perform on the patio of Axayacatl's palace as one in a series of musical performances there, perhaps as a sort of competitive symbolic-tribute designed to deliver Axayacatl from his depression by reminding him of the extent of his dominions.

> Actually, it is unknown what the general circumstances of this performance were. However, according to Chimalpahin, Axayacatl says after the performance, "No one before has ever achieved such a thing, for me to come outside my house and dance" (León-Portilla 1992:261), which implies that some sort of series of performances had already occurred. Whatever the circumstance, it is likely that the Chalca had spent a great deal of time preparing this particular performance. They had to compose the rather lengthy

> lyrics and music, choreograph the dance, memorize both of these, and perhaps prepare the costumes (unless they already existed). Moreover, the many references to Axayacatl in the song imply that it was composed especially for this event, when he would be expected to be present.

The Chalca nobles' song, though, took advantage of the political context—his relative weakness and their subordination to his rule—to allegorically suggest an asymmetrical alliance between the two. Masterfully composed by Aquiauhtzin Cuauhquiyahuacatzintli, a noble from the Chalco village of Ayapanco, "The Song of the Women of Chalco" plays with the Aztec genre of "female songs" (Bierhorst 1985:94–96)[5] to both entertain an audience with overblown sexual imagery and to suggest themselves as subordinate political bedfellows to Axayacatl. Ostensibly, it portrays several Chalca women who contemplate the joys and consequences of copulating with the Aztec ruler as they entice him to have sex.

The Chalca performers—all male—dressed themselves as hyper-women, with exaggerated breasts, perhaps a floral vulva-symbol, and an overabundance of female clothing.

> This is almost purely conjectural. All that I feel certain of is that the Chalca, like other Aztecs, performed in costume, with men impersonating women. The early chronicler Durán describes some performances that were carnivalesque,[6] with grotesque, parodic exaggerations of physical or behavioral attributes (cited in Garibay 1968). Bricker (1977) reports similar performances in a modern-day Nahuatl-speaking village, in which the female character is played by a man in a ridiculous costume hyper-marked as feminine. I hypothesize the existence of a flowery vulva-symbol from the frequency of direct or metaphoric references to the vulva in Aztec sex-songs, for example "my blooming vulva" in this song.

Axayacatl remained within earshot in the house of his women, no doubt expecting to stay inside as he always did during these performances. The drummers began to sound the rhythm, with the *teponaztli* (an indigenous percussion instrument) playing *toco tico tocoti, toco tico tocoti, toco tico tocoti* and the dancers sounding their shakers and other simple percussion.[7] But the song-leader, Cuateotzin, who was supposed to keep time on the *huehuetl* (another type of drum), had never led a performance before, and he made "the great drum sound in a lazy, offbeat way, until finally in desperation he leaned down over it, not knowing what else to do. . . .

[5]The Spanish chronicler Durán's term "lewd songs and ticklish dances" (León-Portilla 1985) covers several named but related Aztec genres, including this one, whose character Durán's term evokes nicely.

[6]Bakhtin's (1984) concept of the "carnivalesque" derives from his interpretation of medieval town-festivals as liminal times-apart in which "the grotesque"—absurd inversions, exaggerations, and convolutions of physical features and social conventions—implied by its very existence a critique of the reigning sociopolitical order.

[7]No one knows quite how these songs were danced, played, and sung. Garibay (1968) and Bierhorst (1985) provide good discussions of possible performance techniques. Here, I am assuming that sections of the song's text such as "*toco tico tocoti*" are musical notations that refer to the playing of the teponaztli as a key, variable part of the accompaniment.

[T]he song and the dance were being ruined."[8] However, a young noble named Quecholcohuatzin took up another drum and led the song and himself to fame. For "Axayacatl . . . when he heard how marvelously Quecholcohuatzin played the music and made the people dance, was surprised, and his heart filled with excitement. He quickly arose and left the house of his women. . . . As Axayacatl approached the place of the dance his feet began to follow the music, and he was overcome with joy as he heard the song and so he too began to dance and spin round and round." Perhaps, as he danced, he playfully acted out his part in the song. This is what the Chalca sang:

> I will interpret only occasional sections of this text, with special attention to one, key section. The most important aspect to keep in mind is the overarching metaphor of Chalca women (representing the Chalca nobles) seeking to have sex with (seeking to establish an alliance as the subordinate partner with) Axayacatl (representing the actual Axayacatl). Paradoxically, this has the Chalca nobles portraying Chalca women who symbolically represent the nobles themselves; I argue below that the possibility of this "disguise" permitted the composer to create this political subtext.

FIRST WOMAN:[9] *Get up, you, my little sisters! Let's go! Let's go! We will seek flowers. Let's go! Let's go! We will cut flowers. Here they spread out. Here they spread out: the flowers of water and fire, flowers of the shield, which appeal to men, which are pleasant—flowers of war.*

> This opening section employs bellicose metaphors (e.g., "water and fire"), but in this case the war is sexual (León-Portilla 1992:263).

They are beautiful flowers. With the flowers that are over me, I adorn myself. They are my flowers. I am from Chalco. I am a woman!

I desire, and I desire flowers. I desire, and I desire songs. I have a yearning, here, where we spin, in the place where our life is spent. I sing his song to the lord, little Axayacatl. With flowers I interweave it; with them I encircle it.

His lovely song is like a painting, like fragrant flowers that give joy. My heart esteems them on earth.

[8]All quotes in my narrative of the performance are from León-Portilla's translation of Chimalpahin's account (1992:259–262).

[9]My method here is to compare three translations—Garibay (1968:55–60), León-Portilla (1994:300–313), and Bierhorst (1985:384–391)—but to use León-Portilla as my default. (I translated his text of the song from Spanish to English, with reference to a somewhat different version published earlier in English [1992:267–280]). I have two reasons for choosing León-Portilla's translation from Nahuatl: (1) I agree with León-Portilla's (and Garibay's) discussion of the text much more than Bierhorst's, and (2) he had the benefit of reviewing both of the other translations before he did his own. However, neither León-Portilla nor Bierhorst divided the text into speaking parts, and Garibay's divisions violate both the sense of León-Portilla's translation and the musical divisions in the original manuscript; therefore, I have made my own, minimal divisions solely to remind the reader that the "text" is actually part of a performed song, probably with multiple personae. Concerning the division of each speaker's part into poetic lines, I follow Bierhorst's practice of dividing them as they are divided in the "original" manuscript. Thus, I have changed only punctuation and line breaks to make it more readable and have added only the notation of speaking parts.

What does this mean? Thus I esteem your word, companion in bed, you, with whom I do it—you, little Axayacatl.

> The dramatic hailing of a character representing a specific person in the audience is not found in the other "lewd songs" in the *Cantares Mexicanos,* Bierhorst's (1985) songs 86–88. I argue below that this culturally marked strategy helps to signal the existence of a "hidden" message for Axayacatl.

With flowers I interweave it. With flowers I surround it.

I raise that which joins us. I make it awaken. That is how I will give pleasure to my companion in bed—to you, little Axayacatl.

And now, as the Second Woman sings, the accompaniment changes: *cotiti tototototo cotiti tototototo.*

SECOND WOMAN: *Companion, little companion—you, Lord Axayacatl, if you are really a man, here is where you can toil. Perhaps you already will not continue. Do it in my warm vessel; then make it so that much truly catches fire.*

Come and join together; come and join together: it is my joy. Give me the little thing already. Let it be put in place already. We will laugh; we will be happy. There will be pleasure. I will have glory.

But no, no—still do not deflower, little companion, you, lord, little Axayacatl. I, I am trapped. My little hand goes round and round. Come already; come already. You want to touch my breasts, almost my heart?

Perhaps you yourself will ruin that which is my wealth. You will finish it. With flowers the color of the bird of fire, I will make my womb resound for you. Here it is: I make offering to you.

The precious flower of toasted corn, that of the rubber-necked bird, the flower of the raven, your mantel of flowers—they are already spread out.

You are lying on the precious mat, in a house that is a cave of precious feathers, in the mansion of paintings.

Thus in his house I am distressed. You, my mother—perhaps I can no longer spin. Perhaps I cannot weave. Only in vain am I a girl. I am a little girl, and they say about me that I have a man.

There is suffering, place of sadness on earth. So I meditate sadly. I desire evil. Desperation has become mine. I say to myself, "Come, child, even if I absolutely will die."

The accompaniment returned to: *toco tico tocoti, toco tico tocoti, toco tico tocoti.*

THIRD WOMAN: *My mother, I suffer. Here I have my man. I can no longer make the spindle dance; I cannot insert the shuttle stick: my little child, you mock me.*

What is left for me? I will do it! How is the shield taken up in the interior of the plain? I will offer myself; I will offer myself. My child, you mock me.

Little companion, my little boy, you, lord, little Axayacatl, we will be together. Make yourself comfortable by my side. Make the man in you speak.

> Thus far, the text has established the general metaphor of sexual pairing with Axayacatl. It is difficult and perhaps wrongheaded to establish a direct correspondence between the text above and the Chalca's situation. However, in general, I read the preceding "soul-searching" as metaphoric of the Chalca's concern about their political standing after falling under Mexica

dominion, which they resolve with the decision to seek (or accept) a coupling with Axayacatl. More specifically, the last lines of Second Woman and the above lines of Third Woman imply that these Chalca recognize that they are regarded (inaccurately) as "sell-outs" and have no choice but to actually offer their services.

Do I not know, have I no experience with your enemies, my little boy? But now, indulge yourself at my side.

The preceding line makes a direct reference to the political aid the Chalca can give to the *tlatoani*.

Even though we are women, perhaps you may gain nothing as a man. Flowers and songs from your companion in pleasure, my little boy.

Man and child, my lord, you, great lord, you, little Axayacatl: you still have not begun. Already you are displeased, little companion. I am going to my house now, my little boy.

Perhaps you have bewitched me here; you have pronounced lovely words. Here, now there is intoxication—you intoxicate yourself! Perhaps there is happiness in our house?

Perhaps you have bought me—did you acquire me for yourself, my little boy? Perhaps you will exchange my pleasure, my intoxication? Perhaps you scorn me; you are displeased, little companion. I am going to my house now, my little boy.

Here they are indicating that, were Axayacatl to mistreat them, they could rebel or at least not cooperate—that is, go "home" to exile in Huexotzinco.

Then the accompaniment changed to: *tocotico tititi tocoticotititi tocoticotititi.*

FOURTH WOMAN: *You, my friend—you, offering woman: see how the song endures in Cohuatepec, in Cuauhtenanpan. How it spreads over us then passes.*

This section is key to my interpretation. It incorporates numerous place names either to refer to the women who live in these places—who, in turn, symbolize the places' political leadership—or as direct references to the polities. My understanding of the section as a whole is that these newly installed Chalca rulers are asking to be treated like Tenochtitlan's two major allies and are indicating the political benefits that Axayacatl will derive. For example, Hassig (1988:185) indicates that the first place mentioned, Cohuatepec (or Coatepec), was conquered by Axayacatl in 1476–1477—perhaps hostilities of some sort persisted at the time of the performance. I have not yet identified Cuauhtenanpan.[10] I have consulted Bierhorst (1985), Chimalpahin (1965), Códice Mendocino (1951), Hassig (1988), León-Portilla (1992; 1995), and Schroeder (1991) for my historical background.

Maybe the woman in me does crazy things. My little heart is distressed. How should I do it to the one that I have as a man, although skirt and blouse be mine? Those that are our men, they are our making!

[10]This might not be a place-name. Bierhorst does not translate this word—which he transcribes as "quauhtenampan"—as a place-name but as "at the eagle wall" (1985:388–389). Frances Karttunen (personal communication) indicates that, depending on the vowel length, it could mean either "eagle-fortification-at" or "wooden-fortification-at."

Knead me like corn dough, you, lord, little Axayacatl. I offer myself to you completely. It is I, my little boy; it is I, my little boy. Be happy—may our worm rise.

Perhaps you are not an eagle, a jaguar—do you not name yourself thus, my little boy? Perhaps you do not play tricks on your enemies at war? Now, thus, my little boy, give yourself over to pleasure.

My skirt is nothing; my blouse is nothing. I, a little woman, am here. He comes to hand over his harmonious song. He comes here to hand over the flower of his shield. Perhaps we are somehow two—I, woman of Chalco, I, Ayocuan?

> Ayocuan was the highest ranking of the exiled Chalca nobles whom the Mexica had defeated and was the patron of the song's author.[11] Thus, here the song explicitly identifies whom the Chalca women symbolize: Ayocuan and perhaps also other exiled kings.

I want there to be women like me, from there in Acolhuacan. I want there to be women like me, who are Tepaneca. Perhaps we are somehow two—I, woman from Chalco, I, Ayocuan?

> The people of Acolhuacan and the Tepaneca were junior partners with the Mexica in the Triple Alliance (Bierhorst 1985:52–57). Here, then, the lyrics are calling for the admittance of Chalco as a similar partner in the Alliance.

They are ashamed: I make myself concubine.

> Perhaps this indicates that the other allies are not keen on an addition or that still-rebellious Chalca factions opposed these nobles as sellouts.

My little child, perhaps you will do it to me like you did it to poor Cuauhtlatohua?

> Cuauhtlatoa was a Tlatelolca ruler (r. 1427–1467) who asserted Tlatelolco's independence before Tenochtitlan had subjugated Chalco. I have not ascertained his fate; however, Axayacatl subdued Tlatelolco (with the aforementioned help of Ayocuan's son in Chalco) in 1473 (Hassig 1988).

Little by little unfasten your skirt; open your legs, you Tlatelolcas, you who shoot arrows. Look here to Chalco.

> Here the Chalca are urging the Tlatelolca to submit as they do.

Let me adorn myself with feathers, my little mother; let me paint my face; how should he see me, my companion in pleasure? Before his face we will leave. Perhaps Xayacamachan will get angry there in Huexotzinco, in Tetzmelocan.

> Huexotzinco had preserved its independence from and enmity for Tenochtitlan. Moreover, all the kings of Chalca towns were in exile in Huexotzinco (Schroeder 1991:66), although some of their sons remained as token local leaders (Schroeder 1991:97). Tetzmelocan was a Huexotzinco town

[11] Although king of Iztlacoçauhcan, Ayocuan was son of the king of Tlailotlacan (Schroeder 1991:50–51). Chimalpahin credits the Tlailotlaca with ownership of the song and states that Ayocuan became famous for the song (León-Portilla 1992:261–262). In another section (not translated in León-Portilla 1992), Chimalpahin credits Ayocuan specifically with ownership: "era del Huehue Ayocuantzin" (1965:214).

(Bierhorst 1985:506). Xayacamachan was a prominent Huexotzinca poet and noble (León-Portilla 1992).

I, woman, have rubbed my hands with ointment. I approach with my skirt of prickly fruit, with my blouse of prickly fruit. I will see all die.

I want the Huexotzinca in Xaltepetlapan, the captive of Cuetlaxtlan, the crafty Cuetlaxteca—I will see all die.

Xaltepetlapan was also a Huexotzinca town (Bierhorst 1985:506). Cuetlaxtlan had revolted around the beginning of Axayacatl's rule but had been reconquered; local commoners had captured and killed the nobles to demonstrate their opposition to the revolt (Hassig 1988:177). I read this verse as an avowal that Axayacatl's enemies will be these Chalca's enemies in much the same way.

Next the accompaniment switched to: *tocotico tocotico tocotico tocotico tocotico.*

FIFTH WOMAN: *How is this known? The boy calls me—the lord, little Axayacatl—he wants to achieve his pleasure with me.*

Here, the lyric suggests that Axayacatl instigated a parley with the Chalca.

Because of me you will have two to care for, my little boy. Perhaps your heart desires it so. Thus, little by little, let us tire each other.

Maybe not with all your heart, my little boy, do you enter into that which is pleasure, your house. Perhaps your heart desires it so. Thus, little by little, let us tire each other.

How will you do it to me, companion of pleasure? Let's do it this way, together. Perhaps you are not a man? What is it that confuses you? You surround my heart with flowers; they are your word.

I tell you the place where I weave, the place where I spin. I make you remember, little companion. What is it that disturbs you, my heart?

As the song neared its end, the musicians again switched to: *tocotico tocoti.*

SIXTH WOMAN: *I am an old woman of pleasure. I am your mother. I am an abandoned, elderly woman. I am an old woman, without juice. This is what I do—I, woman of Chalco.*

Chalco had been powerful until the energetic Mexica newcomers conquered them; perhaps this explains the reference to being old. As to being a "woman of pleasure": the desire to couple is sincere, because that is how these particular Chalca have learned to survive.

I have come to give pleasure to my blooming vulva, my little mouth.

I desire the lord, the little Axayacatl. Look at my flowery painting; look at my flowery painting—my breasts.

Perhaps your heart will fall in vain, little Axayacatl? Here are your little hands; now take me with your hands. Let us have pleasure.

On your mat of flowers, in the place where you exist, little companion, little by little give yourself over to sleep; stay calm, my little boy—you, lord Axayacatl.

If Axayacatl links up with the Chalca, then he will not lose sleep worrying about their loyalty.

"When the dance was over, the Lord Axayacatl spoke, saying, 'Fools, you who have brought this fumbler before me, who played and directed the song! Do not let him do it again!' The people from Chalco answered him, saying, 'It is as you wish, Supreme Lord.'" The Chalca feared that Cuateotzin would be killed and even that they would too, as sometimes happened to musicians whose failure offended the tlatoani (Bierhorst 1985:503). "Meanwhile, the Lord Axayacatl had gone back inside his palace . . . to be with . . . his wives." There, he sent a messenger to fetch Quecholcohuatzin, whom he did not know. The Chalca were fearful that the young drummer who had rescued the performance would be killed and that they would be next, so they followed him to the doorway. As they prostrated themselves in fear, they peeked in anxiously. Quecholcohuatzin bowed before Axayacatl and begged his mercy.

But Axayacatl was far from angry. Instead, he wanted both to reward Quecholcohuatzin's masterful performance and to continue in the carnivalesque spirit of the festivities. Playing on the Chalca noble's hyper-feminine costume, the king told his wives to make room for a newcomer, this 'Chalca woman.'

> Here I am altering slightly the literal sense of Chimalpahin's account. According to Chimalpahin, Axayacatl "said to his women: 'Arise my wives; come and meet this man, for he will remain by your side; here he will be your companion, as though he were a woman as well. . . . [H]e will be your companion forever" (León-Portilla 1992:261).

He continued to joke, pretending that he was taking Quecholcohuatzin as his new wife because "[n]o one before has ever achieved such a thing, for me to come outside my house and dance. . . . For this reason, he will be your companion forever." Finally, Axayacatl revealed his true intent: "I take him now to be my singer." He then gave Quecholcohuatzin masculine clothes to put on that bore his house's insignia, and he gave him many other gifts, too. Last, he ordered that only Quecholcohuatzin could lead that song, "so that [it] would never be ruined again by someone's clumsiness."

The Chalca nobles left, no doubt pleased to be alive and to have achieved in small measure the political coupling their song suggested. Indeed, Axayacatl had liked the song so much that he had them return and "asked" the owners, who were from Amecameca,[12] to grant him ownership of the song. From that point on, when he wanted to enjoy the song he would summon Quecholcohuatzin to Tenochtitlan to perform it. When Axayacatl died two years later, his son (who did not become *tlatoani*) inherited the song, and later *his* son inherited it in turn. "And all these men had this song played and danced in their palaces in Mexico [Tenochtitlan] because in truth it was quite marvelous."

Marvelousness Analyzed

But what made this song so "marvelous"? I argue here that an adequate analysis of its marvelousness should not isolate a single element as the

[12]The composer, Aquiauhtzin, was from Ayapanco, a village near Amecameca (León-Portilla 1992:255).

sole cause of its popularity. More specifically, I argue that its fame probably resulted from a combination of appealing music; entertaining choreography; clever, memorable, and fitting lyrics; and the extremely propitious circumstances of its first performance. In the course of the argument, I try to explain, first, why the Chalca would embed a calculated diplomatic message in a seemingly carnivalesque song and, second, why that song employed a sexual metaphor.

Music and Dance

First, the composed music must have been quite good by Aztec standards. According to the story, it not only drew Axayacatl out of his palace but inspired him to dance. Likewise, I infer that the dance was appealing from Axayacatl's uncharacteristic desire to join in. Indeed, I see the song's continuing popularity as an indication of its entertaining music and dance.

Lyrics

The lyrics probably were also noteworthy, having merited transcription in the *Cantares Mexicanos*. Because they are all that survive of the song in adequately decipherable form, they will receive much more attention from me. Nonetheless, I am not suggesting that the lyrics were (or were not) the most important element of any performance from the standpoint of the composer,[13] performers, or audience. Chimalpahin's account, for instance, pays no attention to the lyrical content but does comment on the dancing and on musical triumphs and failures. Indeed, Garibay (1968:xi) contends that singing occupied only a small part of a song's performance-time. Still, it is clear that the words deserve considerable attention and provide our main clue as to the meaning contemporaries found in the overall performance.

Even on the surface, the lyrics depart somewhat from the expected content of "lewd songs" while remaining identifiably part of this genre. Unlike other such songs in *Cantares Mexicanos* (Bierhorst's [1985] songs 86–88), "The Song of the Women of Chalco" is directed to a specific person. The unmarked rhetorical strategy in such songs is to broaden their appeal by addressing only a generalized audience or other characters who do not have real-world counterparts in attendance. What I infer from the marked tactic of specifying a particular individual in attendance as the addressee, then, is that the composer thereby emphasized that the lyrics contained a message specifically involving the addressed person. Explicitly invoking

[13]It would be interesting to know whether the named composer—in this case Aquiauhtzin—devised only the words or also the music and/or choreography.

the song's patron, Ayocuan, is less marked but provides a clue as to the song's "hidden" meaning.

But what was this message, and how did such a restricted message fit into a song that apparently had such wide appeal? I have already asserted that the message to Axayacatl was that he should consort politically with Chalca nobility as he would consort sexually with a woman, and as support I have interpreted some of the lyrics in this light. My point here is that this message's convolution with an ostensibly absurd, carnivalesque, and public performance made it expressible.

Again, I do not want to overemphasize this political aspect of the performance. I imagine that the Chalca were satisfied to escape with all of their lives intact and happy to have such success that one of their ranks achieved glory. Likewise, I know of no indication of whether Axayacatl was moved by or even seriously considered their suggestion, although I contend that he, a poet and a statesman, could "read" it, especially after having commanded its performance several times.[14] In fact, all indications are that the music, the dance, and the overt scenario of carnivalesque sexual playfulness between the dread *tlatoani* and ridiculous female-impersonators were the keys to the song's popularity (except perhaps among the Chalca). They might have fulfilled their wish of winning Axayacatl's favor without this hidden message, but the cleverness of the whole production—including the inclusion of this subtext—might have aided them.

Here, then, is the "straw man" that led me to write this essay: Bierhorst asks, more or less, why Chalca men would compose a song in which Chalca women want to have sex with the Mexica ruler. Bierhorst sees this paradox as corroboration that, in fact, this is a Mexica song ridiculing the Chalca (1985:502). My analysis rests on the acceptance of paradoxical expressions as common products of paradoxical conditions.

The Political Paradoxes.—The Chalca wanted to increase the goodwill, or at least the tolerance, of the *tlatoani*. Explicitly acknowledging their subordination, though, would undermine their absolute claims to nobility. Indeed, when Axayacatl's successor stripped even the remaining local Chalca nobles of their lands and titles, the local governor complained that they continued to assert their nobility (León-Portilla 1992:247–248). Chimalpahin himself continued to claim nobility (Schroeder 1991).

At the time of the song, Axayacatl apparently was relatively pacific toward the Chalca, thereby augmenting his approachability (León-Portilla 1992:255–256). Moreover, his trouncing at the hands of the Tarascans had

[14]Chimalpahin writes that the next year Axayacatl sent workers to two Chalca settlements to appropriate farmlands for the Mexica nobility (1965:214). While this may have been part of an alliance-deal, it seems more likely to have been a unilateral action.

weakened him in internal Mexica politics, which meant that the time for an alliance was ripe. However, from the perspective of a mere Chalca noble, the *tlatoani* was still practically all-powerful—remember that he could order their deaths just for ruining their own song; it might be a dangerous insult to approach him directly to propose even an asymmetrical relationship and thereby imply that he needed their meager aid. Likewise, the tlatoani was probably unable to initiate such a discussion without losing face. Possibly, then, there was not even a forum to openly initiate such a discussion. In short, the Chalca could not openly admit their utter subordination, and they could not explicitly propose a mutually beneficial relationship to Axayacatl. But they did, or at least Aquiauhtzin did—but without the adverbs.

The Theoretical Analysis.—I derived my ideas of how the unspeakable became spoken (actually, sung) from Lavie's (1990) discussion of "Mzeina Allegories of Bedouin Identity under Occupation." Lavie writes:

> The Mzeini paradox of identity . . . rarely surfaced in ordinary conversation, but if it did, the conversation quickly turned into a heated debate. The ironic paradox was articulated only in the presence of those charismatic creative individuals who might fuse themselves, as persons, with the persona of one of the seven allegory-telling characters. . . . Perhaps they also served as safety valves, because they could playfully act out the tribe's pent-up bitterness about the harshness and absurdity of Mzeini daily life (1990:39).

Lavie also notes that these allegories—themselves paradoxical (1990: 31)—usually place an otherwise marginal person(a) at the center of social debate (1990:39). These allegories, which express what cannot be said mundanely, mediate through absurdity the unresolvable conflicts of Mzeini daily life. For example, "the Fool"—a devout Muslim in traditional dress—characteristically joked about the wealth that he had earned (and donated to the mosque) by catering to tourists' sinful lifestyles.

There are a couple of apparent discrepancies between Lavie's Mzeini allegories and the Chalca's song. First, "The Song of the Women of Chalco" was composed; it did not arise spontaneously from conversation. However, composers often benefit from "inspiration," and, from my experience as a songwriter, I would guess that any work that ineffably mediates a paradox—actually any work that is notably clever—arises in a somewhat spontaneous fashion. As with the Mzeini, without the inspiration—which is unpredictable—the song would not have been notable.

Second, the Chalca did not face a daily "paradox of identity" to be resolved internally so much as a political paradox that involved an exterior force. Their performance, then, did not act as a social "safety valve"; its primary audience was not internal. As with many of the Mzeini allegories, it was playfully absurd, but this absurdity was only what allowed the mes-

sage's expression. In both cases, though, the performances are allegories, but on the surface they are something else (e.g., a joke, a personal story, or a lewd song). This quality of appearing to be "something else" simultaneously allows the audience to misrecognize the "hidden" message and allows the performers "plausible deniability" to avoid confrontation and to deny the veiled message if confronted.[15]

The construction of marginal, paradoxical personae to express and embody the mediating message is common to both the Mzeini and the Chalca allegories; in the Chalca case, though, the performers themselves were far from marginal, perhaps requiring more extensive character construction. (This character construction could not be too successful; the noblemen must still be recognizable as such through their costumes and performances.) First, it is my impression that women were not expected to be political speakers, so any political message they (or female impersonators) communicated would be camouflaged. Second, the absurd conventions of "lewd songs" as a genre helped to camouflage the serious message further. The idea of noblemen dressing as hyper-women and acting sexually aroused seems intrinsically ridiculous. In the Aztec case, this absurdity is heightened by the Aztecs' puritanical attitudes toward male homosexuality and female sexuality (Williams 1986:148; León-Portilla 1988:150–153). Further, I have found no indication that Chalca women were famed for lasciviy, and yet here they are sexually aroused en masse.

Irvine's (1992) analysis of *xaxaar*—ritual, poetic insults in Wolof marriage ceremonies—provides further insights into the construction of "plausible deniability," which she calls "lines of retreat." In xaxaar, the bride's co-wives hire a griot (members of a low caste specializing in speechmaking) to compose and publicly recite insults that shame the bride's family; optimally, the insults will ring true but will appear to be in jest, and the content will be untraceable to any particular source—whether it be the griot or a particular co-wife.

Although "The Song of the Women of Chalco" was not meant to be insulting to Axayacatl, its performance shares many aspects with xaxaar. As mentioned above, the genre itself helps to "protect a performer or composer from retribution" (1992:123); this was, first and foremost, a "lewd song," which apparently was not a common vessel for diplomatic overtures. Moreover, "lewd songs" are ostensibly playful; as Irvine notes of a Wolof insult, "smiling and laughing . . . marks it as non-serious" (1992: 127). Second, "the social organization of participation in the performance event . . . [diffuses] responsibility for authorship of the message" (1992:

[15]I get the term and concept of "plausible deniability" from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which reportedly attempts to undertake its covert actions secretly enough that it can "plausibly deny" responsibility.

123). The use of intermediaries—a separate author and noble performers apparently still living in Chalco—helped to downplay Ayocuan's patronage, especially since he apparently was not present. Insofar as it was perceived, Ayocuan's involvement would have helped to mark the song as overtly political. The performers' role as messengers probably also protected them from responsibility for anything more than the quality of the performance itself. Finally, in contrast to the typical xaxaar, the "perlocutionary target" in the Chalca song is unusually specific, given that the Chalca hail Axayacatl by name; here the need to make the allegory plain superseded the need to preserve the message's deniability.

In summary, the absurdity of using the "lewd song" genre and the marginal personae as political messengers hid the message in plain sight. The message's allegorization within an independently valid and entertaining performance also served to disguise it, as did the use of intermediaries in its performance. It was probably this camouflage that allowed the composer to play with the genre by having the characters address Axayacatl directly. Thus, Aquiauhtzin had semi-spontaneously created a paradoxical message (in that it was both apparent and hidden, out of place, and deniable) that mediated a political paradox (how to communicate a seemingly uncommunicable proposal for alliance).

The Metaphor

Even a cursory reading of the song's text reveals contradictory messages within the over-arching allegorical framework. The lack of rigorous logical consistency in the song's allegorical construction should not be surprising. First, León-Portilla observes that, in Aztec song, "rather than a 'linear development' of a theme, one perceives distinctly synchronic and converging approaches to the same central subject" (1992:53). Without suggesting that the Aztecs made this connection, I find their use of the flower metaphor for song particularly apt: their songs juxtapose different aspects of what appears to be the same subject just as the various petals of a flower appear to attach to different parts of what appears to be a unitary center. In this case, we see different vantages on coupling with Axayacatl. Just as the petals could be perceived to be joined to unique parts in the center of the flower or to be not *attached* at all but rather intrinsically part of a larger unit, the limits and implications of the topic "coupling with Axayacatl" do not form a natural unit for consideration but a cultural one. For instance, here "sexual" coupling with a concubine entails the expectation of political alliance, which would not be recognized as the norm in all cultural contexts. It is from this perspective that I ask why the Chalca men portrayed women and why Aquiauhtzin chose the sexual metaphor as analogous to political relations.

Consideration of the categories contrasted in the song sheds some light on the mind-set of the songwriter. Generally, in any cultural context the statement of a category, such as "man," limits the possible contrasting categories; however, these contrasts are not given in nature but are culturally constructed.[16] Thus, in the performance of the "Song of the Women of Chalco," the transvestism creates a contrast of male-female, which further distances these men from their womanly message. The text also creates a contrast of male-female between Axayacatl and the Chalca women. (The text of the song contrasts types of women, too.) Given that these contrasts are not automatic, the Chalca's choice of portraying women, as opposed to boys or animals or other sorts of men, requires explanation as an appropriate tactic in this context.

First, the available genres and artistic mores must have constrained Aquiauhtzin's creative options. His prior experience with songs must have limited his artistic imagination and tastes. More important, in a world where poor performances can meet with death and where the target audience (Axayacatl) is remarkably fearsome (for the remark: Códice Mendocino 1951:43), the songwriter's desire not to offend with untested practices was probably strengthened.[17]

Perhaps the immediate circumstances of the performance further constrained the choice of genre and, thus, of metaphor. The performance might have been presented as part of a series of "lewd" songs, perhaps during a wider "carnivalesque" celebration. Then again, maybe not—perhaps the metaphor of "sex as asymmetrical alliance" came to the songwriter before he selected a genre.

No matter how he came to choose "female songs" as his starting (or ending) point, Aquiauhtzin had to create something recognizable. Much of the song—in fact, almost all of it except for the section with the place names—looks pretty much like the other sex songs in *Cantares Mexicanos*. Thus, tension between the novel, diplomatic message and the constraints of the available genres partially accounts for both the logical inconsistencies and the choice of the dominant metaphor. (However, I do not

[16]For example, the opposite of "man" is variable. In my experience, it is usually "woman," but in some contexts it is "boy." However, the opposite of "macho man" is almost always another man, frequently a "wimp." In each case, some aspect of both units is implicitly, culturally recognized as essentially comparable, and this equivalence allows a contrast. That is, the opposite of any particular thing, such as "man," conceivably could be "nothing" or something seemingly absurd, such as "quickly," but people juxtapose opposites to make a meaningful contrast in a particular context, which these are unlikely to provide. When the opposite of "man" is "woman," then humanity and age are the common denominators and gender is highlighted for contrast. When "boy" is the opposite of "man," then humanity and gender are held constant and age is being contrasted. (Interestingly, "girl" does not work quite so well as an opposite of "man," perhaps because two items—gender and age—are being contrasted.)

[17]The art of the Soviet Union comes to mind.

want to discount the considerable idiosyncratic creativity that Aquiauhtzin invested in his composition—the text is not the automatic result of combining the message and the genre.)

The question remains, though, of how the metaphor of male-female sex appeared to the Chalca to fit a message of dominant-subordinate political alliance. In a successful allegory the following must make sense: (1) "the surface story"—in this case, the various aspects of Chalca women copulating with Axayacatl; (2) the "hidden" story—here, the proposal of alliance; and (3) the structural equivalences suggested between the two. These elements must make sense not only to sway the audience but simply for the audience to easily recognize the allegory. Thus, the audience and the composer must share cultural logics for both (1) and (2), and the composer can distort these only slightly in establishing (3). That is, the widely held cultural logics of the "surface" story and of the "hidden" story should be similar even before the composer begins to make a formal connection between the two.

The metaphor of "copulation as political alliance" provides an example. The different aspects of copulation that are considered imply different aspects of political alliance. The parts that I have attributed to Third, Fourth, and Fifth women apparently suggest a relationship of marriage-like concubinage, which implies not only sex but also political alliance. Perhaps this is like Axayacatl's connection with the women whose company he left to join the dance and to whom he later likened the performer Quecholcohuatzin. (The last section of the text likens Chalco to "an old whore," which entails different cultural logics linked to different aspects of sex/alliance.) As Marcus points out, marriages among the Aztec nobles often established alliances of many sorts, including "marriages that established interethnic alliances [and] marriages that integrated lower-order centers with regional capitals" (1992:223). That is, the logic of (heterosexual) sex/marriage-as-alliance is intimately tied up with—and similar to—the logic of political alliance among men. In fact, they are so tied together that the "hidden" message sometimes rises to the "surface" explicitly, for instance in Fourth Woman's diatribe: "I want the Huexotzinca in Xaltepetlan, the captive of Cuetlaxtlan, the crafty Cuetlaxteca—I will see all die." Perhaps such (possibly inadvertent) extrusions of the "hidden" message provide another clue to the audience about the existence and nature of the allegory.

In the song, different sorts of copulation signal different sorts of alliance, but the alliances are asymmetrical. It is difficult to establish from the text alone who, if anyone, is to be dominant and who subordinate, given that the Chalca women are initiating the action and seeking their own pleasure (or wealth) in exchange for their loyalty and aid. However, one relation is invariable—the Chalca are always female and Axayacatl

male. As the Aztecs instructed their children, the male is expected to be the dominant partner (León-Portilla 1988). This, then, appears to be a limit born of self-preservation on the carnivalesque inversions: Axayacatl must remain "on top" in the allegory as in the "real world." Indeed Axayacatl's playfulness with Quecholcohuatzin after the performance (to which the Chalca singer had to submit) temporarily extended this metaphorical relation into a more quotidian domain, reinforcing his "masculine" domination and the Chalca's "feminine" subordination beyond the performance (Jane Hill, personal communication).

In addition to genre and gender norms, one more element helped to determine the appropriateness of women to symbolize the Chalca nobles. As Marcus states, in the Aztec codices "the 'names' of the royal women in Aztec marriage scenes are frequently . . . *toponyms*" (1992:225–227; emphasis in original). Feminist scholars critiquing modern nationalist discourses have noted the widespread "depiction of the homeland as a female body" (Parker et al. 1992:6) and have linked it to male political dominance. However, the key difference is that "this [modern] trope of the nation-as-woman of course depends for its representational efficacy on a particular image of woman as chaste, dutiful, daughterly or maternal." This nation-as-woman's "violation by foreigners requires its citizens and allies to rush to her defense" (Parker et al. 1992:6). Obviously, times have changed. Perhaps the Chalca nobles identified themselves more fundamentally as males than as Chalca; the distance they perceived between themselves and women and the proximity to Axayacatl they felt as men allowed them all to share this joke about such extroverted women without the Chalca men losing their pride.

Underlying this analysis, then, is the understanding that the allegory, the diplomatic message's plausible deniability, and the Chalca's willingness to perform the song all depended on and reproduced these men's negative stereotypes of women in general and concubines in particular.[18]

The Performance Revisited

The Chalca came to Tenochtitlan to entertain, and they did so. The choreography, musical composition, and lyrics, combined with the legendary performance of Quecholcohuatzin, drew Axayacatl's attention and then favor. But their song had a "hidden," allegorical message whose construction may have inadvertently produced the effect the composer had wished. By having the personae address Axayacatl directly, the song may have

[18] I want to thank Susan Philips for suggesting that I make this understanding more explicit.

engaged him personally in an unaccustomed way, prompting him to befriend at least one Chalca noble.[19]

Conclusion

This study addresses the mystery of why Chalca men would write a song in which they favorably portray Chalca women as sexually excited for their foreign ruler. I include detailed argumentation for how and why Chalca men could write such a song. The density of argumentation and the "realistic" narrative are meant to support a new interpretation of "The Song of the Women of Chalco" that plausibly explains its production, form, performance, reception, and fame. This interpretation does not privilege the text, but focuses on the use of paradoxical forms of expression to mediate paradoxical social situations.

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[19]I have found no indication that Axayacatl, in his brief time remaining, married a Chalca woman or otherwise forged an alliance with Chalco.

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