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## The Aztec Marketplace: Economy, Culture and Social Control

The Aztec marketplace, though primarily a place of economic exchange and commerce, did not just serve this one purpose. It served as a gathering place for Aztec people, a hub of social and political life, and a place for religious fervor and diligence as the society's main third space outside of work and home. One of the most significant displays of this market system were the twin cities of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco, the latter containing an impressive, sprawling market which captivated conquistadors immensely. Firsthand accounts of these spaces provide insight into their nature on a surface level, but pique interest into their social and political significance and nature. Scholars continue to debate the extent of cultural activity and social or state control, as well as the role of religion and the level of administrative onlook in these spaces. In this paper, I argue through the use of both firsthand accounts of the Aztec marketplace and system as well as through historical accounts and archaeological evidence that the Aztec marketplace was a place of not only economic exchange, but indeed a fixture of the society a testament to the immense and complex organizational structures of Aztec society, as a place of clear state imposed social control, and as a space of cultural development and interaction. However, the truth of the Aztec marketplace is admittedly obscured by history, with continual conversations among scholars about its nature pressing on, and this fact should not be ignored in the discussion of the nature of Aztec market systems.

The Aztec marketplaces' complexity as well as the system of commerce and nature of these public spaces is extremely well documented and well explained not only by historians in retrospect but indeed by first hand witnesses to places like Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco. In Bernal

Diaz del Castillo's *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico*, he explains his viewpoint on these markets, and emphasises their grandeur and sprawl. "When we arrived at the great market place, called Tlatelolco, we were astounded at the number of people and the quantity of merchandise that it contained, and at the good order and control that was maintained, for we had never seen such a thing before... Each kind of merchandise was kept by itself and had its fixed place marked out." (del Castillo, p. 42.) He goes on to describe a great deal of the goods being sold at this marketplace, with each their own distinct sector, stall, and vendor. The intricacy of the organization is on display in his recounting, and he continues later by stating, "I could wish that I had finished telling of all the things which are sold there, but they are so numerous and of such different quality and the great market place with its surrounding arcades was so crowded with people, that one would not have been able to see and inquire about it all in two days." (del Castillo, p. 49.) His account finishes with an admittance that the marketplace at Tlatelolco was even greater, more regulated and better arranged than even markets at Constantinople and Rome, an astonishing remark given the inherent European supremacy in the minds of these individuals. This firsthand account is a true testament to the splendor that such a marketplace must have been, and is even more evidence that the Aztec market system was extremely well fleshed out, centralized, and complex in its nature.

Elizabeth M. Brumfiel makes the argument that, within the economic nature of the marketplace, specialization was of utmost importance to the way that this system operated. Each vendor and district in an Aztec market had its own unique niche, with ideally very little overlap. This level of specialization allowed for a more organized and efficient distribution of resources, and it also ensured the needs of consumers were all met in a structured and regulated manner. A common economic principle in modern industrialized societies, but a relatively complex and

complicated one for a non-industrialized, primarily agrarian society that often functioned on a hybrid system of barter and money exchange (usually in the form of cacao beans, according to Hutson.) Not only is this fact a testament to the Aztec marketplace's economic complexity, so too is it a testament to social control in these economic spaces. The ability to maintain and enforce such a system implies a rigid oversight ensuring that vendors meet their quotas and stay in their lanes. As she states, "Given sufficient administrative complexity, the outputs of different segments of the productive system can be monitored, and, should these outputs fall below their requisite levels, corrective action can be initiated." (Brumfiel, p. 459.)

Another testament to the centralized, important nature of Aztec marketplaces in the daily life and culture of the Aztec people is the role that it played in reinforcing cultural norms and social order. The dominance of the state in organizing marketplaces in Aztec cities like Tenochtitlan is incredibly clear in their structure and organization. The marketplace at Tlatelolco was described by Cortez and his foot soldiers as being directly adjacent to the Tlatelolco temple precinct, and was thus closeby to authority and the state. Not only this, but it was strictly divided into sections based on vendor type and class. Sahagun is documented as implying that this was done to maintain order with vendors and limit confusion. However, Scott R. Hutson attributes this to a form of social maintenance and state domination. (Hutson, p. 129.) By dividing people into distinct groups, it was less likely that any sort of riotous behavior or crowd demonstrations with high tensions or emotions would form - or, at least, they would be far easier to quell and punish with this level of maintenance. Additionally, should anyone be found to be robbing a stall or vendor of their merchandise, they would immediately be brought to the courthouse in the center of the market. A trial would commence, and, if they were found guilty, they would be executed on the spot, with onlookers surrounding on all sides. This fatal enforcement of social

order and rule following would have certainly been effective in scaring potential robbers out of their temptation to steal, and would have contributed to the control and hold the state had on the perceived peace of the marketplace. (Hutson, p. 129.) The marketplace was also filled with and covered by altars and various depictions of gods, almost as if to remind consumers that they were being watched, and to not “try anything,” so to speak. As Hutson states, “Religion thus loomed over the marketplace both spatially and symbolically, piling spiritual imperatives on top of legal ones.” (Hutson, p. 129.)

Another example of religion being extremely intertwined with the marketplace and thus morality and state control factoring in is the presence of tributary items at Huexolta, meaning tribute and perhaps religious ceremony and ritual was welcome and invited in these spaces. “Market exchange and tribute extraction were very closely linked during Late Aztec times,” Brumfiel states, “Much of the obsidian and the cloth procured by Huecotla’s inhabitants during the Late Aztec times had probably been produced as items of tribute rather than market commodities.” (Brumdiel, p. 460.) Not only does this imply a rigid religious order present in the marketplace, it also implies a tribute system that was state organized and run through the marketplace - once again establishing order, hierarchy, and social structure.

In addition to the control imposed on these markets, they also offered an incredibly unique chance where friends or acquaintances could meet each other and visit on random occasions instead of by invitation or necessity. The causeways in the marketplace were wide and offered plenty of room to socialize, necessitating even more of a reason for social control and order - the marketplace was not just an economic center, but a social arena wherein gossip, ideas, and plans of all kinds could manifest. (Hutson, p. 135.) Marketplace attendance was even mandatory on every fifth day, punishable by judgement from the gods should one not attend. On

the daily, it is supposed that around 20,000-25,000 individuals were served daily, and on “market day,” or the aforementioned every fifth day, an estimated 40,000-50,000 individuals were thought to have been present, according to an anonymous member of Cortez’s army of foot soldiers. (Plattner, p. 392.)

Ultimately, however, little can be stated staunchly and definitively about the precise inner workings of the Aztec marketplace and the economic and cultural factors that played a role in this space, as the truth is obscured by minimal trustworthy proof or evidence. Within this field of study that seems to be haphazardly juggled between anthropologists, archaeologists, economists and historians, there is significant dissent and academic squabble on many of these topics. Though most sources point to a general air of social control and immense political order in Aztec marketplaces, some scholars, such as Michael E. Smith, disagree, noting the lack of solid and impenetrable evidence. Spanish conquistadors imply that the level of control and precision in which the marketplaces operated must have been organized by a heavy handed state operative, but there is no solid proof beyond their testimony. He also posits that the Aztec system is not unique in this, and that every market system is politically regulated to some degree. “Turning to the more manageable question of the degree of administrative control over marketing, I ask, what exactly does... “politically regulated” market exchange [mean]?... Where would the Aztec market system fall on the scale of political control over distributive mechanisms? [Other historians] argue for a high degree of such control. [They] are probably basing this opinion on the many reports by Spanish chroniclers of the regulation of trading practices in Aztec marketplaces [the majority of the data are from the central Tlatelolco market, probably the most heavily regulated of the Valley of Mexico markets.]” (Smith, p. 878.) Brumfiel implies an

agreement with this point of low complexity and low political organization, stating, “The local economy of at least [Huexotla] was not very complex.” (Brumfiel, p. 460.)

Perhaps, then, the nature of the Aztec marketplace was not intrinsic to its overall, general place in a wider economy, but was instead a more localized system, varying drastically based on a given locale or population size. While Tenochtitlan and Tlatloco offer extremely vivid and complex glimpses into Aztec commerce, they were incredibly unique places that offered direct connection to political authority and housed an extremely large portion of the population of the empire, perhaps requiring oversight and authority in a way that other places did not. Applying these takeaways to all Aztec marketplaces in a general, broad stroke is likely inadvisable, then. From a historical lens, one is more inclined to believe the firsthand accounts of those who saw the marketplaces and documented them at the time, but as they were mostly confined to twin cities with an immensely high population and an extremely pervasive, powerful government, a margin of error seems reasonable when making sweeping generalizations about the entire civilization’s system. As Frances F. Berdan states in regard to the neglect of outlying, less central Aztec markets, “...problems of the distribution of goods and services in non-industrial societies... have been applied only partially to the Aztec empire.” (Berdan, p. 37.)

In conclusion, the Aztec marketplaces served a greater purpose than being just simply centers of commerce, but were instead meticulously organized and socially bustling spaces that played a large role in social order maintenance, cultural norms, religious mantating and facilitating economic and social intercourse. Observations from conquistadors like del Castillo paint a picture of sprawling, vibrant, regulated market systems with carefully selected goods at artisanal quality. Modern scholars point in different directions as to the implications of these observations, with some arguing for a politically complex and at times tumultuous environment

being harbored in these spaces, vendors under the pressing thumb of rulers, and with others arguing for a far less centralized and complex system, generally more free of overlooking scrutiny from officials. As demonstrated through the contrasting views of various scholars on Aztec marketplaces, there is no one singular narrative that fully encapsulates the truth of the system. Rather, they seem to have been varying institutions whose function and structure ultimately probably varied based on population, political adjacency, and more.

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Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico*.