A dark light: reflections on obsidian in Mesoamerica

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Abstract

Throughout Mesoamerica, from c. 1500 BC to the Spanish conquest and beyond, obsidian was centrally located in the physical and symbolic worlds of indigenous societies. The aesthetic engagement with obsidian, based on its unique physical properties in a world without metal tools, bestowed distinctive kinds of agency on artefacts made from this dark volcanic glass – especially as blades used for bloodletting and human sacrifice. Linked to landscape, cosmology and myth, obsidian attained its apotheosis as the Aztec deity Tezcatlipoca, 'Lord of the Smoking (Obsidian) Mirror'. After the conquest, its symbolic role was re-aligned. Used to decorate early Christian atrial crosses, it was viewed as adornment by Catholic priests, but as a syncretic continuation of pre-Columbian belief by native peoples.

Keywords

Obsidian; Mesoamerica; atrial crosses; aesthetics; Tezcatlipoca.

In the world-view of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican peoples, the natural world was infused with spiritual essence and animated by cosmic forces. Ideas of landscape, cosmology and myth mingled, and could manifest themselves without warning in everyday events, shaping attitudes towards all kinds of matter, both natural and artefactual. The Mesoamerican universe was governed by powerful gods who were repaid for creating the world by a seemingly endless round of ritual bloodletting and human sacrifice – acts which were calendrically determined to recapitulate critical cosmogonic events enshrined in myth.

The ways in which Mesoamerican societies symbolically acquired features of the natural world offer powerful insights into their world-view and the nature of their varied engagements with the materialities of cultural life. For native Mesoamericans the world was a transformational and multi-sensorial place, governed by analogical symbolic reasoning, where the senses of smell, touch, sight and hearing appear to have coalesced in what Houston and Taube (2000) have called 'cultural synaesthesia' (and see Howes 1991). Contextualized within sacred landscapes, different kinds of matter appeared variably

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defined by natural philosophy. Jade, for example, was believed to belong to rulers, it attracted moisture, had a magnetic quality and bestowed greenness and fertility to the area around it (Sahagún 1950–78, Book 11: 222). Turquoise, similarly, was the property of the gods and was believed to emit smoke (ibid.: 224). A defining quality of the Mesoamerican world-view is the cross-media sensual dimension which links objects to landscape, deities, myth and everyday life.

One of the most significant kinds of matter in this respect was obsidian, the dark volcanic glass which, in the absence of metal tools, underwrote the economic and symbolic life of every major Mesoamerican culture for some three thousand years. This shared reality inspired an enduring and widespread indigenous aesthetic, which, by shaping relationships between material and people, bestowed distinctive kinds of agency on the ubquitous obsidian blade. The most powerful role of obsidian as weapon and sacrifical blade blended with its sensual aspect in an Aztec prayer which asked the gods for success in the arranged conflicts known as 'Flowery Wars' – the deity is petitioned thus:

> May he savor the fragrance, the sweetness of death by the obsidian knife. . . . May he desire . . . the flowery death by the obsidian knife. May he savor the scent . . . the sweetness of the darkness, the din of battle.
>
> (Sahagún 1950–78, Book 6: 14)

Hitherto, obsidian has been subject mainly to studies which have privileged such issues as the economic dynamics of production, trade and exchange (e.g. Hester 1978; Santley 1983; Gaxiola and Clark 1989). Yet obsidian's full 'biography' (*pace* Kopytoff 1986) must include an assessment of its unique ideological positioning as a bridge between symbolic and physical realities. In pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, obsidian represented cultural image as much as specialized technology.

An obsidian world

Central Mexico is a tectonically active volcanic cordillera, whose geography is dominated by extinct or dormant volcanoes (Sanders et al. 1979: 81). Mountain slopes and valley bottoms are composed of ancient lava flows which contain the sources of the volcanic glass obsidian. This geological reality framed Mesoamerican conceptions of the world, and was an ever-present part of the social, economic and metaphysical relationships which gave cosmic significance to physical places.

Volcanoes and mountains were considered the dwelling places of ancestors, spirits and animal familiars. Such peaks were conceived as generators of weather, especially rain-bringing clouds, and thereby associated with fertility (Broda 1987: 235; Townsend 1987: 373). Their sacredness was ritually marked by temples whose presence, along with pilgrimages made to them (Roiz 1997: 22), suggests phenomenological associations between religious belief and the natural world.

Caves also are a feature of this landscape, and commonly associated with weather control, fertility and the origins of food and water (Heyden 1981: 27). For the Aztec, the cosmic significance of caves is acknowledged in the myth of *Chicomoztoc*, 'the seven caves' – home of ancestors, and sacred 'place of emergence' into the world (Miller and

Taube 1993: 60). Cosmological myth, ceremonial activity and the natural world combined in typically Mesoamerican fashion in the identification of the Great Temple at Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital, as a representation of the cosmic water mountain (Broda 1987: 321–2).

The layering, more accurately the intermingling, of physical and symbolic landscapes can be seen as having bestowed a sense of inextricability on natural and cultural matter, endowing certain materials with the capacity to embody sensuously a society's spiritual as well as economic identity. Obsidian, like other culturally significant minerals such as jade, crystal and turquoise, possessed polysemic qualities in the multi-sensorial world-view of Mesoamerican peoples (Houston and Taube 2000). These included the shimmer and iridescence of their appearance (Saunders 1998, 2001), the natural and symbolic values attached to their (often-distinctive geographical) places of origin, the political and economic relationships created by the strategies employed to obtain them, and the technological choices deemed appropriate to make them into artefacts.

For the Aztec, there appears to have been a metaphysical association of obsidian, its sources and local inhabitants, in ways which enabled the material to become a metaphorical embodiment – a reification – of cosmic and earthly identity. Such was the case at *Ytztepexic*, a town founded because a hill of obsidian existed there. The settlement took its name from the rocky outcrop of obsidian, and a great obsidian knife was worshipped as a deified 'talking stone' in the temple (Heyden 1981: 25). Other toponyms which include the Aztec term for obsidian, *itztli*, include *Itzamatitlan* and *Itztecoyan*, both of which towns incorporated a curved obsidian blade in their glyphic signs (Taube 1991: 62).

Nowhere is obsidian's incorporation and embeddedness in Mesoamerican symbolic thought more clear than its apotheosis as *Tezcatlipoca*, the supreme Aztec deity whose name meant 'Lord of the Smoking Mirror' (Nicholson 1971: 412). *Tezcatlipoca* was not only the patron god of Aztec royalty, but his diagnostic and eponymous possession – the 'obsidian mirror' – was a metaphor for rulership and power (Heyden 1991: 195). The Aztec believed that, as Master of Fate, *Tezcatlipoca* observed the world reflected in his magical obsidian mirror from his shrine known as the 'House of Mirrors' (Brundage 1979: 81). Such was the semantic proximity of material and deity that the term *itztli* (obsidian) was considered a manifestation of *Tezcatlipoca* (Ruiz de Alarcón 1984: 229). According to the Spanish chronicler Durán (1971: 98), the god's temple image was of a lustrous stone, black as jet, from which sharp blades and knives were made – i.e. obsidian (Heyden 1988: 222). The association of *Tezcatlipoca* and his obsidian image with sacrificial blades and the power of the divinatory obsidian mirror appear a dramatic illustration (if not extension) of Gell's (1992: 44) point that 'the *technology of enchantment* is founded on the *enchantment of technology*'.

Tezcatlipoca's association with mirrors, and his alter ego the supernatural jaguar *Tepeyollotl*, gave an Aztec twist to common Mesoamerican shamanic themes, where the jaguar is the animal spirit familiar *par excellence* of élites, and both are symbolically linked with mirrors as divinatory devices (Benson 1972, 1998; Saunders 1988, 1990). This association finds iconographic expression in several Mesoamerican codices, which show the deity with his left foot replaced by a 'smoking mirror' and jaguar's head (Seler 1904: fig. 28a) (Fig. 1).

This imagery may suggest a deeper, more complex relationship, incorporating the chthonic associations of the god and his jaguar familiar, the subterranean origins of

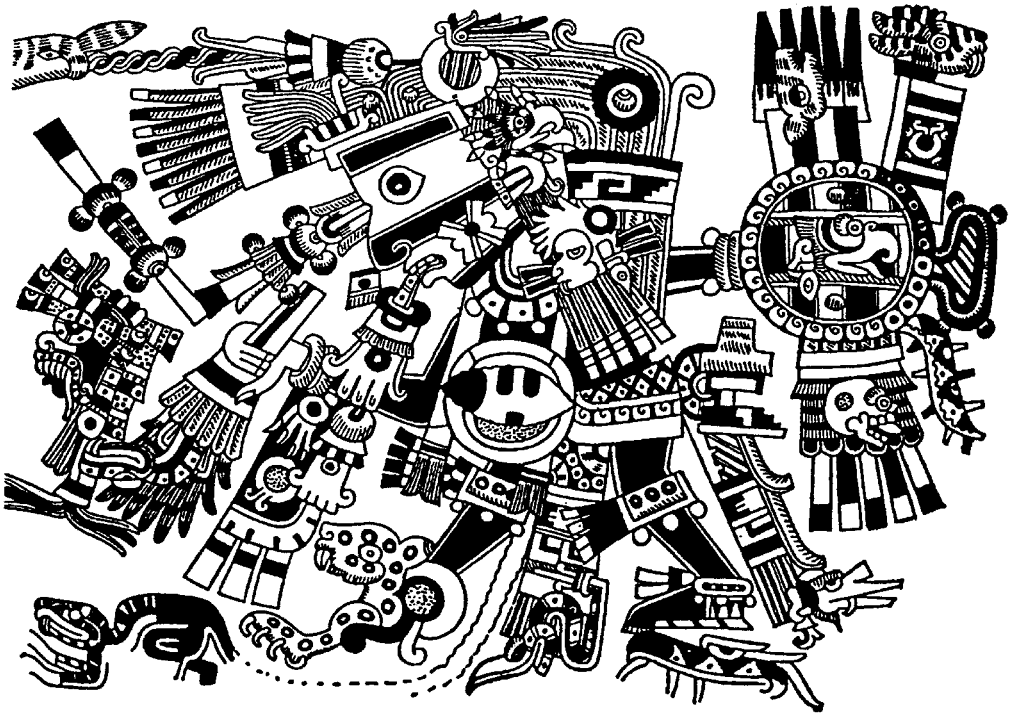

Figure 1 Tezcatlipoca with mirror suspended on his chest and foot replaced by a smoking mirror device from which a jaguar emerges. Codex Borgia.

obsidian, and the use of obsidian blades in auto-sacrificial and heart sacrifice (Saunders 1994: 178–80) – a use identified with *Tezcatlipoca* in a myth which considered him the inventor of human sacrifice by which means humans could nourish the gods and worship him (Brundage 1979: 94–5). There is etymological support for this proposition, as *Tepeyollotl* means 'Heart of the Mountain', and Heyden (1981: 25) regards obsidian as 'heart of the earth'. The Aztec word *yollotl* signifies 'heart' – the human heart being the most precious offering which could be made to the gods (Lopez Austin 1973: 60).

Physical properties and symbolic roles

To investigate the symbolic role of obsidian requires altering our theoretical engagement with its materiality, to view it not only as the 'steel' of New World prehistory (Cobean et al. 1971: 666) – but as matter contextualized by aesthetics and ideology. Obsidian's physical properties – its tendency to fracture conchoidally and produce sharp prismatic blades from polyhedral cores – form the basis for investigating its symbolic importance.

Obsidian's peerless utility in a world without metal tools, together with its occurrence only at particular geological locations, generated an enduring Mesoamerican aesthetic

which saw the controllers of obsidian sources and the makers of obsidian blades connected to cosmic forces. This in turn endowed subsequent acts of obsidian use with potency and significance, whether in acts of sacrifice and bloodletting, or in producing a web of regional exchange networks throughout Mesoamerican prehistory (e.g. Hester 1978; Santley 1983; Gaxiola and Clark 1989). From this perspective, obsidian can be considered unique in its capacity to create social relationships, and stimulate symbolic connections between materiality and culture across Mesoamerica.

Obsidian blades were the agents of death and sacrifice (Matos Moctezuma 1978), an interpetation based partly on sixteenth-century evidence that obsidian was excavated from mines to make implements for sacrificial bloodletting (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 11: 227). The phrase *tentli-itztli*, meant to 'sacrifice and cut one's lips before the idols' (Campbell 1985: 139) – a linguistic identification of material with ritual act.

Obsidian's role as transformed matter which bridged physical and spiritual worlds possessed mythological and religious dimensions. For the Aztecs, three of the nine levels of the underworld were characterized by obsidian – one featured an obsidian mountain where the dead had to walk over sharp cutting paths, another was the 'place of obsidian-bladed winds', and a third the 'obsidian place of the dead' (Matos Moctezuma 1988: 129). Even obsidian debitage had a role to play. One Aztec emperor punished careless priests by confining them in cages paved with small sharp (obsidian?) blades and fragments upon which they slept until they died (Durán 1964: 246) – an act part punishment, part (long-drawn-out) ritual sacrifice.

The idea of obsidian levels in the underworld may have been inspired by the vertical shafts and tunnels which were a feature of obsidian mines across Mesoamerica (Clark 1989: 299–300), and perhaps also by the ritual use of obsidian mirrors to give spiritual access to the underworld realm of the dead. In one native document, *Tezcatlipoca* appears as a black-painted warrior in the earth's interior wielding sacrificial (obsidian?) knives (Brundage 1979: 85). Pre-Columbian associations of obsidian with spiritual and physical death survived the conquest. In colonial times, a Spanish missionary was reportedly killed by eating food spiked with obsidian powder, a practice which continued into more recent times in Mexico (Guido Munch, quoted in Clark 1989: 316), and which might be considered a form of ritual sacrifice by many small obsidian blades rather than a single knife.

An equally striking example of the inter-relatedness of obsidian's physical and symbolic properties was the application of obsidian powder to the eyes of those suffering from cataracts – an indigenous medical practice which prefigured that of modern opthalmic surgery. During the sixteenth century, 'The powder of this stone [obsidian], mixed with quartz crystal equally pulverized, removes cataracts and leucomas and clears up the vision' (Francisco Hérnandez quoted in Clark 1989: 315). This 'vision sharpening' quality of obsidian may have been a contributory factor in the origin of beliefs concerning the all-seeing nature of *Tezcatlipoca*, the acknowledged 'night vision' of his jaguar alter ego, and the divinatory power of obsidian mirrors. In this way, perhaps, the Aztec (and probably pre-Aztec) use of obsidian directly affected the sense of vision, and thus perceptions of the world.

Obsidian in a colonial landscape

As the Spanish under Hernán Cortés explored the eastern marches of the Aztec empire in April–May 1519, the Aztecs were celebrating *Tezcatlipoca*'s annual feast (Heyden 1991). The momentous first contacts between the emperor Motecuhzoma II and Cortés were played out against the background of the former's appeasing of the notoriously capricious god revered as the patron of royalty (Saunders n.d.a.).

When Motecuhzoma sent his sorcerers to investigate the strangers, they returned telling how *Tezcatlipoca* had appeared to them at a point between two volcanoes and had predicted the end of the world (Garibay 1963: 53). The intermingling of landscapes mentioned above, and the inextricability of obsidian with *Tezcatlipoca,* come together in this momentous event. A renowned shrine to the deity was located on the slopes of one of the volcanoes, *Popocatepetl* – a temple to the god of the 'smoking mirror' on the flanks of the volcano whose Aztec name means 'smoking mountain' (Brundage 1979: 87; Siméon 1981: 392).

After 1521, the Spanish conversion of Mesoamerica's indigenous inhabitants proceeded apace, but was often more apparent than real. Ten years after the conquest there was an incipient renaissance of ancestral polytheism carried on by local priest-shamans who filled the gap left by the Spanish eradication of the Aztec state's formal priesthood. These newcomers replaced the sophisticated metaphysics of Aztec ideology with simplified and perhaps syncretized ideas celebrated in clandestine rituals (Lafaye 1976: 20). Drawing on pre-conquest imagery and prestige, it was probably no coincidence that the most famous of these shaman-priests was Martín Ocelotl, whose surname identified him with the jaguar as shamanic familiar, and who also adopted one of *Tezcatlipoca*'s ritual names (Klor de Alva 1981: 133–4). In 1536, Ocelotl was finally denounced to the Holy Inquisition in Mexico City (Klor de Alva 1981: 136–7).

This was not an isolated occurrence, as trial records for the period 1536–40 reveal such pre-Columbian practices as concubinage, idolatry and human sacrifice were actively pursued some sixteen years after the conquest (Ricard 1966: 269–70; Kidd 1982: 62, 168). Thirty years later, in 1565, the Bishops of New Spain were still complaining how easily the natives reverted to their rites, sacrifices and idolatry (Ricard 1966: 269). Hiding idols behind altars in newly erected churches, natives continued worshipping their pre-Columbian deities under the guise of the Christian god and the saints (Brenner 1929: 144). The Franciscan fathers regarded *Tezcatlipoca* as the chief Aztec deity and also as Lucifer whose malign influence they saw everywhere among the indigenous peoples (Burkhart 1989: 39–40).

Despite, or perhaps because of, this obsession with idolatry, there seems to have been little understanding by the Spanish of the materialities and subtleties of pre-Columbian belief, or of their syncretic re-alignment in an often superficially and quasi-Christianized Mesoamerica. The unusually perceptive Fray Diego Durán was a rare exception in this respect, but even he admitted that the complexities of indigenous rites 'are concealed from us, kept as a tightly guarded secret', and that 'the Indians worship idols in our presence, and we understand nothing' (Durán 1971: 55). Sahagún reinforced this view at the most fundamental, linguistic, level, by admitting 'we knew little of their tongue [and] we hardly ever were right' (Brenner 1929: 145; and see Kubler 1972 [1948]: 20–1). One

hundred years after the conquest, pre-Columbian calendrical names, colour symbolism, a pantheon of deities, the use of hallucinogens, and the metaphorical associations of mirrors and *Tezcatlipoca* were still being recorded in rural communities (Ruiz de Alarcón 1984: 107, 336).

Obsidian disks and atrial crosses

The continuing indigenous use and ritual associations of obsidian, together with the imagery and clandestine worship of *Tezcatlipoca,* possessed tangible dimensions, seemingly invisible in plain view to the Spanish. The context for this was the arrival between 1526 and 1533 of the Dominicans and Augustinians who travelled the countryside establishing sanctuaries and open chapels often near or atop the mound of a prehispanic settlement (Kubler 1972 [1948]: 143–4). Considering the vigour with which the Spanish eradicated all traces of pagan idolatry, the missionaries appear to have been unaware of the indigenous metaphysical and religious significance of obsidian, due partly to their inability to speak indigenous languages and capture obsidian's abstract symbolism, and partly due to their different aesthetic engagements with its materiality.

Ironically, the skills of indigenous obsidian workers were illustrated and extolled by the Spanish (Tudela 1956 [1541]: 172, pl. XXIX; Torquemada 1943, III: 210). Admiring comments were made concerning the native manufacture of mirrors and the razor-like blades with which local peoples shaved not only themselves but the Spanish priests as well. Even more ironic was that Spanish priests, cut off from traditional European sources of raw materials from which to make consecrated liturgical instruments, even commissioned local craftsmen to carve substitute items from obsidian, and were complimentary about the results (Saunders n.d.b.). Thus two different (and competing) religions and worldviews were present in obsidian, and operationalized by two equally different cultural aesthetics. Nowhere, for example, does Torquemada mention obsidian's significance beyond its skilled production and practical uses, despite commenting on the identification of *Tezcatlipoca* as the pagan demon whose name means 'shining mirror' (Torquemada 1943, II: 38).

These episodic engagements with obsidian occurred against a background which saw its materiality embedded in notions of spirituality, identity and landscape, and which, curiously, were highlighted by the processes of Christianization. In 1528–9, Franciscans founded a monastery at Tepeapulco on the ruins of a large Aztec temple (Kubler 1972 [1948]: 475; Trueba 1957: 9). Tepeapulco is strategically located near three major obsidian sources and had functioned from prehistory to the sixteenth century as an important obsidian tool processing and manufacturing centre (Charlton 1984: 21). Still today, local rock-shelter Christian shrines are located at sites of pre-Columbian obsidian workshops. In time-honoured Mesoamerican tradition, as at *Ytztepexic*, it is possible that the town's inhabitants identified themselves metaphysically with the material which had been their economic mainstay for over a thousand years and which, by Aztec times, was personified by *Tezcatlipoca*. Perhaps significantly, it was at Tepeapulco that the Spanish chronicler Sahagún collected an early and insightful description of *Tezcatlipoca* as the god who 'makes the black mirror shine' (Van Zantwijk 1985: 128; Nicholson 1973).

The Mendicant friars habitually destroyed evidence of any pre-Christian shrine or

temple and then erected a large cross in the centre of the future atrio (McAndrew 1965: 247). Across sixteenth-century Mexico, large numbers of stone (and wood) crosses were erected by indigenous local peoples under Spanish direction, their size and vivid sculptural style attesting the continuation of Pre-Columbian carving and iconographic traditions. Not only did putatively Christian crosses carry pre-Columbian meanings related to cosmic trees – one of which in Aztec myth was a transformation of *Tezcatlipoca* – but, in a colonial accomodation, magical powers were attributed to crosses placed where idols had previously been. In such situations, there was a transference of spiritual potency, especially when there were secret caches of idols nearby (McAndrew 1965: 243). Calloway is surely correct to say that:

> The lure of native religious worship was an extremely difficult problem . . . where Indians who claimed to follow the Christian faith, reverted to the old religion, or practised it secretly within the Christian church, even under the watchful eyes of Catholic priests.
>
> (Calloway 1989: 188)

The confusions and ambiguities of crosses and obsidian – in fact, the overlapping and part intermeshing of two different aesthetics – coalesced in a unique kind of object. These were the so-called atrial crosses whose visual attractiveness (for the Spanish) and syncretic symbolic importance (for native peoples) were enhanced by the incorporation of obsidian.

At the Franciscan convent at Taximaroa (modern Ciudad Hidalgo), García Granados (1940–2: 55) refers to a survial of indigenous idolatry, 'a perfectly polished obsidian disk', placed at the intersection of the arms (Plate 1). Moreno Villa (1986 [1942]: 18) mentions the small town of San Felipe de los Alzates where there is an obsidian disk at the intersection of the arms of the atrial cross. Above the church doorway, is the Franciscan shield in which there is another smaller obsidian disk (García Granados 1940–2: 56). Apparently unnoticed by both authors, the adjacent small church of La Virgen Maria de la Candelaria has a small courtyard cross mounted on an altar in which there is an empty concavity which may originally have contained an obsidian disk. A similar empty concavity exists in the atrial cross, now removed to inside the church, at the Franciscan monastery at Tepeapulco (Moreno Villa 1986 [1942]: 19). These remarkable survivals, and several others, were still in existence in February 2000 (Saunders n.d.b).

Weisman's explanation of such objects appears at least partly right when he says, in relation to Aztec practices, that their

> idols often have such a disk of semiprecious stone, like obsidian or jadeite, set into the torso: this disk represents the godhead, the soul, giving life to the graven image. Once again the cross is identified with the divinity . . . [because the Indians] held the crosses as Gods, like those which they themselves had.
>
> (Weisman 1950: 13)

García Granados (1940–2: 56) held similar views, as does Calloway (1989: 237–8) who, discussing the conflation of Aztec female deities and the Christian Virgin, notes a statue of 'the colonial Virgin [who] wears a disk which . . . may represent "that inset precious stone" signifying the deity's heart, a purely indigenous characteristic'.

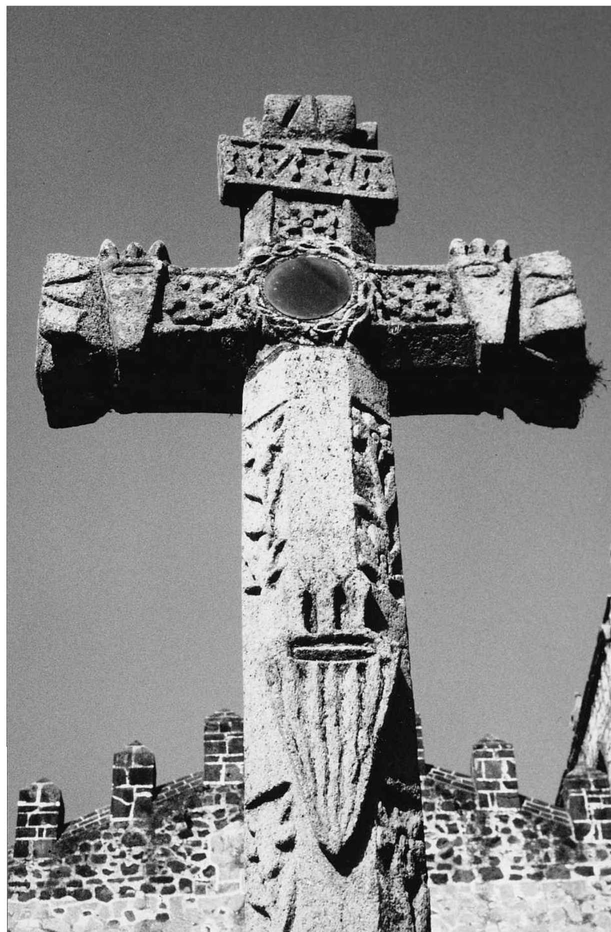

Plate 1 Obsidian disk on the atrial cross at Ciudad Hidalgo, ancient Taximaroa, Michoacán (photo author).

Obsidian, place and identity

Obsidian's capacity to embody a culture's spiritual and economic identity from pre-Columbian through colonial and into modern times can be seen at Zinapécuaro in the Mexican state of Michoacán – a centre of religious importance in prehispanic times (Healan 1994: 274). The symbolic association of obsidian, cosmological myth and landscape is apparent in Zinapécuaro's toponymy. The town takes its name from the pre-Columbian toponym *Zináparo*, whose etymology signifies 'the origin (place) of *zinapa*', i.e. obsidian (Darras 1999: 13; and see Breton 1978 [1902]: 5). As at Tepeapulco, Zinapécuaro's obsidian sources had been important across Mesoamerica during pre-Columbian times and were still the principal sources for the indigenous Tarascan peoples at the time of the conquest (ibid.: 14). It was in Zinapécuaro's market that Torquemada had observed the craftsmanship of local obsidian workers.

In 1538, a Franciscan monastery was founded at Zinapécuaro (Gerhard 1972: 319), built on a hill and over the remains of the pre-Columbian temple to *Cueravápiri* – the female creator deity and mother of the gods who was associated with the earth and controlled

the rains and fertility (Pollard 1994: 224, 226–7; and see Craine and Reindorp 1970: 105). In this way, Spanish building destroyed pagan imagery but retained the sacredness of place for Christianity. The indigenous population conceptualized the land in the form of *Cueravápiri*'s body (Pollard 1994: 226–7). As elsewhere in Mesoamerica, obsidian mines appear to have been an important physical and metaphysical component of a landscape where individual features were given cosmological significance. For example, nearby thermal springs were the focus of *Cueravápiri*'s cult, with human sacrifices made to her manifestation as the clouds and fertilizing rains. In this sense, Zinapécuaro was a microcosm of wider Mesoamerican attitudes where toponymy concealed cosmogony, and where a mountain or spring possessed 'an incommensurably perceptible, affective, even sonorous density' (Gruzinski 1993: 93).

Today, while there is little evidence for the regular or commercial exploitation of obsidian at Zinapécuaro, there is a surprisingly recent manifestation which recalls the clash of indigenous and European cultural aesthetics already mentioned for the colonial period. Lumps and flakes of obsidian are visible on the ground near the church, and the main path to the church's entrance is decorated with pieces of obsidian set in concrete. The most remarkable feature however is the west-facing façade of the church's bell tower which is

Plate 2 Church at Zinapécuaro, Michoacán. The obsidian-faced bell tower is on the left, and obsidian-chip designs set in concrete can be seen in the foreground (photo author).

Plate 3 Detail of the bell tower at Zinapécuaro, Michoacán, showing a block of obsidian flanked by 'flower' or 'sun' designs composed of obsidian disks and fragments (photo author).

covered with rectangular blocks, circular disks and irregular chips of obsidian set into the wall in decorative patterns (Plates 2 and 3).

Church staff and local inhabitants stated that the bell-tower wall had been re-faced within the last five years and that the obsidian was merely a readily available and attractive decorative stone with no special significance. This explanation parallels the official European Christian view of early colonial crosses decorated with obsidian disks. Nevertheless, given the widespread survival of indigenous beliefs in, and the conservative nature of, rural Michoacán, and the considerable effort and expertise involved in creating this impressive architectural display, it may be that obsidian continues in some way to objectify syncretic religious beliefs for the inhabitants of Zinapécuaro, where it defined their ancestors' economic and perhaps spiritual life for almost three millennia. If Zinapécuaro's highly visible use of obsidian has any significance beyond the explanation proffered by its inhabitants, it is debatable – in the absence of ethnographic enquiry – whether this represents a general link to the past or more specific references to pre-Columbian cosmologies.

Selling the past

Whatever the nature of the cultural aesthetic of obsidian in Zinapécuaro today, it is clearly not (yet) oriented towards modern commercial ends. Elsewhere in Mexico,

obsidian has entered the marketplace as tourist souvenirs, whose new aesthetic, based on globalized commerce, has stimulated production, and animated the resulting obsidian items by giving them new kinds of agency in the world.

Currently there are two kinds of obsidian craftsmanship. The first focuses on the mass production of ersatz pre-Columbian objects (nominally 'Aztec', though in fact usually culturally composite items) such as oversized sacrifical knives, statuettes and masks. The second variety, numerically smaller and more expensive, is composed of items of fashionable jewellery and often beautifully rendered ornamental replicas (Möller 1991). In recent years, both kinds have benefited from the international explosion of interest in 'native arts and crafts' as well as a newer aesthetic, that of 'New Age' mysticism, which sees the owning and touching of crystals and semi-precious stones as ways of getting in touch with human emotions and past spiritualities.

The main locus of modern obsidian replicas and kitsch is, ironically, the archaeological zone of Teotihuacán – pre-Columbian Mesoamerica's largest city which owed its cultural influence to its control of obsidian sources, and the manufacture and exportation of finished blades across Mesoamerica during the Classic period (Santley 1983; Spence 1981). In pre-Columbian times, obsidian workshops were located mainly behind the Pyramid of the Moon where today exists a thriving area of tourist shops selling obsidian items made on-site by craftsmen utilizing pre-Columbian sources, though modern techniques (Plates 4 and 5). It is through these modern obsidian souvenirs, made, bought and thus 'authenticated' on-site, then carried home, that many visitors feel they 'know' and have acquired

Plate 4 Replica and pastiche. Obsidian souvenirs for sale at Teotihuacan, October 2000 (photo Michael Roth).

Plate 5 Obsidian working at Teotihuacan, October 2000 (photo Michael Roth).

something of Teotihuacán's and Mexico's past. In this sense, modern Mexican craftsmen make new obsidian artefacts which in turn re-make and re-present their ancestors to a modern world.

Conclusion

For over three thousand years, attitudes towards obsidian in Mesoamerica have been shaped by different aesthetic engagements with its materiality. For native Mesoamerican peoples, obsidian, like any natural material transformed into cultural matter, was physical object and metaphysical concept. It was one of many different kinds of matter which shared the quality of luminosity – an integral part of the pan-Mesoamerican, in fact pan-Amerindian, significance of shiny matter conceptualized as the 'aesthetic of brilliance' (Saunders 1998, 1999, 2001).

By its physical appearance, and symbolic and eponymous relationship with *Tezcatlipoca*, obsidian perhaps signified a uniquely Aztec kind of 'dark light', an ambiguous quality fully in accord with the deity's violent, ambivalent and capricious nature. It was, after all, *Tezcatlipoca* who invented human sacrifice according to Aztec myth. It was his body, manifested as obsidian blades, which were the agents of sacrificial death, and

which yielded the shiny rivers of blood known as 'precious water' (*chalchihuitl)*, the most precious offering that humans could make to the gods.

At each stage of its indigenous biography, obsidian was embedded in a value system that forged social relationships according to perceived aesthetic properties which were reflexively linked to notions of cosmology, myth, landscape and techno-economic propensities. By contrast, for Europeans, obsidian was a cheap and primitive technology, inherently inferior to their iron and steel, but also an attractive, shiny, black mineral, known from Mediterranean Europe and valued for its secular decorative qualities.

These two aesthetics prescribed different relationships between raw material and its use-value, and led to fundamentally different kinds of agency being bestowed on obsidian. While the European aesthetic blinded the Spanish to obsidian's native valuations, it also revitalized the material's indigenous role in aiding native peoples to come to terms with, and in part subvert, a new world of religious practice and experience. In the early colonial period, native Mesoamericans re-defined their engagement with obsidian, creating a new, or at least reconfigured aesthetic, and thus animated obsidian with new kinds of agency.

As the recent explosion in tourist souvenirs indicates, few kinds of matter are as embedded in Mesoamerican aesthetics as obsidian, and fewer still have shown the capacity to affect and transform perceptions of the physical and social worlds in which they circulate.

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