



MAGIC & MYSTERIES OF
MEXICO

Arcane secrets and occult lore of
the ancient Mexicans and Maya

Lewis Spence



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Post Scriptum

Preface

THIS, THE FIRST effort to include in one volume all that is known regarding the arcane knowledge and occult lore of the ancient Mexican peoples and their neighbours, the Maya of Central America and Yucatan, is the result of more than thirty-five years of research in a sphere which has richly repaid the writer by the companionship of its fascination, and which he hopes will prove equally absorbing to the reader who seeks passing amusement and to the serious student.

The book is so compiled as to be useful to both, popular in its general treatment, yet sufficiently authoritative in its sources and data to be of avail either to the practical anthropologist or the student of Mysticism. The historical passages essential to the introduction of the main subject are necessarily sketchy, but embody sufficient information to permit the reader ignorant of Central American chronicles to approach the consideration of the curious knowledge of the more enlightened peoples of Isthmian America in the fields of pure Magic, Astrology, Witchcraft, Demonology and Symbolism.

The chapters on the difficult question of Mexican and Maya Astrology have been reduced to a simplicity of presentation which,

it is hoped, will render this vexed subject plain to everyone, and its basic importance to the whole survey of Mexican occult knowledge has been demonstrated with an equal desire for clarity.

That this astrological lore was inevitably accompanied by a philosophy of dualism, recalling that of ancient Persia, is also shown, and that a system of initiation resembling that connected with Asiatic and European wisdom-religions was also in vogue in Central America is now for the first time suggested, and, it is hoped, adequately proved.

The mystical books of the Mexicans and Maya are described and the relationships between the religions of these people and their magical beliefs fully discussed. Nor have minor questions, such as popular superstitions, augury, and the use of charms and amulets been neglected. In fact, every effort has been put forth to render the volume as complete a treasury of the occult lore of Central America as our present acquaintance with the facts permits.

The writer has, above all, striven to preserve the romance inherent in the subject, and has tried to cast light on the darker places by an occasional appeal to fiction, but when such an aid is invoked its imaginative character is duly indicated.

The Magic of old Mexico, although it closely resembles that of other lands, has distinct racial characteristics of its own, and is capable of illuminating other systems through its peculiar preservation of what many of them have lost or cast aside. Its inherent unity of idea with the arcane systems of the Old World makes it a valuable mine of analogy and comparison, even if the differences brought about by environment seem to render it superficially dis-

tinctive. But, above all, its indwelling spirit of gloomy wonder and mystical exclusiveness perhaps reveal it as the most fascinating of the world's secret systems.

L. S.

CHAPTER I

A Glance at Ancient Mexico

Neglect of Mexican Magic as a subject – Difficulties surrounding it – The Races of Mexico – The Nahua – The Toltecs Brinton's theory that Toltecs were "mythical" – The modern view – Maya sources – Attempt at a solution – Story of the fall of the Toltecs – The Aztecs Mexico at the period of the Spanish Conquest – The great temple of Uitzilopochtli – Culture of the Aztecs – Their system of hieroglyphic writing – Castes and classes – Architecture and its remains – Sketch of Aztec history – Tribal feuds – Aztec tyranny and human sacrifice – Fall of the Aztec state

THE MAGIC OF ancient Mexico and the mysteries which accompanied it have been somewhat neglected owing to the extraordinary difficulties attending the consideration of the Mexican past. Only within the last generation has it been made possible to comprehend even dimly the civilization of ancient Mexico as a whole and that has been accomplished merely in a provisional manner. It is therefore not surprising that the occult side of Mexican life has been dealt with only in a fragmentary way, and chiefly in connection with the religious beliefs of the Aztecs and Maya.

The writings of the Spanish missionary friars who laboured in Mexico subsequent to the period of its conquest by Cortès frequently touch in the passing on the question of the arcane beliefs of the Indians to whom they ministered, but in no very illuminating manner. Indeed, their notices of occult beliefs are confused and exhibit a not incomprehensible terror of the dark knowledge which they conceived it their duty to extirpate. It is therefore not easy to arrive at the facts and discover the principles underlying Mexican arcane science.

In the following pages I shall essay the task, aided, I hope, by a long acquaintance with the writings of the Spanish conquistadores and the missionary friars, and with practically all that has been penned within our times on the subject of old Mexico. And it may be that a strong personal predilection towards the mysterious may further assist me to make the dark places plain to the wayfaring reader.

Mexico possessed a magic of her own as mystical in its essence and as grimly romantic as that of any land, European or Asiatic. Yet its secrets are to be gauged only by treading many obscure and difficult pathways. If those who follow me in the quest find any of these corridors too dark or too difficult of access they must not blame me, but rather the tortuous nature of the study. I would advise them to “skip “ the obscure passages and to turn to those pages which retain more of the atmosphere of that purely dramatic interest which must ever cleave to the occult lore of Mexico and Central America.

But the magic and sorcery of ancient Mexico cannot well be understood unless the somewhat shadowy path which leads to them is rendered more clear by a brief account of the general circumstances of Mexican life and custom in the past. When Hernan Cortès conquered Mexico in 1519 he found it occupied by several races of people of Indian stock, who possessed a common culture, although they differed in language and to some extent in religious outlook.

In the eastern regions the Nahua race, to which the Aztecs belonged, was in the ascendant, but the coastline was occupied by immigrant tribes of Maya or southern stock from Central America. In the south-west the Mixtecs and Zapotecs, races which had embraced

civilization before the Nahua, formed the bulk of the population, though Nahua elements were also largely present in that region. In the centre of the country dwelt the Otomi, the Zacatecs, and other long-settled tribes, whilst the northern pampas were the possession of nomadic bands. To the south-east of Mexico lived the Maya of Guatemala, Yucatan, and Central America, whose civilization greatly pre-dated that of Mexico proper, as we shall see when we come to consider their special conditions.

The Nahua, or Aztecs, with whom we are principally concerned, were a people of much later establishment in the country than most of the other races. They occupied a sphere extending from the present site of Tlascala, no great distance from Mexico City, to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec on the south, and were divided into tribes, most of whom owed allegiance to the Emperor of Mexico, although they were governed by their own immediate kings or chiefs. Research has established the distant relationship of the Nahua tribes with the Indians of British Columbia, whose language, customs, religion and art bear a close resemblance to those of the Mexicans, who, in all likelihood, migrated at various periods to the region in which they are presently situated.

At the time of the Spanish Conquest we find several Nahua tribes grouped round the lakes in the Valley of Mexico, the most notable being those which occupied the borders of the Lake of Tezucuo. The tribes composing these groups had entered the plateau of Mexico about the tenth century A.D., but had been preceded there by a much older civilization, the Toltec. Legend said that the Toltecs had settled there in the year 7 Tecpatl, or A.D. 387, coming from the

north by way of the coast and then striking inland, a journey which occupied one hundred and four years. But the myth which recounts this exodus is almost certainly of artificial origin. The Toltecs were regarded by the older writers on Mexican affairs as the great initiators and conservators of the occult sciences, magic and astrology.

Perhaps no argument in the once passionate forum of American Archaeology was formerly debated with such splenetic vigour and breadth of invective as the obscure and intricate question of the origin and identity of that earliest and most mysterious among the civilized races of Mexico, the Toltecs. In their simplicity the first Castilian chroniclers of the affairs of New Spain accepted without demur the native traditions which exalted the culture of this shadowy race to a pitch which, as Prescott puts it, "almost transcends the human." They write of the clever architects and potters of the city of Tollan, which lay about forty miles north of Mexico, as inspired sages from whom none of the secrets of ancient civilization and few of those of modernity were hidden, and vaunt in epical periods the astonishing excellence of the culture which they were believed to have spread broadcast over North America. The ruler of this Mexican Corinth was that Quetzalcoatl who is so frequently mentioned in Indian tradition as the bringer of all culture and enlightenment to the American isthmian regions. His descendants, we are assured, ruled in Tollan for several centuries, but were at last finally defeated and dispersed by barbarous Nahua invaders from the north, who destroyed the brilliant metropolis of the Toltecs, and scattered its inhabitants, noblesse and plebeians alike, to the ends of the American continent.

These accounts were, for the most part, based on the histories of the half-blood chronicler Ixtlilxochitl, whose relationship with the ancient kings of Tezcucó, a famous town near Mexico City, manifestly biased his conclusions. Nevertheless, these were credited by Mexican and foreign antiquaries alike from the end of the sixteenth century almost to the middle of the nineteenth. The doubts hesitated by Prescott, however, were more vigorously expressed by Daniel Garrison Brinton, the foremost Americanist of his day, who in 1887 published an essay, “Were the Toltecs an Historic Nationality?” in which he settled the question to his own satisfaction by the dogmatic assertion that the Toltecs were a sept of the Nahuatl or Aztec race whose sun-myths had surrounded their fragmentary history with a legendary brilliance which had the effect of dazzling those who chronicled them with visions of a civilization which never existed. “The mythical Tollan,” he wrote, “and all its rulers and inhabitants, are the baseless dreams of poetic fancy, which we principally owe to the Tezcucan poets. I have no hesitation in repeating the words which I printed some years ago: ‘Is it not time that we dismiss once for all these American myths from the domain of historical traditions? Why should we make an enlightened ruler of Quetzalcoatl, a cultured nation of the Toltecs, when the proof is of the strongest that they are the fictions of mythology?’”

For a couple of decades Brinton’s statement was accepted, in official quarters at least, as final. But reaction from statements so positive was bound to set in. From 1873 to 1887 Charnay, the French archaeologist, had been excavating at intervals on the site of Tollan, the Toltec city, and his researches there made it evident that

A thrilling journey through Tezcatlipoca's smoky mirror

Author Lewis Spence was no doubt one of the most prolific hybrids of a researcher and occultist that ever lived. *Magic and Mysteries of Mexico* is, in his own words an: *“effort to include in one volume all that is known regarding the arcane knowledge and occult lore of the ancient Mexican peoples and their neighbours, the Maya of Central America and Yucatan...”*

This book saw the light after no less than 35 years of research. Published in 1932 the efforts of Spence are still of actual value for anyone who wants to get a solid grip on this selected body of secrets. Whether you are inspired by Carlos Castaneda, Mexican magic, witchcraft, mythology or Mayan astrology, this volume may be the missing manual you've always been looking for. The Mexican gods and demons are all put in clear perspectives. Everything from the naguals and sorcery to Mexican witchcraft, including the witch-mother Tlazolteotl, Devil worship, fairies, demon bats and lightning dogs is discussed. The echos of the Aztec, Maya and Toltec civilizations are clearly outlined.

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- Lewis Spence

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