

Lucha Libre, the continuum of the Aztec Gladiatorial Sacrifice



During the reign of Moctezuma Xocoyotzin in 1504 the Mexica Empire (a.k.a. Aztec) went to war with the neighbouring Confederacy of Tlaxcala in an effort to procure sacrificial victims for their flayed skin god Xipe Totec, as part of the bloody Festival of Tlacaxipeualiztli. During this 20 day conflict the greatest warrior of Tlaxcala, Tlahuicole, was finally captured after a fierce battle in which he had previously killed many dozens of Mexica braves. Rather than immediately being taken to the top of the pyramid temple in the city of Tlatelolco to have his beating heart ripped out of his chest as was the usual practice, Tlahuicole asked that he at least be given the option of participating in the ritual of Tlauauaniliztli. This was a form of trial by combat in which the victim was tied by his ankle to a large circular platform called a temalacatl, which was carved from a single block of stone & was forced to fight a long succession of the most battle hardened warriors, given only inferior weaponry to defend himself. After besting nearly 30 opponents, including killing eight of the elite warrior order of Ocelotl Jaguar Knights, the severely wounded Tlahuicole finally succumbed to exhaustion & allowed his last adversary a free strike to slash his neck with an obsidian backed macuahuitl sword. Because of his courage & fierceness in battle, Tlahuicole was honoured in death by his former foes & his legend was remembered by many subsequent generations, including by those that met the Spanish Conquistadors.

This is at least how the story was recorded by a half Spaniard, half Tlaxcallan mestizo named Diego Munoz Camargo in his 1584 work “Historia de Tlaxcala” but it does give a clear description of the Tlauauaniliztli ritual, as it was called in the Nahuatl language or what is now most often referred to by anthropologists as the Aztec Gladiatorial Sacrifice. The story of Tlahuicole was not completely unique however & it was common to allow enemy combatants that had fought bravely to continue to battle until their last so that they could experience the favour of the gods in their next life. Naturally these rituals were mostly obliterated with the imposition of European culture & fanatical Catholicism on the indigenous people but as the philosopher Carl Jung once said “*the foreign land assimilates its conqueror*”. It is hard not to see echoes of the Aztec Gladiatorial Sacrifice in the most famous form of combat display to come out of modern Mexico, the unique form of professional wrestling called Lucha Libre.



Most have probably already been informed that Lucha Libre started in 1933 when the businessman Salvador Lutteroth, impressed by the spectacular growth of professional wrestling north of the border in the USA, began promoting matches at an abandoned boxing stadium called Arena Modelo. His company, Empresa Mexicana de Lucha Libre, grew at a phenomenal pace over the next two decades & in 1956 he constructed what was then the largest purpose built wrestling stadium in the world, the now iconic landmark in Mexico City, Arena Mexico. Of course many will assume that due to the 500 year gap between the end of the Aztec Gladiatorial Sacrifice & the beginning of Lucha Libre that no connection can be found between the two traditions but that assumption would be incorrect.

The Aztec Gladiatorial Sacrifice was a popular spectacle done during the Feast of Tlacaxipeualiztli (the flaying of men), around the spring equinox of March 5-24, to encourage a good agricultural harvest. In recognition of the god Xipe Totec, who had burst out of his own skin like an over ripened corn cob, priests would wear the flayed dermal layer of sacrificial victims like a tight fitting garment & dance through the streets of the city calling on all to come to the festivities. Nobody can accuse the Aztecs of not adding the flair of high drama to their events! The gladiatorial fights were done in the ritual centre of the city of Tlatelolco, the twin neighbor of the capital Tenochtitlan, on an elevated platform with a sacred temalacatl stone

circle at its apex. This was in front of the largest pyramid in the city with a plaza that had a capacity to hold huge audiences numbering in the tens of thousands.



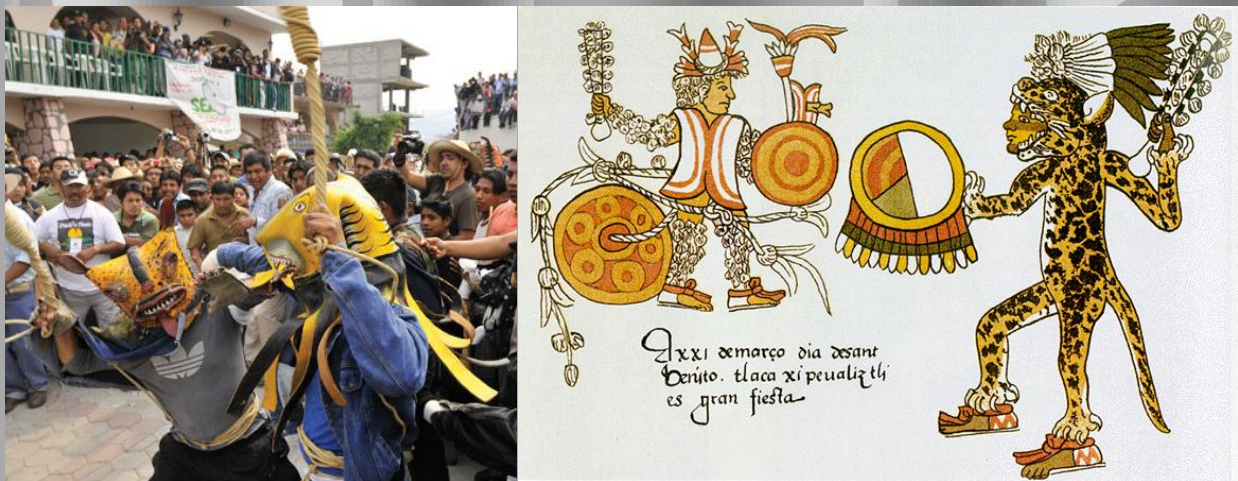
This way spectators could watch something resembling warfare from the safety of their own surroundings without actually visiting a battlefield but in addition to its appeal as a spectacle, the Aztec Gladiatorial Sacrifice shared another commonality with Lucha Libre in that the outcome was also predetermined. On occasion warriors like Tlahuicole would defeat several opponents but it was inevitable that they would eventually fall & to ensure this they were sometimes given macuahuitl swords backed only with soft feathers rather than sharpened obsidian blades, along with shields made of easily breakable material. The garish outfits worn during events were also reminiscent of modern Lucha Libre & even though the victim was not allowed any form of body armour his attackers were dressed in full war regalia, with the Ocelotl Jaguar Knights the standouts in their black spotted outfits over the top of their bulking quilted vests & their helmets in the shape of a snarling feline. In this we see a template of the lucha mascara, the wrestlers' masks that are now so iconic.

Again these similarities between what once was & what now is are often put down to pure coincidence but there are indicators that demonstrate a direct lineage between the two. Is it possible that the Aztec Gladiatorial Sacrifice was retained under the very noses of the Conquistadors, even if in a modified form during the whole colonial period? Although others may argue the point I say absolutely yes. One only has to look at the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe to see how such a thing can be achieved & even though this highly sacred symbol of Mexican Catholicism is often interpreted as being of the Virgin Mary, to most indigenous people with knowledge of the old faith it no doubt represents the earth mother goddess Tonantzin.

A flag with a representation of the Lady of Guadalupe was the symbol of Mexican War of Independence from Spain, led by the very unorthodox priest Miguel Hidalgo in 1810, who by some miracle managed to gather an enormous army of mestizo & indigenous peasants within a very short period of time to fight for his cause. After the humiliating defeat of Mexico during its war with the USA in 1846, the cultural mores of the country became noticeably mestizo rather than Spanish as the government introverted, looking more to its ancient heritage to forge its

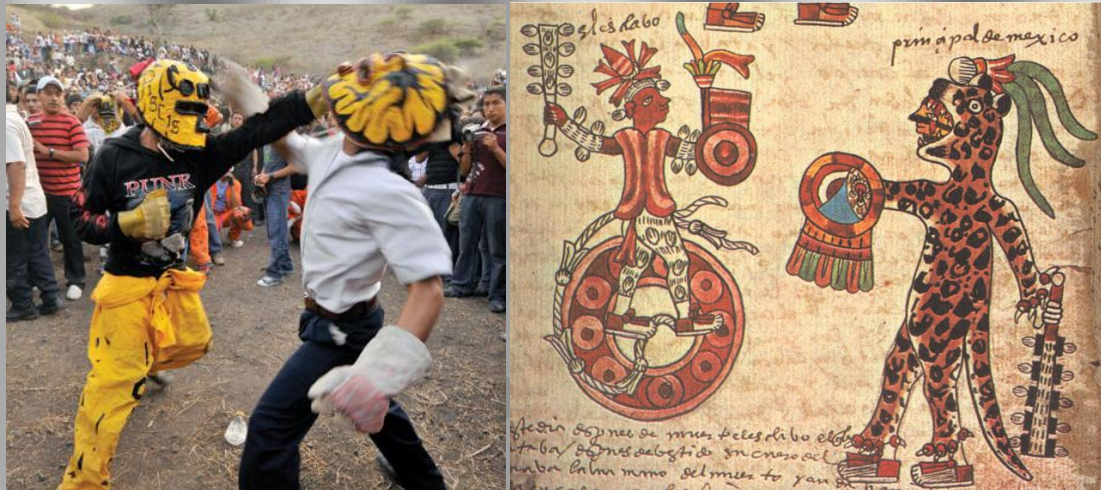
national identity. By the time of the Mexican Revolution (1910-29), the only remnant of the colonial period was the common usage of the Spanish language & the people began to show open pride to their indigenous heritage.

At this point in Mexican history Salvador Lutteroth enters the picture. The question that should be asked is what gave him the confidence that his idea that a form of show wrestling would succeed where professional boxing had so recently failed? Despite the propaganda we are told, Lutteroth did not invent Lucha Libre. Professional displays of wrestling had occurred sporadically throughout Mexican history & in the 1850s there are clear records of circuses travelling around the land with strongman wrestlers included as part of the show. In 1910 two rival Italian promoters, Giovanni (Nino) Relesevitch & Antonio Fournier, were building a regular competition circuit in Mexico City in what they referred to as Lucha Libre or Free Fights. In essence these were the equivalent of the Mixed Martial Arts events of today rather than what we now associate with the term. Completely unregulated, they provided a savage display of combat to satiate the bloodlust of the crowds & must have been quite successful because big name international fighters, such as Mitsuo Maeda the founder of Brazilian Jujitsu, were brought to Mexico to participate in these events. Unfortunately, despite the fact these events were sometimes booked at prestigious locations like the El Toreo de la Condesa, at that time the most important bull fighting coliseum in Mexico City, they slowly petered out after little more than a decade of existence.



The question I am trying to answer however is more about the crowds that came to witness the shows after 1933, were they from the social elites or were they more the common rabble? Lutteroth must have had some insider knowledge when he started promoting his shows in the Colonia Doctores neighbourhood of the Cuahtemoc Borough of Mexico City. Surely he must have known that poor indigenous & mestizo people were the majority ethnicity in this area, this after all is exactly where the old Aztec city once existed. Even though Lutteroth's enterprise struggled within its first year of operation, soon after he introduced masks as part of the performance there was a sudden explosion in popularity for Lucha Libre, which was weekly

drawing crowds numbering in the tens of thousands. Whether by coincidence or design the area where Lucha Libre grew in the 1930s is not that far from where the Aztec Gladiatorial Sacrifice rituals were held at Tlatelolco five centuries earlier. There must have been a potential readymade audience in the waiting that Lutteroth was fully aware of & while his predecessors in Boxing/MMA had failed to tap into that resource, he was able to fully exploit it. Had Lutteroth discovered a remnant of the Aztec Gladiatorial Sacrifice, which was secretly drawing crowds to witness contested battles? There is no direct proof of this like photographs or contemporary written accounts but as the maxim says “*absence of evidence is not evidence of absence*”.



Surprisingly in another part of the country exactly such a ritual still exists & although documentation can now be found for it, up until the late 1980s nobody from the outside world had any inkling that these events were happening. In Oaxaca & Guerrero in the southwest of Mexico the indigenous people have been holding the widespread “Danzas de los Tigre” or tiger dances to entertain people at public fiestas since time immemorial. As such men dressed as jaguars, complete with beautifully carved masks, would do acrobatic dances while taunting members of the crowd during street parades, often with hilarious results. This of course was well known to tourists but what was not so well known is that tiger dances became tiger fights in the highlands away from the coast where outsiders rarely ventured. In the towns of Acatlan, Zitlala & Tixtla the men have been putting on jaguar costumes & committing acts of aggression against each other for longer than anyone can remember. We know it is an ancient custom because it was officially outlawed by Holy Inquisition in 1631, which obviously did nothing to stop it & the jaguar has been a symbol for power since the time of the Olmec Civilisation some 4000 years ago.

The ritual varies from region to region but in Acatlan the tiger fights take the form of men wearing large protective jaguar helmets & using a club made of rope, try to whip each other into submission. In Zitlala the fights more resemble boxing matches, again with the fighters wearing protective jaguar masks, while in Tixtla it looks more like a wrestling match between two bare chested men dressed only in knee length trousers & jaguar masks. According to anthropological

studies, the premise of these fights is that they are designed to appease the spirits of nature, with the suffering (blood) of the combatants used to ensure the rains & fertilise the earth for a good agricultural harvest. They are performed each May & travelers can journey to the three towns in succession to witness the fights in a kind of religious pilgrimage. The fact that the tiger fights deescalate in violence between the towns, from a weapon fight to a boxing match to a traditional wrestling contest is no accident & this in itself holds great symbolic significance.



In the city of Chilpancingo, the capital of Guerrero State, this form of traditional wrestling becomes even more spectacular during pre Christmas celebrations. As part of elaborate street performances involving 15 different characters that retell a story expressed in colourful dance narrative, men from each of the city's six suburbs dressed as comical looking hunters, called *tlacoleros*, herd men dressed as jaguars, called *tecuaní nagual*, through the city into the major bullfighting ring. Known as the *Chupa Porrizo del Tigre*, which strangely translates as the 'suck fall of the tiger', spectators then watch these jaguar warlocks wrestle each other to the accompaniment of traditional flute & drum music, all done for the honour of their ethnic identity. Despite the obvious prehispanic metaphors used in this ceremony, the fights are similar to other styles of traditional wrestling & the first to fall is the loser of the match. In 2010 Chilpancingo celebrated its 185th anniversary of its *Chupa Porrizo del Tigre* but no doubt this is just a part of a much more ancient tradition. This however must be the least known major traditional wrestling festival from around the world & outside of Chilpancingo, few are aware of it.

So with this knowledge we can view Mexico City prior to the 1930s, especially in the Borough of Cuahtemoc, in a very different light. If the majority indigenous people had kept the spring equinox Festival of *Tlacaxipeualiztli* going post conquest it would have coincided with Carnival & the Mardi Gras. Seeing men dressed as jaguars during this 5 day period of exuberant chaos would not have looked out of the ordinary & combat displays could have easily eluded authorities, even for half a millennium. One of the major events of the Mexican Carnival is what is called '*querna del mal humor*' or the burning of bad feelings in which effigies of unpopular political figures are burnt in front of large crowds & no doubt combat sports could have been

used in a similar manner, by allowing personal resentment between individuals to be physically expressed rather than fester. Of course unlike in the pre-colonial period, if death became the outcome of such a fight this would naturally draw suspicion so the Aztec Gladiatorial Combat would have faced evolutionary pressures to modify & over the period of time concerned, it could have altered many times over.



By the time Lutteroth came to witness these events maybe they looked something like the jaguar wrestling matches in Chilpancingo & using this symbolism, he lured the crowds to his shows. Lucha Libre has certainly retained many Carnival like elements in its expression, adding to its colourful appeal & therefore longevity. The company that Lutteroth started, Empresa Mexicana de Lucha Libre, or as it is now called Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre is the oldest professional wrestling organisation in the world & it is still the strongest promotion in Latin America. Even at 78 years old, this still pales in comparison with the 186 documented years of the tiger fights in Guerrero; we can only guess at how old they really are. The Nahuatl word for wrestling is *necalihua*, which is often shortened to the slang term *neki* & for such a phrase to exist the Mexica must have held wrestling contests. With the phenomenal success of Lucha Libre from 1933 however, any trace of an earlier incarnation of the sport which clearly demonstrated a direct connection to the Aztec Gladiatorial Sacrifice was subsumed & lost to history. I hope this article contributes somewhat to making the wider world community more aware of the ancestry of Mexican wrestling & Lucha Libre comes to be recognised as the continuum of the Aztec Gladiatorial Sacrifice.

Coreeda Association of Australia

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