

NEPENTHE IN ABORIGINAL AMERICA

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The custom of anesthetizing a potential sacrificial victim in order to make him insensate to the moment of pain has a limited and nearly continuous distribution in the New World. Human sacrifice is of much more general occurrence than is such nepenthic care for the victim. In this paper, I shall review the distribution of the custom of nepenthe and attempt to arrive at an explanation for its failure to diffuse to the limits of human sacrifice.

Inca¹

On the death of an emperor, some of his wives and servants were expected to volunteer for immolation in order that they might accompany him. Before they were killed they were made drunk with chicha.^{2,3} Some of the human sacrifices offered at times of economic distress and extreme need were also narcotized with chicha before being executed.^{4,5} Rowe has reported a survival of nepenthe and human sacrifice: "About 1903 during a severe drought the villagers decided to make a sacrifice to the Urubamba River. The sorcerers picked a victim and persuaded him to offer himself. A great festival was held and the victim got drunk and threw himself into the river from a bridge."⁶

Chibcha

The Chibcha of the middle Magdalena anesthetized the wives and retainers of a dead chief with a drink of chicha containing leaves of datura and tobacco before burying them alive with their master.⁷

Cueva

Bancroft, speaking presumably of the Cueva, says that the faithful wives of a dead chief sometimes volunteered to commit suttee. They were praised at a general assemblage which included much drinking of chicha and "At the expiration of such time they became entirely inebriated and in a senseless condition, when the final act was consummated by throwing dead and doomed into a grave and filling it with logs, branches and earth."⁸ This is probably taken from Oviedo.⁹

Mixtec

Among the Mixtec of Oaxaca, a chief was accompanied in burial by two male and three female slaves who had been made drunk and then strangled.¹⁰

Tarasco

Bancroft describes the elaborate funeral ceremony of a Tarascan "king" in Michoacan in which seven noble women and a large number of male subjects representing each trade and profession were chosen by the successor of the deceased to be sacrificed at the cremation: "While the flames shot up, and the funeral chants fell from the lips of the mourners, the victims were stupefied with drinks and clubbed; the bodies were thrown in holes behind the temple by threes and fours together with the ornaments and other belongings of the deceased."¹¹

Natchez

The ceremonies accompanying the death of a Sun amongst the Natchez were so elaborate - and so disturbing to the French - that the chroniclers wrote long circumstantial accounts of them and of the French efforts to dissuade the Natchez from the practice of mortuary immolation. In theory, sacrificial victims volunteered themselves or their offspring but it seems clear that custom decreed just who would volunteer and that the wife (or husband in the case of a female Sun) was always one of the victims. Adult victims were anesthetized by being made to swallow little balls of tobacco. Swanton¹² has presented five accounts of ~~stupefaction~~ of victims of which three are by eye witnesses: "While they interred the female Noble in the temple the victims were stripped before the door, and, after they had been made to sit on the ground, a savage seated himself on the knees of each of them while another held his arms. They then passed a cord around his neck and put the skin of a deer over his head; they made each of these poor unfortunates swallow three pills of tobacco, and gave him a draught of water to drink, in order that the pills should dissolve in his stomach, which made him lose consciousness; then the relatives of the deceased ranged themselves at their sides, to right and left, and each as he sang, drew an end of a cord, which was passed around the neck with a running knot, until they were dead, after which they buried them."¹³

Similar rites accompanied the burial of Tattooed Serpent, war chief, brother to the Sun and partisan of the French: "...a third carried the cord for strangling him (each victim), another the skin, the fifth a dish in which were five or six balls of pounded tobacco to make him swallow in order to stupefy him. Another bore a little earthen bottle holding about a pint, in order to make him drink some mouthfuls of water in order to swallow the pellets more easily. Two others followed to aid in drawing the cord at each side."¹⁴ Dumont describes the same ceremony at the death of Tattooed Serpent.¹⁵

The custom of nepenthe is limited in the Western Hemisphere to the higher centers of culture of Middle America and to the Natchez of Mississippi. Its occurrence among the latter is not so surprising as it would at first appear, for the Natchez share a large number of specific Middle American traits including the shoulder-borne litter

for human transportation, the temple with altar and carved idols, a ceremonial fire, the game of pelota de ule, the maize ceremony, the feather sun shade carried by an attendant before the chief, pyramidal substructures for temples, hierarchical ranking of gods and society, etc.

The institution and its associated features differ in specific details from tribe to tribe. Thus the victim is disposed of by various methods (clubbing, strangling, burial alive, etc.) and oblivion is achieved by getting drunk in most groups; however, the Natchez, who live well north of the distribution of alcoholic beverages, substitute tobacco in a narcotizing form, and the Chibcha add datura and tobacco to chicha.

The single consistent feature associated with nepenthic stupefaction is that it accompanies mortuary immolation, both suttee and retainer sacrifice, and that the victim enjoys such consideration because he earns the approbation of the group by his martyrdom. Only the Inca seem to have extended the idea of nepenthe to victims of sacrificial situations other than mortuary sacrifice and these victims, too, can be supposed to have gained prestige by contributing to the public weal.

Excepting, for the moment, the northwest coast of North America, social systems in which single individuals are so exalted that their funerals call for sacrifice of a number of victims are not found beyond the limits of Middle America and the Southeastern United States. Where human sacrifice does occur in these marginal areas it is almost invariably associated with warfare and the victims are captured enemy. Such victims are customarily taunted and tortured in preparation for the sacrifice. Hence, the attempt is to achieve results which are just the opposite of nepenthe in anticipation of the final act.

On the Northwest Coast where mortuary immolation of slaves is practiced, adequate narcotizing drugs seem to have been absent so that there may have been no way to drug the victims even if there was sufficient consideration for their personal comfort to justify such treatment.

Nepenthe, then, is limited in distribution to the higher centers of culture where the sacrificial victim earns prestige by his death and is absent in those areas where the victim is degraded by being killed.

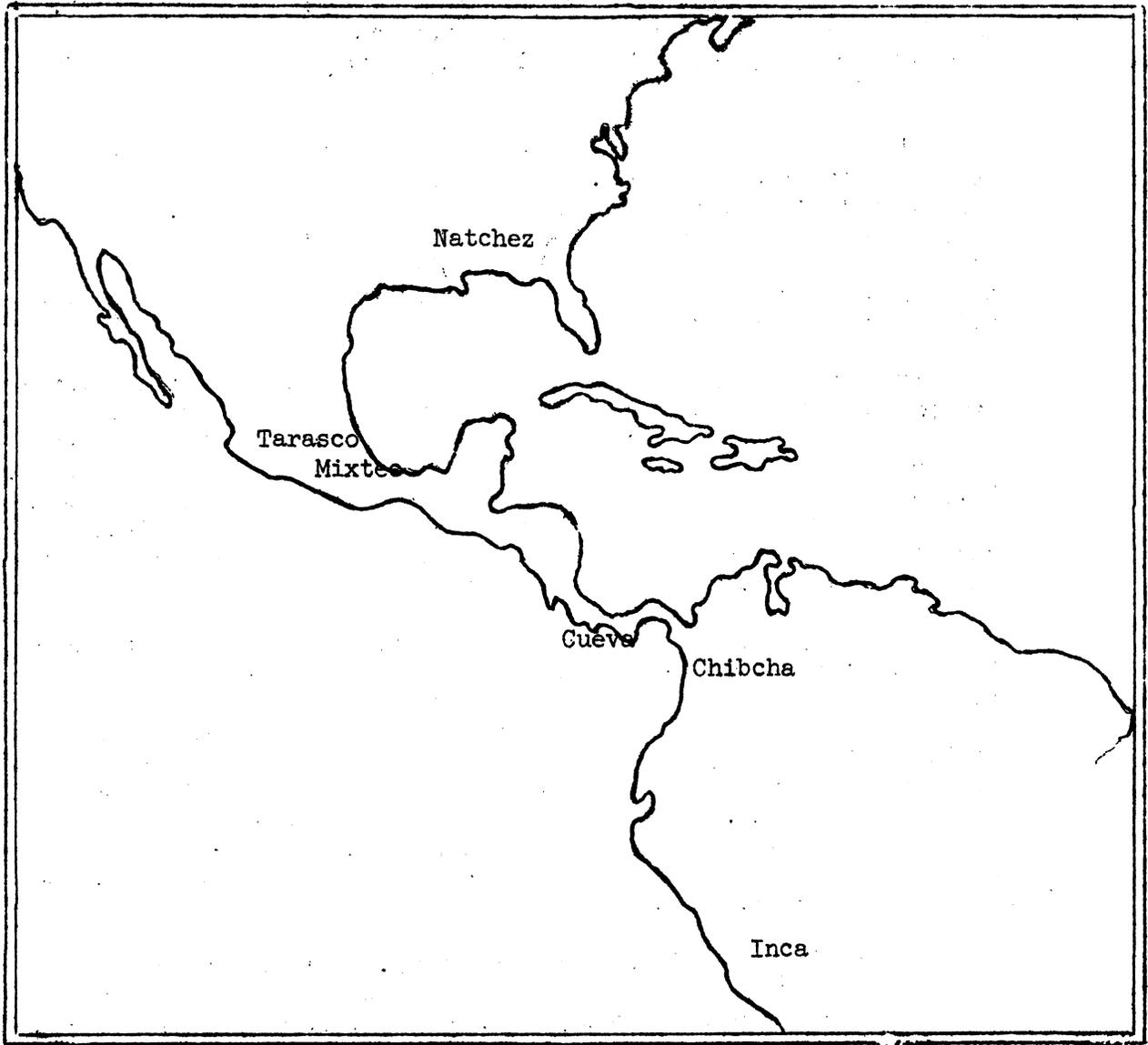


Figure 1: Location of Tribes

Footnotes

1. I am indebted to Professor John H. Rowe for most of the Inca references.
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6. Rowe, John H., Inca Culture at the Time of the Spanish Conquest. Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 143. Washington, 1946. vol. 2, pp. 183-330. footnote, p. 306.
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10. Bancroft, H. H., The Native Races of the Pacific States. vol. 2, Civilized Tribes. D. Appleton and Co., New York, 1882, p. 622.
11. Ibid., p. 622.
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14. Le Page du Pratz, Historie de La Louisiane. 3 vols., Paris, 1758. vol. 3, pp. 23-57.
15. Dumont de Montigny, Mémoires Historiques sur La Louisiane. Edited by Le Mascrier. 2 vols., Paris, 1753, vol. 1, pp. 208-239.