A New Beginning as a Midwife

My name is Necahual —it means survivor in Nahuatl. I was born in 1592 and I am 17 years old and I am training to become a midwife. I live with my grandmother, Tonalnan, which means mother of light. I never met my mother because she died in childbirth from having me. My grandmother weeps for her all the time, but she gave me this name because she knew I would be strong just like my mother. My grandmother is one of the most respected elders in the village and has assisted over 50 women give birth. She is the best midwife and it has been an honor to train under her and learn as much as I do.

The first birth that my grandmother took me to was right before my 15th birthday. Her husband came to our house as his wife started going into labor. When she arrived at the house, she started to rub her back and prepare a special bath for the mother to sit in. She began to pray to Xochiquetzal, goddess of fertility and childbirth, to keep the mother and child safe as she was experiencing a challenging birthing process. The mother’s labor pains went on for over an hour, and my grandmother decided to make a medicine with the opossum tail to quicken the birthing process. When the baby boy came out, my grandmother let out a beautiful cry that filled the atmosphere. This victory chant that she shouted into the air commemorated the mother as a warrior who survived the battlefield of birth.[[1]](#footnote-1) Upon his arrival, my grandmother stayed at the woman’s house for four days, washing the baby and helping her become accustomed to breast-feeding since this was her first child. Upon the fourth day, “the baby was brought into a courtyard where many formal procedures were performed.”[[2]](#footnote-2) First, the child was bathed and the midwife professed blessings upon him to the heavens. After, she placed a feather in his hand showing that he would become a skilled codex maker to record the history of our people. Finally, he was named Cualli, meaning good, in hopes that he will become a good person filled with much light and love.

However, as a midwife, my grandmother has not only assisted women in giving birth. Many women have come to her for her healing powers in dealing with unwanted pregnancies. My grandmother cultivates many flowers and herbs such as the *cihuapatli* (aster flower) and the *yyauhtili* (marigold) which are the main flowers used when inducing abortions. In our society, crimes of infanticide and abortion can be punishable by death, so many of the women who need this help come to my grandmother and ask for help ‘regulating their menses.[[3]](#footnote-3)’ By doing so, she does not risk being executed or denounced in public for her abilities.

I happened to walk in on my grandmother one time when a young woman came to our house asking for help. This woman was very beautiful as she was adorned with many gold rings and necklaces, and her hair was flowing down her back. My grandmother invited her into the house and created this special drink for her. Within 20 minutes, the woman left and she left a ring as a token of her gratitude. Later that day, I learned that she was a sex worker. In our society sex work carries no stigma and is “respectable because they fulfilled a function within the community”[[4]](#footnote-4) During war, these women prevented soldiers who were filled with lust from raping or abducting women of the societies they have just conquered. Sex workers were viewed as honorable because of the willingness of these women to pleasure the men in society, ultimately sacrificing their body for the greater good.

Another time a young woman came to our house asking for help, she was weeping heavily and told us that she had nowhere else to go. Her brother-in-law took advantage of her one night and she found out recently that she was pregnant. She was a virgin before that evening and was ashamed of what happened. For elite women, it was easier to hide this sort of thing because they could bend rules and hide proof of their offspring. However, for women of lower social status, this was not always available and they were worried about protecting the honor of their family.[[5]](#footnote-5) For both women, my grandmother made them promise to keep this interaction a secret because she did not want to be exposed and possibly taken to trial like one of the other midwives in the community.

My grandmother’s name was Atzi, meaning rain because she was born on a cold and rainy spring day. She was powerful and yet calming like the force of nature. A lower-class woman who was being abused by her husband who suffered from alcoholism was pregnant and did not want to have another child by him, for she feared him abusing the child as well. This woman went to Atzi to have an abortion. When her husband found out, she attempted to lie and say she was regulating her menses, but he knew that she was pregnant. He then went to the Holy Office of Inquisition in New Spain and she was put on trial for her actions. The verdict of the trial was that she was denounced publicly because it was apparent that the husband was not stable enough to take care of another child. However, because of the public humiliation that she endured, Atzi left the community and has not returned since then.

Although abortion can be punishable by death, the women who were tried for either conducting the procedure or being the recipient were often denounced publicly. This was because regulating menstruation was a legal and socially acceptable practice. The tribunal courts did not suspect abortion and infanticide happened as often as it did.[[6]](#footnote-6) Factors such as women who were widowed early or single contributed to the belief that there were low birth rates in Mexico. However, many single women were engaging in extramarital affairs and because of the contraceptive practices of the women in our community, many women could keep their honor and engage in activities as they pleased.[[7]](#footnote-7)

As I am learning more along this journey of becoming a midwife, my grandmother divulged one of her deepest secrets to me. She was the midwife for my mother as she was giving birth and she blames herself for me not being able to meet my mother. My mother was a frail woman and she was having complications throughout the pregnancy as she was constantly sick. My grandmother has only lost two women in her journey as a midwife. She told me this because she is asking for my forgiveness since she sees so much of herself in me and my ability to become an amazing midwife. She wanted me to know that although we can do everything in our power to ensure a healthy mother and baby, sometimes the worst can happen, and ultimately, we must ask for forgiveness and get better in our craft.

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1. Thoele, Kelly. “Children of the Aztecs.” *Historia* 14 (2005): 94-100. <https://www.eiu.edu/historia/2005Journal.pdf>. —women who gave birth were considered as honorable as warriors. If a woman died while giving birth, she would be buried in the same place as warriors who died in battle with an elaborate ceremony. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Thoele, 95 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jaffary, Nora E. "Reconceiving Motherhood: Infanticide and Abortion in Colonial Mexico." *Journal of Family History* 37, no. 1 (2012): 3-22, p.9 —According to Jaffary, it was believed menstruation could be suppressed for other reasons such as fright, sadness, rage, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. "Prostitutes were respectable in pre-Columbian Mexico." *EFE World News Service*, February 26, 2007. *Gale General OneFile* (accessed March 4, 2020). https://link-gale-com.ccny-proxy1.libr.ccny.cuny.edu/apps/doc/A159873092/ITOF?u=cuny\_ccny&sid=ITOF&xid=90a212cb. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Johnson, Lyman L. *Faces of Honor: Sex, Shame, and Violence in Colonial Latin America.* Diálogos Series. 1998, p. 157 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jaffary, p.9 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jaffary, p.7 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)