



TEMAZCAL

The Traditional Mexican Sweat Bath

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Some twenty years or so ago, a renewed interest in the ancient sweat bath, still called by the same name used by the Aztecs, the Temazcal, sprang up in Mexico. It's a part of the movement, now so widespread in this country, to return to the healing practices preserved in indigenous medicine. These sweat baths, still a living tradition in many parts of the country, are usually small round stone or mud structures looking rather like old-fashioned beehives. Many more began to be constructed everywhere, and more and more often; people who are ailing will turn to them for relief from their complaints.

Sweat baths, of course, are used in many cultures of the world, both ancient and modern. The sauna of Scandinavia is famous, as is the hamem of North Africa and Turkey. In the ruins of Pompeii there are the remains of sweat baths, and in India, people lay in the sun, covered with leaves to protect themselves from the burning rays of the sun, to bring on sweating. It is, of course, a well-known part of the culture of our own Indians, and in this form the sweat lodge is enjoying renewed popularity.

The traditional Mexican sweat bath, however, differs in several ways from the others. It is not primarily used for ceremonial purposes, as is the sweat lodge of our Indians, nor for relaxation or bodily cleansing or for general well-being, as are most of the other sweat baths, It is and was, as far back as we can trace it, a therapeutic instrument, an arm of the medical practices developed in what anthropologists like to call, Mesoamerica, that vast area that now includes Mexico, Guatemala and Belize. We know it best, in its ancient forms, through the Aztecs, and Temazcal, as it is still called in contemporary Mexico, is a Nahuatl word, taken from their language.

When the Spanish conquerors arrived in the New World, it was an integral and important part of the medicine, which they found here. If was, as best we can make out from the sources still left to us, used in the healing and easing of almost all kinds of medical conditions, including, as we shall see, pregnancy and child birth, and still is.



The Spaniards were appalled and outraged by what appeared to them as barbaric practice. Not only was it inextricably interwoven with pagan beliefs and ritual, as is all ancient traditional medicine, but, most shocking of all, the bathers entered into these small, dark chambers, all sexes and size together, naked as the day on which they were born. The Spaniards were convinced that some sort of unspeakable orgiastic rites were taking place, and so they set themselves to forbidding the practice and destroying the baths wherever they found them. In the Penal Code and Order for Governing of the Indians, proclaimed by Charles the Fifth, the emperor of Spain, it was declared that "Indians who are not sick shall not bathe in hot baths under penalty of one hundred lashes to be followed by two hours bound in the marketplace..." Later, the proscription was extended to the sick as well.

But there were some among the conquerors who were impressed more favorably by this practice and, fortunately for us, recorded their impressions of what they had seen. It is from these accounts that most of what we know of ancient practice has come down, and it is worth quoting some of their observations. In the Magliabechi Codex, one of the few books which come down to us from those days, a caption under a native drawing of a Temazcal observes, "This is a drawing of the baths of these Indians which they call the temazcalli. At the door of the bath there is an Indian who is the advocate for the sick, and when a sick person goes to the baths he makes an offering and stretches his body on the ground in veneration of the idol, which they call Tezcatopocatl and who is one of their principal gods. They used in these baths other infamous reliquaries and many naked Indians bathed and committed great ugliness and sins in this bath".

Temazcaltoci: The grandmother of the baths

The name Temazcal, or temazcalli is made of two Nahuatl words, temas, which means bath, and calli, meaning house. At the time of the Conquest, they were found everywhere in almost all of central and southern Mexico. They were so common that the same Clavijero was led to remark that "...there is no town, however small it might be, that does not have many of them."

Although the Spanish did their best to wipe out this custom, they failed. The battered Indians preserved the custom secretly in remote places, as they did with so much of their traditional medical skills and practices. In this way, the Temazcal has come down to modern times, and on the basis of the knowledge so carefully preserved, the contemporary revival of this healing sweat bath has taken place.

In the Nahuatl culture of central Mexico, the goddess of the sweat bath was Temazcalteci, "the grandmother of the baths". She was, really, one of the manifestations of the goddess Teteoinan, "the mother of the gods", or, as she is also called, "our grandmother", the principal goddess among the higher Nahuatl divinities. Sahagun says of her that "...this goddess was the goddess of medicine and of the medicinal herbs; she was adored by doctors and surgeons, and bleeders, and also by midwives... She was also adored by those who had baths, or temazcals in their houses. All placed the image of this goddess in their baths". The cult of this goddess of the Temazcal extended throughout Mesoamerica and it is found in the other great cultures of the region --the Mixteca, the Zapoteca and the Maya. It was in great part because of this close relationship between the worship of a goddess and the Temazcal that the Spaniards found it so important to ban the use of the bath.

The Temazcal not only involved the worship of a goddess, but it incorporated all the elements of the ancient cosmology, both in the manner of its construction and the way in which it is used; and most of these concepts have been preserved in traditional thought and practice down to our own day. The Temazcal is a microcosm reproducing in itself the characteristics of the universe, the macrocosm. So we find in the Temazcal all elements of the different eras or cycles (known as suns) throughout which, according to Aztec mythology, the world has passed and continues to pass: earth, wind, fire and water (we now live in the fifth 'sun') and through whose constant movement and life is manifest.

More, the Temazcal is oriented according to the cosmic directions: the fire which heats its stones is placed towards the east where our Father, the sun, the god called Tonatiuh, arises; he is the light or masculine element which comes and fertilizes the womb of the mother earth (the chamber of the Temazcal itself), and so life is conceived. The doorway through which the bathers enter and leave is oriented toward the south, "the pathway of the dead", which begins with birth and ends in death, to the right of the path of Sun. In this way, the ever-present duality of traditional Mexican thought is manifested. Just as there are mother and father, sun and earth, hot and cold, so we are born and, in being born, we begin our path towards death.

Aztec cosmology presents us with several different levels of the heavens, and these are considered to be present in the different levels of temperatures found inside the Temazcal: the highest in the upper part of the chamber where the temperature is the lowest.

When we enter the Temazcal, according to this ancient doctrine, we return once again to our mother's womb, presided over by the great goddess, Tonantzin or Temazcaltoci, the great mother of both gods and humans. She is our beloved mother, concerned with the health of the children and she receives us into her womb - of which our own mother's womb is but a microcosmic manifestation - to cure us of physical and spiritual ills. The entrance way is low and small, and through it we enter a small,

dark, warm and humid space, in this way recreating the uterus, cutting off the outside world and giving us a chance to look inside and find ourselves again. Our re-emergence through this narrow opening represents our rebirth from the darkness and silence of the womb. It is no wonder that the Spaniards were so shocked by what they found!

Temazcal produces a series of physical reactions

Physical cleanliness has always, and still continues to be, a matter of great importance to the people of Mexico. When the Spaniards arrived, the people of Mexico bathed daily when it was possible; the Europeans of those days, on the other hand, placed little importance on personal cleanliness and it was not uncommon for a month to pass between baths. Andres de Tapia observed that "Motecuhzoma washed his body every day two times.

Clavijero noted that bathing in the Temazcal "was only a little less frequent" than regular bathing among the Mexicans.

The practice of inducing sweat has long been known to be beneficial in sicknesses of the skin, liver and circulation, in problems of rheumatism, arthritis, gout, and other chronic diseases, as well as acute problems like muscular pains, colds and congestions, and sweat baths are but of the ways used to bring about healthful sweating. The Temazcal, because of its special methods, is perhaps the most effective of this kind of curative technique, certainly the list of conditions for which it has been used in the course of centuries is the most extensive.

Overheating of the body (during the bath, the body temperature may reach one hundred and four degrees) produces a series of reactions: it stimulates both the superficial and the deep blood circulation, accelerates the frequency of heartbeats, as well as increases their force, calls into action the mechanisms of thermal regulation, activates the metabolism, and promotes sweating. All of these effects produce a great internal movement of energy and liquids; somewhat similar to the way in which strenuous exercise does, bringing increased circulation to all the muscles, organs and tissues. While all sweat baths produce these effects, the Temazcal, because of the way it works and the precision with which it can be regulated by the healer in charge of the bath, controls these body reactions to high heat to maximize the curative effects of the bath.

Its basic advantage as a sweat bath consists in the way high heat and high humidity are combined. The sauna, for example, reaches much higher temperature but the bath is drier and consequently, its curative capacities are lower. Other types of steam bath also combine heat and humidity, but the Temazcal surpasses them in effectiveness for two reasons: the person in charge of the bath can adjust -increase, diminish or direct- both heat and humidity to meet the specific needs of the patient he is treating, and the vapor is made from herbal teas, the herbs chosen for their effects on each individual patient.

The high heat and the high humidity, taken together, produce their healing effects, basically, through reducing or impeding the body's mechanism for cooling itself. The heat, higher than normal body temperature, induces sweating; the high humidity inhibits the evaporation of the sweat, the chief method through which the body normally cools itself, and thereby, blood circulation is increased, sweating is increased, and the elimination of toxins is maximized. It is said that every liter of sweat lost in the Temazcal is equivalent to a full days' work by the kidneys!

There are two others special characteristics of the Temazcal as a sweat bath that must be mentioned. The first is that every bath is directed by a specially trained healer, most often a woman (called in Mexico, the Temazcalera). She examines the patient, makes her diagnosis, chooses the herbs that are indicated, decides on the levels of heat and humidity that are to be used, prepares the Temazcal, and then enters the chamber with the patient to oversee and manage the course of the bath. She can raise or lower the intensity of the heat during the bath through ventilating the chamber using the entranceway or the vent that is in the roof of the Temazcal, or by fanning with the fan made up of branches of a suitable herb that she has chosen, or raising or lowering the height at which the patient is placed to do the bath (heat rise, and the Temazcal is much cooler at floor level than it is towards the roof, and with all gradations in between).

A good Temazcalera is amazingly skillful in handling her herbal fan; she can bring down heat for the upper parts to the lower parts of the chamber at will, and if she wishes, direct currents of heat to whatever part of the body wants special attention. Extra heat can be put on your leg, for example, to deal with sciatica, or on your back to get rid of back pain. She will use her fan to beat gently on any part of the body to increase circulation at that spot, should it be necessary. She is, by the way, trained to do massages using a variety of traditional techniques, in the Temazcal, for any condition that might require such treatment.

Found only in the Mexican method of using sweat baths for curative purposes, when the patient comes out of the bath, he is carefully wrapped in a sheet or blanket, and made to lie down and rest, usually in a room or place specially prepared for this purpose, until the body completes its cycle of sweating. This period of mandatory rest varies very much from individual to individual; it can range from half an hour to more than an hour. The patient is given a cup of herbal tea, normally made from an herb chosen for his precise condition, to help replace liquids lost in the bath, and then left to rest. Most people fall sleep during this rest period, and awaken feeling refreshed and strengthened; no patient is permitted to dress or to leave until his body has dried itself completely through its own action.

These two special features of the traditional Mexican sweat bath -the skills of the Temazcalera and the mandatory rest period after the bath- may go a long way in explaining its impressive curative powers.

The practice of the Temazcal as we find it today, has carried with it almost all of the conceptions, beliefs, methods of using it, ways of constructing it, and the like, and it is almost impossible to talk about the Temazcal or understand how it works with out invoking these ancient concepts. Chief among them and essential for comprehending almost all aspects of the Mexican practice of the sweat bath, are the terms, 'hot' and 'cold' as they are used by traditional healers. It is interesting to note that these terms are used in quite the same way and for quite the same purposes in traditional Chinese medicine, as well.

Permanent and temporary structures of Temazcal

In the indigenous cultures of the United States the sweat baths are usually temporary structures; in central and southern Mexico they are usually permanent, although sometimes a temporary structure is constructed quickly for some special occasion. Often they are circular in shape, quite like the bread ovens still seen in the villages, with a domed roof symbolizing the heavens. Occasionally, they are rectangular or square. They are made of 'adobe' bricks, stone, unbaked brick, mud and wattle, wood, or dug into the earth, much the same as they were made more than 500 years ago. Clavijero said of the ancient Temazcals, "The Temazcal is most commonly made of unbaked brick... Its diameter is around eight feet [referring to the human foot] and the entrance has the height that a man may enter on his knees". The Temazcals discovered in the ruins of Xochicalco, Piedras Negras, Palenque and Teotenango are luxurious buildings of stone plastered with stucco and even decorated inside.

And so, the Temazcal is a room small enough and low enough to preserve heat. It may be round or rectangular and it is rarely high enough for a person to stand up in. The reason for this is that heat rises, and it is hard to maintain the heat and steam in the lower part where the bathers are if the ceiling is too high. The door is quite small and low for the obvious reason of loss of heat as well as for the more symbolic role that it plays --re-entry into the womb. The shape of the Temazcal also has to do with the control of heat; a round or domed structure has fewer spaces or corners for the heat to escape to, and also has a very nice feel inside. It has the added advantage over a flat ceiling of a little more height in the center for moving around, without increasing greatly the cubic space inside.



Traditional construction of a Temazcal

The nature of the materials used in the making of the Temazcal is very important. 'Hot' materials, or, at the very least, materials which are not 'cold' are preferred. While we may not have instruments to measure such things, they are within our everyday experience. For example, we have all tasted the difference between a muffin that has been heated in the oven and one, which has been heated in the microwave: the temperature of each is the same, but the flavor is different.

Symbolically, the Temazcal calls into play the elements of fire and earth, but these elements play a therapeutic role as well as symbolic. The heat created by a wood fire is of a different nature (it is hotter, or more yang) that of electricity, for example. Cement is colder than brick. Just try placing your bare foot on brick and then on cement one cold morning and you will feel the difference. Metal is also very cold in nature. Hence stone or adobe are the preferred materials of which to build the Temazcal.

The Temazcal, then, is generally a small structure; commonly, a round one, just big enough for two people to lie down in, or for four seated, will measure some 2 meters in diameter (about 6 1/2 feet). The height is nearly 5 feet. There is a traditional way to measure these dimensions: you hold a string to the center of your chest (where the heart is) with one hand and hold in to the side with the arm outstretched with the other. This will give the radius of a round Temazcal, or half the length of a rectangular one. The interior height is the level of the heart.

A temporary or semi-permanent Temazcal may be thrown up very quickly, using flexible branches or bamboo to make the frame. Twelve branches is the traditional number, representing the twelve levels of the celestial dome. These are planted in a circle and fastened together at the top, with an external ring added halfway up, to which each branch is fastened in order to add support. A hole, called the umbilicus, is dug in the center to receive the hot stones (these are heated in a fire built outside). This frame once in place is then covered over with blankets or canvas. The simplest way is with blankets, although these absorb a lot of the steam and so it may be necessary to douse the hot rocks with tea with some frequency. Woven straw mats, easily found in Mexico, makes a better covering.

The selection of the stones for heating

The selection of the stones for heating is very important. These will be heated to red hot and then doused with water, so they must be stones that will withstand such changes in temperature without cracking or exploding. We often use volcanic rock, and always avoid stones from the river. The construction of the interior wall of the fireplace must be carefully done so that cracks do not form with use, allowing smoke to enter the Temazcal.

It is important to remember to leave a vent hole a couple of inches wide in the ceiling for use in airing the Temazcal. This is used sometimes during the bath to lower the temperature, to clear smoke if some should have entered, or to clear out the 'humors' left behind after a bath.

Preparation of the Temazcal

If the Temazcal is the type that has a fireplace on one side, the fire is made there. Otherwise, the stones are heated in a pit by placing them on firewood, covering them with more wood, and stoking the fire until they are as hot as possible. Meanwhile, the Temazcal is prepared by placing leaves, mats or low benches inside for the people to sit or lie on. A tea is prepared with which to make the steam. Herbs that may be used for purpose include eucalyptus, rosemary, mugwort, or other warming or stimulating herbs and the bucket of tea is placed, still hot, inside the Temazcal along with a cup with which to dip it out. A couple of buckets of cold water are also placed inside at the last minute, along with a dish with which to dip it out and pour over the bathers to

bring down body heat and make possible several cycles of sweating. An herbal tea should be prepared for drinking afterwards. This may be a tea selected for a specific condition or may be a general tea for all, such as chamomile, saffron, horehound, or milfoil.

Aloe juice spread on the body and face just before entering the bath does wonders for the skin and should be made available if desired.

Finally, herbal branches must be gathered to be used inside the Temazcal for directing the heat. The choice depends on the season and region, but eucalyptus, mullein, or the leaf of the castor bean plant are some examples of plants that may be used. A vegetable or chicken soup may be prepared to be eaten after the bath and rest period. Sheets must be gathered and placed near the entrance to the Temazcal to receive the bathers and the resting place must be prepared, with blankets, if necessary.



When all is prepared, it is time to arrange the stones. In the case of a Temazcal with a fireplace, the remaining fire is usually removed in order to prevent any smoke from entering the Temazcal through cracks that might exist in the internal wall, and the entrance to the fireplace is covered to prevent loss of heat. If the stones were heated outside, they are picked up with a shovel and carefully placed inside the Temazcal in the hole that was prepared to receive them. Often, a piece of resinous incense (copal is traditionally used) is dropped on at least the first stone to ritually purify the inside of the bath. When all this is done, the Temazcal is aired to remove any vestiges of smoke that may remain. This is done by opening the air-hole at the top and leaving the door open while someone enters and fans the upper part in a circular motion.

Now, with the teas prepared and in place, the bunch of herbs and buckets of cold water inside, the fire put out and the stones in place, the Temazcal aired out, and sheets at hand near the door, the Temazcal is ready to use.

In preparation for the Temazcal, we often fast for a day, or half a day. Certainly, one must not enter the bath until a couple of hours have passed since eating, and never after a heavy meal. The Temazcal is entered naked. Cotton underwear may be used for modesty's sake, but it does prevent the heat from reaching the covered parts with

the same intensity. Inside, the bath may be taken sitting on a low bench or lying down. The floor of the Temazcal may be covered with a woven straw mat (known as a petate) or leaves such as banana leaves.

Inside of the Temazcal

When the bathers have settled down and have begun to feel comfortable with the dark and the warmth (and not until then), the temazcalera will throw a cup of hot herbal tea on the hot rocks to create a blast of fragrant steam which deliciously envelops the body. Those who had still not begun to sweat now begin. Initially, it might take more than one cup tea on the rocks to create and maintain the heat and level of humidity of the Temazcal. Once this is reached, the temperature and steam are maintained or manipulated in the same manner with more occasional dousing of the rocks. It is important to wait for steam to abate a little before throwing more tea on the stones, both in order to gauge the temperature and effect attained, and in order not cool the stones too much.

There are some who feel uncomfortable at first with the reduced space and the heat inside the Temazcal. Usually a few deep and relaxing breaths will help to allay this initial reaction. Lying down also helps, in part because the floor is cooler than the upper parts and in part because the prone position helps to relax. It is the job of the Temazcalera to put bathers at ease, but it is strongly recommended that the Temazcal be a quiet place where one is drawn back into oneself.

After a short time has passed, the Temazcalera begins to manipulate the heat with branches of herbs. By passing the herbs near the ceiling, he or she can bring down the heat in order to make it uniform throughout the Temazcal or direct it towards a certain part of the body by fanning. Or the herbs may be used to do what is called a 'leafing', where the bather is gently beaten with the herbal branches. The heat that these herbs bring to the body is remarkable! Although it already felt very hot in the bath, these gentle herbal beatings bring much more heat. In the case of aches and pains, this additional heat feels very soothing. In this way, the affected area of the body is treated specifically by directing more heat to it.

Sometimes an herbal tea is used to wash the affected area, or a massage may be done. Cold water may be used over the body, including the head, while inside the Temazcal. This may be done therapeutically to cool off the outside of the body, shrinking superficial blood vessels in order to exercise them, and allowing them to swell again with the heat. It is often recommended that this be done just before leaving a

Temazcal that has been very hot. It helps to assure that the heat does not rise to the head afterwards. This 'closes the pores' while at the same time facilitating intense sweating afterwards.

The length of time spent inside the Temazcal varies greatly, depending on the heat of the bath, the constitution of the individual, and the condition that is being treated. It is entirely an individual matter, and even may vary from bath to bath for same person. When one feels impelled to leave, it is best to do so.

After the Temazcal

Traditionally, one leaves a Temazcal by crawling out backwards, to be received by a cotton sheet and led to a place to lie down and rest, well covered. Now, one of the most therapeutic parts of the Mexican sweat bath beings. While the bath may have lasted twenty minutes (or ten or thirty), sweating may continue for another hour, thus increasing the therapeutic detoxifying effect of the bath. As much warm herbal tea as is desired may be had at this time.

Only when the body has stopped sweating should one get up and get dressed. Here, it is important to be well covered and to avoid 'aires', as the Mexicans say, or drafts (open car windows, for example). As the 'pores' of the body have been opened, care must be taken not to get cold during the succeeding twenty four hours. It is also important not to eat or drink cold foods or to eat too heavily. Finally, some recommend not bathing for a day after wards, while others say that it is permitted as long as it is done with warm (no scalding nor cold) water and care is taken with drafts afterwards.