

# **Omens and Prenatal Care: Understanding the Care of Pregnant Women, Newborns, and Gender Roles through Omens in the Florentine Codex**

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The Florentine Codex is one of many codices from Mexico, with this codex in particular originating from New Spain, or what was once the Aztec Empire of central Mexico.<sup>1</sup> The Florentine Codex is best described as a manuscript that is categorized into 12 books delving into different aspects of Nahua cultures in New Spain.<sup>2</sup> These range from the history of Aztec kings and lords to the Aztec creation myth and gods.<sup>3</sup> The Codex itself is divided into three distinct parts, the Nahuatl description of a certain topic, a Spanish translation of the Nahuatl summary, and the occasional illustration to accompany the text it is associated with. Because the Florentine Codex's primary purpose is to provide an understanding on the Nahua peoples of New Spain, it required the collaboration of Bernardino de Sahagun and Nahua scholars.<sup>4</sup> The codex itself gives key insight into the nuances of Nahua life and how they explained or even resolved logistical problems based on their cultural framework. Based on the titles of books alone, it can be inferred on the values of the Nahua, including their botanical knowledge, or even genealogy.

One book in particular, Omens and Prognostications, delves into how the Nahua used natural phenomena to determine their course of action, ranging from a predetermined death to whether or not a merchant would have safe passage.<sup>5</sup> This also includes a handful of omens and practices associated with pregnancy and birth, ensuring the good health of not only the mother but also the child. By analyzing the texts related to these topics, it can be drawn that the Nahua

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<sup>1</sup> Kim N. Richter, Alicia Maria Houtrow, Berenice Gaillemin, Alanna Radlo-Dzur, "Creating the Digital Florentine Codex: Collaboration and Reproduction in the Digital Age," *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture*, no. 4 (2023): 101.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 102

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 103

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 102

<sup>5</sup> Bernardino de Sahagun, *Florentine Codex, General History of the things of New Spain* (Salt Lake city: University of Utah, 1970), 2v-2r.

developed their own cultural framework on how pregnant women and newborns should be cared for; not only that, but it would have also been used to reinforce gender roles based on the expectations surrounded childbirth and interactions with pregnant women.

The Nahua knew of how important and delicate the gestation period for women were, with two omens being associated to the care of pregnant women. The tenth chapter, titled “On a pregnant woman,” describes how it was recommended for pregnant women to not walk outside at night, for they risk encountering ancient ghosts.<sup>6</sup> However, if they wished to still travel at night, they would have needed to carry ashes and place them against their chest or waist to prevent the supernatural encounter.<sup>7</sup> The nineteenth chapter, titled “which telleth of the woman with child,” describes events that a pregnant women must avoid at all costs, for they risked the baby’s deaths or risked being born with birth defects. This included avoiding any kind of hanging, for the baby would be born with the umbilical cord wrapped around their neck.<sup>8</sup> The chapter also describes how pregnant women must avoid looking at any kind of eclipse, for the baby would be born with a cleft palate.<sup>9</sup> However, this could be remedied before the child’s birth by place a small stone knife against the woman’s chest.<sup>10</sup> The chapter also calls back to the traveling at night as a risk for a pregnant woman, expanding on other remedies, which now includes pebbles and a type of wormwood called “*itzauhyatl*.”<sup>11</sup> If the practice wasn’t done, and the pregnant woman had a supernatural encounter at night, the newborn would cry a lot. Fathers were also at risk of causing harm to their newborns if they travel at night, for if they experienced the supernatural encounter at night, the baby would be born either a heart disease or “*cuetzpalicihuiztli*” or lumps in the groin area.<sup>12</sup> While the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 17v.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 17v.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 19v.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 20r.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 20r.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 20r.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 20r.

Nahua's understanding of pregnancy doesn't reflect western views on prenatal care, they still understood the delicate and difficult process pregnancy was, implementing multiple rules and traditions surrounding it. The implementation of omens limited what actions pregnant women were able to do, which ensured as much safety as possible for the mother and their child. This also reflected the gendered views on women, treating them as fragile beings despite some of these practices still being a health risk for men, such as looking at an eclipse which can cause problems to their vision. While these omens only relate to the pregnancy of women, there are also other omens related to newborns and birth, instilling beliefs on gender roles and general practice to ensure the good health of newborns.

The ninth chapter, "which telleth of the umbilical cord," describes the course of action that should be taken right after childbirth. Once the child is born and the umbilical cord is cut, there is a procedure that must be done depending on the baby's sex. If the baby is a boy, a "brave warrior" must carry the umbilical cord with them when heading into battle.<sup>13</sup> This would instill the child with the aspiration to become warriors.<sup>14</sup> If the baby was born a girl, it is expected for the umbilical cord to be placed near the hearth of their home, since it is expected for her to stay at home and maintain the home.<sup>15</sup> While this superstition doesn't have any connection to the health and wellbeing of newborns or their mothers, it provides key insights on the expectations of an individual based on their sex. Chapter eleven, "which telleth of the woman lately delivered," describes the expectations of mothers who visit other mothers who recently gave birth.<sup>16</sup> When this occurs, the visiting mother must go to the hearth and rub ashes along their child's temple,

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 17r.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 17r.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 17r.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 17v.

knees, and shins, for the child's joints would "crackle" if they don't.<sup>17</sup> Based on this interaction, it can be inferred that there is a degree of importance when it comes to mothers who had recently given birth and their newborn, limiting on who can visit them to insure their health and wellbeing. There is also no mention of fathers or other male figures, possibly reinforcing gender views and expectations on who should have cared and protected children. Chapter eighteen, "which telleth how maize cobs were burned," describes the warning of disposing maize cobs by mothers, where they risk the child to develop pockmarks if they burn the maize cobs.<sup>18</sup> In order to prevent this, the mother is expected to rub the maize cobs across the newborn's face before disposing the maize cobs by burning them.<sup>19</sup> While the chapter does discuss the health of a baby, it also provides insights on the expectations of mothers. This practice relies on the fact the mother is expected to continue following the traditions of a woman and mother such as caring for their baby, cooking, and maintaining the cleanliness of their home.

All of these chapters detail the expectations surrounding prenatal care, childbirth, and ensuring the well-being of mothers and newborns. However, it also provides an understanding of the values and expectations surrounding gender roles. The few times men or fathers are mentioned in these chapters, they are described as powerful warriors ensuring their sons would follow their path of a warrior or risking a life-threatening disease on their unborn child. Aside from these two instances, the rest of the chapters focus solely on pregnant women or mothers. They are associated with fragility during gestation and are expected to follow more rules associated with the care of their child. While these views limited the expectations of women, it also reflects their views on a women's role in society, equating them to that of a warrior. This is especially prevalent when

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 17v.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 19v.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 19v.

looking at the role of the Aztec Empire in central Mexico, an empire that quickly rose to power through their militaristic feats. Thus, while the role of women was limited to the boundaries of their homes, it was not seen as something inferior to a man's role in what is now New Spain, treating the role of a mother as important as that of a warrior's.