

# Exhibit or Human?: Analysis on the Life of the Aztec Children

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## INTRODUCTION

Few events in the world have captured the fascination of curious masses as did the exhibition of the Aztec Children. Displayed for their physical difference from Western norms, the two siblings were paraded and showcased in front of eager nineteenth-century audiences for profit. During this century, freak shows were at the height

of their popularity due to the growing need for national identity, and thus the fame of the Aztec Children and their exploitation was no coincidence. The misconceptions about foreign cultures and misunderstanding of microcephaly at the time led to the exhibition of the Aztec Children.

The Aztec Children were first exhibited in 1849 in the state of New York. The exhibition focused firstly on their physical “deformities” and secondly on their cognitive disabilities. These two traits allowed for easy stigmatization as well as the confusion of race with disability. Audiences were encouraged to see the disabilities of these two as characteristics of their “Aztec” race. This stigmatized their entire race as cognitively underdeveloped and portrayed those with the disability as “savages.” The owners of the Aztec Children played up their supposed “Aztec” origins and lost-civilization appeal in order to attract customers and therefore profit from their exploitation. Incredibly, *people believed these stories*. As Nigel Rothfels states, “We know that especially in the early years of their tours many believed the pair could in fact have been representatives of a lost race of Aztecs” (159). In reality, the pair were mestizos. Mestizo refers to people

## Abstract

Through researching the lives of the Aztec Children, the exploitation of performers becomes evident. These “children” were adults with a congenital disorder who were purchased and commodified since childhood. Due to the manipulation by their various owners, not even the true history of these two are known. This article delves into the history of these two, the issues surrounding their exhibition, and works at the time shedding further light on their time touring the world.

with both Spanish and Native American blood (“Mestizo”).

The Aztec Children were often displayed on stages throughout North America. They were dressed up in costumes with props that fit the image of “otherness” in the mid-1850s. They were generally dressed in clothing that conformed to the stereotyped notions of “Aztec” garments, such as in the following photo. In this historical photo, the siblings are shown wearing ill-fitting and amateurly made clothes with triangle patterns and a sun on the front. Their hair is teased, flamboyantly so, and they are shown on the ground next to some sort of stone pillar, hinting at primitivism and savagery. The background of a staircase and entrance is blurred and



Image of the Aztec Children taken from [PENN Libraries Blog](#).

most likely painted, symbolizing lost civilizations and structures.

In order to better understand the cultural significance of the Aztec Children, it is important to know their historical past. The “twins,” as they were known, were in fact siblings, a brother and sister with the names of Maximo and Bartola, respectively. In Aztec Children research, one comes across different, conflicting versions of the same story, some more realistic than others. This more than likely occurred due a lack of documentation in third-world areas, such as Central America, as well as the false stories that were created in order to promote their popularity as freaks. If documentation did exist, it was neither official nor precise but forged. In fact, P.T. Barnum is an example of someone who forged the history of human exhibits, even though at one point he claimed to be “duped” by a “forged bill of sale” for Joice Heth, the supposedly 161-year old nursemaid of George Washington (Fretz 102-103). Because of her “deteriorated” appearance, Barnum worked to make the story of her age believable in order to elicit profit. The Aztec Twins were treated similarly by their owner-managers.

Rothfels notes, “The true origins of the ‘Aztecs’ ‘Bartola’ and ‘Maximo’ will probably never be known” (159). According to an 1854 article, their story began in the village of San Puerty, Guatemala. A different version states that

they came from El Salvador (this difference might have to do with shifting geographical boundaries over the years). In this version, the mother of the Aztec Children sold the two siblings to a man by the name of Raimond (or Raymond) Selva, who had the intent to display and profit from them. Rothfels describes an origin story that is viewed as the most historically accurate by scholars and gives more details than previous versions. It states that the brother and sister were actual twins birthed to Innocento and Martina Murgos from the town of Tococho in the Department of San Miguel and that Raimond Selva had taken a more active role in convincing the mother to sell them to him (Rothfels 159). This second version places responsibility for the exploitation of the Aztec Children on Selva, while the first story blames the mother.

One of the less realistic stories states that the siblings passed into the ownership of an American man. Another version of the story focuses on a man by the name of Pedro Velasquez in the year 1851. Pedro Velasquez was said to be a traveler who wrote a memoir published in 1850, about having “discovered” the ancient Aztec city of Iximaya with two other companions and left with two children (Aguirre 45). He proclaimed he had with him twins from this lost city and that the twins were “found squatting on an altar of idols” (Bogdan, “Maximo and Bartola” 128). Not only were they found in those positions, but they apparently “looked” like sculptured images of Aztec origin. Thus, they were deemed to be the last two survivors of the Aztec race (Stephens 33).

The next unrealistic story of Maximo and Bartola was created by their owner-manager, Morris. Morris fabricated this “history” after he learned about the traveler John Lloyd Stephens and his encounter with a Spanish Catholic priest in Central America (Aguirre 44). Robert Aguirre cites Stephens’s volume about a lost city with inhabitants—still living there and speaking the Mayan language—who would murder any white man who approached them (Aguirre 44). It turned out Stephens never went to that lost city, and, since that fact was not mentioned in his work, it left an opportunity to construct an origin story for the Aztec Children (45). The fabricated stories of the Aztec Children, their exhibition—which exemplified cultural stereotypes, and their display both of disability and race all did cultural work that brought in audiences. All of this worked to stigmatize other races and cultures as well as to confirm white superiority.

The Aztec Children, in their fame, eventually made their way into Europe in the year 1853. They toured for the remainder of their lives, often showcased privately to scientists and aristocrats. In 1867, in order to draw more attention to them, the Aztec Children were officially married, despite being brother and sister, under the names Maximo Valdez Nuñez and Bartola Velasquez (Rothfels 160). It is noteworthy to mention that the last name “Velasquez,” given to Bartola for the sake of this marriage, comes from the supposed “savior” of the Aztec Children. Maximo died in the year 1913, while Bartola’s exact date of death is unknown.

The Aztec Children, in all actuality, had a condition known as microcephaly. By definition, microcephaly is a condition characterized by an abnormally small head accompanied by an incomplete development of the brain (“Microcephaly”). Microcephaly was recognized in the scientific community during this time period, though people with this disability were often displayed in freak shows as “pinheads” (“Microcephaly”). Features that today point at developmental problems would have not been as obvious for audiences during the mid-1800’s, making it far easier for the fantastical and fictional stories of these “Aztec” beings to spread rapidly.

The description of the siblings, as well as pictures of them, show the obvious physical differences of individuals with microcephaly. The two became well known, not just due to their tours around America and Europe, but also through their display before the scientific community. Doctors and scientists flocked to the Aztec Children in an attempt to better understand and classify disability and cognitive problems, as Rothfels states in his essay:

The two were measured in every possible way: their skulls (twenty-eight separate measurements by Rudolf Virchow in 1877 to be expanded upon in later examinations) were compared to those of apes; their hair, cropped peculiarly to further the theatrical presentation of difference, was compared to that of all the known races...the scientists discussed the vocalizations, expressions of will, and potential reproductive capability of the pair. (Rothfels 166)

While Rothfels failed to comment on this in his discussion of disability, it is interesting to note the issue of consent. Due to the siblings’ cognitive disability, it is questionable whether informed consent was ever possible for them. They were unable to give clear definite agreement, and this resulted

in their own mother selling them in exchange for gold coins. The siblings were then paraded around the world in order to make fortunes for their owners without a say in their own fates.

Freaks who were physically, but not cognitively, disabled were able to give their consent, but even this consent presents ethical dilemmas for scholars. David Gerber states,

Choice and consent continue to be problematic precisely because of the role of circumstances, such as the accident of the social situation into which we are born, in our lives, and because we are not equal in power to influence the course of our lives or even to understand them. (Gerber 41)

The fact that the Aztec Children were developmentally disabled intensifies this problem.

The exhibition of the Aztec Children created not only a form of cheap entertainment but also a platform that both justified and conquered societal fears. The display of these “freaks” was directly tied to the thing that audiences at that time feared the most, namely an “other.” With evolutionary theory becoming a major issue during this time, it was no wonder audiences flocked towards these “Aztecs” (Rothfels 171). Such fears and other social and cultural issues during this time period will be addressed in the following section.

## **CULTURAL ISSUES REGARDING DISPLAYS**

One reason for the multiple versions of Maximo and Bartola’s origin story is that the Aztec Children were handled by different managers and owners who concocted the stories to assure audiences of how other-worldly the siblings were. The managers may have had some facts, but they mixed fiction into the stories to get the audience’s attention. For example, Pedro Velasquez was made up, along with the lost city of Iximaya, in order to fabricate Maximo and Bartola’s origins. Their history in the 48-page booklet provided by Morris was a hoax; their origin story along with their appearances—“dwarfish” (Bogdan, “Maximo and Bartola” 128) with smaller-than-normal skulls due to microcephaly (Tredgold 122), which mimicked the Central American drawings and sculptures (Rothfels 159)—furthered the speculation that they were of Aztec origin. People took in the twins’ exhibition and believed these two to be part of a long-lost civilization. J.



Tithonus Pednaud's research on human marvels and bizarre history backs up this belief as he writes that they wore "Aztec-looking garb," especially the Aztec suns on their fronts (1). Rothfels writes their hair was "cropped peculiarly to further the theatrical presentation of difference" (166). This cut would expose more of their heads to show people that they looked like the drawings and sculptures of the Aztec people. This look distinguished the twins from "normal," "modern-day" people at the time.

When Maximo and Bartola were first placed on display in 1853 in Europe, they were exhibited before the Ethnological Society of England (Bogdan, "Maximo and Bartola" 130). According to Ronald Rainger's research on organizations of anthropology, this society was known for collecting ethnographic data and publishing materials to learn about mankind's "distinguishing characteristics" and what causes those characteristics (713). During that time, along with Britain's imperialism, the scientific community was fascinated with racial theory (Aguirre 41); in America, they wanted to learn more about other races and civilizations, like the Mayans, who had been the subjects of recent publications (Pednaud 1). Learning about the discovery of the "Aztecs" was just as desirable. Their microcephaly, a highly stigmatized trait, was used to make the Aztec Children and their entire "race" out to be inferior. This framed them, and their entire race, as the "other" when compared to Americans and Europeans.

Belief in white supremacy was common at the time. People of European descent believed they were culturally and morally superior (Gardiner 3) and that they were "more fit" in regards to physical and intellectual capacity than African Americans, Native Americans, etc., according to Social Darwinism (Gardiner 12). Rosemarie Garland Thomson recognizes this in her article, "The Cultural Work of American Freak Shows," as she stresses how freak shows were an "opportunity to formulate the self in terms of what it was not" (59), which means that audiences could define themselves as ideal in comparison to what they considered "inhuman": one who was not white, civilized, or able-bodied. Freak shows would assure spectators of their superior selves. Those represented as "freaks" could be anybody who was different from the norm in appearance or anybody considered "less evolved" or "primitive" in a white supremacist culture.

In Britain, scientists were drawn to Latin American people, especially

the “mestizo” (Aguirre 41), which is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a person of Spanish and Native American heritage (“Mestizo”). To scientists, mixed race individuals “confounded reigning binary models” (Aguirre 41). Mixed races were disapproved of because some people interpreted them to be offspring of “sin.” There are Biblical verses that people saw as condemning interracial marriage. One example is from Deuteronomy 7:3-4, when Moses spoke with the Israelites: “Do not intermarry with them [Hittites, Jebusites, etc.]. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods” (*NIV/KJV Parallel Bible*, Deut. 7:3-4). Mixing races was seen as going against the norms of society. The Aztec Children’s parents were “mulattos”—a period term for those with African and European heritage (Aguirre 56).

Because of the theory of polygenism, a theory stating that humans evolved from several independent pairs of ancestors (“Polygeny”), children of racially mixed couples were believed to be infertile (Aguirre 56). Not only would the Aztec Children be othered for being racially mixed, but their otherness would be confirmed if they could not produce children. According to Robert Bogdan’s article, “The Social Construction of Freaks,” human differences, both physical and mental, were considered “dangerous” and were used to warn people that these exhibits would need to be “controlled” so they could not “weaken the breeding stock” (34).

Maximo and Bartola’s small statures combined with their mental disabilities confirmed spectators’ beliefs that what they were seeing was a childish race. In one of the twins’ exhibitions in England, they were reported as behaving like “English children at two or three years of age” (Aguirre 52). Their small physical size allowed many spectators to see them as “children.” Their small heads were touched most of the time and were compared to “dolls’ heads.” But these touches weren’t necessarily forced on them. In fact, their acts “encouraged mutual interaction”: not only were the twins touched, but they also touched spectators (Aguirre 52-53). Unfortunately, as Gerber points out, shortness was stigmatized in and out of the Western world; it was thought to signal “immaturity and powerlessness” (49). Their mental condition was not emphasized, but they were not treated as the adults.

## THE “AZTECS” AND EVOLUTION

Rothfels proclaims that, even though the story of their lives was in question, Maximo and Bartola held an “important and almost unique place in history” (Rothfels 160). Whether people believed the story of Aztec origins or not, the scientific community saw their exhibition as a “preeminent site” for formulating and debating the “technical and philosophical features” of two theories: evolution and recapitulation (Rothfels 160-62). The latter theory is defined as the “repetition of evolutionary stages in the growth of a young animal” (“Recapitulation”).

For anatomist Carl Vogt, the twins’ microcephalism provided “the classic case for exploring the validity of recapitulation and the importance of arrested developments” (Rothfels 166). The latter subject is defined as “development stopped at some stage of its progress” (“Arrested”). That, along with recapitulation, would raise the question of whether the twins could present a “milestone” in the understanding of human evolution (Rothfels 166). In *The Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin takes note of Carl Vogt’s study with “microcephalous idiots.”

Their “skulls [were] smaller, and the convolutions of the brain [were] less complex, than in normal men. The frontal sinus... is largely developed, and the jaws are prognathous (projected forward), so that these idiots somewhat resemble the lower types of mankind” (116-17).

Their brains were thought to resemble those of apes (117), and thus it could be inferred that people like Maximo and Bartola might be seen as links between apes and humans. Given that they were presented as representatives of their race, the entire Latin American world was thus made “primitive.”

Maximo’s and Bartola’s features were measured and compared to apes’ features. One argument was that, if what the promoters said was true when they claimed these Aztec Children were really descendants of “primitive people,” then Maximo and Bartola would be part of a race somehow half-human and half-ape (Rothfels 166-67). In other words, their condition was seen as making them, not simply primitive, but also less human, equated with animals.

Rudolf Virchow, an anatomist, had a different opinion however. He did not believe the Aztec race was a “mature form of an extinct species or race.” Because of the idea of “survival of the fittest,” Virchow felt the Aztecs



would not be fit to live (Rothfels 167). Virchow believed they would have died off long ago due to the arrested development of their cognitive abilities: they would not understand how to survive and thrive. The Aztec Children, he thought, could not be part of that extinct race if they were still alive in the nineteenth century.

## CONCLUSION

The exhibition of Maximo and Bartola offered to provide people a look into a lost civilization apart from the Western World and, in doing so, made Westerners feel superior. The Aztec Children were made to seem primitive in comparison. Because they were presented as representatives of an uncivilized, undeveloped, and primitive race, the stigma against them was extended to include an entire people. Even though it was all a hoax, people still believed in what managers' booklets said about the life story of the Aztec Children. The constructed origins and appearances of the Aztec Children, combined with their misunderstood microcephalic symptoms, contributed to their exhibition.

The boy, named "Maximo," is about ten years of age, and 33 3/4 inches in height; weighs 20 pounds 12 ounces; circumference of chest, which is well developed, 18 1/4 inches; ditto of waist, 17 inches; circumference of head, 12 3/4 inches.

The girl, named "Bartola," is about eight years of age, and 29 1/2 inches in height; weight, 17 pounds; circumference of head, 13 inches. In both, the arms and legs are of the pipe-step order of animal architecture, but are muscular, strong and tough. Their physiological and anatomical formations have been pronounced perfect after several very careful examinations. In short, they are like each other, and nobody else, and nothing else, living, dead, or imagined.

## PRIMARY SOURCES

### "The Aztec Children":

This newspaper article goes into great detail about the physical appearance

of the Aztec Children. These children were such a physical anomaly that they gained headlines simply so others could picture their appearance prior to seeing the show. While this newspaper article was not typical propaganda because it was not created by the exhibit itself, the information within the article was clearly provided by those exhibiting the Aztec Children. Without having to pay for or directly associate themselves with the story, the owners of the exhibit were able to publicize and attract interest simply by providing a newspaper with the fascinating and unusual physical description of these twins. These descriptions also made the exhibit seem educational—these people were not on display for entertainment but for their value as scientific discoveries. By providing the physical measurements of the twins, readers of the newspaper could visit them under the pretense they were fascinated

In brief, these Aztec Children present the most extraordinary phenomenon in the human race ever witnessed by the modern world: let their origin be what it may—let their history and their country's history be ever so vague and traditionary—doubt the truth of Velasquez's narrative or believe it wholly, these children present themselves the eighth wonder of the world. They are, without exception, the most remarkable and intensely interesting objects that were ever presented to the European public.

from a scientific standpoint.

### **Illustrated Memoir:**

This memoir was clearly a piece of promotional propaganda intended to entice and interest potential spectators. By publishing a memoir covering the expedition to and from the home of the Aztec Children, owner-managers legitimized the heritage of these twins. Rather than simply telling spectators the whole history of these twins at the beginning of a show, this pamphlet provided a history, an adventure story, thrilling action, an escape from uncivilized people, and a triumphant return to the safety of civilized society—all for what was no doubt a bargain of a price. The pamphlet opens with a list of each royal family the twins met while traveling through Europe on their tours prior to coming to America. The reader is then engaged in a gripping tale featuring diary entries describing both the journey and the people included in great detail. Nearly everyone in the party died, but the

Aztec Children and their savior, Velasquez, miraculously lived. This tale would most likely be sold outside the tent exhibiting the twins. It would ideally create a profit, interest people in the show, and potentially lead

The human monstrosities known here some years ago as the “Aztec Children” have recently been exhibited in England. The London papers report that they were married in that city on the 7th instant. The London Herald says:

“The bride was dressed in a Russian costume, presented to her by the Governor-General of Moscow; and the couple proceeded, with Mr. J. M. Morris, their guardian, to the office of the Registrar of St. George’s, Hanover Square, where, in the presence of the Registrar-General, who had issued the license after due inquiry whether there was any bar to the union, the couple were made one by civil contract. They then returned to their lodgings, where the girl was attired in a white satin dress, with a lace veil, an orange-blossom wreath, all, as well as the jewelry which she wore, being made for the occasion....”

people to return to the exhibit after reading this supposed history.

#### “Marriage of the Aztec Children”:

This newspaper article was placed directly above other marriage notices, but the content is clearly different. The other marriage notices within this particular issue mentioned people within Philadelphia, the city where this paper was published. However, rather than just focusing on the local news, the Aztec Children were considered so notable that the paper needed to include the London *Herald*’s view on this marriage. Despite not being married within the United States, the Aztec Children served as so large an attraction that the news of their marriage traveled across the globe. It is also carefully noted that the Aztec Children had the permission of their guardian to get married, a requirement most men and women are not forced to adhere to. The article also focused carefully on their attire. This extra attention draws the reader’s notice away from the joy of the ceremony and toward a mental image of how these “freaks” might have appeared in traditional wedding dress.

We owe it, therefore, to candor and to the amicable relations existing between the United States and those powers to declare that we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety. With the existing colonies or dependencies of any European power we have not interfered and shall not interfere. But with the Governments who have declared their independence and maintain it, and whose independence we have, on great consideration and on just principles, acknowledged, we could not view any interposition for the purpose of oppressing them, or controlling in any other manner their destiny, by any European power in any other light than as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States.

**Monroe Doctrine:**

While one does not generally connect the Monroe Doctrine with the Aztec Children, this passage clearly shows how the two are related. Despite being just children, the Aztec Children were taken from their home and travelled around Europe and the United States as nothing more than a sideshow. The Monroe Doctrine clearly states that people from established lands in the Americas will not be bothered, but the Aztec Children were taken from their small community in Mesoamerica by outsiders. These outsiders were from the American continent themselves, but they directly violated the moral- and respect-based standards posed by the Monroe Doctrine. Rather than leaving these children to their life in a small, unknown community, these children were kidnapped and used as a commodity—the exact act the Monroe Doctrine sought to discontinue. European nations saw the Americas as a source of cheap labor and a land filled with foolish, uneducated people who could be used to better an educated man's existence. When the Aztec Children were taken and used in freak show, they served only to create a profit and amuse a middle- or upper-class family who chose to witness the spectacle of foreigners with strange, and seemingly disproportioned features.

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