

# The roots of thought

Luis Barjau \*

*I understood the seductive power concealed in a life where all is reduced to the simplest form of repetition.*

Canetti

**T**he ancient Mexicans fervently believed that the Earth was a four-cornered plane, and that beneath it, nine strata continued downward, culminating in *Chignahumictlán*—the region of the dead or nothingness. Here, beings dissolved completely, after having crossed through the nine degrees of death; these were nine final and unavoidable tests undergone by individuals before disappearing completely:

1. A leonine dog, our dog, must help one cross a great river of blood, which is the beginning of non-existence.
2. One must squeeze between two adjoining mountains.
3. One must climb an obsidian mountain.
4. One must pass the spot where the icy wind blows, cutting like obsidian knives.
5. The place where the banners wave.
6. The ambush where the wounding arrows fly.
7. The place where savage beasts eat hearts.

Excerpt from the unpublished volume *El mito mexicano de las edades*.

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8. The narrow stone passage, where a man barely fits.
9. The place where souls rest or disappear.

They also believed that above the plane of the Earth there rose thirteen divine strata, which were the dwelling-places of a hierarchy of gods. These strata culminated in the *Omeyocan*, the place wherein dwelled the primordial divine duality, *Ometecuhtli* and *Omecíhuatl*, the Second Lord and Lady (figure 1).

The numbers nine and thirteen are, at the same time, important figures in calendar computations. Nine represents

half the number of days in a month of the solar calendar, while thirteen is the basic number used to count the days in the divinatory calendar or *Tonalámatl*. Both, then, are guides for the measurement of time.

If, as the majority of studies of Mesoamerican history have directly or indirectly indicated, for ancient philosophers time and space were coinciding dimensions—an idea on which indigenous peoples and modern physicists agree—these numbers must have been equally important in the measurement of space.

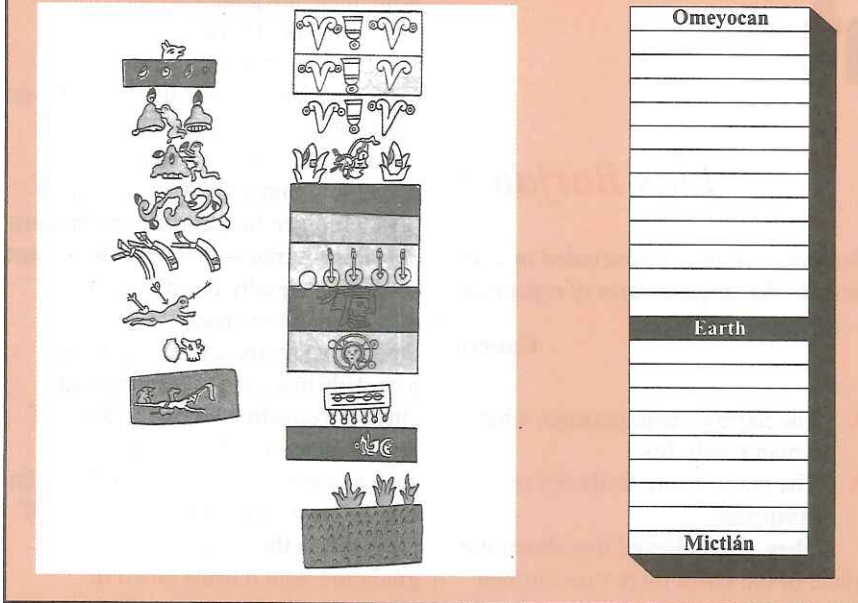
In fact, many of the surviving pyramids in ancient Mesoamerican cities are constructed on the basis of nine staggered architectural masses, such as the Castle pyramid in Chichén Itzá. If, as we have seen, the plane of the Earth is the upper stratum of a gradation which leads down to *Chignahumictlán*, or the ultimate stage of death, then the base of the pyramids should represent the part corresponding to this stage. In fact, the Tomb at Palenque is located at this level, and according to Ruz Luehiller (*Chichén Itzá en la historia y el arte*, Editora del Sureste, Mexico, 1979), there may well be a tomb within the base of the Castle at Chichén Itzá.

## Thirteen divine strata

13. Ometecuhtli and Omecíhuatl	Lords of duality
12. Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli	God of dawn
11. Yohualtecuhli	God of night
10. Tezcatlipoca	Principal idol
9. Quetzalcohuatzin	Principal idol
8. Tlalocantecuhtli	God of the Earth
7. Tonacateuhli and Tonacacíhuatl	Two gods
6. Mictlantecuhtli	God of the infernos
5. Tonaloque	Five gods
4. Tonatiuh	The Sun
3. Chalchiutlicue	House of a goddess
2. Xiuhtli	Goddess of the Earth
1. Xiuhtuctli	God of the years

Source: *Histoire du mechique*.

**Figure 1**  
**The nine hells and the thirteen divine strata**  
**(Vatican codex A.)**



Thus, the temple crowning all Mesoamerican pyramids corresponds to the level of the Earth, or the first plane of death, or the intermediate

degree between the nine descending strata of death, and life, represented by the thirteen scales of divinity, which are crowned by the notion of

duality. It was on these temple platforms that religious sacrifices were carried out (figure 2).

If the thirteen divine strata were composed of light, then the nine descending grades were in darkness. The square plane of the Earth, when exposed to the sun at its zenith, casts a square shadow larger than itself. Thus, if an imaginary square is suspended a certain distance from the ground, an enlarged repetitive shadow would be formed. The volume of the pyramid would be obtained from the union of the four right angles of each face (figure 3).

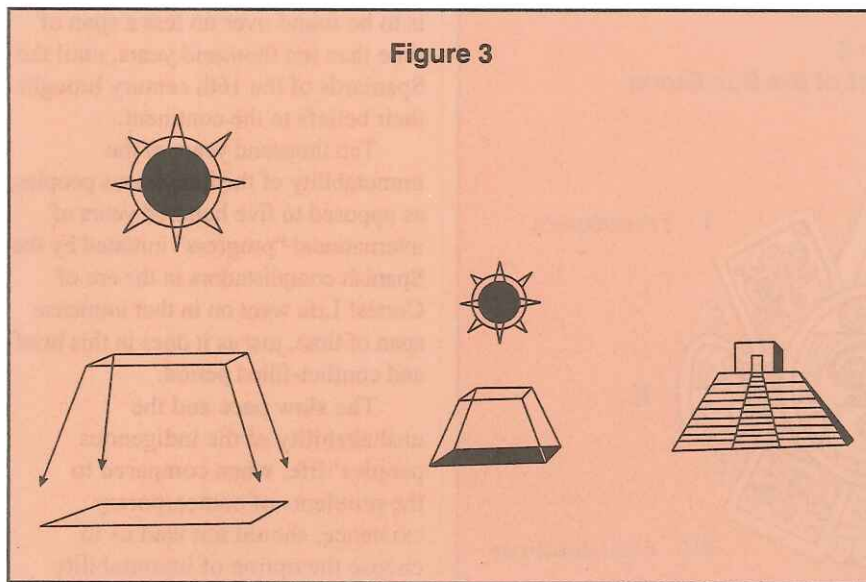
The feasibility of this system rests on the archeological certainty that the base of the pyramids—the ninth mass or platform, if we count downward from the top— corresponds to the final stratum of the netherworld, since the tombs of governors have been found at this level.

The possibility therefore exists that if the squared plane of the Earth is an intermediate level on an imaginary scale descending through nine levels



Chichén Itzá castle

Figure 3



of the netherworld and ascending through thirteen divine degrees—the *Mictlan* (Chignahumictlán) being the ninth architectural platform in the pyramids, and the one established at ground level—the first and smallest of the platforms would then be the one crowning the pyramids (the temple platform), while also “floating” between the thirteen upper and nine lower planes on the imaginary scale. If we were to picture this, it would appear as shown in figure 4.

It would not be at all strange that, from a certain angle of Lake Tenochtitlan, an ancient Náhuatl might have seen this image, composed of the real structure and its reflection in the water, although the two images would thus have been joined at the base and not at the temple platform. However, for the ancient Mexicans, time and space must have been contiguous dimensions.

In the myth of the ages or the “legend of the suns,” the periods of the Earth (time) had followed one another (see the graphic representation of this in the Aztec Calendar) in the same directions as the cardinal points (space) of the sun (figure 5).

First, dawn, second, zenith, third, evening, and fourth, sunset. At each of

these spatial points, a period of time occurred, where a world or age had existed, with a certain specified type of man, who was doomed to disappear. A deity would also have reigned over each.

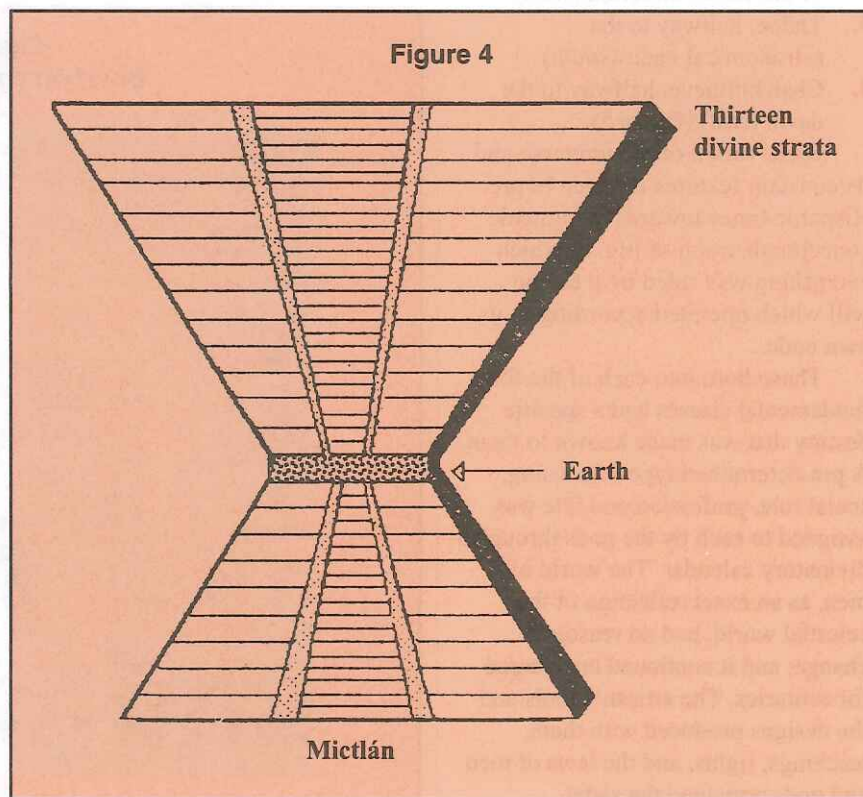
Four of the principal deities ruled simultaneously over a cardinal point

and an era of time. As the deities are thus simultaneously time and space, the stratification of the imaginary world inhabited by them is therefore also temporal and spatial. The same is true for pyramidal architecture, which we have seen to be built in the image and semblance of this imaginary stratification.

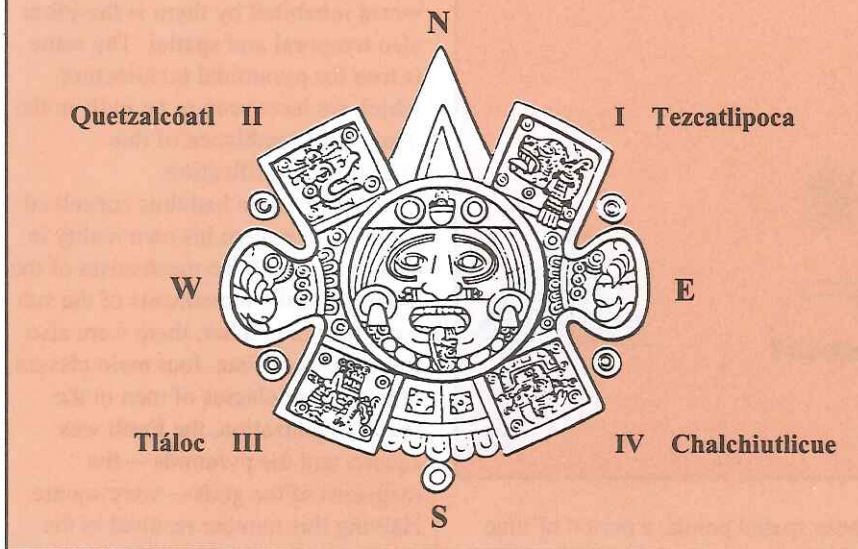
Ancient man had thus conceived of a way to govern his own reality in accordance with the mechanism of the universe. If the movements of the sun were four in number, there were also four phases of time, four main classes of gods, four classes of men in the social organization, the Earth was square, and the pyramids—the mansions of the gods—were square. Halving this number resulted in the essence of the *Ometecuhtli/Omecihauhtli* divinity, as the masculine and feminine, the sun and the moon in the skies over Teotihuacan, the light and obscurity of day and night.

The gods depicted in the Sun Stone are also, coincidentally, at the

Figure 4



**Figure 5**  
Nahui Ollin, central part of the Sun Stone



mid-point in the fundamental movements of the sun and the cardinal points as known to the Europeans:

1. Tezcatlipoca, between the dawn (east) and the zenith (north).
2. Quetzalcóatl, at the halfway point of the sunset direction (west).
3. Tláloc, halfway to the astronomical nadir (south).
4. Chalchiutlicue, halfway to the dawn (east) (figure 5).

Observation of the universe and its constant features led men in pre-Hispanic times towards a dogmatic conceptualization of life, in which everything was ruled by a divine will which operated according to its own code.

Those born into each of the four fundamental classes had a specific destiny that was made known to them. A pre-determined type of housing, social role, profession and fate was assigned to each by the gods through a divinatory calendar. The world of men, as an exact reflection of the celestial world, had no reason to change; and it continued unchanged for centuries. The artisan's tools and the designs produced with them, teachings, rights, and the laws of men and gods remained the same.

Despite the fact that the immutable order of life and thought of our remote Mexican ancestors remains incomprehensible to us as modern men, undeniable evidence of the longevity of this order of things

is to be found over no less a span of time than ten thousand years, until the Spaniards of the 16th century brought their beliefs to the continent.

Ten thousand years of the immutability of the indigenous peoples, as opposed to five hundred years of international "progress" initiated by the Spanish conquistadors in the era of Cortés! Life went on in that immense span of time, just as it does in this brief and conflict-filled period.

The slow pace and the unshakability of the indigenous peoples' life, when compared to the problems of contemporary existence, should not lead us to choose the option of immutability and set ideas inherited from the past, given that such an option is as improbable as it is undesirable. Yet the evidence that societies were able to survive over the course of centuries, under a constellation of ideas distinct from those underlying contemporary progress and competition, remains valid. Man has

**Figure 6**  
Bourbon codex, plate 21

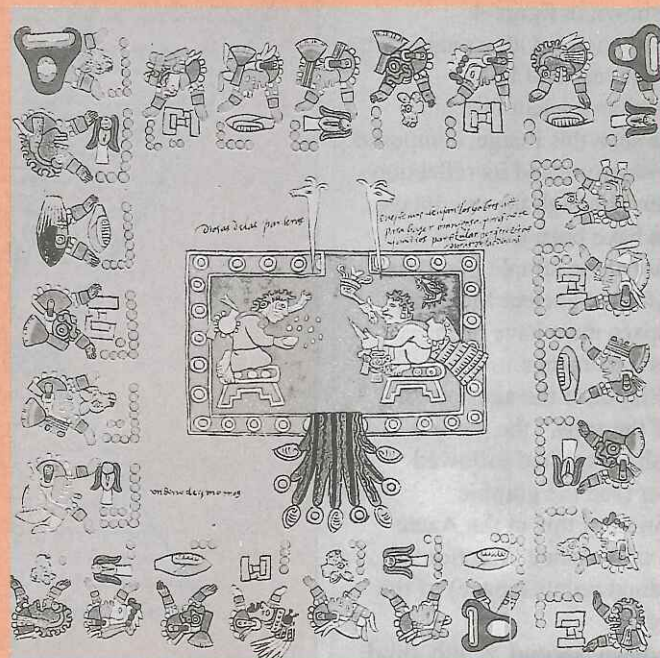
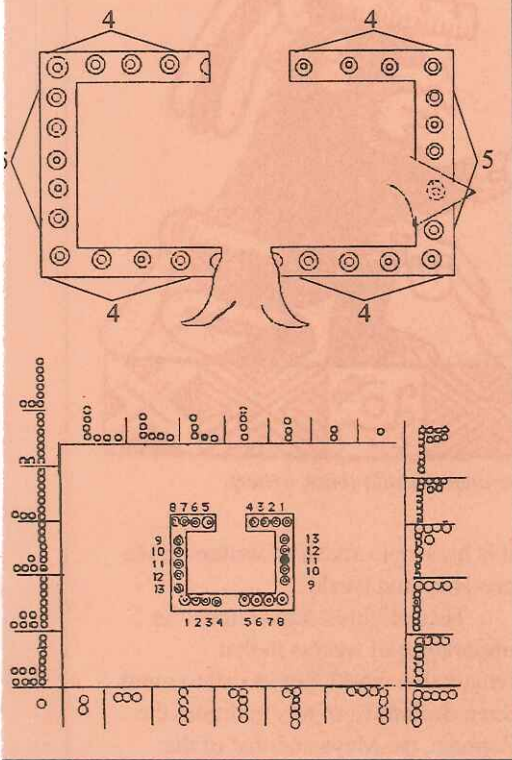


Figure 7



never been indefinitely condemned to one form of thinking.

How was it that the Mesoamericans latched on to the ideas of fixedness and immutability, ideas that bound them for so many centuries under the weight of unalterable religious precepts, immersed in a fixed social organization, inhabiting the same houses, celebrating the same festivals on the pyramids, sculpting the same stone faces with the same tools, planting corn with the same implements, over the course of ten long millennia?

The answer lies in the phenomenological basis of this constellation of ideas and behaviors. Man, his customs and his intelligence, are an integral function of the cosmic mechanism; there is the sun and the moon, light and shadow, masculine and feminine, and duality is the principle of divinity. There are four solar movements, with four principal gods—the offspring of

duality—who project temples in their own image upon the face of the square Earth, which is also projected downward towards the nothingness of the netherworld.

How does change occur, when it is the reflection of the cosmos? Yet, above all, who would be daring enough, and what reasons could he have, for going against the will of the gods who had delivered the world in this very form, and who watched over it afterwards?

In reality, this indigenous phenomenology would become familiar with the concept of change when the Spaniards arrived. Without them, would the native populations of ancient times have become familiar with change, sooner or later, at any rate? In questions of human behavior during past eras, the only reasonable evidence is what actually happened. Questions posed in hindsight have only speculative value and belong to the field of metaphysics—a rather intangible field by definition.

Plate 21 of the Bourbon codex (figure 6), which Francisco del Paso y Troncoso erroneously interpreted as “figures on a mat”—an error repeated by some contemporary authorities—is a scene that takes place in the interior of a temple platform. The access door, located in the upper part of the scene, would be out of place on a mat, and the concentric circles surrounding the platform are, as in other cases, the thirteen calendar circles, which also decorate the borders of the plate itself (figure 7).

The figures are those of *Oxomuco* (left) and *Cipactónal*, the primordial couple, a type of Náhuatl Adam and Eve, resting in the interior of the platform. Placed upon the Earth, or the intermediate level between the sky and the netherworld, they are the pristine pair selected by the gods to interpret calendars, to aid in planting and divination: she throws down nine grains of corn, an iconographic

synthesis of harvesting and divination. The two figures depicting the imaginary strata of the world are repeated throughout the plate. Naturally enough, the scene is set at the intermediate level: the square of the Earth, or the temple platform.

In light of this, does the interpretation of the scene as located on “a mat” have any meaning? Del Paso also left us, together with his error, a correct interpretation, which confirms my hypothesis: *Oxomuco* “throws down nine grains of corn, which fall upon the mat; this is the diviner or augurer throwing lots, using as many grains of corn as there are Spirits of the Night” (Bourbon codex [1898], Del Paso, Siglo XXI Pubs., pp. 92-93).

The “Spirits of the Night” are the gods of the nine levels of the netherworld. Thus, the other thirteen gods, dwelling in the sky, rise above the heads of the primordial couple, who are simultaneously on the level of the Earth and at the top of a pyramid.

Similar beliefs regarding thirteen skies and nine levels of the underworld are illustrated in the Vatican codex A. The existence of nine architectural platforms, plus a temple, in many Mesoamerican pyramids which have the ninth level—the ultimate stage of the underworld—as their base, is a consequence of solar illumination of a square suspended in the air.

This also proves that ancient Mexican beliefs included the concept of time and space as contiguous dimensions and, furthermore, that these beliefs were founded upon the concept of a pre-established world based upon observation of the universe, with particular emphasis on solar and lunar movements.

The tireless repetition of these premises made Mesoamerican societies unalterable formations in which conceptions of change or “progress” played no relevant role in the socio-cultural dynamic. M