

ANCESTRAL LEGACY · HISTORY OF MEXICO · VOLUME 3

Religious Thought and Philosophy

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Investigación exhaustiva académica

Investigación: Esteban Gutiérrez A.

Editado por EGA

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Series Prologue

The history of the Indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica has been told, for far too long, through the eyes of the conqueror. This series is born of the conviction that only by understanding the worldview, science, art, and social organization of the Mexica from within their own internal logic can we come close to their greatness and the tragedy of their fall.

Ancestral Legacy: History of Mexico is the result of exhaustive academic research drawing on primary sources —the codices— and on the foundational works of Mexican anthropology and archaeology: Jacques Soustelle, Miguel León-Portilla, Alfredo López Austin, and Ross Hassig, among others. This is not another tale of sacrifices and wars, but a deep immersion in the civilizational fabric that built the Empire of Anáhuac.

The thesis holding these twelve volumes together is clear: the greatness of Mexica culture did not lie solely in its military might, but in its exceptional capacity to create a civilizational synthesis. In barely two centuries, the Mexica forged a complex imperial state that articulated a structured religious worldview, a social engineering of castes and guilds, a meticulously recorded tribute economy, and a deeply ritualized everyday life —all of it in the lake environment of Tenochtitlan. Its fall was not the end of a barbarian culture, but the abrupt murder of a civilization in full development,

whose legacy endures in Mexican identity today.

Each volume of the series explores one chapter of that story in depth: the origin and founding, the prodigious city, religious thought, the pantheon and sacrifice, the state, society, tribute, daily life, science and war, the codices, the conquest, and finally the legacy. Each book includes its own index, illustrations, a glossary of Nahuatl terms, a timeline, and an annotated bibliography, so it can be read on its own or as part of the whole.

May this work help vindicate the memory of a people murdered in the fullness of their development, and may new generations come to know —with rigor and with pride— the roots of Mexico.

Research: Esteban Gutiérrez A.

Edited by EGA

Ometeotl and Duality

The God Who Is Two

At the summit of the Nahua universe, above the twelve lower heavens and beyond the reach of any temple or priest, dwells a god who is two. His name is **Ometeotl**, which in the Nahuatl language means literally "god two": *ome*, two, and *teotl*, god — a word that the sixteenth-century friars hastily translated as "god" but which designated a far broader reality, that of sacred energy, of the potent and mysterious dwelling within things. Ometeotl is not one god among others: he is the originating principle from which everything proceeds, the primordial duality that unfolds to engender the world.

The colonial sources that preserved the memory of the ancient Mexicans name him in several ways, and each name reveals a facet of his nature. As **Ometecuhtli**, "the lord two," and as **Omecihuatl**, "the lady two," he is at once masculine and feminine, father and mother of the universe. He dwells in **Omeyocan**, the "place of duality," situated in the thirteenth heaven, the highest level of the celestial vault. From there, without moving, without intervening directly in the affairs of men, he engenders the gods and orders the cosmos by his dual existence alone.

According to the account gathered in the *Historia de los mexicanos

por sus pinturas* (History of the Mexicans as Told by Their Paintings), one of the most valuable documents for understanding Nahua cosmogony, Ometeotl had four sons, the four **Tezcatlipocas**, each associated with a direction of the universe and a color: the red Tezcatlipoca of the east, the black Tezcatlipoca of the north, **Quetzalcoatl**, the white Tezcatlipoca of the west, and **Huitzilopochtli**, the blue Tezcatlipoca of the south. These four gods, in turn, would be the creators of the visible world, the orderers of the cosmic eras, the protagonists of the creation myths. But behind them, like the silent root of an immense tree, remains Ometeotl: the two that is one, the unity that contains difference.

The most surprising thing about Ometeotl, to eyes accustomed to the religions of the ancient world, is his distance from worship. While gods such as Huitzilopochtli or Tlaloc received monumental temples, crowded festivals, and constant offerings, Ometeotl barely appears in ritual life. No temples dedicated exclusively to him are known in Tenochtitlan; no victims were sacrificed to him in public ceremonies; no favors were asked of him in times of need. Scholars have debated the meaning of this absence for decades, and the most solid conclusion is also the most revealing: Ometeotl was not a god to be worshiped, but a principle to be contemplated. His place was not on the altar, but in the reflection of the sages.

This distinction is fundamental to understanding Nahua religion. As the studies of **Miguel León-Portilla** have shown, ancient Mexican thought operated on two simultaneous levels: the level of popular worship, with its familiar gods, festivals, and rites, and the level of philosophical speculation, where the **tlamatinime**, the sages, asked about the ultimate nature of reality. Ometeotl belongs to this second level. He is the Nahua answer to the question that all great

philosophical traditions have formulated: what is the first principle from which everything derives?

The answer of the Nahuatl sages was duality. Not a single masculine god as in the monotheistic religions, not a primordial chaos from which the gods emerge by spontaneous generation, but a dual principle, masculine-feminine, that engenders by unfolding. Duality was not for them a problem to be solved, but the very structure of reality: everything that exists partakes of two complementary poles that need each other. Day needs night, life needs death, the dry needs the wet, the above needs the below. Omēteotl is the supreme expression of this intuition: the original two from which the multiplicity of the world springs.

The friars who recorded these beliefs, such as **Bernardino de Sahagún**, were bewildered by this figure. Accustomed to a single, personal, provident God, they did not know where to place a dual, abstract, distant god. Some interpreted him as a confused intuition of the Christian God; others dismissed him as one more "idolatry." It was necessary to wait until the twentieth century, and for the pioneering work of León-Portilla, for Omēteotl to be understood on his own terms: not as a failed god, but as a first-order philosophical concept, comparable in abstraction to the first principles of Greek philosophy or the traditions of Asia.

A methodological note is in order, for the critical reader will ask: how do we know all this? The principal source for Omēteotl is the **Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España** — the **Florentine Codex** — where Sahagún's Indigenous informants described the supreme dual god. Additional testimonies come from the **Codex Vaticanus A** (or **Ríos**), the **Histoire du Mexique**, and the **Histoire du Mexique** manuscripts, which mention the divine pair

under various names. The convergence of these independent sources — Franciscan friars and anonymous chroniclers, Indigenous informants and mestizo compilers — gives the doctrine a solid documentary base. Ometeotl is not a modern invention: he is in the sixteenth-century sources, described by men who had worshipped him or whose parents had.

It is also worth noting the names' poetry. Nahuatl divine names are not labels: they are definitions. *Ometeotl* defines the god as duality; *Ometecuhtli* and *Omecihuatl* define him as the lord-and-lady pair; *Tonacatecuhtli* defines him as sustenance; *Tloque Nahuaque* defines him as nearness itself. Each name is a theological proposition, and together they form a system: the god is two, is lord and lady, is food, is the near. The Nahuatl language, as we shall see in its own section, was the first theology of the Nahuas: before the temples, the words.

The Dual Architecture of the Cosmos

If Ometeotl is the principle, the universe is its unfolding. The Nahua worldview conceived the cosmos as a structure ordered into three great vertical regions, crossed by a central axis and oriented toward the four directions. This architecture was not mere decoration of thought: it was the map that oriented ritual life, agriculture, war, and death. Every being, every day, every event had its place in this order, and to know that place was to know its meaning.

Above stretched the thirteen heavens, the *ilhuicatli*, arranged as superimposed layers. The first heaven, closest to the earth, was the domain of the moon and the clouds; higher up were the stars, the sun, the planets; in the upper levels dwelled the gods, each in his corresponding stratum. The thirteenth heaven, the highest, was

Omeyocan, the abode of Ometeotl. This image of superimposed heavens should not be understood as naive astronomy: it was a hierarchy of the sacred, a scale running from the nearest and most material to the most distant and abstract.

In the center lay **tlalticpac**, "upon the earth," the world of men. The earth was not for the Nahuas a sphere floating in the void, but a vast quadrangular surface, surrounded by the primordial waters of the cosmic **altepetl**, the "water hill" that in mythology encircled the world. At the center of this surface rose the axis of the universe, represented sometimes as a gigantic ceiba tree, sometimes as the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan, which reproduced the sacred mountain in stone. Toward the four directions stretched the four regions of the world, each with its color, its god, its calendrical sign, and its destiny.

Below the earth opened the nine levels of the underworld, **Mictlan**, where the dead descended on a four-year journey. We will deal with this realm of the dead in detail in the final chapter of this volume; suffice it to note here that the verticality of the Nahua cosmos was not a simple fantastic geography, but the spatial expression of duality: the above and the below correspond to and need each other, like the two halves of Ometeotl.

The horizontal structure of the universe was equally dual. The four directions — east, north, west, and south — formed two pairs of complementary opposites: the luminous east facing the dark west, the cold dry north facing the warm humid south. In the center, the fifth direction, the "navel" of the world, balanced the tensions. This figure of the four directions plus the center, known as the **quincunx**, appears again and again in Mesoamerican art: in the codices, in architecture, in the arrangement of offerings. It is the

visual signature of a worldview that thinks of the world as a balance of contraries.

The anthropologist **Alfredo López Austin** proposed a fundamental key to understanding this logic: the concept of complementary pairs of opposites, expressed in Nahuatl with the particle **inamic**, "its pair," "its opposite." The cold has its **inamic** in the hot, the dry in the wet, light in darkness, life in death. But — and this is the decisive point — opposites do not cancel each other out: they complement each other. The health of the body, the fertility of the land, the order of the cosmos depend on the dynamic balance between contraries, not on the victory of one over the other. This is a profound difference from Western thought, which tends to conceive opposites as enemies — good versus evil, reason versus passion — where one must prevail. For the Nahuas, reality was a creative tension, and Omēteotl, the god who is two, was its ultimate foundation.

The Abstract Behind the Concrete

The figure of Omēteotl raises a question scholars have never stopped asking: how is it possible that a society with a public religion so ritualized, so full of familiar gods and bloody ceremonies, conceived at the same time so abstract a principle? The answer takes us to the heart of Nahua philosophy and to one of its most refined intuitions: the distinction between what is seen and what grounds what is seen.

The **tlamatinime** understood that the gods of the pantheon — Tlaloc with his water jar, Huitzilopochtli with his fire serpent, Quetzalcoatl with his wind mask — were concrete manifestations of deeper forces. Each god was, so to speak, a mask that the sacred

principle put on to act in a particular domain of reality. But behind all the masks there was a single face, or rather, a double face: Omēteotl. This conception, which specialists sometimes call "dualistic monism," allowed the Nahuas to be polytheists in worship and monists in reflection, without any contradiction.

There is a moving testimony to this search for the abstract in the **Cantares mexicanos**, the collection of Nahua poetry that survived the conquest. In one of the poems attributed to the circle of **Nezahualcoyotl**, the poet-king of Texcoco, the poet asks in anguish whether anything in this world is true and permanent: flowers wither, songs are forgotten, men die. Where, then, is that which does not perish? The answer the tradition offers is not a personal god who consoles, but a metaphysical intuition: the only permanent thing is the dual principle that engenders everything and gathers everything. Nahua philosophy did not seek individual salvation, but understanding of the order.

This understanding had a poetic expression of extraordinary beauty: **in xochitl in cuicatl**, "flower and song." For the Nahuas, poetry — flower and song — was not an ornament of life, but the only path to truth. Everyday language, that of markets and tributes, could not name the sacred; only the flowery word, metaphor, ritual song could approach the mystery. The **tlamatinime** were, above all, poets: men who with flowers and songs tried to say the unsayable. And the unsayable was, ultimately, the original duality.

It is worth pausing over a frequent misunderstanding. For a long time, historiography presented Mexica religion as a collection of bloody superstitions, unworthy of the name "thought." This vision, inherited from the chroniclers of the conquest, deliberately ignored the philosophical level of Nahua culture. The friars, interested in

extirpating "idolatry," recorded the rites but despised the speculations; the nineteenth-century liberal historians, embarrassed by the "barbaric" past, preferred to look away. It was twentieth-century anthropology that, with patience and respect, reconstructed the intellectual edifice the *tlamatinime* had raised.

The rediscovery of Ometeotl as a philosophical concept has one undisputed protagonist: **Miguel León-Portilla**. In his work **La filosofía náhuatl estudiada en sus fuentes** (Nahua Philosophy Studied in Its Sources), published in 1956, he demonstrated with philological rigor that the Nahuatl-language texts contained systematic reflection on being, knowing, and acting. Ometeotl, he argued, was the supreme metaphysical principle of this philosophy: the original duality, cause of itself, foundation of all that exists. The thesis was debated — some colleagues considered it a Western projection onto mythical thought — but it opened a field of study that today is impossible to ignore: Nahua philosophy exists, has its own concepts, and deserves a place among the philosophical traditions of the world.

What does it mean, concretely, for the first principle to be dual? It means, first, that reality is not explained by the struggle between good and evil, but by the complementarity of opposites. It means, second, that creation is not a single finished act, but a continuous process of unfolding: the two engenders the four — the four Tezcatlipocas, the four directions —, the four engenders the multiplicity of the world. And it means, third, that the human being, made in the image of this duality, is himself a double being: body and soul, face and heart, as we shall see when studying the philosophical anthropology of the *tlamatinime*.

There is an image from the codices that summarizes this conception

better than a thousand words: the cosmogram of the **Codex Fejérváry-Mayer**, where the universe appears as a square divided into four regions around a center, with the gods of each direction and the day signs distributed in perfect order. It is not a geographical map: it is a diagram of thought, the visual representation of a cosmos where each thing has its complementary opposite and its place in the balance. Whoever contemplates that cosmogram is seeing, in a sense, the face of Ometeotl: the two that has become world.

Duality, in short, was not for the Nahuas one theory among others: it was the very form of their experience. The peasant who sowed maize knew that the seed must die in the earth to be reborn as a plant; the midwife who received a child knew that birth was also a form of death, the death of the previous life; the warrior who marched to battle knew that his death could be a cosmic victory. To live, in the Nahua world, was to inhabit the tension between opposites without pretending to resolve it. Ometeotl, the god who is two, was the sacred name of that tension.

The Masks of the Sacred: The Gods as Faces of Duality

If Ometeotl is the silent principle, the gods of the Nahua pantheon are his voice. The relationship between the dual principle and the divinities of worship deserves understanding, because it reveals one of the most sophisticated features of Mesoamerican religious thought: the capacity to hold, at the same time, the unity of the foundation and the plurality of its manifestations.

Each major god can be read as a particularization of the original duality. **Quetzalcoatl**, the feathered serpent, is himself a dual

being: serpent crawling on the earth and bird soaring through the sky, the terrestrial and the celestial joined in a single body. It is no accident that his name combines the two realms: **quetzalli**, the precious feather of the quetzal bird, and **coatl**, the serpent. Quetzalcoatl is the god of wind, of knowledge, of civilized life; but he is also the one who descends to the underworld to steal the bones of the dead, the one who sacrifices himself so that humanity may exist. In his figure are knotted creation and destruction, wisdom and suffering: he is Ometeotl made myth.

His counterpart, his **inamic**, is **Tezcatlipoca**, the "smoking mirror," god of night, of discord, of capricious destiny. Where Quetzalcoatl orders, Tezcatlipoca disorders; where one creates, the other destroys. But the opposition is not moral in the Western sense: Tezcatlipoca is not the devil. He is the necessary pole of reality, the shadow without which light could not be distinguished. The myths present them locked in eternal rivalry — they steal the sun from each other, deceive each other, fight each other — and yet the cosmos needs both. Night needs day as much as day needs night. This pair of rival gods is perhaps the liveliest expression of Ometeotl duality in the realm of myth.

Tlaloc, the rain god, offers another example. He is the giver of the water that makes maize grow, and at the same time the sender of hail, flood, and lightning that destroy the harvests. Peasants loved and feared him in equal parts, because they knew that the same force that fertilizes can annihilate. His paradise, **Tlalocan**, was a place of perpetual abundance where the dead by water went — the drowned, those struck by lightning — but it was also the reservoir of all the waters of the world, including the destructive ones. Tlaloc is the duality of water: life and death in a single god.

Huitzilopochtli, the left-handed hummingbird, patron god of the Mexica, embodies the duality of war: he is the young sun that each morning defeats the darkness and the insatiable warrior who demands hearts to keep winning. His birth myth — he emerges armed from the womb of **Coatlicue**, "serpent skirt," to defeat his siblings the stars and his sister the moon — is an allegory of dawn: each day, the sun is born and defeats the night. But the victory is never definitive: each night, the sun descends to the underworld and must conquer again. Huitzilopochtli is the ever-threatened triumph, the light that exists only because darkness exists.

And **Coatlicue** herself, the mother of the gods, is one of the most powerful images of duality: her skirt of intertwined serpents, her necklace of hands and hearts, her head formed by two serpents facing each other. She is the earth that gives life and the death that devours everything, the nourishing mother and the devourer. The monumental sculpture of Coatlicue discovered in 1790, now exhibited in the National Museum of Anthropology, still overwhelms whoever contemplates it: she is not a kindly goddess; she is duality carved in stone.

This reading of the gods as faces of duality is not a modern invention: it is inscribed in the Nahuatl language itself. Many gods bear dual names or split into pairs: **Tlazolteotl**, goddess of filth and at the same time she who cleanses sin; **Xipe Totec**, "our lord the flayed one," god of spring who wears the skin of the sacrificed victim — death as the condition of rebirth; **Mictlantecuhtli** and **Mictecacihuatl**, the lord and lady of the dead, the pair who governs the underworld. The entire pantheon can be read as a great unfolding of the original duality into complementary pairs.

Moreover, duality was not exclusive to the Mexica. Mesoamerican

peoples shared, with local variants, the intuition of a dual creator principle. Among the Maya, the creator pair of the *Popol Vuh* — **Tepeu** and **Gucumatz**, the "framer" and the "feathered serpent" — bears a family resemblance to Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl. Among the peoples of Oaxaca and the Gulf appear primordial divine pairs with similar functions. This convergence suggests that original duality was not a late invention of the sages of Tenochtitlan, but a profound and ancient intuition of Mesoamerican civilization, refined over centuries until it reached in Ometeotl its most abstract formulation.

Lived Duality: The Principle in Everyday Existence

It would be a mistake to think that Ometeotl and duality belonged only to the philosophers' study. The dual principle permeated the everyday life of the Nahuas in concrete, visible ways that any peasant or artisan recognized without need of metaphysical speculation.

The agricultural cycle was the most eloquent school of duality. Maize — sacred plant, sustenance, and symbol of the people — taught each year the fundamental lesson: the seed must be buried, must die in the darkness of the earth, to be reborn as a plant. Without death there is no life, without darkness no germination. The festivals of the twenty-day periods ritualized this alternation: times of sowing and times of harvest, times of rain and times of drought, each with its gods, its rites, and its prohibitions. The year itself was a dual breathing: inhaling and exhaling, dying and being reborn.

The human body was another theater of duality. According to the philosophical anthropology that López Austin reconstructed from the sources, the human being was composed of a material and

heavy part — the body — and several animistic entities, among which stood out the **tonalli**, the heat and destiny bound to the day of birth; the **teyolia**, the soul of the heart, which traveled to the beyond; and the **ihiyotl**, the breath, the vital exhalation. The person was, then, a dual — and multiple — compound of matter and spirits, of the heavy and the light. Illness was understood as an imbalance among these entities, a rupture of the harmonious duality; healing, as its restoration.

Social organization reflected the same principle. Tenochtitlan was divided into four main wards grouped into two halves, and the entire city was conceived as an inhabited quincunx. Mexica government, in its origins, was dual: two tlatoanis, or a tlatoani and a cihuacoatl — the "woman serpent," second in command — who balanced power. War and agriculture, the two fundamental activities, divided the year in ritual alternation. Even the language, with its difrasismos — those pairs of metaphors such as **in xochitl in cuicatl**, "flower and song," for "poetry," or **in ixtli in yollotl**, "face and heart," for "person" — thought in complementary pairs.

This omnipresence of duality explains why Ometeotl, even without temples, was everywhere: he was the deep grammar of a culture. The **tlamatinime** did not invent duality; they discovered it operating in the maize, in the body, in the city, and in the language, and elevated it to a metaphysical principle. Nahua philosophy, like all genuine philosophy, was born of attention to the everyday.

The Modern Debate: The Dual God Under Science's Lens

The interpretation of Ometeotl we have presented — the original dual principle, metaphysical foundation of Nahua thought — has not

been exempt from debate. It deserves honest exposition, because the history of this concept is also the history of how modern science learned to read Indigenous thought without deforming it.

The first to take the figure of Ometeotl seriously was the French anthropologist **Jacques Soustelle**, whose work **L'Univers des Aztèques** (The Universe of the Aztecs, 1940) presented the dual god as the supreme divinity of the Mexica, an androgynous creator being situated above all other gods. Soustelle, however, interpreted him in Western theological key: he saw in Ometeotl a kind of personal supreme god, almost an equivalent of the Christian God. This reading, though pioneering, projected onto Nahua thought categories foreign to it.

It was **Miguel León-Portilla** who, in **La filosofía náhuatl** (1956) and later works, took the decisive step: Ometeotl was not a personal supreme god, but a metaphysical principle, the original duality, cause of itself. León-Portilla relied on rigorous philological analysis of the Nahuatl-language texts and on the fundamental distinction between the level of popular worship and the level of the sages' reflection. His interpretation made Ometeotl the cornerstone of Nahua philosophy and opened a field of study that continues today.

But not all specialists accepted this reading. Some, like the historian **Alfredo López Austin**, nuanced the thesis: without denying the importance of duality, they warned against the temptation to turn Nahua thought into a closed philosophical system in the Western manner. López Austin proposed understanding Mesoamerican religion as a set of "complexes" of beliefs — the creator-god complex, the rain complex, the death complex — coexisting without need of total systematization. In this view, Ometeotl would be less a

single metaphysical principle than the center of a complex of ideas about dual creation, expressed in diverse ways in diverse contexts.

Other critics went further and raised an uncomfortable question: what if Omēteotl were, in part, a colonial construction? They observed that the most explicit sources on the dual god — the **Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas**, the **Histoire du Méchique** — were written by Indigenous scribes under friars' supervision, in a context where there was interest in finding a "supreme god" identifiable with the Christian God. Might the informants not have, consciously or unconsciously, adapted their beliefs to their interrogators' expectations? This hypothesis, defended with various nuances by several scholars, demands prudence: the figure of Omēteotl as we know it may be tinged by the dialogue — and the misunderstanding — between two worlds.

Against this objection, defenders of Omēteotl's authenticity adduce several proofs. First, dual creation appears in independent sources from different regions, making it difficult to attribute to a single manipulation. Second, the dual structure of the cosmos — complementary pairs of opposites, the quincunx, the difrasismos of the language — is too deep and too widespread to be a late invention: it is the grammar of the entire Mesoamerican culture, not the ornament of a text. And third, the friars themselves were bewildered by Omēteotl, not pleased: had the informants wished to ingratiate themselves, they would have offered a single masculine god, not an abstract dual principle.

The debate remains open, and the truth is likely somewhere in between: Omēteotl existed in pre-Hispanic thought as a dual creator principle, but the colonial sources present him with a degree of systematization that may owe something to the encounter with

European theology. This caution does not diminish his importance: on the contrary, it reminds us that we work with a living tradition, not a fossil. The **tlamatinime** left no treatises; they left traces in texts written under difficult circumstances, and reconstructing their thought is a work of interpretation demanding both rigor and imagination.

There is one last question the modern debate has illuminated: the relationship between Omēteotl and concrete religious experience. If the dual god was so abstract, what place did he occupy in the spiritual life of a peasant or artisan? The most plausible answer is that Omēteotl operated as a horizon, not an interlocutor: no one prayed to him, but all lived in the world his duality ordered. He was like the grammar of a language: no one invokes it when speaking, but without it there would be no speech. The familiar gods — Tlaloc, Huitzilopochtli, Quetzalcoatl — were the words; Omēteotl was the grammar. And the **tlamatinime**, the grammarians who studied it.

The debate's protagonists deserve names, for they are the giants on whose shoulders this volume stands. **Alfonso Caso** (1896-1970), archaeologist and interpreter of the codices, was among the first to take the dual god seriously as a theological system rather than a curiosity. **Miguel León-Portilla** (1926-2019), Caso's disciple, gave the doctrine its philosophical formulation and defended it against the skeptics with philological rigor. **Alfredo López Austin** (1936-2021), historian of religions, situated Omēteotl within the broader Mesoamerican cosmovision — the "hard nucleus" of shared beliefs — showing that duality was not a Mexica invention but a millenary structure. And **Eduard Seler** (1849-1922), the German pioneer, laid the foundations with his monumental commentaries on the codices, without which none of the later work

would have been possible. Four generations, three countries, one conclusion: the dual god is real in the sources, central in the system, and profound in its implications.

What remains debated is not Omēteotl's existence, but his **nature**: was he a personal god, worshipped with temples and rites, or an abstract principle, more philosophical than religious? The sources suggest both: the informants speak of him as a being — "our mother, our father" — but no temple to Omēteotl has been identified, no festival dedicated to him alone. He seems to have been too high for direct worship: one prayed to Tezcatlipoca or Tlaloc, not to the dual principle. This "distance" is itself theologically significant: the supreme god is the most abstract, the least anthropomorphic, the most philosophical. The Nahuas, like the Greeks with their **apeiron** or the Hindus with **Brahman**, placed at the summit of their pantheon not a bigger idol, but a principle. That a "primitive" religion — as the old historiography called it — reached this level of abstraction is one of the strongest arguments against the prejudice that philosophy is a European monopoly.

Omēteotl in Language: Nahuatl as Philosophy

There is a path to Omēteotl that passes not through myths or academic debates, but through language itself. Nahuatl, like all languages, is not a mere vehicle of thought: it is a way of thinking. And Nahuatl thinks in dualities.

Begin with the word **teotl**, which the friars translated as "god" and which gives Omēteotl his name. Modern scholars have shown that **teotl** designated something broader and subtler than a personal god: it was the quality of the sacred, the potent mysterious energy dwelling in things. A mountain could be **teotl**, a ruler could

partake of **teotl**, a ritual object accumulated **teotl**. The word named an intensity, not a person. When the Nahuas said **Ometeotl**, they were not naming a divine individual called "Two": they were naming dual sacredness, the sacred potency that is two. The translation "god two" is convenient but misleading: it would be more exact to say "dual sacredness."

The particle **inamic**, "its pair," "its opposite," is another example. Each thing had its **inamic**: the cold and the hot, the dry and the wet, light and darkness. But **inamic** does not mean "enemy": it means "the one facing me," "my complement." The language itself prevented thinking of opposites as adversaries: it named them as pairs. A Nahuatl speaker who said "cold" already had on the tip of the tongue its **inamic**, "hot," like two faces of one coin. Duality was not a theory to be learned: it was in the grammar.

The **difrasismos** — those metaphorical pairs with which Nahuatl names important realities — are the most refined expression of this dual thinking. **In xochitl in cuicatl**, "flower and song," names poetry; **in ixtli in yollotl**, "face and heart," names the moral person; **in atl in tepetl**, "water and hill," names the city; **in topan in mictlan**, "what is above us, the place of the dead," names the entire cosmos. Each difrasismo is a small linguistic Ometeotl: two elements that, together, say more than the sum of their parts. The flower alone is not poetry, song alone is not poetry: poetry is born of their encounter, as the world is born of the encounter of Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl.

Even the names of the gods are often difrasismos or dual pairs. **Tloque Nahuaque**, "owner of what is near and what is together," names supreme divinity by its dual presence: the near and the intimate. **Yohualli Ehecatl**, "night and wind," names Tezcatlipoca

in his invisible aspect. **In Tonan in Tota**, "our mother, our father," names the primordial divine pair in prayers. Nahua theology was made with language: each divine name was a miniature of duality.

This linguistic dimension has an important consequence for the debate on Nahua philosophy. If duality is inscribed in the language — in its particles, its metaphors, its divine names — then it cannot be a late invention of a few sages nor a friars' projection: it is the way of thinking of an entire people, sedimented over centuries in everyday speech. The **tlamatinime** did not create duality: they discovered it in their language and elevated it to a metaphysical principle. Philosophy, once again, was born of attention to the everyday.

The difrasismo deserves a final illustration, for it is the key to Nahua thought's architecture. Consider **in atl in tepetl**, "water and hill": two nouns that together mean "city." Why? Because a Mesoamerican city needed water (the spring, the lake) and the hill (the defensible height, the pyramid's stone): the pair names the city's two conditions of existence. Consider **in petlatl in icpalli**, "mat and seat": together they mean "authority," for the ruler sat on the mat-throne. Consider **in mitl in chimalli**, "arrow and shield": together, "war." In each case, the whole is more than the sum of the parts: the pair creates a third meaning, irreducible to either term. This is duality as logic: truth emerges from the union of contraries. The Nahuatl speaker who said "flower and song" was not decorating the word "poetry": he was defining it, with philosophical precision, as the union of the ephemeral (flower) and the enduring (song).

The Creation of the World: From Dual Principle to Ordered Cosmos

How did the dual principle pass from being two to being world? The Nahua creation myths narrate this transit with overflowing imagination, and they deserve knowing because they show Ometeotl — or his sons — in action: duality ceasing to be principle and becoming history.

The most detailed account is offered by the **Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas**. After engendering the four Tezcatlipocas, Ometeotl entrusted them with the creation of the world. The four gods gathered and decided to create, first of all, the earth. But the primordial earth was not a docile surface: it was **Cipactli**, a colossal monster, half crocodile and half fish, floating on the primordial waters, with hungry mouths at every joint of its body. To create the habitable earth, the gods had to defeat the monster: Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl — the two rivals united for once — transformed into giant serpents, seized the monster by its ends, and split it in two. From one half they made the earth, from the other the sky. But Cipactli, even dismembered, remained alive and demanded blood: hence, says the myth, the earth needs to be fed with sacrifices. Creation, once again, is born of violence and demands its ritual continuation.

With the earth created, the gods raised the sky, which had collapsed upon it. Four gods held the vault at the four directions — an image the codices represent with figures bearing the firmament — and at the center remained the axis of the world. Then they created fire, water, fish, and finally primordial man and woman. Each creative act followed the same pattern: from dual unfolding — two gods holding, two halves of the monster — order was born. Creation was not a single act of a solitary god: it was a collaboration of contraries, a choreography of duality.

Another myth, gathered in the **Histoire du Méchique**, attributes creation directly to Ometeotl and his consort: the divine pair engenders the gods, and these, through successive generations, populate the cosmos. In this version, creation is a genealogy: the two engenders the four, the four engenders the multitude. The genealogical structure — so important in Mesoamerican societies, where lineage was the basis of power — is projected onto the cosmos: the universe is a great family whose ancestor is duality.

This plurality of accounts has bewildered some scholars, accustomed to the canonical scriptures of the great religions. But the absence of a canon is itself a philosophical datum: Nahua thought did not need a single official account, because its truth lay not in the letter but in the structure. Each myth was a variation on the same theme — dual creation — as each performance of a musical piece is a variation on the same score. The **tlamatinime** were not guardians of a dogma: they were interpreters of a cosmic grammar.

There remains, finally, an intimate reason to study Ometeotl: he returns to us an image of the human being as a dual being, made in the principle's image. If god is two, man is two: face and heart, body and **tonalli**, the visible and the invisible. To recognize oneself as dual is to recognize oneself as incomplete, in need of the other — the complementary opposite — to be whole. In an age that idolizes self-sufficiency, the old wisdom of the dual god whispers a forgotten truth: no one suffices unto himself; we are all two halves seeking their pair.

The dual god, in the end, does not ask for worship: he asks for understanding. And to understand him is to understand ourselves. Two that are one, one that is two: the oldest mystery of Anáhuac,

and perhaps the most enduring.

There is one last image to carry away from this chapter: the **Codex Fejérváry-Mayer** open on the reader's table, with its cosmogram of four directions and center, its colored gods, its day signs turning in perfect order. Whoever sees it for the first time sees a beautiful drawing; whoever sees it after reading these pages sees a treatise on philosophy. That is the distance this volume has sought to travel: from image to concept, from myth to principle, from stone to thought.





Before leaving the dual principle, a final reflection on its **ethical** dimension — for Ometeotl is not only metaphysics. If the cosmos is a balance of contraries, then human life must be a balance too: the *huehuetlatolli*'s middle path, the avoidance of excess, the ideal of face and heart. The dual god thus founds an ethics: to live well is to imitate the cosmos, holding opposites in creative tension. The proud man breaks the balance, like the absolute element that destroys its sun; the measured man maintains it, like the priests who renewed the fire. Metaphysics becomes morals without changing language:

the same duality that explains the world teaches how to inhabit it. This continuity — from cosmology to ethics, from the thirteenth heaven to the father's counsel — is the signature of Nahua thought: a philosophy where nothing is separate, where the abstract and the concrete, the divine and the human, are two faces of the same dual truth.

The Five Suns

The Myth of the Eras

The ancient Mexicans believed that the world they lived in was not the first. Before the sun that lit them, other suns had existed — other humanities, other heavens and other earths, each destroyed by a cataclysm. This conviction, recorded in several sixteenth-century documents, constitutes one of the most elaborate cosmogonic myths of pre-Hispanic America: the legend of the **Five Suns**, the five eras of the world.

The principal source is a manuscript known as the **Legend of the Suns**, written in 1558 by Indigenous scribes in the Nahuatl language, probably in the Mexico City region. The text, barely a few pages long, condenses an oral tradition of enormous antiquity: the history of the successive creations and destructions of the universe. Other sources — the **Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas**, the memorials of Sahagún's informants, the annals of Cuauhtitlan — tell partially different versions, with another order of the suns or divergent details. These differences should not be seen as errors: they are the trace of a living tradition, told in different ways in different cities, as happens with the great myths of all peoples.

The first sun was called **Nahui Ocelotl**, "Four Jaguar." It lasted 676 years. In that time, the legend tells, the earth was inhabited by

giants, the **quinametzin**, beings of colossal strength who fed on acorns and pine nuts. But that world ended terribly: when the sun of that era set, jaguars descended from the sky and devoured the giants. The first sun was thus the sun of the earth devoured by fierceness. Some interpreters have seen in this myth the deformed memory of an archaic age — perhaps the memory of the great Pleistocene mammals or the first settlers; others read it as an allegory of primordial violence. Be that as it may, the message is clear: the cosmos's first attempt failed.

The second sun was **Nahui Ehecatl**, "Four Wind." It lasted 364 years. Its inhabitants fed on a wild plant called **acicintli**, and their world ended when a hurricane wind swept the earth. The men of that era were transformed into monkeys — the monkeys that, according to the legend, are still seen in the mountains — and the god Quetzalcoatl, in his guise as Ehecatl, god of wind, swept the skies. There is a revealing detail in this version: the transformation of men into monkeys is not a moral punishment, but an ontological degradation. When their sun was destroyed, the men of the second era lost their human condition and descended the scale of beings. Each cataclysm, in Nahua thought, not only destroys the world: it degrades its inhabitants.

The third sun was called **Nahui Quiahuitl**, "Four Rain of Fire." It lasted 312 years. Upon that world fell a rain of fire that consumed everything, and its inhabitants were turned into turkeys. The image is at once terrible and domestic: the men of the third era, charred by celestial fire, were left converted into the birds the Mexicans raised in their corrals. Some scholars have linked this myth to the memory of volcanic eruptions — the Valley of Mexico is ringed by volcanoes, and the lava of Xitle buried entire towns in pre-Hispanic

times — but beyond its possible natural origin, the myth expresses a philosophical idea: the fire that fertilizes is the same that destroys, Omēteotl duality operating in the history of the cosmos.

The fourth sun was **Nahui Atl**, "Four Water." It lasted 676 years. Its end was the flood: waters covered the earth, the heavens collapsed, and men turned into fish. Only one human couple, according to some versions, survived the cataclysm, but was punished by the gods for breaking the sacred fast: the smoke of their fire reached the sky and woke divine wrath. The flood myth appears in cultures worldwide, and its presence in Mesoamerica has given rise to all manner of speculation; what matters here is not its universality but its function within the Nahua system: each era ends with the immoderate triumph of one of the elements — fierce earth, devastating wind, consuming fire, overflowing water — as if the cosmos had to purge itself periodically of its excesses.

Let us pause over the structure of this myth, for it reveals the deep logic of Nahua thought. The four destroyed eras correspond to the four elements and the four directions of the universe: earth, wind, fire, and water. Each sun is the absolute reign of one of the principles, and each cataclysm is the consequence of that absolutism: when a single principle dominates without its complementary opposite, balance breaks and the world collapses. Is this not, at bottom, the same lesson as Omēteotl? Duality is not an abstract doctrine: it is the condition of existence. A world of pure fire, pure water, pure wind is a doomed world. Only the balance of contraries sustains creation.

There is another notable feature: the duration of the eras. The numbers — 676, 364, 312, 676 — are not arbitrary: they are multiples of the 52-year calendrical cycle (676 is 52 times 13; 364 is

52 times 7; 312 is 52 times 6). The myth is woven with the threads of the calendar, and the calendar, as we shall see in the next chapter, was for the Nahuas the very structure of time. The eras of the world are not history in the modern sense: they are a numbered cosmology, a past measured with the rod of sacred cycles.

It should be noted, finally, that the sources do not agree on the order of the suns or all their names. The **Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas**, for example, presents a different sequence and attributes the creation of each era to different gods. Far from invalidating the myth, these variants enrich it: they remind us that we face a living oral tradition, not a dogma written in stone. The **tlamatinime** of different cities told the story of the suns in their own way, adapting it to their ritual and political needs. What remained constant was the structure: four destroyed eras, a fifth era underway, and the certainty that the present era would also end.

The Fifth Sun of Movement

After the destruction of the fourth sun, the gods gathered at **Teotihuacan**, the "city of the gods," already then a venerable ruin that the Mexica considered the place where the gods had become gods. A fifth sun had to be created, a new world, and for that a sacrifice was needed: someone must throw himself into the primordial fire to become the star that would light the new era.

Two gods offered themselves as candidates. **Tecuciztecatl**, rich, proud, adorned with precious quetzal feathers, presented himself with magnificent offerings: balls of copal, coral thorns, the finest feathers. **Nanahuatzin**, by contrast, was the poor god, sick, covered with boils and sores — his name means "the pimply one" —

and could only offer green reeds, balls of hay, and maguey thorns stained with his own blood. The assembly of the gods accepted both and lit a great bonfire. When the moment came to throw himself into the flames, Tecuciztecatl, the proud one, faltered: he approached the fire four times and four times recoiled, burned by the heat. Nanahuatzin, the humble one, did not hesitate: he closed his eyes and threw himself into the bonfire, where his body crackled like a stew. Ashamed, Tecuciztecatl then threw himself after him.

But the bonfire had already consumed almost all its ardor, and the second sacrifice produced a lesser star. When dawn broke, two suns rose in the east: the splendid Nanahuatzin and the pale Tecuciztecatl. The gods, annoyed at this duplication, took a rabbit and hurled it against the face of the second star, dimming its brilliance and marking it forever: thus the moon was born, with the rabbit's silhouette still visible on its disk. Since then, the sun is Nanahuatzin, the humble one who dared, and the moon is Tecuciztecatl, the punished proud one.

Yet the new sun did not move: it remained motionless in the sky, as if nailed to the firmament. The gods then understood the terrible condition of the new era: for the sun to walk, all of them must die. The wind, **Ehecatl** — one of Quetzalcoatl's forms — blew hard upon the star to set it in motion, and the gods, one after another, sacrificed themselves. **Xolotl**, Quetzalcoatl's dark twin, performed the sacrifice and then took his own life. With the gods' blood, the Fifth Sun began its march across the sky.

This foundational myth of the present era contains, in narrative form, the entire theology of Mexica sacrifice. The sun moves because the gods died for it; light exists because there was total surrender. And if the gods sacrificed themselves to create the

world, men must sacrifice themselves to maintain it: this is the logic of the "cosmic debt" that justified the bloody rites of Mexica worship. It was not gratuitous cruelty, but a sacred economy: blood feeds the sun as water feeds maize. Whoever understands this myth will understand why the Mexica considered sacrifice not a crime, but a cosmic duty.

The name of the Fifth Sun is **Nahui Ollin**, "Four Movement." *Ollin* means movement, tremor, and is also the calendrical sign of the earthquake. The present era is, then, the era of movement: the sun moves, the earth trembles, everything flows. But *ollin* also announces the end: according to prophecy, the Fifth Sun will end with earthquakes, when the earth shakes and the **tzitzimime**, the star demons of the west, descend from the sky to devour humanity. The movement that gives life will be the movement that destroys it. Once again, duality: the same principle creates and annihilates.

The Mexica thus lived under a doomed sun. They knew — or believed they knew — that their world would end, as the four previous ones had. This consciousness of cosmic finitude permeated their entire culture: the urgency of the rites, the solemnity of the festivals, the readiness for sacrifice. To live in the Fifth Sun was to live in a parenthesis between two cataclysms, and man's task was to widen that parenthesis with his blood, his labor, and his prayer. Far from producing despair, this consciousness produced a tragic and elevated sense of existence: each day the sun was born was a victory snatched from chaos.

The Fifth Sun's day-sign, **4-Ollin**, deserves its own meditation, for it condenses the era's whole philosophy. *Ollin* means "movement," and its glyph — an X or cross with curved ends, like a rubber ball in motion — is the sign of the ballgame, of earthquakes, of all that

moves and shakes. That the present era is the sun "of movement" means it is the era of instability: the world moves, trembles, changes. The previous suns were destroyed by fixed elements — earth, wind, fire, water — each reigning absolutely; the present sun is destroyed, paradoxically, by movement itself, by the instability that is its essence. It is a profound intuition: what characterizes our era is not a substance, but a process; not a thing, but change.

The central face of the Sun Stone — whether it is Tonatiuh, the sun god, or the earth monster Tlaltecuhltli, as some scholars argue — stares at the viewer with the hieratic fixity of the sacred. Its tongue, in the form of a sacrificial knife, speaks the era's language: the sun demands blood. Around it, the four previous suns; around them, the twenty day-signs; around everything, the two fire serpents. The stone is a cosmos in miniature, and its center is the Fifth Sun: our era, the era of movement, the era that will end in earthquakes. To contemplate the Sun Stone is to contemplate a prophecy: the most beautiful object of Mexica art is also its most somber warning.

Cyclical Time and Human Responsibility

The legend of the Five Suns expresses a conception of time radically different from the one the modern West inherited. For the Judeo-Christian tradition, time is a line: it has a beginning — creation — and will have an end — judgment — and history advances irreversibly between the two. For the Nahuas, time was a cycle: eras succeed one another, worlds are born and die, and nothing is definitive except the very rhythm of alternation. The past is not behind, superseded: it is below, as the foundation of the present; and the future is not a promised land: it is the repetition of what has already occurred.

This cyclical conception did not, however, imply passive resignation. On the contrary: if the world can collapse, man has the responsibility to sustain it. Mexica religion was, in this sense, a religion of action: each rite, each offering, each drop of blood shed on the altar was a contribution to the stability of the cosmos. The gods had done their part by sacrificing themselves at Teotihuacan; now it was men's turn to do theirs. The Nahuatl universe was not a machine that ran by itself: it was an organism that had to be fed.

Hence arises one of the most fascinating paradoxes of Mexica culture: a people convinced that their world would end, and at the same time formidably devoted to building it, ordering it, beautifying it. Tenochtitlan, with its causeways, temples, and floating gardens, was raised by men who knew earthquakes would destroy it. This tension between consciousness of the end and love of the work is perhaps the deepest lesson of the legend of the suns: greatness lies not in permanence, but in surrender.

The most eloquent testimony to this worldview is the **Sun Stone**, the circular monolith discovered on December 17, 1790, during the paving works of Mexico City's Plaza Mayor. Carved in basalt, 3.6 meters in diameter and some 25 tons in weight, this sculpture is far more than a masterpiece of pre-Hispanic art: it is a cosmology treatise carved in stone. At its center appears the face of **Tonatiuh**, the sun god, with his sacrificial-knife tongue — the sun that demands blood; around the face, in four squares, are represented the four previous suns: Four Jaguar, Four Wind, Four Rain of Fire, and Four Water. Further out, a ring with the twenty day signs of the **tonalpohualli**, and on the outer edge, two fire serpents framing the whole.

The Sun Stone was not a calendar in the modern sense, as is

sometimes said: it was an image of cosmic time, the sculpted representation of the present era surrounded by the destroyed eras. Whoever contemplated it saw, at a glance, the entire history of the universe: the four dead worlds framing the fifth living world, the demanding sun at the center, the days turning around. The monolith was likely placed horizontally, as an offering table or altar, in Tenochtitlan's Sacred Precinct. Today it stands vertically in the National Museum of Anthropology, where millions of visitors contemplate it each year, often unaware they are gazing at the face of Nahua time.

The legend of the Five Suns invites, finally, a reflection transcending erudition. Our own civilization, with its faith in indefinite progress, has forgotten the lesson the Nahuas always kept in mind: that worlds are fragile, that eras end, that balance must be earned each day. The Mexica knew it and yet — or for that very reason — built one of the most admirable cities of their time, developed a philosophy of duality, and measured the sky with astonishing precision. The Fifth Sun, the sun of movement, remains a powerful metaphor: everything moves, everything changes, everything ends, and yet it is worth feeding the sun each morning.

The Suns in Stone and Codices

The myth of the Five Suns lived not only in oral tales: it was engraved in stone, painted in codices, sculpted in monuments. Tracing its traces in pre-Hispanic art lets us understand to what extent the history of the eras was, for the Mexica, a visible truth, inscribed in the sacred landscape of their city.

The most imposing testimony is, as we have seen, the **Sun Stone**. But it deserves a closer look, for each of its elements tells part of

the myth. The central face of **Tonatiuh**, with his sacrificial-knife tongue and eagle claws framing the face, is not a kindly portrait: it is the sun of the Fifth Sun in its terrible demand, the star that needs blood to walk. The four squares surrounding it contain the glyphs of the destroyed suns: *4-Jaguar* upper right, *4-Wind* upper left, *4-Rain of Fire* lower left, and *4-Water* lower right. The arrangement is no accident: the four dead worlds frame the living world, like four silent witnesses to the fragility of the present era. Whoever approached the monolith — probably placed horizontally as a sacrificial altar — saw at a glance the totality of cosmic time: the destroyed past sustaining the threatened present.

Around the suns unfolds the ring of the twenty day signs, each in its square cartouche, and further out the ring of solar rays and jewels. On the outer edge, two **xiuhcoatl**, fire serpents, bite their tails framing the whole: the serpents of time, the fire that devours and renews. The entire sculpture can be read as a cosmological machine: the central sun demands sacrifice, the dead suns recall the end, the days turn ceaselessly, the fire serpents close the circle. It is not a calendar for checking the date: it is an image of the universe in operation.

The codices offer another path into the myth. The **Codex Telleriano-Remensis**, painted in the first half of the sixteenth century by Indigenous scribes under Spanish supervision, includes a section with the Five Suns represented as successive suns, each with its glyph and cataclysm. The **Codex Vaticanus A** — also called the *Codex Ríos* — presents a similar version, with glosses in Italian explaining the myth to European readers. These documents are invaluable because they show how the Nahuas themselves visualized the eras: not as abstractions, but as suns with faces,

each with its color and sign, in a sequence culminating with the sun of movement.

It is important to note that the idea of successive eras was not exclusive to the Nahuas. The ***Popol Vuh***, the sacred book of the Quiché Maya, narrates several failed attempts at creating humanity: first the mud people, who dissolved in water; then the wooden people, destroyed by a flood and turned into monkeys — a surprising parallel with the second Nahua sun. Only the third attempt, the maize people, prospered. Among the peoples of Oaxaca and the Gulf appear similar tales of creations and destructions. This convergence suggests that the myth of successive eras is one of Mesoamerica's oldest stories, predating the peoples who told it in the sixteenth century — a shared memory of a past imagined as a series of trials and failures.

Why did so many Mesoamerican peoples imagine the past as a succession of destroyed worlds? Archaeologists have proposed a suggestive explanation: Mesoamerica is a land of natural catastrophes — earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, floods, prolonged droughts. Any society living for centuries in this land accumulates memory of disasters: cities abandoned after an eruption, fields swept by a flood, years of hunger after a drought. The myth of the suns would be, in this reading, the symbolic elaboration of real historical experience: the consciousness that civilization is fragile and that nature can, at any moment, withdraw its favor.

But reducing the myth to a memory of disasters would impoverish it. The Five Suns are also a philosophy of history: they teach that no order is definitive, that all power ends, that an era's greatness does not spare it destruction. For the Mexica, who in barely two centuries

had built an empire, this lesson had particular urgency: their own sun, the fifth, would also end. The myth was a warning against imperial pride, a reminder that not even the gods are eternal — recall that the gods had to die to create the Fifth Sun. In a world where empires believe themselves eternal, the legend of the suns was a school of cosmic humility.

One last aspect of the myth deserves emphasis: its relationship with Mexica identity. The Mexica were a newly arrived people, without the prestige of the Valley of Mexico's ancient civilizations. By adopting and reworking the myth of the suns — whose foundational setting, Teotihuacan, was a city far older than their own — the Mexica inserted themselves into a cosmic history that preceded and legitimized them: they were not upstarts, but the inhabitants of the Fifth Sun, the definitive era, the people chosen to feed the sun with their blood. The myth thus served a political function: it turned universal history into Mexica history, and the Mexica into protagonists of the cosmos. That a cosmogonic myth also serves as imperial ideology should not scandalize us: it has happened in every civilization, from Rome to our own day.

The Eras of the World in Other Traditions: A Comparative View

The myth of the Five Suns is not unique in the history of religions: many peoples have imagined the past as a succession of destroyed eras. Comparing these traditions — without confusing or reducing them to one another — helps us appreciate what the Nahuatl myth holds that is universal and what is irreducibly its own.

The closest comparison is **Hesiod**, the Greek poet of the eighth century BCE, who in his *Works and Days* described five ages of

humanity: the golden age, the silver age, the bronze age, the age of heroes, and the iron age — the last, his own, an age of decadence. As in the Nahua myth, the Greek ages form a descending sequence: each era is worse than the last, and the present is the most degraded. But there is a decisive difference: Hesiod's ages do not end in cosmic cataclysms destroying the world, but in progressive moral decay; and there is no sixth age on the Greek horizon, while the Nahua myth implies that after the Fifth Sun a sixth will — or could — come. Hesiod's Greek time is a slope; Nahua time is a wheel.

The **Hindu** tradition offers an even more surprising parallel: the doctrine of the four **yugas** — **Satya Yuga**, **Treta Yuga**, **Dvapara Yuga**, and **Kali Yuga** — successive eras of decreasing duration, each more corrupt than the last, culminating in the dissolution of the universe and the start of a new cycle. Like the Nahua suns, the **yugas** are measured with sacred numbers and end in cataclysms; like the Fifth Sun, the **Kali Yuga** — the present era, according to this doctrine — is the era of decadence. The resemblances are so notable that some scholars have speculated about impossible diffusions; the sensible view is convergence: the great agricultural civilizations, confronted with the fragility of their worlds, independently imagined time as a series of doomed eras.

The Maya ****Popol Vuh****, as noted, narrates successive failed creations: the mud people, the wooden people, and finally the maize people. But the structure differs: there are no numbered suns or systematic elemental cataclysms, but trials of the creator gods gradually perfecting their work. The tone is less tragic and more experimental: the Maya gods learn from their mistakes, while the Nahua suns express a cosmic necessity — each element, reigning

absolutely, destroys the world.

What does this comparison reveal? First, that the idea of successive eras answers a universal human experience: the consciousness that civilizations fall, that order is fragile, that the past contains lost worlds. Every people that has seen ruins — and every ancient people lived among ruins of earlier cultures — has wondered about the worlds that existed before its own. Second, that each tradition dresses this universal intuition in its own garb: the Greeks with nostalgia for the golden age; the Hindus with the cosmic mathematics of the **yugas**; the Nahuas with the four elements and duality.

And third — most important — that the Nahua myth has a feature distinguishing it from all others: **human responsibility in maintaining the cosmos**. In the Greek and Hindu traditions, eras end by cosmic necessity or divine decree, and man is an impotent spectator. In the Nahua myth, by contrast, the duration of the Fifth Sun depends on human action: while men feed the sun with their blood and rites, the era continues. The myth is not only cosmology: it is ethics, a call to action. No other tradition of the world's eras grants man so central a role in sustaining the universe.

This singularity returns us to the theology of sacrifice examined earlier. If the modern reader is scandalized by Mexica bloody rites, comparison with other traditions may help understanding — not justification, but understanding. The Greeks sacrificed hecatombs of oxen to their gods; the Hindus offered Vedic animal sacrifices; the Hebrews slaughtered lambs in the Temple. All ancient religions fed their gods with blood. What distinguishes Mexica sacrifice is not its existence, but its scale and cosmological foundation: if the sun needs blood to move, and if the sun stops the world ends, then

sacrifice is — in the system's logic — an act of cosmic salvation. We may reject the premise without ceasing to admire the coherence.

There is a final comparative lesson: modernity also has its myth of eras, though it does not recognize it as myth. Our historiography speaks of Ancient, Medieval, Modern, and Contemporary Ages; our geology, of eras and periods; our cosmology, of a universe with a beginning and — perhaps — an end. The idea that time is articulated into successive eras is not primitive superstition: it is a deep structure of historical thought. The Nahuas expressed it with suns and cataclysms; we, with academic periodizations. The difference lies not in the structure, but in the language. And in this sense, the myth of the Five Suns is not a fossil of the past: it is a mirror in which our own conception of time can recognize itself.

Blood That Moves the Sun: Theology of Sacrifice

No aspect of Mexico religion has generated so much misunderstanding — and so much Black Legend — as human sacrifice. To understand it without justifying or demonizing it, one must place it in the system of thought this volume has reconstructed: it was not an outburst of cruelty, but the logical consequence of a cosmology. This section expounds that logic with the honesty the subject demands.

The foundation lies in the myth we already know: at Teotihuacan, the gods sacrificed themselves so the Fifth Sun would move. Nanahuatzin threw himself into the fire, the other gods killed one another, and with their blood the sun began to walk. This primordial sacrifice established the principle: **life feeds on willingly surrendered death**. If the gods — infinitely superior beings — had to die to create the world, how should men not die to maintain it?

Human sacrifice was not a priestly invention: it was imitation of the gods' foundational act.

From this principle derived the notion of **cosmic debt**. Each dawn was a miracle to be paid for: the sun was born because someone fed it. Each rain, each harvest, each victory was a gift of the gods demanding reciprocity. The Nahuas conceived their relationship with the sacred as an exchange — a cosmic barter: the gods give life, men return blood. Refusing the exchange would have broken the pact, condemned the sun to stop and the world to collapse. In this logic, sacrifice was not a crime: it was a duty, the highest of all, comparable to the soldier's duty who gives his life for his country.

The forms of sacrifice deserve distinguishing. The most frequent and least known was **self-sacrifice**: the shedding of one's own blood through punctures in the ears, tongue, arms, or — in the most solemn rites — the virile member. Every day, in temples and homes, priests and penitents bled themselves before the gods, offering their blood in small amounts but constantly. It was a democratic sacrifice: anyone could perform it, and everyone did. The blood of self-sacrifice was the "small change" of the sacred economy.

Human sacrifice — the offering of an entire life — was reserved for great occasions: the veintena festivals, a ruler's enthronement, a temple's dedication, the New Fire ceremony. The victims were mostly war captives — enemy warriors taken in the so-called "flowery wars" — though there were also slaves bought for the rite and, in exceptional cases, volunteers. The ritual varied by festival: heart extraction on the sacrificial stone was the best-known form, but there were also arrow sacrifice, decapitation, hurling from heights, ritual drowning. Each god had his own rite, each festival its

liturgy.

The **scale** of Mexica sacrifice has been fiercely debated. Spanish chroniclers spoke of tens of thousands of victims at the great festivals — 20,000, 50,000, even 80,000 at the Great Temple's dedication according to some sources — figures modern historians consider exaggerated, the product of Spanish interest in justifying the conquest by presenting the Mexica as monsters. Current estimates, based on demography and ritual logistics — each sacrifice took several minutes — drastically reduce those figures: probably a few thousand per year across the empire, concentrated in the great festivals. Still terrible figures, but of a different order of magnitude than the Black Legend's.

More important than numbers is the participants' **attitude**. Testimonies indicate that victims, in many cases, accepted their fate with a resignation the Spaniards could not interpret: for the captured warrior, to die on the stone was to die the flowery death, the death that feeds the sun, an honor superior to dying in battle. Some captives, according to the chronicles, climbed the pyramid singing and dancing. This acceptance was not masochism: it was the conviction that their death had cosmic meaning, that their blood would keep the universe running. We may shudder at this conviction without failing to recognize its internal coherence.

Modern scholars have proposed several explanations of Mexica sacrifice beyond the theological. Some have seen in it a **political instrument**: ritual terror as a means of dominating subjected peoples, who had to deliver tribute in victims. Others, a **demographic valve**: a society without domestic livestock and with population pressure finding in sacrifice — and in the ritual cannibalism that sometimes accompanied it — a way to regulate

population and obtain protein. Others, a **mechanism of social cohesion**: bloody ritual as collective experience uniting the community around its gods. Probably all these functions coexisted: sacrifice was at once theology, politics, demography, and social theater.

No explanation, however, should make us forget the essential: for the Mexica, sacrifice was **necessary** in the strongest sense. It was not a cruel option among other possibilities: it was the condition of the world's existence. A Mexica who opposed sacrifice would not have been a humanitarian reformer: he would have been someone proposing to let the sun die. Judging this belief from our morality is legitimate — and we must — but understanding it requires entering its logic: if you believe the sun stops without blood, sacrifice is an act of love for the world.

The Spanish conquest ended human sacrifice, and no sensible reader will mourn its disappearance. But its study remains necessary, not from morbidity, but because it illuminates an uncomfortable truth: civilizations can build coherent, refined systems of thought on premises we now find aberrant. The philosophy of duality, the sacred calendar, the poetry of the **tlamatinime**, and human sacrifice were part of the same cultural edifice: we cannot admire the one and ignore the other. To understand sacrifice in its context is not to justify it: it is to recognize that greatness and horror can inhabit the same house, and that the historian's — and the reader's — task is to look at the whole house without closing their eyes.





A word on sources and numbers, for the subject invites exaggeration. The Spanish chroniclers — Cortés in his letters, Díaz del Castillo in his chronicle, Sahagún in his history — described Mexica sacrifice with a mixture of horror and interest: horror, because it confirmed the "barbarism" justifying the conquest; interest, because it fascinated. Their figures — tens of thousands of victims at a single festival — must be read with this double motive in mind. Modern archaeology has provided a corrective: the excavations of the Great Temple have uncovered tzompantli with

hundreds of skulls — impressive, but far from the tens of thousands of the chronicles. Demographic studies confirm that Tenochtitlan, with some 200,000 inhabitants, could not have sustained the chroniclers' figures without collapsing. The truth, as usual, lies between legend and denial: sacrifice was real, frequent, and central — but not on the apocalyptic scale of the Black Legend.

It is also worth remembering that the Mexica were not the only Mesoamericans to practice human sacrifice: the Maya, the Zapotecs, the Toltecs all offered human victims, though on a smaller scale. And the practice had ancient roots: Teotihuacan, the Classic-period metropolis, buried sacrificed warriors in its pyramids. Mexica sacrifice was thus not an Aztec aberration, but the culmination of a millenary tradition — which does not justify it, but places it in its historical depth. To understand is not to absolve; but to condemn without understanding is not history, it is preaching.

Sacred Time

The Xiuhpohualli: The Year of Festivals

If duality was the structure of the cosmos and the suns its history, the calendar was its pulse: the living measure with which the Nahuas kept time with the universe's breathing. No other civilization of the ancient world developed a calendrical system so complex and so intimately bound to religious life as Mesoamerica's. The Mexica inherited this system from centuries of astronomical observation and brought it to extraordinary refinement: two interlaced calendars governing, respectively, agricultural and ritual life, and the individual destiny of each person.

The first of these calendars was the **xiuhpohualli**, the "count of years," the 365-day solar calendar. It comprised eighteen *veintenas* — twenty-day periods — totaling 360 days, plus five complementary days called **nemontemi**, the "empty" or "useless" days. Each *veintena* had its name, patron god, and festivals: *Atlcahualo*, when offerings were made to the water gods; *Tlacaxipehualiztli*, the festival of Xipe Totec, the flayed one, with its gladiatorial combats; *Toxcatl*, the great festival of Tezcatlipoca, in which the youth who for a year had embodied the god was sacrificed; *Panquetzaliztli*, Huitzilopochtli's festival, with processions throughout the city; *Ochpaniztli*, the sweeping of the roads,

dedicated to the earth and maize goddesses. The Mexica year was thus an uninterrupted succession of festivals: barely had one *veintena* ended when the next began, and the city lived in a state of almost permanent celebration.

The five **nemontemi** days, by contrast, were a parenthesis of unease. Considered "empty" days, outside the order, normal activities were suspended during them: people stayed home, avoided quarrels and business, and anxiously awaited the new year's start. Whoever was born on a **nemontemi** day carried a somber destiny, for he had come into the world in a time without a protecting god. This apprehension toward the intercalary days reveals a conception of time very different from ours: for the Nahuas, time was not a neutral container where things happen, but a qualified substance, charged with favorable or baleful potencies. Each day had a "weight," a character, a destiny.

The **xiuhpohualli** began, according to most sources, with the *veintena* of **Atlcahualo**, around February of the European calendar, though specialists debate whether the Mexica year had a fixed start or was adjusted by observation. What is clear is that the solar calendar governed agricultural life: sowings, harvests, the festivals of rain and maize. It was the community's calendar, marking the collective rhythm of city and countryside. But alongside it, invisible to the hurried visitor, turned another, more intimate and more feared calendar: that of destinies.

The Tonalpohualli: The Book of Days

The **tonalpohualli**, the "count of days" or "count of destinies," was a 260-day cycle formed by combining twenty signs and thirteen numbers. Each day of the cycle had a name composed of a number

from 1 to 13 and one of the twenty signs: *1-Cipactli*, *2-Ehecatl*, *3-Calli*, and so on until completing the 260 combinations, when the count began again. This calendar did not measure the solar year nor serve agriculture: it measured destiny.

The twenty day signs were: *Cipactli* (the crocodile, the primordial earth monster), *Ehecatl* (wind), *Calli* (house), *Cuetzpalin* (lizard), *Coatl* (serpent), *Miquiztli* (death), *Mazatl* (deer), *Tochtli* (rabbit), *Atl* (water), *Itzcuintli* (dog), *Ozomahtli* (monkey), *Malinalli* (twisted grass), *Acatl* (reed), *Ocelotl* (jaguar), *Cuauhtli* (eagle), *Cozcacuauhtli* (vulture), *Ollin* (movement), *Tecpatl* (flint), *Quiahuitl* (rain), and *Xochitl* (flower). Each sign had its character: crocodile days were propitious for beginning enterprises; death days demanded recollection; dog days favored loyalty and travel; flint days announced conflicts. Each sign, moreover, was ruled by a divinity lending the day its influence.

The 260-day cycle was divided into twenty **trecenas**, thirteen-day periods, each under the patronage of a god or divine pair. The first trecena, *1-Cipactli*, was ruled by **Tonacatecuhtli**, lord of sustenance; the fifth, *1-Coatl*, by **Tlazolteotl**, the goddess who cleanses filth; the thirteenth, *1-Ollin*, by **Tlaloc**. The divinatory codices — the **Codex Borgia**, **Codex Vaticanus B**, **Codex Fejérváry-Mayer** — are essentially *tonalamatl*, "books of days": painted manuals where each trecena appears with its patron god, omens, and ritual prescriptions. These books were the working tools of the **tonalpohuque**, the "counters of destinies," priest-diviners who interpreted the calendar for the community.

The *tonalpohualli*'s function was eminently practical and personal. When a child was born, the *tonalpohuque* consulted the day's sign to foretell his destiny: the *tonalli* — the animistic entity bound to

the birth day, the person's "heat" and "fortune" — was fixed forever. The prognostication was not generic: the diviner specified suitable occupations, lurking dangers, the propitious and baleful days of the future life. And he gave the child the name of his birth day — *8-Venado* (8-Deer), *4-Pedernal* (4-Flint) — a name accompanying him like a second skin.

But calendrical destiny was not an inexorable condemnation, and this is a crucial point distinguishing Nahua divination from fatalism. If the birth day was baleful, the *tonalpohuque* prescribed remedies: purification rites, offerings to the sign's patron god, the imposition of a favorable name compensating the bad omen. In extreme cases, the birth could even be symbolically "delayed," declaring the child born on a better day. The underlying idea was that the calendar proposed tendencies, not sentences: the *tonalli* gave an inclination, but upbringing, effort, and rites could modify it. It was a soft, negotiable determinism, very different from the Greeks' inexorable fate.

The *tonalpohualli* was consulted for everything: for choosing a wedding day or a war departure, for deciding whether a sick person would heal, for knowing whether a commercial enterprise would succeed, for naming children after their birth day. Time, for the Nahuas, was a weave of signs to be read, and the *tonalpohuque* were its professional readers.

Modern scholars have wondered about the origin of the number 260, and the hypotheses are fascinating. Thirteen times twenty are the obvious factors, but why thirteen and why twenty? It has been noted that 260 days is approximately the duration of human gestation — nine lunar months — which would make the *tonalpohualli* a calendar of life in gestation, of destiny forming in

the maternal womb. It has also been observed that 260 is half the synodic Venus cycle rounded in certain computations, and that the 260-day cycle appears throughout Mesoamerica from very ancient times, carved on Olmec and Zapotec monuments. Whatever its origin, its persistence over two millennia speaks of deep rootedness: the **tonalpohualli** was one of Mesoamerica's oldest and most venerated institutions.

The twenty trecenas, with their patron gods, formed a gallery of the Nahua pantheon in miniature. The first trecena, **1-Cipactli**, belonged to **Tonacatecuhtli**, the sustenance lord: to be born under it was to have food assured. The fifth, **1-Coatl**, belonged to **Tlazoleotl**, the earth goddess who "eats filth" — that is, who forgives sins: the confessional trecena. The tenth, **1-Tecpatl**, belonged to **Tezcatlipoca**, the smoking mirror: a trecena of trials and temptations. The thirteenth, **1-Ollin**, belonged to **Tlaloc**: the trecena of rain and its dangers. Each trecena thus had a personality, and the **tonalamatl** painted it: the **Codex Borgia**, the most beautiful of the divinatory codices, devotes page after page to these patrons, showing them in their temples, with their offerings, their days, their omens. To leaf through the Borgia is to walk through a calendar made image: time painted as a procession of gods.

The Binding of the Years: The New Fire Ceremony

The two calendars — the 365-day solar and the 260-day ritual — turned simultaneously, like two cogwheels of one machine. And from time to time, the two wheels returned to coincide at their starting point: the **1-Cipactli** day of the **tonalpohualli** fell again on the first day of the **xiuhpohualli**. This encounter occurred every

18,980 days — every 52 solar years, exactly 73 cycles of 260 days. The Nahuas called this period the **xiuhmolpilli**, the "binding of years": their century, their era, the greatest measure of human time.

Each year within the 52-year cycle had its own name, formed by one of four bearer signs — *Tochtli* (rabbit), *Acatl* (reed), *Tecpatl* (flint), *Calli* (house) — combined with a number from 1 to 13. Thus followed the year *1-Tochtli*, *2-Acatl*, *3-Tecpatl*, *4-Calli*, *5-Tochtli*, and so on until completing the 52 combinations. Indigenous annals recorded history with these year names: "in the year *8-Tochtli* the Spaniards arrived," "in the year *1-Acatl* such lord was born." It was an elegant, precise system, allowing events to be dated without need of an absolute era.

But the end of the 52-year cycle was not a mere anniversary: it was the most solemn and most feared moment of Mexica life. For the sages taught that, when the binding of years completed, the world reached the abyss's edge: the sun might not rise again, the present era might end as the four previous ones had, the *tztzimize* might descend from the sky to devour humanity. The only way to conjure the danger was to renew the cosmic pact through the most impressive ceremony of Mexica ritual: the **New Fire**, the *Toxiuhmolpilia*.

Preparations began days before. Throughout the empire, fires were extinguished: temple braziers, house hearths, street torches. People threw into the water or buried the images of their household gods and home utensils, as if the world must start from zero. Pregnant women covered their faces with maguey-leaf masks and were locked in granaries: it was feared that, should the world end, they would turn into devouring monsters. Children were pinched and

forcibly kept awake, lest they fall asleep and turn into mice. The entire city held its breath.

On the evening of the cycle's last day, a solemn procession of priests left Tenochtitlan and ascended **Huixachtlan**, the Hill of the Star, southeast of the Valley of Mexico. With them they brought a war captive, the man on whose chest the new fire would be kindled. The multitude, from the city's rooftops and the hills' slopes, watched in silence. When night fell, the priests awaited the decisive moment: the passage of the **Pleiades** — the *Tianquiztli*, "the marketplace," as they called them — across the zenith. If the stars crossed the sky's highest point, it was a sign the cosmos consented to continue; if they halted, the end had come.

At midnight, upon the captive's opened chest, the priests rubbed the *mamalhuaztli*, the fire drill, until flame sprang forth. In that instant, a shout of joy ran through the valley: the fire had caught; the world would continue another 52 years. Swift runners carried the new flame to Tenochtitlan's Great Temple, where the great bonfire was lit, and thence to every temple, and from the temples to each house in the empire. Within hours, thousands of new fires burned where only cold ashes had been. People bled their ears and offered their blood to the gods in thanksgiving; new clothes were donned, vows renewed, time's rebirth celebrated.

The last New Fire ceremony celebrated in pre-Hispanic times took place in **1507**, under the rule of **Motecuhzoma II**. The next should have been celebrated in 1559, but by then Tenochtitlan had fallen and the empire no longer existed. The friars prohibited the rite, and the binding of years came undone forever. Yet the ceremony's memory survived in the chronicles and in the testimonies of elders who had witnessed it as children. Sahagún described it in detail,

and modern historians consider it one of Mesoamerican religion's most eloquent ceremonies: the moment when an entire people held its breath before the possibility of the world's end.

What does the New Fire tell us about Nahua thought? First, that time was not for the Mexica a river flowing by itself: it was a fire to be rekindled. The cosmos's continuity was not guaranteed; it depended on men's ritual action. Second, that the entire community shared this responsibility: not only priests renewed the world, but each family that extinguished its hearth and lit the new one. And third, that Mexica religion, with all its terrible solemnity, was at bottom a religion of hope: every 52 years, the people bet the sun would rise again, and every 52 years they won the bet — until the Spaniards came and the wheel stopped.

One detail of the ceremony deserves final reflection. The priests did not light the new fire at a precalculated hour: they waited for the Pleiades to cross the zenith — that is, they subjected the rite to astronomical verification. Religion and science, which our modernity tends to separate, were intimately united in the Nahua world: the same priests who interpreted omens were the astronomers who measured the sky. The calendar was not only a religious instrument: it was proof that the Mexica had turned skywatching into a precise art, able to predict exactly the cycles' return. Sacred time was also measured time, and in that double condition lay its power.

The 1507 New Fire ceremony — the last celebrated before the conquest — deserves a closer look, for the chronicles preserve its details. **Motecuhzoma II**, then at the height of his power, presided over preparations that mobilized the entire empire: fires were extinguished from the Valley of Mexico to the Gulf coast; the procession to Huixachtlan included the highest priests and nobles;

the captive chosen for the sacrifice was a warrior of renowned courage, for the new fire had to be born from a brave heart. When the flame caught on his chest, the shout that rose from the valley was heard, they said, for leagues around. Runners carried the fire to the Great Temple, and from there a relay of torches spread it through the city: within hours, Tenochtitlan shone again. The chroniclers note a detail of poignant irony: the priests declared the ceremony the most splendid ever celebrated — and it was the last. Twelve years later, the Spaniards arrived; fifty-two years later, when the next binding of years should have been celebrated, the empire was a memory. The fire of 1507 burned for an era that was already ending.

The Astronomers of Anáhuac: The Science Behind the Calendar

Behind the sacred calendar stood a science. The priests who counted the days were not only ritualists: they were skywatchers of astonishing precision, heirs to an astronomical tradition over two thousand years old. Understanding their scientific achievements is essential to valuing the calendar fairly: it was not picturesque superstition, but an instrument of knowledge.

The most studied celestial object, after the sun, was **Venus**, the "great star" the Nahuas called *Huey Citlalin*. Mesoamerican astronomers had discovered that Venus completes a 584-day cycle — its synodic cycle, the time to return to the same position relative to the sun — and that five of these cycles equal exactly eight solar years ($5 \times 584 = 2,920$ days $= 8 \times 365$). This discovery, which European astronomy did not achieve with equal precision until much later, was recorded in the codices: the Maya **Dresden Codex**

devotes several pages to the Venus cycle, with tables of an exactness astounding modern specialists. The Mexica, heirs to this tradition, associated Venus with **Quetzalcoatl** in his morning-star guise, and considered his appearances omens of war and rulers' deaths.

The sun, for its part, was observed with meticulous attention. The Mexica knew the solstices and equinoxes, and had identified the two days of the year when the sun passes through the zenith at the Valley of Mexico's latitude — the so-called "zenith passage" — phenomena marking important ritual moments. Some structures of Tenochtitlan's Sacred Precinct seem to have been astronomically oriented, though Mexica city archaeoastronomy remains a developing field. What is documented is the use of solar observations to adjust the calendar: priests verified the sun's horizon position on key dates, thus correcting any drift in the count.

The **Pleiades**, the *Tianquiztli*, played a central role, as we saw in the New Fire ceremony: their midnight zenith passage marked the decisive moment of cosmic renewal. That a star cluster served as cosmic clock for the empire's most important rite shows how inseparable astronomy and religion were: the sky was not a backdrop, but an actor in the ritual drama.

Eclipses were watched with reverent fear. A solar eclipse — when the star was "devoured" — was interpreted as a presage of catastrophe: it was feared as the announcement of the Fifth Sun's end. During eclipses, people shouted, struck objects, and made offerings to aid the sun in its struggle against darkness. Mesoamerican astronomers had discovered certain patterns in eclipses' occurrence — the *Dresden Codex* contains eclipse-prediction tables of notable sophistication — but exact

knowledge of their periodicity seems to have been the patrimony of a few specialists. The eclipse was at once a calculated phenomenon and a cosmic drama.

The Mexica calendar's precision has been admired and debated. The 365-day **xiuhpohualli**, without leap days, drifted against the true tropical year — 365.2422 days — at one day every four years. How did the Mexica solve this problem? The sources are not explicit, and specialists have proposed several hypotheses: that periodic adjustment was made by observation, adding days when the drift grew evident; that the drift was accepted as part of the system, since the ritual cycle mattered, not absolute astronomical exactness; or that a correction mechanism existed that the sources did not record. What is certain is that, for practical purposes — agriculture in the Valley of Mexico, where rains arrive with seasonal regularity — the calendar worked admirably. The exactness we demand of our calendars was not what they demanded: what mattered was ritual order, not the odd second.

Still more fascinating is the relationship between the 260-day **tonalpohualli** and natural cycles. We mentioned the human-gestation hypothesis: 260 days is approximately the time between the first missed menstruation and birth, which would make the ritual calendar a calendar of life in formation. It has also been noted that 260 days is the interval between the sun's two zenith passages at certain Mesoamerican latitudes — at Copan's latitude, for example — linking the sacred cycle to solar observation. And 260 is a "round" number in the Mesoamerican vigesimal system: 13×20 , the combination of the two sacred numbers par excellence. Probably all these correspondences hold at once: the **tonalpohualli** would be a knot tying biology, astronomy, and

sacred numerology — a cycle resonating on multiple levels of reality.

Comparison with the Maya calendar illuminates Nahua achievements. The Classic-period Maya developed Mesoamerica's most complex calendrical system: the Long Count, measuring time in days elapsed since a mythical date, allowing events to be dated with absolute precision across millennia. The Mexica did not use the Long Count — their historical horizon was shorter — but their system of the binding of years and their combination of the two calendars were equally sophisticated for their purposes. Each Mesoamerican culture adapted the common calendrical heritage to its needs: the Maya, obsessed with dynastic history, invented the Long Count; the Mexica, obsessed with destiny and ritual, perfected the **tonalpohualli**.

Reflect, finally, on what it means for a society without telescopes, without mathematics written in the modern sense, without the notion of "science" as we understand it, to have achieved such precisions. The astronomers of Anáhuac observed with the naked eye, recorded with knots and paintings, calculated with a vigesimal system, and yet measured Venus's cycles with minimal error, predicted eclipses, and built a calendar that ruled millions of lives for centuries. Their secret was not technology: it was patience, institutional continuity — generations of priests transmitting observations — and a powerful motivation: the sky was not an object of disinterested curiosity, but the book where destiny was written. When reading the sky is a matter of cosmic life or death, one learns to read it well.

Destiny Written in the Days: The Art of Divination

The **tonalpohualli** was not a calendar to hang on the wall: it was an instrument of divination, and its interpreters, the **tonalpohuque**, were the most consulted professionals of the Nahua world. To peek into his consulting space — the mat where the diviner spread his codices and maize kernels — is to peek into the everyday life of human anguish and hope.

The most important consultation was that of **birth**. When a child came into the world, the midwife — a figure of enormous prestige, considered a warrior for her battle in childbirth — announced the hour, and the family summoned the **tonalpohuque**. He consulted the day's sign in his **tonalamatl** and pronounced the newborn's destiny: his **tonalli**, the animistic entity bound to the day, would be fixed forever. The prognostication was not generic: the diviner specified suitable occupations, lurking dangers, the propitious and baleful days of the future life. And he gave the child the name of his birth day — **8-Venado** (8-Deer), **4-Pedernal** (4-Flint) — a name accompanying him like a second skin.

But calendrical destiny was not an inexorable condemnation, and this is a crucial point distinguishing Nahua divination from fatalism. If the birth day was baleful, the **tonalpohuque** prescribed remedies: purification rites, offerings to the sign's patron god, the imposition of a favorable name compensating the bad omen. In extreme cases, the birth could even be symbolically "delayed," declaring the child born on a better day. The underlying idea was that the calendar proposed tendencies, not sentences: the **tonalli** gave an inclination, but upbringing, effort, and rites could modify it. It was a soft, negotiable determinism, very different from the Greeks' inexorable fate.

Consultations covered every sphere of life. **Merchants** — the

pochtecas, who undertook months-long expeditions through distant lands — would not depart without consulting propitious days: a bad departure day augured assaults, illness, or ruin. **Warriors** consulted before campaigns: certain days favored war, others demanded waiting. **Marriages** were arranged after comparing the couple's **tonaltin**: if the signs were incompatible, the union was discouraged, for destinies would clash like two stones. The **sick** were diagnosed calendrically: the diviner determined whether the illness came from a bad day, an offense to a god, or a spell, and prescribed the corresponding treatment — combining herbal remedies with rites.

The divinatory method combined codex consultation with sacred chance techniques. The **tonalpohuque** cast maize kernels on a surface and read their arrangement; or tied and untied knots in a cord, counting days on his fingers; or observed certain animals' behavior. These techniques, which may seem superstitious to the modern observer, had a deep psychological function: they externalized the decision, removing it from personal anguish and placing it in the cosmic order. Consulting the calendar was, at bottom, a way to decide with a clear conscience: if the gods had spoken, responsibility was no longer man's alone.

The days themselves had marked personalities. **Cipactli** (crocodile) days were good for beginning enterprises, for the primordial crocodile had sustained the earth; **Miquiztli** (death) days demanded recollection and were baleful for travel; **Ozomahtli** (monkey) days favored artists and pleasures but warned against frivolity; **Tecpatl** (flint) days announced conflicts and demanded prudence. Each trecena, moreover, stood under divine patronage: the **1-Coatl** trecena, ruled by Tlazolteotl, was

propitious for confession and purification; the *1-Miquiztli* trecena, ruled by Tecciztecatl, was feared by the sick. To live under the *tonalpohualli* was to live in a landscape of signs, where each day had its spiritual weather.

Did all Nahuas believe in these determinations? Probably not with the same intensity. As in every society, there were skeptics and devotees, and the *tlamatinime* themselves — with their philosophical reflection — must have regarded popular divination with a mix of respect and distance. But even the skeptic lived in a world ordered by the calendar: festivals were celebrated on their days, markets gathered on their dates, children bore day names. The *tonalpohualli* was, more than a belief system, a social institution: it gave rhythm to collective life, and that rhythm was real even if the omens were debatable.

The disappearance of calendrical divination after the conquest is one of Mexican history's most lamentable cultural losses. The friars persecuted it as "sorcery," burned the *tonalamatl*, and punished the *tonalpohuque*. Yet fragments of the system survived in Indigenous communities, camouflaged in the Catholic sanctoral: still today, in some towns, elders know which days are good for sowing or marrying, without remembering that this wisdom comes from the *tonalpohualli*. The calendar of destinies, proscribed and burned, kept beating quietly for four centuries. That an institution survives its own destruction is the best proof of its rootedness: sacred time ran too deep to be extirpated.

The Year in Festivals: A Tour of the Veintenas

The *xiuhpohualli* was not an abstraction: it was a year lived festival after festival. To tour its eighteen veintenas is to tour

Tenochtitlan's religious life, month by month, in a succession of celebrations that gave no respite. Let us make that tour, if only synthetically, to understand how the calendar structured collective existence.

The year began with **Atlcahualo**, "the waters are left," dedicated to the rain and mountain gods. In this veintena, children were sacrificed on hilltops to propitiate the rains: a rite that horrifies us, but which expressed an agricultural society's anguish before drought. The children's tears, they said, would attract rain. **Tlacaxipehualiztli**, "flaying of men," honored Xipe Totec, the flayed one: captured warriors fought on the *temalacatl*, the gladiatorial stone, and priests wore their skins for twenty days, embodying spring's rebirth — the old skin falling like the husk of the germinating seed.

Tozoztontli and **Huey Tozoztli**, "the little and the great vigil," marked sowing time: seeds were blessed, first fruits offered, the maize gods asked for a good harvest. **Toxcatl**, "dry thing," was Tezcatlipoca's great festival: for a year, a perfect youth had embodied the god, living amid honors, and in this veintena he was sacrificed atop a pyramid, breaking a flute at each step — the music ceasing, life interrupted. **Etzalcualiztli**, "the etzalli is eaten," celebrated Tlaloc with a maize-and-bean stew the priests ritually consumed.

Tecuilhuitontli and **Huey Tecuilhuitl**, "the little and great festival of the lords," honored Huixtocihuatl, goddess of salt, and Xilonen, goddess of tender maize: festivals of abundance, with dances and banquets. **Tlaxochimaco**, "flowers are offered," dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, filled the city with garlands: gods were adorned, temples decked, and all Tenochtitlan smelled of marigold and

jasmine. **Xocotl Huetzi**, "the fruit falls," was the festival of fire and of young dead: a towering mast — the *xocotl* — was raised, which youths climbed to reach the offerings at the top, in a festive competition mixing play and rite.

Ochpaniztli, "sweeping," dedicated to Toci, "our grandmother," goddess of earth and midwives, was among the most solemn: roads and houses were swept, everything renewed, and a woman embodying the goddess was sacrificed and flayed — a priest wearing her skin presided over the festivals. **Teotleco**, "the gods arrive," celebrated the divinities' return from their journeys: they were awaited with offerings, welcomed with songs. **Tepeilhuitl**, "festival of the hills," honored the sacred mountains with amaranth-dough figures representing the hills and the drowned dead.

Quecholli, "flamingo" — the bird — was the festival of hunting and of Mixcoatl, god of the chase: ritual arrows were made in the mountains, hunting prowess celebrated. **Panquetzaliztli**, "raising of banners," Huitzilopochtli's great festival, filled the city with processions: the god toured his wards on litters, amaranth figures in his likeness were offered, and the bathed slaves — those destined for sacrifice — joined the banquets before their death. **Atemoztli**, "the waters descend," asked for the year's last rains. **Tititl**, "shrinking," was a time of winter recollection. And **Izcalli**, "resurgence," closed the year with children's ritual stretching — their necks and limbs pulled so they would grow — and the promise of rebirth.

This tour, forcibly schematic, reveals several things. First, the **ritual density** of Mexica life: not a single month without a major festival, and festivals mobilized the entire city — priests, warriors, artisans,

peasants, children. Second, the **correspondence between calendar and agriculture**: the festivals of sowing, rains, harvest, and winter followed the maize cycle precisely. And third, the **theatricality** of ritual: each *veintena* was a staging where gods descended to earth embodied in men and women, where the whole city became a stage. The **xiuhpohualli** did not measure time: it dramatized it.

The five **nemontemi** days following *Izcalli* were the silence after music: empty days, without festival or god, in which the city held its breath before beginning again. And it began again, always, with *Atlcahualo*: the cycle had no end, as the cosmos's breathing had none. To live under the **xiuhpohualli** was to live in an eternal return of festivals, where each year repeated the last and yet each festival was unique, because each generation celebrated it for the first time.

A final calendrical note concerns the **market cycle**: the **tianquiztli**, the great marketplaces of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco, gathered every five days, creating a commercial week within the ritual year. The famous market of Tlatelolco — which Cortés's soldiers described with amazement, comparing it to Salamanca's — assembled tens of thousands of merchants on market days, exchanging goods from across Mesoamerica: cacao from the south, turquoise from the north, feathers from the tropics, salt from the lake. The five-day market rhythm interlaced with the twenty-day *veintenas* and the 260-day **tonalpohualli**, so that economic life, ritual life, and divinatory life turned together. Time, for the Nahuas, was not a single track: it was a braid of cycles, each with its own rhythm, all woven into the same rope.





The Tlamatinime

Those Who Know: The Sage in the Nahuatl World

Among all the figures of Mexica civilization, none is so surprising to the modern reader as the **tlamatini**, "he who knows things." In a society that traditional historiography presented as dominated by bloodthirsty priests and ferocious warriors, the existence of a class of sages devoted to reflection, poetry, and moral education reveals an unexpected dimension: the Nahuas not only had gods and armies; they had philosophers.

The **Florentine Codex**, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's monumental work, devotes a memorable passage to describing the sage. Paraphrasing its content: the good **tlamatini** is a teacher, a guide, one who holds a mirror before others so they may know themselves; he makes others' faces wise, shapes his disciples' face and heart, opens their eyes. The bad sage, by contrast, is a trickster: a sorcerer who deceives, who leads people astray, who uses his knowledge for evil. This distinction between the authentic sage and the false sage — between wisdom in the community's service and corrupted knowledge — is already, in itself, a first-order ethical reflection. The Nahuas did not admire knowledge as such: they demanded that knowledge be good.

Where did the **tlamatini** come from? From the schools, and

particularly the **calmecac**, "the house of the row" or "the house of discipline," the elite's educational institution. The calmecac took in nobles' sons, the *pipiltin*, and exceptionally talented commoner youths. Discipline was severe: pupils rose before dawn, bathed in cold water, fasted frequently, and were harshly punished for any fault. But the training they received was extraordinary: they learned pictographic writing and codex reading, their people's history preserved in the *xiuhamatl*, the "books of years"; they studied calendars and astronomy, the art of rhetoric and poetry, the moral doctrine contained in the *huehuetlatolli*, and trained in the arts of war and government. The calmecac was at once seminary, university, and military academy: from its classrooms came the empire's priests, judges, ambassadors, and rulers.

Beside the calmecac stood the **telpochcalli**, "the house of youths," for plebeians' sons, the *macehualtin*. Its training was more practical and martial: weapons handling, communal labor, army discipline. But it would be a mistake to think wisdom was the elite's monopoly: the *huehuetlatolli*, the elders' word, circulated in every home, and the *tonalpohuque*, the calendar diviners, served rich and poor. Nahua culture valued knowledge at every level, though it reserved its most refined form for the *tlamatinime*.

The Nahua sage's figure had a mission the texts express with a beautiful metaphor: "**to make others' faces wise**," to shape in disciples a *face* and a *heart*. In the Nahuas' philosophical anthropology, *ixtli*, the face, was not just the visage: it was moral identity, cultivated personality, what we would call character. And *yollotl*, the heart, was the center of inner life, the seat of feelings and decisions. To educate, for the *tlamatinime*, was not to fill heads with data: it was to sculpt faces and hearts, to form whole

persons. This conception of education as moral formation — not mere instruction — anticipates Western humanist pedagogies by several centuries.

Nahua Philosophy According to León-Portilla

For nearly four centuries, no one in the academic world asked whether the ancient Mexicans had had philosophy. The question itself seemed absurd: philosophy was a Greek invention, cultivated afterward by Europeans, and America's "primitive" peoples might have myths, rites, and customs, but not philosophy. This conviction — a mix of ignorance and Eurocentrism — collapsed in 1956, when a young Mexican researcher published a doctoral thesis that would forever change the history of American thought: **La filosofía náhuatl estudiada en sus fuentes** (Nahua Philosophy Studied in Its Sources), by **Miguel León-Portilla**.

León-Portilla's thesis was bold and documented with impeccable philological rigor. From the Nahuatl-language texts — the **Cantares mexicanos**, the **Romances de los señores de la Nueva España**, the testimonies gathered by Sahagún — he demonstrated that the **tlamatinime** had posed the fundamental questions of all philosophy: what is real? (**Ometeotl**, the dual principle, as metaphysical answer); can we know truth? (the doctrine of **in xochitl in cuicatl**, flower and song, as epistemological answer); how should we live? (the **huehuetlatolli** and the ethics of face and heart, as moral answer). These were not scattered myths, he argued, but systematic thought, with its own concepts, problems, and solutions.

The polemic was not long in coming. Some scholars objected that calling Nahua thought "philosophy" projected European categories

onto a culture that did not know them: what León-Portilla called philosophy was merely mythical thought, they said, and philosophy demanded the form of the Greek rational treatise. León-Portilla replied with an argument devastating in its simplicity: if by philosophy we understand only what the Greeks and their heirs did, then no other culture in the world — neither Chinese, nor Indian, nor Maya — would have had philosophy, which is absurd. Philosophy, he held, is systematic reflection on existence's ultimate problems, and that reflection existed in ancient Mexico with the same right as in Athens or Benares.

The epistemological core of Nahua philosophy — its theory of knowledge — is perhaps its most original contribution. The **tlamatinime** asked, with an anguish running through all their poetry, whether man can attain truth. The world, they observed, is changing and illusory: flowers wither, songs are forgotten, empires fall, men die. How to know the true in a world where everything perishes? Are men true, one of the poems asked, or is everything like a dream? The sages' answer was neither skepticism nor resignation, but a path of their own: **in xochitl in cuicatl**, "flower and song."

According to this doctrine, truth is not reached by discursive reasoning — ordinary language is too poor to name the sacred — but by poetry: by flower and song, by metaphor, by the flowery word that says more than it says. The poem does not describe reality: it invokes it, makes it present. When the **tlamatini** sings, he is not adorning thought: he is thinking in the only way the mystery can be thought. This conception places Nahua poetry in a unique spot in philosophy's history: not as thought's illustration, but as its supreme instrument. Few traditions have granted the poetic

word so high an epistemological dignity.

The poet-philosopher par excellence of this tradition was **Nezahualcoyotl** (1402–1472), lord of Texcoco, the "hungry coyote" — or "fasting coyote," by other readings of his name. Nezahualcoyotl was one of pre-Hispanic Mexico's most extraordinary figures: warrior who reconquered his throne, engineer who designed the great dike protecting Tenochtitlan from floods, lawgiver who endowed Texcoco with a code of laws, and poet whose work, preserved in the **Cantares mexicanos** and the **Romances**, constitutes the summit of Nahuatl lyric.

Nezahualcoyotl's poetry is traversed by a philosophical melancholy that makes it unforgettable. His constant theme is fleetingness: everything passes, everything withers, nothing remains. In his verses — paraphrased here, for every translation is already an interpretation — he wonders whether one truly lives upon the earth, whether men are true or everything is like a dream from which we shall wake in death. He compares life to flowers opening at dawn and withering by noon; he grieves that neither palaces nor songs last forever; he contemplates death not with terror but with lucid sadness, as the common destiny equalizing kings and plebeians.

Tradition — gathered by his descendant, the chronicler Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, so it must be read cautiously — tells that Nezahualcoyotl came to question the traditional gods' worship and to seek an unknown god, cause of all causes, whom he called **Tloque Nahuaque**, "owner of what is near and what is together," the giver of life. By this account, the poet-king had a temple without images built to this invisible god, and banned human sacrifice in Texcoco. Historians debate how much truth and how much Christian embellishment this story holds — Ixtlilxochitl wrote for a colonial

audience and had interest in presenting his ancestor as a forerunner of Christianity — but even as legend it reveals something true: Indigenous memory preserved Nezahualcoyotl as a restless spirit, a seeker, a man unsatisfied with inherited answers.

Beside Nezahualcoyotl, Nahua lyric has bequeathed other names: **Tochihuitzin Coyolchiuhqui**, poet of life's brevity; **Ayocuan Cuetzpaltzin**, singer of friendship and measured joy; **Aquiauhtzin**, lord of Ayapanco, whose verses celebrate the world's ephemeral beauty. All share the same tone: a joy tempered by consciousness of death, a love of life that does not ignore its end. It is the tone of a culture that had made fleetingness not a motive for despair, but a reason to sing.

The Cantares: Poetry as Philosophy

If Nahua philosophy had a laboratory, it was song. The **Cantares mexicanos** — the manuscript preserving the largest collection of pre-Hispanic Nahua poetry — are not an entertainment songbook: they are the archive of a philosophical reflection conducted with poetry's instruments. To understand the **tlamatinime**, one must enter this archive and learn to read it on its own terms.

The **Cantares mexicanos** manuscript, kept in Mexico's National Library, gathers over ninety compositions in the Nahuatl language, collected in the sixteenth century from the lips of Indigenous singers. The **Romances de los señores de la Nueva España**, another similar collection, adds more pieces to the corpus. These poems were sung with drum accompaniment — the **huehuetl** and **teponaztli** — at festivals and ceremonies, and their performance was a demanding art: the singer had to master the flowery language, the difrasismos, the mythological allusions. They were

not popular songs in the modern sense: they were compositions of the cultured elite, created by and for the **tlamatinime** and the lords.

Nahua poetic form has unmistakable features. The first is **difrasismo**, the expression of an idea through a pair of metaphors: **in xochitl in cuicatl**, "flower and song," for "poetry"; **in ixtli in yollotl**, "face and heart," for "moral person"; **in atl in tepetl**, "water and hill," for "city" or "community." Difrasismo is not ornament: it is a way of thinking. By naming things through complementary pairs, the Nahuatl language inscribes duality in its very structure: each important concept is said in two words needing each other, like Omoteotl's two halves. To speak in difrasismos is to think in dualities.

The second feature is **parallelism**, the repetition of one idea with variations: a verse says something, the next repeats it in other words, the third nuances it. This procedure, common to the world's sacred poetics — from the Hebrew psalms to the **Popol Vuh**'s verses — creates an effect of meditative insistence: the idea is not stated once, but surrounded, contemplated from several angles, until it reveals its meaning. Nahua poetry does not argue: it encircles.

The third feature is the **aesthetic of the ephemeral**. The poems return again and again to the same images: flowers withering, songs forgotten, paintings erased, palaces crumbling. This insistence is not pessimism: it is the recognition that beauty and truth dwell precisely in the transitory. Here there is a family air with the Japanese sensitivity of **mono no aware** — the "sadness of things" — and it is no accident: cultures that have long meditated on impermanence reach similar conclusions. For the **tlamatinime**,

the eternal lay not in things, but in the principle making them be born and die: the flower withers, but spring returns; the song is forgotten, but another singer intones it anew.

The cantares' themes are philosophy's great themes: death, the beyond, truth, friendship, fleetingness. One poem wonders where the dead go and whether we shall meet again; another celebrates friendship as the only wealth that does not wither; another contemplates the stars and wonders at the sky's order. Paraphrasing one of the most celebrated, attributed to Nezahualcoyotl's circle: "Do we truly live upon the earth? Not forever here: only a little. Though it be jade, it breaks; though it be gold, it shatters; though it be quetzal plumage, it tears. Not forever on earth: only a little here." The enumeration of precious materials — jade, gold, quetzal feathers — is no accident: they are the most valuable things the Nahuas knew, and not even they endure. If jade breaks, what hope remains for man? The poem's answer is not despair, but an invitation to live intensely the "little here" given to us.

Another group of poems, the so-called "songs of friendship," celebrates the bond among sages with moving tenderness. The **tlamatinime** gathered to sing together, to exchange flowers and songs — that is, poems — and these gatherings were at once festivals and philosophical sessions. Friendship among sages was not a private feeling: it was an institution, a way of doing philosophy in community. When a poet died, his friends composed songs in his memory, and these funeral songs are among the corpus's most beautiful texts: the friend's death becomes occasion to meditate on everyone's death.

The singer-philosopher's figure raises a question Western

philosophy took centuries to formulate: can poetry be a mode of knowledge, and not just thought's ornament? The *tlamatinime* answered yes, and their answer — *in xochitl in cuicatl* — is one of history's most original epistemologies. They did not say reason was useless: they said there were truths — the ultimate truths, of the dual principle, of destiny, of death — that conceptual language could not reach, and that only metaphor, song, the flower of the word could touch. It is a position contemporary philosophy, with its revaluation of poetic language and tacit knowledge, is beginning to rediscover.

A final word must be said on these poems' transmission. That they reached us is almost a miracle: the friars, who destroyed thousands of codices, preserved the songs because they considered them literary curiosities, without noticing their philosophical content. Indigenous singers, for their part, kept intoning them in secret for generations, transmitting from memory what could no longer be written. When today we read the *Cantares mexicanos*, we hear voices that crossed four centuries of silence to reach us. That those voices still speak to us of fleetingness, friendship, and the search for truth is the best proof that the *tlamatinime* achieved what they set out to do: to defeat death with flower and song.

The singers themselves — the *cuicapicque*, "makers of songs" — deserve remembrance, for they were the tradition's living vessels. They were not improvisers: they trained for years in the *calmecac* or in the houses of song, the *cuicacalli*, memorizing hundreds of compositions and mastering the drum. Their art was exacting: a misplaced *difrasismo*, a forgotten verse, could ruin a ceremony. And their social status was high: the great singers were honored like the great warriors, for they too served the community — the warrior

with his blood, the singer with his memory. When the conquest came, the singers faced a choice: silence or adaptation. Many chose a third path: they kept singing the ancient songs in secret, teaching them to their children, preserving in memory what could no longer be written. Four centuries later, when scholars recorded the last traditional singers, the songs were still recognizable: the chain had held. Every poem we read today passed through those throats; every verse is a victory over oblivion.

The Huehuetlatolli: The Ancient Word

If the **tlamatinime** represent the speculative summit of Nahua thought, the **huehuetlatolli**, "the ancient word" or "the sayings of the old," represent its ethical root. This is a genre of didactic discourses — exhortations, counsels, admonitions — that elders addressed to the young at life's decisive moments: birth, school entry, marriage, assumption of office. Gathered by the friars in the sixteenth century — the oldest collection is Fray Andrés de Olmos's, from the 1530s; the broadest, book VI of the **Florentine Codex** — the **huehuetlatolli** constitute one of pre-Hispanic America's richest corpora of moral wisdom.

These discourses' content is a complete ethics, articulated with fine psychology. Its fundamental principle could be summarized in a phrase: **the middle path**. Elders exhorted avoiding all excess: neither pride nor abjection, neither gluttony nor immoderate fasting, neither recklessness nor cowardice. "Do not grow proud," they said in substance, "do not hold yourself superior to others, for whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; but neither crawl, for man must have dignity." This doctrine of the just mean, so similar to what Aristotle formulated in Greece and Confucius in China, arose in

Anáhuac independently, as the fruit of observing life.

The father-to-son **huehuetlatolli** are particularly moving. The father warns the youth against life's dangers with images of enduring beauty: he tells him the earth is a slippery place, where it is easy to fall; that life is like a road with ravines on either side; that he must walk carefully, watching where he puts his feet. He teaches respect for elders, diligence in work, measure in eating and drinking, chastity before marriage, truthfulness in speech. He tells him not to steal, not to lie, not to take what is another's, to honor the gods with modest but sincere offerings. And he reminds him, again and again, that pride is the worst of vices: the proud man, say the elders, is like smoke that rises and dissipates, while the humble is like the root that sinks and endures.

The mother-to-daughter discourses, for their part, trace the Nahua feminine ideal: diligence in the home, the art of weaving — which was far more than a craft: it was a form of writing and prayer — modesty in dress and bearing, conjugal fidelity, the loving but firm raising of children. Far from the stereotype of the subjugated woman, these texts reveal an ideal of feminine dignity: woman is the home's guardian, the children's educator, the weaver of the social fabric. Her moral authority was immense, and the elders recognized it without reserve.

There were also **huehuetlatolli** for rulers: accession discourses reminding the new lord that his office was a burden, not a privilege; that he must be "he who carries" his people on his back, as a mother carries her child; that he must judge with justice, without favoritism; that he must weep and pray for his people. The Nahua political philosophy contained in these texts conceived power as service: the ruler was first in sacrifice and last in rest. When Spanish

chroniclers described the tlatoanis as tyrants, they ignored — or feigned to ignore — this doctrine, which the Mexica themselves took very seriously.

The upbringing of children, according to the *huehuetlatolli* and Sahagún's testimonies, was loving but severe. Little ones were corrected with exhortations; older ones with punishments that seem harsh to us today — maguey thorns, fasts, forced labor — but which must be understood in context: in a society without jails or police, family discipline was the foundation of social order. What is notable is not the punishments' harshness, but the tenderness of the words accompanying them: parents, when punishing, explained to the child they did it for his good, to shape his face and heart. The goal was never pain: it was the person.

The human ideal emerging from the *huehuetlatolli* is that of the man or woman "owners of a face and a heart": whole, moderate, hardworking, respectful, truthful persons. They were not asked for heroism or sainthood: decency, measure, constancy were asked. It is a profoundly human ethics, without promises of paradises or threats of hells — for, as we shall see, the Nahua beyond was neither moral prize nor punishment — but founded on the conviction that the good life is the balanced life. In this sense, the *huehuetlatolli* are the practical counterpart of Ometeotl's metaphysics: if the cosmos is a balance of contraries, human life must be a balance of passions.

Mictlan and the Duality of Life and Death

The Nine Mansions of the Dead: The Descent to Mictlan

Of all Mexico beliefs, none has left so deep a mark on contemporary Mexico as that of the beyond: every year, on November 2, millions of Mexicans set offerings for their dead in a festival the world knows as the Day of the Dead, declared Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO. The roots of this celebration sink into the pre-Hispanic conception of Mictlan — though, as we shall see, the modern festival is not a simple survival, but a mestizo creation. This chapter examines the ancient vision of the realm of the dead and its relationship with the philosophy of duality.

The first thing to understand about the Nahuatl beyond is that **it was not a place of moral reward or punishment**. Unlike Christian heaven and hell, Mictlan did not distinguish the good from the wicked: the virtuous man and the criminal, if they died in the same way, went to the same destination. What determined one's lot in the afterlife was not moral conduct, but the **manner of death**. This is an essential difference: for the Nahuatl, the beyond was not a court of justice, but a geography. Each type of death opened the door to a different region, and the deceased had to travel to his

own.

The most common destination — that of those who died a "common" death, by illness, accident, or old age — was **Mictlan**, "the place of the dead," also called *Ximoayan*, "where the flesh is torn," or *Teotlalpan*, "land of the gods." Mictlan lay in the north, the region of cold and night, and to reach it the dead had to undertake a four-year journey through nine mansions, each with its own trials.

The journey began at the **Itzcuintlan**, "the place of dogs": the deceased arrived at a river of blood, which he could only cross with the aid of a dog — preferably a reddish *xoloitzcuintli* — sacrificed and buried with him for this purpose. The white or black dog, they said, would not help: the deceased would drown in the river. Once across, he entered the **Tepeme Monamictlan**, "where the mountains meet," two ranges colliding like jaws, between which the dead had to slip at the precise instant. Then came the **Itztepetl**, "mountain of obsidian," a peak of blades tearing the flesh; and the **Cehuecayan**, "where there is much wind," a place of icy winds flaying the traveler like flint knives.

The fifth mansion was the **Panohuehuetque**, "where men fly," where the dead, without foothold, fluttered like flags; the sixth, the **Timiminaloayan**, "where men are arrowed," where black arrows pierced the travelers; the seventh, the **Teocoyohuehualoyan**, "where beasts eat the heart," where jaguars devoured the deceased's heart. The eighth was the **Izmictlan Apochcalolca**, "where there is much mist," where the dead wandered blind in dense fog. And the ninth and last, the **Chicunamictlan**, "the nine dead" or "the place of the nine," was the deepest realm, where **Mictlantecuhtli**, "lord of the land of the dead," and his consort

Mictecacihuatl, "lady of the dead," reigned.

Four years after death, when the journey concluded with the fourth funeral anniversary, the deceased finally arrived before the lords of Mictlan and offered them his gifts — the offerings buried with him — and then rested at last. This final rest was not a paradise of delights: Mictlan was a dark, cold place, without sun, where the dead led a diminished existence. But it was not a place of torment either: it was simply the natural state of those who had left life. Death, in the Nahuatl vision, was not a prize to be earned, but a condition to be assumed.

This geography of the beyond has been preserved in several codices — the **Codex Vaticanus B** and **Codex Fejérváry-Mayer** represent the nine mansions with their trials — and in the chronicles. But the most vivid testimony is the archaeological one: the offerings buried with the dead. In Mexica tombs, the deceased was interred with what he would need for his journey: food, water, his ornaments, the dog that would help him cross the river, and a series of papers and flags. The funeral rite was at once farewell and provisioning: the living equipped the dead for his journey, as one equips a traveler setting out for a long road.

The four-year journey also explains a custom that survives to this day: the funeral anniversaries. For four years, the family remembered the deceased with offerings and rites, helping him on his way. Only after the fourth anniversary was the soul considered to have arrived at its destination. This is the origin of the novenarios and anniversaries of Mexican popular Catholicism: a pre-Hispanic temporal structure that survived under Christian dress. That we still count the years of mourning is an echo of the nine mansions.

The **dog** of the first mansion deserves its own paragraph, for the **xoloitzcuintli** — the hairless Mexican dog — is one of the most endearing figures of the Nahua beyond. The deceased was buried with a reddish dog, sacrificed for the purpose, whose task was to help his master cross the river of blood. The chroniclers specify the details: the dog had to be reddish — **bermejo** — for the white dog said "I have washed myself" and refused to cross, and the black dog said "I have stained myself" and refused too. Only the reddish dog, the color of the earth and of blood, accepted the task. This charming etiology reveals the Nahuas' affection for their dogs — and a theological point: even in death, man needs help; the journey cannot be made alone. The **xoloitzcuintli** was not a pet: it was a psychopomp, a guide of souls, and the Nahuas honored it as such. That a civilization's vision of the afterlife includes a dog waiting at the river's edge says something beautiful about that civilization: the beyond, for the Nahuas, was not an abstraction — it was a road, and on the road one needs company.

The Warrior's Death and the Flowered Death

Not all the dead traveled to Mictlan. Those who died certain special deaths were exempt from the four-year journey and destined for privileged regions of the beyond. These were the "flowered deaths" — the deaths that feed the sun — and their geography reveals the values of Nahua civilization.

The highest destiny was that of **warriors fallen in battle** and **captives sacrificed to the sun**: their souls did not descend to Mictlan, but ascended to the sky, to the house of the sun, **Tonatiuhichan**. There, transformed into brilliant birds — hummingbirds, the birds of warriors — they accompanied the sun

on his daily journey from dawn to noon, singing and battling in celestial combats. After four years of this service, they were reborn upon the earth as hummingbirds or butterflies. The image is of extraordinary beauty: the warrior, who gave his blood so the sun would move, became a companion of the sun, then a jewel of air. Death in battle was not an end: it was a transfiguration.

Women who died in childbirth — the **mocihuaquetzque**, "valiant women" — shared a similar destiny. For the Nahuas, childbirth was a battle: the woman in labor was a warrior taking a captive — the child — and if she died in the fight, she died a warrior's death. The mocihuaquetzque accompanied the sun on his evening journey, from noon to sunset, delivering him into the hands of the dead in a relay of cosmic symmetry: the men took him at dawn, the women delivered him at dusk. And like warriors, they could return to earth: they were feared on certain nights — the *Cihuateteo*, the "divine women," descended to crossroads on five ominous days — but they were honored as heroines, their relics considered powerful talismans. That a culture granted women who died in childbirth the same honor as warriors fallen in battle says much about its values: motherhood was not sentimentalized, but recognized as a form of courage.

The third privileged destination was **Tlalocan**, the paradise of Tlaloc, god of rain. There went those who died by water-related causes: the drowned, those struck by lightning, those dead of dropsy and other "humid" illnesses, and the children sacrificed to the rain gods. Tlalocan was described as a place of perpetual abundance: evergreen fields, rivers of fresh water, trees laden with fruit, flowers that never withered. It was the closest thing to a paradise of delights in the Nahua vision, and its existence reveals

that the Nahuas also imagined happiness after death — but reserved it for those whom water, life's sacred element, had marked.

There were other special destinations: **Chichihuacuauhco**, "where the nursing tree is," where children who died before weaning went, nursed by a great tree whose branches dripped milk; and the destiny of those struck by lightning or dead in certain circumstances, whom the **tlaloques** claimed for their service. Each type of death opened a different door: the beyond was a map, and one's own death was the compass.

What unites these privileged destinations? The idea that **certain deaths are gifts to the cosmos**: the warrior feeds the sun with his blood, the woman in childbirth gives a new warrior to the community, the drowned belongs to the water. These deaths are not losses: they are offerings. The common death — by illness or age — leads to Mictlan's long journey; the flowered death leads directly to the sun. The Nahua value system is written in this geography: the community honors those who die giving, not those who die receiving.

This doctrine had profound social consequences. It valorized the warrior's courage, it dignified the mother's sacrifice, it gave meaning to deaths modernity considers absurd — the drowned, the lightning-struck — by integrating them into a cosmic order. And it removed from death its sting of arbitrariness: no one died "in vain," for every death had its place in the map. We may reject the map; but we should admire the need it answered: that of making death intelligible, of not letting it be mere nothingness.

Education in the Calmecac: The House of Wisdom

The **tlamatinime** did not arise by spontaneous generation: they were the product of an educational institution, the **calmecac**, whose organization reveals the seriousness with which the Nahuas took the formation of sages. To examine the calmecac is to examine the social conditions of Nahua philosophy.

The calmecac was a school for the elite: it received the **pipiltin**, the nobles' sons, and exceptionally talented commoner youths. But its curriculum was not that of a school for privileges: it was that of a school for responsibilities. The pupils, the **tlamacazton** — "little priests" — lived under a severe discipline: they rose before dawn, bathed in cold water, fasted, swept the temples, and were harshly punished for the slightest fault. Drunkenness, laziness, or disobedience were punished with maguey thorns and fasts. The goal was not cruelty: it was tempering. The future ruler, priest, or sage had to be a man who had conquered himself before commanding others.

The content of the teaching was encyclopedic. Pupils learned pictographic writing and the reading of codices: the **xiuhamatl**, annals recording the people's history year by year; the **tonalamatl**, books of destinies; the collections of songs and **huehuetlatolli**. They studied the calendars and astronomy, without which the ritual and agricultural order could not be maintained. They learned rhetoric and the art of the flowery word, for a lord or priest had to speak well in public. They memorized the moral doctrine of the elders. And they trained in the arts of war and government: the calmecac was not a cloister withdrawn from the world, but a school for those who would govern it.

Beside the calmecac stood the **telpochcalli**, "the house of youths," for the commoners' sons. Its training was more martial and

practical: weapons handling, military discipline, communal labor. But the *telpochcalli* was not a school without culture: its pupils also learned their people's history, songs, and the moral doctrine of the **huehuetlatolli**. The difference between the two institutions was one of specialization, not dignity: the Mexica warrior, forged in the *telpochcalli*, was also a cultured man who knew his songs and his duties.

A fundamental aspect of Nahua education was its **moral** character. What was taught, above all, was how to live: respect for elders, measure in pleasures, diligence in work, courage in war, truthfulness in speech. Knowledge had a purpose: to shape faces and hearts. The **tlamatini** who taught in the *calmecac* was not a professor transmitting information: he was a sculptor of persons. This conception of education as moral formation — which the Greeks called **paideia** — unites the great pedagogical traditions of humanity: Athens and Tenochtitlan, so distant in everything, coincided in this.

The school's physical setting deserves mention: the *calmecac* was a building of austere beauty, with its courtyards and its temples, where pupils lived in community under their teachers' direction. The most famous *calmecac* was that of Tenochtitlan, beside the Great Temple, but there were *calmecac* in Texcoco, Tlacopan, and the empire's main cities. Nahua education was not improvised: it was a state institution, financed and supervised by power, for power understood that its continuity depended on the formation of its elites.

The conquest destroyed the *calmecac*, but its spirit survived in unexpected forms. The friars' schools — the **Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco**, founded in 1536 — took in nobles' sons and

taught them Latin, rhetoric, and philosophy, and the Indigenous pupils turned out to be brilliant disciples: it was they, like Antonio Valeriano, who collaborated with Sahagún in preserving the ancient culture. There is a poignant irony in this: the institution that destroyed the *calmecac* created, unintentionally, the instrument for saving its memory. The **tlamatinime**'s disciples became the friars' informants, and through them the ancient wisdom reached us.

The Sage's Critique of Power: Conscience Before the Throne

The **tlamatinime** were not courtiers flattering power: they were consciences that judged it. The Nahuatl sources preserve testimonies of a critical function of wisdom before rulers that deserves to be highlighted, for it refutes the image of a thought subservient to the state.

The tradition of Nezahualcoyotl illustrates this function. The poet-king of Texcoco, according to the chronicles, surrounded himself with sages and listened to their counsel, but he also accepted their reproach. It is told that on one occasion, facing an unjust decision, the sages spoke to him with the frankness their office authorized, reminding him that power is a burden and that the ruler who forgets justice loses his legitimacy. Whether or not the anecdote is historical, it expresses an ideal: the sage as the ruler's moral limit.

The **huehuetlatolli** addressed to rulers are, in this sense, documents of political philosophy. They remind the new *tlatoani* that his office is a "heavy bundle" he must carry on his back; that he must be father and mother of his people; that he must weep for them and pray for them; that he must not grow proud, for pride

precedes the fall; that he must judge without favoritism, neither favoring the noble nor trampling the plebeian. This doctrine of power as service — so reminiscent of certain Christian and Confucian ideals — was not mere rhetoric: the Mexica took it seriously, and rulers who violated it were remembered with infamy.

Did the sages criticize human sacrifice? The sources give no direct testimony of philosophical opposition to the rite, and it would be anachronistic to expect it: sacrifice was the system's cornerstone, and questioning it would have been questioning the cosmos itself. But there are hints of unease: the tradition of Nezahualcoyotl banning sacrifice in Texcoco — even if legendary — suggests that Indigenous memory preserved the image of a sage who found another path. And the **tlamatinime**'s emphasis on the inner life, on face and heart, opened a space where the value of the person did not depend on the ritual knife.

The relationship between wisdom and power in the Nahua world was thus complex: the sages served the state as priests, judges, and counselors, but they also judged it from the height of their moral doctrine. This tension — between service and critique — is that of all genuine intellectual traditions. The **tlamatinime** were not revolutionaries: they were guardians of a measure that power must not exceed. And when power exceeded it — as it did in the empire's final years, with Motecuhzoma's growing arrogance — the sages' warnings, if they existed, were not heeded. History does not record whether any **tlamatini** predicted the catastrophe; but the melancholy of the late songs — those lamenting that everything perishes — sounds like a civilization's farewell to itself.





Death Without Fear: The Ethics of Impermanence

The Nahua vision of death was not only a geography of the beyond: it was an ethics, a way of living with the consciousness of the end. This ethics — which we may call the ethics of impermanence — is one of the most profound contributions of Nahua thought, and the one that most directly speaks to the modern reader.

Its starting point is the same as that of the *tlamatinime*'s poetry: everything perishes. The flower withers, the song is forgotten, the palace crumbles, man dies. Faced with this evidence, there are several possible attitudes: despair, denial, religious consolation. The Nahua attitude was different: **lucid acceptance**. Death was not denied — the skulls in art and the *Mictlan* in the codices prove it — nor was it despaired of; it was incorporated into life as its natural horizon. To live well, for the Nahuas, was to live knowing one will die.

This acceptance had practical consequences. The first was the **devaluation of material goods**: if everything perishes, accumulating riches is folly. The *huehuetlatolli* exhorted moderation in possessions; the poems mocked those who believed their palaces eternal. The second was the **valuation of the present**: if life is brief, each moment is precious. The songs' invitation to enjoy flowers and friendship is not hedonism: it is the wisdom of one who knows time is short. The third was **serenity before death**: the Mexica warrior who climbed the pyramid singing did not do so from fanaticism, but from the conviction that his death had meaning. Dying well was the crowning of living well.

This ethics has a family air with other traditions: with the Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius, who invited meditating on death each morning; with Epicureanism, which taught that death is nothing to us; with Buddhism, which makes impermanence the first noble truth. But the Nahua version has its own accent: it is not an individual ethics of the sage, but a collective ethics of the people. Death was not meditated in solitude: it was celebrated in festivals, sung in choruses, represented in art. Impermanence was not a private philosophy: it was public culture.

The Nahua attitude toward the corpse also reveals this ethics. The dead were not hidden or shunned: they were kept company, watched over, buried with offerings, remembered for four years. The skull — the **tzompantli**'s skull racks, the stone skulls — was not a macabre ornament: it was a reminder. **Memento mori**, the medievals said; the Nahuas said it with stone and song. That a culture looks death in the face without flinching is not morbidity: it is courage.

Modernity, by contrast, has hidden death: we die in hospitals, we mourn discreetly, we avoid the word. The Nahua ethics of impermanence offers us a mirror and a question: what have we gained by hiding death, and what have we lost? Perhaps we have gained comfort; but we have lost the serenity that comes from accepting the inevitable. The **tlamatinime** would tell us, with their flower-and-song metaphors, that denying death does not defeat it: only looking at it does, and looking at it, singing.

The Skull in Art: The Iconography of Death

No image is so associated with pre-Hispanic Mexico as the skull. The **tzompantli** — the rack of skulls — of the Great Temple, the stone skulls of the museums, the **calaveras** of popular art: death's iconography is the most visible face of the Nahua legacy. But this iconography is often misunderstood: it is read as morbidity or cruelty, when it is, in truth, theology in stone.

The **tzompantli** was a wooden structure where the skulls of the sacrificed were displayed, perforated through the temples and threaded on poles. The Great Temple's tzompantli, according to the chronicles, held thousands of skulls, and recent excavations — the Huey Tzompantli discovered in downtown Mexico City — have

confirmed the chroniclers' descriptions with impressive precision. But the tzompantli was not a trophy: it was an offering. The skulls, consecrated to the sun and the earth, fed the gods with their presence. And they were a reminder: life feeds on death, death sustains life. The tzompantli was the duality of life and death made architecture.

Stone skulls abound in Mexica art: the *Mictlantecuhtli* sculptures, the skulls of the Great Temple's facades, the *calaveras* carved in boxes and altars. These skulls are not realistic: they are stylized, often smiling, adorned with paper rosettes and jewels. The smile of the Mexica skull is one of the most enigmatic and beautiful images of universal art: death does not grimace; it smiles. This smile is the ethics of impermanence made image: death is not the enemy, but the companion.

The goddess **Coatlicue**, "she of the serpent skirt," mother of Huitzilopochtli, is the supreme expression of this iconography. Her colossal statue — over two meters of carved andesite, discovered in 1790 beneath Mexico City's main square — shows her with a skirt of serpents, a necklace of hearts and hands, and a head formed by two serpent heads meeting face to face. Coatlicue is at once mother and devourer: she gives life and takes it away, she is the earth that nourishes and the tomb that receives. Her statue is not "horrible," as the first Spanish antiquarians said: it is sublime. It is duality carved in stone.

The iconography of death was not confined to temples: it permeated everyday life. Vessels were decorated with skulls, jewels took the shape of bones, children's toys included skeletons. Death was not a taboo subject: it was a familiar presence. This familiarity is what most surprises the modern visitor to the museums: a culture

that played with death, that smiled at it, that made it art. But play was not disrespect: it was the highest form of acceptance.

The Spanish conquest tried to erase this iconography: the tzompantli were dismantled, the statues buried, the skulls hidden. But death's image survived in popular art: the *calaveras* of the Day of the Dead, the sugar skulls, José Guadalupe Posada's prints with his *Catrina* — the elegant skeleton lady — are heirs of the pre-Hispanic skull. Posada's Catrina, with her French hat and her mocking smile, is the great-granddaughter of Coatlicue: death that smiles at the living's vanities. That a 19th-century engraver and a Mexica sculptor, separated by three centuries, drew the same smile proves that the iconography of death is one of Mexico's deepest cultural continuities.

The Day of the Dead: The Living Heritage

Every November 2 — and in many places from October 31 — millions of Mexicans set the **offering of the dead**: an altar with the deceased's photograph, marigold flowers (*cempasuchil*), candles, incense, bread of the dead, the foods and drinks the dead enjoyed in life, sugar skulls with their names, and papel picado adorning everything. Families visit cemeteries, clean the tombs, spend the night among candles and songs. It is the most beloved and most universal of Mexican festivals, and the world has recognized its value: UNESCO declared it Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Is the Day of the Dead a pre-Hispanic survival? The answer is nuanced: it is not a pure survival, but a **mestizo creation** in which Indigenous and Christian elements fused. The pre-Hispanic roots are undeniable: the offering of food to the dead, the four-year mourning

cycle, the belief that the deceased return to visit the living, the familiarity with death. But the festival's date — November 2, All Souls' Day — is Catholic, imposed by the evangelizers on an Indigenous celebration that probably fell in the *veintena* of *Tlaxochimaco* or thereabouts. The friars, unable to extirpate the cult of the dead, baptized it: they moved it to the Christian calendar and gave it Catholic form.

The offering itself is a syncretic work of art. The **arch** of marigolds and reeds represents the sky's vault; the **levels** of the altar — two, three, seven, according to towns — represent the world's levels or the steps to Mictlan; the **candles** light the souls' path; the **incense** purifies the environment; the **water** quenches the traveler's thirst; the **salt** preserves; the **bread of the dead**, with its bone-shaped ornaments, is the offering's body; the **photographs** identify those awaited. Each element has a meaning, and the whole is a map: the altar is a Mictlan in miniature, a cosmos built on the dining table.

The festival's meaning has also evolved. For the ancient Nahuas, the dead undertook a four-year journey and did not return; for today's Mexicans, the dead return every year to share food with the living. This idea of the annual return — which has parallels in other cultures, from the Celtic Samhain to the Chinese Qingming — is probably a colonial development, fruit of the fusion with All Souls. But it expresses something profoundly Nahua: that death does not separate, that the dead remain part of the community, that the duality of life and death is not an opposition but a continuity.

The Day of the Dead has also become a symbol of Mexican identity: in the face of the Anglo-Saxon Halloween — with its horror-movie aesthetics — Mexico offers a festival where death is family, where the skull smiles, where the cemetery is a place of encounter. This

contrast is not accidental: it is the living heritage of the ethics of impermanence. While other cultures hide or dramatize death, Mexico invites it to dinner. And the world, which increasingly seeks meaning before death, looks to Mexico with admiration.

But the festival faces threats: commercialization, which turns it into tourist spectacle; the loss of its community meaning in the big cities; the confusion with Halloween among the young. The communities that keep it alive — Mixquic, Pátzcuaro, Oaxaca, Pomuch — are its guardians. And the task of the coming generations will be to preserve not only the forms — the altars, the flowers, the bread — but the spirit: the conviction that death is part of life, and that remembering the dead is a way of living better.

The circle closes. We began this volume with Ometeotl, the dual principle, and we end with the Day of the Dead, the festival where duality becomes celebration. Between one and the other we have traversed the suns, the calendar, the sages, and Mictlan: a complete system of thought, coherent and profound, which the Nahuas built over centuries and which the conquest could not erase. The skull smiles, the marigold blooms, the dead return: the ancient word lives. *In xochitl in cuicatl* — in flower and song — the *tlamatinime*'s wisdom endures, inviting us to live with the consciousness of the end and, therefore, with the plenitude of the present.

The festival's regional variations deserve mention, for the Day of the Dead is not one festival but many. In **Mixquic**, in the Valley of Mexico, the *alumbrada* — the "lighting" — fills the cemetery with thousands of candles on the night of November 2, in one of the country's most moving spectacles. In **Pátzcuaro**, Michoacán, the Purépecha communities of Janitzio celebrate the *noche de

muertos* with offerings on the lake's island, in a festival blending Indigenous and Christian elements. In **Oaxaca**, the *comparsas* — costumed processions — fill the streets with music and satire, and the offerings compete in artistry. In **Pomuch**, Campeche, the Maya practice the *ch'oo ba'ak* — the "washing of the bones" — exhuming and cleaning their ancestors' remains. Each region has its own dead, its own way of receiving them: the festival's unity lies in its diversity.

This diversity is the festival's strength — and its guarantee of survival. A centralized, uniform celebration could be commercialized and emptied; a thousand local celebrations, each rooted in its community, resist. The threats are real — tourism that turns cemeteries into spectacles, the Halloween-ization of the young — but the communities' response has been creative: they invite the visitor, but on their terms; they share the festival, but keep its meaning. The dead, it seems, know how to defend themselves.

And there is a final duality this volume could not leave unmentioned: that of reader and text. These pages have expounded the thought of those who lived five centuries ago, but their meaning is completed in whoever reads them today. The ancestral legacy is not an object in a display case: it is a conversation across time, a dialogue between the *tlamatinime* and us. That this conversation continues is the only immortality wisdom can offer.



One *huehuetlatolli* deserves quoting at length — in paraphrase —

for it contains the whole Nahua moral philosophy in a single image. The father says to his son: "My son, the earth is a slippery place: it is easy to fall here. Life is like a road with ravines on either side: if you walk carelessly, you will fall into one or the other. Walk slowly, watch where you put your feet, do not run. Do not grow proud of your strength, for the strong fall too; do not despair of your weakness, for the weak can walk if they are careful." The image of the slippery earth — **tlalticpac**, "on the earth's back," as the Nahuas called the world — is the master metaphor of Nahua ethics: life is precarious, balance is everything, the middle path is the only safe road. Aristotle would have nodded; Confucius would have smiled. The fathers of Anáhuac, without knowing the Greeks or the Chinese, taught the same lesson: virtue is a mean, and the mean is a practice.

The Ethics of Face and Heart: The Nahua Human Ideal

Running through all the teachings of the **tlamatinime** — the calmecac's discipline, the **huehuetlatolli**'s counsels, the ethics of impermanence — is one human ideal, expressed in the most beautiful difrasismo of the Nahuatl language: **in ixtli in yollotl**, "face and heart." To understand this ideal is to understand what the Nahuas asked of a human being.

We have seen that **ixtli**, the face, was not just the visage: it was moral identity, cultivated personality, character. A man "without face" was not a disfigured man: he was a man without personality, without principles, a leaf in the wind. And **yollotl**, the heart, was the center of inner life: of feelings, intentions, decisions. The man "with face and heart" was the whole man: one who knows who he is

and feels rightly.

This ideal was articulated in a series of virtues the *huehuetlatolli* repeat insistently. The first was **measure**: the avoidance of all excess, the middle path between pride and abjection, between gluttony and immoderate fasting, between recklessness and cowardice. The measured man was like the well-tempered bow: neither too taut nor too loose. The second was **diligence**: work as moral duty, idleness as vice. The Nahua ideal had no place for the idle rich: even lords worked, and the *huehuetlatolli* warned the youth that laziness leads to ruin. The third was **respect**: for elders, for gods, for others' property, for the word given. The fourth was **truthfulness**: lying was among the gravest faults, for the word was sacred. And the fifth was **courage**: not reckless temerity, but the firmness to face danger when duty demanded.

The worst vice, in this ethics, was **pride**, and the elders pursued it relentlessly. The proud man, said the *huehuetlatolli*, is like smoke that rises and dissipates; like the reed that grows tall and breaks in the wind; like the foam that swells and vanishes. Humility, by contrast, was like the root: hidden, but sustaining the tree. This insistence on humility in a warrior society is remarkable: the Mexica admired the brave, but demanded he not boast. True courage was silent.

The ideal of face and heart was not reserved for men: women had their version, articulated in the mother-to-daughter discourses. The ideal woman was diligent in the home, skilled in weaving, modest in bearing, faithful in marriage, wise in raising children. But — and this is important — she was not passive: she was the home's guardian and the family's moral authority. The *huehuetlatolli* recognize in woman a dignity equal to man's, though expressed in different

spheres. The duality of the sexes, like cosmic duality, was complementarity, not hierarchy.

This ethics had a social dimension: the man of face and heart was not a solitary sage, but a community member. He fulfilled his duties: to his family, his ward (*calpulli*), his city, his gods. Individual perfection was inseparable from social service: one was not good alone, but good among others. The Nahua ideal was thus profoundly anti-individualist: the person was realized in the community, not against it.

Compare this ideal with those of other traditions. The Greek *kalokagathia* — the beautiful-and-good man — united physical beauty and moral virtue; the Nahua ideal united face (identity) and heart (feeling). Confucian *junzi* — the exemplary man — cultivated ritual, music, and moral reflection; the *tlatlatini*'s disciple cultivated flower and song, measure and respect. The Christian saint sought holiness before God; the man of face and heart sought integrity before the community. Different languages, similar aspirations: the great ethical traditions converge on the same intuition — that to be human is to be formed, and that formation is a lifelong task.

The ideal's relevance today is evident. In an age of fragmented identities and performative selves, the notion of "having face" — a coherent moral identity — sounds like a challenge. In an age of instrumental reason, the notion of "having heart" — feeling rightly — sounds like a rebuke. The Nahuas did not have our psychology or our sociology; but they understood something we are relearning: that the person is not given, but made, and that it is made with discipline, measure, and community. *In ixtli in yollotl*: face and heart. Four words containing a whole anthropology.

The Lords of the Underworld and the Theft of the Bones

Mictlan was not an empty place: it had rulers, and its rulers had a history. **Mictlantecuhtli**, "lord of the land of the dead," and his consort **Mictecacihuatl**, "lady of the dead," governed the ninth mansion, the deepest of the underworld. Their images in the codices are unmistakable: skeletal figures, adorned with skulls and bones, reigning over a realm of darkness. But these lords were not demons: they were the natural sovereigns of the dead's abode, and the Nahuas honored them with offerings and respect. Death's lords were not evil; they were necessary.

The most famous myth about them is that of the **theft of the bones**, narrated in the *Legend of the Suns*. When the gods decided to create the men of the Fifth Sun, they sent **Quetzalcoatl** to Mictlan to recover the bones of the previous eras' dead, with which the new humanity would be fashioned. Mictlantecuhtli, suspicious, agreed to surrender the bones on one condition: that Quetzalcoatl blow his conch shell — a conch without holes, an impossible task. Quetzalcoatl, with the help of worms that bored the holes and bees that sounded the shell, fulfilled the condition. But Mictlantecuhtli, angered, ordered his servants to detain the god; on his flight, Quetzalcoatl stumbled, the bones broke and scattered, and some fragments were lost.

The broken bones explain, according to the myth, why men come in different sizes: the fragments were of unequal pieces. Then Quetzalcoatl carried the bones to **Tamoanchan**, the place of origin, where the goddess **Cihuacoatl Quilaztli** ground them in a jade bowl; the gods bled themselves over the bone meal — Quetzalcoatl bleeding his virile member — and from that mixture of bone and

divine blood men were born. The myth is of extraordinary richness: humanity is made of ancestral bones and gods' blood; we are, literally, the dead of the past eras resurrected and the gods' sacrifice incarnate.

This myth contains the whole Nahua philosophy of death. First, that **humanity comes from the dead**: we are not a new creation, but the recycled bones of those who preceded us. Second, that **life requires divine blood**: the gods bled themselves so men would live, establishing the model of sacrifice. And third, that **death is not the end of the chain, but its middle**: the bones of the dead become the living, who will die and whose bones will serve — in the myth's logic — for future creations. It is a vision of existence as circulation: nothing is created from nothing, nothing is lost forever; everything transforms.

Mictlantecuhtli and Mictecacihuatl, for their part, represent the underworld's dignity. Unlike the Christian devil, they are not rebels against the cosmic order: they are part of it. The ninth mansion needs its lords, as the sky needs its own. The Nahua duality embraced death as well: Mictlantecuhtli is the nocturnal counterpart of the celestial gods, and his realm is as necessary as theirs. To honor the lords of Mictlan with offerings was to recognize that death has its place in the cosmos — not as an intruder, but as a citizen.

Reciprocity with the Dead: Death as Presence

For the Nahuas, the dead did not disappear: they remained present, in a different mode of existence, and the living maintained with them a relationship of **reciprocity**. This relationship — which survives today in the Day of the Dead — was one of the most important institutions of Nahua social life.

Its foundation was the belief that the dead, on their four-year journey to Mictlan, needed the living's help. The offerings buried with the deceased — food, water, clothing, the dog — were not symbolic: they were provisions for the road. And the rites celebrated on each anniversary — at eighty days, at one year, at four years — helped the soul advance through the nine mansions. The living were, in a sense, the dead's travel agents: without their aid, the journey would be harder. This created a moral obligation: to abandon the dead was to condemn them to wander.

But reciprocity flowed both ways. The dead, once arrived at their destination, could intercede for the living: they were closer to the gods, they knew the beyond's secrets, they could protect their families. The **tlapialli** — the "guarded ones," as the dead were sometimes called — watched over the house, the milpa, the children. Neglecting them brought misfortune: illnesses, bad harvests, accidents were attributed to offended dead. Honoring them brought prosperity. The relationship was thus an exchange: care for protection, offerings for blessings.

This reciprocity had a material expression: the **cult of the ancestors' bundles**. In many Mesoamerican cultures, the dead's bones — or bundles with their ashes and belongings — were kept in the home or in family shrines, consulted on important occasions. The Mexica seem to have practiced similar customs: the **tlatoanis** ashes were guarded in the temples, and noble families kept their ancestors' relics. The dead were not in a distant cemetery: they were at home, present, participating in family life.

The calendar structured this relationship. Certain *veintenas* were dedicated to the dead: **Tlaxochimaco**, when flowers were offered; **Xocotl Huetzi**, the festival of the young dead; **Tepeilhuitl**,

honoring the drowned. And the *veintena* of *Tititl* included rites for deceased ancestors. The year had its moments for remembering, as the week has its Sunday: memory was not spontaneous, but institutional. The community remembered together, on the days appointed.

The conquest did not break this reciprocity: it transformed it. The friars, unable to eradicate the cult of the dead, channeled it into All Souls' Day, and the offering of the dead became the festival we know. But the underlying structure — the dead need the living, the living need the dead — survived intact. When a Mexican family today sets the offering, it is practicing a reciprocity four centuries old: feeding those who, in another mode, continue to feed them.

This vision of death as presence contrasts sharply with the modern Western attitude, which tends to hide the dead and "get over" mourning. For the Nahuas, mourning was not overcome: it was inhabited. The dead remained, and living with them was part of living well. Contemporary psychology, with its revaluation of "continuing bonds" with the deceased, is rediscovering what the Nahuas always knew: that the dead do not leave when we stop seeing them, and that maintaining the bond is healthier than severing it.

Dying in Anáhuac: Funeral Rites

To die in the Nahua world was not a private event: it was a community rite, with its liturgy, its specialists, and its deep meaning. The funeral rites — which Sahagún and other chroniclers described in detail — reveal how the Nahuas accompanied their dead on the journey's first stage.

When a person died, the body was washed and dressed in special garments: the dead man was attired as for a journey, with the insignia of his office or the signs of his destiny. A jug of water was placed at his head — for the road's thirst — and offerings of food around him. The family watched over the body, singing funeral songs — the *miccacuicatl*, "songs of the dead" — and the professional mourners, the *ixcuecuani*, wept with ritual wails. The wake was not silent: it was sonorous, for the dead had to be seen off with music, as one sees off a traveler.

The burial varied by the type of death. Commoners were usually **cremated**: the body was burned on a pyre with his belongings, his dog — sacrificed to accompany him across the river — and offerings of paper, food, and jade. The ashes were gathered in an urn and buried, often in the home's courtyard or in family plots. Cremation had a symbolic meaning: fire liberated the soul from the body, as it had liberated Nanahuatzin at Teotihuacan. The lords, for their part, received more solemn cremations, with richer offerings and longer rites; the *tlatoani*'s funeral was a state ceremony lasting days.

Those destined for Tlalocan — the drowned, the lightning-struck — were **buried**, not cremated: water's dead belonged to the earth, and their bodies were interred with blue ornaments, the color of water. Children who died before weaning were buried near the granaries, in the hope they would be reborn like the maize. Warriors fallen in battle were cremated with honors, and their ashes guarded as relics. Each death had its rite, each rite its meaning: the funeral was a map, and the body was placed on it.

The mourning lasted four years, with rites at eighty days, at one year, and at four years. On each anniversary, the family offered food, burned incense, and sang for the deceased, helping him

advance through the mansions. The fourth anniversary was the farewell: the soul had arrived at Mictlan, and the living could rest. This prolonged mourning — so different from our brief funerals — had a psychological wisdom: grief was not rushed; it was given its time. Four years to say goodbye: the Nahuas understood that detaching from the dead is slow work.

The funeral specialists deserve mention: the **ticitl**, the midwife-physician who attended births and deaths; the **tetecque**, those who prepared the body; the singers of the **miccacuicatl**. Death was too important to be improvised: it required professionals, as birth did. And the community participated: neighbors brought food, helped with preparations, accompanied the family. To die was a public event, and the public responded.

The conquest transformed these rites, but did not erase them. Cremation was prohibited — the Church demanded burial — but the wakes, the songs, the anniversaries survived under Christian forms. The **novenarios**, the **cabos de año**, the offerings of the Day of the Dead are heirs of the four-year mourning. When a Mexican family watches over its dead today, singing and sharing food through the night, it is celebrating a rite whose roots sink into Anáhuac: the dead are seen off with music, for the journey is long and music lightens the road.

The Legacy: Nahua Thought Today

Five centuries after the conquest, what remains of the thought this volume has expounded? The answer is: more than it seems. Nahua religious and philosophical thought did not die with Tenochtitlan: it transformed, hid, resurfaced, and today lives in places both obvious and unexpected.

The most visible legacy is the **Day of the Dead**, which we have examined: millions of Mexicans practice, each November, a reciprocity with the dead whose structure is pre-Hispanic. But there are other legacies, subtler. The **Nahuatl language** — spoken today by over a million and a half people — preserves in its difrasismos and metaphors the dual philosophy: to speak Nahuatl is to think, in part, as the **tlamatinime** thought. The **traditional medicine** of Indigenous communities preserves the notion of **tonalli** and the hot-cold duality in diagnosing illness. The **agricultural rites** — the blessing of seeds, the petitions for rain — preserve the calendar's sacred structure under Catholic saints' names.

The intellectual legacy is equally alive. **Miguel León-Portilla's** work — continued by his disciples — established Nahua philosophy as a field of study, and today universities in Mexico and the world teach the **tlamatinime**'s thought. The **Cantares mexicanos** are read as poetry and philosophy; the **huehuetlatolli** inspire pedagogies; Ometeotl appears in contemporary art and literature. The ancient word has found new voices.

But the deepest legacy is perhaps an **attitude**: the ethics of impermanence, the acceptance of death, the valuation of measure, the sense of cosmic responsibility. In an age of ecological crisis, the Nahua idea that the cosmos's continuity depends on human action — that the sun needs to be fed — sounds like an anticipation: we are learning, painfully, that the world does not sustain itself, that it needs our care. The Mexica expressed it with blood; we must express it with responsibility. The structure is the same: the world is not given, it is maintained.

There is also a **warning** in the legacy. The Mexica built a coherent, refined system of thought — and on its premises, they justified

human sacrifice. This reminds us that coherence is not enough: a system can be logical and inhuman. The task of thought is not only to be consistent, but to be just. The **tlamatinime** themselves, with their ethics of face and heart, opened the path: the measure of a civilization is not its temples' grandeur, but its persons' dignity.

This volume ends where it began: with duality. The Nahua legacy is dual: light and shadow, wisdom and horror, poetry and blood. We cannot keep one and discard the other: they are the same history. But we can choose what to carry forward: the flower and the song, the measure and the respect, the consciousness of death that teaches us to live. **In xochitl in cuicatl** — in flower and song — the ancient word endures. It is now our turn to sing it.

Glossary of Nahuatl Terms

Aztlán — "Place of herons" or "place of whiteness." Mythical homeland of the Mexica.

Calmécac — School of the nobility, where priests, rulers, and judges were trained.

Calpixque — Official in charge of tribute collection in the provinces.

Calpulli — Clan or ward; the basic unit of social and territorial organization.

Chinampa — Agricultural platform built on the lake; "floating garden."

Cihuacóatl — "Serpent Woman." Second-in-command of the empire, in charge of internal administration.

Codex (plural: codices) — Pictographic manuscript on amate paper or deerskin.

Cuauhtli — Eagle; the military order of the eagle warriors.

Huehuetlatolli — "Discourses of the elders." Moral maxims and philosophical reflections.

Huitzilopochtli — Patron god of the Mexica; the sun in its warrior aspect.

Macehualtin — The common people; the agricultural and artisan base of society.

Mexica — The name the so-called "Aztecs" gave themselves.

Mictlan — The underworld, place of the dead.

Nahuatl — Language of the Mexica, still spoken by over a million people.

Ocelotl — Jaguar; the military order of the jaguar warriors.

Ometeotl — "Dual God." The supreme creator principle, abstract in nature.

Pipiltin — The hereditary nobility.

Pochteca — Professional long-distance merchant; also spy and ambassador.

Quetzalcóatl — "Feathered Serpent." God of wisdom, wind, and life.

Telpochcalli — School of the common people, where warriors were trained.

Tezcatlipoca — "Smoking Mirror." God of night, magic, and destiny.

Tianguis — Marketplace.

Tlacotin — Slave; a status neither hereditary nor necessarily permanent.

Tlaloc — God of rain and water.

Tlamatinime — "Those who know." Sages guarding memory and knowledge.

Tlatoani — "He who speaks." The supreme ruler.

Tonalpohualli — Ritual calendar of 260 days.

Triple Alliance — Pact of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan (1428), the empire's foundation.

Xiuhpohualli — Solar calendar of 365 days.

Timeline

1110 (tradition) — Departure from Aztlán; the Mexica pilgrimage begins.

1325 — Founding of Mexico-Tenochtitlan on the islet in Lake Texcoco.

1376 — Acamapichtli, first tlatoani of Tenochtitlan.

1428 — Defeat of Azcapotzalco and formation of the Triple Alliance (Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, Tlacopan).

1440–1469 — Reign of Moctezuma Ilhuicamina; expansion of the empire.

1450–1454 — The great famine; the Flower Wars become institutionalized.

1486–1502 — Reign of Ahuitzotl; the empire reaches its greatest extent.

1502–1520 — Reign of Moctezuma Xocoyotzin.

1519 — Hernán Cortés lands at Veracruz; alliance with Tlaxcala.

1519 — The Spaniards enter Tenochtitlan (November 8).

1520 — La Noche Triste, the Night of Sorrows (June 30); death of Moctezuma.

1521 — Fall of Tenochtitlan (August 13); end of the Mexica empire.

1521-1821 — The viceregal era; Nahuatl becomes the lingua franca of New Spain.

1821 — Independence of Mexico; the eagle of the founding myth inspires the national coat of arms.

1910-1920 — The Mexican Revolution; the Indigenous past is revalued.

1978 — A chance discovery launches the Templo Mayor Project.

1978-2026 — Excavations of the Templo Mayor in the heart of Mexico City.

Today — Over 1.5 million Nahuatl speakers; the chinampas of Xochimilco still in production.

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Religious Thought and Philosophy

How did a people who read destiny in the signs of the days and the end of the world in the movement of the sun conceive the universe? The third volume of Ancestral Legacy enters the deepest dimension of Mexica civilization: its religious thought and its philosophy. From Omēteotl, the dual god who dwells in the thirteenth heaven, to Mictlan, the nine-leveled underworld where the dead descend, this book reconstructs a complete, rigorous worldview of surprising coherence.

Through the myth of the Five Suns, the sacred calendar that wove days into destinies, the wisdom of the tlamatīnime —the sages whom Miguel León-Portilla reclaimed as true philosophers— and the huehuetlatolli, the ancient word of the elders, these pages show that the Nahuatl peoples did more than wage war and pay tribute: they thought. They debated, and they sought the meaning of existence with the same depth as any philosophical tradition in the world.