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# The Art of Divination in Indigenous America—A Comparison of Ancient Mexican and Modern Kuna Pictography

Alessia Frassani

This essay will focus on a few pages of two pre-Hispanic religious codices from the so-called Borgia Group.<sup>1</sup> Of the estimated hundreds of manuscripts only five have survived the destruction by the Spaniards during the conquest and the following colonization. Nevertheless, a remarkable consistency of style, iconography, and contents among these manuscripts has been recognized.<sup>2</sup>

Early colonial and seventeenth century documents are the main interpretative sources of indigenous pictography. These documents portray religious customs and ritual practices as they existed before the political and religious colonization. Since the Borgia Group manuscripts date to a period just prior to the European contact, a direct historical approach can be used to interpret the iconography.

The original ritual context of the pre-Hispanic codices can be inferred from written sources however cannot be studied by direct means, because the pictography, particularly of religious subject matter, ceased to be employed rapidly after the conquest. This disjunction has not only posed methodological problems, but has also resulted in a theoretical obstacle, by which both the oral tradition of present-day indigenous people and the pictography of pre-Hispanic times are described only in negative terms: oral cultures are understood to be a culture lacking written documents. Pictography, on the other hand, is seen as a deficient recording system that lacks the accuracy of the alphabetic script. This paper endeavors to overcome this obstacle by applying works on indigenous oral tradition to the study of the pictography.

In his seminal work *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico* published in 1969, León-Portilla identified the couplet as one basic poetic feature of Nahuatl literature.<sup>3</sup> The couplet can be described as a set of two lines (verses) linked together by a semantic or syntactic parallelism. Lyrical and epic poems of the ancient Mexican tradition were primarily created through

the juxtaposition of these sets of parallel verses and were typically very long and redundant both in content and structure, only very slight variations occurring between the lines. More recently, ethnographic research, such as the work by Dennis Tedlock on the Maya Quiché Popol Vuh, has proven to be essential in the reconstruction of early colonial indigenous texts.<sup>4</sup> In addition, philological investigation on oral poetics and narrative features can also be directly applied to the interpretation of codex pages.

In the Mixtec historical codices, paired sets of elements, which parallel verbal couplets, are common. In the codex Vienna, page 27, third line (Figure 1), the wind god Ehecatl is represented twice. Jansen reads: “Sopla el viento de oriente / sopla el viento que quema” [The wind from the east blows / the wind that burns blows].<sup>5</sup>

More recently, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez, a native Mixtec speaker, also proposed a tentative Mixtec reading of the same lines: “Kee tachi ichi nuu kana iha Ndikandii / kee tachi ñuhu, tachi jahmu itu” [The wind from the Orient blows / the earth wind blows that breaks the fields].<sup>6</sup>

A good example of the couplet structure can be found in the religious manuscripts in Vaticanus B, page 71 (Figure 2). The open jaws of the earth are represented sequentially nine times. The couplet-like pattern is highlighted by the alternate jade and yellow color of the earth monster and the dots linked to it. Nonetheless, as will be seen, cases in which pictographic elements can be reduced to discrete verbal components, such as parallel verse structure, are rare in the religious manuscripts. The pictographic page is typically more elaborate, and looks more like what is called, from the Western perspective, a painting. Looking for another key to understand the relationship between spoken word and painted image in the divinatory codices, this discussion turns first to a few specific pages.

The codices Vaticanus B and Borgia share a long parallel

<sup>1</sup> The Borgia Group includes: Codex Borgia (Vatican Library, Rome), Codex Vaticanus B (Vatican Library, Rome), Codex Cospi (University Library, Bologna), Codex Féjervary-Mayer (Free Library, Liverpool), Codex Laud (British Museum, London), Fonds Mexicain 20 (National Library, Paris) and Codex Tututepetongo (Library of the National Institute of History and Anthropology, Mexico City).

<sup>2</sup> Eduard Seler, *Codex Borgia. Eine altemexikanische Bilderschrift der Bibliothek der Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* (Berlin: Druck von Gebr. Unger, 1904); Karl Anton Nowotny, *Tlacuilolli. Die mexikanischen Bilderhandschriften; Stil und Inhalt* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1961); Donald Robertson, “Mixtec Religious Manuscripts,” *Ancient Oaxaca*, ed. John Paddock (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1964) 298-312.

<sup>3</sup> Miguel León-Portilla, *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico*, trans. Grace Lobanov and the author (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1969).

<sup>4</sup> *Popol Vuh*, trans. Dennis Tedlock, 2nd ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Maarten Jansen E. R. G. N., *Huisi Tacu. Estudio interpretativo de un libro mixteco antiguo* (Amsterdam: CEDLA, 1982) 182. Author’s translation.

<sup>6</sup> Maarten Jansen E. R. G. N., and Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez, *Origen e historia y de los reyes mixtecos. Texto explicativo del llamado Códice Vindobonensis* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992) 69.

sequence of sections that encompasses pages 13 through 27 and 49 through 53, respectively. In the codex Vaticanus B, the first section (pages 13-16; Figure 3) twice represents a set of temples, seen first in frontal display, and laterally in the following pages. The disposition of the days of the calendar further emphasizes this movement in space, by placing the day-names first around the temples and eventually in a row from the center to the temples. The first temple is presided over by an owl, obviously a nocturnal symbol that also bears negative connotations in ancient and modern indigenous belief in Mexico. Death symbols such as bones, skulls and hearts are prevalent. Around the temple is a centipede. The second temple is, on the other hand, characterized by a colorful bird. Precious jewels and a powerful serpent further decorate the scene.

Four temples are found on the codex Borgia, pages 49 through 52, at the center of each page. They are not as clearly paired as in the previous example, but rather are associated with the cardinal directions and a specific iconography. The first temple (Figure 4), for example, corresponds to the east and bears solar connotations, such as the sun seen inside the temple, and Tonatiuh, the sun god, as officiating priest. The last temple (Figure 5) clearly resembles the one on pages 13 and 15 in the Vaticanus B. The structure is made of bones, and the owl inside the temple receives a deadly offering from Miclantechutli, the death god.

Pages 17-18 in the Vaticanus B (Figure 6) are divided into two vertical registers, tightly connected to one another. In both cases, the periodical division of the calendar is regular, four periods of thirteen days each, repeated five times. According to the tonalpohualli (the full-fledged calendar found in the first pages of the codex) each section can be associated with a cardinal direction, east-north-west-south, respectively. Each direction is characterized by a tree, associated with a bird (a jaguar in the last tree) and a man in the lower part. In the upper part, a deity "rules" by pointing a finger, seated on a royal cushion covered by a jaguar skin (except for the third deity, who is seated on the ground).

In the same pages 49-52 (Figures 4 and 5) in the Borgia, four trees are depicted just below the temples discussed above. Similarly to those of the Vaticanus B, they are topped by a bird. Cihuacoatl, the mother earth is lying under the trees.

Pages 19-23 in the Vaticanus B (Figure 7) are divided into two vertical registers, like the previous section, although the connection between the two parts is less clear. The upper part has a counterpart in the section of the Borgia considered. The chapter portrays the sky bearers: four couples of deities associated with the four directions, plus one with the center. The first deity of the couple is associated with the day of the year, seen below the feet, while the sky band above contains the day immediately preceding the year bearer. The second deity of the couple walks and holds a rattle staff, and is more probably leading a procession for the celebration of the days to come (represented with three day signs). This chapter is represented in a very similar fashion in the Borgia, where it

runs across four major sections in a long strip from page 49 through 53.

Finally, the Vaticanus B concludes in pages 24-27 (Figure 8) with the depiction of animals, men and deities engaged in various fights. They, as well, are associated with the cardinal direction (east-north-west and south) in similar manner to pages 17-18. The respective section in the Borgia is found again in the main pages 49 through 52 on the right top corner.

Comparing the composition of the sections in the codices (Figure 9), it is clear that pages 13-27 in the Vaticanus B encompass six different chapters laid out in a linear and consequential fashion. On the other hand, the same information is present in the Borgia according to a quadripartite sequence that breaks down the chapters and reorganizes them according to a tighter cardinal order. Although references to the four directions are found in the Vaticanus B, such as the trees and patrons in pages 17-18, and the sky bearers in pages 19-23, the temples in pages 13-16 do not bear any cardinal information differently from examples in 49-52 in the Borgia, which are the center of the cult's activities.

The anthropologist Carlo Severi studied extensively the oral tradition of the Kuna people who today are settled in the archipelago of San Blas off the Atlantic Coast of Panama.<sup>7</sup> His research offers an interesting comparison to Mesoamerica because pictography is similarly employed as a mnemonic device for the correct recitation of ritual songs. However, far from merely transcribing the song as a written counterpart of the oral performance, the pictography has a much more complex relationship with the meaning, the preservation, and the transmission of the chant with which it is connected.

Only the very restricted number of songs characterized by a ritualized and fixed structure is recorded in pictorials. The pictography is mainly a didactic tool through which the teacher introduces the apprentice to the most esoteric knowledge of the shamanic practice. Pictographic documents are therefore generally not used or displayed in public.

Priestly education requires the apprentice to learn by rote the texts of the oral tradition. The education does not allow improvisation and great concern exists about the exact preservation of the text of the songs. During the long process of memorization, the trainee does not know the meaning of the text he is performing. Only when he can recite the text without mistakes is he initiated to the art of pictography; and only then, will the shaman show to him that the long enumeration of slightly different sentences is not merely a listing of elements, but corresponds instead to an ordered setting within a spatial composition. Thus, the initiation to the pictography corresponds to the entrance into a cosmological knowledge and cannot be understood by merely reciting the chant.

The picture *Canoe of the Moon* (Figure 10) is a pictographic page of the Kuna tradition and is today in the Ethno-

<sup>7</sup> Carlo Severi, *La memoria rituale. Follia e immagine del Bianco in una tradizione sciamanica amerindiana* (Florence: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1993).

graphic Museum in Goteborg, Sweden. At the bottom of the pictographic page, a canoe carries various spirits that accompany the moon in its nightly tour. Above, a starry sky hosts more spirits. The realms of the earth and the sky are clearly divided by the horizon line in the middle of the composition. In the diagrams below Severi illustrates the two possible interpretations of this page. On the left, the arrows show the reading order that corresponds to the listing of the spirits from bottom right to top left, in a form that corresponds to the plain enunciation of the text, the litany. The second diagram illustrates the territorial distribution of the spirits in the realms of the sea, the horizon, and the sky. When read in this manner, the pictography reveals information about the placement in the cosmos of the supernatural beings that is never explicitly verbalized in the chant, but that can only be accessed through the vision of the pictographic page. The cosmological order that substantiates the litany will never be revealed to those who are simply listening to the chant. However, for the priest the pictography works also as an efficient support for the recitation of the song. The shaman knows, or literally envisions, why the list of the spirits has to be repeated in that specific

order and he will be able to reconstruct it by recalling their pictorial classification.

This double interpretation can also be applied to the codices Vaticanus B and Borgia just considered. Although both contained the same information (the coupled temples, the trees, their patrons, the sky bearers, and the mythical fights) the linear disposition of the sequences adopted by the painter of the Vaticanus B prevented that deeper understanding of cosmogonic nature, i.e. the reference to the cardinal directions, that becomes apparent when looking at the same sections in the codex Borgia.

This brief case study, just one of numerous parallel readings found in the divinatory manuscripts, illustrates how faulty is the current opinion of pictography as a deficient recording device, and typical of simple and underdeveloped societies.<sup>8</sup> The comparison of these two distinct, yet culturally close pictographic traditions demonstrates the complexity of the pictography that, without the substantial employment of phonetic devices, combines and enhances the potentials of both literature and the visual arts.

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<sup>8</sup> See for example Irving J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1952) and, more recently, John De Francis, *Visible Speech. The Diverse Oneness of Writing Systems* (Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1989).

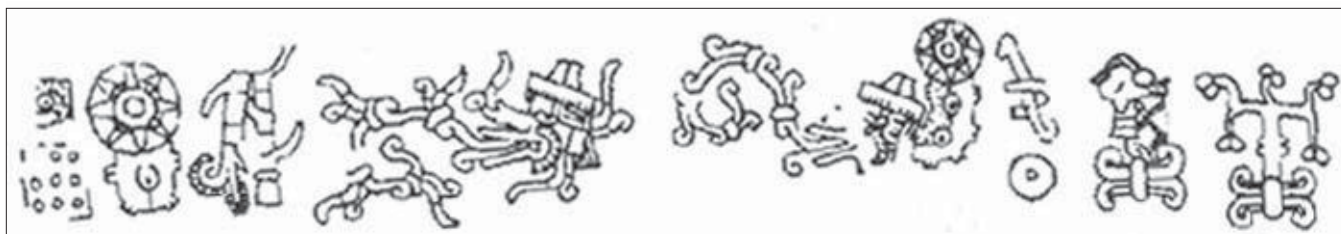


Figure 1. *Codex Vienna*, page 27.

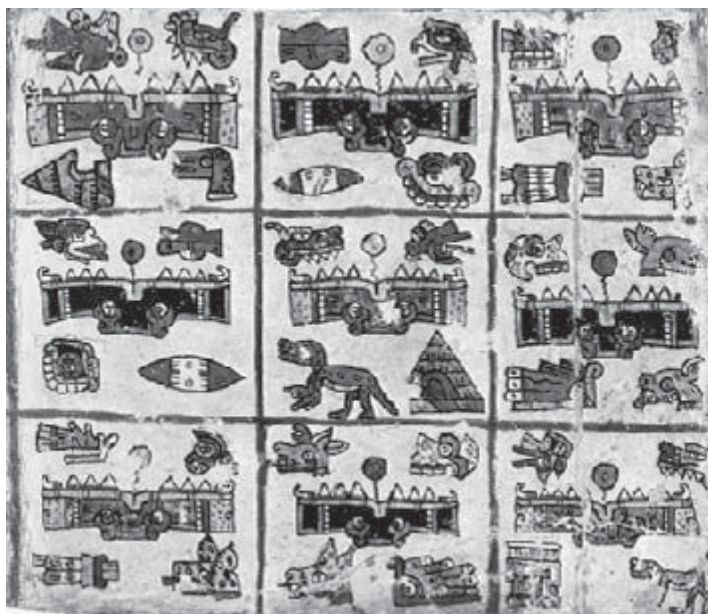


Figure 2. *Codex Vaticanus B*, page 71.

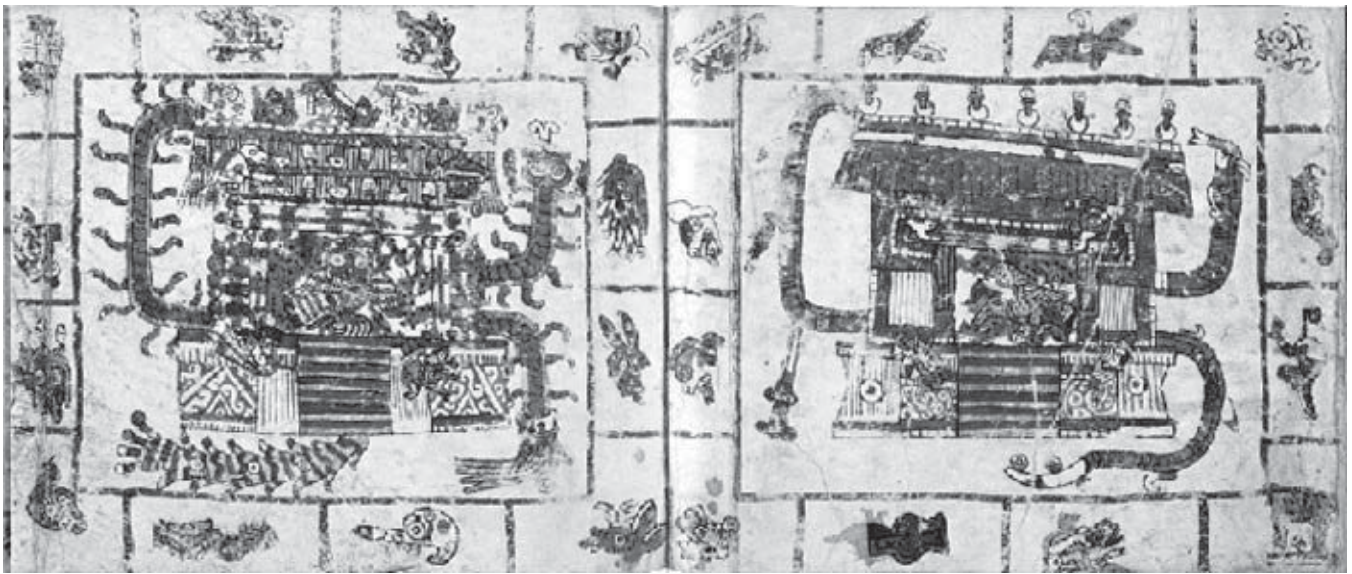


Figure 3. *Codex Vaticanus B*, pages 13-14.



Figure 4. *Codex Borgia*, page 49.



Figure 5. *Codex Borgia*, page 52.

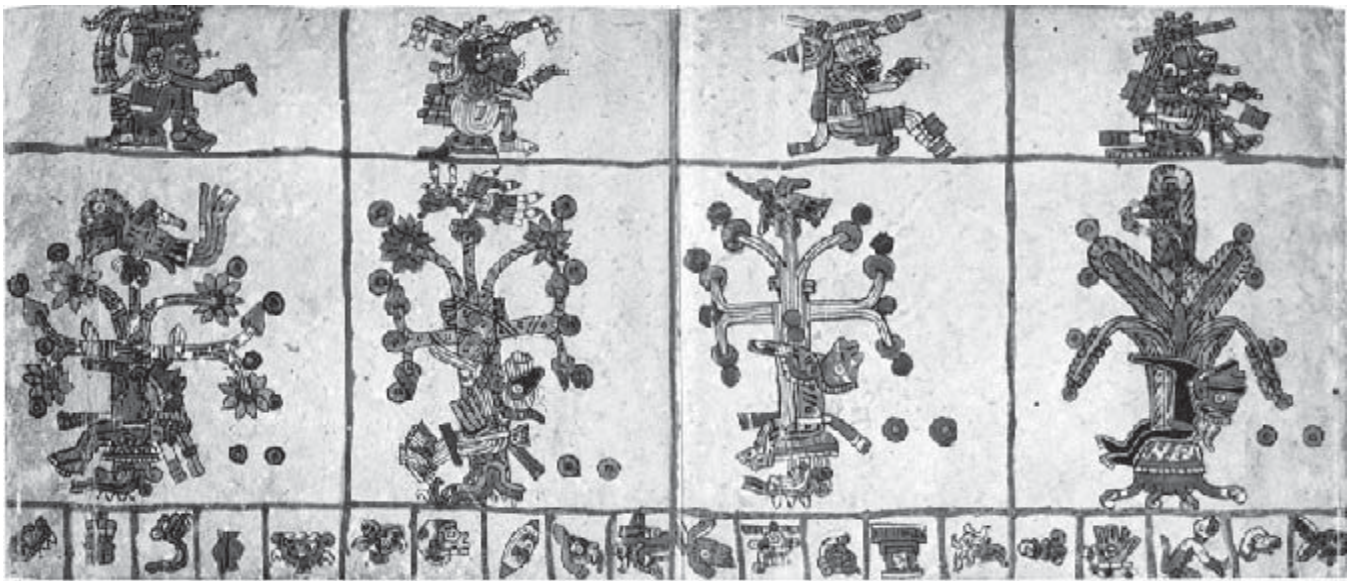


Figure 6. *Codex Vaticanus B*, pages 17-18.

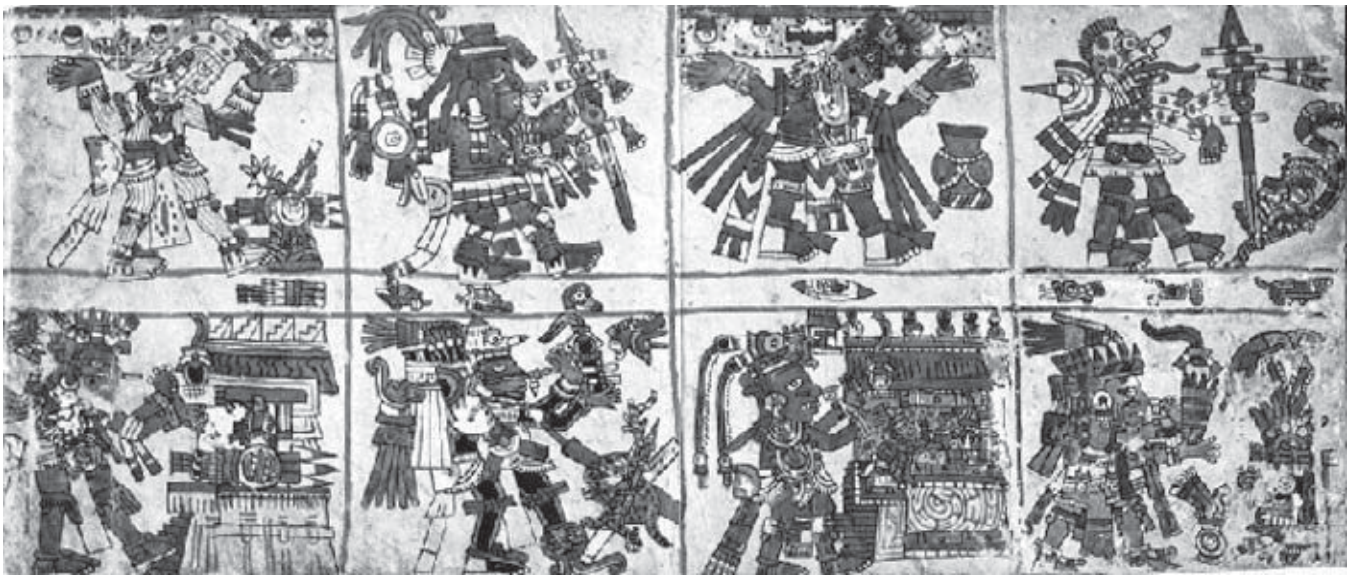


Figure 7. *Codex Vaticanus B*, pages 19-20.

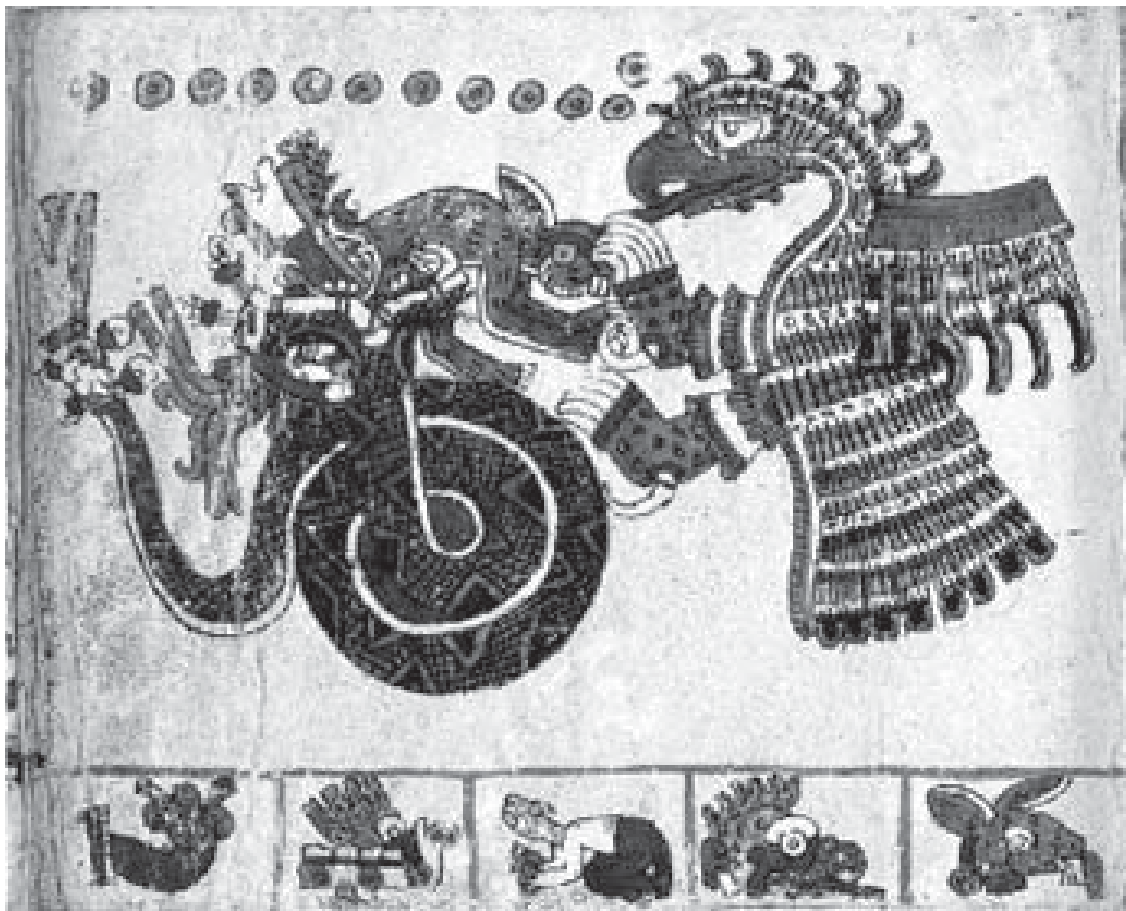


Figure 8. *Codex Vaticanus B*, page 27.

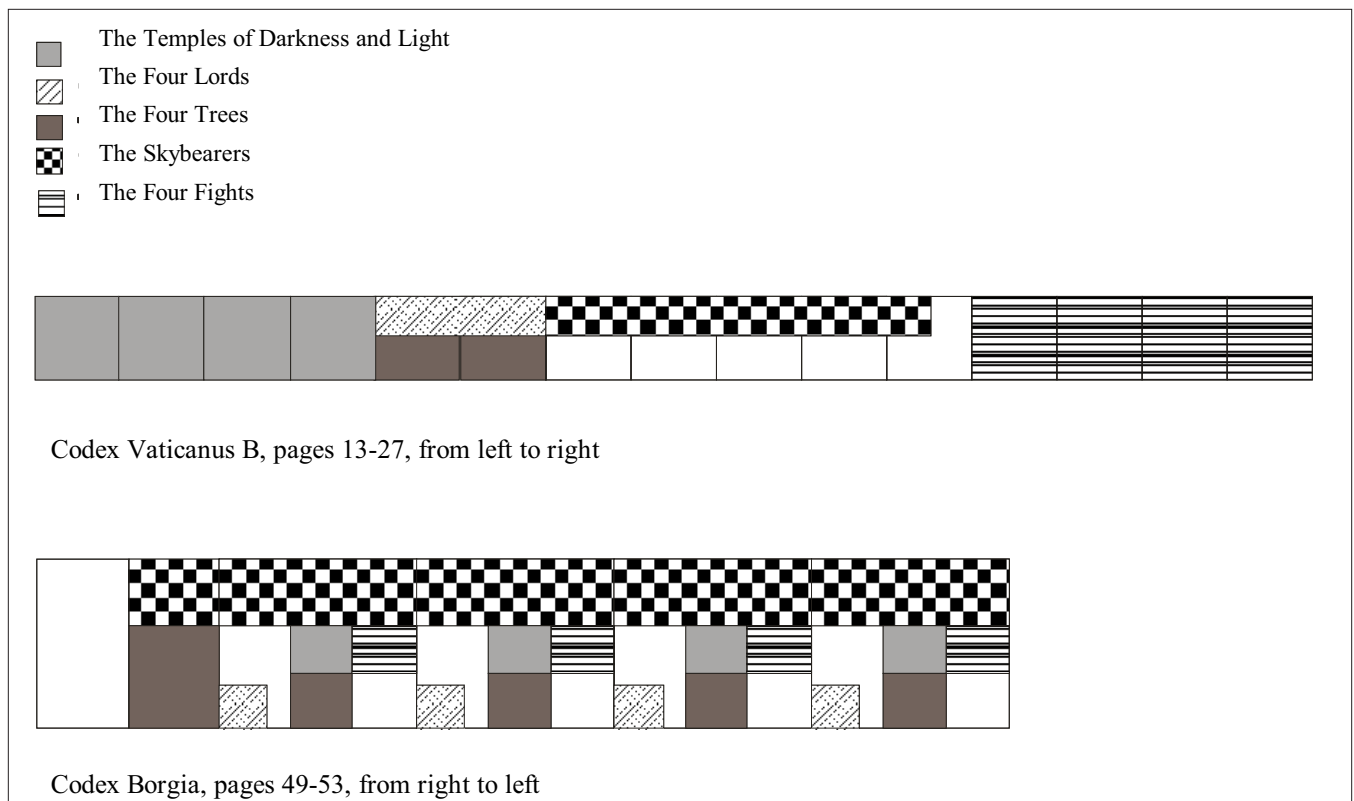


Figure 9. Diagram of the composition of the two codices.

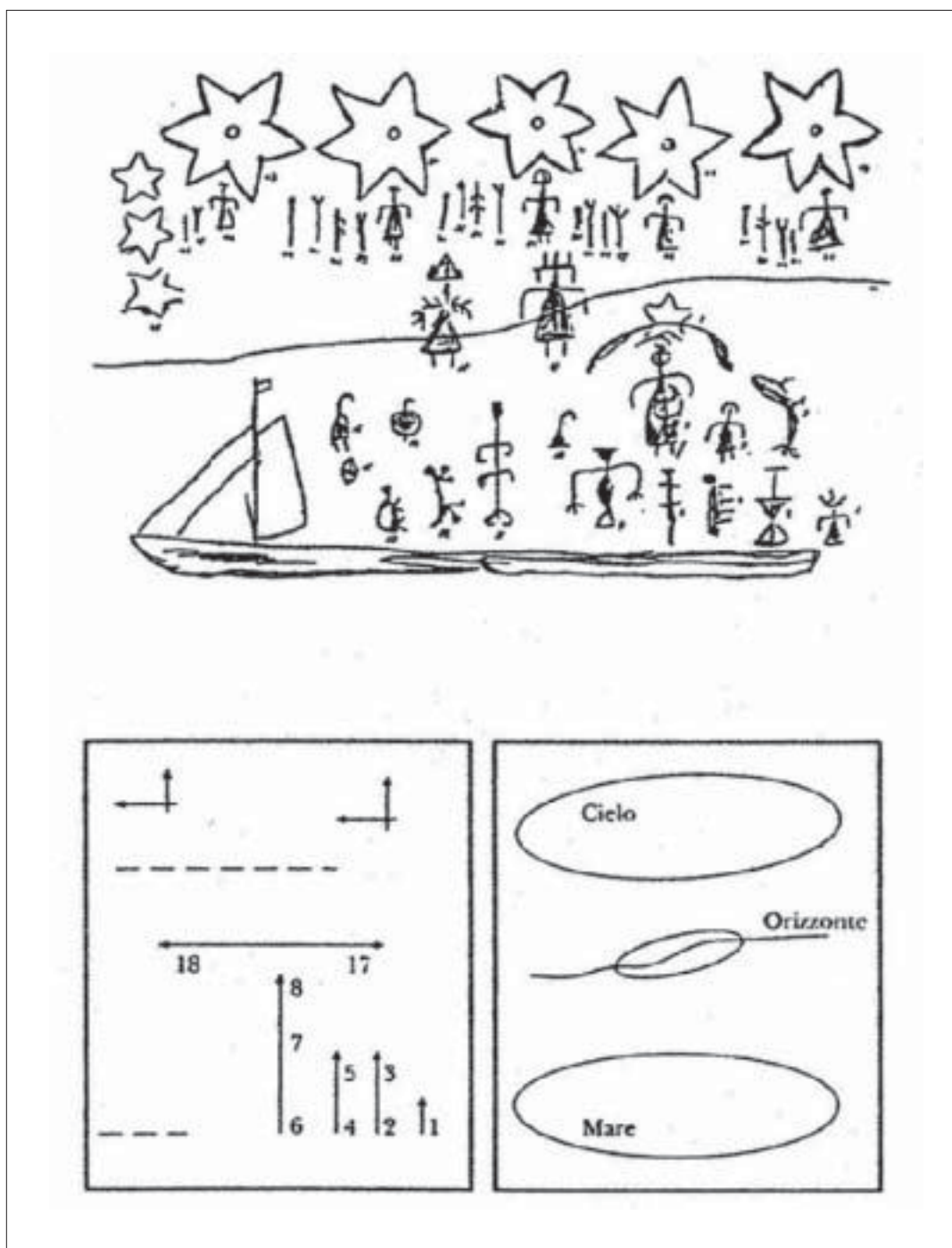


Figure 10. Above, *The Canoe of the Moon*. Below, diagrams of two possible readings; in Carlo Severi, *La memoria rituale. Follia e immagine del Bianco in una tradizione sciamanica amerindiana* (Florence: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1993) 178.