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The Symbolism of the Number 3 in the Korean and Andean Cosmovisions*

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<Abstract>

This study examines the cultural preference for the symbolic use of the number three in the Korean and Andean worlds. Through an ethnomathematical approach, the symbolic and cultural functions of this number within each worldview are analyzed. The results reveal, first, that in Korean culture the number three is preferred compared to its neighboring Chinese culture, while Andean culture also privileges the number three more than the Mesoamerican one. Second, in the Korean tradition, the number three is associated with the notions of infinity, totality, perfection, transformation, and balance, whereas in the Andean worldview, the concept of mediation (chawpi) plays a particularly central role.

Keywords: number 3, ethnomathematics, Korean culture, Andean culture, symbolic function of numbers

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Ⅰ. Introduction

The importance of numbers in social development is clear, for they permeate daily life and are employed both consciously and unconsciously. Among the immense variety of its possible applications, one can identify: date recording, time measurement, object accounting, variety of calculations, accounting controls, logical-mathematical games, and quantitative predictions. Historically, a concrete expression of the functionality of numbers has been the creation of ritual calendars and their relationship to natural phenomena, which provided meaning to human activities.

In the face of the diversity that persists in globality, only numbers give the impression of maintaining the character of universal, compatible or penetrable entities in all countries. However, numbers have not followed a single and uniform cultural trajectory, to the point that we can speak of an ethnomathematics, that is, of a mathematics closely linked to the culture in which it has taken place. Becoming aware of cultural diversity, in all fields, is an imperative that is expected to help overcome cultural barriers and build ways of understanding to make possible coexistence with equity, respect and dialogue.

This essay does not seek to determine whether numbers are universal concepts or culturally specific constructs; rather, it aims to analyze the numerical symbology in Korean and Andean cultures as reflected in mythological traditions, particularly the *Dangun* myth and the *Changsega* (창세가, *The Song of Creation*) in Korea, as well as the founding myth of *Manqo Qhapaq* and *Mama Oqllo,* the *Ayar* Brothers, and the *Huarochirí*

Manuscript (1966) in the Andean world. In both cases, the referents come from both oral sources and written records.

Ⅱ. Numbers from a theoretical point of view

Not only mathematicians but anthropologists, historians, and philosophers have struggled to define and have tried to understand numbers. In the Western world, thinkers such as Pythagoras, Euclid, Dedekind, Cantor, Frege, Peano and Russell, among other philosophers, devoted themselves to mathematical reflection and studied numbers. Some modern scientists are convinced that numbers are key to solving the riddles of the universe.

There have been and still exist systems of philosophical, metaphysical and scientific thought with an interest in numbers, particularly in their symbolic aspect, which is what interests us in this study. Thus, we have 'numerology', an esoteric practice that relates numbers to people and spiritual or physical forces, understanding that each number has its own vibration or energy associated with specific characteristics and patterns of behavior; 'Arhythmsophy', inherited from the Hermetic-Pythagorean tradition, considered as the science of numbers that seeks to determine the role of numbers in the understanding of beauty, based on harmony and balance.

Not concerned with speculation, but rather with the understanding of the meanings culturally attributed to numerical representations, we, the authors assume as pertinent the theoretical proposals of 'symbolic anthropology' and the point of view of 'ethnomathematics'. 'Symbolic anthropology' is a current field of research and theory of social anthropology that studies how culture

is a set of symbols and meanings that give meaning to the existence of human groups. The central idea is that culture is the basis of people's interpretation of their environment and that it does not exist beyond the individuals themselves. Thus, the meaning of people's behavior is shaped by established cultural symbols. The current state of symbolic anthropology has its roots in the thought of Marcel Mauss, who in the second decade of the last century already raised the issue of the symbolic mediation of social experience; other similar scholars are Gregory Bateson, Evans-Pritchard, Jacques Lacan, Paul Ricoeur, Cornelius Castoriadis, Gilbert Durand, Clifford Geertz.

The first hypothesis, within the framework of symbolic anthropology, can be formulated as follows: numbers, as symbols, form the foundation of how each culture interprets its environment, and their meanings must therefore be understood (López Austin 2016, 27).

The second hypothesis rests on the proposition of comparative anthropology: each culture has a unique symbolic system, yet none of them completely departs from the symbolic matrix embedded in the cognitive structure of Homo sapiens. This means that, despite the ethnomathematical differences across cultures, we can still find similarities in the concept of numbers. In modern anthropology, it is problematic to claim that Culture A is equal to Culture B, or that Culture A is not equal to Culture B. The premise of comparative anthropology suggests that Culture A is more similar to Culture B than to Culture C (López Austin 2016, 28).

Based on these basic premises, the authors aim to demonstrate that Korean and Andean cultures simultaneously exhibit a strong symbolic

preference for the number 3, specially in contrast to their respective neighboring civilizations—Mesoamerica in the case of the Andes, and East Asia, particularly China, which has historically served as a major interlocutor for Korea—drawing upon clearly defined textual and oral sources. In the following chapters, however, the authors focus on the comparison between Mesoamerica and the Andes. This decision is based on the observation that while comparative studies on numerical symbolism are relatively abundant in East Asia, such research remains limited in the context of Mesoamerica and the Andes.

Therefore, Chapter III.1. <The numbers preferred by the native peoples of the Latin America> introduces the shared features of numerical systems and cultural preferences found in both Mesoamerican and Andean traditions. Chapter III.2. <Symbolism of Two and Five in Latin America with a Yin-Yang and Five Elements Perspective> offers an explanation about the coherence in the functioning of the numbers 2 and 5 in Mesoamerica, the Andes, and in the theory of yin-yang and the five elements—that is, in fact, the functioning of the numbers 2 and 5 in East Asian thought. In this section, detailed explanations of this well-known East Asian theory have been deliberately minimized.

In Chapter IV <The symbolism of the number 3 in the Andean and Korean myths>, the discussion turns fully to the symbolism of the number 3 in Korea and the Andes, based upon the understanding of the concept of the numbers 2 and 5 in Chapter III, because we cannot grasp precisely the concept of the number 3 without understanding the number 2, its doubling as number 4, and its spatial-temporal articulation through the number 5.

Ⅲ. Numerology of pre-Hispanic Latin America

1. The numbers preferred by the native peoples of the Latin America

If we take a tour of the Andean and Mesoamerican cultures, we find in their cultural heritage calculation instruments that were used before the arrival of the Spaniards to the continent: the *taptana, the yupana* in South America and, in Central America, the *Mayan nepohualtzintzin.* These instruments made it possible to carry out various mathematical operations through efficient procedures, employing space in a way that differed from the Western conception—sometimes within decimal base systems and, at other times, within vigesimal ones.

Scholars of Mesoamerican culture argue that the number 2 is of marked importance in the lives of the Mesoamerican Indigenous peoples (López Austin 2016; León-Portilla 2006). The meaning of the number 2 of Mesoamerican culture is different from that of Western culture; for the latter it is assumed that A cannot be B if A is different from B according to Aristotelian logic, but in Mesoamerican culture A can be B even if A is different from B. It is not difficult to observe the convergence of the idea of 'complementary opposites' between Mesoamerican and South American cultures.

From the Caral culture that began its city 5,000 years ago, to Cuzco (A.D. 1535), all Andean cities were basically divided into two: *Hanan* (Upper) and *Urin* (lower). Also in Andean culture, the number 2 or *iskay* is

associated with the concept of *yanantin*, whose nature is defined by 'complementary opposites'. The authors do not find a substantive difference between the Mesoamerican and Andean concepts of the number 2.

Anthropologists and historians have identified certain commonalities across the American continent—from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego—as exemplified by the symbolic function of twins or dual sibling figures in both Mesoamerican and Andean mythologies. Nevertheless, scholars remain cautious about asserting the existence of a Pan-American cultural unity.

The indigenous chronicler Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala depicted a symbolic map in his book (1615, f. 42), in which he divided Spain into five regions and placed the Inca Empire above them, according to the traditional Andean cosmovision of upper and lower worlds.

<Fig. 1> Maps of the Inca Empire(upper) and of Spain(lower)

In the Andean myth, more precisely, Inca, four brothers and four sisters, known as Los Ayar founded the Inca empire (Sánchez Garrafa 2020). The Incas called their domains Tawantinsuyu, which means made up of four regions. From Qosqo, its capital city, lines were projected in the four cardinal directions and these linked the temples or shrines called wakas. Not only the Inca state of Tawantinsuyu and its capital were structured in the form of a chakana—a stepped or square cross—but that earlier cultures, such as the Chavín culture (ca. 1500 BCE), which succeeded the Caral civilization, also exhibited a quadripartite spatial design, as evidenced in its principal city, Chavín de Huántar.

Moreover, the doubling of the number 2 into 4, as in many other Andean and Mesoamerican cultures, is related to the organization of space, time and mythical structures. The Andean peoples associated the number 4 with the organization of the territory in regions or *suyus*. The *Tawantinsuyu* comprised *Chinchaysuyu*, *Antisuyu, Collasuyu* and *Contisuyu* in the *Inka* administration. The four cardinal directions had an impact on ritual practices and on the construction of *wakas* and sacred paths. The agricultural and festive cycles were also organized in relation to the four cardinal points and the seasons of the year.

Although peoples all over the world have tended to make sense of every number, including some that exceed the number 10, it cannot be said that all cultures unanimously prefer some specific numbers; therefore, it is not possible to specify favorite numbers in general. As for the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica and the Andes, it is clear that the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica and the Andes clearly attributed symbolic meaning

to the ten foundational numbers of their accounting systems, but the preferences are undoubtedly strongly linked to historical factors and a particular vision of the world. It is true that the Mesoamericans used a vigesimal system while the Andeans used a decimal numbering system, but in both regions a certain preference for numbers such as 2, 4, and 5 can be noted, with the particularity that, in Mesoamerica, the numbers 7, 13, and 20 are prominent (Dehouve 2014), while in the Andes, the numbers 3 and 10 function as key symbolic elements (Urton 1997).

2. Symbolism of Two and Five in Latin America with a Yin Yang and Five Elements Perspective

In the Mesoamerican world, the supreme God Ometeotl is divided into two halves, which, when are divided again, transforms into four deities. At the end, a fifth deity is added, which in nauátl is called *Nahui Ollín,* 'movement'. Laurette Séjourné uses the word 'quincunce' (Séjourné 1962), which was the five-ounce coin of Roman times, to define the Mesoamerican worldview, since it was used in astrology and alchemy of the Western classical and medieval period. The 'quincunce' or quincunx is a very apt word to explain the five Mesoamerican space-time units, since the Mesoamerican worldview developed a sophisticated theory to explain its universe. But just applying the concept of quincunx or terms such as the Maltese Cross or St. Andrew are not enough to explain the sophisticated principles of the developmental process of the Mesoamerican world from number one to five.

Anthropologically, the Roman and Mesoamerican quincunx, the *chakana*

of the Andes, and other symbols such as the swastika, lightning bolt motifs, and the East Asian tachi can be understood as symbols of the sun, but this anthropological explanation does not give enough argument to explain how the *Ometeotl* (the god of duality) becomes five divine units. However, the theory of yin yang and of the five elements in East Asia is very apt to explain the process of the development of the number 1 to 5 of the Mesoamerican and Andean worldviews. As for the Andean, the term *yanantin* can be easily explained by the concept of yin yang since both terms reject the Aristotelian Second Proposition or Law of the Excluded Third, as much as the Mesoamerican name of the supreme God of duality: *Ometeotl*. Surely, this does not imply that the five elements of East Asia (water, fire, earth, metal, and wood) directly coincide with those of Mesoamerica or the Andes; yet, the East Asian concept of the five elements can help us understand clearly the functional roles of these fivefold structures in Mesoamerica and the Andes.

Ⅳ. The symbolism of the number 3 in the Andean and Korean myths

Although the theory of yin yang and of the five elements infiltrated Korea as it did in China, Koreans have shown a relatively stronger preference for the number 3. Still modern Chinese speak of "好事成双 (Good things come in pairs), in business and daily chores. Undoubtedly, there is a cultural preference for even numbers in China (Chang 2000; Xu 2011; Tan 2015).

Surely it does not mean that cultural preference for the number is absolute, but that it is relative and fluid along the long history of each country.

Two traditional portals in Kyonggi-do. Photos by the authors.

<Fig. 2> Dual and triple Taeguk patterns

Furthermore, the authors engaged in a comparative study of Korean and Andean numerology, have reached a consensus that some recent studies on the number 3 in Korea are closely related to the discourse of national religion and nationalism. These studies attempt to associate Korean identity with the number 3. In contrast, the authors have found few, if any, studies specifically addressing the symbolism of the number 3 in Latin America. Yet, this observation does not imply that Korean scholars have distorted the genuine cultural preference for the number 3 among the Korean people.

In the Aztec cosmovision, creation begins with a singular entity possessing dual potential—*Ometeotl*—which then manifests as a divine pair: *Quetzalcoatl* and *Tezcatlipoca*. The number 4 plays a critical role in spatial

organization, while the number 5 functions as a key element in sustaining universal balance—not only in Mesoamerica but also across various world cultures. For this reason, this paper aims to demonstrate the distinctive features of the preference for the number 3 in Korea and the Andes, drawing on objective and verified data provided by Korean and Latin American scholars.

1. The *Dangun* Myth and *Changsega (The Song of Creation)*

The number 3 is deeply embedded in the daily lives of Koreans, and numerous folktales reflect its symbolic significance (Choi 1985). However, the most representative narrative that embodies the Korean cultural mentality is indisputably the myth of *Dangun*, which recounts the founding of the first Korean kingdom, Gojoseon. In this myth appear the numbers 3, 7 and 100, which are still preferred by Koreans today. However, in the myth, the number 3 takes on a role of primary importance: in heaven there were three prince brothers; the heavenly king sent his second son with three angels, who take control of the rain, the wind, and the clouds, as well as with a book called Cheon Bu Kyong (*천부경, Book Given from Heaven*).

When Koreans accepted Neo-Confucianism, Chinese Neo-Confucianists devoted themselves to the study of cosmology, while Korean Neo-Confucianists concentrated more on the human being. Although, first Buddhism, then Confucianism, and, in modern times, Christianity, have officially ruled the mentality of the Korean people, the spirit of Dangun has not disappeared from the mentality of the Korean people, as Mi Rae Gu (2000) asserts in *The symbolic world of Koreans* (한국인의 상징체계) "for

the Korean people the number 3 is a special number. Since ancient times, it has been regarded as an auspicious or sacred number, and considered the supreme number"(Gu 2000, 17).

Although the symbolism of the number 3 is also present in Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity—and may have influenced or merged with Korean thought—its archetypal form remains most strongly and prominently in the *Dangun* myth. Despite historical suppression, the myth persists in oral traditions—specially in legends, myths, and shamanic songs—where the symbolism of number 3 is more visible.

Dangun is a shaman or sama. For this reason, some Korean scholars insist on maintaining that the *Dangun* myth is linked to North Asian shamanism, including that of the Mongols (An 2021). It is also known that in North Asian shamanism a lot of importance is given to the number 3, so Jang Sik Jang and Ulziibat (2011) wanted to find in this tradition the concept of the number 3. In order to know Korean myths and legends, etc., one must understand that there are two systems of tradition: written one and oral one. If we consider that Koreans did not have a native writing system until the reign of King Sejong, and that they used Chinese characters instead, the oral tradition becomes specially significant. Accordingly, the *Dangun* myth, recorded in Classical Chinese, narrates only the founding of the Korean nation through Chinese linguistic and conceptual frameworks. In contrast, the *Changsega* cycle is grounded in a rich oral tradition through which Korean shamans recount the events from the beginning of the universe. Numerous variations of the Korean creation myth have been preserved through these shamanic recitations. These

shamanic songs are specially abundant in regions such as Jeju Island and North Hamgyong Province, which are geographically distant from Seoul. This means that the shamanic songs of those remote places from Seoul are under less pressure from state ideology. Despite regional variations, *Changsega* has been spread throughout the Korean country.

> When heaven and earth were born,
> Maitreya Buddha was born.
> Heaven and earth were united,
> And they did not separate.
> Heaven protruded like a cauldron knob,
> And the earth raises copper columns at the four corners.
> At that time, there were two suns and two moons.
> One moon was set apart to form the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper,
> And one sun was set aside to create a great star (Son 2012, 17).

There are several methods of interpreting the first part of this song. Still, we can find that even numbers (two suns and two moons) are avoided by removing one of them. The song follows the shamanic tradition of avoiding even numbers and preferring the number 3 throughout the entire song. Another variation of the shamanic song of the Korean creation myth, which is called, *Chogamse* (*초감제: Initial Spirit-Contact Ritual*) describes that "In the heavens, there are three skies; beneath the earth, there are three skies; and upon the earth, there are also three skies. Thirty-three heavens, and 9,033 heavens. This is what constitutes the sky" (Kim 1988, 207). *Chogamse*

and its variations are widespread nationwide, so Koreans' preference for the number 3 is justified. There are many studies on the subject, but the authors do not want to present all those works because among them are some bold ones emphasizing the great contribution of the number 3 to the Korean mentality, but of which other scholars are suspicious.

Therefore, the authors cited the studies in which the relevance of the number 3 in Korea is cautiously suggested, because this essay is not to define the Korean concept of the number 3 again but to compare the concepts of the number 3 in the two different worlds: the Korean and the Andean. In this light, En Kyoung Choi (1985) in *The Concept of Number Appearing in Folk Tales: Around the Number 3*" (한국민담에 나타난 숫자 개념 - '三'을 중심으로), Sang Un Lee (1995) in "The Study on Concept of Number (Vol.1) - On Number 3 (한국인의 수 개념 연구 1 - 숫자 3에 대하여)" and Mi Rae Gu (2000) in The System of Imagination of Koreans (한국인의 상징체계) are consequently cited as key sources in this context. Therefore, based on the comparison of these three studies with recent Korean research on the number 3, the concept of this number can be articulated in terms of five aspects: infinity, totality, perfection, transformation, and balance.

Infinity. In many cases the number 3 has the meaning of 'a large number of'. Within the *Dangun* myth, the number of subjects who accompanied *Dangun's* father on the descent to earth is 3,000. Here three means great number, therefore, the Dangun myth speaks of a large number of subjects accompanying *Dangun's* father.

Totality. Surely the wholeness of the number 3 relates to the notions of

'perfection' and 'infinity'. Sang Un Lee (1995) defines one of the notions of the number 3 as totality, showing some evidence that he has found in the history and life of the Korean people. If we look for examples of the notion of totality in the *Chogamse,* the "three heavens" would mean the entire universe. And surely, the thirty-three participants in the March First Movement of 1919 represent the entire Korean nation. The number 3 is seen as "the whole, the cautious decision considering all things, and the general denomination that encompasses everything (Lee 1995, 150)." Its definition is a bit abstract, but if we see examples, it will be easily understood: in the medieval Korean dynasty, the penal system mandated that a prisoner sentenced to death undergo three separate trials (Lee 1995, 124).

Perfection. Within the theory of yin yang and of the five elements, the number 1 corresponds to yang, while the number 2 corresponds to yin. Within this framework, the number 3 emerges as the one that unites these two fundamental principles. Thus, the number 3 is considered perfect, embodying a complete and sufficient harmony without the need for further addition. In agricultural societies, this symbolic perfection is reflected in the triad of angels—those of rain, clouds, and wind—who govern the natural elements essential for sustaining the cosmic and agricultural order.

Transformation. In *Dangun* Myth the couple *Hwanung* and *Ungnio* brought *Dangun* to light. It is the perfect and sacred family, but also this family or union is a starting point to open a path to more prosperity. In the *Dangun* myth, the union of father, mother and child is the beginning of change, transformation or prosperity. This notion easily can be connected

with vitality or fecundity. *Samsin Halmi* (삼신할미) is a traditional Korean goddess or group of goddesses associated with birth, fertility, and protection of infants and mothers. The term *Samsin* (삼신, 三神) means 'Three Deities', while *Halmi* is an affectionate term for grandmother. Toward the conclusion of his article, Lee underscored the significance of Korea's shamanistic heritage in shaping the concept of the number 3, going beyond Buddhist and Confucian frameworks. Because, he insists, Korean shamanism is a ritual practice that serves as a threshold between chaos and cosmos—something that can only be symbolized by the number 3 (Lee 1995, 152). Some Korean scholars emphasize the notion of symbolic stability in the traditional concept of *Jeong Lip* (정립: "to set up a cauldron firmly balanced on three legs") (Park 2013, 21). However, from a physical perspective, a three-legged cauldron is not necessarily more stable than one with four legs. Rather, the number 3 may symbolically imply dynamism or potential transformation, specially when contrasted with the structural completeness associated with the number 4.

Balance. The western cliché ''three for one and one for three' can be applied not only to Western culture but also to Korean one. Mi Rrae Gu argues that "the number 3 symbolizes completeness, stability, harmony, and change by adding one more to the duality of yin and yang" (Gu 2000, 18). However, while the concept of the Trinity in Western culture emphasizes the number 1 as a unified whole, the *Dangun* myth highlights the importance of balance among three distinct entities—thus placing greater emphasis on the number 3 itself.

2. The founding myth of *Manqo Qhapaq and The Huarochirí Manuscript*

In contrast to the substantial body of Korean scholarship dedicated to the symbolic significance of the number 3, studies focusing specifically on this number within the Andean context are notably scarce. Most existing research addresses numerical systems more broadly, with only a few exceptions, which will be examined in this chapter. This disparity underscores the divergent cultural frameworks and academic traditions that characterize the two regions. Among the few exceptions are works by Urton (1997), Depaz (2014; 2015), Kemper (1992), and Lorente Fernández (2010), who touch upon the symbolic, mediating, cosmological, or ritual role of the number 3—often framed in terms of concepts such as tinku, chawpi, or the structure of three worlds in the Andean cosmovision.

The native Quechua word for the number 1 is *huq*, which alludes to another and different entity from the one who enunciates it. In Spanish, the number 1 is uno, that indicates itself, while the Quechua *huq* is not individualistic. This could be one more argument for the American anthropologist Bruce Mannheim (1991), who asserts that the Quechua language is focused on others, unlike, for example, Spanish, which has an egocentric tinge. The numbers 2 and 4 are important in the Andean numerology. As previously noted, the Andeans called *yanantin*, the complementary opposition, between the masculine and the feminine, between the great and the small, the above and the below, and between what is on the left and what is on the right. In this word yanantin surely contains the number 2. And as we have explained above, in the name of

Tawantinsuyu, there is number 4 which is in Quechua tawa.

<Fig. 3> Moche pottery (400 A.D.)
The principle of complementary duality. Photo by the authors.

Despite this relevance of numbers 2 and 4, the *Huarochirí manuscript* shows that the tradition of Andean numeral symbology seems to have its regional particularities. The *Huarochirí* region is close to Lima. When the Inca empire existed, this region was of considerable strategic importance, although it is located towards the Pacific coast, far from the highlands of Qosqo. The manuscript is a collection of myths and legends from the *Huarochirí* region edited by a Catholic priest. It is the only collection of Andean myths and legends that were transcribed into Spanish in the seventeenth century, so its value is great.

What is striking is that in this manuscript the numbers 3 and 5 are

emphasized by repeating them many times, even though not only *Huarochirí* region but also all Andean regions did not ignore the importance of these numbers. However, this paper confines its analysis to the number 3, setting aside a detailed discussion of the number 5. In fifth chapter of the manuscript two foxes (one from above and one from below) exchanged information about the events in their respective regions and a man (*Huatiacuri*) heard them in his dream. In *the Cosmo-vision of the Huarochirí manuscript* (2015), Zenón Depaz argues that the two foxes are two opposites and that Huatiacuri is the one who mediates between the two opinions of the foxes. This legend persuades us to act like *Huatiacuri,* the 'meta' fox who listens to the two foxes.

This paper proposes that the fluctuation in numerical preferences among Andean peoples—between even numbers such as 2 and 4, and odd numbers such as 3 and 5—is better understood as a product of the Andes' intricate historical trajectory than of coastal-highland regional distinctions.

As mentioned above, from the Caral civilization to the Inca Empire, the Andean peoples used even numbers (2 and 4) and odd numbers (3 and 5) throughout history. All indigenous Andean cities are basically divided into *Hanan* and *Urin*, and the universe is divided into two worlds and a liminal reality (a kind of earthly interface where living societies live).

In that regard Gary Urton asserts that "with only one consistent exception, even numbers are considered to be a good sign, odd numbers are a bad sign" (Urton 1997, 58). Yet, he adds that the exception is the number 3, as it is regarded in Quechua (*kinsa*) as the number of "wholeness and completeness" (Urton 1997, 40) for the Andean peoples. In

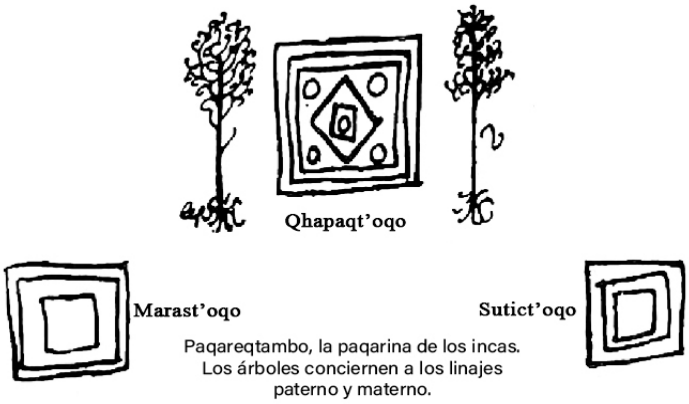
this context the Quechua use the word chawpi (in Aymara *taypi*) instead of the word "center". According to Zenón Depaz, in the context of the Andean worldview, "*chawpi* is third o fifth mediator, equally irreducible to the binary oppositions" (Depaz 2015, 101). The number 3, as chawpi, is also an encounter. "The central element of the Andean symbolic universe is the encounter or tinkuy" (Depaz 2015, 109).

In Andean culture, the number 3 is seen as a balanced and complete number, representing the union of two opposing elements and the creation of a new order. This relates to the idea that the number 3 can symbolize the balance between the spiritual world and the material world, as well as the connection between the past, present, and future. That is, the number 3 is the chawpi that mediates two or parity. The Andean peoples believed that parity was beneficial because it guaranteed the balance and equilibrium of the universe. Still, they were also keenly aware of the dangers of 'static' stability, as much as the *I Ching* cautions through the 'Standstill Hexagram (䷋)' against excessive 'stability' or rigidity. Platt understands *tinku* (encounter or a ritual fight between two opponents) as a necessary step toward achieving a higher level of harmony:

> The slight disequilibrium between the two poles of a symmetric opposition represents a fundamental nexus in Aymara thought. It means that the political reflection will not remain suspended in a state of static equilibrium, but rather that it will be thrown back for what it is a continual flux of reordering. It could perhaps be said that a precondition for continuity in the social order is the constant process of smoothing over the excesses of a hierarchy in order to achieve once again the soughtafter state of mokhsa ["sweetness,

peace, harmony"] (Platt 1987, 98-99, quoted in Urton 1997, 193).

Therefore, the Aymara people find themselves celebrating every year the 'violent' festival of *tinku* (encounter), because, through a long history of experience, they have learned that parity or equilibrium eventually reaches a tipping point and necessitates change or transformation. Thus, the number 3 mediates between the two numbers, 1 and 2, which constitute simple parity. The number 3 ensures another complementarity — in other words, another possibility — namely, encounter (*tinku*). Releasing from an 'ab-solute' or rigid state of parity — releasing state is *tinku* — requires an invisible and mediating hand. Hence, the number 3 is regarded as *chawpi*, the third element, which is highly valued by the Andean peoples.



<Fig. 4> The image of three windows or t'oqokuna
The drawing of the Indian chronicler Juan Santa Cruz Pachacuti (1993,198).

The first haircut of infants was done at the age of 3. In the founding

myth of the *Ayar* bothers, founders of *Qosqo*, the capital of the Inca state, were four brothers. But they emerged from three windows or three caves. In this case, the middle window, or *Qhapaqtoqo*, was *chawpi*, which connected and interacted with the windows of *Maras* and *Sutiq*; they represent the *Hanan and Urin halves*.

Additionally, in *the Huarochirí manuscript,* the supreme god, *Kuniraya Wiracocha,* is depicted as a mediating god who connects the beginning and the end of the universe. In this context, the anonymous indigenous narrator of the manuscript, faced with the dire straits of the Spanish conquest and the fall of the Inca Empire, dictated a folktale in which the supreme god *Kuniraya Wiracocha* invited *Huayna Capac* (the penultimate Inca emperor to historically exist) to accompany him on a journey from Qosqo to Lake Titicaca. The god *Wiracocha* also promised the Inca that he would show them his true self there.

When they got there, they sent the descendants of the condor, the hawk, and the swallow to find the sister of the same god. Here again, the number 3 was repeated. Eventually, the descendant brought them a small box, inside of which was hidden a curly-haired woman, who was the sister of the same god. After the appearance of this woman, who is the third or middle element, the god draws a line on the ground and says to the Inca, "Inca, we will divide this land (the seque or line) or *'kay pachakta'*; I will enter through one part of the land or '*huk pachakta*'. You and my sister will enter through the other part of the land or '*huk pachaktactac*'; you and I will not see each other" (Taylor 1987, 248). Before disappearing, the Inca sends his doppelgänger to *Qosqo* to face the Spaniards.

As interpreted Zenón Depaz, *pachak* means a "Womb of the World" (Depaz 2015, 109) that functions like a threshold between chaos and cosmos. Thus, both the supreme god and the supreme Inca return to the potential and invisible world (*pacha or pachak*) from the manifested or real world. However, at this critical moment, the sacred *pachak* is divided into two. This division, though apparently equal, becomes dynamic due to the intervention of a third, invisible entity that enters into one of the two halves of the *pachak*. This suggests the beginning of a new potential and hidden world, and that is the symbolic function of the number 3 in the Andean cosmovision.

Zenón Depaz acknowledges the significance of the numbers 2 and 4 in the Andean cosmovision, stating that "wherever something is manifested, it is at least dual – two" (Depaz 2014, 11). For instance, the goddesses *Yanañamca* and *Tutañamca* are described as twin deities representing darkness and night in the *Huarochirí manuscript*, illustrating this inherent duality. Yet, the presence of two elements in the universe implies the possibility of a third, implicit and less visible one: *Chaupiñamca,* goddess of "betweenness" (Kemper 1992, 36). Thus, the Andean symbolic system includes a visible duality— *Yanañamca* and *Tutañamca*—complemented by an invisible or at least obscure, mediating deity, *Chaupiñamca,* who functions as the necessary third element.

Ⅴ. Conclusion

Numbers have always held significance for humankind, initially driven by

mathematical needs to calculate and measure the mysteries of the universe. However, beyond this utilitarian purpose, numbers have also served symbolic and philosophical functions across diverse cultures. The division between the scientific and symbolic uses of numbers is, in fact, not as wide as it might seem. Even today, in East Asia, the theory of yin yang and of the five elements—which is deeply rooted in numerological principles—continues to be studied and taught as a legitimate branch of contemporary philosophy. In the Andean region, numbers are treated as human beings, which is why Urton (1997) characterizes Andean numerology as a form of ontology.

This essay has sought to examine the anthropological similarities and differences in the symbolic use of the number 3 in Korean and Andean cultures. While Greco-Roman numerology, medieval European traditions, and East Asian cosmologies such as yin yang and the five elements have been well studied, comparative studies between the numerological systems of the so-called 'Old World' and those of the 'New World' remain significantly underexplored. This study aims to help bridge that gap by focusing on the concept of the number 3. In Korea and Andean region, a cultural preference for the number 3 is apparent when compared to their neighboring civilizations—Korea in relation to China, and the Andes in relation to Mesoamerica.

The authors' findings suggest that Koreans tend to associate the number 3 with notions of infinity, perfection, totality, transformation and balance of the universe. In contrast, the Andean conception of the number 3 emphasizes its roles in 'bringing two elements together(*tinku*)', 'mediating

between them(*chawpi*)', and 'concealing its mediating function'. However, this distinction does not imply that the Andean number 3 lacks associations with infinity, totality, perfection, transformation and balance nor that the Korean number 3 lacks mediating aspect, even though Zenón Depaz and Kemper's notion of 'invisible third' looks unique until this moment.

The authors have deliberately refrained from offering a premature conclusion regarding the symbolism of the number 3 in both regions. Instead, the authors have presented conceptions articulated by scholars from both regions and compared them using verified bibliographic and oral sources from each cultural context. In Korea, there exists a substantial body of research on this number, whereas in the Andean context, such studies remain notably scarce. In Andean scholarship, beginning with Tom Zuidema (1964) and followed by scholars such as María Rostworowski (2007) and, more recently, León Quiroga Canaviri·Zaiduni Salazar (2022), it is widely accepted that the numbers 2 and 4 form the foundational framework of the Andean cosmovision. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the number three plays a significant role in Andean mythology, architecture, and rituals (Lorente, 2010)—beyond the evidence discussed in this paper—as well as in everyday life, particularly when compared to its relative de-emphasis in neighboring Mesoamerican traditions, much in the same way that the Korean preference for the number 3 contrasts with the Chinese emphasis on even numbers. Should future studies on the number 3 in the Andes develop as robustly as those on the Korean side, comparative research on its symbolic significance across both regions could be considerably deepened. The authors hope that this study may serve as a starting point for such future explorations.

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<Resumen>

Este estudio examina la preferencia cultural por el uso simbólico del número tres en los mundos coreano y andino. A través de un enfoque etnomatemático, se analizan las funciones simbólicas y culturales de este número dentro de cada cosmovisión. Los resultados revelan, en primer lugar, que en la cultura coreana el número tres es preferido en comparación con su cultura vecina, la china, mientras que la cultura andina también privilegia el número tres más que la mesoamericana. En segundo lugar, en la tradición coreana el número tres se asocia con las nociones de infinito, totalidad, perfección, transformación y equilibrio, mientras que en la cosmovisión andina el concepto de mediación (chawpi) ocupa un papel especialmente central.

Palabras clave: el número 3, etnomatemáticas, cultura coreana, cultura andina, función simbólica del número

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