

Tochan, “The House of All of Us”: Decolonizing Space through Nahua Oral Narratives

Julieta Flores Muñoz¹ and Patricia Murrieta Flores²

¹Tropical Research Center, University of Veracruz, Veracruz, Mexico; ²Department of History, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

Abstract

Mapping is an established practice by which people represent, explore, and share their understandings of geography. While cartographic products have become the dominant medium for this, there are many ways of expressing spatial knowledge, providing a rich opportunity to understand different forms in which people recreate, navigate, and understand their landscape. This research explores how Nahuas in Mixtla de Altamirano, Veracruz, Mexico, build tochan, their space called “house,” and how this knowledge is transmitted orally over time. This shows the potential that oral narratives have to inform and decolonize historical and archaeological knowledge and to lead us to reevaluate our own spatial thinking.

Introduction

The Mesoamerican historical documents that survived the European conquest of America are mainly pictorial manuscripts, including precolonial codices and early colonial maps or *pinturas* (Gruzinski 1987, 47) that emerged after the conquest. These documents combine different types of knowledge, from geographic information to spatial conceptions and genealogies. These sources have not only allowed researchers to recreate mythical journeys and the cosmogony of pre-Hispanic Indigenous groups (Boone 2007, 27), but they also represent a window to the creative ways that Indigenous people described their historical process of belonging to their geographical and physical space (López Saco 2017, 199), as a way to “account for their own history” (Coatsworth 2007, XX). In these unique accounts, space and time are united and represented in an exceptional way (Carrera 2017; Mundy 1998, 183; Mundy 2010), making them a useful tool for understanding the way people experienced the landscape and the mobility that produced their historical dynamics. Although a significant amount of work has been done to explore spatial thinking in Mesoamerican times, codices are scarce. Additionally, despite the fact that there have been substantial efforts to study early colonial maps, the focus has been on large map collections, such as the ones belonging to the sixteenth-century Geographic Reports of New Spain. Therefore, there is still much research to be done with these maps and other, less studied collections, as well as other evidence.

that remains in institutions such as the National Archive in Mexico and the General Archive of the Indies in Seville (Martínez Musiño 2015, 33; Miller and Mundy 2012; Mohar Betancourt and Díaz 2006, 10; Mundy 1996; Russo 2005). Other information used to fulfill this purpose includes primary historical sources that contain territorial and spatial information, such as the written component of the Geographic Reports of New Spain, the *Suma de Vistas de los Pueblos de Nueva España, 1548-1550*, as well as a variety of land titles and documents related to territorial disputes, among many others. However, even though these might be able to shed light on some aspects of Indigenous spatial thinking, they were written after the conquest at the time when many spatial and territorial reconfigurations were happening or had already happened. Moreover, the majority of these historical sources were written by the Spanish, and/or with a Spanish audience in mind.

In short, the arrival of the Europeans not only introduced a completely new culture and way of life, but also a new conceptual framework in which Mesoamerican understandings, representations, and narrations of both space and time entirely differed from the newcomers. While codices combined mythical space and time, intertwining it with geographies and the actual movement of communities and people, the Spanish narratives conceived time as linear and constrained spatial knowledge to cartographic representations. Early colonial sixteenth-century maps, such as many of those presented in the Geographic Reports of New Spain, reflect the ongoing battle at the time, when the traditions of the codices and writing without words were being confronted by new modes and conceptions of space and place (Boone and Mignolo 1994). Eventually, the Mesoamerican tradition would become subaltern to the European in many contexts, while Indigenous communities and life continued. Despite the dramatic irruption of the conquest and the creation of a new territorial order, Indigenous groups still have, as Barbara Mundy expresses (2015, 9), deep temporal roots, and communities continue to use their own social and cultural networks, infrastructure, and practical knowledge (Mona-ghan 1995). Such is the case of the conception of the land as a mother that nurtures, but in return, needs to be fed and feasted, which also can be understood as the communal “house” that brings Nahua people together.

Despite the surge of a refreshing wave of scholarship that challenges, for instance, colonial ideas of Mesoamerican territoriality (see Fernández-Christlieb 2015; Fernández Christlieb and García Zambrano 2006; Wilk 1997; Wilk and Ashmore 1988), when it comes to the exploration of Mesoamerican concepts of landscape and inhabitation, especially when exploring Central Mexico, modern scholars usually continue to rely on the categories presented by western understandings and theories. Such is the case of the Nahua concept of the house explored in this paper. We argue that the Nahua tradition of narrating history that combines both mythical and physical space-time remains alive today (Chance 1996; Echo-Hawk 2000; Macuil Martínez 2019). Hidden in the oral narratives, although usually overlooked by some Mesoamerican historians and archaeologists, it is still a way in which Indigenous communities transmit knowledge to younger generations (Ridgway Schneider 2005, 162; Vant’t Hooft and Solis 2021). We also aim to highlight the centrality of community life and its profound relationship to spatial thinking, as it is demonstrated by the conceptualization of the term *tochan*, which means “the house of all of us.” This concept underpins all scales of understandings regarding what brings together communities as well as members of close extended families. In addition,

we hope to bring orality in the form of oral narratives, stories, and history to the attention of colonial-period historical and archaeological studies and to explore the potential that it has as a tool. This is important for understanding the non-western spatial knowledge that we believe remains in the acts of remembrance reproduced by Indigenous Mexican communities in their daily lives. We also wish to shed light on some aspects of Mesoamerican spatiality, particularly for the Mixtla de Altamirano region that we present as a case study, and the different ways in which people have conceived of spatiality and time. With this, it is not implied that Indigenous communities remain living in the past, or that their practices remain static with direct links to pre-Hispanic societies, but that there is continuity in the unique ways spatial knowledge has been shared, and therefore, preserved.

Accordingly, we call for a more inclusive construction of academic knowledge and historical discourses in Mexico, aiming to embrace voices that are usually not considered. We hope that by using Indigenous epistemologies, this research will also serve to produce a counter-narrative to decolonize views embedded in colonial discourses based on “official” governmental knowledge and versions of history. Because these epistemologies are people and place-specific (Smith 1999; Tuck and McKenzie 2015), in this particular case we focus on the collective interviews undertaken during fieldwork (2013–2015) and the narratives that were voiced by Nahua Elders who live in the municipality of Mixtla de Altamirano, located in the Zongolica Mountains in the State of Veracruz, Mexico (Figure 1). Even though oral narratives in Zongolica have been studied before by anthropologists, the focus of those studies has been the religious belief system that these communities have (Martínez Canales 2013, 73; Ramírez 2017; Rodríguez 2003a). By centering on the way Nahuas in Mixtla de Altamirano remember and conceptualize their house, our analysis aims to highlight the way spatial knowledge was presented by the Elders in their processes of remembrance, and the importance of materiality (absent or not) in their accounts, as well as how this knowledge is transmitted to newer generations. In doing so, we intend to voice the flexible and unique way in which history is recounted in Mixtla de Altamirano as the narratives of space-time movements that occur within the rhythms of everyday life, which go from cooking and meeting family and friends to working in the *milpa* (maize field).

Mixtla de Altamirano: A Nahua Landscape

This is the land of the Nonohualcas, they came and inhabited here, well, not really here, the first Zongolica [a settlement] was on top of a mountain nearby ... Nonohualcas did come before to try this land, but they died and the ones that survived moved to the old Zongolica ... they moved from this part of the mountain because we are living on top of water, like as if we were on top of a *petate* [reed mat] and on the bottom we find dead rivers where once water was alive ... however, later on, the Franciscans arrived. They were the ones to bring evangelization in this region, and near here we still have the Calvary that they established, but we all come from the Nonohualcas. (Doña Maria Cira, Zongolica, 2015)

This short statement comes from one of the few interviews that we had outside the Indigenous municipality of Mixtla de Altamirano, in a larger town nearby called Zongolica, in a different municipality. Although Doña Maria Cira does not live in a communitarian context anymore, she did grow up in one. She later attended school and became a radio broadcaster in the local communitarian radio station, and she speaks both Spanish

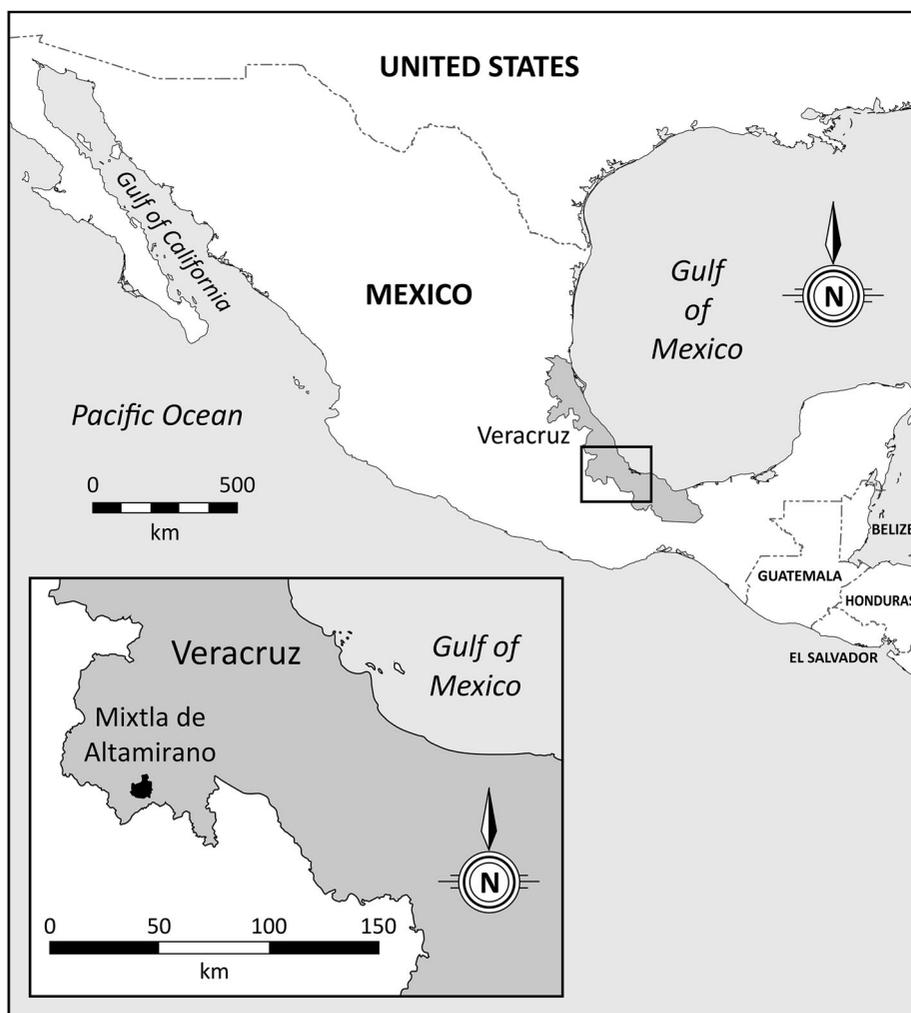


Figure 1. Location of Mixtla de Altamirano in Veracruz, Mexico.

and Nahuatl fluently. In her account, even though she refers to the well accepted historical narrative of regional history that she learned in school, she manages to intertwine the narratives recounted by the Elders, “*los abuelitos*,” who taught her while she was growing up. In Spanish, *abuelitos* translates to “grandparents,” exactly the way Elders referred to their ancestors during our interviews: “*tata*” in Nahuatl, always in the plural and atemporal: “*nuestros abuelitos*” in Spanish and “*Nochti tahtameh*” in Nahuatl. In this case, Doña María Ciria then talked about the Nonohualcas (Gomezjara and Mijares Malagón 1998, 44; Reyes García 1961; Rodríguez 2003a, 2003b; Yoneda 2005) a subgroup of the Toltecas who dispersed once Tollan collapsed (Brotherston 2001; Cobean 2007; Diehl 1983; Fowler Jr. 1989). However, later she continued her account with a story of movement and, finally, a settlement on top of death rivers. This intertwined narrative points out the complex dynamics underlying official national versions of history. It can’t be denied that a particular narrative is prioritized, while often disregarding what

Indigenous communities might have to say about their own past or communities. This also highlights an interesting aspect of the conception of time in Indigenous communities: throughout the interviews and conversations in Mixtla de Altamirano, there was always the uncertainty of whether Nahuas were referring to their actual grandparents or talking about a deeper past, and it is only within the context of the conversation that the situation clarifies. In a way, it is as if time is not fixed in their conversations. Instead, space is perfectly narrated, and it interlaces with the variable of time to account for change:

The entire municipality was first built there, where the water is flowing constantly, our grandparents came to that part to live in the mountain range and from there, people started moving to other communities, looking for better land or other resources ... Our grandparents suffered a lot, they did not have animals to carry water into their houses, that is why grandparents always settled next to the river. (Doña Elo, Centro, translation from Nahuatl, 2015)

Even Doña Maria Cira in her interview combined certain elements of Indigenous history with a more official version, such as the strong connection with the ancestors that can be found deep in communitarian contexts in Mixtla de Altamirano:

Grandparents never knew any computers, never knew any technological matter such as the radio produced here in the mountains of Zongolica ... But also, one thing is for sure, people don't lose their culture just because they want to lose it ... I like for instance speaking in my own language, it is through the language that I feel my ancestors, our first grandparents are alive. My traditional clothes capture the wisdom of my grandparents and then I believe that they are not dead, they are still with us sharing their wisdom. Somehow, if we forget, it is as if we are rejecting our traditions and betraying our ancestors. (Doña Maria Cira, Zongolica, 2015)

Whether Nahuas in Mixtla de Altamirano come from Nonohualcas or a mix of different groups, today Mixtla de Altamirano is just one of the 61 Native municipalities that comprise the larger region called Las Grandes Montañas (the Great Mountains) (INEGI 2015). It is located in the mountain range of the Sierra Madre Oriental that crosses part of the southeastern Mexican territory. This chain of mountains is a natural barrier that separates the central plateau from the Gulf Coast and crosses three different states in Mexico: Puebla, Oaxaca, and Veracruz. The Sierra de Zongolica (Zongolica mountain range) is what authorities call the specific region that is the homeland of Nahuatl people in Veracruz. The Sierra de Zongolica is ecologically diverse due to the different altitudes that result in varying environmental conditions (Rodríguez 2013, 25).

Despite the natural diversity, according to the National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI 2008), the Indigenous people of the region share the same language: Nahuatl from Orizaba. Currently, there is debate among researchers regarding the origins and dispersal of the Nahuatl language (Beekman and Christensen 2003; Bellwood 1997; Boone 2000; Escalante Gonzalbo 2008; Hill 2012; Kaufman 2001). The one thing that almost all researchers agree on, however, is that at some point, the Nahuatl language expanded from the central high plateau of Mexico into the whole of Mesoamerica and even further (Escalante Gonzalbo 2008, 87; Lockhart 1992). Interestingly, although the Zongolica mountain range was of importance during colonial times due to the production of tobacco, few records come from any *pueblos de Indios* (as the Spanish

crowns called Indigenous communities) in the entire mountain range (Aguirre Beltrán 1987). Therefore, we know only little about the reconfigurations that occurred during colonial times in this region (Martínez Canales 2013, 82; García Márquez 2005). Despite the lack of information, some researchers have suggested that for rural settlements with a small Spanish population, the transition was one of indirect colonial rule, with plentiful space for social and cultural continuity (Chance 2008, 133; Lockhart 1991, 3; Taylor 1979, 168). An interesting observation related to this is that the core of the Mesoamerican concept of the *altepetl*, the conjunction between the mountain, water, the ancestors, and the community, still seems explicit in historical narratives, such as the ones provided by Doña Elo.

From this perspective, the entire mountain range is a Native cultural landscape built upon communitarian values involving cooperative labor, domestic production of staple foods for domestic consumption, reciprocity, and other communitarian activities. Mixtla de Altamirano has a high percentage of Nahuatl speakers; 99.74 percent still speak Nahuatl as their first language and 42.38 percent remain monolingual speakers of Nahuatl. Combined with the high poverty indexes, which are mainly based on the scarcity of commercial materials in the construction of houses and the low investment in services such as drainage and electricity, these are some of the many indicators that Mixtla de Altamirano preserves a still “traditional” way of life (see Gilberto Giménez 1996, 12–14 for discussion of traditional vs. modern communities).

Methodology

Due to the mountainous topography of Mixtla de Altamirano, we expected geography to play an important role in the way Nahua people use and therefore have conceived their space. Conventionally, national authorities have divided the Mixtla de Altamirano into three distinct areas according to elevation, which determines environmental conditions and natural resources. These official distinctions affect social and economic development plans at the national and municipal levels. During fieldwork we aimed to consider these distinctions in the interviews with the Elders. Therefore, our study included Nahua communities from each area (see Figure 2):

- (1) The humid lowlands, or Zona Baja, are situated from 300 to 800 meters above sea level. This land has rich soil supporting the cultivation of a diversity of fruits and grains. During fieldwork we conducted interviews with Elders in seven communities in the Zona Baja, including Cuatlajapa, Mangotitla, Matlatecoya, Tecolotla, Xochitla, Zacaloma, and Zacatitla.
- (2) The temperate central zone, or Centro, is located from 800 to 1700 meters above sea level. It is where the municipal seat of Mixtla de Altamirano is located. Although the soil is not as rich as the lowlands, the elevation benefits the production of coffee beans. The main activities in this area are related to the administration of the entire municipality. Our interviews in the Centro were held in 11 communities, Ayahualulco, Barrio Primero, Barrio Segundo, Barrio Tercero, Barrio Cuarto, Capultitla, Colonia Miguel Aleman, Tetzilquila, Tlachicuapa, Xala, and Xometla.
- (3) The cold highlands, or Zona Alta, are located from 1700 to almost 3000 meters above sea level. This area is mountainous with rugged terrain, land covered with large

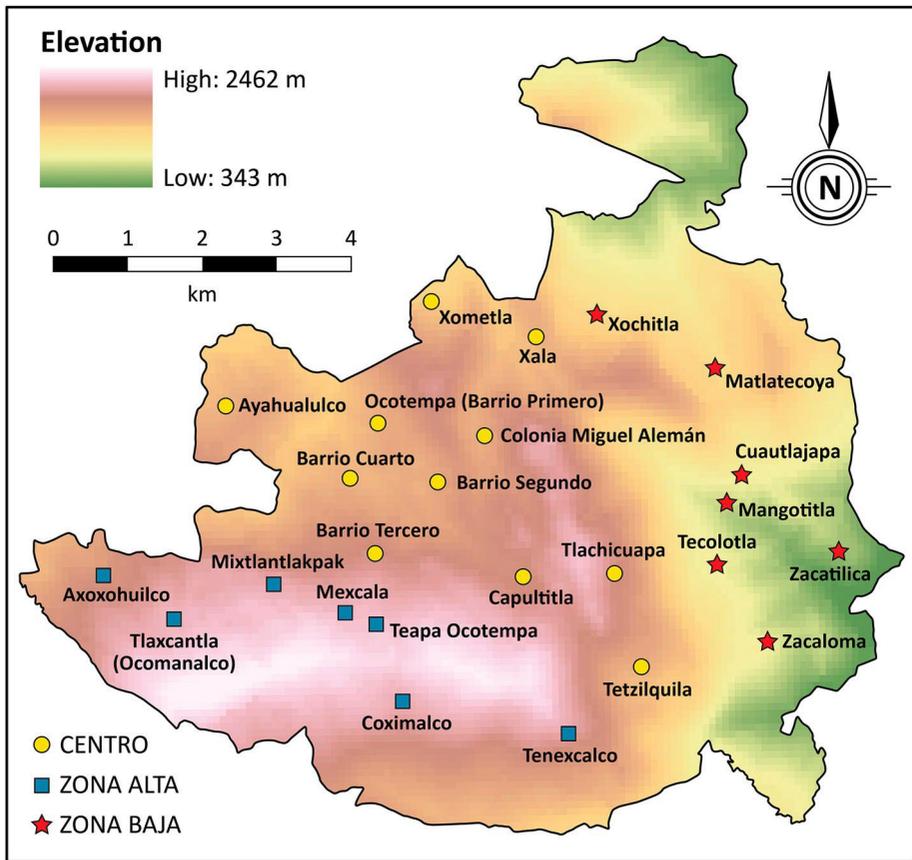


Figure 2. Geographical distribution of the 25 communities where collective interviews were conducted during fieldwork visits.

boulders, and dense forest, which not only creates abrupt changes in scenery, but also makes cultivation almost impossible. However, people exploit these surroundings in different ways. The main commercial activities are logging and lime and coal production. We conducted interviews in seven communities in the Zona Alta, including Axoxohuilco, Coximalco, Mexcala, Mixtlantlakpak, Teapa Ocotempa, Tenexcalco, and Tlaxcantla.

To create a record of the narratives of Mixtla de Altamirano, we carried out an exercise of remembering. This took place during visits to the different communities. From a total of 43 communities in the entire municipality, we visited 25, and we conducted a total of 25 collective interviews with the Elders in the different communities, mainly in Nahuatl. Elders were invited to participate in the interviews and asked to meet in the community center where the collective interviews would be undertaken. We arrived to prompt the conversation and to listen.

In each of these communities, collective interviews with Elders and community members who accompanied them proved to be a productive way of encouraging

conversation. The interviews were conducted as listening sessions, prompted by our questions, such as “what stories do you remember?” and “do you think Mixtla de Altamirano has changed?” Additionally, we were able to recreate a smoky kitchen in a drawing during an interview in the Centro of Mixtla de Altamirano, an exercise in consensus-building that reunited the Elders and created comradery among all the participants. Although the interview questions were planned, the conversation flowed in multiple directions, as it was the Elders who encouraged each other in the process of



Figure 3. The process of remembering by Nahua Elders in the collective interviews.

remembrance (Figure 3). As a result, interviews were constructed by both the interviewees and the interviewers and were prompted by our questions but were not constrained. Interviews were recorded in video and audio and were held both in Nahuatl and Spanish. We later transcribed and translated them from the original audio. All the material produced during fieldwork was returned to each community and a full copy was given to the communitarian radio and the local intercultural university.

Orality in Mixtla de Altamirano

Mixtla de Altamirano comes from the word *mixtli*, the Nahuatl word for “clouds.”

Our first grandparents told us the story that in the mountain called Tlacuilotecatl, big snakes live and have their nests in caves, and some of them are even bigger than the size of people. It is also said that some of the snakes are old and have feathers ... The story goes that these snakes are always sleeping, but when they are hungry, they produce a kind of fog that is very well spread ... that is why we live surrounded by clouds [mixtla]. (Doña Carmen, Centro, 2015)

In multiple stories recounted by the Elders, the spatial narratives uniquely bridge space and time:

This is our land, home of our grandparents. When they first arrived there was nothing, but little by little they built what we have now ... Before our kitchens were made out of grass that had to be cleaned from debris and thorns, it was a lot of work but we helped each other, so if we started in the morning we might finish late at night ... , we collected the water from a spring that is located up in the mountain ... we planted and collected tobacco and then coffee ... Houses were made of *tejamanil* [wooden planks] a meter long. To produce the *tejamanil* they use ocote pine and then people cut it in small planks, but today ocote is almost disappearing. (Don Pedro, Zona Baja, 2015)

The examples above show the intricate relationship with time and its difference from narratives in the western sense of “past and present.” For another example, tobacco was last cultivated in Mixtla de Altamirano around the final years of the eighteenth century, but community narratives integrate this knowledge into a continuous time and a past that is still tangible.

A clear description of the surroundings emerges from the interviews with the Elders and expresses their sense of place: “We respect our mother earth. That is why we keep giving her food [a ritual called *Xochitlalli*], otherwise, we can get sick or expect to have bad luck” (Doña Eli, Centro, 2015). “*Xochitlalli* is a very local tradition that was taught to us by our grandparents ... I remember how important it was for my grand- mother to have the *temazcalli* or these big ceramic pitchers that were in my grand- mother’s kitchen.” (Doña Maria Cira, Zongolica, 2015)

In their narratives, any place may be described combining sacred narratives and elements with the physicality of the landscape. Nevertheless, this combination of remembrance, remote and present history, beliefs, and landscape is not unique to “place.” It is present also in the narratives of past activities, such as those that involve the making of their regional music (Figure 4):

Tequitl de faena [communitarian work] had to be done every Monday. Our grandparents used to call for it with the flute and the drum, the music gave them strength, it was



Figure 4. Conversation with two of the few traditional Nahua musicians in Mixtla de Altamirano. They explained “instruments have changed, we even used a turtle shell, but turtles disappeared in the region” (Don Laurencio and Don Juan, Centro, 2015).

mandatory to attend the *tequiltl* because when you live in the mountains and there is rain, the paths and roads that connect each other get destroyed easily, also it is a matter of taking care of our mother earth ... Because we never knew how much the work is going to last, our music has no beginning or no end ... Now we use it only when there is a party or someone important is coming ... younger people like playing music with their phone! (Don Jacinto, Zona Alta, 2015)

Their narratives introduce us to the cosmogony of the region through profound descriptions, and these are full of anecdotal details related to ideology. However, they are also strongly materially oriented. For instance, when talking about the spaces for cooking, Nahuas granted them a soul and even located their heart, as in a living being. Both heart and soul are “objects” that are located in a specific place. When referring to their family stoves or hearths, they say: “The three stones have been there forever, that is how our grandparents cook on the floor and they have the shape of a heart, look!” (Doña Eli, Centro, 2015). Interestingly, the soul was hidden, as they explained: “Our grandmothers used to bury their *metlatxontil*. I have found mine when I wanted

to change the stove ... it is the soul of our kitchen” (Doña Rafaela, Zona Alta, 2015). The *metlatxontil* is an object that is not in use anymore, but it looks like a smaller version of a *metate* (grinding stone). Its original use has been forgotten. “I don’t really know what they grind in this stone, but I don’t think they use it for maize, I tried it once and it is very small, maybe they used it to grind coffee or spices” (Doña Eli, Centro, 2015). Materiality such as this has an important dimension in practices connected to the belief system. The materials that are buried represent somehow the soul of an existing being and they need to be fed and feasted to keep a balance:

We used to feast with the rivers, we were the guardians of the land and the mountain, my grandparents used to take me near the river to feed it as if it is one of us, and when you live in the mountain you understand that to survive you need to help all. That is why we also give food to the river and the land, at least that is what our grandparents used to tell us (Don Manuel, Zona Alta, 2015; see also [Figure 5](#)).

This practice of buried materiality is also a point of tension related to change. When talking about this, particularly about the *metlatxontil*, they said: “So maybe you should do the same with your metate, after all, younger people don’t want to use it anymore!” (Doña Elo, Centro, 2015).

It All Started with the House

When being asked about old narratives, the Elders’ first response implied a forgotten past: “We do not know any old narratives, we did not go to school ... we don’t know how to write or read.” However, this seems rather to reference a direct association with the western idea of time and history, and the Nahua Elders, in a way, also disconnected from it. This becomes clear when asked to narrate their material world, specifically when talking about their house. Through their explanation of the material expressions of a house, the past presents itself as deep and complex:

“Before, houses were made of grass ... that had to be cleaned from debris and thorns. Once the grass was clean, we tied it up making them into rolls; if we started in the morning we might finish late at night, we use around 50 tied rolls of grass; it’s a lot of grass and a lot of work for just one man, so we help each other. After we make the house we sleep and eat there because we need to have smoke. At the beginning, the smoke comes out white, and that means that the house is not ready, that is how our grandparents taught us.” (Don Toño, Centro, 2015)

Although this is an account about how houses used to be built, the Elders recount it as if they were the ones building these houses. Using a playful combination (that might seem unusual to an English or Spanish speaker) of past and present tenses in their grammatical constructions, time blends in the narratives, making the past, present, and creating social and historical continuity. The centrality of the concept of house also shines through the way Elders evoke smoke and fire that, according to them, “bring us home ... that is how home is built” (Doña Maria, Centro, 2015).

Throughout the exploration of the many narratives, the Nahua Elders usually invoked a multifunctional space, that although they call it house in Spanish (“*casa*”), the word in Spanish does not really represent the complete Nahua understanding of this concept. In



Figure 5. Women remembering the *metlatxontil* stone.

anthropological literature, these spaces are known as *cocinas de humo* or “smoky kitchens” (Pazarelli 2016, 52; Vargas and Casillas 2008, 114). However, it is not clear if the name was ascribed by people who have visited Native communities across Latin America (e.g. authorities, academics, and non-governmental organization workers, among others) or if it is the way Native people referenced these spaces. The truth is that across the interviews, Nahuas presented these spaces as much more than a simple kitchen. In their words, “it is where life develops,” and these spaces are the heart of the community (Figure 6).

Although smoky kitchens have changed, these constitute still the main room of a household. However, it is not the only component of the house. An example that is found in archaeological literature allows us to understand the complex definition in the Nahuatl context of the word *tochan* for house and the many problems of describing the archaeological material remains. Among researchers, there is still a debate when it comes to the differences between *altepetl* (as an ethnically based political entity) and *calpollí* (which has been interpreted as “neighborhood” but literally means “big house”), and whether the urbanism in ancient Mesoamerican societies can be reduced or explained through the western definitions of town, city, districts, neighborhoods, and houses (Boornazian-Diel 2008, 2; Charlton, Charlton, and Nichols 1993, 147; Colin 2014; Perkins 2005; Santley and Hirth 1993; Smith 1993, 192). Although their translations give the impression that *altepetl* and *calpollí* are sharply defined, in reality, these Native historical concepts are highly complex, and each may involve degrees of association with one or many social, political, and economic forms of organization and phenomena. Adding to this complication, within Nahuatl communities today, there is also a more encompassing definition of the Nahuatl word *tochan* that includes what anthropologists have defined as “the larger house” and can be related to the cargo system (also known as *mayordomías*), a civil-religious system of organization introduced during the Early Colonial period (Aguirre Beltrán 1981; Chance and Taylor 1985; Medina 1995, 7; Ortega-Olivares and Mora-Rosales 2014, 55; Wolf 1967, 195).

The definitions of the concepts of home and house rooted in modern western society prioritize a dichotomy of inside-private/outside-public spaces. However, in the Nahuatl

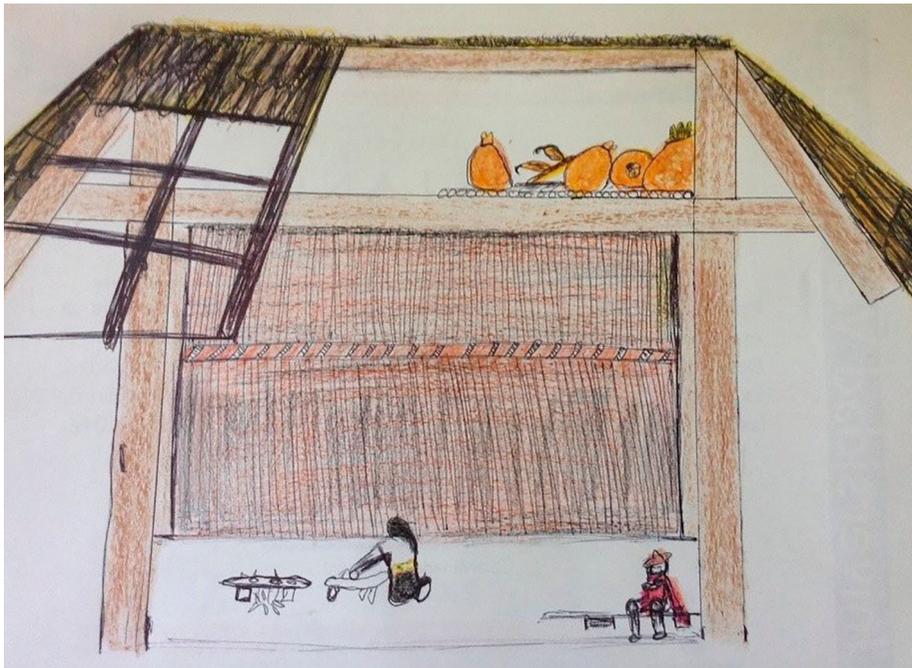


Figure 6. A consensus drawing of the smoky kitchen produced in a collective interview with Nahuatl Elders (Centro, 2015).

context, this dichotomy is not so clear. Throughout the conversations and stories that the Elders shared during fieldwork, the Nahuatl word *tochan* emerged as a combination of natural and cultural, a space-place with no clear boundary between the intimate-private and the collective-public. Rather than a dualistic understanding, the Elders referred repeatedly to a complex set of intertwined relationships that were forged collectively, and that, moreover, unified the home/house/community understanding: “This is our land, home of our grandparents. When they first arrived there was nothing, but little by little they built what we have now ... Before, our kitchens were made out of grass that had to be cleaned from debris and thorns, it was a lot of work but we helped each other, so if we started in the morning we might finish late at night” (Don Pascual, Centro, 2015). In the Nahua world, and in opposition to the modern western view, construction of self-identity reinforces the collective. Through common knowledge that can be perceived but hidden in the oral narratives, Nahua Elders overcome the individual/collective dichotomy. As expressed through their conversations in the three regions: “Sometimes, when we didn’t have food, we talk to our brothers [referring to Nahuas inhabiting a different region] and share ... Now things are different, but we need to return to what our grandparents taught us, we need to keep our traditions alive” (Doña Elo, Centro, 2015). In this way, stories of struggle are eased by the collective and encourage a sense of cooperation and relationship. The idea of the collective is intertwined with the sense of self, heritage, and experience of daily life and materiality. For instance, the smoky kitchen is not only a feature or room within the house. In a way, it can be said that this is the family central space, as it is not only where food is prepared, but it can also function as the place where the family sleeps, even when there are other rooms available. Furthermore, the smoky kitchen can be shared with other families, and some of these include up to 20 other related households. This is to say that, contrary to modern western societies, for the Nahua, it is in the collective, continuous past and present, as well as daily and material experiences, that *tochan* is constructed.

This understanding, therefore, is not static, and there is a need to consider that there are dissimilar rhythms produced by the different generations of Nahuas who inhabit the region. While for the Elders the definition of house – *tochan* – includes the whole concept of the modern municipality together with the communal ties and exchanges along what they define as their land/territory, for younger generations house might be conceived closer to the western sense: a closed space composed by a kitchen and a room. Therefore, it could be said that definitions granted to the concept of house in Mixtla de Altamirano are in transformation, but the material expression granted to this complex concept has not yet been substantially changed. In any case, it can be said that Nahua people are constantly re-signifying the materiality that surrounds them according to the specific rhythms of their everyday lives, and this is reflected in oral histories where spatial and cultural practices are also depicted:

This is our home [referring to the smoky kitchen], the place of the fire is where the heart of the house is located, look! ... Besides, they say that if your kitchen doesn’t have a fire, then it means that you don’t want to invite people, or even that you have family problems, so there is always the need for smoke and fire in your smoky kitchen (Doña Eli, Centro, 2015)

Furthermore, these histories capture the essence of change, and it can be understood how definitions are slowly being reconfigured through the act of remembrance while sharing their history:

Before, we did not have any other rooms than this one [referring to the smoky kitchen]. Here we used to sleep on the floor, all the house activities we used to have were done on the floor. Sometimes the women wove outside the kitchen when the day was warm, but they needed to be paying attention to the fire, so it was better to be near it. (Don Juan, Zona Alta, 2015)

However, while the center of a home can be considered the smoky kitchen, this does not necessarily represent only one household. Quite the contrary, one smoky kitchen can belong to more than one family, and one household can have more than one smoky kitchen. Although belonging to someone, these are hardly thought of as individual property or spaces, and many people have free access to them. Therefore, the material essence of *tochan*, the word for house, and its definition, rely entirely on the spatial practices and conceptions that each generation has.

Landscape and Fellowship: Tochan

Interestingly, the Elders did not point out any differences between communities as officially categorized by national authorities. On the contrary, in their narratives and conversations, the entire municipality of Mixtla de Altamirano exists as one large household called *Tochan*, where fellowship remains an essential concept for Nahuatl people to organize themselves. This concept of fellowship and unity highlights the contrast with a colonial approach that governmental offices still have in Mexico, where they do not necessarily take into account local knowledge or tradition. This contrast was portrayed by Nahuatl Elders in their narratives: “We were forgotten, nobody cared if our kids died or if we had food or health, we had to survive alone, we did it as our grandparents taught us, everything we know is because our grandparents show us, they show us how to work hard” (Don Severino, Zona Alta, 2015). This sentiment of unity in the experience of a difficult past and change over time is also expressed in terms of houses: “Back in my days we didn’t have anything, today everything looks nice, we have corrugated metal sheets. Before, houses [referring to smoky kitchens] were made of grass” (Don Pascual, Centro, 2015).

Nevertheless, there is a difference between these areas in terms of local material resources and products, and spatial practices vary. For example, the Zona Alta focus on the production of lime, wood, charcoal, and grinding stones; the Centro on traditional ceramics; and the Zona Baja on corn, fruits, and livestock. “I remember that some ladies made really beautiful ceramics up there [signaling a place with his hand] because they have good clay over there, they used to come here and exchange them or sell them for other products” (Don Manuel, Centro, 2015).

Likewise, the differences in landscape and environment affect people’s access to materials for building their houses. Although throughout the interviews it became apparent that the general tendency was to use grass, the variation observed from Zona Alta to Zona Baja depended greatly on the natural surroundings. Particularly, although the roofs of smoky kitchens were mainly made of grass thatching, the variety of grass used

depended greatly on where the house was built. For example, in the Zona Alta, Nahua communities used to cover the smoky kitchen with local grass that grew without cultivation, and in the Zona Baja they used cane that was cultivated. In the Centro and Zona Alta areas, Nahua people used to build their houses using roofing material from the maguey plant. The Elders remember using maguey leaves to roof their houses and transforming maguey fibers into twine to tie the bundles.

This variation was expressed in terms of building techniques, as well. To build the walls of a house, the Elders remember using mainly wood, but a few people remember building stone walls. The interviews reflect a general tendency to use wood-plank cladding in the colder areas and wood poles or cane in warmer regions for walls. Seven Elders recalled use of a pre-Hispanic woodcutting technique called *tejamanil* to build the roof, but only in the Centro and Zona Alta areas.

Although there might be a slight difference in materials and techniques to build the houses, the sense of fellowship and community related to these activities remains: “It is easier to pick up the wood in this area, and besides we exchange wood for food with our brothers in the tierras bajas” (Doña Concha, Zona Alta, 2015).

The collective, therefore, is at the forefront of all life and activities, from a local scale to a landscape scale, where it becomes apparent that the distinctions between Zona Baja, Centro, and Zona Alta belong to a different conceptual framework, not the one established by the national and municipal authorities. This was highlighted throughout the collective interviews in each community we visited, compared to the officially named regions, where an alternative way of naming the municipality emerged. This was called *Tochan*. Remembering a collective space with free passage along travel routes, shared access to communal resources, and barter transactions rather than a cash economy, the Elders said: “We called it *Tochan* because it is the center, the first community we all lived in, and then our grandparents spread through the whole municipality, but this is our first home so it is our house, it could be said that we were born there and we will all go die there, we will be all together there someday” (several interviews across the three regions, 2015). In this manner, *Tochan*, the Nahuatl word for “the house of all of us,” represents the collective space and conception of home among the Nahua in Mixtla de Altamirano. As understood from these narratives, this is a place where even if in the past, life has been presented as difficult, isolated, or poor, this space and people’s attachment to it has been misunderstood by the colonial gaze. The memories that came from it preserve the spirit of the community’s “grandparents,” and somehow, the knowledge of surviving in the mountain range.

Conclusion: Toward an Understanding of Nahua Conceptions of Place

Oral narratives have the power to unveil how spatial concepts are conceived and remembered. For the Nahuas of Mixtla de Altamirano, the places where they live can be conceptualized as a complex multidimensional house, where geography is only one of its dwellers. The past, present, and future merge and inhabit it, converging through the collective oral memory of their ancestors, their materiality, their shared experiences, and the transformations of everyday life. As such, the key to understanding *tochan* lies in the collective. As their description of the smoky kitchens – “the heart of the home” – made evident, the Elders favor spatial practices that prioritize extensive family ties and

shared materiality. Rather than reducing this to a building or a local space, or subjecting it to an opposition between outside/inside or intimate/public, the concept of *tochan* expresses a collective entity that their ancestors continue to build through all of them. As such, boundaries are fluid and dynamic. *Tochan* is not only within a confined focal place, it permeates the landscape and its temporality. Cycles and changes in nature determine spatial practices such as agriculture and gathering resources, and it is in these rhythms, and not the Gregorian calendar, that Nahua oral narratives capture the essence of home, integrating accounts of their landscape. The physical features of such a landscape and its modifications are not only grounded in tangible, physical space, but also in the sacred realm, where they are conveyed as one. In this manner, the unknown must be celebrated and remembered to be in communion with it. For Nahua people in Mixtla de Altamirano, especially the Elders, organizing feasts and offerings for the dead and the land, water sources, and caves recreates a living mythical space within the present, physical one.

Materiality, therefore, plays an important role. The natural environment, the materiality that Nahua people create from it, and their interactions are key elements in the Nahua conception of space. Changes in these relationships have the power to transform the concept of *tochan*. In the narrative of Maria Cira (Zongolica, Interview in Spanish, 2015), for example, discussed above, the ceramic pitchers of her grandmother take particular importance. In granting a crucial role to that heritage, there is a sense of responsibility toward the past. For new generations, however, although the material essence of home has hardly changed, there seems to be a radical disconnection from these views. The Elders explained that this is due to two main reasons: differences in the way their young are being raised and educated, and the introduction of new concepts regarding the value of the collective, materiality, and money in their communities: “Before, we used to listen to our grandparents because they were the wise ... we used to call each other brothers and sisters, now they don’t even look at each other’s eyes and say hello. Young people don’t care about us, they don’t want to learn Nahuatl” (Elders in the Centro, interview in Nahuatl, 2015); “We used to help each other, we all have the duty to do collective work (*faena*); now people go only because they pay them” (Elders in Zona Baja, interview in Spanish, 2015). Throughout the different regions the Elders’ narratives were consistent in their ideas of *Tochan*, but for younger generations, collective practices and even their language seem to be falling into disuse.

Nahua oral narratives have a profound impact on the ways of understanding Native and historical spatial concepts. While there have been great advances in Mesoamerican studies, there is still room to emphasize the deep-rooted social aspect that Indigenous communities seem to preserve. In this article we looked to how Nahua communities in Mixtla de Altamirano emphasize the collective nature of *Tochan*, its strong difference from colonial ideas of scale and landscape, as well as its complex and deeply rooted nature.

Therefore, including memory and oral narratives to dialogue with concepts defined by western academia, such as space, landscape, and environment, among others, allows us not just to add complexity, but voiced traditional knowledges that are being constantly lost, and that represent a different way of understanding. We believe, that, as Mundy (2015, 110) expresses, in the Mesoamerican world there are many “ways of knowing,” and spatial conceptions can go well beyond the act of drawing territorial limits. This

research demonstrates that Nahua communities today still conceive the world in this way, and we believe that definitions of concepts such as “close” and “far,” as well as definitions of “them” and “us” can probably be better understood and applied to archaeological and historical research through the lens of these oral narratives. In this sense, we hope that the work we have done with oral accounts in the Zongolica mountain range can be integrated in the not-too-distant future as effective and important sources of information for a diversity of disciplines, including historical geography, Mesoamerican archaeology, environmental history, and colonial history.

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