

Foreword and Acknowledgements

This book explores the wide and complex definition of the space named ‘house’ in an indigenous community, the Nahuas, located in the Zongolica Mountain Range, Mexico. It will draw on ethnographic research to show how Nahuas relate to the corporeal world (objects and environment) and, through processes of struggle and negotiation, use them to produce this physical space, called house. In doing so, it will uncover a different historical narrative. By examining the ‘house’, and the materials used to produce it, as a space that is lived in and built (the house) but is also perceived, dreamt and remembered (a home), this research highlights interconnections between the study of the physical world (materiality) and the study of social processes (social structure and social relations). For, it is through the rhythms of the Nahuas’ everyday life, including material acts of remembrance and spatial practices of memory, that these physical spaces (their houses) can be better understood.

Throughout the book I will argue that the Nahuas’ delimitation and definition of their houses is continuously changing. This because Nahuas modify their space through their traditions (even those spaces that haven’t been explored, such as caves and other ones, are modified through their tales and beliefs). These living traditions transfer meaning and orientate both the objects and the environment. Therefore, their objects and the environment (materiality) is built upon cultural patterns and values that are constantly being modified. Regardless of any processes of subordination, dominance or interrelationship between other groups, Nahuas materiality do not disappear; because it is fluid and dynamic, these become modified or reinterpreted. Nahuas materiality permeates through memory, imagination and traditions.

Therefore, rather than beginning with a define idea of what a house is – size, architecture, social structure – this book addresses houses as complex physical spaces that encapsulates history, religion, folklore and knowledge, both materially, spatially and through the oral traditions and storytelling of the communities that produce them, and in turn produced through them. This continuous movement that builds these space-places allow us to uncover the fluid rhythms that built them. Consequently, this book will present houses as complex spaces that are fluid, rather than walls and intimate spaces. Houses are presented as built spaces in constant change with a never clear present; rather, there is an experience based on the past and the projection to the future. By presenting the materiality of the houses that connects people with their environment (to which Nahuas had to adapt), an agentive and meaningful space was built, one that includes the

memory of adaptation that construct their ‘Nahua-ness’ when producing their home (*tochan*, as they name it), and the projection of this ‘Nahua-ness’ into the future. Houses then remain in the memory of the elders and become agents in the construction and consolidation of subjectivities through the knowledge and rhythms of repetition that constitute their everyday life.

This book draws in part on the results of my own fieldwork carried out thanks to CONACYT (grant number 313690, 2013) and the Mexican public education system. So firstly, I would like to celebrate free education and equal access to it by thanking our great funding body CONACYT, which help in promoting research both inside and outside my country.

But more importantly, to all the people in Mixtla de Altamirano that kindly open the imagined door of *tochan* and invite me in. A special thanks to Eliazar, who walked with me and helped me to better understand it. Although some of the names have been changed to protect their privacy, I would like to thank all the people that took part in the book, especially the elders who shared with me their memories of Mixtla de Altamirano: *Nochi tatas tlapopoeilistli miak tlasohkamati, intechnoske iwan otechtlapowike tlen yowehka opanolok, iwan itechtikeh nimokatlitik, wan itechweweskiteh, itechtlapalohke, iwan itechnoskeh timotlapowiskeh. Tlasohkamati miak tlen otechpolewikeh. Inin libro miak ipahti, ikinon techtlapowitokan miak tlen axtoh yopanolok kemen wehwetlatotli.*

I would also like to acknowledge the Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural, Sede: Grandes Montañas. *Tlasohkamati Miak* Doctora Shantal Mesenger and Maestro Felipe Mata. *Tlasohkamati Miak* to the students Alicia Mayahua and Victor Quihua. In Xalapa, a special thanks to the amazing team of CUO (Coordinacion Universitaria de Observatorios – Universidad Veracruzana) and to Dr. Jessica Ransley (University of Southampton), whom I owe for many hours of edits, comments and laughs (this book is definitely yours!) To Professor Fraser Stuart, Dr. Josh Pollard and Professor Colin Richards, for great final insights. To Dr. Crystal and Kira El-Safadi, for all your love and support. To Robert and Jen Meldrum, who taught me the British way. To Dr. Atasta Flores, for all the support back in Mexico. Finally, I would like to thank my big extensive family for always being there. Though, it is my family who I have to thank the most, Dr. Monica Flores and Jimena Flores – thank you for being great companions in this adventure called life. José Othón Flores Consejo and Leonila Muñoz Carrillo, you both deserve all the credits for this book ¡*Muchas Gracias!*

Introduction

A Nahua Melody: Material Rhythms of Houses

Exploring the wide and complex definition of the space called house in an indigenous community is presented with many difficulties. This book presents the specific case of the Nahuas, located in the Zongolica Mountain Range, Mexico (see Map 1). It draws on ethnographic research to show how Nahuas relate to the corporeal world (objects and environment) and, through repeated social practices and negotiations, use them to produce this physical space. By examining the house, and the materials used to produce it, as a space that is lived and built (the house) but is also perceived, dreamt and remembered (a home), this book highlights the interconnections between the study of the physical world and the study of social processes. For, it is in the rhythms of their everyday life, including material acts of remembrance and spatial practices of memory, that these physical spaces (their houses) can be better explored and understood. Throughout the book, I will argue that the Nahuas' delimitation and definition of their houses is continuously changing. Therefore, rather than beginning with a define idea of what a house is – size, architecture, social structure – houses will be addressed as complex physical spaces that encapsulate history, religion, folklore and knowledge, both materially and spatially, and through the oral traditions and storytelling of the communities that produce them, and are, in turn, produced through them.

In order to explore these processes of co-constitution, this research turns to the material world of Mixtla de Altamirano (see figure A for location). This municipality is one of the sixty-one that constitute a larger region called the *Grandes Montañas* (Big Mountains), inside a longer chain of mountains that cross the south Mexican territory called the *Sierra Madre Oriental*. This chain of mountains becomes a natural barrier that separates the central plateau from the Gulf Coast and crosses three different states: Puebla, Oaxaca and Veracruz. The *Sierra de Zongolica*, or Zongolica Mountain Range, is how authorities name the specific region that Veracruz Nahuas inhabit. With 1000 km² (Rodríguez 2013: 25), the Sierra Zongolica is ecologically diverse due to the different altitudes that result in different weather conditions. Despite the natural diversity, according to INALI (National Institute of Indigenous Languages 2008), the region shares the same language, Nahuatl – specifically a subdivision known as Nahuatl of Orizaba – and from the twenty-one municipalities where they still use this subdivision to communicate, Mixtla de Altamirano stands out. This is not only because 99.74% (INEGI 2010) of the population still uses Nahuatl on a daily base, but because it is the municipality with the highest human poverty index (HPI) in the entire country of Mexico. According to INEGI-

SIMBAD¹ (2010), 97% of the population that inhabit Mixtla is living in poverty.

This is despite the fact that the highest poverty indexes are mostly related to the financial capacity that families have. To calculate this index, other factors are taken into consideration. For instance, according to economists, the lack of new materials and difficult access to health and education are a reflection of the scarcity (CONEVAL 2017). In other words, social researchers use the lack of new materials in houses and the low level of investments made in services to calculate the index. Hence, Mixtla de Altamirano's lack of investment in areas such as drainage, electricity, water systems and newer materials to build houses imply a still traditional and economically limited everyday life.

On the other hand, a strong national narrative, reinforced by traditional archaeology, has linked Nahuas in Mixtla de Altamirano with a specific ethnic group that is highly implicated in the construction of the Mexican national identity. It is a situation that has led to an ethnic discourse grounded on a deep past and an almost unexplored present. Rather than exploring the slow rhythms of co-configuration produced by the intimate tangled connections between materials and humans, Nahuas tend to have disappeared in the archaeological research of a once colonial Mexico. However, Nahuatl speakers are linked together in colonial narrations as poor peasants living in rural Mexican *barrios* (Smith and Novic 2012:15), with a specific organisation that, later on, was defined as the 'cargo system' (Nash 1966; Vogt, Evon 1966; Wolf 1967; Cancian 1976; Carrasco 1990; Korsbaek 1996: 82). Little attention has been paid to the material modifications that can allow researchers to account for the dynamics of the region and the way Nahuas have responded to these material changes, by remembering them, and finally producing a specific space.

In answer to this problem, this book offers a closer exploration of the way Nahuas in Mixtla de Altamirano produce their landscape or 'homeland' today. By doing so, it focuses on the importance of the re-enactments that oral traditions and storytelling hide. Throughout this research, a different understanding of the materials-human relation is presented in the way elders in Mixtla de Altamirano account their space through constantly remembering it (materials that are absent or those that are still in

¹ INEGI-SIMBAD is the institute in charge of the statistics and geographical information of Mexico through the municipal databases. Databases are provided for free through the web page www.inegi.org.mx.



Map 1. Location of Mixtla de Altamirano, Veracruz.

continuous use). These narrations represent a different way of presenting the fluid essences that materials have when being accounted within the rhythms of the everyday spatial practices. In other words, the relationship that indigenous communities, through these accounts, established with the concept of the past did not only build their collective sense of self (in this case their 'Nahua-ness') through what they called '*el costumbre*' (spatial practices), but put to the forefront the importance of the materials and the fluidity in which people use them. Whether materials help in the process of remembrance or if they are used in a different context, it is this material fluidity that built their history. The following research used ethnographic fieldwork to

explore the fluid rhythms of change that built the houses in Mixtla de Altamirano.

Aims of the book

The overall aim of this book is to explore the materials used to produce the house, a space that is lived in and built (the house), but is also perceived, dreamed and remembered (a home), in a Nahua municipality located in the Zongolica Mountain Range, Veracruz. By doing so, it confronts the way archaeology has narrated Nahua ethnicity, and therefore their past, unveiling the material fluidity and changes that built their history.

The book stands on the idea that the Nahua produce and reproduce certain rhythms of repetition that involve a collective way of understanding the environment, social relations and human subjectivity. Moreover, these rhythms create a particular knowledge that is transmitted via memory and materialises with the act of remembrance-performativity of the self, where the characterisation of the home continues being ontologically fundamental. Consequently, this research argues that the Nahua use the act of remembrance as a creative way to resist the material impositions coming from outside, but also to project and reinforce the self (being Nahua) and the relationship between self and others (humans and non-humans) as free.

The Nahua, therefore, signify and re-signify traditions (continuities or discontinuities) through time and power in creative ways. However, it is the material expression of the collective self being ('Nahua-ness') and their bottom-up organisation (cargos system) that is being analysed. Accordingly, one of the main questions to be solved throughout the book refers to the way Nahuas in Mixtla de Altamirano lived, perceived and imagined houses, and how these were materially realised. Yet, in order to answer this broad question, other issues had to be taken into consideration (as shown in figure 1), especially those regarding the way Nahuas used and are using the materials that produce a home and how these materials are constantly changing through their narrations.

Structure of the book

The book uses ethnography as the method and means to analyse and answer the question that foregrounds the relationship established between humans and materials: how do people (in this case, the Nahuas) use materials to produce their house and how are these materials constantly changing through their narrations? Within this general question, other issues were uncovered, such as the way archaeologists, elders and others narrate materials to produce a Nahua 'history' and the implications of those

differing narratives. Therefore, this book's main aim is to highlight the fluidity in which people use materials and the changes that are hidden in the way people narrate them. Consequently, special attention is given to the way changes are acknowledged and accounted. Accordingly, chapter 1 provides a wide overview of the background of the Nahuas in Mixtla de Altamirano. It is a national traditional archaeological narrative that dismisses continuity and that challenges anthropological discourses in its attempt to bridge identity and history. In the national account, reinforced by traditional archaeology, Nahuas are linked to Toltecs and possibly Aztecs (Limón Olvera 2008; Stark & Chance 2008; Smith 2012), groups that are not only highly implicated in the construction of the Mexican national identity, but also of whom mythological narratives evoke movement (migration as a rite of passage). That is to say, in their accounts, these two groups walked and occupied different types of environments (Taggart 1983; Fowler 1989; Beekman et al. 2003; Van't Hooft 2006). However, if Aztecs and Toltecs are important in the national account, in the state of Veracruz a different historical narrative recognises other ethnic groups: Totonacas, Huastecos and a deep past of Olmecs (Medellin-Zenil 1989; Melgarejo-Vivanco 1960). This leaves the Nahuas in Mixtla de Altamirano with an unexplored and, therefore, unclear deep narrative of their past. With a total surface of 66.3 km² and 43 different localities, their history becomes a set of disconnected pieces in a puzzle that will be explored in chapter 1. Nonetheless, this disconnection sheds light on the lack of interest given to the materiality and fluid rhythms that built the sense of self of the Nahua in Mixtla de Altamirano. This chapter ends with a set of definitions and theories that will lay the foundations for the rest of the chapters. The main aim of chapter 1 is to present the Nahuas that live in Mixtla de Altamirano.

Subsequently, chapter 2 provides a closer insight into the ethnographic methodologies that have been used to answer archaeological questions. First, it sets out the ways that archaeologists have used ethnography to create models

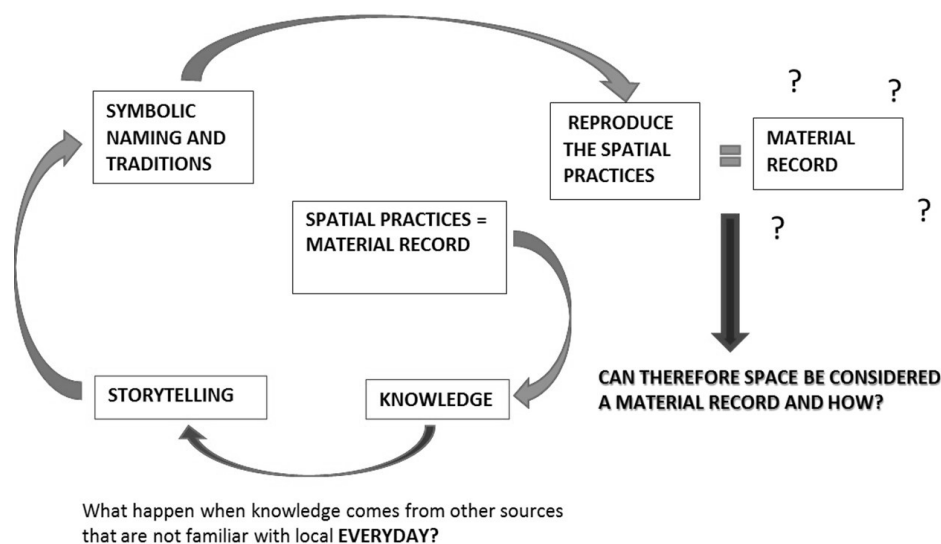


Figure 1. Other issues to consider.

that help them in understanding past societies, and the important debates that arise from this specific perspective and the newer ideas that recognise the colonial frameworks behind this use of ethnography. These newer ideas return the politics into the ethics in the praxis of archaeology, a perspective that I assume through the entire book. Next, the chapter relates a personal experience of working with the elders: memory and the elders' idea of pastness that are still transmitted orally from time to time. Within this scheme, memory became knowledge and was central in their act of performativity. However, due to the new ways of conceiving the elders inside the communities as a non-wanted minority, the transmission is almost lost, as Doña Dolores expresses to me in one of the interviews: '*before we used to listen to our grandparents, we treat them with respect, now they treated us like garbage*' (Ayahualulco, 19 March 2015). Memory, then, is reinforced in other ways. In addition to the ethnography, other resources were used in order to have a better understanding of the Nuhua home/house. Chapter 2 is thus an insight into the work undertaken in the municipality located in the Zongolica Mountain Range that helps in defining archaeological narratives (the material culture studies) as a living matter.

Chapter 3 then provides a catalogue of forms: the materiality of the houses that I was able to document during my stay in the mountain range. Presenting the materials in a disconnected way allows the reader to detach them from the meaning and the understandings that people gave them. Nonetheless, in presenting them in a certain order, a particular account is being captured, one that foregrounds the techniques used to document the houses. It could be said that in presenting the materials in that specific order, I am presenting my own account, one that distinguishes the chaotic material dissonance that is produced in the everyday life of Mixtla de Altamirano and that differs greatly from their own understanding of the materiality of 'the house'.

Consequently, chapter 4 takes a closer look at the dialectic relationship between people and materials through the space called 'house' in Mixtla de Altamirano. It is thus a closer exploration of the interrelationships between spatial practices, materials and collective self that Nahuas have, and that produces their landscape. It brings together past and present in an attempt to understand the continued rhythms that build the fluid essence of materials in everyday life: from the shared kitchen to the individual working land.

Chapter 5 examines the social interactions that are built in and throughout the houses. In this chapter a hierarchical invisible structure that operates for each household is revealed. This structure is, furthermore, endorsed by the different symbolic alliances that go unquestioned. '*El Costumbre*' (Spanish for tradition or everyday activities), even though it could be said that the preservation of the Nahuas' cohesion depends greatly on this hierarchical structure, is the mouldable quality of this hierarchy that allows traditions and previous understandings to survive

in Mixtla de Altamirano. This means that even though each member of the community knows the different tasks to be done, these can and are modified according to the particularities of everyday life.

Chapter 6 brings together the key elements that have been analysed in the preceding chapters: the materials and the way people relate, use and remember them to produce the home. This discussion chapter highlights the way transformations are being realised materially. These transformations furthermore redefine people's understanding of, but, more importantly, define the fluidity of the materials that produce, the house. As a brief conclusion, this discussion chapter will include a suggestion into the way archaeologists could narrate this fluidity and the importance of the living memory and history. Materials are fluid and so are people; in narrating them in different and creative ways, archaeological research overcomes static discourses.

Finally, the conclusion summarises the main points argued in each of the chapters, to lastly suggest future work.