

Dissertation

Dancing spirits.

Towards a Masewal ecology of interdependence in the  
northern highlands of Puebla, Mexico

Alessandro Questa Rebolledo

Anthropology Department,  
University of Virginia

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>I. INTRO</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>I.I Breathing in a living world: animism and non-anthropocentrism</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>I.II. A yearning, communicative, social and inhabited world</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>I.III. Masewal people and Modernity</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>I.IV. Ritual Practice as Knowledge</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>I.V. Dancing as an opportunity to think and to relate</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>I.VI. Dances are moralizing acts</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>I.VII. Dances are part of a larger <i>kostumbre</i></b>	<b>38</b>
<b>I.VIII. Categories... supposedly</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>I.IX. Sections and Chapters</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>II. PEOPLE, LANGUAGE, PLACES, REGIONS, AND TEPETZINTLA</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>II.I. Coordinates of a field site</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>II.II. Anselmo, Rosalba, and <i>xochipilli</i></b>	<b>51</b>
<b>II.III. Masewal and Mexican people</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>II.IV. The rugged highlands of northern Puebla and its peoples</b>	<b>61</b>
II.IV.I. Anthropogenic mountain gardens	67
II.IV.II. A local ecology	70
II.IV.III. Demographics and local economy	74
<b>II.V. Sketches of time: historical notations on the highlands of Puebla</b>	<b>76</b>
II.V.I. Historic regimes: from Teotihuacan to Tajin	77
II.V.II. Barbarians from the north: the <i>altepetl</i> political system	79
<b>II.VI. The idea of Mesoamerica as a <i>transcendent</i> civilization</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>III. KINSHIP, CARGO SYSTEMS AND <i>COMPADRAZGO</i></b>	<b>94</b>
<b>III.I. Protocols to relate</b>	<b>94</b>
III.I.I. Co-parenthood and ritual kinship	102
III.I.II. Barrios and family cults	112
III.I.III. The circuit of Mayordomías	115
<b>III.II. Divination: seeing spirits and ‘the gift’</b>	<b>120</b>
III.V.I. <i>Kixpatla</i> : Change of vision, change of face	125
Alessandro Questa, PhD Dissertation’s Final Version, November 2017, V4.0	2

III.III. Modernity elsewhere, émigrés, and religious change	128
III.IV. Remembering again	136
III. V. The end of the background	145
<b>IV. WHAT IS A HOUSE?</b>	<b>148</b>
IV.I. Houses and mountains: altars, hearths, and sweat lodges	148
III.II. Overcrowded houses	158
III.III. Houses are everywhere	160
III.IV. To cure a house: <i>kalwewetsin</i>	162
<b>V. MASEWAL EXPANSE: SPIRITED BODIES AND ENCOMPASSING WORK</b>	<b>173</b>
V.I. The multiple Masewal person	173
V.I.I. Spiritual descent	183
V.I.II. The person's spirits outside the body	191
V.II. <i>Kayotl</i> : Flesh, Work and Form	195
V.II.I. Bodies are maize dough	196
V.II.II. Working bodies	201
V.II.III. The sadness in laziness	211
V.II.IV. Bodies and form	214
V.II.V. The importance of having a head	217
V.III. Sick bodies and the after life	219
V.IV. Hunting and growing maize in the mountain	221
<b>VI. DANCING IN TEPETZINTLA</b>	<b>231</b>
VI.I. Dancing is inventing culture	231
VI.II. Dancing is a way to know	235
VI.III. To dance is but a word: bailes, mijtotia and Danzas	241
VI.III.I. Bailes	243
VI.III.II. Mijtotia	248
VI.IV.III. <i>Danzas</i>	253
VI.V. Rehearsing dances	262
VI.VI. Dancing together: “participación”, “respeto”, and “gusto”	264
VI.VII. Dancers as spirits	266
VI.VIII. Dancing ancestors, mountains, winds, devils, necromancers and bears	270
VI.VIII.I. Dancing mountains: Tipekayomej	270
Alessandro Questa, PhD Dissertation's Final Version, November 2017, V4.0	3

VI.VIII.II. How the world works: Wewentiyo	273
VI.VIII.III. Masewal Apache	279
<b>VI.IX. Heads, and faces, masks and crowns</b>	<b>283</b>
VI.IX.I. <i>Tipekayomej</i> crowns: mountain heads	284
VI.IX.II. Masks: faces of the forest	290
<b>VII. ENCOMPASSING MINES, HURRICANES, AND MOUNTAINS</b>	<b>298</b>
<b>VII.I. Tentacular mountains</b>	<b>299</b>
<b>VII.II. Monsters, bigness and anxiety</b>	<b>304</b>
<b>VII.III. Between local and foreign monsters</b>	<b>313</b>
<b>VII.IV. An accumulated environmental crisis. Water and winds</b>	<b>321</b>
VII.IV.I. Experience with ancient storms	324
VII.IV.II. Pauline, 1997	328
VII.IV.III. Earl, 2016	332
<b>VII.V. Wind spirits</b>	<b>335</b>
<b>VII.VI. Megaproyectos</b>	<b>339</b>
<b>VII.VII. Resistance and the invention of culture in the highlands</b>	<b>340</b>
<b>VII.VIII. A conspiracy of spirits</b>	<b>344</b>
<b>VII.IX. From non-environmentalism to a native ecology</b>	<b>350</b>
<b>VIII. CONCLUSIONS: THE REEMERGENCE OF DANCES AND OTHER UNEXPECTED MASEWAL EXPANSIONS</b>	<b>354</b>
<b>VIII.I. The end is the beginning</b>	<b>354</b>
<b>VIII.II. Ifigenio: the least probable source of inspiration</b>	<b>357</b>
<b>VIII.III. Mountain's bowel movements: summing up what we know so far</b>	<b>362</b>
<b>VIII.IV. Unexpected images: art, murals and reviving concerns</b>	<b>371</b>
<b>VIII.V. Remembering and forgetting are ways of being in the world</b>	<b>375</b>
<b>VIII.VI. Dances as active models of relations</b>	<b>378</b>
<b>IX. REFERENCES</b>	<b>384</b>

"As with astronomy, the difficulty of recognizing the motion of the earth lay in abandoning the immediate sensation of the earth's fixity and of the motion of the planets, so in history the difficulty of recognizing the subjection of personality to the laws of space, time, and cause lies in renouncing the direct feeling of the independence of one's own personality. But as in astronomy the new view said: "It is true that we do not feel the movement of the earth, but by admitting its immobility we arrive at absurdity, while by admitting its motion (which we do not feel) we arrive at laws," so also in history the new view says: "It is true that we are not conscious of our dependence, but by admitting our free will we arrive at absurdity, while by admitting our dependence on the external world, on time, and on cause, we arrive at laws."

In the first case it was necessary to renounce the consciousness of an unreal immobility in space and to recognize a motion we did not feel; in the present case it is similarly necessary to renounce a freedom that does not exist, and to recognize a dependence of which we are not conscious."

War and Peace, Leon Tolstoy

# I. INTRO

*"When we saw all this, we were both frightened and sad at the same time because it tossed the houses about and we were saddened. We asked "Why is this happening to us?" "Why the winds?" "Why doesn't the wind forget?" It always damages the entire maize field and we lose the fruits of our work, and now there is a poor harvest. The maize field grows, then, when it is halfway grown the wind comes again and tosses it all about so, what did we do? Well, I had a dream."<sup>1</sup>*

## **I.I Breathing in a living world: animism and non-anthropocentrism**

All around us, the overwhelming intertwining between what used to seem detached universes continues to emerge in powerful ways. The influences of air and water currents, pollution, and their correlation to industrialized waste are ever more evident to scientists as well as to fishermen and farmers. Arguably, historical human activity enhanced by the rippling invasions of modernity are experienced in multifarious ways and intensities

---

<sup>1</sup> *"Tos nono ojko otikitake otikmowilijke wan otimotlakoltijke porque nono ojko omochi siki mas kalmej nochí ope kintsinkopa, siki okixkop kalmej wan tos nono ojko otimoyotlakoltijke wan tos timolwiya ¿Malke ojko timochiwaj? ¿Malke ye lak ejeka? ¿Malke ye amo kilkawa ejekatl? Nochipa ojko tlapojpolo ika tlamilol, wan titikitej tome, wan axa ke ijkiní amo wili tlayoli; yoli mili ya tlajko yowi yakitlamotlatok ejekatl wan tos nono tlen otikchiwke? tos onitemik."* Macaria Rosete (Appendix, Entry II, fragment).

by human societies according to their relations with specific, historical “branches” of capitalism, from husbandry and extensive agriculture to oil drilling and all sorts of mining. It’s not only capital, markets, and jobs that disappear or evaporate, but also, it would seem, the land itself. Apparently, an even larger foot has left its mark upon what we once understood as “conventional” and undisputed Globalization: the Anthropocene.

The term Anthropocene was popularized by geologists to mark the geophysical effects of human transformations to the planet, having a wide range of impacts from the endangering of biodiversity (Cardinale 2013) to alterations to global climate patterns (Crutzen 2006). The Anthropocene has been mobilized by a bewildering range of disciplines beyond environmental sciences primarily to speak about risk, change, and various impending tragedies on a planetary scale. The Anthropocene has been also acknowledged and reimagined by the social sciences, including anthropology (Palsson *et al.* 2013, Ogden 2013, Latour 2014, Swanson *et al.* 2015), for in the end, isn’t the Anthropocene pushing the *anthropos* to an even more central stage? (Latour 2014:4). Understanding the Anthropocene indeed requires the inclusion of the social dimension of all human activities (Ellis *et al.* 2016), and especially those dealing with massive transformations derived from large-scale economic endeavors,

giving rise to expected variations such as the Capitalocene (Moore 2015) and unanticipated ones, such as the tentacles that emerge with the Chthulucene (Haraway 2015). Indeed, the long-term historic pan-Eurasian expansion has been proposed to set the preconditions for such a geological emergence (Hann 2017). It would seem that the advent of the Anthropocene constitutes the last undeniably universal evidence-backed by some of the best minds and most serious disciplines— of Western exceptionalism, only by the worst possible means.

The Anthropocene seems to be perceived as a sort of post-industrial karmic return, or better still, as a secular version of the Judeo-Christian Apocalypse, and a fitting update on the ending of the world due to human transgressions and greed. Whatever we can now imagine life to be must be peripheral to the centrality occupied by an imprudent global capitalist economy (Tsing 2015). But is it the Anthropocene really a Western invention? What if some people, somewhere, have survived the end of times already? Moreover, what if they are facing it yet again while adding their own anthropogenic remarks?

This dissertation centers on the lives of Masewal people of Tepetzintla in the highlands of Puebla, Mexico and on the ways in which they establish relations with their circumambient spaces. Specifically, this research explores how some of those relations are maintained, debated and reinvented by Masewal



people with the rugged mountainous landscape they have inhabited for, at least, the last millennium. When we say landscape we tend to associate it with either the realms of Nature or Culture. Indeed, landscape inevitably evokes in Western thought an idea of objectification and then of contemplation. Masewal notions about landscape are centered more on the regular and relevant interactions they have with it, in that sense, the landscape becomes another production that foregrounds (and backgrounds) social life (Hirsch 1995). Hence, rather than speak of landscape as a sum of orographic features and climatic patterns, in this research landscape or *tlaltikpak*, "the land's surface" should be regarded as a sum of places with social agency (Humphrey 1995), that is, places that are also persons to a certain degree.

The highlands of northern Puebla, according to Masewal people, are neither ruled by the amalgamation of nonhuman forces to be eventually deciphered by science, nor are they the result of a buzzing and well-designed (or corrupt) human production. What we tend to understand as geographical landscape and meteorological conditions and occurrences are, in Masewal terms, not inanimate forces nor are they artificial creations; they are but the manifestations of other than human *living things*. The land itself is an animated place where life, even if invisible, erupts from winds and rainbows, rocks and crossroads through the

actions of invisible and evasive but nonetheless influential beings or spirits (Espíritu Santo, Blanes 2013). Without a locked classificatory system, such spirits can be referred also as "owners" (*dueños* [Spanish], *itekomej* [Nahuatl]), "mountain people" (*tipekayomej*), or simply as "spirits" (*espíritu* [Spanish]). There are numerous individually distinctive names that can at times become fused on the same character or speak of different characteristics. Hence the *kwoxiwa*, the dangerous and hypersexual "wood/tree man" is at times also called *nixikol*, "the devil", while at others share characteristics with the more ancient *tipewewe* or "mountain elder"; who in turn can be fused to the *tlalikipanoske* or "earth sustainers".

The Masewal world is intrinsically animated, willful and multi-planar. It allows for people and things to be all potentially and closely interconnected and yes, it is very dangerous.

This ethnographic research is an attempt to narrate how certain dance practices and other ritual activities have been recovered and repurposed by Masewal people in recent years, after having been, according to Masewal people from Tepetzintla, "something only a few old men did", and a disappearing practice by all appearances by the end of the last century. This reemergence is connected, I suggest, to a larger preoccupation across the highlands ignited by catastrophic weather, poor

harvests, and economic depression. I claim that today's dances are connected with a profound local concern about the destructive force of hurricanes and a growing apprehension about extractive mining, and corrupt local political practices, and the palpable abandonment of traditional farming along with the ongoing challenge of relations with city life.

Throughout this dissertation I am exploring a rather elusive Masewal notion in which some geographical features carry an animated existence, or life. This does not refer to an individual entity (unlike the popularized notions of Gaia, Pachamama or Mother Earth) but to a composition of interrelated beings operating at different scales. Moreover, this research studies how such animated geographical features and layers of beings ascertain the conditions that regenerate life in the highlands and are critically adapting to drastic transformations.

Throughout the following chapters of this dissertation and in the Appendix, I will show many of the ways in which elements of this *living landscape* interact and participate in Masewal everyday existence, and how such dealings need to be constantly ordered but also reimagined through codified speech and performative events.

What I have been calling "life" is imprecise. It is in fact conceptualized more like a potential capacity, a latent power

that can be accumulated in certain places such as altars and caves while it can also be obtained from spicy food, sweet drinks, or alcohol. Certain flowers like *sempoalxochitl*, crops like maize, domestic animals like dogs, pigs and turkeys, and wild animals such as deer, have it in abundance, and are hence good for eating, and exchanging. One time, my friend Anselmo referred to this amplified and expanding idea as breathing, "it's just like us, everything breathes, like it moves. It has to be alive because it takes breath."<sup>2</sup>

Although it is sometimes referred to as *tonal*, a kind of solar vitality, I did not find during my fieldwork, however, a definitive term for this widespread local notion. According to some Masewal interlocutors the sun stands as the main force behind all life, and different incalculable quantities of the energy of this "prime mover" are captured and passed on between beings. Local friends have also linked this nameless notion to the concept of *chikawak* or "strength". *Chikawak* is a cumulative term, a metaphor used mainly to refer to the growth of crops and forests. People, like trees and crops become stiffer, dryer and harder with time and care. Sometimes, this notion has also been paired to *yolia*, as heart-beating life and to "the desire for things" and imprinting one's presence in other's dreams. To be alive is to be animated and to have some sort of desire and vice

---

<sup>2</sup> "es como nosotros, todo respira, como que se mueve. Tiene que estar vivo, porque tiene resuello." Field notes 2012.

versa. On a couple of occasions, younger Masewal interlocutors used terms such as *energía* or “energy”, *vida* or “life”, and *poder* or “power” when referring to this animated capacity in things and beings.

In short, this form of potential animation loosely associated to solar energy, beating movement, maturity, and will, is not a “hard concept”, as Masewal people emphasize an aspect over another of this multi-source effect, depending on particular circumstances. I propose thus, rather than attempt a direct translation, to analyze those contexts. Whatever this animation can sometimes be (solar energy, growth power, beating life, will, oneiric presence) is not based on a system of biological speciation confined to taxonomical classifications of carbon-based creatures, so it does not match animal or vegetable kingdoms. As living things can have relations and affect others, then hence rocks, winds, streams, and clouds but also machines, artifacts, places, and even dirt can at times be instilled with flickering and mysterious vitality. Such animation recursively explains its own existence (the wind was alive-so it ate the maize field-because it was alive) as a sort of Bergsonian *elán vital* (1983[1907]).

### **I.II. A yearning, communicative, social and inhabited world**

The land, and more specifically, some of its features, becomes animated mainly through the composition of four Masewal postulations: yearning, communication, sociality and inhabitation. By this logic, almost all things (from plants and animals to houses and tools) can potentially come into a form of sentient existence, and hence desire or yearn for food, while also have more abstract needs such as respect in order to perform their work. Yearning things somehow speak, that is, they are capable of communicating their desires and they do so through Masewal people's visions, dreams, and body afflictions, or by manifesting their presence in other ways. Masewal people, for example, consider that it is necessary to end a ceremony by thanking and dancing with the objects that facilitated their own celebration.

When each person dances with the particular artifacts and tools used (pots, machetes, axes, or incense burners) they *subjectify* them by "dancing them" (*danzarlos* in Spanish), in order to establish a respectful and personal relation with them. Similarly, when a Masewal person observes that the pond and river are inhabited by a family of spirits that might desire to take away her baby (see Appendix), she is immediately entering in a relation with it (the pond) and them (the water people).

Importantly, these yearning and speaking things are approachable via social protocols, which include specific

parliaments, offerings, and visitations. "It is important to treat them as a person" is a common explanation I have received from elders over the years. Indeed, food, respectful speech and proper visitations form a set of actions expected when visiting a *compadre's* household, or when moving the image of a saint during a *mayordomía*. If Masewal people consider themselves as part of a bigger multispecies and spiritual society, they achieve this not by "biologizing" themselves but by socializing others as persons. Hence, from a Masewal perspective, most of what anthropology would call "ritual" constitutes the heavily stylized procedures Masewal people have developed to deal with such multifarious diversity of living things.

These native protocols are based on the fact that yearning, speaking and social things all have particular places of origin, dominion and inhabitation positioned in the landscape and influencing one another. Crucially, all spirits (all nonhuman entities, being saints, underground, water, wind, mountain, and forest invisible dwellers) inhabit *somewhere* in the local landscape or in the larger highlands region. When active, these beings facilitate the creation of unstable assemblages (for example, through dances) connecting people to diverse occurrences on different scales (from an infant's fever to a hurricane). Animated by a spiritual content, these relations are

linked to elements and certain places that can become persons too.

These assortments of “living things” may very well be described as quasi-objects, taking from Latour’s vast array of terms. He proposes that the world is in fact not divided between subjects and objects, as we have been led to believe after the Enlightenment, but thickly –and increasingly– populated by entities that are composed of others and that can become subjects at some point. Such entities are made by and can produce orders that, in turn, can simulate a kind of life. Famously computer programs or software, but also corporations, stock markets, and different bureaucracies can operate as quasi-objects or quasi-subjects gaining legal statuses, taking risks, acquiring rights, or regulating complicated processes (Latour 2004). More ordinary entities can occupy can be quasi-subjects too, such as cars, houses or even mountains and storms. Such assemblages, if flickering, can however exercise and direct some kind of power over many other entities, namely humans.

The idea behind quasi-objects and quasi-subjects is to recognize that the world is more complicated than the old binary and that our lives are mediated by a multitude of such unstable actors. Beyond that, thinking specifically for this research, Masewal people attach semi-human capacities, characteristics, and pulsations to powerful events and forces that originated in



far away places (storms, mining operations, federal government authorities) or that can be traced as developing over long periods of time (urban vice and postures, abandonment of traditional farming, conversion to other forms of Christianity).

For Masewal people in Tepetzintla, Saints and Virgins, "Owner" spirits, Christ, the dead, certain objects such as masks (when mistreated) as well as malicious wind spirits can all mobilize storms, mining companies, and even the diseases that afflict a person. In other words, climatic disasters are locally understood ultimately as manifestations of other sentient agencies and in that sense are somewhat living and can be even addressed. The importance of everyday words and actions by Masewal people carries a similar weight. When a person says dirty or insulting words these travel and can harm other unintended targets, including spirits. All human actions are locally regarded as potentially having some effect on everything else, from the land and plants, to even other people and spirits. However, they become more dangerous when performed carelessly or clumsily can become sources for future harm to unknown others.

Aspects of this *living landscape* intrude upon every day conversations, chores and even dreams. However, certain practices and discourses stand as the privileged moments for these living interactions. Themed dances, divination and healing

practices as well as the regular series of visitations and offerings to the mountain dwellers comprise the main recurrent actions specifically geared towards the recognition of the diverse entities (owners and spirits), continuously emerging from the circumambient world.

I propose that, in order to understand how Masewal people in Tepetzintla and surrounding towns and villages in the highlands of Puebla think about and engage with the drastic changes on climate and with the surge of mining and extractive enterprises, it is necessary to understand such engagements are predicated on a so-called animistic world and on how such animated world is non-anthropocentric.

The first proposition that informs this research is that Masewal people live in what has been called an *animistic* world, that is, a world in which not only life, but also language, will and consciousness are not exclusive to the human sphere but are shared, to various degrees, with animals, plants, places and meteorological phenomena (Brightman *et al* 2012). In other words, the notion of humanity is not entirely equivalent to the biological speciation of *Homo sapiens sapiens* but instead occupies an expansive category that includes other beings. Such inclusive meta-human sociality is not new to anthropology (Boas 1911, Hallowell 1930), but has been reinterpreted somewhat recently in Amerindian and Amazonian ethnographies in relation

to major, specific ontologies, or schemes of practice (Arhem 1996, Descola 1996, 2013; Viveiros de Castro 2014). These Amazonian conceptualizations take animism as ultimately a way to be in a multinatural rather than multicultural world (Viveiros de Castro 2014). Besides these, other conceptualizations have been useful during my research as I am trying to understand how Masewal people organize, see and act, especially taking account of how human societies exist as part of larger multispecies assemblages (Latour 2004, Haraway 2012, Povinelli 2013, Tsing 2015). However, Masewal assemblages of life in the highlands go beyond what these anthropologists observe in the Amazonian as well as in other contexts –in which the center of this meta-human society is focused mostly animals and some plants–, as they can potentially include the spiritual component of corporations, or the willful invisible agency behind murderous landslides.

### **I.III. Masewal people and Modernity**

The animistic and multi-natural Masewal posture should not be associated with some form of primitivism just as it could hardly be called primeval or endowed with traditional purity. This is initially so because primitivism, authenticity and purity are all Western concepts for which there are no

equivalent words in Nahuatl language. Furthermore, Masewal people are living, plain and simple, inside the boundaries of what we define as modernity; as yet another unstable Western concept.

Masewal people are mostly mountain farmers but some are also drivers and teachers, merchants and car mechanics, politicians and engineers. They travel and learn trades, languages and businesses. Political and legal structures interconnect all their villages and towns. All Masewal people live nowadays under a monetized and national economy. To be Masewal, to speak Nahuatl, to have an animistic take on relations does not impede a person from also participating in modernity and from suffering from it.

Crucially, the Masewal animistic world must be regarded as directly related to modernity and its multifarious manifestations such as lucrative migration, economic and environmental stress, democratization, and numerous other phenomena under (in spite of and after) global capitalism (Moore 2014, Tsing 2015). Immersed in such modernity, Masewal people are still able to maintain a keen critical stance towards some of its appearances, fruit perhaps of their mostly unfortunate historic dealings with other modern people. Such cultural critique is recursively enabled by their own animistic and socializing view on relations.

As I hope my research demonstrates, it is precisely the conflicting and anxious relations with modernity that inspire the production of Masewal dances, and that to some extent obsess many of my Masewal interlocutors in the highlands. I learned to see Masewal *Kostumbre* more as a subtle procedure to deal with change and as a controlled inclusion of novelty than as a gatekeeping and enclosed cluster of unchanged “traditional” ideas and practices.

#### **I.IV. Ritual Practice as Knowledge**

Knowledge is relational and as such is constantly communicated and updated. This happens as Masewal farmers aim to understand and respond to various phenomena, including climate change. How to make sense of catastrophic events or long-term droughts? Why would those be unrelated to modernity and migration? Since, for Masewal people, human action is connected to nonhuman forces, knowledge about one informs the other, being both part of the same social network (Lammel 2008, McIntosh & McIntosh 2000, Crane et al 2011, Crate and Nutall 2009, Diemberger 2012, Mondragón 2014). I look at traditional conservation, dancing, and ceremonial artifact production and use as joint activities that materialize a particular kind of reproductive knowledge, which includes, saliently, a Masewal

interpretation on how the modern world –or at least certain its local manifestations– works as well (Alcorn 1993, Faust 1998, Damon 2004, Boege 2008, Coupaye 2009, Lemmonier 2012).

Masewal people are thus revitalizing their traditional dances as an overt strategy for making sense of and, ideally, combatting specific manifestations of climatic change, but this strategy, although goal-oriented, is not a functional endeavor (in the sense of Anthropological Functionalism). Masewal conceptions of interconnectedness with a living landscape turn on a model of the environment that is premised on an agentic and unpredictable interdependence between humans and the multifarious entities that constitute their circumambient spaces and landscape (Crate and Nutall 2009; Jacka 2009; Dove 2014).

In Tepetzintla, people are able to understand and categorize knowledge and how to change it, mainly through certain elastic narratives and protocols similar but not equal to what anthropology has labeled “myth” and “ritual”. Certainly, when Crispín or Anselmo, as diviners, have told me about the potential correlation between receding waters in the mountain springs in relation to spirits of the water being molested by detergents and pollution, or that floods are spiritual reactions to mining, they are not telling me a “myth” but are connecting preexisting narratives to current and unexpected elements in their lives, expanding them to convey both realities. Similarly,

when people gather to celebrate the house spirits during the ceremony of *kalwewetsin* or when they establish a *compadrazgo* relation, as I will detail later, they are not performing a “ritual” but following, with strict observance to detail, a protocol to relate that could be labeled also as “politics”, “diplomacy”, “spirituality”, “kinship”, or “healing”.

Masewal narratives and protocols constitute major social devices to establish relations and to recollect, reinterpret, and update knowledge. Such knowledge merges both moral and utilitarian notions; showing a way to respectfully address mountain spirits or how to plant a corn seed. The form that knowledge takes is not a mere mental abstraction but also requires practice in order to be communicated and transformed through such protocols and narratives. This circuit between producing and recollecting knowledge in order to effectively communicate and creatively modify it finds one of its best expressions in themed dances.

The second associated proposition of this research, and almost an automatic effect of the first proposition (that of animism) is that, what we could call the local philosophical stance towards such living world –openly enunciated in narratives, and ceremonial speech, and particularly, evidenced by themed dances– is not anthropocentric. In other words, Masewal people don’t act and think of themselves as the owners

or inheritors of the world, operating somewhat freely upon a collection of passive or somehow inferior beings and spaces. Initially, this affirmation is hardly new as many other Amerindian societies share similar non-anthropocentric notions (Arhem 1996, Descola 1996, Viveiros de Castro 2004, Pitarch 2010, Acosta 2011, Ford and Nigh 2014). However, let us consider its implications. If this nuanced Masewal praxis and cosmology don't consider humans as the ultimate dictators over the land then Masewal people don't automatically assume an evolutionary hierarchy in which intellect and technology makes them superior to the multitude of other beings. Hence, all change and technological achievements, which are presented as "progress" – such as colossal dams, computers, or skyscrapers– are also ancient accomplishments, known by Masewal spirits all along.

From what I gather from my innumerable conversations with young and mature Masewal people from Tepetzintla and surrounding villages and towns, they see themselves only as long-term caretakers of the surface (not the depths) of the land (*tlaltikpak*). To use their own words, *nomás rentamos*, "we only rent it". Masewal farmers speak of their *socios* or *compadritos* (Spanish) or *compalijme* (Nahuatl), their "co-parents" and "partners", the invisible subterranean beings that cultivate and co-grow maize with them.



The true “owners” (*itekomej*) and “hosts” (*chanekej* or *chanchiwanej*) of the land are actually the ancestral nonhuman beings that animate the circumambient land and that are the force behind most of its continuities and its transformations. The implications of this affirmation —that humans are just caretakers— are not only that Masewal people are aware of a certain indebtedness towards “spirits” but also that they recognize there are preexisting rules and relations that go beyond what humans might invent or desire.

Ultimately, the world does not belong to humans and is not controlled by them. This Masewal *decentered* notion of humanity is key to understanding how they perceive and negotiate their ecology, including their perception of climate change and their action upon its local effects. The perception always begins from a notion of interdependence and co-production with other life forms and spaces, chiefly animals, cornfields and forests.

If, as reflected above, the multifarious and “westernizing” effects of the Anthropocene are being felt by —and forced upon— different populations in the planet, I ask, can Masewal people be said to live in the *same* Anthropocene even when they don’t hold anthropocentric views?

#### **I.V. Dancing as an opportunity to think and to relate**

These two propositions about Masewal animistic and non-anthropocentric ways of living can probably be best expressed in certain routinely performed and conventionally themed local dances. Dances will be described in detail later, for now it suffices to say that they are local organizations that include at least a dozen dancers (and sometimes up to fifty) ordered in a clear hierarchy lead by a *Capitán* or Captain and musicalized by a violin and guitar players. Dancers are disciplined by and must follow their Captain. There are six known dance groups in Tepetzintla: *Tejoneros* (in Spanish) or "Badger Hunters", also known as *Wewentiyo* or "Dear Grandfathers" (in Nahuatl); the *Negritos* or "Little Black men" (in Spanish), or *Tipekayomej* "Mountain Bodies" (in Nahuatl) also referred to as *Kaporalmej* from *Caporales* (in Spanish) or "Foremen"; the *Españoles* or "Spaniards"; the *Apache*, also known as *Xantilmej* (from the old Spanish term *gentiles*) or "pagans"; the *Toreadores* or Bullfighters; and the *Santiagueros* or "Santiago's men". Each of these groups tells a different story with specific musicalized segments and refers to particular spirits. Even if some of these dance groups are somehow dismantled by lack of musicians, dancers, costumes and/or sponsoring *Mayordomos*, they can, potentially, become reactivated with some effort if the interest and conditions arise.

These dances involve specific music and choreographies that require months of weekly rehearsals by both dancers and musicians and can take years of practice to master. Saliently, in all these dances the dancers utilize particular garments, costumes, and masks acquired by each individual dancer. Each dance group contains a number of characters in relation to one another. The characters portrayed by dancers of any themed dance are always a spirit, that is, a nonhuman entity. Even if dances are noisy and musical events, they contain neither parliament nor an overt sequential narrative. Local people, surrounding dancers are thus transformed into an audience, and they enjoy but also interpret what the dancers do: their movements and costumes, their gestures and pace.

In general, dances deal with the spiritual world, which, in turn, is directly related to the related to the local landscape. Dances model what are the expected and desirable yearly weather conditions while also reminding the audience of other strategic alliances between people and local nonhuman dwellers. But, are dances "culture" or are they "social action"? (Spencer 1989). This old anthropological question finds its origins in the very rise of American anthropology. While Durkhemian anthropologists (French and English) saw dances as social phenomena inserted into wider contexts, emergent American anthropologists would see them as manifestations of ancestral, unquestionable truths that

impacted all aspects of life (Ibid.). None of these positions can satisfactorily explain why dances, for Masewal people in Tepetzintla, are so important and are also being revitalized. A mixture of the two is required. For dances are socializing devices that dramatically allow for the visualization of otherwise invisible connections but stand also as sources for knowledge about the world. In that sense dances are critical to a native epistemology, that is, "culture" or, in Masewal terms, *Kostumbre* or "custom". Dances are both relational devices to continually maintain and expand social networks while being part of that "truth" that comes from cultural practice. Yet this is still not a complete view, for dances are also scalable, as they can always include more people, characters and themes; powerfully meaningful as each individual dancer can express deep and relevant emotions and intimate concerns; and moral, as dancing is an embodied stance that invokes certain values to be acknowledged and "respected" by landscape spirits, ancestors and local society alike.

Dances are performative practices that bring together people and materials. They tell stories about the interspecies social world in the highlands. Dances, even if musicalized and heavily events that require the skill and organization of dozens of people are mostly silent performances. There are almost no verbal narratives to explain them, and the few available

descriptions are never encompassing or canonical stories, but are instead isolated explanations of certain characters, artifacts and relations, and can even be contradictory with one another. In other words, dances are not the enactment of verbal stories but stand as collective actions that show and create those stories in every performance and in relation to events and concerns *outside* the scope of the dance. Dancers and audience usually identify dance characters with current actors in their lives, such as mountain spirits, bureaucrats and local politicians, rich mestizo merchants, and “cholos” or urban gangsters. In that sense, rather than merely telling stories, dances seem to capture and accumulate them.

Apparently unencumbered by acting out a specific script, Masewal dancers are however expected to follow precise orders of action and to leave out all explicit descriptions of what such actions are about. The lack of verbalization and voiced accounts would seem to be counterweighted with a flooding of simultaneous activities, strictly codified behavior, specific object use and fabrication, musicalized cries and energetic movements.

Even if they are mute, the stories portrayed by these dances effectively present a vast array of specifically identified and identifiably costumed characters in relation to one another. Sometimes the characters work together and sometimes they kill each other. The particulars of such stories

are a major part of the ethnographic content of this dissertation and, as will be detailed later (see Chapter 3), they contain important premises of what we could call Masewal *culture* but, more importantly for this project, they instantiate premises that are necessary to understand a Masewal *ecology*.

To see a dance is to witness and to interpret several intermeshed and at times even contradictory stories. Moreover, entire episodes can occur between two specific characters while the rest of the members in a dance troupe are doing something else. To register such simultaneity can prove challenging. But, what then is being “told” by these dances, what messages do they carry and why are they being revitalized during a period in which globalized modernity reigns supreme?

I propose that these dances are not merely artistic performances or executed narratives but more like laboratories for Masewal people to deploy and update their concerns, and visualize the connections that exist in a hyper animated world. Dances are construed spaces for collective speculation. Such speculation is not simple belief but rather a form of educated guessing that combines repetitive and contextual elements to provide, in turn, appraised knowledge, which facilitates communication.

Masewal people in Tepetzintla have been farmers for many centuries. The cycles throughout the year are marked by the

seasons, roughly divided in a hot and dry season from March to August, and a wet and cold season, from September to February. Seasons demand from farmers' meticulous observation of weather changes and determined actions in order to maintain their milpa gardens. Dances are linked to these yearly variations and the spirits portrayed in them are precisely linked to rains, winds, pests, and land fertility. Dances are thus calendric and also associated with certain aesthetics: they produce orders. They are based on the laborious production and maintenance of costumes, rigorous choreographies accompanied by musical encompassment, predetermined formations and routes across the town, and an unequivocal hierarchy of dancers organizes them all. In that sense, dances are nothing if not a manifestation of the reliable, normative recurrences desired by mountain farmers.

Yet, like the seasons and the weather itself, dances always change. Sometimes they can change suddenly and visibly, through the appearance of *in proviso* garments (costumes, masks) and characters (bureaucrats, school teachers) related to current affairs. Other times, changes are produced inconspicuously, through the contextualized actions and reactions of dancers or the novel interpretations among the audience in relation to current specific situations.

At critical moments, such as in the aftermath of a hurricane, the same themed dances can be taken by dancers and

audiences as related to the terrible consequences that just happened or the more disastrous effects that could have occurred instead. For example, in 2013 Hurricane Dean hit the slopes of the massive Chignamasatl mountain, in which eastern slopes the town Tepetzintla is located and almost all of the cornfields were destroyed or damaged by the pouring rains (if fortunately no human lives were lost). The next year (2014), when we performed the *Wewentiyo* dance some people, like my friends Anselmo and Rosalba, saw in the dance an explanation of what just had occurred (that the mountain was somehow jealous or angry at people and had taken “its maize” back). Other people however, like Juan and Ramón, my fellow dancers that year and Ana who sells food in the town plaza, saw in the dance instead a promise of a better year, trying to “read” the relations between dancers and the effectiveness of the different contraptions that the dance includes (see Chapter 6).

This capacity for accumulation of meanings and potential contextual reinterpretation of events and relations beyond the dance make themed dances not only *good for thinking* but also *good for doing*. A couple of illustrations might serve here to clarify how dances become opportunities to think and relate about actual situations and crucially, how dancing can explain change, alter traditions, and even be transformed in the process.



## **I.VI. Dances are moralizing acts**

During the 2013 dry season, I was part of the Wewentiyo dance and we gathered at the Captain's house every Saturday. We heard that a mine in the neighboring municipality of Tetela, to the west, was bound to open soon, in spite of the protest of local people. My fellow dancers were puzzled by this action and considered it "disrespectful" not only to the local people's wishes (which is what I thought) but to the mountain itself. Over coffee and tortillas, some Wewentiyo dancers proposed that this year –2013– we all should be extra respectful with the way we danced and with the masks we used, arguing that "what is happening in Tetela is because they don't respect, those fuckers, they don't care about the owners. That cannot happen here".<sup>3</sup>

The main implication of this statement carries an ecological assessment in Masewal terms, as mining is an ultimately damaging activity in a double logic. On the one hand mining is locally regarded as a polluting practice; on the other, it is also viewed as a profoundly disrespectful act towards spirits by invading its *tipeijtik* or "belly". Spirits are powerful and dangerous entities if offended and can hence

---

<sup>3</sup> "Lo que está pasando en Tetela es porque no respetan esos cabrones, no les importan los dueños. Eso no puede pasar aquí." Field notes, 2013.

bring even more harm to people through their swift and unpredictable reactions (storms, landslides, disease). By collapsing pollution with disrespect, Masewal people acknowledge the relation between the land and people; while by potentially disrupting milpa gardens, subterranean waters, mountain animals, mining acts against the very mountain spirits as well. Even if, from a scientific perspective spirits could be assumed to be humanized local observations on hydrodynamics, what matters for Masewal people is that –unlike hydrodynamics– spirits are moral and social actors that can be approached and convinced to act in favor of human interests.

Dances offer Masewal people opportunities to think about and to relate current events –such as the aforementioned presence of a mine nearby, a planting season, an individual illness, a potential tropical storm, or political elections– to the local spirits and to their ancestral presence and will. That is, dances are, as I will describe in detail later, not mere performances but, in fact, visualizations of ongoing affairs between spirits, landscape, and people and constitute interventions in those relations as well. Every time a dance occurs, it connects particular present realities with one another, beyond the realm of the hypothetical. Dances are thus necessary as reconnecting efforts that remind both people and spirits of their interdependency.

However, such themed dances require large amounts of resources, people, and knowledge that can be sometimes difficult to muster, making some dances disappear or stay “dormant” for years. Volatile personal relations between dancers and patrons (the Mayordomos), absence by death or Christian conversion of knowledgeable musicians or lack of the minimum amount of fully garmented dancers due to emigration can all become factors impeding a themed dance from taking place.

Dances are “blessed” acts that can cure devoted dancers and their loved ones from affliction. A few years ago, in 2012 Lourdes was 16 years old and she felt inspired by her grandfather’s dedication to a dance as she was also worried for him and wanted to heal him. He was then suffering from his knees and couldn’t walk very well, much less dance. Supported by her own father, she decided to recuperate the dance of Toreadores, her grandpa’s favorite dance. She proceeded to invite some of her cousins and other girls and boys, but also asked older men, seasoned dancers, to join. Older men knew the steps and possessed the costumes and masks for the dance, older men were the musicians too, and were also the longtime friends and *compadres* of Lourdes’ grandfather. Not only was Lourdes the main organizer but she also became the official Captain of the Toreadores dance that year.

In local memory, this unprecedented act is understood to have served as an inspiration for other dances to incorporate young people and opened the prospect for women to occupy leading roles. Therefore, the intimate nostalgia and Lourdes' love for her grandfather and her desire to heal him from his knee affliction, expressed in the Toreadores' dance, ignited a major change in cross-generational participation and the possibility for women to expand their participation in dances (other women had been dancers before Lourdes) and to attain commanding roles in some dance groups (Lourdes was the first). In this case, the dance of Toreadores resurfaced initially inspired by a healing purpose and became transformed by allowing exogenous elements (namely the tendency towards the acceptance of women taking more roles and responsibilities in general and of becoming dancers in particular) to emerge.

In this connection, it is important to specify that the links between dance performances and surrounding events are not guaranteed to be upbeat and joyous. While Lourdes' story shows how dancing is understood to have healing powers, more worrisome consequences can also result from poorly performed dances. The infamous *tonalejekatl* or "hot wind", an invisible destructive force, can fall upon the cornfields of sloppy or uncaring dancers who do not abstain from sex during dancing days, who cheat on their spouses, drink too much, or who slander and

insult fellow dancers in front of the altar and the masks. In 2011, for example, Martín, a drunken dancer, brought disaster upon his cornfield and those of his neighbors far up the mountain; an unexpected hot wind dried up most of their corn plants in less than two hours. Other dancers named his reckless drinking habits and quarrelsome behavior as the reason for this.

Quarrelsome Martín was at the time a member of the Apache dance group and often would skip rehearsals or fought with his fellow dancers; his bad habits were considered offensive and contagious. "We all pay for one. They [the spirits] don't like coarseness. Now it [the hot wind] finished it. Came from the other side of the mountain. It screwed everything."<sup>4</sup> For Martín this was a public humiliation and in the following years, his behavior mellowed down dramatically even if his drinking habit didn't change as much. Again, a particular reality links the act of dancing as a potent communicative venue with weather events, which in turn result from spiritual actions.

Masewal themed dances, by using masks, costumes and choreographies, mimic and empathize with spirits in order to exercise some power over them to, ultimately, favor human fortunes. By mimicking spirits, themed dances invoke a certain set of attitudes and rules towards them, acknowledging that climatic events, weather patterns, fertility and human industry

---

<sup>4</sup> "Todos pagamos por uno. No les gusta la grosería. 'Ora ya se lo acabó. Vino del otro lado del cerro. Se chingó todo." Field notes 2011.

are all, to some degree, intertwined and determined by the actions of such spirits. Dances allow for a wider world of relational interdependence. Hence, what is currently at stake behind Masewal dancing in the highlands are not only concerns about the disappearance of traditional livelihoods or the fears of extractivist transformation of the local landscape, but also the production of a specific kind of Masewal personhood and specific kind of Masewal life.

#### **I.VII. Dances are part of a larger *kostumbre***

Masewal people have the sense that there is an unsteady balance in the world and that, somehow, in recent times, the ancient relation between landscape spirits and people has become disturbed. Such a diagnosis has to do with what is locally perceived as an epidemic of cumulative collective misbehavior, being spelled out mainly as: urban vice (alcohol, drugs, crime), selfishness, greed, and laziness. Each of these attitudes strongly resonates with the negative implications of city life and the influence of mestizo people, locally called *koyomej* "coyotes".

People from Tepetzintla regularly admonish children and unruly youngsters by reminding them about local values. A person must be, above all things, hardworking, respectful and

cooperative. All opposed actions to these core values (laziness, disrespect and selfishness) are locally characterized as *amo kilnamitl*, literally “not remembering” or “forgetfulness.” A child who acts in a selfish way by not sharing a toy or food is called forgetful. An adult who doesn’t work enough is defined as lazy or sad while a person who rejects participation in the many opportunities presented by the local ritual obligations, or who drinks too much, or boasts about his possessions is called selfish. These too are local forms of forgetfulness.

One time, when pressed to explain “forgetfulness”, Rosalba, my comadre, a bit annoyed by my usual mix of doggedness and short sight but always patient and pedagogical said, “it is like something that is lost but was there, long before. What then? We have to go look for it again!”<sup>5</sup> Certainly, knowledge about the world is regarded as mostly lost to time and transformations and one of the main objectives of all ceremonial efforts is to remember and to name again things, places and relations. In other words, ritual activities constitute efforts to reinstitute classifications. Reinstitutions tend to be, however, highly interpretative and non-orthodox, opening possibilities for different kinds of innovations.

Perhaps one of the most striking testimonies about this forgetfulness and its profound connection to the highlands came

---

<sup>5</sup>“Es como lo que pierde, pero que ya estaba, más antes. Luego? ¡Tenemos que ir a encontrarlo de nuevo!” Field notes, 2014.

from one of the female elders and respected midwife and healer or *teese*, Manuela. I visited her on several occasions as she was treating me for a back affliction I got from ill-advised basketball maneuvers. On my last visit we talked about how much the town had changed and grown in the last few years due to people sending money and then coming back from the cities, sometimes bringing their foreign (non Masewal) spouses, children and relatives. With a heavy heart Manuela told me:

*"Before, we knew everything. Now? We remember nothing. Who knows why is it so? Before yes, but now one forgets. It is because we go to the city and there we don't remember anymore, just dancing and partying. Men are all drunk. Then, they come back, but they don't understand anymore, they don't work as before, they don't remember."*<sup>6</sup>

In Manuela's opinion as in that of many other people I talked to, to move away to the city looking for work is equaled to a kind of deeper and dangerous transformation in the person. Such transformation is evidenced in many ways. When moving away people change their habits and diet, they dress and even speak differently, they acquire other knowledge and sometimes reject

---

<sup>6</sup> Antes, todo sabía [mos], ¿ora'? Nada se acuerda. ¿Quién sabe porqué? Antes sí pero ya se olvida uno. Es que vamos a la ciudad y allá no se acuerda, puro baile y fiesta, andan [los hombres] de borrachos. Luego viene de regreso, pero ya no sabe, ya no trabaja igual, no se acuerda". Field notes, 2015.



previous indoctrinated ideas; crucially they tend to stop using and teaching their children the Nahuatl language. But what is forgotten and what needs to be remembered? These tropes – forgetfulness and remembrance– are associated with specific contexts. First, they are linked to the tacit recognition of interdependent affairs with invisible spirits and “owners” (sometimes also called “saints” and “angels”). Secondly, they refer to the ritual obligations linked to the Catholic faith, as well as to local participation in collective political decisions and finally, they are mentioned with respect to the different activities and relations around traditional farming. All of these ideas and practices are usually framed as *kostumbre* or “custom”. Remembrance nowadays is, in short, a concept that erupts from both lay people and specialists in relation to all protocols and narratives (ritual and myth) about strategic knowledge of the land, its subtle features and spiritual inhabitants. Forgetfulness today, in the context of what is considered un-thoughtful modernization and urbanization, is a matter of the abandonment of farming and of local engagement with traditional customs.

However, “tradition” and “custom” are at best blurry concepts. In Tepetzintla, the term *kostumbre* refers specifically to the series of practices and discourses around the ongoing negotiations with local landscape spirits, and with whatever is

related to the continuation of the local mountainous life style. *Kostumbre* is an encompassing category that includes traditional farming, *compadrazgo* relations, and *mayordomías* as well as dances as will be detailed in the following chapters.

#### **I.VIII. Categories... supposedly**

I've claimed that the driving objective of this research is to understand and show how current Masewal ideas about their territory, and concerns about climatic changes and industrial transformations (mines, dams, power plants), are expressed and reinterpreted through the practice of dances. Dancing, under this ethnographic approach, becomes more than just the performance of an aesthetic endeavor. It is a way to speak of interdependent and multi-species relations, to pedagogically show their relevance to current circumstances, and even as a way to attempt to intervene in favor of continued life.

Following one of Bateson's arguments, in this research rather than an attempt to *generate a set of categories*, I am offering a *schematic formulation* of the main actions, concerns and narratives that join and at times collide in the highlands, (Bateson 1972: 73). Masewal people know how to grow corn, measure the year's seasons, and prevent plagues as well as how to create adequate offerings, place the blame on specific

spirits for damage to *milpa* gardens and people, and what to expect from dreams and travels to the city.

To attempt to crystalize such emotionally loaded and fluid reflections and engagements would probably provide a false image of fixity, which would depart –more than it is already– from the lived experience, of the people who are producing it. However, by keeping to schematic formulations about Masewal engagements, I aim to follow more closely the native open ways of speculation.

After telling a story, Masewal people sometimes add the phrase *sa ijki* “it was said” or “supposedly”. In this sense, every Masewal storyteller puts into doubt the very stories that she tells and that she has heard from others. The conveyor of knowledge is rarely challenged, for when she is, she will forfeit it; it will become something that someone else said once and that she just heard and is now repeating. Narratives are thus almost never dogmatic, but rather are continuously changing and expanding, accommodating newer elements and fixing them as old, coming from far away, resonating knowledge. “We saw what happened, the maize didn’t grow because we are not behaving right. It is just like it happened before, when the priest

killed those people and was trapped in the mountain, it is said".<sup>7</sup>

Such Masewal way of producing and presenting knowledge inspires a similar anthropological engagement from my part. Bateson noticed how anthropological categories are abstractions that are conveniently placed to describe other local abstractions present in a given culture (1972). However, unlike marching Marxists, Bateson does not give in to the primacy of economic pulsation. The problem of portrayal is his main concern and he asks what makes a category valid in a certain ethnographic context. For him it is the moment of 'cultural contact' (aka the description of it) that creates them in the process (ibid). Consequently, what is 'religious' in a ritual can be correlated to art and economy as much as it can be linked to kinship or politics, technology, conviviality and, ultimately, to whatever the anthropologist is able to describe at that 'cultural contact' moment.

Description categorizes, whereas categories describe. The same event can generate different interpretations, even oppositions between them. Bateson thus refuses to settle on the poetics and politics of writing as an act (Clifford 1988), but rather wagers for keeping with the desire to depict, to contact

---

<sup>7</sup>"Así vimos que pasó. El maíz ya no se dió porque nos 'tabamos portando mal. Así igual pasó antes, cuando el cura fue acabar con aquella gente y quedó adentro del cerro, dicen." Field Notes, 2014

others, to be shocked by them and to engulf them. For Bateson 'culture contact' would then simply be 'culture' or schismogenesis, the process of the creation of difference from unity and the revolving door of union and division from it (Bateson 1972: 75). Following Bateson, in Wagner's well-known terms, anthropologists invent "a culture for people who cannot invent it for themselves" (Wagner 1981:19).

Masewal dances are culture in those terms. They are descriptions and categories that evidence a normative system of relations (between dance characters, music and costumes) that carry possible outcomes. When a dance group moves in a certain way following a specific musical piece, or when a group of dancers identified as "elders" or "black men" performs a concerted action towards another group, they are all not only classifying groups of spirits or relations but describing them in potent visual ways. Importantly, all dances are about classifying, describing and reproducing culture contact (and shock) about *others*. In other words, dances stand as the Masewal invention of culture.

Culture contact and cultural shock are about culture and its invention and, therefore, carry still a relativistic approach. Culture on the one hand, is whatever people do and it is therefore human. Culture is an anthropocentric concept, so we are left to wonder how can we analyze not-all-too-human

participants at all scales (corporations, bureaucracies, spirits, environments, and mountains).

Actor-Network Theories (ANT) have proven helpful for the development of my research when thinking about complex imbrications in a global world as they decentralize essentialisms (aka cultures, nations, religions, languages or economies) to follow actions and relations between “nodes” (Latour 1992).

Propositions launched by different authors labeled by themselves or by others as part of the so-called ontological turn (Risjord and Palaceck 2014), have brought to the table old anthropological conceptualizations (such as animism and cannibalism) elaborating on how such concepts work on non-Western societies, particularly in the Amerindian context. They have effectively renewed our understanding of the possibility of different modes of existence (Latour 2014), schemes of practice (Descola 2013), and radical alterities (Eduardo Viveiros de Castro 2015). From my exposure to part of the vast array of political ecology literature, I understand how questions of oppression, histories of inequality and capitalistic endeavors are nowadays at least, embedded in all human and nonhuman affairs. The Anthropocene, seen as the still blurry-era of preeminence of human enterprise on the planet, would instead

speak of a very specific kind of humanity, a capitalistic one (Moore 2015).

However, even if I concur and think through these diverse materials, when I try to engage with what I saw and experienced in the field, these abstractions fall short. They speak either of fantastic systematizations or become anxious reportages of “reality.” Some of these undertakings seem to me even gothic theoretical pursuits, creating architectural darkness on the ground only to emphasize the light from above.

Masewal people have poignantly showed me how they are living in a dangerous world, a world where spirits prey on human souls, where sorcerers become winds and infect the crops and the human body, where the dead desire to keep the living with them and where mountains are devoured and ripped from their hearts by mining corporations. How can I adhere to standard ideas of social and natural systems of classification, in disregard of these local notions?

The Masewal model for what we call culture is a combination of conventions and innovations, patterns and adaptations, conservation and networks. The Masewal world expands based on collective and laborious ritualized negotiation, grounded on three main ideas: remembrance, gratitude and respect.

## **I.IX. Sections and Chapters**

Eight chapters and one appendix that also form three major sections compose this research: the question, the hinge, and the answer. The first three chapters, including this introduction, frame “the question” providing language, history, and geographic and economic contexts. Through this emplacement of temporal and special coordinates and experiences I aim to provide a sense of depth and complexity of the place and people I work with. Also included is a description of Tepetzintla’s barrios and a short positioning of the slow process in which I became an ethnographer, a dancer and eventually an adopted member of a Masewal household. This first section also includes brief but crucial descriptions of some of the most important Masewal institutions as protocols for creating relations: *compadrazgo*, *mayordomías* and shamanism or divination.

The second section is “the hinge” between the other two and is formed by two chapters. The first explores the ideas and practices of Masewal people about their houses and the numerous spirits that inhabit them. I connect households with the previous section on *mayordomías* and describe the ceremony of *kalwewetsin*. I also leave some hints on how houses are associated to mountains through the same principle of human-spiritual cohabitation. The second chapter of this second mid section emphasizes Masewal notions about bodies, souls and the



encompassing notion of work (and laziness). In it, I pour my interpretative descriptions of the epistemic and philosophical principles that govern how Masewal people categorize and relate with one another and with the world. The dynamic of work as an animating force, the pairing of plants animals and people, the challenging notion of an unfolding and intrinsically interwoven cosmos.

The third and final section is "the answer", made by the last three chapters. These is the most heavily ethnographic section as these chapters deal with the description of mountain visitations and offerings; with the different forms of Masewal dance in general; as well as with the current local experiences with mining and disastrous weather. In these chapters I attempt to show how local spiritual notions help Masewal people understand and propose explanations for unprecedented events and massive transformations due to disastrous weather and the growing menacing presence of mining corporations in the region as interlinked to a moral crisis.

Finally I offer an appendix with 26 Masewal narratives translated both from Nahuatl and Spanish into English, in which different interlocutors have shared their received ideas and their own reflections on the dangerous mountain spirits but also on the perilous actions of humans that provoke their anger.

## **II. PEOPLE, LANGUAGE, PLACES, REGIONS, AND**

### **TEPETZINTLA**

#### **II.I. Coordinates of a field site**

This chapter presents some basic notes on the circumambient spaces, history and practices of Masewal people of Tepetzintla, the protagonists of this research. It is a collection of contextual information that clarifies however some important background and provides a sense of “ethnographic reality”, historical depth, and geographical complexity to my research. This is where I also place myself as a researcher and as a person in the field. It is subdivided in four sections.

The first section is a brief contextualization of my own presence as a researcher and as a member of a household in Tepetzintla, my main interlocutors and the ways in which I engaged in participant observation. The second section, deals with coordinates in terms of language, brief historical accounts, and environmental and demographic data on the northern highlands of Puebla as a region and of the town of Tepetzintla, the main locus of my research. This has the purpose of offering a wider, deeper context even if it escapes beyond the main scope

of this research, providing a grounded vision of a real place and peoples. A third section is dedicated to describe the town of Tepetzintla as a space of relations, its main social practices, physical disposition, and productive and calendric activities. The fourth section goes into the specifics of three important institutions that impact directly dances as organizations, performances and environmental models: Mayordomías, compadrazgo/padrinazgo relations, and divination/healing practices. These analytic spheres invoke the attention, resources and creativeness between households and are the most salient forms in which Masewal people from Tepetzintla relate to one another and to the nonhuman inhabitants of the highlands.

### **II.II. Anselmo, Rosalba, and *xochipilli***

I started visiting this particular town in August of 2006, as I started my masters in anthropology, at the Institute of Anthropological Research, in the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). During the following years and until my graduation from this program, in 2010, I regularly visited Tepetzintla spending between one to three weeks on each visit, amounting to around 32 weeks of fieldwork between 2008 and 2010. After that, as soon as I started the PhD program at UVA my

presence and involvement in Tepetzintla became more intense, culminating with a year of ethnographic work (July of 2014 until July of 2015) after two summers (2012, 2013). Today, after more than a decade of ethnographic presence, the total amount I've spent in and around Tepetzintla and the highlands is difficult estimate, but between 24 to 26 months would be a safe approximate.

During most of my doctoral fieldwork I stayed in the household of Anselmo and Rosalba Reyes, a couple in their early sixties who, in time, became not just my hosts, but my friends and now, my *compadres*. Anselmo is a locally renowned if very modest diviner, in his time, before his leg problems, he was also a great dancer. Anselmo is a *wewe*, a respected elder, for he has been a *mayordomo* on several occasions. He likes to sing religious songs and plays the keyboard. Everyone in the house knows Anselmo is in a good mood when they listen to him singing as he cleans his corn by the kitchen. Rosalba is a *teese*, a healer and a midwife; I have seen her cure babies from stomachache and other afflictions using her soothing voice, speaking softly to them as she dances, and with her knowledge on herbs. Rosalba is also great cook, and she maintained for many years a small restaurant, the only one in town, where she would prepare meat stews, rice, beans, tortillas every day for the random visitors and government people who passed by Tepetzintla.

Anselmo and Rosalba have acquired many *compadres* and godchildren over the years, as they have both enthusiastically participated in the most important and demanding *mayordomias*. They have *compadres* in many towns and villages over the highlands, Masewal, Tutunaku and Mestizo alike.

Around Anselmo and Rosalba's household live several of their daughters with their respective husbands and children and now, a couple of their own grand children. They together form the household and there are almost always some children playing at the patio with the dogs. Anselmo and Rosalba help to sustain themselves with a small grocery store in which they sell beer, sodas, snacks, cigarettes and domestic products. The daily shuttles pass through Tepetzintla and go to Zacatlán and Ahuacatlán regularly stop at Anselmo's grocery shop. The grocery store is a place for gossip and for receiving news from customers, travelers, and deliverymen who come from far away towns. The daily environment at Anselmo and Rosalba's tends to be unexpected, with visitors dropping by, patients looking for either the diviner or the midwife, or just paying a visit to the old grandparents.

Anselmo and Rosalba's house is located in one the most strategic corners in town as all car traffic coming from the Inter-Serrana highway, after the several kilometers of dirt road enters through that street. However, the massive Chignamasatl

Mountain looms over it, as it looms over the rest of the town: an ever-present green and cloudy wall of trees with yellowy and brown patches where milpa gardens grow. As I drink my coffee on Anselmo and Rosalba's open kitchen, and on a clear day, I can see its rugged top as people, those tiny dots of color, like ants, climb up and down its massive body visiting their gardens.

Perhaps, Anselmo and Rosalba's openness towards foreigners, their experiences dealing with outsiders, paired to their profound sense of duty and spirituality and their 'big family' posture were key elements for, first of all, letting me stay at their house, charging a very small amount at first, and then, nothing at all.

Anselmo and Rosalba's only son left to the USA almost twenty years ago. He crossed the border illegally and worked in different fields in eastern Texas, Alabama, South Carolina and Georgia, before settling in North Carolina. Anselmo and Rosalba built and furnished a biggish room for him and his family in case he could come back to visit them. He did once and brought his children. However the expenses and risks of travelling are far too great and he has become a voice over the phone, a voice that speaks in Masewal still.

Anselmo and Rosalba eventually used the room as a supporting source of income, renting it to teachers and engineers who spent some time in town. I was only the latest

renter of that room but as I just kept visiting Tepetzintla I slowly became more a welcomed guest than and a foreign occupant.

To make a very long story short, I was eventually treated as a household member, with obligations and tasks. I also got a nickname, *xochipili*, which literally means “flower child” and is used to refer to the “favorite son”, usually the youngest, in a nuclear family. The nickname emerged really as a joke after I was always enthusiastically would eat all the different dishes, *salsas* and *tamales* Rosalba would cook without complaints. With no exceptions I heartedly ate all of Rosalba’s experiments, all the herbs, meats, and stews as well as the spiciest chili peppers she would put on the table. Moreover, I was also an assistant eager to help in the kitchen, a most unusual thing for a man, and a mestizo at that. If I was the object of some bullying (especially by Lucho and Jorge, Anselmo and Rosaba’s sons-in-law) very quickly it was clear that I just liked to hang out in the kitchen and that was okay for everyone. Eventually, Lucho and Jorge became my friends and fellow dancers. My exploits as a voracious being and an enthusiastic if clumsy kitchen assistant were always rewarded with more food and, with my favorite: *wawatsal iwan chiltepin*, partially burnt, over toasted tortillas with fiery local chili pepper, a true delicacy and a sign of strength.

It would be a lie to present myself as a family member of the Reyes household, but it is not untrue to state that via *compadrazgo* and many years of company and affection we have created a relation that is more similar to an household adoption than to a research-informant association or even a one on one friendship.

On my side I have tried to become as useful to Anselmo and Rosalba as possible if in very limited ways. When they have had to visit Mexico City due to healthcare problems (they are both diabetic), I assumed my role was to facilitate medical appointments, rides to the bus station, company and economic (if quite limited) support. On each of my visits I made sure to bring with me gifts, useful things, non-prescription medicine, or toys. By request, I became an unpaid English teacher at the local junior high school for a term (2014-2). While in Tepetzintla and during the few times I had a car with me, I operated as a driver for the household and friends. I took people to the doctor, to the diviner, to the market towns of Ahuacatlán and Zacatlán, I carried wood and tools for my friend Jaime, and took Angelica (Anselmo and Rosalba's daughter) to the bank in Zacatlán.

However, I believe my main duty is to speak about them (not "for them"), and in that way to become a source to help them remember. In other words, I see my work as a potential



repository (artificial, alien, and incomplete) for some small part of their experiences, challenges, and knowledge. Nowadays, for example, I am also engaged with collaborative projects having to do with preservation of documents and with the publication of their local stories. I have organized presentations of my work at the local school and town hall.

Equally important for my research and experience in Tepetzintla was Isabel and Ángeles, Anselmo and Rosalba's youngest daughters, as well as the rest of their vast network of relatives of all ages. My relation with Anselmo and Rosalba's family at this point has exceeded by far the requirements of my own research questions and we have engaged in a circuit of favors, support and care that will continue for our foreseeable future.

My friendship with Anselmo started as a challenge. I knew of him by some other local people before we even met. As I asked questions about spirits, landscape and other similarly abstract and dangerous subjects, a few of my interlocutors and my previous host (Rafael), recommended me to look for Anselmo. When I finally did, Anselmo, polite as always accepted my request for a casual conversation with the condition that if I took notes he would to. And he did. The first couple of times we spoke, Anselmo asked more questions about me than I about anything else. It was an exchange through which he wanted to know what

was I really interested about. Years after these first conversations it was also Anselmo, along with Miguel and Pedro, who invited me to dance for the *Wewentiyo* for the first time, in 2010. This experience as a dancer proved to be a “total” one. By participating in long hours of rehearsal, dance, and celebration, I was granted not only an unprecedented access to spaces, processes, conversations and collective reflections, but also a different was crucial to my research and it is, without a doubt, one of the main reasons I ended up studying abroad, and ended up choosing, and being chosen by UVA anthropology department.

Besides the extended Reyes family I established relations with many other Masewal people. This has become over the years a surprisingly vast network of interlocutors in many towns. Some have become my fellow dancers, others my basketball teammates, travel companions, teachers and friends, partially and imperfectly invoked here. Their voices, experiences and teachings are the threads weaving this research.

### **II.III. Masewal and Mexican people**

Contemporary Nahuatl speaking groups inhabit different regions in the central part of Mexico. They are one of the 62 politically recognized Indigenous Peoples or *Pueblos Indígenas*,

(INEGI: 2010). These are in turn segmented into 11 linguistic families with 68 linguistic groupings, subdivided into 364 linguistic variants (INALI: 2009). The total of speakers of an Indigenous language in Mexico is 14,850,000 people, roughly 12% of the country's total population.

There are innumerable Nahuatl speaking communities in at least six states (Estado de México, Guerrero, Morelos, Puebla, Veracruz). The Uto-Aztec linguistic family expands to the north connecting Huichol, Rarámuri, Cora, Mexicaneros languages and, to the south it meets with Zapotec and Maya territories of Tabasco, Veracruz and Oaxaca (INALI, 2009).

There is still no absolute certainty on exactly when and from where the ancestors of the people scholarly known as "Nahua", "Nahuatl", "Nahuatl" or "Masewal" migrated from the North to the Mexico Basin. The suggested homeland for the Proto-Uto-Aztec family is placed between the Gila River and the northern mountains of northwest Mexico (Campbell 2004: 402-403), today home of the Tohono O'odham Nation, once called Papago/Pima people. This hypothesis, based on 9 certain linguistic reconstructions, suggests that the origins of the language family developed in a landscape with a mixed woodland/grassland setting in proximity to mountain forests, fitting the region of southeastern California, Arizona and northwestern Mexico (Ibid.).

Nahuatl language has been distinguished as having two main lineages, the “Pochuteco” (a dead language that was used in Oaxaca) and the “nuclear Nahuatl”, in turn divided into Pipil (a variant spoken in Central America) and the rest of the “dialectal variations” (Kauffman in Conabio, 2008). Kauffman distinguishes, coming from the “nuclear Nahua”, the “center-west” and the “north-east” variants. The former is spoken in Morelos, Guerrero and Michoacán states and along the craggy Sierra Madre Occidental (Western Mountain Range) that follows the Pacific coast. The latter, which is the one spoken in the Northern Highlands of Puebla (NHP), was profoundly influenced by the contact, of nearly 800 years, with the Totonac languages (Ibid.). Tepetzintla’s Nahuatl belongs to this last dialectal variant.

Today Masewal people know that they are Mexicans and they belong to the Mexican nation, even if they rarely have any positive or fruitful relation with it. They are aware that the language of their ancestors is different, and they call it *Mexicano*, suggesting that they are indeed the “original Mexicans”. It is also common knowledge in the highlands that Nahuatl and Tutunaku are the main native languages besides Spanish and that *Nahua* and *Totonaco* are the dominant ethnonyms used by foreigners. However, when asked in confidence people in Tepetzintla call themselves Masewal, never Nahua.

Thinking through such linguistic variations in history has been helpful to envision what kind of relations have existed in the highlands of Puebla as a multi-linguistic region with dramatic changes in its ecosystems and intense communications between different altitudes and peoples. The sometimes “easy” associations between culture and language as equivalent and uniform units becomes challenged by a population that has used different languages and responds to distinct identities, have developed and adapted to numerous territorial organizations and religions, and possesses a vast network of marriages and migration patterns. Unencumbered by “cultural identity” fetish, in the words of my friend Anselmo, Masewal just means, “people who work the land”.

#### **II.IV. The rugged highlands of northern Puebla and its peoples**

The Sierra Madre Oriental is a 1,350 km long mountain range that is part of a major mountain system that connects Mexico with the eastern United States (Appalachia) and Antarctica. The sierra elevates south of the Bravo river (Rio Grande), in the northeast, connecting the states of Coahuila, Tamaulipas, San Luis Potosí, Querétaro, Puebla, Tlaxcala, Veracruz and Hidalgo and runs to the southwest, along the Gulf of Mexico, ending in the Neo-Volcanic axis, which in turn divides North America from

Central America (Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia 2012). The sierra is marked by a multiplicity of micro ecosystems and an abundance of biodiversity, from drier bush and forest in the north to pine forests and subtropical vegetation in its wetter south.

The sierra is a historical multi linguistic region in which different groups share a series of practices, ideas and lifestyles that are fruit of their long-term relations with the mountainous territory (Galinier 1987). The northern highlands of Puebla are a fragment of the SMO that stands in between the hills and lowlands of Veracruz towards the Gulf in the east and the higher, colder valleys of Tlaxcala to the west. Its altitude ranges from 400 to 2,200 masl (meters above sea level).

Its rugged morphology makes high concentrations of population and resources (land, water and people) unattainable, favoring instead the exchange between smaller settlements and productive areas in different altitudes. Settlements are interconnected by dirt roads and smaller walking trails across the mountains. Goods and people, laboring, marketing and partying, travel from high to low mountains and back, bringing products, money and news but also stories and knowledge. The people living in the in the 1350 km, Sierra Madre Oriental are thus not living in a landscape interrupted by mountains but in a decentralized network of animals, plants, people, and ideas.

The different inhabitants of the highlands also share historical experiences and have endured a series of political configurations, from the warring states of Teotihuacan and Tajín to the dominance of the Nahuatl people from Tenochtitlan in the high plateau, the Mexico. With the Spanish Conquest and the debacle of the political Pre-Columbian world came the viruses that killed the vast majority of the indigenous population during the 16th and 17th centuries with terrible more focalized events in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Such mortality forced the diaspora and abandonment of entire regions. The highlands became one of the “refuge regions” (Aguirre Beltrán 1986) to which numerous indigenous people, speaking different languages escaped the plague, war and exploitation of the first part of the Colonial period (Borah 1979). Dominican and Franciscan monks carried out forced Catholic conversion and evangelization in the highlands (García 1987).

The foundation of parishes, missions and towns reconfigured the settlement distribution and concentrated population in specific patterns and places (Ibid). The 19<sup>th</sup> century was probably the period in which people in the highlands became involved in national scale events. In each of the wars during those years—the war of Independence (1810–1821, the invasion wars (1837–1847), the Reform wars (1854–1856), and the Second Empire rise and fall (1860–1864)—there were liberal leaders,

nationalist troops, terrible bandits and, in general, a political awakening to a world of affairs beyond the mountains (Ibid).

## **II.V. Understanding a long history of interconnected mountains**

Mountains are the orographic bodies that mark the highlands and upon which all life is organized, including Masewal fields and villages. To understand the origin of this particular territory is important in order to also see how it is part of other, larger geological and meteorological systems, and how their long past can unravel some of the challenges that Masewal people face nowadays. The land that is called Mexico is subject to the continuous play of five tectonic plates: North American, Caribbean, Rivera, Pacific and Cocos. The constant pressure between these plates makes them fold into each other, slowly creating the mountain ranges that run along the Pacific and Gulf of Mexico coastlines and causing volcanic activity. These two major mountain ranges or sierras, and the plateaus and depressions at the center and south of the country are thus related through an ancestral, pre-human, underground and powerful activity. This fantastic pressure makes more than half of Mexico's total territory lay above 1000 MASL (around 3,280



feet) in what is called the Central High Plateau (Conabio-GEP-BUAP, 2008).

Due to the continuous change in altitude, which determines temperature, as well as in the humidity brought in by winds coming from both coastlines and blocked by mountains, Mexico has a varied mosaic of climates having many of the existing climates in the world represented within its borders (Conabio, 2008). Its territory lies on the frontier of the two ecozones into which America has been divided: 1) the Neartic, occupying Canada, Greenland, Alaska, most of the United States and the High Plateau of Mexico to the North and, 2) the Neotropical ecozone, from Patagonia northwards including Central America, the Caribbean islands, the arms around the High Plateau in Mexico and the southern territories of southwest and south Florida in the U.S. (Semarnat, 2008). This setting has precipitated a great diversification of life, for which this region is known as the Mexican Transition Zone (Ibid).

Central Mexico is located on an elevated plateau, precisely where the Neartic and Neotropical ecozones come together. The main five mountain ranges<sup>8</sup> at its center take the form of a U-shape (see Map 1), called the Mesoamerican Mountainous Region (Conabio 2008). The forests and vegetation in these central mountain masses are rich in biota and endemic species. Mountains

---

<sup>8</sup> These mountain ranges are: Sierra Madre Occidental, Sierra madre Oriental, Eje Neovolcánico, Sierra Madre del Sur and the Sierras de Chiapas. (Conabio, 2008)

operate as passes allowing for microclimates supporting not only life but also cultural exchange and diversity. Animals, plants and people travel through these interconnected mountain systems, influencing the development of North American common species, but possibly also of peoples (Flannery, 2001). Today, these mountain ranges are home of most of the indigenous peoples in the country today (INEGI 2010). Aguirre Betltrán, a Mexican anthropologist and later director of the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI) or “National Indigenist Ministry”, proposed that such massive mountain ranges were in fact historic “regions of refuge” for indigenous peoples escaping the Spanish oppression, which explained their thickly cultural and linguistic composition (1987). Public policy, regarding the assimilation of indigenous population, operated on this principle. Even if this view, based on conventional historic evidence testifies to the territorial displacement of indigenous societies, we could alternatively argue also that these same mountain ranges operated not only as “walls” but also, at times, as “hidden highways”, favoring the communication between people, the passing of plants and animals, and facilitating all manners of movement and exchange (Flannery 2001).

If the fertile coastal lowlands and the central high plateau constitute two major biomes, the intermediate mountains, located as a borderline between these, compose a series of

multiple micro-ecotones. Continuous processes of isolation and annexation have been occurring in the mountain's cloud forests, have created an *archipelago effect*, favoring the formation of habitat islands where many endemic species can be found still today (Conabio-GEP-BUAP, 2008).

Most of the mountains in the highlands of Puebla result from tectonic folding dividing east and west. The relatively high temperatures of around 29°C, give adequate conditions to hold thick forests. However, the vegetation in the humid slopes (towards the sea to the east) is radically different from that of the dry slopes (towards the inner west). On the eastern slopes, oak forests stretch out below the mountaintops, dominated by coniferous vegetation, which are more resistant to lower temperatures. The northern mountains, with more acidic soils due to volcanic activity from the geologic past, are mainly covered with pine trees, resulting in one of the main concentrations of oaks and pine trees worldwide (Conabio 2008, Conabio-GEP-BUAP, 2008).

#### **II.IV.I. Anthropogenic mountain gardens**

Along the craggy countryside of the highlands where Nahuatl speaking people have lived for over a thousand years the disappeared jaguar was once a common resident both feared and

revered by all. Thick tall forests captured humidity and blocked sunlight while giant ferns and small palms covered the forest floor. Today, even if small pockets of this ancient forest are conserved, most of the landscape has drastically changed. The forests along with the fauna have been, for many years, used, transformed and even made extinct by growing human settlements, either by the expansion of plots, the specialization of land use (sugar cane in the lowlands, coffee in the highlands), or by the subsequent population increases, especially in the last century (García 1987). In spite of these transformations, the main rivers and some high conifer and temperate forests have been strategically preserved and have been integral to the highland life styles and ecosystem (Boege 2008).

The highlands, in their inherent territorial intricacy, and their arguably small human population seem to have historically challenged Eurocentric ideas of agro-industrial progress, in which food production increasingly relies on over exploitation of land and labor, and in which pastures and plow lands inexorably expand at the expense of horticulture (non-plow agriculture). This “ecological imperialism” (Ford and Nigh 2015) has not taken hold in the highlands region mainly due the ruggedness of the terrain but also due to a local notion of wealth that favors continued reproduction or sustenance over accumulation of goods and grains for economic profit.

Native populations have learned not only to endure and adapt to this complex mountain environment but also to transform it and make it work through the milpa garden system (Alcorn, 1987). The native production organization operates as an agroecosystem where diverse species are manipulated in a long-term scope (Boege, 2008). The space for vegetal domestication is subdivided into three different plots: 1) surrounding forests, where wood, honey and medicinal herbs are strategically grown and conserved; 2) the milpa, as an annual active space for polycrop production of food; and 3) house gardens, where new species are brought and observed, also several short-term herbs are planted for medicinal use (Ibid.).

Although it is based on individual—and even genealogical—experimentation, the milpa system is a multi-level organization that allows also for exchange not only between neighbors but also throughout the highlands via a network of different regional markets. The result is a wide range of varieties of corn adapted to the challenges presented by diverse geographical conditions that change in altitude, humidity, sunlight, etc. Together, humans and corn as well as controlled forests have engaged in what could be called in biological terms a “coevolution” relation that in economic terms is known as a “traditional production system” (Ibid.).

## II.IV.II. A local ecology

The mountainous landscape contains varied ecosystems, with passageways between lowlands and highlands, and which, crucially, is impacted by annual and long-cycle storms and hurricanes coming from the Gulf of Mexico to the east and from the Isthmus of Oaxaca to the southwest. Such multi-faceted land calls for decentralized networks and interspecies negotiations as a necessity for survival.

Masewal people have inhabited this land and have developed three parallel conceptualizations: a) the world is a mesh of powerful and potentially alive beings or spirits, b) such beings are dangerous and need to be constantly appeased, and c) human abuse of resources from such a living, powerful, and dangerous world is also immoral.

First, almost everything that exists in the highlands (from rocks to clouds, animals and people), according to Masewal lore, is potentially alive and has a representative a *viyarol* or *abogado* (Sp.) or “lawyer”, that is, an invisible and powerful entity that can be addressed and negotiated with. These entities are not gods, but mighty non-human inhabitants that occupy precise places in the landscape, have specific names, duties and agendas and must be approached by people for their goodwill in exchange for tangible offerings and ‘respect’. For example, the

Chignamasatl mountain is inhabited on its top by the *tipewewe* or “mountain’s elder” which happens to be its *iteko* or “owner.” However, the elongated mountain range has different places, high and low, in which other *tipewewe* dwell having areas of influence on plots, rains, and forests. According to Aristeo, a local diviner, the mountain is itself like a town in which different invisible spirits live, to confuse their identities and locations or to forget to name them properly can cause more harm than good to an unprepared farmer. The particularities of naming and locating spirits form the backbone of the diviner’s esoteric knowledge. In short, rather than living in a world of material and objective relations, Masewal engage in social and subjective interactions with a powerful, circumambient world.

Diverse forces in the world are not only potentially alive and powerful, but are also sentient and dangerous. The second way in which Masewal people conceive the landscape has to do with the unknowable and uncontrollable force of gods, saints, animal and ancestral spirits, which they need to constantly and preventively appease. If there are a series of more quotidian relations with localized spirits water springs or gardens, there is also a hierarchy in which these forces may act with major intensity upon Masewal farmers. Chiefly mountain and sky saints need to be appeased and “remembered”.

The third conceptualization of the landscape is more pragmatic. Masewal conceive of their land as a vast source of resources that they can manipulate to satisfy their needs. Farming the land is a comprehensive endeavor that takes into consideration the access and relations between water sources, soils, secondary vegetation, animals and pests, people and spirits. Mindless exploitation is technically difficult but also unsafe as it can make spirits angry or even scare them away, and with it also lose crops. The resources provided by the landscape exceed however the water, plants, game and soil as mountains also provide for human health, justice and fertility. Resources taken from the land must be returned eventually, and greediness is seen as a pernicious and unsustainable attitude. Accumulation, in itself a hard task anyway, is locally regarded as dangerous and immoral.

Similar to what Taussig observed in Bolivia among tin miners, commodification (monetization) of the land implies a tacit pact with the devil, the owner of the mountain's depths, bringing ultimately ill "unnatural" effects to people (Taussig 2010[1980]) and accounting for the sudden death that befalls miners due to unexpected accidents in the mine. For Taussig, the transformation from an agricultural, precapitalist economy to a capitalist and extractive one carries a moral doom, a



"holocaust" in which a cosmology needs to be reorganized (Ibid. 101).

To amass wealth in Tepetzintla is intrinsically a treacherous act as it attracts envy and witchcraft from others. Ambition and greed are well regarded only if accompanied by overt collective and laborious ritual participation in *mayordomías* and *compadrazgo* relations. For example, Luis, an astute and stingy merchant, regarded as a selfish, arrogant and uncooperative person in town rapidly attracted ill fortune to himself and his close ones. Luis' wife Marta became very sick and one of their sons mysteriously died while away in the city. Inversely, several local elders or *wewe*, like Pedro, can boast to be mostly safe from spiritual wrath and sorcery. Pedro is locally regarded as a rich person (he has a business and several plots of land that he rents to younger men), but he also has numerous godchildren, *compadres* and many friends, as well as a long record of lavishly sponsoring *mayordomías*. He has spent his life "working for the townspeople" and is that service and networks what ultimately protects him from most of such dangers. *Trabajar por el pueblo* or "working for the townspeople" is a way to show wealth but also to keep harm from witchcraft at bay.

Unlike what Taussig interprets for Bolivian tin miners, I argue that what Masewal people see in mountain spirits are ancestral authorities that can become potential allies and

protectors and who can produce wealth, as they possess a primordial technology from which all technology and wealth originated. Capitalism is thus not lived as a dooming innovation but as a local and ancestral invention.

#### **II.IV.III. Demographics and local economy**

The town of Santa María Tepetzintla (called by locals Tepetzintla or "Tepe") is located in the northeast portion of the state of Puebla, where the mountain range slopes go downwards onto the limits with the state of Veracruz, with cultural and natural boundaries that are hardly evident between these states. Hidden by mountains, valleys and plateaus, the town of Tepetzintla is located at 1,680 masl.

The municipality of Tepetzintla is located in the warm humid climatic eco-region of the Sierra Madre Oriental (SMO). The local climate is described as humid semi-warm with rainfall throughout the year (Conabio-GEP-BUAP, 2011). In spite of the seemingly rich natural resources that distinguish the state of Puebla and the municipality of Tepetzintla, its inhabitants live with minimum wages and are ranked among the highest levels in marginalization according to Mexico's national standards (INEGI 2011). Since the mid-90s, the urbanization process of Puebla has

been growing consistently and today just over 50% of the population live on and off in nearby urban areas.

A *municipio* in Mexico is a territory that can radically vary in size but is usually composed of several cities, towns and villages. Dozens or even hundreds of *municipios* compose a state. Some urban *municipios*, for example, can be completely covered by urban sprawl while some rural ones can be very scarcely populated. Each *municipio* has a *cabecera municipal* or municipality seat, which is where the main local government is positioned and commonly placed on the larger or most important settlement. The *presidente municipal* is an elected official and the highest authority in any *municipio*.

The main towns in the *municipio* of Tepetzintla, all of which are dedicated mainly to agricultural activities, provide temporary and seasonal labor to Mexico City, and the city of Puebla, the state capitol, among others. The main towns are Tepetzintla, Tlamanca de Hernández, Tonatlíxco, Xochitlaxco, Chicometepepec, Tenantitla and Omitlán, although there are several much smaller villages spread out throughout the mountains (INAFED, 2009). A little over 50% of the 2,227 households in the entire municipality of Tepetzintla have running water and sewage, electricity, and floors that are not made of dirt. There are a total of 42 schools in the municipality (INAFED, 2009), although out of a total population of 10,240 in 2010, 40% have

completed elementary school and only 1% hold college degrees (INEGI, 2011).

The municipality has a total of 1,213 hectares of land rendered to agriculture (INEGI, 2011), where the production of maize dominates over other crops, none of which is done with industrial machinery or irrigation systems. Most households keep chicken but pork is the second most consumed animal meat.

Santa María Tepetzintla is a small town that holds the seat of government for the municipality and a total population of around 1,131 people (INAFED, 2009) although, for many years, it has maintained a silent rivalry with the neighboring town of Tlamanca for regional dominance.

## **II.V. Sketches of time: historical notations on the highlands of Puebla**

Ever since the time of the Olmecs —circa 1500 BC (Coe, 2011)— the history of settlements in Mesoamerica seems to be one of rapid success followed by collapse of a series of city-states or chiefdoms. For Tim Flannery, these successions have to do with the predominant bimodal environment of North America, one which shifts from a sequence of droughts and cold weather to periods of humid and temperate climate (Flannery, 2007[2001]). Although this proposal has not yet been expanded, its seminal

Alessandro Questa, PhD Dissertation's Final Version, November 2017, V4.0 76

idea is enough to make a claim for an intertwined environmental explanation linked to cultural and linguistic concentration in urban centers and subsequent Diasporas. These drastic changes could have provoked in part the constant flux of people migrating from the Mexico Basin to the Eastern and Western Mountain regions and vice versa. During the Classic period (from 500 to 900 AC) the Teotihuacan culture concentrated, like probably never before in the High Plateau of Mexico, a massive population of nearly 200,000 thousand people (Escalante, 2004). Its downfall was immediately followed by the splendor of Tajín, the Totonac city-state in a borderline region between the highlands and the High Plateau.

#### **II.V.I. Historic regimes: from Teotihuacan to Tajin**

The first Western account of the Northern Highlands of Puebla (NHP) we know of comes from a dialogue between a Franciscan monk, Fray Juan de Torquemada<sup>9</sup>, who, during his stay in the town of Zacatlán interviewed several times Don Luis, an old baptized Totonac man. Don Luis's tale, recorded by Torquemada in his *Monarquía Indiana* (Book III, Chapter XIX,

---

<sup>9</sup> Between 1599 and 1601, Fray Juan de Torquemada lived in Zacatlán as the local Franciscan convent prior. Later, between 1602 and 1603, he would be the guardian of the Tulancingo convent (Stresser-Péan, 1998). He possessed vast knowledge about indigenous life in Mexico, part of which is contained in his *Monarquía Indiana*. In several volumes, this work describes his experiences with some indigenous peoples in the budding New Spain.

1975), would become one of the most important sources on the pre-Hispanic history of the Puebla Sierra. Don Luis described the history of his ancestors in a way that challenged the medieval assumptions of the young monk. It started with the Totonac departing from Chicomoztoc, the seven mythical caves, accompanied by their Totonac brothers from Xalpan to the North, and leaving their old enemies (and brothers), the Teo-Chichimeca (Nahuatl speaking people), confined behind them. The mythical Totonac settled in Teotihuacan, where they would have built the pyramids of the Sun and the Moon, according to the account (and coinciding with Kauffman's [in Conabio, 2008] hypothesis). Afterwards, those same ancestors left towards the East and founded Zacatlán, then called Atenamitic. Nearby, in the mountains, they also established Mizquihuacan, meaning "in the heart of the hilly country" according to García (1987:50). The city became the capital of the Totonac kingdom and its main political center lay in what is now Ahuacatlán (Stresser-Péan, 1998:89).

The eastbound migration continued until they reached the Gulf, to end up in the Zempoala lowlands, close to the port of Veracruz. Nowadays, we find Totonacs or a record of their presence in all of these places, which *grosso modo* span from the Puebla-Tlaxcala valley, through the Puebla North Sierra to the coast in the center-north region of the state of Veracruz

(INALI, 2009). The old man's tale showcases the main groups in the region's history: Totonac, Masewal or Teo-Chichimecas and Spaniards. These three players, along with the sporadically recorded relations they held with Teenek, Otomí and Tepehua groups, make up the cultural tapestry of the region.

## **II.V.II. Barbarians from the north: the *altepetl* political system**

Prior to the arrival of Nahua speaking peoples, the area was inhabited by Totonac<sup>10</sup> and Tepehua speaking groups who spread across the Eastern Highlands in Late Pre-Classic times (0-600 AC), especially between the current states of Puebla, Hidalgo and Veracruz, followed by some Huasteco –Teenek– groups arriving, from the South East and through the Gulf of Mexico, and Otomi speaking people from the North East coming through the continental tip of the Sierra Madre Oriental (García, 1987). The fall of Teotihuacan around the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (Manzanilla and Lopez 2001 [1995]) brought about a period of population relocation and multiple migrations so large they collectively

---

<sup>10</sup> The name for the historic Totonac or *Totonaca* in Spanish is differentiated from the contemporary Tutunaku people, Totonacos in Spanish, who inhabit part of the highlands of Puebla today.

have been dubbed the “Mesoamerican territorial reorganization”<sup>11</sup> (García 1987; Pascual 2007, 2009).

By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Nahuatl languages became predominant in the Mexico Basin and the High Plateau. If the alliance with the Spanish invaders expanded in the 16<sup>th</sup> century the reach and relevance of Nahuatl language, its influence as *lingua franca* however slowly waned during the rest of the Colonial period in favor of the dominant Spanish language. In spite of this, there are nearly a million and a half speakers of 18 different dialectal variations of Nahuatl in Mexico (INEGI 2010) with the vast majority present in the *Sierra Madre Oriental* (or Easter Mountain Range) of which the northern highlands of Puebla is a part (INALI, 2009).

The movements of different groups of people fostered the development of other settlements in distant economic, political and military power centers. One such example may be the Totonac at Tajin, which climaxed precisely in the Terminal Classic to Early Post-Classic (roughly from the year 800 to 1200) (Coe 2011; Pascual 2009), which was a time of great geo-political changes occurring in Mesoamerica (Pascual 2007). After the fall of Teotihuacan, the Sierra cultures in general thus enjoyed an era of grandeur, which would last for about 300 years. “Never

---

<sup>11</sup> My translation.



was the (Puebla) Sierra so close to holding a nuclear position in Mesoamerica”<sup>12</sup> states Garcia (Ibid 1987:40).

After the rapid expansion and slow decay of the Totonac city-state of Tajin (Gordon and Bernal 1971), the next city-state in power in the region was Tula, located 60 miles southwest of Tajín, in the central high plateau. Tula however had an even more rapid heyday and downfall by the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Ruíz and Pascual 2004; Manzanilla and Lopez 2001 [1995]).

These somewhat rapid successions of centers of power, languages and peoples ended with the arrival and predominance of Nahuatl speaking groups. Indeed, Nahuatl speaking people might have been the most recent inhabitants in the area (García, 1987). The other indigenous groups had an older presence in the territory, such as the Otomí people with settlements to the northwest, or the Tepehua to the north, all of whom had occupied the region for almost 2 thousand years (Ibid.). The Tutunaku speaking population is today the largest group by far in the region and is also the group with which Nahuatl speaking groups have the most relations of exchange.

With the arrival of the Spaniards in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> Century and, particularly since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, there has been a growing presence of mestizo population concentrated in the main market towns of Zacapoaxtla, Cuetzalan

---

<sup>12</sup> My translation.

and Zacatlán, as well as in other minor towns close to the main Inter-serrana road, such as Ahuacatlán, Huitzilan or Zongozotla.

Totonaku people share with Tepehua people a common long history in the territory and their languages, belonging to the same linguistic family, could have been spoken by the “base population” of Teotihuacan, (Kauffman in Conabio, 2008). Today, Totonaku and Nahuatl communities are disseminated along the highlands of Puebla, following the natural twists and ramifications of the Cempoala river, that runs from the north west towards the Gulf of Mexico, and which has been the historical frontier between these two linguistic families (García, 1987). Even if these ancient borderlines and settlements remain more or less the same, people living in such villages are very mobile. Nowadays local highlanders, identifying themselves as either Totonaku, Masewal or Mestizo, engage in a number of activities across and out of their home region, establishing constant contacts by religious celebrations, commercial trade and marriage.

The first Masewal groups to enter in the Highlands arrived from the north, according to the chronicles (Torquemada, 1975) and were considered by the local Totonacs as ‘barbarians’ or *teo-chichimeca* (Ibid.) this last term is associated with belligerent Nahuatl speaking tribes settled in the Tlaxacala valley with whom Totonacs maintained long-term war relations

over land and territory (García, 1987). These 'barbarians' settled in Otlatlan, some twelve miles from today's Zacatlán, between Tetela and Tenamitic, possibly at the site of certain ruins, very close to the community of Omitlán, which belongs to the municipality of Tepetzintla. A new model of government arrived in the area with the Nahuatl, the *altepetl* (plural: *altepeme*). *Altepetl*; *in atl* "the water(s)" and *in tepetl* "the hill(s)", terms that referred, in principle, to a territory, but above all, to the organization of people and its dominion over them (Lockhart, 1999:27). The term *altepetl* is translated as town, kingdom or territory in early 16th-century documents, so it can very well be compared to this type of entity, even though its organization was particular and distinct. In like manner, the term *altepetl* possessed the symbolic connotation of a central place. Its equivalent in Totonac would be *achuchutsipi*, *chuchut* "water", *tsipi* "hill", with the Tepehua variation *xcansipej*, *xcan* "water" y *sipej* "mountain." (García, 1987:50). Other authors, like Lockhart, have marked how the interlinked *altepetl* formed a decentered network, like "a necklace", over the Mesoamerican landscape. Lockhart defined the *altepetl*, perhaps unfortunately, as an "ethnic-state" (Lockhart, 1999:27)

Beyond what "ethnic" might have meant on the rich political landscape of Pre-Columbian central Mexico, what I prefer to stress is how the *altepetl* evokes the relation water-mountain as

a indivisible unit and from which all other organizations emanate. *Altepemej* (pl.) became consolidated as the basic political unit in most of Mesoamerica and was divided into minor units during the Late Post-Classic period (roughly from 1200 to 1520 DC).

In turn, said units were composed of a series of related parts, which, even if relatively distant, maintained an ordered, cyclical and common rotation of political-religious power. These parts were population units called *calpolli*, literally "big house" (Ibid, 1999). The *calpolli* made up each *altepetl*, varying in number, whether seven –like the seven caves of *Chicomoztoc*– or pairs: four, six or eight, which emphasized dual organization (Ibid, 1999). The rotating organization based on kinship relations and ultimately on the presence of the *altepetl*'s lord, made the center of the *altepetl* usually highly mobile. Actually, unlike the later Spanish centralized system based on fixed governing towns called "*cabeceras*" (as in today's *municipios*), the *altepetl*'s *capitol* was located wherever the lord or *tlahtoani* and his court were (García, 1987). The *altepetl* thus made up a concept which "...provided a symbolic reference encompassing the Earth and the germinal force, the territory and resources, and even history and political institutions formed in its wake." (García, 1987:73)<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> My translation.

Altepetl is a Nahuatl word, which comes from the sum of *atl*-water and *tepetl*-mountain, so "water mountain". The centrality of such units resided not on a city-state like organization but on a mountain based one. What characterizes an altepetl is its identification with a mountain (or a chain of mountains) with a variable number of settlements located around it.

The consolidation of the *tlaholoque*, Nahuatl speaking lords, and their *altepeme* (pl.) in the area, grew stronger from the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, the consolidation of the *altepetl* as a territorial and political system irreversibly furthered the expansion of the Nahuatl language in the whole of central Mexico as a lingua franca used for trade and political relations between different *altepeme*. García suggests that this geopolitical network operated as the territorial skeleton, which would serve as the blueprint for Spanish highland congregations in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Ibid, 1987).

### **II.V.III. The formation of an empire: tributes and resistance in the highlands**

The expansion of Nahuatl speaking groups and the *altepetl* territorial and political system in central Mexico took a couple of centuries and culminated with the dominion of Toltec Tula and

then, rapidly after, by the Mexica (aka Aztec) from Tenochtitlan who took power from Tula. However, this reorganization also produced a series of linguistic and demographic displacements brought about by the numerous long-standing conflicts between the various multi-ethnic settlements and the new *altepeme* (Ibid.). This reordering would be strategic for the Spanish invaders that arrived by the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The Spaniards even settled old conflicts. One of the most important conflicts in the area was the one between the lordships of Chicnahuapan and Zacatlán, ignited by the control of routes and goods in a trade competition. It started many years before the Spanish Conquest but would not end until 1519, when the new Spanish government decided the former would be a subject of the latter (Gerhard, 1986). These intense commercial relations explain why, upon arrival, the Spanish found in the area of Zacatlán a multi-ethnic indigenous population disseminated across a large number of scattered settlements (Ibid, 1986)<sup>14</sup>.

The power of Nahuatl centers in the Valley of Mexico – Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, Azcapotzalco– impacted the highlands around the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century. Local conflicts, until then between rival lordships, would eventually be surpassed. Thus, the

---

<sup>14</sup> The Códice Carolino reports that by the last years of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there were still Chichimeca groups in the area (Stresser-Péan, 1998:93).

Relación de Hueytlalpan states that, even though there was an age-old war between Tetela and Zacatlán, both peoples would fight as allies in the subsequent war against the Tlaxcalteca, as a part of the Triple Alliance (Stresser-Péan, 1998: 92).

However, by the time of the Spanish conquest, the population was mostly Totonaca and only the notables or principals (or nobles) knew the "Mexican" (Nahuatl) language. The predominant Totonaca presence in Hueytlalpan is evidenced by the missionary Fray Andrés de Olmos' learning the language in order to evangelize the area (*Ibíd.*, 1998). Such presence testifies to the lengthy process of linguistic displacement suffered by the Totonac to the Nahuatl and then both to Spanish language. The effects of this process, as shall be seen later, are expressed in the mythology and the ritual life of the present-day Masewal from the sierra.

## **II.VI. The idea of Mesoamerica as a *transcendent* civilization**

Mesoamerica is a scholarly concept, and not a native category. That is to say, it never existed as such in the minds of the people that historically inhabited inside its mentioned demarcations, nor is it a relevant term for most of the people that live in it today. There is no Mesoamerican identity or political party, no monument to its origin in time, Memorial Day

or center; there is not a notion of its antiquity or longevity for the majority of the so-called Mesoamerican or Mesoamerican descendant population. However, we can find classrooms with seminars about Mesoamerica, libraries filled with textbook references about it as well as panels, symposia and of course, experts. Mesoamerica has been the logical conclusion of a diffusionist hypothesis, originated from curatorial questions oriented by the idea of cultural 'cores' (Steward, 1955), from which ideas and objects travelled to reach cultural peripheries. However, Mesoamerica has come a long way from this polemic point of origin.

The initial collective research in archeology, history, and pictography, as well as historical linguistics, biological and forensic anthropology was closely followed by other studies. Such investigations dealt with historical sources and translations, glyphs and crisscrossed interpretations, leading to a body of less materially based but equally relevant notions. Indeed, studies of literature (León-Portilla 2011 [1967]), philosophy (León-Portilla 2006[1956]) and medicine (López Austin 1969) helped to build an encompassing idea of Mesoamerica no longer as an archeological region but as a civilization (López Austin, 1996).

Certainly, all of these studies were still focusing on pre-Hispanic and early post-Conquest indigenous populations. During



the last seven decades the idea of Mesoamerica has grown to be not only a heuristic model of the Pre-Columbian past but a multilayered discourse that provides explanations for contemporary practices and beliefs among indigenous populations as well as for pre-Hispanic ones. It is indeed an encompassing concept based on a "hard nucleus" idea (Ibid.) quite in the line of Boas, Wissler and Kroeber's culture-area proposals. However, the hard nucleus master concept proposes that the Mesoamerican civilization, although fragmented linguistically and environmentally, maintains enduring ideas that still carry relevance as part of an encompassing worldview (López Austin, 1980, 1994, 1998; Medina, 1984, 2000). In short, Mesoamerica has always been an artificial construct that is now used as transcendent (or trans-historic) explanation for past and present indigenous peoples' ingenuity and beliefs, ultimately denying history.

The definitive agglutinating feature for the building of Mesoamerica as a *transcendent* concept was yet to come and it would not derive from any archeological site, for it was not be an object. It would be an idea. Based on the notion of a diffuse set of religious beliefs and practices –like pantheistic adoration (Caso, 1953), deified ancestors and leaders (López Austin, 1998 [1973]), multiple "animic" entities (Ibid. 1996), associations between humans with spirit animals (Foster 1946),

the idea of shamanic transformation (Schele and Freidel, 1990)—the notion of a Mesoamerican worldview (cosmovisión in Spanish), also referred to as cosmogony (Lupo, 1995) and Anthropovision (Martínez, 2011) was forged. To be sure, all of these religious features could be encompassed by a cosmic notion of cyclic creation and destruction and a universe oriented with four cardinal points (Coe 2011 [1966]). This more or less ordered set of cosmologic ideas (unlike political entities, economic systems and state religions) could travel through time and be found in any *contemporary* indigenous village in Mexico.

The main beliefs and practices associated with Mesoamerica, beyond the common use of varied milpa gardens for food production, relies on the invention of a cosmic order that, as we said, the Mesoamerican school study under the principle of 'hard nucleus', that presupposed that a series of ideas, practices and characteristics (cultural, religious, productive and otherwise) does not change or at least not in a meaningful way over vast periods of time while also being highly contagious (López Austin, 1998). Therefore, ethnographic and historic accounts have become inextricably mixed in the argument of a spread out Mesoamerican civilization almost immune to historical changes and strategically unconcerned by cultural differences as it is rather predicated on major transversal commonalities.

The first main commonality across Mesoamerica has to do with the mountain and hill cult complex (Broda, 2001). In the highlands, where hills dominate the landscape, every one of these has a name and it is related to a potency or Lord ('dueño') (López Austin 1994, 1998). These mountains are related to one another and possess personal names as entities, and people can address them through ritual offerings by specialists (Broda and Félix-Jorge, 2001; Albores, 1997). People, sometimes the dead, inhabit those mountains, on the inside (Broda, 1997a; Broda and Maldonado, 1997b). In some cases, the hills preserve corn grains, water or even chickens and other animals, as fertility or sustenance for the human communities that live on the surface of them (López Austin 1994, 1998). The sky in turn is where other entities play and favor the coming of rain and wind, as elements for the fertility of milpas –cornfields (López Austin 1994, 1998; Espinoza, 1997). These entities also need sustenance in the form of sacrifice and offerings. While in Pre-Hispanic times human sacrifice was practiced, in contemporary times, chicken, roosters and turkey are the common victims; accompanied by ritual parliaments, prayers and other food (Lupo, 1995; Báez, 1999). The functionalist and economic master device in the Mesoamerican 'hard nucleus' system is the dynamic idea of a massive energy –as congealed labor or work– that migrates through different forms of life (water, mountains, corn,

animals, humans and gods) in a cyclic continuum where death, growth, sex and prayers are transformative acts that enable the passing of it (López Austin 1994). The implications of this notion in food preparation, commensality and sustenance in offerings and ritual exchanges are taken as a current proof of this system (López Austin, 1994; Albores, 1997; Aramoni, 1990; Báez, 1999; Broda, 2001; Lupo, 1995).

The undeniable amount of data produced by the so-called Mesoamerican school has inspired this research. For this research the attention to mountain cult complex and to the mutability of forms between living entities have been salient. However, there are some problematic assumptions that have to do with disregard of cultural specificity in favor of macro-regional confirmation, the sub-utilization of ethnography as confirmation of historical practices and interpretations and, perhaps crucially for this research, the almost complete denial of change and contradiction (and hence of invention and transformation) in indigenous cultures. The present research consciously works inversely to the Mesoamerican school. Instead of endorsing major Mesoamerican postulates by way of ethnographic verification, it is based, almost solely, on ethnographic engagements and long standing presence in the field, asking what Masewal people do and why, in light of current and pressing concerns.

To conclude, there are two ideas that are troubling for ethnographic purposes regarding Mesoamerica currently understood as a "cultural area". First, the assumption of Mexican indigenous societies as "traditional" in a sense that carries, in several ethnographies, a tacit mechanical repetition of conventions, devoid from inner contradictions, debates, or innovations. Second, the idea of Mesoamerica as a holistic and mega-ordered civilization, of which its "hard nucleus" somehow endured violent colonization, forceful Catholic conversion, and the massive, unprecedented death toll by infectious diseases, is unattainable and empirically non-existent.

What anyone can observe when visiting for a certain period of time indigenous rural settlements today are numerous languages, forms of relations, profound knowledge about local landscapes, and creative ways of organization by a multiplicity of people who share some knowledge, experiences and practices but that, in fact, do not consider themselves as the visible parts (or surviving remnants) of an invisible whole. More grievous perhaps is the idea that such Mesoamerican tenets have been mostly unaffected by change or variation, impermeable to conflict and radical transformation, because it suggests that contemporary indigenous societies are, in fact, crypto-Mesoamericans, unaware, unwilling, or somehow impotent to realize, reflect, critique or transform themselves.

### III. KINSHIP, CARGO SYSTEMS AND *COMPADRAZGO*

#### III.I. Protocols to relate

The three forms of relation that have been traditionally identified by anthropology as the “most fundamental institutions in Mesoamerica” are: kinship, cargo systems and *compadrazgo* (Schnegg 2007:6). These three models of relation have been recognized as the pillars of the peasant indigenous community, at some point defined as the *closed corporate community* by Wolf (1957, 1981). Communities and villages are not, and have never been “closed” in relational (Dow, 1996; Monaghan, 1996; Sandstrom, 1996), productive and ecological terms (Alcorn, 1987; Hill, 1999). However, the functional drive behind such inquiries proposed such as kinship, ritual kinship, and cargo systems as stable units of analysis and tended to imagine homeostatic models. However, indigenous societies have never been stable. In the Masewal case, the highlands of Puebla have faced, time and again, drastic changes that have left marks on their organization on every aspect (environmental, political, economic, ideological, and cultural).

Thus, the seemingly bilateral kinship system prevailing in most indigenous communities in Mexico, the presence of rotational religious cargoes and scheduled horizontal organization systems, and the ubiquitous practice of *compadrazgo* became the main evidences of this encompassing order. And so, it was determined that extended families united by kinship (formed by three generations of descendants from a common patriarch living in houses around a common patio), would share work, lands and income. Such families would escalate to assemble groups of interrelated families and neighbors by different forms of *compadrazgo*, establishing ritual bonds and mutual debt and obligations between them that would be evident in major ritual occasions and annual harvest and planting seasons. Such groups of interrelated people, neighbors and associates would then participate in annual cargo systems around religious offices, celebrations, and sacred images. Finally, all of these groups would live in autonomous communities that would coagulate into a "culture" or an "ethnic group", followed by *municipios* and villages, ultimately existing in a sort of super ordered microcosm.

Moreover, when the studies of religious practices, myth and shamanism became more relevant to anthropology, more "cosmic" layers were added to this already cemented idea of stability. Indigenous people, particularly Nahua (Masewal), became

entrenched in the unconscious reproduction of their ancestral *cosmovisión* or “world view” (López Austin 1994), reliving ancient times by way of myth and ritual practice (Signorini and Lupo 1989, Knab 1995, Lupo 2001, among others).

The evidence, however, constantly proved to be different and needed thus to be rearranged and “completed”. Against the “exclusiveness” implied in the corporate closed community model (Wolf 1980), *compadrazgo* relations persistently proved to exceed these limits, in an open, inclusive mode that effectively connected people between communities in rural and urban settings in an ever-expanding social network that very quickly would stop responding to agricultural calendars or religious offices. Such indigenous openness to relate was not a novel –post-industrial– device, but indeed, a historic and malleable practice that had enabled indigenous people to understand and integrate, perhaps sometimes in the hopes to domesticate, the presence of foreigners and the transformations in their lifestyles, lands and economic systems.

Even if these anthropological generalizations forced indigenous life into a cultural “strait jacket” there are some aspects that hold some truth, at least, in the case of Tepetzintla. However it is not regarding the imagined stability that I make these ethnographic concessions but rather, to the observation of a constant effort, by Masewal people, to maintain



a complicated life in which modernity, migration, political action and organization, land and people's exploitation of it, and environmental dangers are –and have been– probably as ancient as myth, ritual organization, and maize cultivation.

Families in Tepetzintla do practice bilateral kinship recognition and, with variations, practice too a preference for maternal relatives over paternal ones. This might have to do with the commonly observed differences in age between husband and wife that make descendants closer in age to mother's siblings. Another reason might be the jealousy and tension around the inheritance of the limited number of plots and lands between paternal siblings as, customarily at least, lands are still given to male descendants.

Among the Reyes extended family with whom I lived during the second, longest period of my research (during the summers of 2012, and 2013, and for over a year between 2014 and 2015), such a tendency was observable. Rosalba's nieces and nephews (from her brothers and sisters) had more regular and solid relations than Anselmo's, older brothers, some of whom, by the time of my research, had already died.

The Reyes patriarchal home and patio, located close to the center of the town in an already paved and "urbanized" area, was used by all descendants as a place for gathering, but also as a place for working, collecting and cleaning grains, and for

making tools. The same patio worked as an “open living room”, the place to receive visitors (those not close enough to enter into the main house or the kitchen), who were then seated on wooden stools and under the sun. That patio was too where all celebrations took place, from birthday parties to major mayordomía obligations.

Families can be quite malleable in Tepetzintla. Numerous marriages are broken and couples live together mostly without the sanction of marriage by a Catholic priest or by the state. There are some older men, who have had many women and are said to have fathered cohorts of sons and daughters. Such men, even if quite old, are regarded as fearsome, sexually potent and powerful.

So, how is a Masewal person related to others? In general, Masewal categorizations of kinship are not based on the opposition between the biological and cultural poles, affinity and filiation, as they are, arguably in Western societies (Schneider 1969). For Masewal people life presents a continuum of opportunities to expand in a web of relatedness between people and households. These different opportunities, marked at every occasion, can generate long-term relations that are somewhat determined by location, family identity and the participation of each person in several of the many groups and organizations in Tepetzintla.

For example, Pablo Bravo (see Appendix), a middle-aged man in Tepetzintla, was a musician and a dancer, and at some point in his life, he became a *mayordomo* as well and a captain of a *danza*. Pablo is indeed still regarded as a masterful dancer and he was a *wewe*, a town's elder. Yet, different troubles in his life, having to do with excessive alcohol and an aggressive personality, prevented his continuing with these activities as he entered in continuous disputes and quarrels with *compadres* and fellow dancers and *mayordomos*, ending in his old age being somewhat isolated and lonesome. Pablo gradually lost his local connections and thus, in time, he also lost his position in town with friends, and even to some degree with his extended consanguine family. It wasn't however Pablo's individual standing that changed but that of his entire household. Pablo's nuclear family became marked and faced choices that ended with the conversion, arguably due to resentment, to Pentecostalism of the majority of its members and the emigration to the cities of Pablo's two eldest sons. It is not mainly consanguinity however that created the loss of local prestige for Pablo's family, but the fact that they were all inhabitants of the same household and thus shared responsibilities and risks and, crucially, house ancestors.

Each household is made of a group of interrelated people that not only live together sharing food, income and space but

share also in some ways their fortunes and can even unwillingly pass spiritual diseases to other members. A typical house in Tepetzintla, like the one in which I stayed, is more than a building as it is also alive in some ways. Houses listen to good and bad words, houses can get angry but can also be persuaded. The moral actions of a house's inhabitants have different impacts on it that are passed to others. For example, if a drunkard lives in a house, the house gets in turn offended and a baby sleeping under its roof (a daughter, a niece or a grandchild of the offender) can become sick and even die.

The term for house as a building in Nahuatl is *kali*, but is commonly used only to refer to churches, domestic altars, government offices and some local mountain caves. When used as a verb however, *chan* and not *kali* is the term used. For example, "where do you live/inhabit?", people will say *kanin mochan?* "where-you-inhabit?" *Chantli* is a noun that means "house" or "home" related to the verb *chan*, "to inhabit". There are two similar terms to name the people that live in any given house in town: *chanchiwanej* and *chanekej*. The first is *chanchiwan* (sing.) but more commonly used I plural, *chanchiwanej*, a word that can be translated as "co-dwellers" and that Masewal people freely translate to Spanish as *caseros* in Spanish or "hosts". Hosting not exactly inhabiting is what defines a *chanchiwanej* group. The house spirits, which are composed of a couple of female and male

elders, are but the nameless dead, the ancestors of each living family. They in fact inhabit each Masewal house and are too part of the *chanchiwanej* group, moreover they are the main hosts, for they are also regarded as the *chanitekomej*, *dueños de la casa* in Spanish or “house owners” (chan-house/inhabit, itekomej-(pl.) owners).

The second term is *chanekej*, and it also means “dwellers”, this word is however used preferably when talking about mountain spirits, sometimes adding the root *tipe-* from *tipetl*, “mountain”. Both terms use the same prefix (*chan-*) for “house”, and also emphasize the plural suffix (*-ej*), as tacitly suggesting that, when talking about guest and host relations, we speak of *households*, as much as we speak about *collectives*. When people in Tepetzintla talk about *tipechanekej* “mountain dwellers” they are always making reference to spirits. When casually referring to mountain spirits Masewal people will just say *chaneke* (sing.) or *chanekes* (pl.) utilizing Spanish grammar. Sometimes dancers, especially those of the *Tipekayomej* or *Negritos* dance, can be also called *tipechanekej*.

In short, families and houses, inhabitants and spiritual hosts are all related concepts for Masewal people in daily activities and are sometimes more relevant than consanguine assumptions of relatedness.

### III.I.I. Co-parenthood and ritual kinship

Interest in ritual kinship in Mexico has a long history, mainly in American anthropology since Taylor's first observations about the obligations it entailed between *compadres* (in Mintz and Wolf 1950)<sup>15</sup>. Later on, Redfield would notice too the relevance of this relation for creating new ties and for sanctifying previous relations (Redfield 1941). Contrastingly, Rojas identified *compadrazgo* as an "Indian" institution, referring to its native bonds to pre-Hispanic rituals and beliefs (Rojas, 1943). Foster (1953) would address *compadrazgo* as well, but would take an opposite position to Rojas, as he would support an acculturation paradigm (in which contemporary native cultures were the result of older, medieval Spanish institutions as replacements for the destruction of previous orders) and *compadrazgo*, together with *cofradías* (trade guilds) as an evidence of it (Ibid). Foster would also emphasize the utility of co-parenthood as a local variation derived from the universal existence of "minimal cooperative units" designed to produce solidarity and provide mutual help (Ibid). Foster would argue that in all societies, these units are difficult to define, as they exist in a three level interplay: general

---

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, Edward B. Tylor, in a visit to Mexico, around 1861, was the first anthropologist to write about the subject, stressing its power in creating obligations of loyalty between the *compadres* and *comadres* saying that: "A man who would betray his own father or his own son will keep his faith to his *compadre*". (In Mintz and Wolf 1950:342)

configuration or patterns (as structure), unique or peculiar characteristics (as culture) and historical "accidents" (history). These levels could be thought of as articulated, in spite of time and form, by the solidarity produced between the different units, i.e. their "functional role" (Ibid: 3). Thus, the notion of ritual kinship as an encompassing "universal" category has been traditionally paired, in the Mexican ethnographic arena, as an equivalent of *compadrazgo* (from European co-parenthood) by the anthropologists and historians who have studied its structure, ramifications, and implications (Foster 1953; Mintz and Wolf 1950; Nutini 1979; Nutini and Bell, 1986). There is a gap though, almost invisible, which lies in the fact that even if indigenous peoples commonly used the term *compadrazgo* they usually mean a host of different relations.

The study of Mintz and Wolf initiated a long debate on *compadrazgo*, mainly on defining its social functions and cultural variability and, therefore, its possible taxonomies. In a synthetic effort Thompson has summarized<sup>16</sup> a list of the main features remarked in anthropological models around this relation. He listed the 4 main characteristics of *compadrazgo* relations, followed by 9 secondary rules: 1) are named as sacraments of the Catholic church, (baptism, confirmation, first

---

<sup>16</sup> See Thompson (1971) for references on (in alphabetical order): Erasmus 1950; Foster 1969; Gillin 1951; Harris 1956; Ingham 1970; Mintz and Wolf 1950; Ravicz 1967; Redfield 1941; Reichel-Dolmatoffs 1961; Sayres 1956; Service 1954.

communion, and marriage); 2) baptismal bonds are usually the more important bonds established 3) they impose asymmetrical relationships (focusing on the god-parents as contextually higher in rank); 4) the stress is placed upon the *compadre* relationship between adults, rather than upon the godparent-godchild tie, accentuated in the European Catholic tradition; 5) multiple strategies in the designation of *compadres*, by ramification (extension) and duplication patterns in which pre-existing blood or ritual ties are reinforced (intensification); 6) where there are strong kinship groups, *compadrazgo* tends to diminish, suggesting overlapping functions; 7) incest taboo extended to ritual kinsmen; 8) unlike kinship, *compadrazgo* is normally not a feature in the inheritance of property; 9) is a mechanism of social control; 10) vertical selection strategies in multi-class or multi-ethnic situations; 11) rural and urban settings related to differentiations in *compadrazgo*, particularly in relation to horizontal versus vertical selection configurations; 12) the distinction between a tension from the convention of mutual respect between *compadres* versus the latent hostility sometimes present as an outcome of the compulsory obligation character of the relation; and 13) the use of ritual kinship as a "device for constructing ego-centered social networks." (Thompson 1971:382-383).



Along with the assumptions embedded in the idea that *compadrazgo* might be proof of acculturation, other suppositions have been deployed; mainly those of nuclear families and bilateral kinship as normative for native –defined too as peasant, Indian, or Mesoamerican– populations (Tax, 1952; Foster 1953; Thompson 1971; Gudeman 1971; Nutini 1979; Robichaux 1997).

The next most important reflection about *compadrazgo* in Mexico was derived from Masewal populations in the Tlaxcala-Puebla Valley, a region adjacent to the highlands of Puebla where my ethnographic work has taken place so far. From the late sixties until the early nineties of the last century Hugo Nutini produced a number of publications centered on *compadrazgo* (1968, 1976, 1989) and connected this to the history, marriage system, community organization and land ownership in peasant Masewal communities. Nutini produced a functional analysis that portrayed *compadrazgo* as a current tool for the continuity and “functionality” of community daily life, allowing for the connection of households between each other, and also to the Church and the land. He also linked this form of relation to the whole dynamic of kinship and land tenure systems arguing that: “Until there is a comparative analysis of the developmental cycle of the extended family, we will not fully understand a series of problems related to the importance of kinship as an organizing principle of community life.” (Nutini 1976:10).

In Tepetzintla *compadrazgo* is a ubiquitous relation. People call each other *compadrito* and *comadrita* at the market, in church or on the street. The opportunities and need for such relations are plenty, so many in fact, that sometimes people forget the particular circumstances of why someone is or is not a *compadre*. In addition, *compadre* and *compadrito* (the endearing form) is used as a polite term to call authorities, saints, and local healers and diviners. The network of *compadrazgo* relations ties all the inhabitants to one another almost directly. With age, mature people will accumulate more *compadres* and *comadres*, as well as godsons and goddaughters. Guests are also treated as *compadres* on other less joyful occasions as when they are asked to become *padrinos the cruz*, or "cross godparents", and they pay for the wooden cross and other expenses for a funeral.

Masewal people encode in particular sequences the actions that anthropology calls "ritual" and that they use every time they establish a relation, particularly those of *compadrazgo*, although, not exclusively. Such sequential actions appear on different occasions, *mayordomías*, weddings, baptisms, or the different occasions celebrating *compadrazgo*. Importantly, these preordered actions appear whenever a relation is being established or whenever an existing relation is being "remembered" and maintained. In other words, the standardized procedures that are present in marriages and baptisms as well as

at funerary rites and celebrations to the saints stand as a model for expressing interest respect and, ultimately, relationship. Dances are no exception to these protocols and, even in their aesthetic uniqueness, are still ordered by an encompassing sequence.

During each ritual occasion, specific parts or stages are clearly defined by temporal (calendars, day and night), spatial (scenarios, location), gestural (dances, greetings), and acoustic boundaries (bells, music and fireworks). Any ceremony may be seen as a syntactic chain that is in fact “read” and always evaluated by the participants, the majority of whom, despite the fact that they are not ritual specialists, can express an opinion about it based on previous experiences. Attendees to a celebration can appraise the quality of a performance in the dances and musical songs or *sones*, can say if costumes and ornaments with flowers are properly made, if the quantity and taste of food and drinks is correct, or if the efficacy and synchronicity of the *tlatoponani* (the fireworks man) was precise when marking the beginning and the end of each stage. All stages are “assembled” with each other by specific actions.

I will briefly describe each of these parts or stages that occur at a private household or at the town’s church and that form the recurrent Masewal protocols for relating with others.

The objective of this description is to make evident the local scalable protocols that can appear on what would seem completely different endeavors (agricultural ceremonies, Catholic baptism, *mayordomías*, mortuary rites, and some healing procedures). The recurrent similarities of such stages speak of a common, encompassing interest: that of relate different groups.

The first consideration on every Masewal ceremony is to divide the attendees into two distinct groups: the *chanchiwanej* or 'hosts' and the *compalijmej*, *compadritos* or 'guests'. Each of these groups will have specific roles and receive differential attention during the ceremony. The host group is the one that finances the event (food, drink, fireworks, incense, pays for mass) and that prepares the meals and usually the one that owns or provides the space for the event. It is led by a married couple, but with the help of a larger group of family and *compadres*. The guest group is composed of people who were previously the hosts (when in a *mayordomía*) or who are becoming related as *compadres* by accepting the role of god parents to newborn babies at a baptism, accepting a daughter in-law at a wedding, a saint's effigy during a *mayordomía*, or a sick person during a therapeutic ritual. This same division between hosts and guests and respectful treatment can also be observed when *compadres* are invoked to help with crop collection during harvest season.

The sequence starts when a reception is held at the doorstep, where the hosts, i.e. the people that constitute the household or the local Catholic priest and his assistants cover the visitors in flowers and perfume them with incense. Once the visiting group enters the house/church, they are seated in benches placed around the room and in front of the altar. Both groups formally greet each other, with the priest or the *mayordomo* going across the room to take each visitor's hand and place it on their chest and mouth. This greeting is called *motlapopolhuia* "salutation". The hosts offer food to the visitors according to specific hierarchic considerations, where the hosts will only serve the food but not eat with the guests; this is called *tlakachiwalistli*. No food is consumed when in church. A special domestic dance or *mijotia* follows after the feast and a violinist and guitarist play at least 18 traditional *sones* or "songs", which take between two to three hours, although usually some enthusiastic dancers and musicians end up dancing more than that.

Three times the visitors and hosts must dance around the house/church. This specific type of domestic dance, as will be detailed later, is called *mijtotia* and is different from the so-called *danzas*, the themed costumed and masked public dances that are the main ethnographic concern of this research. Indeed, to dance is a salient form of expression and communication for

people in Tepetzintla. For every *son* during the *mijtotia* dance, the first and third rounds tend towards the right (dextrorotation) while the second round is done towards the left (levorotation). The parents and godparents, as well as the *mayordomo* and his *tlanosalmej* or “callers”, dance at the center and perfume the spectators with incense. They then ask for “forgiveness”, *tlapopolhuia*, and recite a speech where they thank for the participation of the audience and apologize for the modesty of the feast. Finally, in the rites for *mayordomía* they perform the *ejtotilistli* the day after, in which the *mayordomo* thanks his *compadres* for their work and support; another celebration is held and this time they dance with the “tools”: wood, beer, knife and pots.

Between each of these stages, the *tlatoponane* or “thunder man” detonates two fireworks, sonically announcing the separation between each stage. Thus, with important variations (mainly in food offerings, number of participants, duration and others), all Masewal ceremonies observe the mentioned stages, as a recurrent protocol.

This regularity speaks of local method to emphasize the possible homogeneity between spaces, or at least the assumed connections among individual people (dancing, dressing and eating the same), groups or households, and town’s scales. By establishing these protocols, Masewal preemptively resolve the

possible unevenness of terrain, social hierarchy and even unexpected or novel situations. The two groups are always formed, the salutations happen, and then the feast and the dance. Such protocols are not only done on religious affairs but also appear in political events. Importantly, these protocols, with variations, appear on funerary rites and even in offerings to spirits.

Table 1: Masewal ceremonial sequences

Stages	Actions
1) Reception	Utilization of incense at the doorstep by hosts, giving flowers to guests and hosts
2) Greetings	Hosts approach each guest and greet them
3) First Gratitude	Meal is served and a first speech is made by hosts in gratitude to guests
4) Dance	Both groups drink and dance in circle, accompanied by a number of <i>sones</i> .
5) Apologies	The main host apologizes for the austerity of the meal and promises to make a bigger one next time. The guests respond in kind and reassure the hosts that everything was satisfactory. Some guests receive more food and leave.
6) Second Gratitude	The hosts and their helpers stay and celebrate the completion of the feast. The main hosts proceed to thank the guests and they all dance again, this time with the main objects used during the ceremony, thanking them as well.

### III.I.II. Barrios and family cults

Tepetzintla presents an organization that can be identified as indigenous in the sense that it is organized around a combination of territory, agricultural work and calendric celebrations that involve families, segments built on territorial basis that can be called *barrios*, *secciones* or *mitades*), or the whole of the town's population.



The literature on Masewal and, in general, indigenous peoples, has produced a series of ethnographies focused on the notion of community. Indeed communities are taken as automatic units for many anthropological studies and have been assumed, by functionalism, as parallels to 'total societies'. The most relevant proposal was that of Wolf (1957), who followed Redfield's (1939) studies. After these authors, almost every ethnographer has studied the Masewal on a community scale assumption (Lupo, 1995; Signorini, 1989; Baez, 1999; Lok, 1987, 1991; Romero, 2007; Millán, 2008, 2010). Other literature done among the Masewal, at least in the Eastern Range region, has attested to groups united not only by consanguine kinship but organized by intermediate associations that don't include the entire population of a given village.

This literature calls for the recognition of other forms of traditional organization, complementary to those studied by anthropology. Monaghan proposed the house as an extensive concept (1996), Dow regarded the Otomí family cults as integrating groups (1996), Sandstrom advocated for a model from center –the house– to periphery –the Nation– according to the Nahua of Veracruz (1992, 1996), Mulhare (1996) and Chance (1996) addressed the barrio, as a territorial unit operating at the level of an intermediate group, or Nutini, again provided an encompassing model of the "Mesoamerican community" (1996).

Beyond their differences, all of these studies focus on 'social organization', as their prime objective, either by examining communities, barrios, or intermediary segments.

In Tepetzintla the barrios are units that divide the town in four parts. Originally there were only two barrios, *Tlajko* "midland" and *Bokalko* "forest lot", occupying roughly the northeast and southwest halves and united by *Centro* or "downtown", a public space occupied by the town hall, the market plaza, the church with its old graveyard and two general stores. The original and largest barrio is *Tlajko*. Demographic expansion has produced a third barrio in the last three decades, *Tipesingo* "little mountain" which occupies the central part of town up into the steep slopes of the mountain. If we imagine a bat-like figure, the small body would be *Centro*, while the both *Tlajko* and *Bokayotl* would be its larger wings, and *Tipesingo*, climbing up the mountain, it's tiny head. After the disaster of hurricane Pauline, in 1997, when a massive landslide took dozens of houses from both *Bokalko* and *Tlajko* barrios, a government program built 50 houses in the lowest part of the town, close to the river. This new, artificial barrio is called *Analco*, "land by the river": the bat's feet.

Each of these barrios, even *Analco* are united by certain practices and relations that revolve around neighbors and do not involve the other barrios. Each barrio is inhabited by certain

groups of originally interrelated people, as the common descendants of elder inhabitants and the inheritors of contiguous land. If, in theory barrios would be exogamous groups, marriage between people of the same barrio is however possible, as some of the families have moved out to the city and eventually sold their plots to other people in town. The other practice that unites some of these groups of people is generated by the circuit of sacred figurines of saints and virgins between households once a year, called *mayordomías*.

#### **III.I.III. The circuit of Mayordomías**

*Mayordomías* are yearly ceremonies devoted to images of Catholic saints and virgins on prescribed days of the Catholic calendar. The sculpted figurines (varying in size between 12 to 25 inches) are kept on heavily ornamented glass and wooden boxes kept on a given household throughout the year. The *mayordomo* (sometimes called *mardomo*) is always a male married man, strategically aided by his wife who is not officially called "*mayordoma*" but is *de facto* the ceremonial counterpart of her husband and also the main hostess and cook for the *mayordomía*. Both the *mayordomo* and his wife are aided by their descendants (who live in the same household) and who are all together the

hosts (*chanchiwanej* or *caseros*) of one such image during the whole year at the household altar or *santokal*.

Typically after a year (some images might remain in the same house for more than one year), the *mayordomo* must choose another married man –usually a family member, a friend, or a neighbor, although not exclusively– to keep the image. Faith and wealth also play a role and other unrelated households may well come and seduce the *mayordomo* to give away the image with gifts and delicacies. This yearly change of *mayordomos* is called *timopatlaske* “we are shifting or flipping” and creates a strong linkage between these men and their households, either reinforcing previous alliances or opening new ones. The strains of *mayordomos* and their ‘pull’ become most evident in political action, during local elections, for example.

In Tepetzintla there are a number of minor and major *mayordomías*, the first happen mostly on a territorial basis, where images mostly travel between households located in the same barrio or between interrelated households located in different ones. The financing and participation of such *mayordomías* is limited to a few households. The second, major *mayordomías* will occupy enough social and economic resources to become real power bases for *mayordomos* who usually belong, or aspire to belong, to the local ruling cluster. *Mayordomías* are in a way Masewal politics merged with national democratic

practices. To become a *mayordomo* of one of the two major Mayordomías (Corpus Christi in June and Virgen de la Asunción in August 15th) means to become a *wewe*, an elder. *Wewes* are treated with respect and can ask people to participate with them in more ceremonial activities. They are the only ones who can aspire to local political office.

In times of *mayordomía*, several feasts are called for, as the image is changing from one family to another. The main question is then to know which and how many *danzas* will be performed at the request of the *mayordomo*. To an extent, his power and success is gauged and determined by his ability to invoke people, and *danzas* comprise first and foremost, identifiable groups of "people". The *mayordomo* calls for his aides or *diputados*, "deputes", from 4 to 8 married couples, again friends, family, and neighbors, who will give their labor and help during the coming days. This involves killing pigs, preparing tortillas, adorning the altar, etc. In addition to the *diputados*, the *mayordomo* typically calls for one or two older men, usually his godfathers, to be *tlanosalmej* or "callers" to be part of his entourage. These men will be entrusted with money and resources to visit the *Capitanes*, leaders of every dance organization, as well as the musicians.

There are five different such organizations in the village, and very rarely more than three of them are called on the same

festivity. However, nowadays, such confluence is very rare. Between the years of 2005 and 2016, I only witnessed one occasion in which three *danzas* occurred on the same *mayordomía*, in 2008, after hurricane Earl occurred. I observed three main factors that impede such large participation. First, the current political fragmentation in the town provoked by the increasing presence of numerous political parties has also broken *danzas* groups splitting dance groups and sometimes even pitting its members against one another due to political party allegiances. Second, the growing rate of conversion to other forms of Christianity (mainly Pentecostal) that don't conform with *danzas* (deemed as pagan) and *mayordomías* (for being Catholic), takes its toll of dancers and musicians every year. Finally, the financial difficulties to sponsor *mayordomías* and *danzas* have increased with the advent of monetized economy. Masewal elders remember that maize, pork meat, *refino* (rum) and *tamales* used to be the locally financed and mountain based way to pay for both *danzas* and *mayordomías*.

Besides these three factors, the success of a *mayordomía* depends on the diverse networks of relations, preferences, old favors, previous engagements, tacit antagonisms, and public alliances between the different households and people involved at every time. The *tlanosalmej* or "callers" need to be seasoned, mature men, as they will be performing a perilous job; they will

provide food and drink to the dancers who, during the ritual, will become 'different people', and any direct contact with them will be dangerous. The work of the *tlanosalmej* is to deal with the ambivalent status of the dancers. 'Callers' also perform as interlocutors with nonhumans, for they are human diplomats interacting with dancers. During the ceremony, the *tlanosalmej* will endure continuous contact with the masked dancers, giving them petty orders, moving them around and giving them food. *Tlanosalmej* are said to be "attorneys" for the *mayordomo* in dealing with the dancers, who in those moments are temporarily transformed into "not-Christian" or *amo kishtani* entities.

All themed dances locally known as *danzas* (described on Chapter VI), occur in interdependence with another ritual sphere, that of the *mayordomías*. While *danzas* stand as visualizations of non-Christian and nonhuman collectivities (animals, mountain and ancestor spirits), *mayordomías* instead focus on the cyclical cult to Catholic saints during specific dates and connect each participant household to the Catholic temple at the center of the town. The main sponsors of a *mayordomía* are the *mayordomos* and their wives, and they also pay for the *danzas*. This double sponsoring, in which the same *mayordomo* hosts a Saints figurine in his home for a year while also invites and sponsors one or more *danzas* is the local way to

resolve the apparent paradox, between “pagan” and “Catholic” cults.

For Masewal people there is no contradiction between these religious practices. Both spheres (*danzas* and *mayordomías*) are linked to one another and centered on specific and necessary interactions between Masewal people and wide range of different nonhuman beings. *Mayordomías* and *danzas* are concomitant practices that together limit the participation (and dominance) of both local diviners and the town’s Catholic priest. In doing so, in these two interconnected activities Masewal people can re-invent the outcome of human spirit relations and propose more favorable relations of reciprocity.

### **III.II. Divination: seeing spirits and ‘the gift’**

There are many types of healers and ritual specialists in Tepetzintla, many of such forms of expertise and functions are contextual and, as I have described earlier, an old person can become, for example, a *tlanostal* or “caller” for a *mayordomo*.

There is however a special kind of people who are born with distinctive characteristics that separate them from the majority and marked their life with special and often times a conflictive and painful destiny for they can see and interact with invisible



spirits. Such characters are respected and feared and are known as *tlamatk* (sing.).

I utilize the term *tlamatk*, as it is the most commonly used in Tepetzintla, together with *adivino* in Spanish. However, diviners are also called *tepatlani* “those who change someone” which means both “to change” or “to flip” someone’s clothes, or to “turn someone” into something else, like an animal, for example. Another term associated with these is *tlamilawani*, used for those who “align” or “straight up”, this translates literally, “to unfold” something or someone. Finally, there is also *tlaixpatlani*, or the skill to “change someone’s vision” also used to refer to “exchange vision”, which is a simultaneous shift between people and/or invisible beings. Anthropological classifications tend to overlook these nuances. For Masewal people, however, each of these emphases implies equally distinct forms of spiritual skill and interrelations with the invisible beings in the world.

The life of a diviner *adivino* or *tlamatk*, “a person who knows/sees things”, is marked by a gift called *ojko ilwalalis*, “that which has been given”. This talent is always bestowed upon the diviner and cannot be learned nor inherited or acquired by any other means. It is often obtained in early age or puberty and it often presents itself as a perilous disease, one that

offers the recipient with a near death experience, after which he or she is able to "see".

The gift or *ilwalalis* is given to the initiated diviner by numerous non-human entities (spirits) and is therefore always *someone else's decision* occurring against the receiver's will. The gift implies then a heavy load in a person's life, one that many deny or attempt to postpone as it calls for a different way of existence, one marked by constant spiritual and physical peril, as *tlamatkimej* (pl.) act both as healers and doers of harm in their own towns. Therefore, each *tlamatk*-shaman if you will- end up being the focus of his neighbour's hatred, fear and envy: the life of the shaman tends to be hence, a lonely one. They explain this non-human choosing with movements of the hands upon the forehead saying, "I was chosen when I was a child. Now they [the spirits] sit upon my head, my crown, like if it was a chair"<sup>17</sup>. But who are *they*? Who sits on the shaman's head?

A multitude of named saints and virgins, animal and landscape beings, as well as Jesus Christ are revealed as the main spiritual patrons of each *tlamatk*. These beings will appear in a succession of initiatory dreams, introducing the diviner to other spiritual entities located in specific places of the local landscape (Romero 2007, Pérez 2011). Boulders and caves, ravines and old tree stumps, mountain tops and crossroads are all

---

<sup>17</sup> "Me dijeron cuando era yo chico. Ora ya se sientan [los espíritus] en mi cabeza, mi corona. Como si fuera una silla." Field Notes 2012.

potentially *someone* under the eye of a Masewal diviner. In all these places, people's souls are misplaced, captured or lost. The *tlamatk*'s first task is to be able to see where exactly—in which specific rock, twig, or artefact—these are.

In some cases, the *tlamatk* can even become *compali* (from the Spanish *compadre*) of several different beings/places or have sexual partners amongst them (Pérez 2011). Along with these entities are also often mentioned other, less individualized invisible forces that form part of the spiritual network established by every diviner; they are generally called in Spanish *ángeles*, "angels", also referred as *ejekamej* or "winds". Such "winds" dwell in the mountaintops and move around the highlands, bringing different types of desirable things like clouds and rains, but can also invoke catastrophes, like hurricanes and virulent disease (Lupo 1989a, Báez 1999). The *tlamatk* and his/her patients actively speculate about the causation behind disease or ill fortune based on the indication of conduct, names, and place of spirits in the local landscape.

Masewal people distinguish two main different forms of invisible harm. The first one is caused by human envy or *tlawelitalistl*, "to regard someone with anger". Envy can cause all sorts of harm and even death and it is caused by almost any person and in some cases even by animals. Sorcery is referred as *tlachiwa*, "a thing that is done", which implies the malicious

action of another *tlamatk*, always described as a *brujo*, a *tlakatekolo*, “man-owl”, or evil sorcerer. Their engagement in obscure interactions with different spirits and *itonalmej* “animal souls” unavoidably ends with some form of soul hunting. Good and evil shamans compare themselves to hunters and narrate how they transform, through dreams, into feline like jaguars, more precisely, *tekwani*, “people eaters”. Every *tekwani* is thus a *tlamatk* “from some other town”. Diviners thus engage in cruel combats as they chase each other while guarding or hunting souls.

The predatory actions of shamans and spirits are not entirely secret, as all Masewal people know to reckon and handle daily hazardous encounters with invisible spirits. For example, most people know it is unwise to cross a river at noon, as the Awewe “Water’s old man” is at that time feeding or his daughters are bathing, and they all would drown the soul of anyone passing by. Women know too how to bring their children back after they have accidentally fallen to the ground, while walking up on the mountain. They will find a stick and hit the dirt, thereby stopping ‘mother-earth’, *tlaltikpak nana* from grabbing the child’s *ianima* or “soul.” Importantly, these are all highly speculative formulations, as people never see these various invisible beings, they associate their presence and effects

(e.g. a fallen child or a splash in the water with a posterior disease). Seeing spirits is the privilege of shamans.

### **III.V.I. *Kixpatla*: Change of vision, change of face**

The ultimate outcome of the "gift", the *ilwalalis*, resides in the shaman's skill to "see" the invisible world at will. This is defined as *kixpatla*, a term that Masewal people locally translate as "change of vision" and simultaneously as "change of face"<sup>18</sup>. *Kixpatla* is defined as the temporary capacity to observe the things in the world in a different way, detecting simultaneous forms and identities. For example, an unwary hunter may see the caves as doorways to houses and churches, deer and boars as dogs, birds as hens and serpents as people. Although *kixpatla* may occur to any person during dreams as an uncontrollable experience, only shamans have conscious control over it in the waking world. *Kixpatla* is a deadly experience for anyone else as it puts into contact a person with numerous and unstable spirits whom in almost in every case, will devour them.

---

18 From a transitive verb that includes the particle *ix-*, 'face or façade' and *quipatla*, 'change or shed' (*Diccionario náhuatl del norte del estado de Puebla*, Vocabularios Indígenas 42, ILV/UMAD, Mexico, 2000). In his *Vocabulario en lengua castellana/mexicana* Alonso de Molina described the term *-patla* as a verb used to "change o touch something", as well as to "substitute or take another's place". Based upon local exegesis, and following the direct translation to Spanish by several Nawa interlocutors, I use "change of vision" and "change of face" as the closest translation. It is clear that part of the difficulty for a translation of this concept lies on its implications. *Kixpatla* implies not just an exchange between individual perceptions, but conveys a condensation of these.

A seemingly powerful *bitlaxtl* or “white man”, for example, can also be a frog and be eaten by a snake in the invisible world, hence dying of strong back pain. The snake can be a woman who later presents a strong cough (from swallowing the frog). An old man can be a dog, and a jaguar, a bird and a fish; as such he can bite, claw, throw or drown someone else. According to shamanic lore, the invisible world of spirits is a very dangerous one, as it is predicated almost exclusively upon predatory relations.

*Kixpatla* characterizes how Masewal people conceive their interactions between visible and invisible beings: as a series of interwoven or layered “natures”, perceptible according to personal abilities or circumstantial location on the landscape (e.g. falling in the street, in front of the church, on the mountain). On different occasions, local diviners have exemplified to me this dimensional overlapping –or indeed folded– world, as either the layers of an onion being peeled away or as the multiple foldings of a tablecloth. This native conception does not anticipate enigmas or falsehoods in the world, just infinite layers of possible contacts without any ultimate or definitive truth. Diviners are special people who can see through some of the “foldings” and can attest for higher number of relations than most other people.

This overlapping stands as a recurrent Masewal allegory for invoking a native principle, which considers that most things and beings are related somehow, and that such relations are mostly invisible to the ungifted eye. Moreover, these multiple and invisible relations are also unstable, in constant change, as relations are never fixed. Therefore, clouds, winds, people or animals stand potentially over multiple layers of relations that consider neither centrality nor periphery, never being completely true nor entirely false, with no extreme characterization of good (benefit) or evil (harm). Thus, all things and meanings are overlapped, remaining always dangerously together.

This is the account of the world from the point of view of “gifted” *tlamatkimej* (pl.). There is another version of how the invisible nonhumans and the landscape itself interact with the people. This version is made evident by the staging of collective dances. Through dancing, “ungifted” Masewal people can appropriate the otherwise exclusive *kixpatla* from diviners in order to evidence –or unfold– the invisible world, right in the middle of the town. The description of such dances belongs to the IV chapter, for now it suffices to note that divination provides with the existents, the basic units, that inspire and give content to dances: the multifarious and invisible spirits.

### III.III. Modernity elsewhere, émigrés, and religious change

To this point I have made an effort to present the functional, structural and historical conditions and institutions that regulate life for Masewal people in the highlands but that have also ordered anthropological inquiries about them. Now, I want to describe how these institutions are changing and hopefully how anthropological eyes on them can change too.

On several occasions, when talking about the local participation of youngsters in dance groups, dancers have recalled that dances were a disappearing practice by the end of the 20th century. Masewal usually associate this lack of dances with the gradual movement to the cities and to "forgetfulness" (*amo kilnamitl*), and to "urban vice". As Agustín, a fellow dancer put it once, "There were almost no dancers back then. We didn't hear about them, or about other things, like Mayordomías. Almost no one came here anymore. I was working in Mexico City. I didn't come to dance or for any other reason. I was very busy. I drank a lot [of alcohol] too. That is why."

By the end of the last century, more and more Masewal men and women had stopped using their language in public, and had taken the new highways into the cities to find cash jobs, either



as construction workers or as house cleaners. Their destiny, they were convinced, seemed to be someplace else. Rural life was, and it still is, locally equated with economic poverty and hardship. Ramón, who is a respected elder, and has never left Tepetzintla for more than a few days, has told me, on more than one occasion, about the hardships of his early childhood and the loss of many of his siblings. He recalls that child mortality was high as there was no clinic in town, no one had any money to speak of, and the dirt roads were bad.

Such conditions have left an imprint on Ramón, as he understands why his sons and daughters do not live in town anymore, "who knows? Maybe they are better off in the city, they eat everything [well] there. They all have jobs and their kids go to school. None of their children have died." <sup>19</sup> Such survivalist ideology, however, can be distinct according to generations. Lourdes is over 40 years old now; she has a small grocery store in town and is the mother of three children. She remembers with excitement how the girls in her generation would dream about leaving Tepetzintla to work in the city. "We were very happy and nervous [...] we only knew that we wanted to have money and buy clothes, to go out with a boyfriend, and to live

---

<sup>19</sup> "¿Quién sabe? Tal vez están mejor allá en la ciudad. Comen de todo y todos tienen su trabajo, sus hijos van a la escuela. Ninguno se les ha muerto." Field Notes, 2014

in a big house. That's why I didn't think twice when my godmother got me that job in a house".<sup>20</sup>

Living in the city, away from home, was harder than expected for many Masewal men and women, particularly for those who left for Mexico City, as many of them faced the drastic effects of economic poverty due to low income for unspecialized labor, urban crime, and the different and frequent forms of linguistic, racial and economic discrimination. Steady jobs are hard to find there and, as the economy shrank and the oil boom from the 60s and 70s ended and the industries were expelled to the interior, the big city stopped needing construction and factory workers even though many of them already had their homesteads and families in it. To these macroeconomic conditions, more quotidian challenges were added, such as the persistent discrimination and abuse from city people, the slurs, the long and expensive commutes, gang violence, and the lack of water and energy services in the urban peripheries they inhabited. As Nacho, a Masewal man who is a welder and has reestablished himself in Tepetzintla remembers:

"We had no water at home, we had to wait in line for hours to get it. Then I bathed my boys in a plastic

---

<sup>20</sup> "Estábamos contentas y bien nerviosas [...] nomás sabíamos que queríamos feria para comprarnos nuestra ropa, salir con un novio, ir a vivir a una casa grande. Por eso ni lo pensé dos veces cuando mi madrina me consiguió ese trabajo en casa". Field Notes 2015.

barrel. And it always smells like a latrine that place! That is how I remember San Jacinto [a peripheral neighborhood in south east Mexico City]. It is true! You couldn't go out at night for a beer or to the plaza, kids could rob you, stab you even. Everything was expensive and it would take me 2 or 3 hours to go to work. Then back again. Every day."<sup>21</sup>

By the mid 90s, Mexico entered into full economic recession and many Masewal people returned to their towns out of necessity. Additionally, the generation from the 70s and 80s were reaching a mature age and were having difficulties getting by with hard manual labor, most of them having no pension or social security of any kind. Many of them were injured and sick. Families got separated as sons and daughters preferred to stay in the city, unfamiliar with rural life, while their parents elected to return to the highlands to pick up what in most cases was a romanticized community living.

Upon arrival to Tepetzintla, many men and women faced the fact that, even if they had grown up there and even when some of them were lucky enough to have inherited some labor land, they

---

<sup>21</sup> "No teníamos agua en la casa, teníamos que hacer fila horas. Luego bañaba mis niños en un bote. ¡Y siempre huele a baño por allá! Así me acuerdo de San Jacinto. ¡De verdad! No puedes salir en la noche por una cerveza o a la plaza, los chamacos te asaltan, hasta te pican. Todo es más caro y son dos o tres horas par air a trabajar. Luego de regreso. Todos los días" Field Notes 2014. "

didn't know how to grow maize anymore, a hard and demanding task even for the young that mature people navigated only through accumulated experience. They also found that they were vastly uninformed about many of the innovations in local ways, the politics and changes in power relations between families and villages. People who didn't left town for meaningful periods of time usually say *amo kinamijkej* "they don't remember", scornfully suggesting that returnees are ill informed and in no position to take control of things. Such disempowering and uncertain identity as 'not quite foreigners' would have deeper impacts in the ways émigrés reinserted themselves into town activities.

Inversely, several families of returnees brought back with them resources, materials, technologies, and different kinds of knowledge from the city, greatly changing the local landscape and power dynamics. Masons imitating the urban settings in which they had worked for years rebuilt their traditional houses, changing wood and adobe for cement and glass, transforming the town's whole appearance and many, effectively annulling many of the traditional techniques and relations around house construction.

Similarly, merchants, bakers, mechanics, welders, and plumbers applied their expertise to local businesses, transforming the town in a very short amount of time. Such

returning émigrés also conceived a modern critique of the local ways in which their parents and families would do things, entering into regular conflicts with those people who had stayed. Language use, politics, Christianity, and governance became new fields in which these different groups collided and pressed their views. For the next decade or so, returning émigrés would assert themselves by dismissing local customs as 'backward', while 'locals', in return, would neglect the newcomers' 'forgetfulness' and 'ignorant' views.

The city is the locus for the transformation of people, from Masewal into *koyomej*, by acquiring affectations and different tastes, by changing their appearance and garments and by "improving their lives". "It shames me," says Antonio, a self-educated auto mechanic who came back to Tepetzintla recently, "to see my people living like this," he points out his neighbors' houses before continuing,

"...their poor houses, just a dirt floor, the little huts. Their children having no proper education, they all have fleas, the poor children. That is how I lived when I was a boy. Well, my brothers and me. That is why we all left. My children are different now."<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> "Me da vergüenza ver a mi gente viviendo así. Sus casas pobres, nomás piso de tierra, sus jacalitos. Sus niños no tienen educación, con pulgas todos, los pobres niños. Así vivíamos nosotros antes cuando era yo chamaco. Bueno Alessandro Questa, PhD Dissertation's Final Version, November 2017, V4.0 133

Contrastingly, Antonio's cousin, Himelda, openly expressed her critiques towards Antonio and other émigrés. She told me that, "They come back here with their tails between their legs. They come back because life there is tough." And she continued:

'We are city people now' they say. They eat [wheat] bread, they feel better than us. But we all know the city, it smells like shit. The food is awful... yikes... and they say they don't like my kitchen because it's dirty? It is just soil, no trash here in town... hahaha".<sup>23</sup>

The transformation is not just about lifestyle but also about new religious practices, considered to be *más modernas* or "more modern". Some few émigrés converted into Evangelical Christians during their time away, bring back to the village with them their religious zealousness and newfound verbosity. They have however faced the backlash of belonging to a rural community grounded on religious practices associated with

---

mis hermanos y yo. Por eso nos fuimos. Mis hijos yas son diferentes ahora." Field Notes 2015.

<sup>23</sup> "Vienen de regreso con la cola entre las patas. Vienen porque allá la vida es difícil. "Es que ya somos de la ciudad" dicen. Comen pan, se sienten mejores que uno. Pero ya sabemos cómo es la ciudad, huele a porquería. La comida sabe feo... guácala... y dicen que no les gusta mi cocina que dizque está sucia? Nomás es tierra, aquí en el pueblo no hay basura... jajaja" Field Notes 2015.

Catholicism. "Why are we supposed to stay forever corralled by Catholicism?" asks Gregorio, a local Evangelical leader, "if we can know Our Lord by reading from his own word. We do not drink, and we do not misbehave. It has been hard for us, families have been torn apart. People are jealous of us, because we work hard, we help each other, and we thrive in businesses."

Their overt abhorrence to alcohol and harsh critiques of *mayordomías* as senseless economic expenditure, have had an undeniable impact on local life. Moreover, Evangelicals have tended towards marrying only between people of the same faith. This has had even a stronger impact on social participation and a wider gap regarding economic power between Catholics and Evangelicals. There is as well, a special appeal for local young women about Evangelical men, men who are healthy and don't drink and who are observant of religious practice. "She was always the first in church, and she loved to sing and go to 'bailes' [public dance parties]" says Juana about her younger sister Laura, who recently got together with a young Evangelical boy, "now she doesn't come by home. She is always there [at her in-laws]. She walks in the street and never says hi. I don't know what is going to happen. My newborn nephew doesn't know me. "

With the so-called advent of democratic change, different political parties begun to have a steady presence in Tepetzintla, as people enrolled in them, but also captured them.

Political parties constitute an enticing source of “easy money”, as they provide some basic resources for campaigning and provide just enough currency to organize feasts and events. The money runs out after elections take place, but the divisions created remain and renewed feuds arise, creating more tensions between families and neighbors. Eventually, algid disputes become complaints, waiting to be refueled again, by more money and more campaigning on the next elections. Democratic politics have created, in this way, their own calendar of conflict. I have witnessed several election processes by now, and on every occasion, more or less the same configurations of people have fought over accumulative grievances and have taken over different political flags, only to collide against their usual rivals and enemies.

We could say, after this gruesomely brief rendition, that by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century modern Masewal were religiously diverse, politically active, often engaged in several family feuds and constantly expanding their social and labor networks into Puebla and Mexico as well as to parts of the US and Canada.

#### **III.IV. Remembering again**

Over a similar timeline, the Catholic Dioceses of Zacatlán started to acknowledge the growing presence of other Christian



denominations, which were gaining presence in the surrounding municipalities (Zacatlán, Ahuacatlán, Huitzilán, and Tetela), with a particular presence of Evangelical temples. According to father Pedro, the then local Catholic priest at Tepetzintla parish, the Bishop wanted to “win back the people” by providing more support to local events and by becoming even more tolerant of what are called now “traditional celebrations”, even when it was precisely the Catholic church who chastised some of them as “pagan”, in earlier times.

Amongst such traditional –pagan– celebrations receiving unexpected support in recent years from the Catholic Church is ascending to the mountains to visit the “owner” spirits. Desperate times call for desperate measures and Evangelicals are now discreetly participating in *mayordomías*, even if these practices are cemented and sanctioned by Catholic practice and discourse. Their overt reasons are that they need to be recognized politically. Indeed, once *mayordomías* and *danzas* have been “defanged” from their religious labels and politically translated as “traditions” and “cultural heritage”, they become more inclusive. The not so overt reasons for Evangelicals to have a limited participation in both *mayordomías* and *danzas* is the deeper concern that somehow disastrous weather has to do with the breakage of families. As Marino, a senior Evangelical member explained to me:

"Who knows why The Lord sent us those things [hurricanes and tropical storms]. What can we do? We just have to do his bidding. The Lord punishes families who forget him, who neglect him. We like to join our [Catholic] brothers as a traditional culture. We just avoid the church, the mass. There is no harm in that. On the contrary, I say it is good, that it pleases Our Lord to see us united."<sup>24</sup>

Families reunite again in unexpected ways during these occasions, in which some family members return to participate in local customs. For example, even if they do so discreetly, some women slip into the kitchens to help with cooking to their sisters and relatives embarked in a *mayordomía*, while young boys inconspicuously join the ranks of masked dancers to be with their friends. There is a "gluing" appeal in *Kostumbre* for people, even if they are not Catholic anymore. Indeed, some "lighter" Evangelicals and specially Protestants are beginning to transform their relations with the dominant Catholic life of the town by conceptually segmenting practices between religion

---

<sup>24</sup> "Quién sabe porqué El Señor nos mandó esto [huracanes y tormentas tropicales]. ¿Qué podemos hacer? Sólo su voluntad. El Señor castiga a las familias que se olvidan de él, que lo niegan. A nosotros nos gusta unirnos con nuestros hermanos [católicos] como cultura tradicional. Sólo no vamos al temple, a la misa. No hay problema con eso. Al revés, yo digo que es bueno, que a Nuestro Señor le gusta vernos unidos" Field Notes 2015.

and tradition, and embracing the *cultura tradicional*, “traditional culture” secular discourse.

In May of 2007 a small group of Masewal people, led by a *tlamatk* or diviner, returned to the top of the Chignamasatl mountain, to pay a long overdue visit to the spirit called *Tipewewe*, “Mountain’s old man” who is also the mountain’s *iteko* or “caretaker”. Since then, every year people have been going up there, to leave some offerings of food and to talk, to plead for fertility, and to give thanks for what has been given. By 2014, the ascension to Chignamasatl was expanded and tripled. On that same day of 2014, the diviner and his companions ascended to three different places in the mountain, visiting three different spirit caretakers (*itekomej*).

This renewed interest was mainly motivated by two reasons. The first is somehow “exogenous” having to do with a Catholic group of young priests that have understood that some indigenous practices could be potentially reframed and labeled as “Catholic” and conflated with “cultural” values against the growing numbers of Evangelicals and Protestant conversions in the highlands. The second reason, which could be called “endogenous”, has to do with the recurrent dreams of several women about the mountain Owner, *Tipewewe*, and his dangerous sadness for not being remembered. These women eventually convinced their husbands and together looked for a diviner,

Aristeo, to continue the visits. These two groups –locals and priests– united to enthusiastically rekindle mountain visitations and offerings. However, the Catholic priests moved on after three years while Masewal people have continued doing the visitations every year, in June.

On June 15 of 2014 I accompanied my Masewal friends to pay a visit to Tipwewe, “the mountain elder”. For the first time in local memory, a mestizo, a *koyotl*, was allowed not only accompany them to the mountain but also to audio record and to take photos of such offerings. “Why are we to feel embarrassed by this?” said Aristeo, the main *tlamatk* leading the offering, when he finally accepted my request, “We live here. When they let us, this is what we do. Because it is needed, because we must. Now, we will do it with joy.”<sup>25</sup> It is true that my many years as a guest and as a dancer had given me some access to celebrations and discourses that are otherwise denied or hidden to foreigners. However, I noticed that this time it wasn’t less about an individual granted access and more about a local reinforcement of values and traditions, of “remembrance.”

Unlike previous times in which only one place was visited, that day we visited three places in different parts of the mountain. We first visited the top, then we went down to the river, finally we went up again to a minor rock formation

---

<sup>25</sup> “¿Porqué nos va a dar vergüenza? Si aquí vivimos. Cuando nos dejan lo hacemos. Porque hace falta y tenemos que.” Field Notes 2014.

uphill. Every one of these places formed a crack in the mountain, a seeming hole into it. Masewal call each of these places *kalnakas* or "mountain ear". On each of these places Aristeo whispered and talked to the mountain in both Nahuatl and Spanish, leaving food offerings, and burning incense. I here attach first in Nahuatl and then in English the words of Aristeo and Miguel, his assistant to the mountain spirits and to one another after each parliament and offering (see Appendix)

At dusk, as we were walking down the mountain, I asked Aristeo why we visited all those different spirit-places. Stopping, he laconically responded, "we have always done it this way, don't you remember?" "No I don't", I answered. "No matter", he benevolently continued walking, "we forgot too for a while, but now we asked, and we just remembered again. This is the way it was always done back then." I was left to ponder upon Aristeo's words all the way back to town. Indeed I didn't remember such an event (visiting three different spirit-places in the mountain) happening in my years visiting Tepetzintla. Was Aristeo assuming I should remember because he figured I had been there long enough? Or by remembering he was perhaps referring to a more general action? As I realized later, it was the second option. For Aristeo, a diviner, certain specific ways of acting (in this case visiting particular crevasses and caves in the mountain) generate in fact remembrance.

Jaime is a carpenter. He learned his trade working for a mestizo, a *koyotl* carpenter in Puebla City, where he lived for almost 20 years. Since he returned to Tepetzintla, he has been interested in local politics, he even ran for municipal president once, in 2000, and he lost. The candidate that won that year had too much money and bought the votes he needed. He was too a *koyotl*. Although Jaime is becoming a respected elder and he is still very much involved in local affairs, he is also beginning to realize that his chance to run again for local office might never come. I enjoy talking to Jaime because he is an honest man, and he always knows the ins and outs of local news. He has never been particularly interested in dances or in *Kostumbres*, or "customs", because he thinks people get distracted from the "real issues" by them. However, in recent years he has begun to change his mind. Two of his oldest sons are now Apache dancers. I asked him what he thought about that, "I told them to do it, and they accepted my boys [...] it is the time. Here we all have to do it, I say. Also, we now need the dancers here, in town, more than we need more garbage from elections! Hahahaha".<sup>26</sup>

Through these varied narratives and experiences, we can start to understand some of the sources for the recent reemergence of dances as a local practice geared towards

---

<sup>26</sup> "Yo les dije que fueran y sí aceptaron is muchachos [...] ya es tiempo. Todos aquí tenemos que entrarle, yo digo. Ora, hacen falta más danzantes aquí en el pueblo, ¡mejor que la mierda de las elecciones! Jajajaja", Field Notes 2015.

understanding social practice in connection with ill weather and misfortune. An idea has been developing in the doing of these practices, and is perhaps powerful, as it seems to be transversally running across standardized religion, farming, social participation, and political activism.

This contagious idea is being locally rebranded in terms of “tradition” and “culture”. It has no proper definition and no leader overtly acting to uphold it. It is an idea merged with different practices and elicited in informal gatherings. It is an idea about caretaking, and about reconnecting what is considered to be a broken world. Felipe, a fellow *Tipekayomej* dancer in previous years, was climbing the mountain and helping the diviner. Felipe lost his entire crops after Earl in 2013, and the shed that he kept in his milpa. Felipe is a returning émigré and owns a truck, with which he does trips taking people and goods to regional market towns. All of Felipe’s brothers and recently, his own wife had converted to Protestantism, while he stubbornly stayed Catholic and became more active on certain activities, such as accompanying the diviner to the mountain. In Felipe’s words:

“Now, why us, here? We have always grown corn, we kept our milpa gardens. [we are] Poor people. In the city, we were just doing foul things, bad things. Now some

[people] have no jobs, others lose our crops, pigs. We come back from there [the city] and we forget [...] the dance help us to remember how it was, how it must be, in case we forget again. Again."<sup>27</sup>

Fundamentally, for Masewal people of Tepetzintla region, remembering is a way to express the connection that needs to be recovered in order to also regain what has been lost. Masewal people identify generational embracement of modernity in the form of migration, together with the progressive abandonment of traditional farming and even of language use as the main actions of 'forgetfulness.' Dancing, ascending to mountains, and recognizing the spirits in the landscape are, in turn, all actions locally associated to a notion of 'remembrance' or *kilnamitl*. These two tropes—forgetfulness and remembrance—regularly appear in conversations when talking about 'the young' people or 'the old' ways. Beyond being an arguably common generational conflict what Masewal people are signaling is. But what has indeed been lost?

Dances are tied then to a general preoccupation in Tepetzintla, ignited by catastrophic weather, poor harvests, and

---

<sup>27</sup> "Ora ¿Porqué a nosotros aquí? Siempre sembramos el maíz, cuidamos nuestras Milpitas. [Somos] Gente pobre. En la ciudad nomás hacíamos cochinadas, cosas malas. Ora la gente ya no tiene trabajo, otros perdemos cosecha, puercos. Venimos de allá [la ciudad] y nos olvidamos [...] danzas es para acordarnos cómo fue, cómo tiene que ser, por si se nos olvida otra vez. Otra vez." Field Notes 2014.



economic depression and religious competition. The local diagnosis has to do with cumulative collective misbehavior, locally spelled as 'forgetfulness.' In turn, such forgetfulness is defined by un-thoughtful modernization and abandonment of farming and local engagement with tradition and customs or *Kostumbre*. Finally, tradition is just a word for a series of practices and discourses around ongoing negotiations with local landscape spirits.

### **III. V. The end of the background**

I have described so far the different geographical, demographic, social and historic contexts that pin this research focused on how Masewal people are looking to renew their relations with the landscape in light of calamitous weather and the advent of mining and dam projects in the region. Through the description of the and geographical characteristics of the highlands of Puebla, its fauna and plants, and its pre-human history, I have tried to frame the kind of conditions that mark this territory and how they have been integrated by Masewal *kostumbre* and are now part of their social relations as is any local person. I have provided also some basic demographic information and a short account about the main economic activities, infrastructure, and population and general

distribution of the town of Tepetzintla. In the series of historical vignettes offered I have attempted to evoke the different moments at which Masewal people have faced drastic changes and adapted to a series of regimes and institutions all the while maintaining their territory and farming activities. The limited historic information on Tepetzintla forces me to imagine it by reading the larger regional studies on neighboring towns.

I have also presented the main institutions around which Masewal social life revolves and that mark the times and relations between people and landscape: *compadrazgo*, *mayordomías* and divination (or shamanism). These three practices are deeply interwoven. If *mayordomías* are predicated on the circulation of sacred figurines between households, it does so by implying also a circuit of *compadres*, indeed, *mayordomos* of the same image will treat each other as *compadres*. Similarly, *compadres* help each other when one of them is entrusted with a compromise or commitment, a *mayordomía*. Importantly, *compadrazgo* unites households, not merely men, hence, groups of households via *compadrazgo*, will work together during ritual celebrations but also will coalesce (or break), facing others at times of political elections. Diviners are needed constantly in these affairs (*mayordomías*, *compadrazgo*, political organization) and

much of what they do is related to protect their own (compadres) and attack others. Divination is also prevalent as a

By briefly describing the more recent events and transformations that have occurred in the last few decades, I have sketched the main tropes in local affairs, namely migration (erupting after the construction of the Inter-Serrana highway) and subsequent urbanization of many families; the gradual abandonment of local farming practice paired to that of Nahuatl language; massive conversion to Protestantism and the linked conflicts, breaks and rearrangement of relations between families; and the arrival of political parties after the debacle of the one party system after 2000.

Indeed, most local Masewal people have been deeply invested on all these transformations, and have now also, a critique on their own enthusiasm and involvement. What twenty years ago looked as the beginning of a new era and the end of poverty and starvation, has eventually developed, for many local people, into a profound dissatisfaction with urban life, and critical evaluation of those same changes.

In the following chapters I offer an ethnographic analysis of the main concerns and practices in which Masewal people in Tepetzintla engage regularly.

## IV. WHAT IS A HOUSE?

### IV.I. Houses and mountains: altars, hearths, and sweat lodges

Masewal houses in the highlands of Puebla are more than mere dwelling facilities, and more than just property. Houses are living places, inhabited by ancestral spirits. Each house is therefore a sentient place possessing a certain level of participation in family life but also a morality that requires acknowledgment and respect. In Tepetzintla as in other indigenous regions of Mexico, houses can be thought of as places where transformation happens. On the one hand, people become objectified after death in altars and offerings, on the other, some objects become subjectified, such as the hearth, the sweat lodge or the entire house (Rosemary and Gillespie 2000). Houses not only are edifices built to accommodate and protect people, but this protection and comfort becomes a source for a relation of debt and interdependence with them.

Masewal people in Tepetzintla inhabit permanent dwellings in each of the three *barrios* or “sections” of the town. Some people keep a second house –a woodshed really– near their milpa gardens up in the mountain or down by the river, which they move into near harvest time in order to take care of the maize during

the last stages of its growth, when birds and mammals can eat it. Houses were traditionally all made of native pinewood and/or locally made adobe with tile roofs. Nowadays however, urban materials are predominant, and houses are made of red brick but mostly gray concrete and asbestos with cheap metal roofs.

Whatever the materials, houses have some sort of open space or patio where people do manual labor—cleaning corn, drying beans— and pens for chickens and turkey. Some houses still keep an attic (*ajkopa*) where the maize is stored. Most houses have small gardens where women grow some medicinal herbs, vegetables, flowers, and spices. Masewal houses, as different as they might come, have a main room dedicated to all sorts of social and ceremonial activities. The rest of the rooms in a house, when there are any, become private bedrooms, usually closed to strangers, and where the *chanchiwanej*, “those who live inside of the house”, sleep and keep their goods and valuables.

The main room or *weyi kalijtik* “big house inside”, together with the patio, is where visitors are received and offered food and where the household’s altar is placed. This altar, called *santokal* or “saint’s house”, imitates in some ways the one at the town’s church although each household altar changes over time and becomes unique as it includes preferred images obtained over the years and during different pilgrimages. There is however a principle of connection and hierarchy between these

altars. When speaking about their own household altar, Masewal people refer to them as *chico* "small" and to the one at the town's church as *grande* "big".

A wooden table against the wall adorned with flowers and ribbons makes the *santokal*. Although according to some elders, domestic altars used to be oriented towards the west, nowadays the particulars of each house tend to impede such ordering; however all domestic altars must be seen directly from the main door. In part, the modernization on house edification has impacted how the space is used and managed so, even if altars tend to be placed on the largest room, next to the door and with a vast empty wall behind them, I have seen many altars placed under the stairwell, or even in the kitchen.

On these altars people also place effigies and picture cards with images called *estampas*, of Saints and Virgins, relics from peregrination sites, candles and incense, and an assortment of paper, metal and plastic ornaments. Household altars are usually illuminated, multicolored, fragrant, and misty places. Masewal people jokingly say the images in the *santokal* are their "lawyers" and that the stamps with their portraits are their "credentials". The patron saints and other deities issue such IDs, instead of being dispensed by a government agency. These images also show the preferential allegiances of each household member to a particular saint or virgin, they mark trade patrons

(for carpenters, musicians, healers) as well as mementos from past pilgrimages. Some images become popular, due to the constant changes and influences of new pilgrimage destinies and migration patterns, while others fade to the back of the altar. Altars are too are where visiting images of saints, "good" (*kwali*) nonhuman entities, come to "sit and cool off and rest". Houses would seem thus "over crowded" spaces that require sanctioned ordering. Besides the people and animals, both the saints of the *santokal* and the ancestral couple inhabit each house and, arguably, the former could be thought of as hosted by the latter.

For most Catholic Masewal people the *santokal* is the most important place in their house. It is a place of reference, a shield against witchcraft, a "readable" apparatus of each family's alliances and peregrination experiences, and, for households at a certain moment, the place where the *mayordomía* effigies are hosted and fed throughout the year.

In similarity with other protocols of relation such as *compadrazgo*, there are two groups of clearly distinguished invisible beings living at each Masewal house. On the one hand, the ancestral couple (*kalwewetsin* and *kaltlamatsin*) embodied in the rocks sustaining the heart; on the other, the collections of saints and virgins at the *santokal* that can, on occasion, be accompanied by a *mayordomía* sacred effigy. The work of saints

and *mayordomía* effigies, in similarity to that of *tlanosalmej* or “callers” and even of *tlamatkimej* or “diviners” is one of negotiation. The equivalence with all of these human and nonhuman authorities with lawyers or attorneys is not accidental. According to Crispín the diviner, for example, powerful mountain spirits have “offices” inside the mountain in which they keep archives and papers with the deeds and of people. Diviners can visit in dreams such subterranean offices and request for such papers through offerings. Diviners can, in short, advocate for human’s health and fortune. For old Crispín, some of the authorities visited in the mountain are in contact with others in different mountains, creating a vast web of communications that reaches Mexico City, the capitol of the country.

For many of my Masewal interlocutors, both people and spirits, including saints, are entities that must be convinced coerced or appeased and that requires knowledge of specific respectful speech, resistance to harm *chikawalis* or “strength”, and the proper offerings. Just like diviners, or callers during a *mayordomía*, lay people can speak to powerful saints, with no other mediation, at their domestic altar.

All of the saints and virgins inhabit each *santokal* and must be “maintained” and “remembered” by household members. The images of each household altar are fed throughout the year and



their food consists of candles (lighted), water, and incense smoke. To have an altar means to be connected somehow not only with local potencies but also with foreign, far away entities (a popular current example is the image of the German virgin of Schönstatt with a temple in the city of Querétaro over 150 miles to the northeast).

The household altar also functions as a place of interconnection between households –as in *compadrazgo*– and with nonhumans. Or, as the diviner Crisanto told me once, altars are like computers or TVs because “...they allow one to view and to talk to others far away.”<sup>28</sup> Domestic altars, like the mountains, resonate and pass on information through prayers and dreams, and people can reestablish contact with their beloved dead ancestors as well as with their living relatives who emigrated elsewhere. It is worth mentioning

Indeed, *santokal* gives in a way access to a supra-regional geography connecting faraway places (indirectly to even Germany, for example). More importantly perhaps is the fact that each *santokal* is a reservoir of each of the household inhabitants’ travels and experiences, while the objects collected and displayed in them are attached to deceased or otherwise absent relatives. Santokal is where food for the dead is placed during *Mikelmey Tonalmej* “Days of the Dead” each year. Each *santokal* resonates thus with emotion (affect) as much as it proclaims the

---

<sup>28</sup> “...lo dejan a uno ver y hablar con otros que andan lejos” Field notes 2011.

vast network to which each household is connected. Just like mountains, as we will describe later, each *santokal* is a place that exhibits the relations between people and spirits and a favored device for facilitating remembrance.

Under the table of every altar, valuables are located: bottles of Coke and alcohol, larger candles and, in time of festivities, baskets with flowers and food. The *santokal* is the most sacred place in a house and lies and insults are not tolerated in front of it. It is the place where visitors are received and expected to kneel and make the sign of the cross to “salute the altar” and where, in times of dances, the dancers’ masks are placed to rest and are also fed.

The *santokal* is a necessary artifact of every house, open to strangers, related to patrilineal descent and to ritual hierarchy and obligations and is part of a major local interest and technology of communication with the spiritual world, and through it, also to important far away places, such as Mexico City, as I mentioned before.

There is a third level for this omnipresence, the mountain itself. All saints and virgins live “in the sky” and highest mountaintops are the places where they can be more effectively addressed. Several crosses and altars are placed on trails and water springs, caves and crevasses around the Chignamasatl

Mountain and are also "houses" for some saints. Each house in town is thus ultimately connected to the mountain itself:

The hearth or *tlekwil* is another necessary place for every Masewal household. Even as younger women prefer modern stoves and kitchens, they all maintain a hearth, fed by firewood, outside the main building. The traditional hearth works on lumber and therefore produces constant smoke and cannot be inside of a walled structure. Women spend most of their days around the hearth, making tortillas and preparing different kinds of food, taking care of their children, and the surrounding pens and gardens. The hearth must always be kept alight or at least have some "live cinders" in it. The hearth, where food is prepared, is supposed to feed the family just as it must be fed, as it is also, like the house itself, alive. It is said that a hearth must always produce some heat; a cold, unused hearth is inadequate and results in ill fortune. However, the hearth is not an entirely female domain, as it is where the "old couple", the "grandparents of the house" lives. These entities are the stones that form the hearth, taken from the mountain by the patriarch when the house was originally constructed and ritually placed after a promissory sacrifice.

The couple, *kalwewetsin* and *kaltamatsin*, "dear house's grandfather" and "dear house's grandmother", respectively, are objects and people at the same time. Thus, the stones must be

treated with “respect” not to be hit, kept unclean or mistreated in any way. My Masewal interlocutors have also explained to me that because the stones that build the hearth in each house are all taken from the mountain, they instantiate a similar hierarchy and original connection between all houses.

According to old Anselmo, any solid (basaltic) rock found in the owner’s land would do for such task. “They are just rocks” he said once, just after signaling how important is not to hit them or to speak disrespectfully in their presence. The rocks need to be chosen as a couple –male and female– leaving offerings of *aguardiente* and incense in the spot where they were located and then be transported, with no other ceremony to the lot where a house will be built. In many occasions people will just choose from rocks that have been just uncovered *in situ* at the time of construction. This unfixed or arguably vague way to refer to things and spirits is indeed intended. Part of what brings the attention of such invisible and impermanent beings is to name them often, overtly and carelessly.

The *temaskal* or sweat lodge is perhaps the most intimate space of every Masewal household and is not to be shared—in contrast with kitchens and altar rooms—or even mentioned to strangers. The people use it with purpose, either after a particular taxing day, to treat or recover from sickness or to treat pregnancy.

*Temaskal* baths are taken invariably at night. These sweat lodges are small, almost invisible semi buried mounds in the back of every house, sometimes covered with plastic blankets and floored with pine needles and hay. Steam is created with hot stones heated with lumber and then placed in water receptacles in a little niche connected to the sweat lodge. Used mostly during the cold season (October-February), these spaces are built for the first time in a new house with pregnancy. Pregnant women are supposed to have a series of ritual baths and be massaged by a *teese* or "midwife". After delivery, women will be wrapped with a traditional woolen belt around their waist to help them recover after the delivery. *Temaskal* means, "bath house" and is a predominantly feminine space, associated with a woman's womb and where an unnamed *abuelita* or *tesi* "grandma" lives. Ancient Nahuatl speaking people would call this female entity *Tlalilyolotl* or "earth's heart", and also *Toci* "our grandmother" (which resonates with the current term used for midwives, *teese*), or *Temaskalteki*, "our bath house grandmother" (Lopez Austin 1997). In Tepetzintla, domestic *temaskal* lodges are identified as not part of the house. Both Rosalba and Manuela, at different times, told me that *temaskal* lodges are like a cave, a *tipeijtik* or "mountain's belly". The term -ijtik is somewhat elusive for it can sometimes be used to refer generically to innards, while at times it is equaled to a

stomach or a uterus. This last use I believe is the appropriate one, for women use a *temaskal* at different times of need (before and after delivery), as a place to recreate a dark, steamy, wet and fertile place where life is created.

### **III.II. Overcrowded houses**

Houses are thus more than mere dwellings for the Masewal people in Tepetzintla, although they are the place where most of life's daily activities happen. Households are not independent or autonomous units but are interconnected to each other through different rituals, through Saints and their altars, and, saliently, through *mayordomías*, which operate as an invisible trail in time that unites the households of different *mayordomos* every year, making their human inhabitants *compadres* with one another. Moreover, each household possesses a direct connection too to the land itself in which it was built and also with the mountain spirits and the underworld's ancestral entities. The ritual of *kalwewetsin* "old and dear house elder" is precisely dedicated to the ancestral entities that reside in each house, protecting (or harming if mistreated) its inhabitants. Fire, earth, and sky forces come to meet in every Masewal household, either at the altar (*santokal*), the hearth (*tlekwil*), or the sweat lodge (*temaskal*). A number of crucial actions (which

involve sacrifices, offerings, exchanges, and healing rituals) are performed inside each house for the benefit of its inhabitants, including the spiritual ones.

Houses, as structures, possess some anthropomorphic qualities as well. According to Masewal interlocutors, they have *kalnakas* or “house-ears” in every corner; they have a “house-heart” or *kalyolo* at their center. That is why roosters and chickens are usually placed under the main house’s columns (*tlaximalli*) and on each of its corners. “We do this for the house”, said Domingo once, “it allows it to hear and to know”. Like people, houses know through their hearts and are thus also alive, as they can manifest some emotions towards their inhabitants. Houses can also get sick sometimes, and this happens because the people that live in them have “forgotten” about them. As a result, houses become offended. An “offended house” or *kwalankali*, can potentially harm rather than protect its inhabitants. Harm can manifest individually but it usually takes on the entire household, which includes the people and domestic animals in it.

This original couple of *kalwewetsin* and *kaltlamatsin* “house grandparents” are not the only spirits inhabiting a household. The dead are also present in every Masewal house once a year, when they arrive to pay a visit to their descendants and to feast on their offerings of food placed for them at the house’s

altar. According to common knowledge in Tepetzintla, in the underworld or *tlalokan*, every year is like a day and so, while it takes a year for the living to repeat the offerings each November (during the week of *Días de Muertos*, *mikitonalmey* or “dead days”), for the dead instead, the feast happens every day. That is, the dead inhabit in a world of plenty in which it is always harvest season. Failing to leave offerings is certainly dangerous, as the dead, according to all Masewal people, become offended at not being remembered properly and can take people back with them as repayment when they leave, and it is usually babies and small children.

### **III.III. Houses are everywhere**

Animals have houses just as spirits do. Therefore, caves, rivers, bridges, ponds, and even trees can potentially be someone’s house. Tombs are certainly regarded as houses just in the same way as the cemetery is viewed as a whole village, or *mikialtipetl*, the “village of the dead.” The town’s temple is referred to as a house, for Jesus Christ (*Totatsin*, our father), the Virgin of Guadalupe (*Tonantsin*, “our mother”), and the saints. Even the Chignamasatl Mountain itself is a colossal house, on which watery inside (*tlalijtik* “earth’s belly”) the mountain people or *tlalokanchanekej* dwell. At the same time, all



of the earth, or at least the highlands, are where Mother and Father Earth reside *Tlaltikpak Nana* and *Tlaltikpak Tata*. The latter is also known as *Tipewewe* "the grandfather mountain".

Such a world implies recognition of space as a constant intersection of overlapping houses and thresholds. Like the Maya people studied by Gillsepie (2000), Masewal people observe too a set of contrasting scale relations where houses are microcosms (they encompass all the relations with the "outside") and cosmic relations are also reproductions of a house (Lok 1989).

Perhaps the best image to understand this notion of overlapping thresholds is the one used by the Masewal people themselves. After my unceasing questioning on the subject, Anselmo, my friend and host took a traditional basket-like mat or *petate*, an intensely interwoven structure. He signaled at the interwoven threads that formed it and said, "it is just like that, [maybe] we are stepping on top of someone else's house. We don't know".<sup>29</sup> I partially understood that in the same way, these coinciding houses, interlocked in space, are bound to become the source of unceasing conflict as humans keep crossing and acting on them every day. "All Masewal people" might not share Anselmo's philosophical posture but I certainly found that it was consistent with some of my other interlocutors' views and experiences. Houses, churches, caves, and mountains are so close

---

<sup>29</sup> "así mero igual. Ora estamos pisando la casa de alguien por allá. No sabemos " Field notes 2011.

together that people and spirits are bound to interact and find cause for conflict. Such assumption of inherent and unavoidable closeness, or interweaving, makes many Masewal people ponder about their own actions and repercussions. Growing corn in the mountain and building houses are probably the two most sanctioned and cautiously performed activities as, traditionally, Masewal tend to be especially attentive (cautious and fearful) to the actions that end up in transformations of the landscape.

As I will detail in the next section, each house is shared with invisible beings (ancestral spirits and saints) because it is a contested space as well.

#### **III.IV. To cure a house: *kalwewetsin***

Respect, relatedness and remembrance are fundamental to social life for Masewal people in Tepetzintla. The house occupies the most important role as *locus* (together a scenario, place, structure, subject and object) for ritual performance. Ritual kinship is acknowledged as a necessary outcome in almost any ritual, a referendum on old pacts, a remembrance –an insisting point made by Masewal interlocutors– of the work or *tekitl* (a local and dense notion that relates work not to a paid labor but to “one’s duty”) done by the ancestors.

A ritual of “remembrance” must be performed in order to appease the ancestors of the house at times of strife. The ceremony is focused on *kalkilnamitl* “remembering the house”, by making noises that sound like the construction process itself (hammering nails, sawing wood, placing planks and tiles). This ceremony is called *kalwewetsin*, which literally means “house dear male elder”, but is locally translated to Spanish as *fiesta a los abuelitos de la casa* or “dear grandparents celebration” (fieldwork 2012). *Kalwewetsin* bears resemblance with other forms of *compadrazgo* celebrations, although therapeutic ends always motivate it, and it is not addressed to other human people but to the house itself.

Over my years visiting Tepetzintla I had heard about the old ceremony of *kalwewetsin* but I was also assured that it was not practiced anymore. It had become forsaken as padre Germán, the local parish priest almost two decades ago, had forbidden people to do it, as it was a flagrant pagan rite. My Masewal friends do not hold fond memories of padre Germán. In recent years, as it is the case with other local practices, people started to perform *kalwewetsin* ceremonies again. Such ceremonies are still rare and are also highly private events and I was never invited to attend to one until in the year of 2012 my friends Anselmo and Rosalba decided to go for it after consulting with their friend and *compadre* Domingo, a local

diviner. Anselmo's knees were failing and hurting and he was unable to go up the mountain to care for his milpa garden while Rosalba had more frequent headaches and suffered dizziness from her diagnosed diabetes. To this was also added the malady of Maribel, her youngest daughter who was also sick. Besides sickness the whole household was affected by accumulated envy and witchcraft as Anselmo himself is a diviner and has many enemies. The conditions were in short ripe for the cleansing powers of a *kalwewetsin* ceremony to occur. This time I was invited to attend (the ceremony taking place in the room I occupied) and allowed to take photos, video and to audio record everything. I did, to some degree but the rhythm and dynamic of the *kalwewetsin* eventually took my mind from the invisible wall that implies the registration of data. And so, I ate, prayed, drank and danced with my friends hoping for the house spirits to listen to them, to take pity on their many afflictions. That night was, I must confess, one of those moments (along with some moments during dances and one time, during a visit to a mountain caves) in which I was overwhelmed by the emotions and intimacy of this important event in my friends' lives.

Masewal people know that after a house has been built, the *kalwewetsin* must take place, even though often enough a few years pass before a family celebrates it. It is thus assumed that a latent and growing harm exists within the house, which

may affect any one of its inhabitants during the time before the ritual is performed. Eventually, when someone in the house falls ill and no cure can be found, or when misfortune and adversities withhold the family, the *kalwewetsin* must take place.

Importantly, Masewal people are very clear in distinguishing that *kalwewetsin* is not a celebration for finishing building a house. That is the local ritual of *kalilwitl*, *fiesta de la casa* in Spanish, or “celebration for the house”, where the builders celebrate the termination of the construction process and they place a cross in the roof of it.

The ritual of *kalwewetsin* is something else; it is not the celebration of the ending of an immediate event, nor is it repeated annually in a periodical plea. A *kalwewtsin* happens when a number of unfortunate events accumulate around a household, typically death and disease in the family, poor harvests and lost farm animals, loss of a job in the city, and other hardships. In other words, a *kalwewetsin* is a ritualized opportunity to collectively address the negative consequences of having “forgotten” the ancestral spirits of the house. That is, an opportunity to collectively remember. “Remembering” here implies not a verbal or mental act done in private by an individual, but a social, material and coded set of actions performed collectively and in a predetermined time or fashion. Emotionally relevant and public relations (what Westerners would

call "kinship" or "friendship") are locally viewed as bonds established not just between living humans but also amongst a more diverse networks of nonhuman entities and dead relatives.

During the *kalwewetsin*, Masewal people acknowledge an event that occurred in the past, years or even decades before the harm falls upon the family. It is because of this old debt that the ritual is an evocation, a "form of remembering". *Kalwewetsin* brings into current relevance something that time cannot revoke.

In general terms, the first step is to diagnose the need for such an expensive and wearisome ritual and just as any other therapeutic practices, *kalwewetsin* commences by first detecting the illness in one or more members of the family that inhabit the house, a discomfort that may comprise stomach or head aches, bad luck, loss of appetite, of sleep or of the will for labor. They then approach a diviner or *tlamatk*, whose first task is to identify the origin of the evil. The *tlamatk* will ask several questions. Among the first ones he (diviners are always men) will ask if the *kalwewetsin* has been performed, depending on the life cycle of the patient's domestic group.

With a positive diagnosis, a date is set to perform the ritual in the house. Once diagnosed by a local diviner, the *chanchiwanej*, the household patriarch and his wife, must nominate the "house *compadres*" *nomojmontsi* and *nojssisiwa* (him and her, respectively) who are generally chosen among those who

have already been co-parents to bring an offering and to speak in favor of the inhabitants to the house spirits. The hosts must collect the resources and money calculated by the diviner and proposes a date to perform the ceremony. Usually a Saturday night, as Sunday is a rest day and the *kalwewetsin* takes all night. Just as in other *compadrazgo* celebrations, all the family group or *chanchiwanej* that live in the house will become related to the "house compadres" and, from this point forward, they will reciprocally treat each other "with respect".

A chicken is offered to the house *tikmetiaincali*, "so nothing happens" at the central post of the house or *tzintlacali*, incense is burnt and a chicken is offered to the *compadre* (it used to be a male turkey) "just as in the offering of All Saints". When the offering is set in the house and the flower ornaments and necklaces *xochikoskatl* are made, the "dance of tile" is performed, where the *compadre* literally dances with a tile from the house and then the *chanchiwanej* follow, one tile for men and another tile for women, simultaneously. According to Masewal Domingo, a Masewal diviner, the tiles represent the house itself and the purpose is to calm its anger through the dance offered. The dance lasts for several hours. After this, two men ascend to the house's roof (a sort of attic actually, where the maize is commonly stored) and dance again. At this time, they are not humans but *pollomej* or chicken-men. They

squeak and scream, they thump on the roof's floor; they use tools (saw, hammer, and nails) and playfully clatter all over the structure, evoking the noises made when the house was built. Meanwhile, in the ground floor, the *chanchiwane* (domestic group) and the *tlamatki* (ritual specialist) keep on dancing and drinking copiously. At around midnight the prepared turkey, the main offering, is taken by the *pollomej* and devoured. They must eat it all, and they make again eloquent noises and jokes about it.

At this point, the *pollomej* have become the house elders, they are the ancestors accepting the offering. After a few more hours, before sunrise, the *pollomej* climb down the roof and join the rest of the group. They all keep drinking alcohol (they all are inebriated at this point) and finally thank each other following the *compadrazgo* formal salutation protocol, that is, they are now *compadres*.

The way the relations are established can be confusing even to some local people. At the beginning of the *kalwewetsin*, the "house *compadres*" are godparents of the house itself bringing gifts. However, later during the night, when the *pollomej* arrive some roles are changed. The *pollomej* are first ignored and taken upstairs. It is only after they have fulfilled their work, dancing, that the *pollomej* are treated with respect, just like *compadres*, and eat the offering (the turkey and chicken), and it



would appear that they eat themselves. What happens is that now, the *pollomej* have embodied the house spirits, and this is the most sacred moment of *kalwewetsin*, and it is their name –as indeed *them*– that they enjoy the offered meal. The rest of the guests also eat the secondary offering placed on the second table for the *xantilmej*, and in a way, also participate in this transformation, eating the offered tamales and atole in their name, they (we) are *xantilmej*, pre-Christian spirits.

As is with the case of themed *danzas*, in which dancer effectively embody mountain and ancestral spirits to socialize them, during the ceremony of *kalwewetsin*, the climax is reached when the *pollomej* (embodied house spirits) accept and eat the offering provided by the house' inhabitants. In both cases, the emphasis is placed in the creation of bodies for spirits to visualize them and, in a second move, to also temporarily "domesticate" them in order to bring them into a relation with humans.

The ritual of remembrance in *kalwewetsin* ends in high hopes that misfortune and calamities will be avoided for a time, abjuring evil spirits and, more than anything else, appeasing the house spirits. If bad things keep happening to the house inhabitants, their gardens, or their animals, they will perform a lesser version of *kalwewetsin*, "the female part" called *kaltlamatsin* or "house dear female elder". I didn't witness a

*kaltlamatsin*, but my Masewal friends say it is the second (remedial) and feminine part of *kalwewetsin*, dedicated this time to the female ancestor spirit. According both to Anselmo and Rosalba and to the other diviners (Domingo and Crispín), *kaltlamatsi* requires fewer resources and less offerings and no *pollomej*. It is supposed to be a complement after the big *kalwewetsin* celebration.

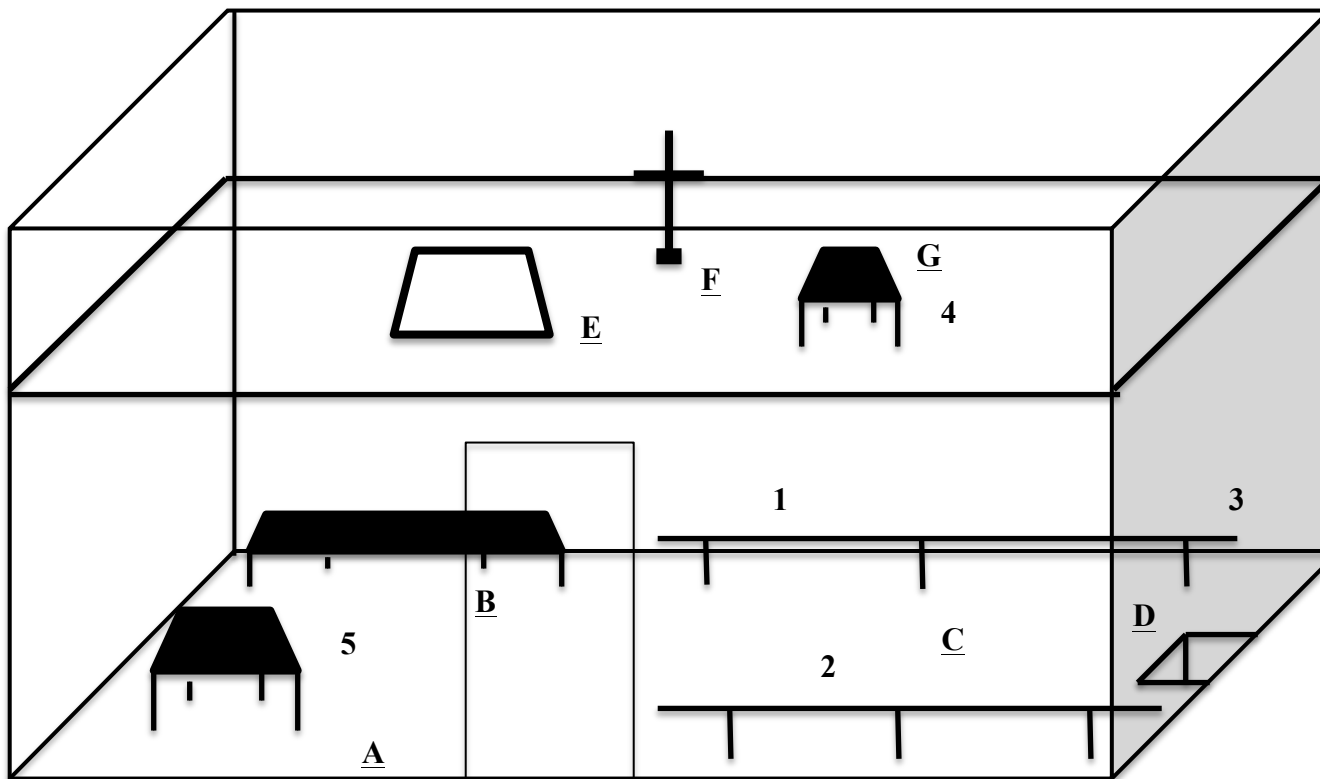
*Kalwewetsin* (and the possible sequel: *kaltlamatsin*) differs from all other local therapeutic rituals in that the evil pursued is not an act of witchcraft, evil eye or envy, nor does it result from a fright or the fall of shadow, all of these being the effects of direct and individual action of male and female witches, neighbors turned enemies or the beings that inhabit the woods. The evil is not caused by the action of the spirits of the deceased that crave for life, nor by the accidental crossing, while searching for firewood, herbs or hunting, with the "Lord of the Mountain" *tipetlwewetl*, an entity considered to be lord of life and earth.

In direct parallel to what dancers do, by embodying spirits Masewal people look to generate relations of reciprocity and to avoid harm. In this particular case, the house itself, as explained before, has a will of its own, and because it is not being "remembered", it takes revenge onto the *chanchiwanej*, the domestic group that inhabits it. The harm produced by the house

may not always be centered on an individual, even when it is only one person who directly suffers the effects, or the discomfort. The object of the evil doing is in fact the *chanchiwanej*, the domestic group as an entire household.

Through the connection between domestic altars as devices for hosting and communicating with spirits, and with *kalwewetsin* ceremonies that appease house ones, Masewal people replicate what they do with mountain and landscape spirits. As I will describe later, themed *danzas* operate as communicative and mimetic devices just in the way as the ceremony of *kalwewetsin* does. Both are attempts to acknowledge (remember and respect) the spiritual “owners” of each place, and then to seek for their forgiveness, help and or benevolence. As dancers embody invisible spirit bringing them into sociality, the *pollomej* embody the house ancestral spirits in order to facilitate (and guarantee) that they accept the offerings. Houses like mountains are spaces dominated by spirits, places that contain sustenance and in which humans are considered not the owners or even the inheritors but the temporary beneficiaries and caretakers.

Diagram 1. *Masewal* house during *Kalwewetsin*



A. Table with main offering to <i>kalwewetsin</i>	1 Hosts
B. Table with secondary offering to <i>xantilmej</i>	2 Guests
C. Benches and dancing space	3 Musicians
D. Hole for rooster offering	4 <i>Pollomej</i> dancers
E. Trapdoor	5 Diviner
F. House cross	
G. Table with offering to <i>pollomej</i>	

## **V. MASEWAL EXPANSE: SPIRITED BODIES AND ENCOMPASSING WORK**

### **V.I. The multiple Masewal person**

The general Masewal principles of yearning, communication, sociality, and inhabitation manifested in certain objects, places and events derive from a similar local idea of the person. Like houses and domestic altars, each Masewal person is inhabited by a collection of different invisible entities that manifest (or communicate), at different moments, through desires, capacities, and physical characteristics of the person in question (yearn), and that require constant attention and ritualized responsiveness or sociality. The Masewal concept of the person assumes that multiple and at times contrasting invisible forces motivate the actions, qualities and feelings of each body. In anthropology such invisible (and crucially, not necessarily "interior") entities have been called "souls".

Indeed, perhaps one of the main subjects in the anthropological works among Nahua (Masewal) people has been to

Alessandro Questa, PhD Dissertation's Final Version, November 2017, V4.0 173

inquire about the seeming overabundance of native souls, perhaps because it contrasts with the Western-Christian pairing of body and soul, and the subsequent conception of an individual composed of one of each.

The foundations for the interest in the so-called multiplicity of native souls was originally registered by Spanish early chronicles, and has been interpreted from the study of numerous Pre-Columbian and early Colonial codices, as well as from logs and letters from missionaries, royal bureaucrats, and conquistadors. Chiefly, the work of Bernardino de Sahagún, a Franciscan friar and missionary who became fluent in the Nahuatl language, learned from the last Mexica priests and nobles, who wrote extensive works, is regarded as the most important source. His monumental work, *Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva España* (1999 [1580]), collects testimonies, chants and cosmological narratives from the disappearing local priestly caste as well as from “medicine men”, and from noble warriors and peasants. Sahagún’s methods, which included field observation, iconographic interpretation, co-translation, and transcription of songs, prayers and different technical procedures, have won him the recognition of being a sort of pioneer anthropologist (León-Portilla, 1999). In modern times, the works of Mexican historian Alfredo López Austin (1982, 1997) are recognized as the most persuasive corpus of scholarly

interpretations around Pre-Columbian cosmology, focusing on the analysis of indigenous metaphysical explanations for and local theories about "the soul".

Ethnographies of contemporary Masewal (Nahua) people also tend to include a section on "animic entities" debating their number, characteristics, and local terminologies (Acosta, 2010; Chamoux, 1987; Báez, 1999; Lok, 1991; Millán, 2010; Pérez, 2002). Different ethnographers have registered in different areas of the highlands of Puebla, similar triads of souls as well as various different practices of *nagualism*. Among contemporary Nawat people in San Miguel Tzinacapan, a spectral extra-corporeal soul called *ecahuil/ejkawil* or "shadow" is related to local diseases (Lupo 1995), while in Naupan, the heart is inhabited by an analogous ghostly entity (Báez 1999). Similarly, Knab (1991) and Aramoni (1990), based almost exclusively on interviews with ritual specialists, assumed the multiplicity of indigenous souls. Down south where the state of Puebla borders Oaxaca state, in the Black Sierra, other Nahuatl speaking populations also regard a multiplicity of souls as being responsible for human diseases and behavior (Romero 2007).

Other indigenous societies, such as the Maya Tseltal in Chiapas, for example, also have divergent, extracorporeal, and invisible interiorities, or souls. These inhabit each person while also carrying on an extra corporeal existence inside the

local mountain (Pitarch 2010). Shadowy shapes, luminescent reflections, animal companions, translucent bodies, ethereal beings, are all manifestations of this plurality of invisible interiorities that inhabit, and at times collide, inside each person.

The anthropological literature on the idea of the “primitive” person is vast and dates back to Hamilton’s work among Zuñi people in the late 1800s referring how people would have names associated to specific relations (roles and ranks) that conformed each clan, giving Mauss the idea that personhood was associated to the performance of personages or characters (Mauss 1985 [1937]). Since then, the studies on cultural notions of personhood have sprawled, to understand how a person might comprise different and opposite souls (Griaule 1970), how it entails a life long process in which a person is formed and “completed”, even after death (Fortes 1987), or just how it is not as important, in the famous “depersonalization” in Balinese culture, according to Geertz (1973). The idea of the person has remained however fixed on the notion of a body as a container for different and even temporary souls, names, identities, or characters.

Based mostly on the reports of Sahagún, López Austin has proposed that in Central Mexico, during the Pre-Columbian (Late Post-Classic) and early Colonial periods (16<sup>th</sup> Century), numerous



parts of the human body corresponded to different invisible “animated entities” (1982). The heart, the liver and the top of the head corresponded to the three main body areas (Ibid.), while the sun’s energy was the main force stirring life (Caso 1953, León Portilla 1999). *Tonalli*, “sun” or “sun heat”, dwelling in the forehead, would be a solar entity, obtained at birth and transcending the individual’s life, unrelated to the person’s character. The *ihiyotl*, connected to the anatomic liver as well as to the heart, would be an entity related to individual’s will, strength and prestige (Lopez Austin 1982).

These invisible forces determined a person’s propensity towards a disease as well as her personal characteristics and preferences. Erratic acts and sudden changes of mood could also be associated with the struggle of such invisible forces inside the person (López Austin 1982). A Pre-Columbian person was more akin to a collective of invisible spirits or souls inside each body.

Ethnographies of contemporary Masewal (Nahua) people tend to include a section on “animic entities” debating their number, characteristics, and local terminologies (Acosta, 2010; Chamoux, 1987; Báez, 1999; Lok, 1991; Millán, 2010; Pérez, 2002). Different ethnographers have registered in different areas of the highlands of Puebla, similar triads of souls as well as various different practices of *nagualism*. Among contemporary

Nawat people in San Miguel Tzinacapan, a spectral extra corporeal soul called *ecahuil/ejkawil* or "shadow" is related to local diseases (Lupo 1995), while in Naupan, the heart is inhabited by a similar shadowy entity (Báez 1999). Similarly, Knab (1991) and Aramoni (1990), based almost exclusively on interviews with ritual specialists, assumed the multiplicity of indigenous souls. Down south where the state of Puebla borders Oaxaca state, in the Black Sierra, other Nahuatl speaking populations also regard a multiplicity of souls as being responsible for human diseases and behavior (Romero 2007). Other indigenous societies, such as the Maya Tseltal in Chiapas, for example, also have divergent, extracorporeal, and invisible interiorities, or souls. These inhabit each person while also carrying on an extra corporeal existence inside the local mountain (Pitarch 2010). Shadowy shapes, luminescent reflections, animal companions, translucent bodies, ethereal beings, are all manifestations of this plurality of invisible interiorities that inhabit, and at times collide, inside each person.

More recent ethnographies have paid attention to another element in Nahuatl (Masewal) metaphysics, that of a certain "inner strength" referred as *fuerza* in Spanish or *chikawalis* or *chikawalistli* in Nahuatl language (Acosta, 2010; Pérez, 2002, 2011; Questa, 2010; Ríos, 2010). This invisible strength is

differentially given to people at birth but it is also cumulative. The main way to obtain *chikawalis* is to participate in the town's ceremonial circuits of *mayordmías*, fostering saints; and to have many *compadres*. In other words, the acquisition of *chikawalis* is associated with having a moral and political continued investment in one's town's affairs. If expanding one's relations increases *chikawalis* then it also means it takes time. Older people have, consequently, more strength than children and younger people. Growing *Chikawalis* presents a person with authority and the capacity to be listened to by others. Moreover, *chikawalis* also protects a person against diseases caused by envy and *tlachiwil*, or "witchcraft". A strong person is, in sum, a moral, participative, healthy and mindful person.

These so-called "animic entities" are taken as a given by anthropology done among Nahuatl speaking communities in Mexico. Presupposed to exist by previous literature, the task of the ethnographer has been understood to be one of confirming and accentuating the local variations of indigenous souls already prescribed by history. If multiple souls are not found or if their configuration differs from the pre-established canon, the problem is not that history is somehow wrong but that ethnographic engagement is. My intention is not to confirm or deny such classifications but to destabilize the equivalence

between spirits and souls as my own research indicates that, for Masewal people today, souls are just another variation of spirits.

The problem with the assumption of a Nahua soul is that it pretends to standardize and “translate” diversity into fixed categories equivalent to “souls” (Knabb 1990, Lupo 1989, Millán 2011). Ethnographic engagement tells a different story, in which Masewal people, at least in Tepetzintla and surrounding towns and villages, are less canonical regarding such classifications about their own interiority and are, on the contrary, open to possible variations and quite prone to debate about such possibilities.

In the case of Tepetzintla, Masewal people refer to notions like “souls” as *animatsin*, from the Spanish *anima*, a soul-like notion, indeed a colorless ghost-like image of a person that has a wandering predisposition and constantly abandons the body. Consequently, the *animatsin* needs to eventually be brought back to the person’s body, until inescapably, it elopes at death. Indeed, many times the task of a diviner is to contain the *animatsin* within the boundaries of the person’s body. The diviner’s job circumnavigates many times to guess where the *animatsin* might have gone and what force lured it to a far away place. None of the several diviners and healers I talked to ever questioned “why” this happens. “It wants to go, we have to go

get it back" said many a time Crisanto, "no, we don't know where it goes [the *animatsin*], so we ask around, we go catch them. It is like an animal that wanders off to the mountain."<sup>30</sup> The assumption by Masewal diviners and patients is that the *animatsin* trapped inside the person always wants to leave. It is precious but it does not originally *belong* to the person. The *animatsin* is then also "like an animal", drawn (or ensnared) towards the forested mountain at every opportunity. All *animatsin* ultimately end up with God and more specifically with Christ, who is the Sun.

In Tepetzintla, besides the *animatsin*, inside each human person lies a heart (*iyolo*) that determines her will and disposition. There are also the *itonalmej*, which are up to seven animal spirits associated to each human person at birth. *Tonal* is an ancient and important concept as it means 'sun' but also 'heat' and 'day', it is a term indeed related to all sun-like, day-like, hot, spiritually strong, and living things.

In my own field work, I have assumed that my task is precisely not to ask what a soul is, or how many do Masewal friends envision, but to keep an open stance towards such abstractions and take what I can, infer when possible, and generate opportunities to debate about such matters if Masewal interlocutors are so inclined. Methodologically speaking, I have

---

<sup>30</sup> "Se quiere ir, ora' tenemos que ir traerla", "...no, no sabemos a dónde se va [el *animatsin*], 'tos preguntamos, la vamos traer. Es como el animal, que jala pal' monte" Field notes 2014.

preferred to refrain from launching specific inquiries. My aim has been to decompress the already tight scholarly environment about matters that, in the first place, are quite hard to effectively translate from Nahuatl to Spanish (and to English now), and that are better understood through long exposure, even for locals.

Indeed, younger Masewal have little idea and many have even less interest about how such metaphysical “fluxes”, “capacities” and “entities” (let’s just go along and call them like that) might work. More mature people, exposed to the usual hardships, painful losses, unwanted separations due to migration, and just facing many other such complicated processes, are more lenient to reflect upon such matters, but even then only sometimes, that is: when they need to. Even in these sporadic moments of reflection provoked by necessity, to arrive at a “hard” or “rigid” conceptualization is not their main concern. Contrastingly, the diverse actions of interiorities strongly emerge whenever a disease happens or when a woman is in labor, or when misfortune strikes a family, or when a hurricane or a storm damage fields and lives, only to fade again into the backdrop by the constant influx of life’s happenstances.

More recent ethnographies have paid attention to another element in Nahuatl (Masewal) metaphysics, that of a certain “inner strength” referred as *fuerza* in Spanish or *chikawalis* or

*chikawalistli* in Nahuatl language (Acosta, 2010; Pérez, 2002, 2011; Questa, 2010; Ríos, 2010). This invisible strength is differentially given to people at birth but it is also cumulative. The main way to obtain *chikawalis* is to participate in the town's ceremonial circuits of *mayordomías*, fostering saints; and to have many *compadres*. In other words, the acquisition of *chikawalis* is associated with having a moral and political continued investment in one's town's affairs, especially as mediated by Saints and the Church. If expanding one's relations increases *chikawalis* then it also means it takes time. Older people have, consequently, more strength than children and younger people. Growing *Chikawalis* presents a person with authority and the capacity to be listened to by others. Moreover, *chikawalis* also protects a person against diseases caused by envy and *tlachiwil*, or "witchcraft". A strong person is, in sum, a moral, participative, healthy and mindful person.

### **V.I.I. Spiritual descent**

When it comes to determining certain life processes, such as birth or death, I have observed how many Masewal people will tend to not assume descent over alliance but remain open to possible outcomes. Unlike Western traditions in which blood

quantum, genetics and dynasty take precedence, Masewal people don't seem to give to individual names, physical features or ascendancy the same importance. In fact, in their daily lives they care very little about it. There are many cases in which siblings have different last names and don't recognize the bond as a determining factor, not even for the purposes of spouse choosing. Inversely, I have also observed how local people maintain close ties with their different *compadres*. Such distances and ties have effects on work around milpa gardens, support to sick people, *mayordomías*, call for help when building a house and many other activities that require the help and support of family members or friends.

Usually, siblings –traditionally brothers but nowadays also sisters– will have sometimes land feuds due to inheritance preference from their parents. Although customarily is the eldest son who gets the lands of labor, and the youngest son who inherits the parental household, very often things become more complicated. Close by daughters tend to overtake lands from absent sons (due to emigration), while godparents and uncles will sometimes leave some plots to their godchildren and nephews bringing more lands not without complications. Houses and pens are being built in places where there would only be plots a few years ago. The expansion of human inhabitation is reordering boundaries between maize gardens and families.



Middle sons and daughters often will receive no lands and possibly not even a small plot to build their houses. They become effectively dispossessed and must work on other people's lands and save to buy from others plots and fields or, in most cases, immigrate to the city.

In general, a person is not guaranteed possessions or status from his/her parental household. Marriage, clever negotiations and hard work will usually render more success than waiting for inheritance or living from the parental lands and name. So, a person very quickly needs to start building his own relations in town and elsewhere, participating in different activities that, very slowly, will provide him with a network of kin that can be relatives or not. Such relations take many times precedence over consanguine ties and will even define a person's character traits, preferences, sympathies and antipathies.

This seeming disregard for the primacy of "blood ties", I think, can help us realize the relevance of certain other relations such as *compadrazgo* and *mayordomías* not only in organizing groups of people but also on making a person by delimiting his capacities and providing him with tasks and roles. Moreover, some specific forms of traditional Masewal knowledge such as healing, divination, craftsmanship and dancing, are commonly attained via dreams in which personal relations of alliance with specific spirits are activated,

rather than by family inherited traits. I think now that Masewal consider human life more as a product of a relational process, in which slowly acquired knowledge, prestige and performed behavior, experienced through a constant sequence of adequate exchanges, will determine a person's identity.

The next example I have confirmed over the years at least from three different sources, and still can't quite understand it: it is a common practice that a woman who lost a baby at birth will pay a visit to another woman in town who successfully delivered a baby in the same period of time. She will be allowed to check the back of the baby's ear lobes. If she finds two or more dots, (that could also be bumps or whorls), she will be convinced that this is, in fact, her baby who 'preferred' or 'was sent' to be born from the other woman's womb. The corpse of her baby will not be a definitive counter argument for this assertion and the mother of the (living) baby will not oppose this idea either if she finds the same marks in her baby as well. There is not a denial that a baby effectively died; however the local exegesis is that the corpse is only flesh while the *ianima* successfully migrated between bodies. The hypothetical *ianima* of the other (living) baby is of no consequence, and Masewal interlocutors have been unconcerned about such hypothetical preexistent surplus; what ultimately

matters is, they say, that a “complete” baby is delivered alive and well.

There is in this example no notion of “mistaken identity” or jealousy over the exclusivity of the baby’s individuality. Personality traits are always an open and constantly merging production anyway. So, the bereaved woman will bring gifts from now on to this other baby and will in turn be called, in some cases, “aunt” by the child and *comadre* by the parents. When possible (as many other variables might impede this) she will become the baby’s godmother. This sharing of a baby can be explained as a traditional form to help to cope with the loss. It also asserts how human life and identity for Masewal people can, at its very beginning, allow for unexpected occurrences and combinations that will be taken into consideration and normalized through due exchange.

Accepting the possibility that a baby can potentially have two mothers, or that it can be born again from a different woman marks, on the one hand, a radical difference with national naming system (voting IDs, legal statuses, etc.). On the other, it stresses how Masewal people are profoundly invested into an idea of a constant expansion of relations through multilayered networks, not constrained by consanguine relations, even in the case of human conception and birth.

An emphasis on an expansive alliance (between people, people and animals, objects, and spirits) stands as the main input that accounts for social inclusion, and it is unequivocally expressed through the quotidian practices of *mayordomías*, *compadrazgo* and dances.

Restrictive descent is not inconsequential. It is clearly expressed through the regulation of land inheritance, and the difficult relations (of indebtedness, gratitude, nostalgia and fear), between the dead and the living. Land inheritance is the main form by which descent is expressed in Tepetzintla, next to naming and cohabitation. Traditionally, the small plots of land are inherited only to direct descendants (sons and daughters) with preference to males. After the death of the male patriarch his widow keeps the house but eventually let's her sons, and daughters take charge. In cases where couples have daughters only, it is the husbands (sons-in-law) who become the effective farmers of such plots. The mounting cases in which male descendants have definitely migrated into the cities have produced an interesting contradiction. On the one hand, land plots are always scarce as most of them are too far and forested to be transformed and managed as milpas effectively. On the other, the abandonment of traditional farming is favoring the regrowth of secondary vegetation with heavy canopy around the town, which requires an increasing amount of hard labor to

reshape as maize gardens. The result is, besides an even thicker fog, that available land for cultivation is becoming rare.

Names are also acquired from ascendants and last names, usually, from the father. The standardization of naming system started less than 50 years ago and some people in town didn't comply with a second, harder push for systematization in the early 90s. Hence, there are cases in which brothers from the same parents have selected different last names, which become more complicated with later generations as their descendants (cousins between them). There are at least two cases I know of in which such cousins quickly obviated this not regulated kinship relation and ended up marrying with one another. The majority of the names however conform to a patrilineal descent norm. Cohabitation is the third practice in which descent takes precedence as children are, in most cases, assumed to live with their parents and take care of them, many years later, in their old age. *Compadres* and *comadres*, as close as they might be to one another, consider a priority to help with work or money their descendants over their godchildren.

Men are supposed to work the inherited land of their patrilineal forebears while women will work the fields of their husband's family. This is just a formula; nowadays women inherit and work land and there is also a local land market in which plots change hands constantly in exchange for money. There are

of course many details regarding the life cycle of each household in which I prefer not to delve just right now.

Inheriting land establishes a relation between ascendants and descendants that goes beyond the death of the first. Dead people are still “the owners” of a household. They continue to be part of the family, and it is the overt responsibility of their direct descendants to provide for them by annual offerings and, in general, by performing “remembrance”. Aggrieved –or indeed forgotten– spirits of the dead will take horrible revenge *exclusively* on their own descendants by killing them for being ungrateful (or forgetful) in some way. The living are never ‘free of their parents’, as they only become more indebted to them with the passing of time. Generations of *wewe* or “grandparents” slowly lose their individual identity and amalgamate into the classificatory category of ancestors, in the words of Anselmo, “they become the same with time. We put just one mug of *atole*, but is for all of them.”<sup>31</sup>

In short, I argue that even if descent is a safeguard institution for maintaining the reproduction of patrilineages and households as well as for the anchoring of land tenure, the drive towards expansive alliances remains as the dominant paradigm exceeding the sphere of family reproduction and enabling all sorts of social practices and relations to

---

<sup>31</sup> “Se hacen la misma, al tiempo. Le ponemos su vaso de *atole*, pero es para todos.” Field Notes, 2013.

continue. As consanguinity warrants the elementary reproduction of family groups (food, housing, caretaking), by constantly projecting alliances between humans and nonhuman collectives (mountain spirits, animals, and the dead), Masewal families are able to expand their relations, securing valuable resources and coverage otherwise out of reach.

This principle finds its best expression in the multifarious practice of *compadrazgo*, in the offering to mountain spirits, and in the performance of dances. In the first, all entities (people, objects, spirits) can possibly become allied through a specific protocol; in the second, potent entities are invoked and interconnected to local affairs, such as weather patterns or disastrous events; the third materializes these alliances in a choreographic and heavily visual performance that ends with a confirmation of such pacts.

#### **V.I.II. The person's spirits outside the body**

Each person has a number of animal spirits, as afore mentioned. It is important to point out that the seven *itonalmej* are not packed inside the person (unlike hearts and souls), but wander on their own as "extracorporeal souls" and remain always up, in the thickest part of the forest, disengaged from most of the person's daily dealings. There is not a notion of ownership

of a person over them but rather one of deep interdependence between such entities and the person, as well as one of constant uncertainty.

Masewal people keep an open stance towards the number of *itonalmej* that exist for each person. Some people say there are only two of them (a major and a minor) while many others say there are 7. Additionally, even when most people agree there is a *wei tonal* or a “major” or “leading” animal spirit, some people debate about the diversity of the other six animal spirits; some argue they are all must be of the same species while most people disagree and say they all must be different animals. In any case, all people agree in that these animal companions are never seen or even identified by the person, but that they will however determine many of the individual’s non-inherited characteristics, predispositions and preferences. In short, the composition of the Masewal person is not only multi-spiritual and extra-corporeal but also open to debate under a controlled set of variations.

*Itonalmej* could be thought of as tutelary spirits that share some of their characteristics with the person. *Itonalmej* are always animals and exist in the wilderness, obscure in number or even in nature to the person.<sup>32</sup> They have a complicated hierarchical relation to their human host. On the one hand, the

---

<sup>32</sup> Such animal spirits don’t have to be empirically known by the person, or even native to the highlands. I have been told there are giraffes, elephants, rhinos, whales and any possible animal spirit.



person is determined by the 7 *itonalmey* and is responsible for their welfare as her health is linked to them (killing a specimen of one of your *itonalmey* is a very unwise and unfortunate thing to do). On the other, the person never exactly knows who they are, or where these spirits wander and, therefore, is unable to control any of their actions or destiny in the mountain, not even to protect them from harm.

The anxiety about this paradox of the Masewal person, I must admit, is mostly my own, as Masewal friends accept this naturalized spiritual complexity with more ease. Indeed, part of the constantly playful guessing in Tepetzintla, and other places I have visited in the highlands, resides on the casual observation of oneself and others in order to determine which animal is present in people's actions or moods. A friend told me only recently with some relief, "at least I know I am a snake, because I don't like garlic, and I am never thirsty." It is fascinating to me how every person remains utterly a mystery to herself, and that deciphering such multiplicity is not a native existential pursuit.

Masewal people tend to avoid knowing too much about their "true self", and are usually not committed to most truisms (good, evil, political affiliation, or racial labeling). The fact that, in general, Masewal people do not affiliate themselves to any fixed identity is related perhaps to the

native notion that a person. A Masewal person encompasses a collection of contrasting spirits, many of which are not contained inside of the person's body as the *itonalmey*, the spirit animal companions, roam up in the mountain outside of the person.

Personality is then determined by the spiritual inhabitants of the body as well as by its external invisible animal companions (exhabitants?). Political influence, charisma, piety, eating preferences, disease or even skillful dancing, are all actions and tendencies associated with one of the multiple undetectable influences implanted in each person, independently from kinship or ancestry. Unlike archetypal descent ideas in Western contexts such as 'you dance just like your mother', 'it runs in the family', 'I have a genetic predisposition to diabetes' and so on, for Masewal people such predispositions are individually acquired and randomly influential in a person's life. Inherited characteristics are not spoken about; they are in a way not relevant. Masewal people love and care for each other in a family and recognize ascendants and descendants and the oftentimes convoluting kinship relations between people in different towns. Some families are known for having many sorcerers or for having many drunks or good dancers but this is not thought of as "inherited" but rather as an effect of co-presence, in other words, intimacy and togetherness. The destiny

and capacities of each person is entirely apart from these networks.

The *itonalmej* 'accompany' each person through life and die with her. The causality between the death of a person and that of the *itonalmej* can be both ways: if they die the person dies, if the person dies, the *itonalmej* follow and die as well (although some people say that the animal spirits "just go away, back into the mountain"). Contained individuality does not seem to be a concept that carries much weight for the Masewal, as individual death entails a slow process of dismantling a collective of spirits. In other words, every human person is materially and spiritually linked to the mountain.

The body channels and expresses the diverse manifestations of such invisible multitude of entities through its form, along with its intrinsic capacity to do work.

## **V.II. *Kayotl*: Flesh, Work and Form**

The Masewal notion of *kayotl* or "body" stands as the local main category that locally collapses "natural" and "social" Western distinctions. Animals, plants and even some spirits have a body, or at least a body presence. Fur, skin, bark mixed with reflections and sounds can count as *someone's* body. Bodies are the material concept that drives relations in the highlands;

hence whatever has a body –a person, a cloud or a rock– must have relationships with other bodies. Usually relations across spheres of body involve transformation into something else, and end up, in many cases, in death. Transformation is a dangerous process. Stories about the transformation of animals into people and vice versa are quite common and are brought up whenever an errand or a coordinated task takes Masewal people up to the mountains, to travel between villages, cut wood, grow corn or collect herbs. In all these stories transformation into different bodies is a) possible, b) dangerous and c) can carry unexpected consequences to family and community.

The possibility of bodies changing into other bodies is made possible by a shared vitality between them. Such vitality comes from the fact that all bodies are made or fed by the earth, *tlali*. The main form that conglomerates the idea of earth is the mountain, *tipetl*. Hence, mountains are the places from where all bodies originally emanate.

#### **V.II.I. Bodies are maize dough**

The local Masewal conception of a body (*kayotl*) comprises the sum of flesh, actions and form.<sup>33</sup> Flesh is locally associated

---

<sup>33</sup> This is not a native canon, however, I analytically distinguish these dimensions of the Masewal body according to the different definitions, Alessandro Questa, PhD Dissertation's Final Version, November 2017, V4.0 196

with what a body is made of, actions with what it does, and form with its overall appearance. The flesh part of the body is mostly the outcome of specific food consumption. Food is traditionally conceived as something that is obtained from the earth through farming and linked primarily with maize and all the different vegetables (mainly squash, beans, and chile) produced in the local milpa gardens and other plots, as well as herbs and game from the surrounding forests. Maize is many times referred to as a synonym of food just as food (especially maize dough) is equaled to the human body. Maize dough, the base for the ubiquitous tortillas, results from the sum of ground kernels, lime, and water and, before the arrival of electric mills, drops of human sweat.

Numerous ethnographies among Masewal people in the highlands of Puebla have paid attention to these relations between food, maize and human flesh and body (§: Signorini and Lupo, Taggart, Chamoux, Millán). The analogical association between human bodies and maize dough as the main component of it is also present in different Pre-Columbian myths (Coe, 2011).

In both Mexica (Aztec) and Mayan myths of origin, as well as in other Mesoamerican cosmologies, gods originally formed human bodies with maize dough while their teeth were maize kernels (Caso 1990, López 1997). The idea of maize dough as the

---

associations, practices, and narratives I collected about it, by different Masewal interlocutors in the field.

main forming element for human flesh and body is however, not relegated only to ancestral myth.

People from Tepetzintla recognize in the big yellowy and green masses of corn dough a kind of flesh, a kind of body, one that after being made is then slowly dismembered and cooked to make tortillas, tamales, and many other corn based meals; that is, to make new edible bodies. Tamales, for example, covered by corn leaves and many other kinds of leaves (like avocado and other native tree leaves), are regarded as having their *itilma* or "coat", while their usual chicken and pork meat and chili sauce fillings are unceremoniously named as their *ijtik* or "entrails". In the treatment of some local diseases, for example, such as *empacho* (in Spanish) or *nixwitilistl*, a type of stomachache common among babies and small children and occasionally happening to adults, the abdomen needs to be manipulated and reintegrated just like maize dough except that, instead of water, alcohol is used (externally) to rehydrate it properly. The risk shared by both maize dough and bodies is to either become too watery or too dry. Therefore it becomes necessary to extract water from the body when it is too wet and moisturize it when it gets too dry. The logic behind these procedures is to reintegrate it and to make it whole, in analogy to maize dough. According to Manuela, a respected local traditional healer and masseuse or *sobadora*, is that "...the belly

is also made of the same, the same dough. Now it needs to be kneaded. Otherwise it gets dry. Indeed, we are made of the same little maize dough, if not, of what else?"<sup>34</sup>

The body-flesh is, like maize, in constant need of balance according to traditional medicine, for it can become too dry (with age, over work, alcohol, etc.), too liquid (during first youth, diverse diseases, etc.), as well as too hot or too cold. The body is also partly made of dirt. Human and animal excretions are called many times 'mud' or *sokitl*, while corpses are all "eaten" by the earth.

Another strong connection between food, dirt and the body comes by the intensive use *tinixtl* or "lime" in daily food preparation. Lime is an essential part of maize processing (*nixtamal*); it helps to peel the corn grains' skin making them both easier to digest and more nutritious. Lime is used again when poured over the domestic clay pan in which tortillas are prepared, to avoid them from getting stuck. People thus eat, throughout their lives, a lot of lime. In the household of Anselmo and Rosalba, for example, over 6 pounds of lime per month was used, feeding between 6 and 8 people. That is why Masewal people acknowledge, without a moment's pause, that their bodies are partly made of this white dirt. The body-flesh is then part dirt [like lime, excreta, corpses], part water [all

---

<sup>34</sup> "...su panza es la misma, la misma masa. 'Ora hay que amasarla. Si no se seca. Por eso, somos la misma que el maicito, si no de qué?" Field Notes 2014

body fluids and some diseases] and part food [flesh]. The human body is hence not unlike maize dough as it contains the same ingredients.

Maize consumption determines also the quality of a body as well as certain social capacities. Outsiders and Mestizo people are locally regarded as more or less foreign depending on their conviviality. Together with proper language skills and respectful behavior, elementary conviviality is marked, in every occasion by commensality. In many occasions, for example, I proved my worth (and a few times my inadequacy), by eating spicy sauces, emptying plates with large amounts of pork meat and beans or by tolerating three or four shots of local sugar cane rum.

I remember, for example, how my friend Rosalba proudly boasted of my eating accomplishments to other friends and relatives saying things such as “he is from here now. Never complains. I just give it to him, he knows he must eat it.”<sup>35</sup> This manner of domestication by feeding also links to proper knowledge and behavior about words for food ingredients, tools and cooking methods and different tastes. Beyond being fed, in my case, I was being transformed, with limitations, from a foreigner into a local by controlling my food.

---

<sup>35</sup> “Ya es de aquí ora. Ni se queja. Nomás se lo doy, él ya sabe que se lo tiene que comer.” Field Notes 2014.



Eating together is always a joyful event, characterized by the enthusiastic consumption of maize products and, during celebrations, alcohol. In other words, the body itself becomes the unit that is brought into sociality through a long process of socio-dietary practices.

### **V.II.II. Working bodies**

The human body is determined not only by its flesh but also by its actions, mainly identified as *tikitl* or “work”, that is, things that have a body have to work including for example, axes, clouds, animals and, of course, people. However, *tikitl* is not a mere Masewal translation of labor for it is not a concept focused on generating value.

On first glance work does seem similar to labor as its main effect, according to Masewal people, is to transform or to change things, “when we cut down the tree or wash our clothes, we are working”, as Anselmo once explained, and he continued “...we work but so also does the tree and the wood and the axe works too, and the clothes are working as well, even the rocks where we left them to dry off and, of course, the water. We all

have to work, and we have to do it together. There is no other way.”<sup>36</sup>

Understanding the local distinction between *trabajo* (in Spanish) or “labor” and *tikitl* is exemplified by the many ongoing misadventures of local artisans and farmers when, for example, estimating the price for their crafts and produce for the market. They frequently miscalculate or neglect to add their labor-time to the price. In native terms, labor-time is not what gives value to their merchandise, but the quality, and skill invested in it. This is expressed as *pakilistl* “beauty” or “gusto” of an object or produce. This is by no means naïve but appeals to a different notion of economy and value altogether. Contrastingly, Masewal craftsmen are aware that if something is remarkably well crafted or made with exceptional materials (such as a white cedar mask for example), then its value is three or even five times that of a standard one.

Throughout the years it has become clear to me that work is not for Masewal people equivalent to that original Judeo-Christian condemnation resulting from Eden’s forced exile, but a naturalized activity in every animated body: an intrinsic condition to life but also its very proof. Entities that are

---

<sup>36</sup> “Cuando cortamos al árbol o vamos a lavar nuestra ropa, estamos trabajado [...] trabajamos al árbol, la madera, trabaja igual el hacha y la ropa trabaja también igual, y las piedras dónde la dejamos para que se sequen y pos’ el agua. Todos, cada quien, tenemos nuestro trabajo y ora’ tiene que ser juntos, así”. Field notes 2013.

alive (indeed that take breath) must work, while things that work must possess some kind of life in them.

Again, this is a native system impacted by history so the model is not necessarily replicated at every turn. The flow of State paid labor in recent times has deeply transformed many forms of relation, mainly those of collective work, by introducing government cash. In Tepetzintla as in most other rural and Indigenous towns and villages in central Mexico, people still remember the existence of *faena* or "task force" (my translation), an old, possibly Colonial or even more ancient practice. *Faenas* were called by the local civil authority, asking local men to give one "free" day of work for public services such as fixing roads, cleaning garbage, painting public buildings, mending fences or harvesting the town's owned crops. In Tepetzintla, *faenas* used to happen on a Saturday and the local authorities (penniless until a few decades ago) would provide food and alcohol for workers. Working for the town was no one's favorite activity but everybody acknowledged it was also necessary and there was also the fact that, if they wanted to, the men involved in a *faena* could get drunk for free. This was by no means a perfect local system and all sorts of malfunctions and discrepancies could occur such as men who neglected their obligations, or people who did it just to get drunk. However, *faenas* existed in parallel to *mayordomías* and dances and the

relations, gossiping, prestige or shame of a person was carried across these institutions.

Nowadays Masewal workers enter into constant debates, conflating ritual obligations and economic payment from local jobs, as they ask for both money and food in order to work the fields, basing their pay on government assistance standardized amounts calling it still *faenas*. This conflictive dual system of payment is also the source of subsequent miscalculations and abuse by either side of a transaction as the quality of their labor –warranted before by the impact on other native values and institutions– is now absent from the quantitative formula.

During my fieldwork in 2014, the municipality called upon a major *faena* to fix the bridge that was heavily damaged by a recent storm. Massive rocks were to be moved just as holes needed to be covered and some road shoulders needed bracing. The job was paid for with cash but also with food and alcohol. Some of the workers came from neighboring towns and photos were taken as one more of the local administration's results. Politics now, and not just cash had inhabited the old *faena* practice and the idea of work understood locally as a "natural act" is also being transformed by immediate cash payment and political agendas.

Let's go back to the concept of *tikitl* in general. Working is not constrained to individually conscious tasks but it almost always stands as a tacitly collective effort that involves the

human person and other nonhuman people, such as tools, trees or animals. In many cases, working is not mobilized by the person's body or will but motivated by other agencies. Via dreaming, others (spirits, animals, other people) can ask for simple tasks to be done by the person. On one occasion, Anselmo's turkeys asked him in his dream to fix the fence as they were afraid of dogs entering their corral by night and killing them; on another, Rosalba dreamt the place where her dog was waiting for her up in the mountain after he got lost for days. Juan's pigs intrude regularly on his dreams to demand of him more water, while Estela was told by "someone" in her dreams when was best to take her produce to the market, and Marino was asked to pay a visit to his *compadre* in another town. These actions were all assumed as *encargos* or "entrusted acts" by someone else. When a person is too hungry or too sleepy to finish with a task, he or she understands that someone else (a spirit animal, a tool, or another person) doesn't want them to end and, in fact, this can be interpreted as a directed and conscious attack on the person.

These local interpretations about *tikitl* bear implications on the ways in which Masewal people consider also their relations with "productivity" or "profit", both ideas that are very well known but not ranked in the same way as in, for example, a stereotypical capitalist society. Bearing in mind that all things with a kind of body work and that work is not an

activity towards economic gain only. We could perhaps think through a Marxist allegory of value to try to understand the implications of *tikitl* in the Masewal world. An axe has work, to cut wood and trees just as a hunter's rifle exists to shoot down animals or a farmer's work is to plant a milpa garden *Tikitl* is a meta-human capacity for transformation, all things work. Hence, its gain cannot be alienable, in a Western sense, as it is not chiefly concerned with accelerated production and accumulation of capital. We could argue perhaps that a different form of "alienation" might be embedded into *tikitl*, that is, a different kind of estrangement from a person's work. Instead of accumulation by a third party, the "surplus" lies in the unexpected ramifications or consequences of people's (or anyone's) work, e.g., the vengeful spirits chastising a hunter's ambition, or pests coming down on an immoral farmer. Work, in Masewal terms, essentially, creates conflict because it is not predicated on production but on transformation. By transforming something into something else, all work ultimately leads towards an idea of inexorable dissemination and expansion with unknowable consequences that sooner or later end up in conflict.

Masewal people say that working is a universal capacity, something that everybody can do: *nochi wili tikitl* or "we all can work". To work, in Masewal terms, is to have a present purpose and all forms of social participation (from cooking

meals, and treating guests to dancing or praying) entail too, a kind of work. Authorities, for example, are called *tikiyomej* (pl.) "people that have work to do". Dancers refer to their activity as a kind of work, *nikan nochi tikitl* "here everything is work". Dancing is socially considered work and dancers are excused from all other obligations during ritual times and referred to as *ilamantine*, *danzantes* or "dancers."

Diviners and healers, for example, work with spirits as well, and spirits are defined by the kind of work they perform. *Tikitl* is not constrained either to a material intervention in the world, as indeed there is spiritual work. Even if invisible, spirits occupy bodies (of corn, of tools, of animals and people) hence work is the main form of relation between all kinds of material bodies.

Kichiwa or "do/make" is one of the most common and important verbs in Nahuatl in Tepetzintla. It is used to explain all processes, from food production and transformation to all sorts of descriptions about objects and beings or to strike up a conversation such as *tlen tikchiwas?*, "what are you doing?". However, to ask what a thing does/makes the formula (*tlen kichiwa?*) has not much potency, no real meaning in Nahuatl language. I know this because I used to do it all the time, until Masewal people corrected me. For example, when I wanted to know what a *nixtlamal* or "maize mill" does, I would ask *iwan*

*tlen kichiwas mo nixtamal?*, "so, what does your maize mill do?". Similarly when asking about a person I would say *tlen kichiwa Ramiro ompa Tlaquimpa?*, "what does Ramiro do at Tlaquimpa?" My Masewal interlocutors always understood what I was trying to ask about but also realized I was just translating from Spanish without much attention. Seeing this, my friend Isabel eventually told me that "doing" does not really help to reveal the function or purpose of anything. If one truly wants to know about someone or something one needs to ask *tlen itiki?*, or "What is its work?"

*Tikitl* is then associated to having a 'purpose', but 'purpose' is not mere 'function' in Masewal terms, for having purpose, also entails as I have said before, a form of 'will' or at least, a temporary agency. But purpose is not perpetual and it is not moral (not driven by good or evil transcendental agendas). Work is instead a naturalized action, a necessary condition for existence.

Bodies that work also have a destiny. Specific things (people, certain objects and meteorological phenomena, some plants and animals) will meet again in the afterlife and will interact anew, although in a more equal form of relation. They will all speak the same language again to each other, and there will be grievances to be repaid, mostly by humans to the rest of the spirits.



What counts as 'alive' (*yolia*) is not necessarily determined by biochemical processes. *Yolia* is associated with heart beating, and all vibrant motion. Indeed, related notions of movement and work activate things and bodies. *Tikitl* is then an encompassing native category (that crosses the *etic* realms of spiritual, social and natural) that qualifies what is alive in some way by conflating animation+purpose+agency+destiny. *Tikitl* stands as the key activity that enables all interactions between bodies of people, animals, spirits, plants and other things.<sup>37</sup>

Most of the things a body can do are, in fact, a form of work, even if in the Western sense they wouldn't qualify as such. It is for example common Masewal knowledge that children's work is to play and to laugh, working in a milpa garden and having sex is also work, while doing sorcery and healing, dancing and playing an instrument are all forms of "body work" *ikayotltikiti*. Even rocks for example, specially those that come from the mountain, are somewhat "alive" —that is some rocks, sometimes— and their work can be either to hold the land together, to become part of animals' and people's houses, or to fall over people's heads and, as previously explained in Chapter II, to become one of the three ancestor stones that form the

---

<sup>37</sup> Work is so strongly related to an idea of living that Masewal people use it to define a person. The term *Masewal* is the local ethnonym and, although it existed in Aztec times, it implied an idea of low-caste/working class/peasantry in opposition to *pipiltin* or nobility/priestly caste/rulers/highborn. Nowadays *Masewalmej* (pl.) is the most common term by which Nahuatl speaking people identify themselves in the highlands of Puebla, and it is locally translated as "people that work".

domestic hearth. The basis for this is an original commonality between all beings and things and, an original language.

According to Masewal stories, in the beginning of times, before the sun would rise, all animals, plants and things spoke the same language. After the sun was born (*tonal oyolia*), the light delimited forms and some beings preferred darkness while others enjoyed the newly formed light. Humans adored the sun while some animals and things remained with his imperfect brother, the moon.<sup>38</sup>

This narrative, about the times before the sun, is the answer I have repeatedly gotten from Masewal people whenever I ask why, at the end of any celebration, we dance with knives and bottles, lumber, pots, axes and many other objects, “we thank them for their work, so they won’t get mad. It is a way to show respect.” Indeed, even if most objects are inert and silent (that is, even as they remained as part of darkness) they still have an ancient relation with people and have similar, material bodies. To dance with them at the end of every celebration is to

---

<sup>38</sup> In local Masewal lore, the sun and the moon are brothers, coded too as *San Miguel* and *El Diablo* in Catholic repurposed mythology, and are actually two suns. One of them –the moon– happens to be just older and weaker. The sun is also associated to Christ and, in fact, that is his name *Totatsin Tonal* “Our dear father the Sun”. Therefore, all ceremonies about events, relations and things before Christ, that is, before the coming of the sun, are performed at night. Typically witchcraft is performed during nighttime or in dark places such as caves. The interdependence between darkness and light working together in the world permeates the “cosmo-diplomatic” institutions such as healing, agriculture or mayordomías.

acknowledge, to remember, such relation but also to prevent the risk of angering them and avoid harm.

### **V.II.III. The sadness in laziness**

In order to understand how work is an existential activity not centered on economic interest, it is helpful to think about its native opposite notion: laziness or *tlatsiwak*. There are numerous Masewal stories that start (instead of “once upon a time...”) with “one day, one lazy man...” (*in tonali se tlakatl tlatsiwjk...*). The lazy man, also called *Juan flojo* in Spanish, that is ‘John lazy’, (see Appendix) is a ubiquitous character who gets in all sorts of trouble because he is sad for not having a purpose in life. After many adventures in the wild, which can include attempting to commit suicide by different methods, invading spirits’ homes, stealing the spirit’s capes and becoming a storm, or going underground or marrying an animal, the lazy man finds at last his purpose in life, usually becoming again a peasant or a sorcerer, and either returns to town or dies. The story contains much knowledge about how the world works and many of its characters reappear in other stories. For my argument about work, I want to point out that life joy itself comes from working, just as sadness emanates

from lacking a purpose. To work is to have a purpose and that is a moral stance for Masewal people.

Work is then the main and necessary action of any kind of body on a moral level. It is therefore locally associated with honesty just as poor work or laziness is linked to dishonesty and lying. For example, a common usage for "lying", or for being "senseless" or "without any purpose" is *ye tikitl, sa ijki*, which literally means "he/she works, supposedly". Another example, *ye kitowa ke kimomachtitok, sa ijki* "he says that he has studied, supposedly". The idea is that cheating is like avoiding one's work (studying, cooking or otherwise) and hence, becoming purposeless, and that is a sort of immoral or at least perilous state for any person.

Let me exemplify this implication in relation to cheating and truthfulness: a couple of years ago I filmed a ritual in which a *torito* device (visualize here the archetypical image of a Mexican man carrying a papier-mâché bull fully lighted in fireworks over his head running around and followed by children) malfunctioned. A firecracker, ricocheting on the ground, exploded in the operator's face taking one of his eyes. I remember the shrieking man's yell and the *torito* suddenly falling to the ground still exploding in colors and sounds, still fiery while occluding the immobile operator's body under it. The general opinion was that it was not an accident of

course. The man was just “not really into it” according to some witnesses of the accident. Others mentioned that “he didn’t really wanted to do it”, in the first place or that “he was not really committed to his job”; “he was just doing it”, said others, *ye sa tikitl mijtotiske* ‘he danced... supposedly’. In short, he was punished for being mediocre and dishonest in his work or, in other terms, the fact that he had this accident was the proof of his lack of commitment and mediocre performance.

This native opposition between work and no work can be schematized like this:

Table 1: *Work and laziness*

<i>Tikitl</i> or Work	<i>Tlatsiwwak</i> or Laziness
Purpose	No purpose
Joy	Sadness
Honesty	Dishonesty
Life	Death

To summarize, the human body is made of flesh (food+water+dirt), while it must also have an identity given by its actions or work (*tikitl*). But each body is too the porous container for several invisible entities that govern its

actions; a sort of puppet with too many puppeteers you might say.

#### **V.II.IV. Bodies and form**

Masewal bodies are assemblages of flesh, work, and spiritual demeanors, especially those associated with alliance and exchange, but their form also determines them. Having feathers, fur or skin, possessing a beak, a muzzle or a mouth, can determine certain capacities in any given body. "We all have eyes but we can't do the same things", said Crispín the diviner to me once, when I asked him about his nighttime transformations into different animals. "I cannot fly but an hawk can. I can't swim but maybe a snake can. A frog is small but it can jump higher than me".<sup>39</sup> Some animals are small but powerful, especially spiders and ants. Others, even if bigger, such as dogs, chicken and turkeys are less so.

The power contained in a body form comes from the things it can do. A spider jumps and can have a nasty poisonous bite, while a chicken cannot do any of those things. In the case of animals in general, domesticated ones are less powerful –can do less things– than those that live in the mountain. Human

---

<sup>39</sup> " Todos tenemos ojos pero no todos podemos hacer los mismo [...] Yo no puedo volar, pero un zopilote sí puede. No puedo nadar pero a la mayor una víbora sí puede. Una ranita es chiquita pero salta por allá lejos." Field notes 2014.

intercession, indeed domestication, somehow diminishes the capacities and powers of farm animals having to do with their diet.

As my friend Anselmo put it "Animals up there [in the mountain] eat from the mountain, whatever they can find. They eat plants and meat. They drink water from the river. They are strong because they get their food from them [the mountain owner spirits]. It is like our chicken and us. The same. Only they feed theirs."<sup>40</sup> On the one hand, domestic and farm animals are "more human" because they are feed with maize based food as well as with leftovers from the table, and are hence, regarded as "good" for offering to spirits (as sacrifice) and as replacement of a human person healing from witchcraft. On the other, these "town" animals have lost much of their powers and are therefore less potent in terms of "spiritual strength", *fuerza* or *chikawalistl*.

Masewal people assume that relations between the sky and the mountain are replicated by the human body and vice versa. The feet are linked or buried in the earth, while the head is up and, in standing position, closer to the sun and the sky. Fluids run up and down the body, in and out as well. Just as mountains can be said to have a body, human bodies are in a way little

---

<sup>40</sup> "Animals up there [in the mountain] eat from the mountain, whatever they can find. They eat plants and meat. They drink water from the river. They are strong because they get their food from them [the mountain owner spirits]. It is like our chicken and us. The same. Only they feed theirs." Field Notes 2014.

mountains. Similarly, Masewal people that go up to the mountain more often are locally regarded as stronger, if more dangerous, than those who went out to live in the cities, for example. They are less prone to disease and are resistance to different forms of witchcraft and cheating.

People that go to the mountain often can unwillingly bring back with them a trailing spirit. Interestingly, even if the sun is matched to a divine force and identified as Christ, the mountain's forests and, in particular, its interior, is regarded as the actual point of origin for all life forms. To be closer to this source is to attain more of it.

However, one thing is shared among all bodies and that is eyesight. Blindness is not considered as an optional capacity, all bodies can see. That is why people can transform into certain things and not others or why certain animal companions are available and not others.

I once, jokingly, told Crispín about some deep cavefish I saw on TV that are born without eyes on abysmal caverns, and asked him if those were powerful, or even counted as living animals. "And why don't they have eyes?" he said. I told him that they are born that way, after many generations of fish being there, without light. "Well, if you say so, it must be so, but their grandparents had eyes? I say they took them away. Some sorcerer. That is why, poor things, can't see. Now they are



looking for them.”<sup>41</sup> Beyond Crispín’s creative capacity for improvisation and story telling, his reaction also expressed a very common local opinion: that bodies need to have some form of eyesight. In general, the animal companions’ forms will have an impact on human preferences, tendencies and abilities.

#### **V.II.V. The importance of having a head**

Masewal people say that, in the upper part of the head, resides the sun heat and thus the body’s connection with *totatsin tonal* “our dear father the sun”. All people and animals, but also certain plants, and all flowers, and even mountains have a head (bulbous or otherwise salient rock formations on the upper part of a mountain); according to Crispín, one of the local diviners “they all have to look up for the sun”.

The head (*itsonteko*) connects each living entity with the sun and could be thought of as a sort of an antenna for the person’s body. It links the body to the sun, as it is constantly “up”, and “in touch with it”. Here, placement, posture and form are key. During dances—all dances—dancers’ heads are ornamented with a large variety of crowns and hats. These different head

---

<sup>41</sup> “Y porqué no tiene sus ojos [...] bueno, si uste dice pos así debe ser. Pero sus abuelitos si tenían? Yo digo se los llevaron por ai’. Un brujo. Pore so, pobrecitos, no pueden ver. Ora los andan buscando.” Feld Notes 2014.

ornaments constitute coded symbols that identify each dance group, as well as their inner hierarchy and organization (the diversity of different characters in each dance group).

In ordinary times, women cover their heads with a kind of shawl or *rebozo* or with a *velo*, a white and widely knitted veil surrounded by lace, while men will cover their heads with rancher hats and baseball caps. To dance implies for a dancer, immediately, to get something for his head, as to equip one's head for a ceremonial task is an almost automatic association for Masewal people.

Heads are not ornamented only during dances but are also decorated with flowers during most other rituals: flower crowns for women [*kwaxochitl*], flower necklaces for men [*xochikoskatl*] accompany every *mayordomía*, for example, marking both groups (hosts and guests, entering and leaving *mayordomos*) who are getting related with the saint's image and with one another.

The flowers used are typically (and almost exclusively) *sempoalxochitl* or "20-flower", and are grown in the borders of each maize field and harvested at around the same time in October–November. These same orange flowers characteristically mark the Days of the Dead between October 27 and November 2<sup>nd</sup> each year. Domestic altars, household entrances, and public buildings are surrounded by millions of these flower's petals. Moreover, *sempoalxochitl* flowers are also present, whenever

possible, in all burial ceremonies. They are, unambiguously, the flower of the dead or *mikixochitl*. Some people say these flowers are just "as people", as they too have a head and contain some *tonal* or 'sun heat' stored in them. Cutting flowers is not entirely unlike beheading someone.

Flowers and heads are then analogs of one another; both occupy the top of a body and are particularly expressive. Feet are, to some extent, the opposite of the head; they are always "stuck to the earth" and are said to be 'under it'. Feet are associated with feelings and ideas of sincerity, truthfulness, actions of remembrance, belonging and ethnicity (*kwitlaxtl* or 'rubber' is one of the terms used for 'foreigners' signaling their footwear, and also their trickery by distancing and 'hiding' their feet from the earth) and in general, work in the fields.

### **V.III. Sick bodies and the after life**

The "land of the dead" is sometimes called Tlalokan and is located, unsurprisingly, inside of the mountain. It is usually described as a watery place, under constant rain and mist, where all life taken by the water is accumulated. Flooding and rains can kill animals, plants and people as it also does excess of water inside a body. As another water container, just like the

mountain, a puffy person can be perceived, in some cases, as full of power and wealth.

According to local healing practices however, a swollen body usually signals frailty, fetid disease and even weakness of character. Indeed, many local treatments involve 'drying' the body after a night fever, or expelling excess of water from a distended abdomen.

Through rains and mist, water continuously comes back down to the land, and it reenters the mountain, where it is stored for future rains. Analogically, according to Masewal healers, excess of rain can create a "swollen mountain", one that is sick and bulging, that can drown in water its own foliage and fields, and that, like a human body, can die. Humans and corn depend on water and share some of the same afflictions. The human body, like that of corn plants, can be drowned under too much rain, and it too can rot.

Also analogically, Masewal healers consider that human bodies are not unlike mountains, as both are masses inside which fluids circulate and both need feeding and care. Like mountaintops, human heads are closer to the sun and feet buried in dirt. Such analogies are however secret knowledge and also disputed by young people and also by people converted to Pentecostal Christianity. Healers like Manuela don't really like to talk about such comparisons, for example, when I first

broached the subject to her, and asked about such comparison that, she laconically answered “we don’t know about that here.”

However, a couple of years later after that, when talking about my possible affliction of *empacho* (a special kind of indigestion and “watery” feeling) one time, she associated it to the heavy rains, “now it is filled with water [the mountain]. It runs down from everywhere. It is the same with you, too much water inside.”<sup>42</sup>

#### **V.IV. Hunting and growing maize in the mountain**

Maize consumption determines the qualities of animal bodies as well, making them more or less foreign. Animals can be differentiated between those that eat corn and those that eat something else. Domestic turkeys and chicken mainly eat maize kernels; meanwhile dogs, cats and pigs eat old maize tortillas, leftovers from the household, and scavenge around town for other stuff. Mountain animals like opossums, badgers, some birds and raccoons also eat “stolen” maize from the milpas, if only as a complement to their “mountain” diet. Cows are the exception as they only eat grass, but then again, there are almost no cows – and no beef– in the highlands. Game meat (from opossums,

---

<sup>42</sup> “Ora anda llena de agua [la montaña]. Corre por dónde quiera. Igual usted, trae mucha agua adentro.” Field Notes 2014.

squirrels, raccoons, badgers, armadillo and infrequently deer) is rarely consumed by Masewal people in Tepetzintla and is regarded as dangerous. These animals do not eat primarily maize, hence their bodies are essentially different, made of *tipenakatl* or "mountain meat". To eat mountain meat is to establish a dangerous connection with the mountain owners of that meat, the *itekomej*, true masters of all mountain beings, plants and animals alike. Hunters, their families and domestic animals run the risk of being hunted back in return for the meat they take. There is a specular invisible population living in the mountain, a collective of organized beings in many ways equivalent to humans although radically different in nature.

Indeed, mountain animals are not exactly feral, as they have an owner. All mountain fauna constitute the analog farm animals of the the *tipekayomej*, literally translated as "mountain bodies" but locally referred to as *otras gentes* or *gente del monte* in Spanish, respectively "other people" or "mountain people." Masewal people regard all birds as the mountain's "chickens", for example, while badgers are seen as the mountain's people equals of town's "dogs". *Tipekayomej* are also called *espíritus* in Spanish or "spirits" and compose a somewhat abstract population of immaterial beings, which at times take on human form and at other can become animals. All mountain animals and *tipekajomej* are ultimately, under the

tutelage of the *tipewewe* 'mountain old man' also called *iteko* or 'owner', which is the chief spirit of that mountain. All mountains have then an owner.

Eating too much mountain animal meat inevitably brings death to humans and dramatic post mortem consequences. Hunting is locally understood as an act that indebts the hunter to spirits as he takes farm animals from the mountain, to eat their meat. Excessive hunting generates thus disproportionate debt and the hunter is forced to pay with his own animals' lives, his own children or with his own. Even if "alive" for a time, the overly ambitious hunter will unavoidably die as his different souls or *tonalmej* will gradually abandon him. After death, the hunter will return to existence this time however inside the body of his prey (paradigmatically identified as a deer) only to be hunted by his own sons and descendants.

In other local interpretations, the spirits of the animals the hunter has killed during his life will eat his soul after his death as a form of payback. The hunter's only way of protection is to leave offerings to the mountain spirits and redistribute part of the meat among family and *compadres*. The idea is to both disperse the damage and strengthen the resistance against possible retaliation. A hunter has to avoid sexual intercourse before going on a hunt to the mountain (the specific number of days varies from one to a week). During this

time of celibacy they expect to have dreams, of sexual implications, with their prey, as animals take the form of women. Having sexual intercourse during dreams is, ideally, part of a hunter's success. Many things can go wrong in a dream as hunters might be tricked and hunted by the mountain spirits.

According to Adolfo, one of the very few Masewal men who still practice hunting in Tepetzintla, during the days before a hunt, the hunter is assumed to get married with the prey, no matter if he recollects having a dream with her. Contrastingly, if a hunter has sex with his wife or with any other human woman before hunting this implies a form of anticipatory adultery against his spirit wife-prey. Such action can jeopardize the hunt's success but also the woman's health just as the hunter's safety. In many stories jealous spirit wives transform into serpents to kill and eat human wives and babies (see Appendix). Human wives are fearful and often quarrel or even temporarily leave their hunter husbands, as they feel jealous or just sexually abandoned by them. A good hunter is usually a poor husband, sexually speaking. If a hunter is too good at it, however, he runs the risk of becoming his prey.

In short, hunting is a strict social activity as much as it is a feeding practice and it is harshly regulated by a principle of controlled exchange between humans and nonhumans. Moreover, even if hunting has diminished as a regular practice in most



Masewal households in Tepetzintla, its relevance remains in the assertion that humans stand in a relation of interdependence with the mountain spirits and that constant indebtedness between these groups keeps coming back in the form of disease, dreaming or death.

Growing maize is not entirely dissimilar to hunting, as it also follows the same principle of controlled inter-species exchange, indebtedness and ensuing tension. Indeed, growing maize entails, on the one hand, taking space from the forest by cutting down trees that belong to the mountain, for which it is always necessary to make an offering of alcohol, tobacco and incense. Juan is a local Masewal farmer who lives down by the river, managing a patch of forest that has been in his family since he can remember; "a tree" he told me once, "is like their [domestic] little herbs or their little maize plants for them [the mountain spirits]. When we cut them down, we take their food, we could say".<sup>43</sup> That is why Juan is observant of traditional ways to keep the mountain spirits swayed. Every time he cuts a big tree he offers a prayer and deposits the aforementioned payment on the ground, near the tree trunk.

In addition, in Masewal local lore (see Appendix), every maize grain that comes in a corncob has been in fact "robbed" from its original spiritual existence inside the mountain.

---

<sup>43</sup> "Los árboles son como sus hierbitas o como su maicito. Cuando los tumbamos, ora sí que agarramos su comida se pudiera decir " Field Notes 2013.

According to this widespread narration, in the old days humans didn't know how to grow maize and observed how ants took it from little holes out of the mountain. By forcing the ant to tell them the secret they summoned other animals (a woodpecker, a badger) to help them steal it from the mountain's inside.

"Now we grow them out of the mountain" explained to me my friend Anselmo, "but way before, our dear grandparents just took it. Now, each plant has its partner. [And where is it?] You can't see it! It grows towards its inside, it is theirs [he mountain's spirits]." <sup>44</sup>

All plants are, according to this traditional local notion, a sort of organic device, very much like straws, that people extract from the inside of the mountain preexistent, giving spiritual grains, fruits, and vegetables a material form in the process. All things that grow in the mountain are thus more *channeled* through plants and farming than *produced* by them. Traditional Masewal farmers' ultimate goal is then not growing plants but using them to extract and, mythically at least, steal food from the inside of the mountain.

Plants are, ultimately, devices put by humans into the ground and grown to extract other things (mainly fruits, grains, and flowers) from inside the mountain. Moreover, (and perhaps

---

<sup>44</sup> "Ora las sembramos en el cerro. Más antes no, nuestros abuelitos nomás las agarraron. Ora, cada plantita tiene su compañera. [¿Y dónde está?] ¡No la puedes ver! Crece adentro, es de ellos." Field Notes 2013.

counter intuitively at first glance) mountain spirits, when treated properly, facilitate this extraction, helping humans to grow the plants and protecting the fields from pests and predators. The clue for this seemingly self-robbery resides in that plants grow both ways, that is, every plant and tree grows equally into the inside of the mountain. For Masewal people the roots we see are just apparent, as the real plant's replica is invisible. Interestingly, this inversion works also for mountain's spirits, who on the inside of the mountain, according to Masewal lore, see the plants on the surface as the roots of their spiritual, subterranean twins.

Maize is grown as household's multipurpose staple (feeding people and animals while providing several other uses) rather than as a product to sell in the market for cash. "Maize is for eating only" is a common phrasing of this fact in Tepetzintla. This has to do with the low market prices and high production cost even in traditional, low technology, farming practices. However, this economic conditioning only serves to enforce the local idea that corn is not for selling but for eating and sharing, with the understanding that it is no one's exclusive property anyway, as it was taken from the mountain in the first place.

Masewal people have a pretty clear idea of how institutional and legal frameworks work, about gathering

documentation, land ownership, land inheritance and paid labor, of course. However milpa garden's production is not run from a regular business perspective. All the efforts are driven by a conscious desire for continued nourishment rather than accumulation or commodification of production. Such transversal concept is called *tlatikipanolistl* in Nahuatl, and Masewal people translate it as *sustento* in Spanish or "sustenance". I will delve more into the implications of this particular and influential idea of sustenance as one of the principles for interdependent relations between humans and spirits.

Every year, Masewal farmers plant at least a few rows of maize plants in their domestic backyards or somewhere in the mountain arguing that a town, a household or a plot without maize plants growing becomes and looks sad. Having corn plants gives plots and houses a positive appearance, of *kwali tlali*, or "good land", that in turn generates respect across neighbors but also towards the ever watching spirits, the *compadritos*, that acknowledge and assess the farmer's work.

To grow maize is more than just a feeding or aesthetic practice however. It has to do with a notion of belonging and with the Masewal idea of work, *tikitl*. Men and women need to feel valuable and useful, this is mostly achieved by taking care of their plots and domestic animals, kitchens and domestic gardens. Perhaps the strongest notion of belonging is placed on

planting and eating corn, as the main substance produced inside the mountain and connecting Masewal people with it.

The local view of cash jobs in the city operates under that same principle of controlled exchange. All money too comes, “originally”, according to Masewal friends, from the mountains. A person with too much money is equaled to a hunter that hunts too much or a logger that cuts down too many trees. It creates a big and eventually dangerous debt and unbalance that requires payback while also needs to be redistributed somehow, for safety measures. If mountain and animal spirits take a nonlinear revenge on overambitious hunters and loggers, through disease and misfortune, they operate the same way against rich moneymakers, in theory at least. The historic experience of people in Tepetzintla is much different and some few Mestizo families, all interrelated, have held control over much of the local wealth, political offices, and resources for generations. Like other social theories, the idea of dangerous economic accumulation stands not on the grounds of empirical evidence but on the analogies and narratives that sustain it and apply for those who don’t have wealth; a cautionary tale. For example, when a person is considered to land a good job at the local government level on the municipal palace, or when someone makes good money as a merchant, or buys a truck, they are expected to

participate in some *mayordomía* celebration as *mayordomos*, that is, as sponsors.

Economic accumulation must be then locally regulated by ritual participation and redistribution, however unchecked consumption transforms and can ultimately kill people. About these changes in behavior, and economic accumulation due to urban migration, Ana, a local vendor sternly told me once, when we saw some men passing by in a car with loud music that, “they come with money and buy junk food for their kids, they only drink sodas and beer. They don’t want to support celebrations, the *mayordomías* for the saints. They go back to the city. Then they get sick. They don’t last.”<sup>45</sup>

A more subtle effect of emigration to the cities pursuing cash jobs is the gradual abandonment of local maize consumption, ritual participation, and exchange with the mountain; a dramatic transformation of the person’s body and relations. It is indeed a kind of absence, just as death.

---

<sup>45</sup> “Vienen con dinero y le compran puras papitas a sus hijos, nomás toman puro refresco y cerveza. No quieren apoyar la fiesta, la *mayordomía* para los santitos. Luego se van para la ciudad. Se enferman luego. No duran.” Field Notes 2014

## VI. DANCING IN TEPETZINTLA

### VI.I. Dancing is inventing culture

Dancing, in general terms, could be defined as a series of patterned movements of the body beyond any economic utility (Spencer 1989). Indeed, such non-utilitarian movements could be said to be universal, all humans *know* dancing. Even if some people find it too difficult, shameful, or just too uninteresting, others rejoice and elate through it. Dancing has been elevated to an art form in Western societies and innumerable creations (choreographies, concerts, costume designs, musical instruments, discourses, identities) are inspired and molded through dancing. Like other human proclivities, such as language or exchange, dancing is one of those things that we just do although we cannot easily explain why or when we started doing it.

Paradoxically, even when we all humans know dancing, we can't really find a universal reason to explain why we all do know how to do it. Dance has inspired anthropological studies since the very beginning (Durkheim [1918]). Dancing has been framed as having two sides: one of style, which separates it from non-dancing affairs and marks its special capacities; and one of meaning, which refers back to the "dance world" (Gell

1989). For Alfred Gell, when Umeda masked dancers in Papua New Guinea transform during the *ida* ceremony, they move “gracefully” and they engage in an episodic narration where dancers become animals, plants and spirits. Their movements and investment in their narration separates them from the rest of the people, who become audience. The prestige of dancers, however, comes from contexts that escape the dance setting. For Gell, the Umeda dance at the *ida* ceremony creates a stylistic and temporary separation (a dance world) that finds its source and meaning out of the dancing boundaries (a non-dance world).

Dancing has been also described as, universally, a form of transformation of the person, a transformation in which she steps out of the ordinary and acquires some form of heightened senses (Boaz in Spencer 1989). Dances can be cathartic, associated to spirit possession, and have even been linked to the release of excess of energy (Ibid.). Each of these proposals however could be said to be true to other phenomena not associated to dancing.

All these suggestive propositions are good for thinking and useful but not universally applicable, they are all partial explanations based on comparative analyses. We know, for example, that there are many cases in which dancing does not necessarily create a clean separation from the non-dance world (is moving rhythmically one’s foot when listening to the radio



dancing? A categorical affirmative or negative answer to this question would be equally partial), and that it is often not neatly disjointed stylistically or thematically from "every day life." We also know that meanings can be elusive, debatable and even non-concomitant. Transformation and heightened senses are also not a requirement, nor the expected result of dancing, necessarily (here, I am picturing a couple dancing a waltz), and the same goes for catharsis, healing and spiritual possession. So many dissimilar movements of the body, alone or accompanied by others, encoded or improvised, following some specific music or just the rhythm in people's heads, dancing seems to be but an English word that perhaps falls short when dealing, for example, with Masewal different ways of moving.

However, we can say that yes, to dance seems to be an activity intertwined with aesthetics, meanings, emotions, and a desire of transformation, but also with pedagogy, sexual identity, prestige, rites of passage, public relations and, in other words, with culture. If culture is the ultimate human invention (Wagner 1981), then dancing is part of it too and, just as culture, must be studied through its specificities rather than be marked out by its generality. As Merriam has pointed out, "...the entity of dance is not separable from the anthropological concept of culture" (1974).

A few years back (in the summer of 2012), Crispín, an old and distrustful diviner who would become one of my most important interlocutors and friend with time, asked me what was I doing in Tepetzintla. I answered that I was interested in knowing more about their local traditions, customs, stories and language. A pretty standard retort for a field worker, I guess. His answer was not what I expected however, "Good." He said after a few seconds, adding without a moment's pause "So, you want to know about the dances"<sup>46</sup>. I don't remember my answer to Crispín that time, but in subsequent conversations with other local people, I started to notice I received similar answers. Soon enough I became a dancer myself, invited by some dancers probably as a way to answer my insisting questions about, what I thought at the time, were *other* unrelated issues, such as shamanism, healing, and spirits. I eventually have come to understand that, for many Masewal people, dances stand in an obvious, analogical reference to tradition, custom, culture, and whatever an anthropologist is usually interested in. Full of fallible rules, conflicting codes, debatable hierarchies, and layers of possible meanings, both dances in Tepetzintla and my random and unexpected anthropological inquiries about "Masewal culture" constituted similar explorations.

My own anthropological tradition affirms itself through an epistemology of concept generation, where the stabilization of

---

<sup>46</sup> "Bueno. Entonces usted quiere saber de las danzas" Field Notes 2012.

meanings is the ultimate –and unattainable– goal (Corsín and Willerslev 2007) as it attempts to fill the gaps between experience and description (Bateson 1973). Masewal dances seem to fill similar conceptual gaps between unexpected and overwhelming powers (climatic, economic and spiritual) and routine undertakings through specific practices of embodiment, visualization, and collective performance. Hence, in order to engage with the idea of a “Masewal culture”, I figured, I needed to acknowledge that Masewal dances are models for “something like it” (Viveiros de Castro, 2004). By becoming a –left footed– dancer, I saw how dances, just as culture and anthropology itself, contained coded information about local values and normativity as well as knowledge of the circumambient world.

## **VI.II. Dancing is a way to know**

In Tepetzintla dancing is an omnipresent activity. All people, male or female, young and old, Masewal, Tutunaku or Mestizo dance together at a baptism celebration, and on domestic rituals, such as on *kalwewetsin*, or at a wedding. From the intimate dancing circles of family and friends made at a household during *compadrazgo* ceremonies, to massive country music concerts at the local basketball court or the fanciful choreographic masked performances of dozens of dancers running

throughout the town's streets, dancing emerges as one of the main activities in Masewal people's lives.

Their mostly stern faces and serene attitudes and the rare laughs and complete absence of strident behavior might be misleading, as Masewal people relish to be in the company of others and dancing is their preferred manner to indicate the joy of togetherness during any and all celebrations. To dance is however much more than just choreographic pleasure, joyful gathering or musicalized relaxation.

Dancing in Masewal terms is a way to show respect, that is, a way to publicly perform appreciation, gratitude and willingness to reciprocate towards others. Dancing is "good manners." Hosting *compadres* offer their house to their guests to dance together in the same way that *mayordomos* dance inside the church when they begin and end their specific *cargo*. Dance troupes, before and after a public presentation dance privately at the Captain's house to the masks and saints. Dancing is an "official" and highly regulated practice and people are expected to dance appropriately whenever an occasion arises.

The reasons for Masewal people in Tepetzintla to dance can vary widely, depending on determinate spaces, music, artifacts, seasons and individual motivations. Dance can mean social participation and catharsis, healing, cosmic negotiation and

ordering, as well as individual transformation and protection from witchcraft.

Dancing as a demonstration of togetherness and respect is not limited to human relations and includes, of course, spirits. The dead, Masewal people say, are always dancing inside the mountains; they exist in a state of perpetual celebration and drunken bliss. When they arrive in the living world during the Days of the Dead, even if invisible, they dance in front of the food offerings placed for them at the domestic altars.

The mountain spirits and the house ancestral spirits invariably participate even in the most intimate of domestic dances. For spirits enjoy dancing so much, that, on some occasions, Masewal people dance for them exclusively as a way to show them their respect and gratitude for sharing their houses, lands, and crops and for protecting them from other dangerous spirits. "They look at us from the *santokal* [the domestic altar], they are seeing how you don't want to dance anymore, they see you sitting there, all tired out!" <sup>47</sup> poked at me Jacinta, a *mayordomo's* wife, when I sat on a bench to take break from dancing. I was "pardoned" that time, as an enthusiast and innocent foreigner but, on later occasions, Jacinta was clear, such ignorance and sluggishness were not going to be overlooked.

.....

---

<sup>47</sup> "Nos están viendo del santokal. Tan viendo que ya no quiere bailar, lo ven sentado, todo cansado!" Fiedl Notes 2013

Dancing is then a moral non-discursive statement that assertively lets people know *what one wants, what is one's disposition and what are one's capacities*. It requires technical expertise, physical fortitude, and an overall attitude of perseverance. A dancer is expected to focus and to dance well while following the music with the corresponding dance steps and turns. He is equally required to dance for long hours without the tiniest hint of fatigue or complaints, always in good spirits; and he needs to be punctual, compliant, and to demonstrate a determined and effortless attitude towards dancing at all times. To show exhaustion, boredom, or disinterest is not only in poor form but it can also become dangerous.

The sometimes-arduous dancing sessions can give way to some apparently contradictory statements. For example, Juan's assertion at a given *mayordomía* dance was: "it is nice to be tired, to sweat, to feel exhausted and to then dance hard. It gives us pleasure, really, so we don't feel tired at all or thirsty, because we are together, happy, dancing." On another occasion, my friend Miguel said about a *compadrazgo* celebration that "here they are giving us food, *tortillas*, and they give us beer, how are we not going to dance? Of course we dance. Now, if they give us some *refino* [rum], then we dance even harder!"<sup>48</sup> Such are the typical expressions of participants in any form of

---

<sup>48</sup> "Aquí nos están dando de comer, tortillas, nos dan cerveza, ¿Cómo no vamos a bailar? Claro que sí vamos a bailar. Ora', si nos dan refino, ¡bailamos más fuerte!" Field Notes 2015.

dancing, implying some sort of sacrificial exhaustion as an embodied demonstration of sincerity regarding respect and gratitude.

I propose then to see dancing as a practice around which Masewal people organize knowledge about things that matter. Such knowledge is a composition of environmental concerns, social participation, and preservation of traditional practices, including a local classification of spiritual entities present in the landscape. Dances evidence what cannot be seen or what can be forgotten, and shouldn't. Dances communicate emotions between people and stand also as an embodied way to express gratitude and as a plea to spirits.

The embodied demonstration of respect contains also a theory of how invisible beings move. "They walk the way we dance", told me Crispín on one occasion. "When they dance around town [the masked dancers] they are just showing us how they walk", was what Ramiro, a fellow dancer, explained to me at some point. In other words, dances counter the assumed invisibility of spirits, making them not only visible but also dynamic and collective.

By copying how the bodies of spirits look like and, crucially, how they move and act, Masewal people are doing more than just a "portrait", but they are also inquiring about such bodies: how they look and behave, what are their capacities, why

do they do certain things and how they relate among each other. Therefore, sometimes to dance can also be an exploration and a route to access certain kinds of knowledge. Such knowledge is encompassing and non-specific (that means it isn't constrained to a "sphere of knowledge" such as cultivation, forestry, healing, commerce, etc.) but, on all occasions, is centered on the stories and relations between humans and the influence of surrounding landscape spirits.

In this chapter I will cover several aspects about what different kinds of dancing entails for people of Tepetzintla, providing some brief notes on the historical background of dances and the place they have occupied at different moments in the history of Mexican indigenous societies. Next, following the native classification of dances, I will describe forms of dancing in Tepetzintla and make a description and a typology of the current thematic dances. I will also provide some data and reflections on dancing from the dancer's point of view, bringing some testimonies of dancers and how they describe their experience.

The kind of knowledge that dances allow for is both 'maintained' and 'created' every year. Dances are identified as 'traditional' by local people at the same time however, every year minor tweaks in costumes, music or steps might appear, allowing for a constant trickle of innovations. Dancers have



different views and motives for dancing, they debate about the meanings of *Danzas*, and experiment, to a degree, with each performance, adding personal *new* touches or remembering ones. Therefore, participating in *Danzas* does not constitute a unified experience nor does it stand in any way as a canonical form of knowledge, or create accumulative encyclopedic intelligence. Dances, both *mijtotia* and *Danzas*, might constitute fleeting assemblages but in the collectivity and specified and encoded behavior they produce, they can however ‘capture’ (through a combination of social organization, performance, vocabulary, costumes and masks, music, choreographies, and discourses) strategic information about the workings of the world and its multiple inhabitants.

Dances stand as an *active reservoir* to which people can go back to remember (*kilnamitl*) traditional values and reanimate different relations between them and with spirits and landscape. ‘Knowledge’ is thus a prop for a combination of experiences and relations, in which learning and teaching, as well as organizing and hosting are as important as dancing or knowing the dance’s associated narratives.

.....  
**VI.III. To dance is but a word: bailes, mijtotia and Danzas**  
.....

Masewal people dance on many different venues. But what is dancing on Masewal terms? Is it an action comparable or even translatable to "dancing" in the so-called West? In the same way other people can dance in a given megacity, at a nightclub or at a house party? In a certain way, yes, dancing for Masewal people is a manifestation of emotion, an embodied form of sociality and rhythmic, musical, and aesthetic pleasure. Dancing too stands as an important way to express acceptance and to participate in social gatherings.

The word in the local Nahuatl language for dancing is *mijtotia*, and it can be used for any kind of musically compassed body movement, much like the verb *to dance* in English or *bailar* in Spanish. However, during my fieldwork I slowly realized that Masewal people also use Spanish terms (such as *bailes* and *Danzas*) to differentiate types of dancing (types of body movements) according to specific music but also to other spatial contexts (public balls, domestic celebrations, outdoor performances). Dancing is then not just a word but also a local concept that requires some ethnographic description. As I will explain here, to dance in Tepetzintla is much more than just moving the body following musical rhythms. To dance can also be associated to: a) a codified interpersonal gratitude, b) therapeutics, c) a membership in local organizations, d) acquisition of *chikawalistl* or "strength" by sacrifice, e)

mimetic embodiment of a spirit, f) collective and creative visualizations of otherwise invisible relations.

There are three major different ways in which the act of dancing is classified in Tepetzintla: *bailes*, *mijtotia* and *Danzas*. My research will focus mainly on the third one, *danzas*, but it's relevance and particularity can be better understood in relation to the other two.

.....

#### **VI.III.I. Bailes**

.....

Indigenous and non-indigenous people alike attend *bailes* or "dance parties", across rural and peri-urban Mexico. Although in recent years mass media has greatly standardized music in styles, *bailes* still differ from region to region, with variations in musical and dancing styles. In Tepetzintla, a *baile* is a *koyotl* or "mestizo" kind of dance; it is locally regarded as popular, modern and foreign. *Bailes*, stand as social platforms in which foreign, national ideas, images and behavior are deployed into the local space.

*Bailes* are practiced by a wide range of people of different ages but especially by adolescents and young adults. *Bailes* have been spaces for young people coming from different towns and ethnicities to playfully flirt with one another without much adult supervision. *Bailes* occur at night on public spaces such

Alessandro Questa, PhD Dissertation's Final Version, November 2017, V4.0 243

as basketball courts or the local auditorium and in which music bands and *sonidos* or “DJs”, play different types of Mexican popular music (Norteñas, pasito Duranguense, Cumbias, Merengue, etc.). These *bailes* are usually funded and organized by the local municipal government as main events during a town’s festivities. Typically, young people move from town to town to attend different town’s *bailes* throughout the year establishing friendly and romantic relations.

As in other parts of Mexico, all across the highlands of Puebla, *bailes* are linked to yearly celebrations of the town’s patron female image, La Virgen de la Asunción in August. *Bailes* however can also happen linked to ‘major’ Mayordomías through the year (See Mayordomías). The popularity of a municipal administration is usually related to the quality and frequency of *bailes*, as they involve a great deal of resources and organization, which in turn reflect upon the perception of power and affluence of each current municipal authority. Indeed, it could be said that *bailes*, just like the saints of *mayordomías*, connect the town to a larger geographical region.

But *Bailes* are also noisy events and alcohol, drunkenness and male violence (mostly fistfights) occur on almost every occasion. Young men are influenced more and more by the so-called ‘narco culture’ and *bailes* in recent years have become more violent than before. Young men tend to dress like northern

men of the country do, with cowboy boots and wide hats and perform like young *narcos*. In the Mexican context, the term *narco* originally means "drug dealer" and "thug". However, in recent years it has also become a way to imply a person is "dangerous" or a "rebel". The aesthetics of hyper emphasized masculinity linked to an aggressive attitude, loud music, drunkenness, coarse language, and an accentuated rural look is part of the *narco* scene among young people in rural and peripheral urban areas.

The last time I attempted to go to a *baile* during my fieldwork was in 2015, and I tried to convince some local friends to go with me. Alma, one of my friends, a young woman in her 20s deterred me from going arguing that it could be dangerous for me. I told her that I have gone to many *bailes* and that I had almost never had any problems in the past. She then argued that times have changed and that "They [young men] don't even dance anymore, they just want to drink and get all drunk. They just want us to hang from their necks and then they are also very rude. It is all boring and ugly. That is why we don't like to go anymore".<sup>49</sup>

I headed alone to the *baile* and sadly confirmed all of what Alma had said. The dance floor was almost empty, and only a few young women (half a dozen or so) still stayed with a majority (a

---

<sup>49</sup> "Ya ni bailan, nomás toman y andan bien borrachos. Nomás quieren que nosotras nos colguemos de su cuello y luego son bien groseros. Ya son muy aburridos y feos, por eso ya no nos gusta ir", Field Notes, 2015.

dozen) of drunken young men. Alma was right and, of course, being a young woman in Tepetzintla placed her in a more vulnerable position than me.

During the several *bailes* that I attended during my fieldwork I saw too a change in music. While in 2012 (and before) *cumbia* and *ranchera* music genres, more oriented to rapid and choreographically partnered dancing, were predominant, in more recent years these genres were drastically replaced by *corrido* and *banda* genres, more oriented to chorus singing and slow paced dancing. With these changes also the attitudes amongst young people transformed, becoming less playful. If dancing was the main activity before, drinking became the salient part of *bailes*. With heavier drinking also verbal violence and fistfights became the norm in almost every *baile*.

In 2014 I was invited to a house party in Tepetzintla. Outside, next to the house, a few young people were laughing and chatting in the dark. I couldn't recognize them, but I guessed some of them were not local as even in the dark I could see they dressed strikingly different. As I approached they fell silent and sternly watched me as I entered the house. I spent a few minutes chatting with my host, but curious I went back out. I approached a young man and he stood up from his block-stool, still holding his canned beer in his hand. Wearing dark jeans and a vest, under a wide hat and on top of a skinny pair of

cowboy boots, he looked really foreign in terms of Tepetzintla's typical men's attire. After exchanging formal salutations however, his costume gave way. I recognized him; he was Mario, one of the local boys, who work as clerks at a local grocery store. Mario was at the time the boyfriend of Lupe, a girl of 17 who worked in Mexico City as housemaid and the daughter of my host that night. The previous tension dissipated as we both recognized each other. I complimented his attire and asked him why he and his friends liked to look like "norteños" (Mexican rural northern men), "people might think you are someone else", I suggested. He said, "some people say we are *narquillos* [young narcos] but they don't know. We are just *serranos* [highlanders], not *norteños*, we work hard so we can have our money to drink. We are not asking for it. No one bothers us. They know better. I say, if they don't like it they can go fuck their mothers, no?"<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, the emerging pan-ethnic *serrano* discourse and identity are fueled in part by *narco* aesthetics, as young people imitate their looks and speech so much that is sometimes hard to tell the difference, except for the lack of guns and expensive jewelry and pick up trucks. In the end, young *serranos* are mostly poor farmers, merchants and construction workers.

---

<sup>50</sup> "Algunos dicen que somos narquillos pero ni saben. Somos serranos nomás, no norteños. Trabajamos para traer nuestro dinero para tomar. No andamos pidiendo. Nadie nos molesta. Ya saben. Digo, si no les gusta se pueden ir a chinga a su madre, o no? Field Notes, 2014.

Only a few years back, although far from being uneventful, *bailes* were mostly spaces for playful flirtation, and welcomed both youngsters and adults. Nowadays however, these events have been reconfigured by local young men as scenarios for the performance of an enactment of received narco-culture imagery. This “narco” image-concept (an assemblage of a vocabulary, garments, and music) has fascinated young indigenous and non-indigenous young people across the highlands (and the rest of the country). In Tepetzintla’s case, this imagery is being linked to the emerging pan-ethnic identity of *serrano*, as will be detailed in Chapter VII.

#### **VI.III.II. Mijtotia**

When people in Tepetzintla refer to *mijtotia*, or “to dance” they usually speak of a very specific kind of musicalized collective movement. *Mijtotia* is the verb for “dancing” in Nahuatl language. However, when used, as a contrastive type it also implies specific local contexts for dancing. Unlike *bailes*, which are centered on recorded mestizo music and loud speakers, all *mijtotia* events require live music (guitar and fiddle), a group of people not necessarily dancing in female/male couples, and it is based on specific local choreographies and individual dance steps. Every *mijtotia* is, unequivocally, associated to

Alessandro Questa, PhD Dissertation’s Final Version, November 2017, V4.0 248



ceremonial occasions such as *compadrazgo*, *mayordomías*, and healing dances. People passing in front of a household where *sones* music is playing will usually make the sign of the cross. In that sense *mijtotia* has a devotional element and it is a formal occasion requiring earnestness from dancers. To dance *mijtotia* is also a way to communicate and to imitate spirits and the dead. According to Rosalba, *mijtotia* is "...the way the dead dance. Is the same. The same way people in the mountain dance".<sup>51</sup>

Masewal people are usually not smiley and "effervescent". They tend to have a more stern character and an introverted demeanor. However, *mijtotia* is regarded as a joyful moment, in which people smile a lot, laugh, joke and dance together. *Mijotia*, as is the case with almost all other Masewal practices, implies physical effort, and it can take several hours depending on the vividness and enthusiasm of the crowd on a given occasion. This kind of dance follows after a feast and is usually the closing activity in a *compadrazgo* celebration by baptism or by any other motive, as well as being present in all *Mayordomías* (See *Compadrazgo* and *Mayordomías*). *Mijtotia* is a way to 'close' an event and to express gratitude to *compadres* or to *diputados* (assistants) in the case of *Mayordomías*. In some cases, as I will detail farther down, it is also an embodied way

---

<sup>51</sup> "...así como bailan los difuntos. Es la misma. La misma que bailan en el cerro." Field Notes 2014

to thank the ancestral spirits and even the animals and the tools used for a feast.

*Mijtotia* dances usually take place at the main room of each house and in front of the domestic altar or *santokal* "saint's house" where the feast just happened (See monographic description). Therefore, *mijtotia* tends to be regularly an indoor, almost always private, form of dance. In the words of a local host of a *mijtotia* "we dance *mijtotia* because we are *compadres*, because we are joyous".<sup>52</sup>

*Mijtotia* is characteristically shaped in a semi circular formation that adapts to the dimensions and distribution of each room and that includes all present men and women (not children). Two musicians with a violin and a guitar must accompany this dance, playing harmonious and repetitive instrumental music pieces called *sones*. As with all other local musical forms no lyrics exist in *sones*. *Sones* are played in sequence and have associated steps and turns, some *sones* are faster than others, while specific *sones* are played to end or "close" the *mijtotia*.

People walk and jump in circle in one direction and will change to the opposite following the music. The dance also includes simultaneous, coordinated individual gyrations in both executed left and right directions. At the center of the circle, certain relevant people, such as the main male and female house hosts, the ritual specialists and some special guests, will blow

---

<sup>52</sup> "Nimijtotis malke semos compadritos, malke tipakiske" Field Notes 2012.

on and keep incense lit (*popochtli*) and will regularly pour soda (*refresco*) and rum or *refino* to the other dancers in the circle. Alcohol and soda are said to take away the tiredness from dancing. People are expected to continue dancing for as long as the music plays. Musicians assess and match the enthusiasm of the dancers with their own endurance. This is why *mijtotia* are in some ways anticipated to be strenuous events.

Women wear on their heads a specially made flower crown or *kwaxochitl* ("head flower") as well as a bouquet called *maxochitl* ("hand flower"). Men will have similar adornments around their necks called *xochicoskatl* ("flower necks"). All of these ornaments are especially made on the same day or the night before from collected wild flowers and bulbs of *sempoalxochitl* "20 flower" plants (*tagetes erecta*).

Masewal participants associate the experience of this kind of dancing to the feeling of happiness and with a sense of togetherness embedded both in the concept of *pakilistl*. The enclosed and aromatically smoked environment only enhances this sensation, together with the effects of alcohol and the repetitive body turns following cyclic music and the growing, if controlled, exhaustion. A sort of pleasant dizziness invades oneself on such occasions.

All *mijtotia* dances end with a final stage of gratitude in which people dance one more time carrying the main objects that

made the celebration possible, such as pots and pans, buckets, axes and knives, and the cardboard boxes with the empty beer bottles. On some occasions certain objects represent other things, especially the animals that have been eaten in the feast, “I can’t dance with the turkey, because we ate it already” joked Macario once “or with the piggy”, he continued, “but I can dance with the bucket and the knife for a long time. It’s just easier. It’s the same”.<sup>53</sup>

*Mijtotia* dances, unlike previously described *bailes* are focused on producing harmony and togetherness amongst the participants and emphasize the interdependence between them and the Saints (in case of Mayordomías), and even the objects used. *Mijtotia* also have a healing aspect, as female healers, or *teese* can cure some spiritual diseases, especially amongst babies and small children, by way of dancing a distinctive kind of *mijtotia*. As she dances, the *teese* calls the names of saints and virgins, all dwellers of the mountain, to help her find the lost child’s soul. She sobs as she prays and lights an incense holder.

As in regular *mijtotia* she dances in circles although in this version her feet go together in very little steps and, in the three different times I witnessed such a dance, she carried the sick child in her arms as well. This style of dancing is

---

<sup>53</sup> No puedo bailar con el guajolotito, ¡ya me lo comí! [...] o con el puerquito. Pero bailo con el bote, y el cuchillo ‘uta un rato. Es más fácil.. Es la misma.” Field Notes 2013.

particularly taxing after just a few minutes and teese are respected also for their tolerance to such heavy dance. The objective, as Manuela explained to me once is to find where the child was lost, "they are very small [children] and can't speak words, so we cannot ask them where they are. We have to walk all the way there and grab them ourselves"<sup>54</sup>. Hence, *mijtotia* used for healing is a form of walking, that is, a way to move across the highlands looking for lost children in order to bring them back. When I asked Manuela why she walked with those small steps, she explained to me that that is the way "they" walk, meaning the invisible mountain beings, the *tipekayomej* who sometimes prey on small children. What Manuela was doing through therapeutic *mijtotia* dancing was to walk and travel like an invisible spirit. Such subtle and less known form of mimesis is even more evident in another type of dances, with flamboyant costumes, masks and collective choreographies.

.....

#### **VI.IV.III. *Danzas***

The third and last and most meaningful type of dancing for this research happening in Tepetzintla is formed by different, hierarchically organized groups in which the participant dancers follow special choreographies and specific themed music, wear

---

<sup>54</sup> "Son chiquitos y no saben hablar palabras, tons' no les podemos preguntar dónde están. Hay que ir caminando hasta por allá y agarrarlos uno." Field notes 2015.

coordinated costumes and possess a particular identity as a group. Such performances occur in a combination of places and chiefly at the town's plaza and temple.

These organizations are known locally as *danzas* (Spanish) or "dances". *Danzas* are also locally regarded as *mijtotia*, as they rely on traditional *sones* music, with live instruments. In order to differentiate these from the secular usage of "to dance" I will keep the local term *danzas* in Spanish when speaking about these organizations. Dancers who belong to these groups learn, over the years, the often-complicated steps that each of the different dances require, while musicians take years to slowly learn all the *sones* or 'songs' that compose each dance.

Local people dance for many reasons. I have known quite a few dancers who enjoy dancing so much that they are willing to participate in different *danzas* every year as they have collected over the years different costumes and masks and have memorized different choreographies. They are dance enthusiasts; some of them have become true master dancers and even dancing teachers. However, there are also reasons that make people dance beyond the pleasure of dancing. Some people, for example, dance as a form of bodily prayer in order to heal others and themselves, "I dance because I want my father to get better from his leg", said José, a fellow dancer. Other people dance to

atone to Saints and ancestors for faults committed in the past, or to repay favors asked before, “one dances as gratitude, to repay. I used to drink a lot. I still do, but only during a celebration, like now. I must be thankful for that” confided at some point Martín, another of my fellow dancers. All dancers however add to their individual reasons a common one. They all knowingly embody the invisible beings that live in the mountains and they collectively look for favorable farming seasons and weather patterns. These two driving scales of motives, individual and collective, are not necessarily segmented in a clear way for each dancer, and sometimes the first is the outcome of the second and vice versa.

Importantly, it should be noted that *danzas* are not merely mechanical tasks, explained through a functional analysis of things that people do in order to obtain something else, be it health, fertility or prestige. These elements are all instrumental in every *danza* but do not account for it entirely in any way. *Danzas* are socializing devices that enable people to gather for long hours during many days. Brothers, fathers and grandfathers take part in them, and become closer during those days as they spend much time rehearsing, collecting costume materials and performing during a *mayordomía*. *Danzas* invoke long-standing friendships and can also end in bitter conflict;

they bring jealousy and solidarity, craftsmanship, faith, remorse, and intense joy. *Danzas* resound with emotional content.

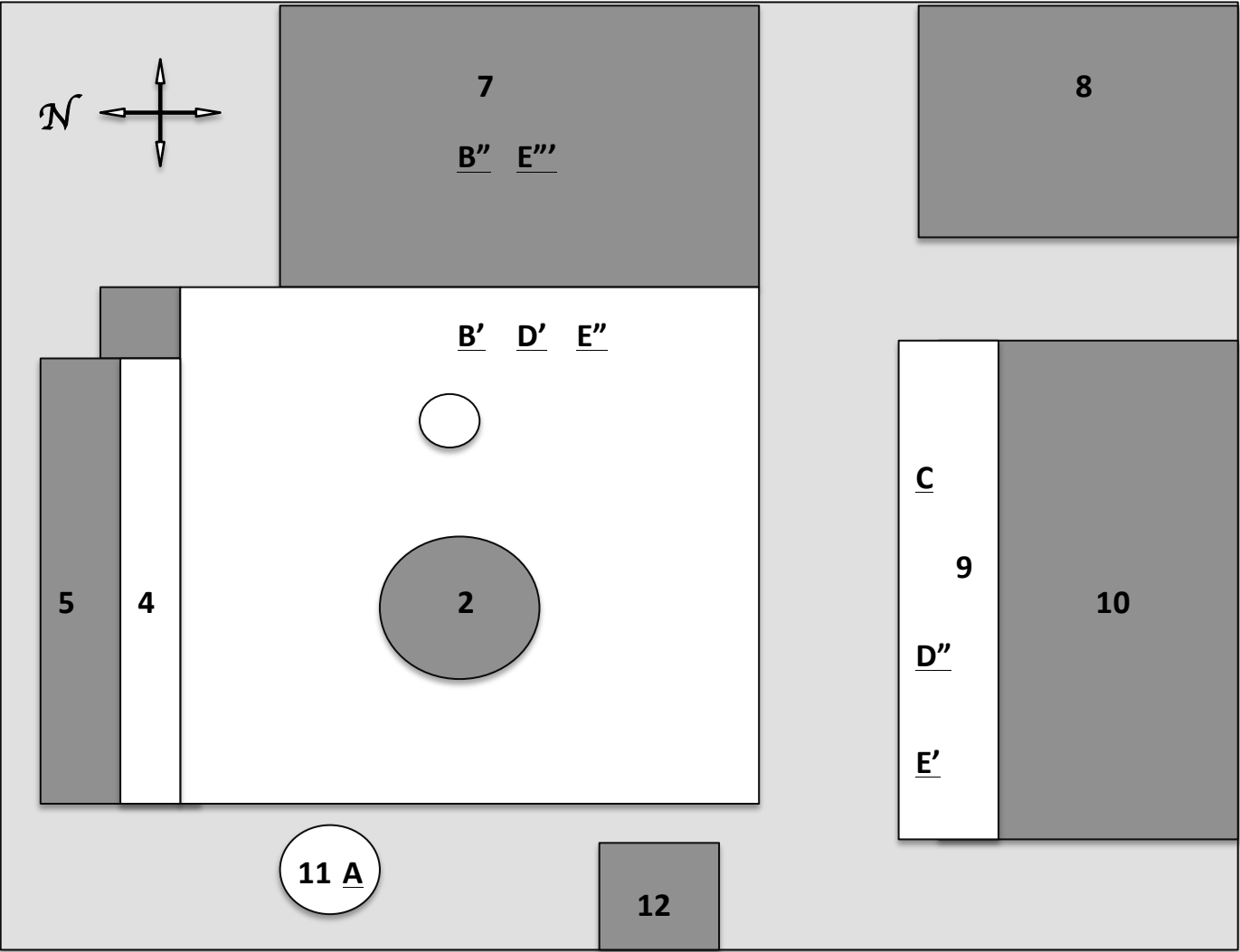
Masewal *danzas* can be described as collectives ranging from around 15 to 50 dancers. Dancers have been traditionally male. However in the last two decades women have been participating more, and gradually taking on specific roles and characters in each dance group. These musicalized performances have each different specific choreographies, characters, costumes, masks, and names. All dancing occurs at public events organized around calendric celebrations or *Mayordomías*, dedicated to a number of Catholic Saints of the liturgical year.

All *danzas* take place at the town's plaza at different specific places for each one. While *Wewentiyo* dance around a mast elevated temporarily next to the plaza, *Apaches*, *Toreadores* and *Negritos* dance on differentiated parts over the front porch of the town hall, or in front of the church. A few *danzas* also take place at a different moment inside the temple. In general terms, the plaza is taken by the *danzas*. In all *danzas* the dancers run and dance from the Captain's house (somewhere in town) to the *mayordomo's* house and then escort the *mayordomía* effigy to the temple, and finally to the new *mayordomo's* house.

.....



**DIAGRAM 2. *DANZAS* AT TEPETZINTLA’S MAIN PLAZA**



Places		Danzas	Spaces	
1. Plaza	7. Church, <i>Teopan</i>	A Wewentiyo		Streets
2. Kiosk	8. Basketball Court	B', B'' Tipekayomej		Roofed buildings
3. Fountain	9. Town Hall's porch	C Toreadores		Porches, open spaces
4. Priest's porch	10. Town Hall	D', D'' Españoles		
5. Priest's house	11. Wewentiyo mast and canvas	E', E'', E''' Apaches		
6. Bell tower	12. Storage, <i>Sagraro</i>			

.....

Each *Mayordomía* entails the yearly hosting of a saint or virgin effigy by a *Mayordomo*. Each *Mayordomo* also invites one or two elder men known for being respectful or *wewes*; they are called *tlanosatl* or “people who know how to speak”. These elders will, in the *Mayordomo*’s name, pay several visits to each dance leader or *Capitán* at his house, in order to invite them to participate. Such invitations often require several visits in which the *tlanosatl* will negotiate and regale with beer and food the Captain. If he accepts, the Captain will commence his own visits to his fellow dancer’s homes, convincing each of them to join him, collect and fix costumes and masks, properly rehearse, and to attend on the set *Mayordomía* date. The Captain selects his *segundo* or “second”, *tercero*, “third” and, when groups are big enough, a *cuarto* or “fourth”. These men, in a hierarchical line that is replicated in the dance formation, will help the Captain to locate and order around the rest of the dancers. Some dances have specific costumed characters that perform his tasks.

*Danza* groups are usually also groups of *compadres*, neighbors, and relatives. For every generation, dances stand as inquisitive performances, relevant inventions, and political tools as much as they are colorful routines and much awaited parades in town. Repetition and innovation are both valued notions that coincide in dances as a practice providing people with the drive to perform things either “as it was supposed to

be", by identifying them with a remote past and a strictly encoded behavior that is supposed to be unchangeable; or "as it should be" by implying the possibility for different interpretations and allowing dancers to innovate minor adaptations into them. Dances stand as a bridge between generations and can give expression to different migrant experiences, for example. By participating in a dance, dancers can become closer to what they call "costumbre" (custom), but can also deploy the newfound elements and interpretations from their lives in the city.

In Tepetzintla, a growing number of men of all ages participate in at least one of the five dance organizations or "danzas". All dances present an assortment of characters that form in turn specific collectivities. In almost all dances—except the Apache and Tipekajomej dances— the characters are predominantly presented as Mestizo people or *koyomej*.

.....

Table: *Danzas* in Tepetzintla

Names in English	Names in Spanish	Names in Náhuatl
*Badger Hunters (S), Dear Grandfathers (N)	Tejoneros	Wewentiyo
*Little black men (S), Mountain Bodies	Negritos	Tipekajomej
*Apache	Apache	Apache
Spaniards	Españoles	Españoles
Bull Fighters	Toreadores	Toreadores
**Santiagueros	Santiagueros	Santiagueros

(N) From Nahuatl

(S) From Spanish

\*In which I have participated as a dancer

\*\*Currently abandoned

Grandfathers teach their grandchildren the steps and gift them with their old hats, masks, and costumes. Old friends are reunited during the daylong rehearsals and travel together to nearby towns to buy the necessary garments for their respective costumes. Mature men that have come back from the city after decades away, are drawn to a particular dance for they remember their participation back when they were children, and dances are a way to be reinserted into local activities. These men take their own children with them now, as they enthusiastically want to teach them the steps in order to dance together. Some men have also started to invite their young daughters into the dance

with little opposition from the rest of the dancers, even if women have traditionally been forbidden to dance in such organizations.

In general, *danzas* are venues in which people become organized around a specific objective. Without such invitations a dance cannot happen, and so, to understand how dances are organized it is necessary to understand their linkage to *Mayordomías*. Importantly, if *danzas* are ordered and invoked by *mayordomos*, *mayordomías* could not happen without at least an escort of dancers from one of the *danzas*. Both *danzas* and *mayordomías* are inseparable in Tepetzintla.

*Mayordomías* are, in turn, linked to the establishment of ritual kinship relations. Indeed, *Mayordomos* establish relations between one another as resembling *compadrazgo* (co-parenthood) utilizing the *effigies* as mediating entities. Just as the child of one and godchild of the other unite baptism *compadres*, *mayordomos* become co-godparents of the same saint.

These three forms of organization (*compadrazgo*, *mayordomías*, and *danzas*) include groups of neighbors, family members and friends but, at the same time, exclude the majority of the town's population. We are speaking of intermediate organizing units that are more inclusive than say, families, but are not as big as to include whole segments of the town, called

"barrios". In short, dances are imbricated into all the other local organizations dedicated to the establishment of relations.

.....  
**VI.V. Rehearsing dances**

Masewal dancers often say that, in the end, what really matters is "to dance together" (*totech mijtotiaskej*). This laconic statement is one of those formulas that belong to the dancing days and is usually said by each dancer at the end, when the dancers gather at the house of the captain of the dance, and almost everybody is drunk. Shared drunkenness amongst dancers is important, as it is considered an award for so much effort taken. Each dance, before being performed in any public space needs to be rehearsed. Only for the dance of the Apache (in 2014), the group rehearsed over 80 hours. Rehearsals were carried out at the basketball court in the center of the town, every Saturday for between 12 to 20 weeks from approximately 9 am until 4 pm, and some days it went on for more hours. Rehearsals are physically exhausting and are supposed to build resistance as much as technical skills in dancers.

Rehearsals are relevant activities in which dance groups become united but are also demanding preparations in which conflict (between dancers, dancers and captains, captains and mayordomos) might arise. Every dance group considers rehearsals

Alessandro Questa, PhD Dissertation's Final Version, November 2017, V4.0 262

almost as important as the final performances. In fact, dancers who don't show up to rehearsals are criticized by others and sometimes reprehended by the Captain and can even be 'discharged'. Rehearsals are times for the creation of "participación" or *participation* in each dancer.

During rehearsals dancers practice and coordinate and learn to follow the music and each other's steps. Each rehearsal must end with drinking, beers and *aguardiente* (high grade rum) provided by the sponsoring Mayordomo who shows up with some of his *compadres* to watch the rehearsal. Each drinking event begins with solemn toasts from the Mayordomo and specifically from his *tlanosalmej* or "callers", offered to senior dancers and captains first, who then take control of the alcohol and offer beers and pour *aguardiente* drinks to all dancers. Children and younger dancers stay around playing basketball and running around, but don't drink. Sometimes the drinking started long before the rehearsal ends and dancers are drunk too early. During my first rehearsals with them (*Apache* and *Tipekayomej* dance groups) I thought such enthusiasm for alcohol was a "failure" of the day's rehearsal. I was not the only one who thought that, other younger dancers shared my opinion. However, I eventually began to appreciate that drunkenness and loose rehearsals often provided socializing moments for dancers to talk about politics, land labor and other everyday matters. On a few occasions, such

"failed" rehearsals ended up in heated debates about what the dance is supposed to be and about the identity of the characters in it –surprisingly to me then– whose actions were in most cases mysterious or at least debatable.

#### **VI.VI. Dancing together: "participación", "respeto", and "gusto"**

Each *danza* involves "participación", "respeto", and "gusto" (participation, respect and joy), three local terms, frequently verbalized in Spanish, used by Masewal to refer to what dances are about. Indeed, participating in one of these organizations presents each dancer with the opportunity to express his or her dancing abilities and knowledge about choreographies, costumes, and masks. Participation is also measured by the discipline and seriousness with which each dancer obeys the orders of the captain and complies with what is required of him. Participation invokes a collective capacity for performance, as the whole dance group is identified as having a good or poor presence.

The individualized effervescence of each dancer, his skill at dancing and the richness and delicacy of his garments and mask are usually identified with "joy" (*gusto* in Spanish or *pakilistl* in Náhuatl). Dancers with more joy can dance for more hours and are regarded as more committed to the saint, the mountain and the town.



Moreover, dances include membership in a specific group, based on the investment each dancer slowly makes in buying their respective regalia, and on their disciplined attendance at events and rehearsals over time. Finally, dances give each participant an opportunity to show their respect or *tlepanitalistl* to the mountain spirits, the patron saint and to *el pueblo*, "the town". This common expression was mysterious to me, as I didn't know, for a long time, to what exactly it referred. Does it refer to the people or the place? The answer came from Manuel a fellow dancer said "dancing is for all the people, not just for the ones here. It is for those in the mountain and for those in the city, and for the grandparents too. We dance for the whole world."<sup>55</sup>

Indeed, dancing is an effort to unite and to recompose the world. By dancing, each dancer connects his own skill to that of his companions and together become part of a larger Mayordomía, accepting food offerings and escorting the sacred images. Each Mayordomía is, in turn, connected to all others and all compose the town. But what is the town or "el pueblo"? The town includes "all the people". Such a term encompasses animals, spirits and the dead, just as much it gives membership to people in the city and their descendants. Dancing is an expansive stratagem. It

---

<sup>55</sup> "La danza es para toda la gente, no nomás para la de aquí. Es para los que viven en el cerro y en la ciudad, y para los abuelitos. Danzamos para todo el mundo." Field notes 2012.

performs connectivity and shows the ultimate Masewal values embedded in actions around dancing like sharing food, dancing together and committing to extreme physical challenges: mutual respect, collective participation and personal joy.

## **VI.VII. Dancers as spirits**

Every *danza* presents a constellation of different characters (animals, mountain spirits, ancestors). Everybody knows the name of every character and feels entitled to strictly observe and evaluate its proper ornaments, colour arrangement, position in the group and so on. Dances are episodic, and dancers make sure that each episode states a defined type of relation between specific characters. The audience also evaluates each performance and critique or even demand that it is done well.

Through the combined movements of these characters in a series of these episodes, it is generally understood that each dance tells a particular story. These stories however are in part a mystery, as most of the audience and even the dancers have little idea or interest in following any linear or master narrative. Each dance receives a name associated with a collective classification. Therefore, all dance groups (e.g. *Negritos* and *Tejoneros*, "Blackies" and "Badger hunters") imply

alignments of similar people. However, these same dances receive a different name in Náhuatl: *Negritos* is the equivalent of *Tipekayomej* "mountain dwelling people", while *Tejoneros* is called *Wewentiyo* "our old men" or "our grand fathers". It is worth pointing out that *Negritos* are not "racialized", nor currently linked with historical African enslaved immigrants, but rather with the primordial, invisible non-Christian people living inside the mountain. Their blackness, even if at some point in the past emerged with the arrival of African population to the highlands, is locally associated with the earth and the obscurity reigning inside the mountain. For their part, the *Tejoneros* are not primarily identified with hunters but with the ancestral *Masewal*, the people who first cultivated maize. In short, this local practice of naming dances emphasizing their different aspects in Spanish and Nahuatl languages, eschews all attempts at linear translations in favour of simultaneous definitions. Such *Masewal* semantic openness regarding dances contains the first clue to a tacit acceptance of coexisting spiritual possibilities.

For their part, unconcerned by this discursive absence, dancers perform eagerly, as they hope to accomplish their promise to a saint, to their fellow dancers, and to "the town".

As Rafael said once; "to dance is to fulfil one's obligation with the town [...] with the entire world."<sup>56</sup>

During the dance and its rehearsals, dancers become dangerous and unstable, they can bring harm and disease with their touch and with their words. They effectively, if temporarily, become spirits. During the days of *Mayordomía*, dancers must not let themselves be touched by anyone nor have sexual relations or, according to some older dancers, even sleep in their own homes for fear of doing any harm to their family and animals. Their masks become "active", once they have been properly blessed and placed for a night at the Captain's domestic altar. Masks are considered dangerous to the touch, especially to women and children.

Dancers are transformed not only visually but also in their voices and interactions with others. They are not allowed to speak during the dance, except to one another, and then only briefly. *Captains* and their *segundos* are always supposed to see that dancers comply. When they interact with non-dancers, they cannot do so in Nahuatl or Spanish, instead they must use gestures to let people know they want a beer, or that they want to dance some more. They utter in their *voz del monte* or "mountain voice", a series of playful yells and unintelligible words and whistles. "That is how they sound like" told me Rafael

---

<sup>56</sup> "Uno danza por que es la obligación de uno con el pueblo [...] con todo el mundo" Field Notes 2012.

a fellow dancer, "so we must speak like them only. We can't speak like Christians".<sup>57</sup>

At that moment dancers are mountain beings and therefore cannot enter into any *Cristiano* or Christian house or be under any sort of roof. Indeed, dancers become ancient pre-Christian beings. They must stay at all times directly under the sun. They must eat whatever they are offered by their patrons, the *Mayordomos*, who pay for the dance and host the feast. Finally, dancers are expected to become inebriated with beer and rum.

Masewal dancers agree that when dancing they are not only themselves, but become someone else *at the same time*. In this condensed state, clad in masked costume, dancers perceive and are perceived differently. Dancing formulates a controlled form of transformation by mimesis, framed by behaviour and regalia, collective movements and individual masking. The dancers refer to this unstable state as *nimopatla*, "to change myself". Dancers change, in every case, into a landscape or ancestor spirit, the same invisible beings seen by shamans via *kixpatla*. *If dancers provide a material body to spirits, risking their health, they do so in order to gain temporary and limited control over them, to make them social and able to reciprocate.*

Below, I describe three of the dances in more detail, in order to argue that Masewal dances occur as an anti-shamanic

---

<sup>57</sup> Así suenan. Entonces así debemos hablar nomás. No podemos hablar en Cristiano." Field Notes 2012.

manifesto of sorts, a space devised to re-capture relations with spirits and a way for the “ungifted” dancers to exercise collectively the exclusive perceptive powers of shamans by enacting the invisible. In short, dances do not tell shamanic stories but *visualize* them and, in doing so, change their outcome.

.....  
**VI.VIII. Dancing ancestors, mountains, winds, devils,  
necromancers and bears**

I will describe, based on my experience as a dancer, the main *danzas* that Masewal people do and utilize as public devices for thinking and countering spiritual-environmental harm: *Tipekayomej*, *Wewentiyo* and *Apache*. Each of these *danzas* is drastically different from the others in presenting unique nonverbal episodic narratives, as well as specific characters, musical *sones*, costumes, and masks.

.....  
**VI.VIII.I. Dancing mountains: Tipekayomej**

The dance of *Negritos* or *Tipekayomej* revolves around a group of primordial mountain beings and is perhaps, the most telling on how Masewal people conceive their relations with the

spirits of the land. Momentarily embodied by dancers, the mountain people visit the town while dancing demonstrate their powers, reminding Masewal people of their relevance to finally kneel in front of the sponsoring *mayordomo* and the saints.

On their heads, dancers carry protuberant black hats that conflate the characteristics of mountains: small mirrors for caves, flowers for trees, fringes for rain and moss. During the ceremony, these mountain-dancers will escort images from the *Mayordomía*, executing a full set of musicalized movements or *sones*<sup>58</sup>, at each household and finally, at the atrium of the village's church. In the first days, the dancers bear a wooden serpent—although on some occasions it might just be a carved tree branch—which they carry around the village. The snake is called *kwojtlacowatl*, “wooden” or “forest serpent”, receiving also the name of *iwitlapilnawal* “Devil's tail”. The *Negritos* take pride in skilfully playing a pair of castanets which represent the sound of raindrops, but which they also call *awakanawal* “Devil's testicles”. In this instance, *Nawal* is a term that refers to the Devil; indeed, the wooden serpent and the dancers that carry it are regarded as dangerous, ancient and malicious entities.

*Negritos* are non-Christian beings and are also the Devil's sons. The Devil is a powerful landscape spirit, commonly

---

<sup>58</sup> Each *son* (pl. *sones*) is a musical piece played by three musicians: one fiddle and two guitars. Specific groups of *sones*, numbering 18 to 24, accompany and structure the actions of each dance.

referred to as *El Dueño del Monte* "The Mountain Owner" in Spanish, and called in Náhuatl called *Kwoshiwa*, or "Wilderness Lord". When it is manifested in this form, this green coloured male being, elder of humankind, makes the *Tipekayomej* dance for him for he taught them the music and steps, which constitute an imitation of the way he walks (the movement of his tail, the clashing sound of his testicles). The Devil is, at the same time, the wooden snake, which is killed by the dancers in the end. The overlapping narratives and materials (where the wooden snake is the Devil and also his tail, castanets are raindrop sounds and also his testicles, and dancers are his sons but also his hunters) and the dance do not exactly match each other, but that is not the point. Nawa informants clearly express that the *Negritos* are there to imitate the Devil by dancing, and to kill the snake at the sound of a specific *son*, whatever the stories around those actions might be.

The *Tipekayomej* or *Negritos* evokes the presence of "mountain people", owners of the wild and dwellers of *tlaltikpakijtik* "the mountains' innards" with which Nawa farmers have to deal in order to plant and harvest maize together. Planting maize on the mountain is assumed thus to be a tacit association with these beings, who simultaneously grow the same plants towards the interior of the mountain. Every maize plant is therefore a double entity, mirrored inside the mountain. What



Masewal people see as maize roots constitutes, for mountain spirits, the plant itself for the mountain spirits (the roots for them being the maize plant). There is consequently, an inter-species partnership in maize production between Masewal people and the mountain spirits. The *Tipekayomej*, in their visitation of the village via the dancers' bodies, remind the Masewal people of their interdependence, and are therefore treated as guests; more specifically, as *compalimej* or *compadres*, that is, as ritual kin.

#### **VI.VIII.II. How the world works: Wewentiyo**

The *danza* of *Wewentiyo* presents an assortment of disguised characters, narrative elements, and artefacts that provide evidence of the connections in the highlands' world. The *Wewentiyo* group—hunters, wives, dogs and clown—dances around a bamboo pole, which is in turn, circled by a painted canvas. The dancing requires the erection of a bamboo pole of 8 to 10 meters called *taro*. The *taro* is erected at the village plaza and covered with leaves and then bound with a number of ropes and riggings over which a second layer of palm leaves is placed.

Importantly, the *taro* is an empty tube, which can be filled with the necessary riggings to move several other artefacts up and down. A gourd and a Mexican flag crown the *taro* mast. The

gourd has been previously cut in two, connected to the inner riggings, and filled with confetti; it is thereby a container that will become relevant at the end of the dancing. The Mexican flag gives a national presence to the event, as it identifies the ceremony as something that happened “somewhere in Mexico”, as dancers say. Once these devices are all in place, the now multi-layered *taro*, wrapped in green leaves, takes the form of “a mountain”, a complex instrument able to mobilize a number of things (ropes “deflowering” the mast, a stuffed badger, a wooden woodpecker, an opening contraption for the gourd) up and down, all connected somehow from its rigging and controlled by just one person, the stagehand, at its bottom. This stagehand is regarded as a special person who knows how technically to erect and manipulate the mast. However, most of his technique remains hidden from the audience, as a high canvas surrounds mast and stagehand.

The dance contains several simultaneous stories and relations between the different characters, proposing, like the dance of *Tipekayomej*, an asequential narrative. The main story focuses on a group of ancestral hunters, their wives, and their dogs as they search for a badger to hunt. The badger has –or will attempt to– steal maize grains from the inside of the mountain. The badger proves to be too clever for the hunters, who are eventually assisted in their search by a trickster

character, called *Payaso* or “clown”, that is revealed only in its Nawa name as *Tipewewe*, the “Mountain Elder”, an ancestral spirit associated with the mountain and its animals. Together, the members of the group will effectively (depending on the actual success of the artefacts in place) hunt down the verminous badger (a stuffed badger shot down by a rifle shot) and attain maize grains for the Nawa to plant and harvest in the coming season (as the gourd on top of the mast is opened by the stagehand liberating a rain of multi-coloured confetti). However several other, seemingly unrelated, characters and relations appear during the dance. At some point a wooden woodpecker ascends up the mast only to be taken down by the riggings. Usually too, a *wewe* or “old man”, who is an unrelated person to the dance group, appears and drunkenly plays and jokes with dancers and audience alike. Also, by the end of the dance, the stagehand will operate a couple of joyful marionettes, who will celebrate with the hunters the killing of the badger, they are “Father-earth” and “Mother-earth”, *Tlatikpaktata* and *Tlaltikpaknana*, respectively.

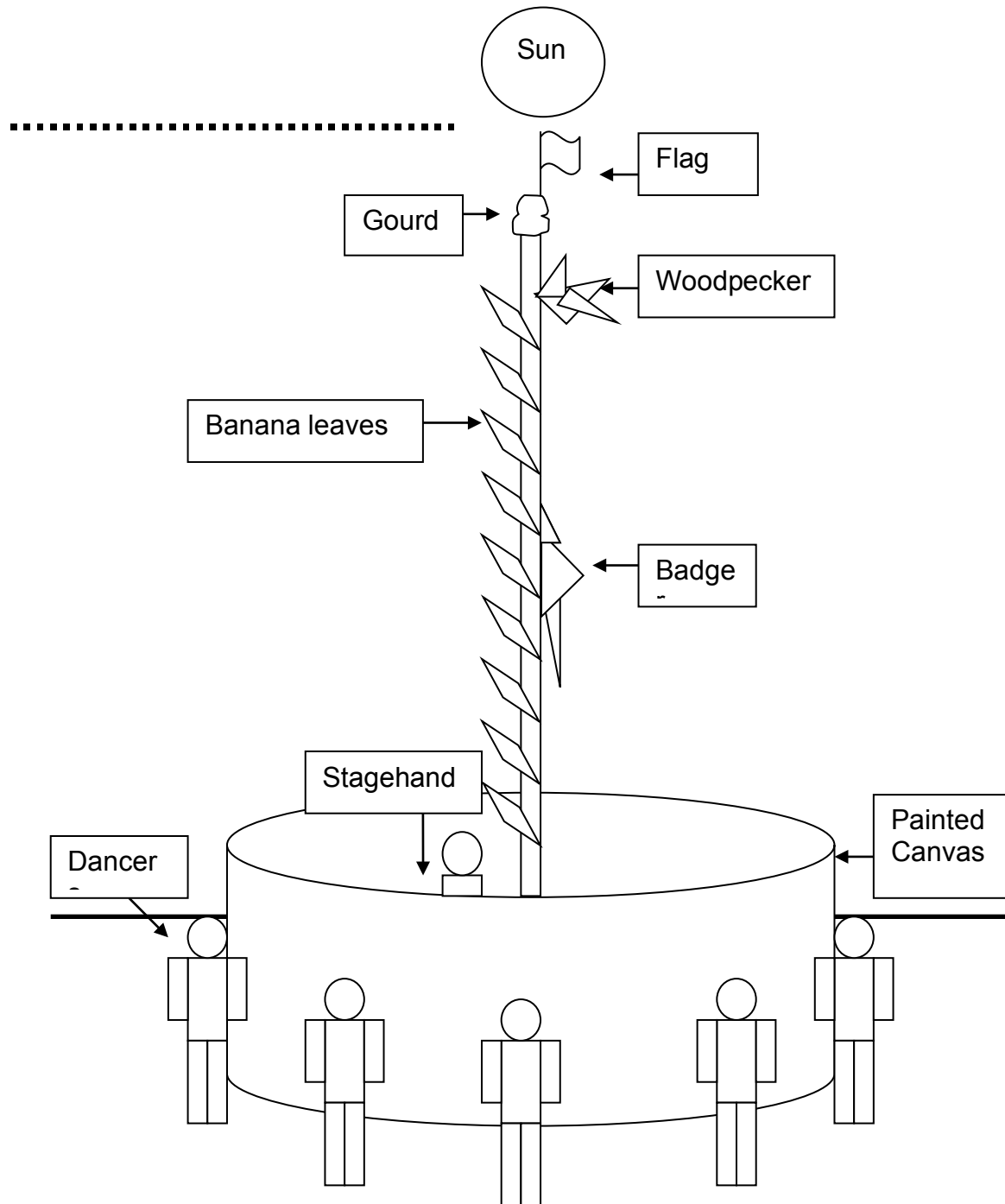
The painted canvas around the *taro* mast is called *mantiado* (from the Spanish “manta” or tapestry), it measures approximately 20 meters long per 2 meters high, and acts as a circular backdrop surrounding the mast in a 3-meter radius. The *mantiado*, fully decorated with an oil painting, depicts a

continuous landscape (mountains, rivers, trees, and rocks) and the town itself (the church, the plaza). Over this scenery, emerges a series of beings: a *mestizo* couple, an eagle, a raccoon, a helicopter, a rainbow. Some characters appear performing different activities: people talking with spirits, a shaman smoking in sight of a mountain spirit, a hunter shooting at a jaguar, and so on. Significantly, every *mantiado* must also depict another *mantiado* with its correspondent group of *Wewentiyo* dancers dancing around the *taro* mast.

By showing the dancing, masked characters “as they should be seen”, the painted canvas or *mantiado* constitutes both a document that displays procedures to be ordered for the dancing; but it is also a map of how beings and things, places and activities are related and seen. The *mantiado* could be thought of as yet another device (along with masks and costumes) with which dancers attempt to capture and visualize the connections between invisible spirits and the visible world., The collection of beings, places and relations showed by the *mantiado* it evidences the local multi-layered landscape in its connections. By stating how “different people” are portrayed in it and how “they all dance here”, it politically invokes the centrality of the village and the countryside while tacitly establishing the necessary reciprocity between the Nawa and their environment.

Finally, some of the contraptions in the *Wewentiyo* dance are associated to maize growth and agriculture as it also entails weather forecasting apparatus. Some elements of the dance are interpreted by the audience. The proper ascendance of badger and woodpecker up the mast, the ropes correctly cutting the leaves, the adequate opening of the gourd, the precision of the hunter shooting down the badger, are all indications of possible storms, droughts, and rains, ultimately defining the harvest season.

Diagram. Wewentiyo dancers



### VI.VIII.III. Masewal Apache

The dance of *Apache* is the third and last *danza* in which I had the chance to participate as dancer. For Masewal people the term Apache has nothing to do with the actual Native American tribes and nations that have inhabited the South West of the US and Northwest of Mexico. The Nahuatlized term *Apache* refers to pre-Christian mountain people, ancestral people who didn't know Jesus Christ (the sun) and who did not know how to grow maize.

Unlike *Wewentiyo* and *Tipekayomej*, in this *danza* most dancers don't wear a mask. The attire of the Apache dancers is a colorful flecked shirt and belt with embroidery. Each Apache dancer carries a wooden bow and arrow. Not real bows and arrows though but a fixed piece of wood that is carried in the shoulder, a sort of simulacrum of a bow. On their heads the dancers carry an elongated conical hat crowned with a small paper headdress. On their hands, they all carry colorful handkerchiefs. There is a series of particular characters accompanying the Apache. A group of 3 couples that are the leaders of the *danza* and are the Captain's, *Segundo* and *Tercero* with their female partners. The music for this *danza*, like the others, is based on violin and guitar *sones*.

Also unlike the *Wewentito* and *Tipekayomej* dances, in which dances dance "on their own" following a circle (the *Wewentiyo*)

or a sequenced choreography in ranks (the Tipekayomej), the Apache dance in two files of couples. The steps are laboriously formed by each of the couples at the same time.

At the end of the two files of dancers, there are another set of characters and these are all masked: the domador or tamer with a white man's mask (identical to the one used by Wewentiyo), the oso or bear with an animal's black mask characterized by a protruding muzzle; and the Ungra, a Nahuatlization of the word "húngara" in Spanish or "Hungarian", which is a transvestite male dancer dressed as a white woman, using a white woman's mask (again, like the *xinola* in the Wewentiyo dance). The *domador* or "tamer" has a metal chain around the Bear and whips it with a leather lash. The *ungra* goes behind them, dancing, unlike the rest of the Apache, alone. Tamers and Bears are buffoons, and engage the audience addressing especially the children. At times the Bear escapes and the Tamer chases after, or the Bear becomes fearless and attacks the Tamer. The *ungra* sometimes joins in the charade but not every time. According to my fellow dancers, the role of each character depends much on the personality and enthusiasm of each dancer. Some dancers as *ungras*, *domadores* or *osos* are remembered better than others.

The danza could be divided in three sections. In the first section, the first three male and female couples, heavily



ornamented as “mestizo” people lead the group. In the middle, the couples of male Apache follow, and at the end *domadores*, *osos*, and *ungras* follow.

The Apache dance, as the other *danzas*, offers a blurry story and not one of my Masewal friends and interlocutors has ever been able to tell me what is it about. They all know however that the Apache are indeed *xantilmej* (see *kalwewetsin*), ancestral pre-Christian Masewal primeval hunters with bow and arrow, as they don’t know yet how to grow corn (that knowledge comes “later” with the dance of *Wewentiyo*). After a few *sones* of dancing all together, the Apache fight against the Bear and are aided by the Tamer, ultimately killing the Bear with their arrows and then starting to dismember it. Unexpectedly, the Apache then feel bad about this and convince the *ungra* to revive it. Then only the *ungra* Tamer and bear dance while the Apache observe in circle. The Bear is mysteriously revived. Ecstatically the characters dance again together. Bear, Tamer, *ungra* and all of the Apache.

The Apache, as the other *danzas*, tell several stories without a master narrative. One part of the *danza* shows a clear hierarchical “chain” with rich mestizo characters at the front, Apache in the middle and an assortment of characters in the back. The *danza* presents the audience with the existence of the *xantilmej* the “true” Masewal ancestors before the coming of

Jesus Christ, the sun. The hunting of the bear, the enemy at first, has no specific meaning among musicians, dancers, or even diviners I talked to about such episode. "They kill it because it's a wild animal. You can't tame such an animal." eloquently said my friend Anselmo once.

Without falling on symbolic conjecture, perhaps Anselmo's take is enough. As he suggests, the *danza* shows how human people and feral animals compete and need to eliminate each other at some extreme point. More difficult to understand is perhaps the last episode, in which the *ungra* reassembles and revives the Bear, asked by the very Apache who killed it. Again, after hours and days of rehearsal and conversations with my other fellow Apache dancers, I have the sense that they don't understand the "meaning" I am looking for. Everardo, the *mayordomo* who that year sponsored the *mayordomía* of Corpus Christi and the Apache *danza*, said at one time, after a few beers that "the *ungra* is the Bear's wife, they are also from the mountain". Rafael, a fellow dancer mentioned that a few years ago the Bear was not revived, only "pardoned". The *danza* ended effectively with the Bear's killing.

As with *Wewentiyo* and *Tipekayomej*, the Apache show how people and mountain beings are connected and somehow interdependent while attempting to produce amicable relations. The relation of dominance and humorous competition between Tamer

and Bear shows a mestizo and an animal, and then a mestizo woman as aide. The assortment of characters and relations is maybe the strongest part of this *danza*, as a showcase of beings.

.....  
**VI.IX. Heads, and faces, masks and crowns**

*Danzas* entail the assembling people (creating artifacts, proposing narratives and relations) and thus provide Masewal farmers with visual models to interact with and, ultimately, to reinvent the highlands as a relational network between humans and nonhuman beings. In every dance, there are artifacts that condense, deploy, and enact propositions about said relations. Masks, costumes and dancers, together conform mimetic machines for enquiring about an environment in which they live. Indeed “to see” is an important concept for Masewal people, as it is a way to potentially connect invisible relations by the materialization and ultimate socialization of otherness.

*Danzas* signal bodies in relation with others and in doing so they also point out what those bodies stand for. Their flesh, forms and actions, as analyzed before, mark all such bodies as belonging to specific collectivities. Certain objects become salient for native analysis, in particular, wooden masks and certain headdresses are the main artifacts used by dancers to not only become spirits but also, to publicly show what they

Alessandro Questa, PhD Dissertation’s Final Version, November 2017, V4.0 283

are, how they behave, and how they look like. In this section I analyze the use of wooden masks during *danzas* (*Wewentiyo*, *Tipekayomej* and *Apache*), as well as the particular “crown” that characterizes *Tipekayomej* dancers.

.....  
**VI.IX.I. *Tipekayomej* crowns: mountain heads**

There is no local word in Nahuatl language for ‘hat’. When asked, old men and women get annoyed, as they can never remember or agree on the “right” word for it. Some say the word for hat in Spanish, *sombrero*, and some say *xombelo*, a Nahuatl pronunciation of a term acknowledged to be borrowed from Spanish. They clearly distinguish however between two kinds of things that can go on a head: crowns and hats. The latter are used mostly by men, and are implements to cover the head and protect it from sun heat and the rain. For some men, hats are can be used as strategic garments of the *serrano* outfit, but for most Masewal people they are just instruments for protection during work.

The term *kwaxochitl* (literally meaning “forest flower”) is used exclusively for ‘crown’ [‘corona’ in Spanish] and marks the ceremonial use of multifarious instruments placed on the head. For even if form and/or material could be the same, use will

ultimately determine if and when an object is just a hat or becomes a crown

During my travels across the highlands I can empirically attest two things regarding these *Negríto* crowns: 1) The *Negrítos* dance is perhaps the most popular *danza* in the highlands of Puebla, according to my informal census, where I registered 14 different different *danzas* in the region today, and 2) with variations in meaning and elements, all of these hat-crowns keep the same basic features and names.

*Tipekayomej* crowns have been the topic of many of my conversations with dancers and there are many different opinions among them about the purpose, form and meaning of this complex device. Dancers, specially the young, are indeed very curious about these instruments, just as they are curious about their own costumes, movements, music and all of the possible meanings. During rehearsals for the dance I talked to them about these artifacts and realize that they also were very curious about them too. After these conversations, I have the sense that their own crowns pose a riddle to them, “why do we use them in such a way?” Julián a young dancer said at one such occasion, “what do they mean at all anyway?” Partially, this analytic curiosity might about possible meanings could be related to the experience of younger dancers with the standardized education system. Contrastingly, older dancers seem to be less curious about

semiotics, and more focused on fulfilling their obligation and particularly strict on their own performance.

According to my numerous informal interviews with many dancers, costume makers, and paraphernalia merchants (some interviews carried out one on one, some in group, some out of context, some during ritual time), the Negrito crown is the single most important, and expensive, part of their attire. To fabricate a crown takes some laborious work and a lot of money (close to 100 USD/1,500 Mexican Pesos in 2014–2015), therefore the crowns are many times slowly improved over the years. When the dancer has the means he will usually follow this process:

.....  
1) In order to produce one of these objects, a regular, either used or new, “cowboy” or “rancher” hat is needed.

2) This hat is then fully covered with a second layer of black velvet lining. All dancers agree that the color black (*tiltik*) is the generic color of the earth. They also agree in that the black lining covering the hat looks like dirt (*tlali*). They all agree too in saying the hat covered in black velvet lining looks like a *tipekayotl* “body mountain”.

3) The hat is then covered with a second layer of colorful—either plastic or metallic—flowers (in previous

times these flowers were made of paper and I have been told that even before then they used "living flowers" or "flower's hearts" [*yoloxochitl*]). The number of flowers is not relevant to some dancers; most however say they need to be at least 24. The main idea is to fully cover the top of the hat with them. All dancers identify the artificial flowers as the trees that 'protect the earth'. Flowers are then called forest or *kwojtla*, and together with the black velvet lining they form earth: *kowjtlali* (*kowjtla+tlali*).

4) The frontal wing of the hat is folded up, creating a vertical surface in which 3 circular mirrors are placed forming a triangle between them. The 3 mirrors have different but simultaneous associations. Most dancers say the mirrors in the hat represent caves, places where spirits live. They also say mirrors remind them of water springs, houses for the "water people" (*akayomej*) and/or the Divine Trinity (main patron image of the town).

5) Around the hat a yellow/golden thread fringe or '*fleko*' is placed. Importantly, the '*fleko*' covers the eyes (and sight) of the dancer, blurring his vision and partially covering his facial features. Most dancers identify the '*fleko*' with rain (*kiyowitl*). Some few dancers say the '*fleko*' resembles the hay that hangs from the trees up in the thickest part of the mountain's forest.

6) The next elements are the 'carsotas', a rather peculiar group of 9 to 13 handfuls of transparent fiberglass filaments that go on top of the hat. Many dancers interpret 'carsotas' as sunrays coming down on the mountain, while a few others say its just rain.

7) Lastly, 9 to 12 ribbons of many colors placed in the back make the final element on the crown. Ribbons must be of different colors, and as thick and long as possible. Ribbons are interpreted either as the winds that come from the mountain in different seasons or as the rainbow during the rainy season.

The opportunity to observe this process of fabrication up close, can allow us to understand crowns as not only objects of aesthetic beauty or cultural value, but also as multipart artifacts at work. In that sense, crowns are seen by the dancers as tools for a purpose, what they build is more than a garment, is a machine. It is through such composite and delicate objects that immaterial subjects can find a body and become visible and crucially, that invisible relations can be visualized.

Crowns are mysterious objects that provoke interpretations from dancers and audience. As my numerous group talks with dancers showed me, these artifacts are enigmatic to them as well. Dancers ponder and advance ideas, recall information or formulate new meanings for the pieces of each crown. Crowns



operate here as material catalyzers, allowing dancers to inquire about the local spirit-environment. Non descriptive, and never explicit or standardized, all possible meanings of crowns are debatable under two basic rules: 1) all the elements used must go together into each crown, that is, there are no mistakes, radical changes or surplus in them, each and every element "must be there", and 2) all said elements are interpreted as different parts of the mountain, there can be debates about which part of the mountain but not about the direct relation between crowns with them. Crowns seem to both concentrate and diffuse divergent elements and narratives, in order to give standardized or close meanings, and also potentially to open controlled possibilities for reflection on each dancer. In all cases, dancers agree that crowns must show a "complete" mountain, thus evidencing a local idea of order and completion in relation to a place.

In short, according to the testimonies obtained from dancers, *Negrito* or *Tipekayomej* crowns are scale models of a mountain, aiming to form a "complete set" as they precisely show what elements are necessary for the mountain life to continue (earth, trees, water, sunlight, winds, caves, spirits). *Tipekayomej* crowns stand thus as Masewal 3D renderings of a local ecology.

Moreover, when on the head of a dancer, the different elements in each crown become, inevitably, vibrant: rolling

rains, reflecting water springs, flowing winds, translucent rainbows, and moving mountains. *Negrito* crowns are not a minor form of engineering –or *bricolage*– proposed by Lévi-Strauss (1966) but stand as native theoretical models of dynamic relations. These “moving mountains” propose a material non-textual register for the fluid and strategic relations between people, spirits, and landscape.

By way of dancing each dancer becomes then a mountain spirit a *tipekayotl*, and also (and crucially) a whole mountain. They become “mountain people”. Together as a group the *Negritos* acquire a dynamism that shows the flows, connections and elements in it. *Negrito* dancers show their audience, their families and friends, not just how mountain spirits look like, but also offer to the public visualizations of the operating living mountain systems.

#### **VI.IX.II. Masks: faces of the forest**

In almost every *danza* there are masked dancers. In the Apache dance, for example, only some characters, like the *Domador* or the *Oso* are masked, and in the *Toreadores* dance there are just no masked characters. However, in *Wewentiyo* and *Tipekayomej* all dancers ideally are. Indeed, it used to be the case not long ago (2010) that sometimes dancers who couldn't

borrow, rent or afford to buy a mask had to go dancing with their faces covered only by colorful handkerchiefs. The reemergence of dances has however ended such scarcity as more people are interested in buying new masks, finding old stored ones, or borrowing them from friends and now there is a larger supply. Today all dancers that require a mask can use one.

Masewal people call masks *kwoxayak*, (from the encompassing term *kwojtla*- which means tree, forest and wood, and *-xayak*, face) locally translated as “wooden faces” but also “forest faces”. That is, faces that look like those of the “forest people”, invisible beings that dwell in the surrounding countryside. “It is just like their face” explained to me Raúl, a fellow *Wewentiyo* dancer once, “it is their skin, wood, what else? We take it and wear it. So, we can dance now.”<sup>59</sup>

A mask’s main purpose is to provide the dancer with *someone else’s* face. This vegetable skin is the visual flesh of “forest people”, a broad category that includes ancestors and animals (the *tipekayomej*, the *tipewewe*, the *xinolamej*, the *wewentiyo*, and all the possible different collectives that might exist between them). The protocol around masking has the overt intention to facilitate a different perception of the world. According to Martín, another *wewentiyo* dancer, “masks are *kixpatla*, [they] allow us [dancers] to see”. “What can be seen?”

---

<sup>59</sup> “Es igual como su cara. Es nomás su piel, la madera, si no cuál? La agarramos, nos la ponemos. Ora ya podemos bailar” Field Notes 2012.

I asked, "More people, other people",<sup>60</sup> was Martín's answer. To be masked is to be equipped and able, if only temporarily, not only to look like a spirit but to see like one.

Indeed, as I have described earlier, *kixpatla* is the most important concept to address the invisible connections that pervade in the Masewal world. It is also an exclusive capacity for certain people, the diviners, used in their dealings with spirits. Diviners can control their vision and transformation but even they are sometimes exposed to the effects of bridging between worlds, between forms. *Kixpatla* is also a highly dangerous experience; people usually die after having such a vision, for to experience *kixpatla* (properly *nimixpatla* "my sight/face changes") is to be transformed into other and to see things, people and places otherwise invisible. Many times such places and peoples are the realm of the dead. Such transformation is usually involuntary and ultimately harmful, the person becomes trapped in the other side, unable to fully return. So, when a dancer declares that he is having a sort of *kixpatla* through masked dancing, he is saying that he is indeed transforming into a spirit and implying that such transformation is dangerous and, without the proper protocols and equipment, would be impossible.

---

<sup>60</sup> "Las máscaras son kixpata. Nos dejan ver [qué se puede ver], Más gente, otra gente". Field Notes 2012.

For Masewal dancers, masks are tools, elements of a technology devised to see other people (or spirits) and to engage in new relations with them through the production of an “artificial” type of *kixpatla*. If *kixpatla* stands for the unattainable skill, or a “speech made thing” (Wagner 1981) possessed by local diviners, then dancing and masking operate as a reverse technology, allowing things, like masks, to capture speech, and dancers to change by embodying others. Powerful masked dancers briefly and safely can control spirits forcing them into social bonds, making them dance in front of the church, eat the offered food, and dance for the same patron saints. Dances not merely endorse esoteric knowledge by visualizing received stories but rather dispute it, as collective actions that contest the diviner’s power over the invisible weavings of the world.

Masewal *tlamatkimej* or diviners despise *danzas* to some degree. Domingo and Crispín, both diviners and important interlocutors for my research cannot stand each other, however, on separate occasions they both agreed that that they would never use a mask during their divinatory practice. “Why? I don’t need that” curtly said Crispín, while Domingo elaborated later that “to wear a mask one needs to not know better. You can wear a mask and that is good, but me? I would only get sick!”. Also, even if they enjoy the spectacle offered by dancers, neither of

them has ever participated as a dancer. In short, a diviner “can't pretend” to become a spirit as it would be “disrespectful” and perilous. In fact, according to Crispín, diviners can't even touch a dancer's mask, “they are contagious” he said. Indeed, these hybrid artefacts are at times animate and can cause nightmares, disease and death to those that touch them “without respect” or “without necessity”.

A few diviners nevertheless have participated as devoted musicians for some dances, while others merrily gather around as part of the audience. They however tend to keep a position of critical observers; they are experts who are never quite satisfied with the masked dancers' appearance and performance. Some diviners, like Crispín, have even deplored the dancers' poor performance or inadequate embodiment of spirits, commenting that such efforts and artefacts are always mistaken, improper, or failed. “Only one who has seen them” said Crispín, “can say what they really look like”. Dancing is then a way to appropriate divination by and for the non-initiated, altering its results. However, dancing not only ratifies or copies what *tlamatkimej* say about spirits but ultimately reinvents its own form of relation with them. Masks become then a mediating object. These artefacts intervene in the actions of dancers inspired by the speech of shamans, allowing them to propose an alternative relation with spirits, looking for reciprocity.



Table: Ways to experience *kixpatla*

<b>Divination (Shamanism)</b>	<b>Masked Danza</b>
Through <i>ilwalalis</i> or 'gift'	Through masks or <i>kwoxayak</i> 'forest face'
Esoteric knowledge	Exoteric practice
Emphasis on narrative, sequence and verbal communication	Emphasis on multi- narratives, non-sequential episodes, non-verbal practices
Hunting souls and spirits	Working together with spirits
Divinatory, aperiodic	Calendric, periodic
Exclusive perception	Inclusive participation
Invisible spirits	Visible dancers
By night	By day

Against the local discourse of divination and shamanism, dancers capture spirits by embodiment, and attempt to playfully bring them into human, Christian sociality. Most shamanic knowledge occurs by night, when people are defenceless and asleep and the spirits of the mountain roam in their dreams. In contrast, *danzas* occur during the day, and usually before noon, in that sense, guaranteeing that the spirit-dancers be under the glaring sun. Spirit-dancers, coming from the non-Christian mountain, are offered food and are required to acknowledge the

Alessandro Questa, PhD Dissertation's Final Version, November 2017, V4.0 296



saints. Even if dancers cannot speak during this time, they do what spirits are supposed *not to do* –according to shamanic convention. Indeed, unlike the predatory narratives told by diviners, mountain spirits become amicable enough to walk the streets, and to share the human food. at the same time admitting their prevalence while disciplining their behaviour.

In short, *danzas* entail an appropriation of the land by way of embodiment as a form of temporary domestication of unruly, immaterial, and dangerous spirits. The local concern with spirits is directly related to the concerns with food production, animal and human health, water supply, disastrous weather, plant growth and all things related to the continuation of life under an assumption of human-spirit interdependency.

.....

## VII. ENCOMPASSING MINES, HURRICANES, AND MOUNTAINS

*"The 'hot wind' can be seen around there, flying and then sitting on the corn fields, or up there, above the tallest trees. Who knows why it does it so? Why does it fly towards this side [of the mountain]? They used to say that it comes when the well is dry. My father used to say it comes when women have been foul, when husbands misbehave. But who really knows."*<sup>61</sup>

*"Yes, they came here, they brought their people. They want to see where the water is born, they said. Fuck. They come for the gold that is inside [of the mountain]. If not, why did they come just now? Who sends them?"*<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> "El tonalejekatl se ve que anda por ahí, que vuela y luego se sienta en el maíz, allá arriba, en los árboles más altos. ¿Quién sabe porqué lo hace así? ¿Porqué vuela para ese lado [de la monaña]? Dicen antes que porque viene cuando se seca el agua del pozo. Mi difunto padre decía que viene porque las mujeres son cochinas, porque los maridos se portan mal. Pero quién de veras sabe." Cristóbal, Fieldwork notes, 2014.

<sup>62</sup> "Sí aquí llegaron, trajeron su gente. Quieren ver dónde nace el agua decían. Chingao. Vienen por el oro de adentro [de la montaña]. Si no, ¿porqué vinieron 'orita? ¿Quién los manda?" Lucio, Fieldwork notes, 2014.

## **VII.I. Tentacular mountains**

For Masewal people, mountains, in their massive physicality, stand as the containers of vast wealth and fertility, and are the locus for the reproduction of all life. Mountains are the place where all productive activities take place and on which plants, animals and people all depend. Eventually, all of them return to the mountain only to reemerge from it again. Humans return again as babies but some can also come back to life as animals or vice versa, this possible recombination of bodies is facilitated by certain practices, such as butchering or hunting.

Mountains are heavily inhabited which also makes them equally contested spaces for production and hence places of dense social interactions and danger. Spirits, animals, corn, mining corporations, farmers, winds, and rains all meet within the mountain. What happens in mountains is therefore never a trivial matter, as it involves relations and processes that can alternately protect or jeopardize life.

To grow corn or hunt an animal is as "social" as to have a vivid dream or cure a person is "natural". Rains, winds, storms and even rainbows can always be also actions done by and presences of someone. The flexibility of these diverse relations

calls for a more nuanced approach from what the conventional division between natural and social orders can provide.

In their massive materiality, mountains are commanding presences that can divert the clouds or block the sight of the sun. In this regard, they are imposing frames with which Masewal must constantly engage and negotiate. As I have explained earlier, mountains are also regarded as the containers of all life forms.

This negotiation consists of staying on good terms with relatively capricious social entities that are not human, but are sapient and emotional as well as alive. Mountains and other forces of nature can be pleased and tranquil or –most importantly– angry and vengeful. When mountains (or houses) are angry, bad things happen to living humans. To defeat or deflect the bad events, mountains (and houses) must be made emotionally tranquil again. This is done through remembering to “respect” these living but non-human beings.

Such landscape relations are never entirely clear or evident for anyone. Each year presents its own variations, which can be presented as weather changes, like droughts, night hail or storms or other events such as a murderous crime, a government project or political elections. Ultimately, Masewal knowledge relies on best guessing, speculating, about for example, what a mountain spirit ‘really wants’ or what a saint

'demands'. Ritual action is hence, always experimental as it attempts to identify a relation of causation, and this is done through specific protocols and meticulous techniques that can never quite guarantee the desired result.

The distinction between what is social and what is natural, as distinct spheres of influence, is not a relevant question in the highlands. There is always the conviction of hidden influences and the uncertainty and the fear of relationship rupture. I propose to envision the associations that take place within and around the highland's landscape as living connections, or as tentacular flows of forces, agendas and beings.

Tentacles, in the context I am describing, offer a useful heuristic image, an analytic metaphor borrowed from Haraway (2015). That which is tentacular, Haraway proposes, refers to a way of thinking about networks created by 'living things' as opposed to mechanic or structural systems between 'ideas' or 'flows'. Such a biological allusion conveys the idea of an animated assembly extending and retracting.

Throughout the seasonal year the highlands seem to also extend and retract. The mountains change with the growth of maize and other crops, the felling of trees, and the arrival of rains and clouds. The hot summers see the movement of thousands of migrant birds across the highlands. Spots of red can be seen

in the winter, when the coffee flourishes in the small family plantations in the low parts of the mountains.

Everything that is grown in the mountain must die, be spent, hunted or eaten by someone else. Expansion is festive and grandiose and manifests in the harvest celebrations that start with *Día de Muertos* or Day of the Dead, which comprise 5 days of preparation and culminate in the exchange of food between households. In the same pattern, even if people cautiously keep some grains and animals, almost all of the produced wealth is supposed to be spent and disappear. Say something about retraction to balance your rhetoric.

In this view, the image of tentacular connections goes well beyond the conventional spheres of culture, economy, and environment, to conceive a certain kind of long-range relations between different scales of living entities. These multi-scalar contacts, in which these metaphorical tentacles are launched and sometimes wrap on each other, seem to take precedence over other distinctions describing not only 'what takes place' in an empirical fashion, but also 'what is related' and 'what is cut off', and how these and other connections matter for Masewal people in the highlands of Puebla.

Like milpa gardens and forests, money and people involved in politics and city jobs also seem to follow patterns of expansion and subsequent retraction. According to Masewal

accounts, money trickles into the mountain, only to be flow away again as a consequence of phenomena such as floods, hurricanes, political corruption, droughts, out-migration and the gradual abandonment of small-scale land tenure. During the long dry season Masewal people look for cash jobs in the region or take the roads to the cities. The highlands are constantly changing with the flows of life, people and money that arrive or depart not just as a result of changes in the seasons, but also with the rise of salaried jobs in the city, ongoing government programs, or the disbursements of political parties during election times every three years.

Inversely, when rains, capital, people and seeds are present, offerings are made and people are respectful and mindful, and then the mountain becomes “refilled” and gives back water, fertility and game. In the words of Crispín, “that’s how they [mountain beings] know we are fulfilling what they charged us to do”<sup>63</sup>. In short, Masewal people are aware that mountains are not inexhaustible sources and that the Owners, Sustainers, Ancestors, water, wind and earth beings are all willful, are observing them.

However, all of these entities and connections escape controlled human measurement and regulation attempts and are always unpredictable and potentially dangerous. The connections

---

<sup>63</sup> “Así es como ellos ya saben que estamos cumpliendo con su encargo,” Field Notes 2015.

with mountain spirits are in that way, tentacular, as a multi-species engagement in which the outcome cannot be forced or even warranted, even after thorough negotiation.

But even colossal bodies, like those of mountains, are not indestructible. Mountains are not conceived just as metaphorical living entities, made of ideas or words. The usually forgotten implication of animism is mortality, indeed, in such an exuberantly living world death is equally present. Even mountains can be disemboweled and drained of the life-giving forces and properties that they contain.

#### **VII.II. Monsters, bigness and anxiety**

Bear with me for this following image. Remember one of those old movies where a giant squid or octopus cleans a ship's deck of sailors? The monster attacks by surprise slowly emerging from the water. We as the audience join the sailors in their anxious anticipation, witnessing the monstrous tentacles elevate while waiting for the *real* creature to emerge, although it never quite does. We *know* it is there even when we never have access to its full schematics. We are denied a total view. Barely under the water's surface we can guess the monstrous eye, the carnivorous mouth. The creature's massive tentacles are in fact the only real force we can witness; they coil, slam, and snatch.



The tentacles are, however, incomplete, they are blind and vulnerable extremities that can be dodged and hacked by nimble sailors. The image is then of a double speculation: the Kraken wonders about its victims on the waterless deck, just as much as we—and the sailors—dare to conjecture about its underworld dimensions, its unknowable will.

Now, let's think about this metaphor in relation to what Masewal people see and think about in the highlands regarding different arriving enterprises and actors. Two brief snippets: a recent local election and a protest against the construction of a hydroelectric power plant, a *megaproyecto*.<sup>64</sup>

In 2014 I was present when municipal elections took place in Tepetzintla. Although these elections usually occur every three years, this time there was an effort to pair all municipal elections to the state one (for governor), which happens only every six years. So the period had to be extended to four years and three months. That gave more than an extra year in power for the winning candidate and his team. Even if Tepetzintla is a 'poor' and small municipality in comparison to others in the state, it receives a yearly budget of over 150 million pesos (around 9 million USD) from federal and state sources and

---

<sup>64</sup> *Megaproyectos* or "Mega-projects" is the common term by which people in the highlands refer to a diverse set of enterprises deemed as negative and dangerous: silver-gold mines, dams and hydroelectric power plants, rural cities and hydraulic fracking. *Megaproyectos* as a concept has developed into an unofficial synonym of foreign greed and environmentally damaging actions. *Megaproyectos* invoke o Masewal people, immoral.

institutions. The winner of the local election would have an extra 15 months of access to these funds and becomes the *de facto* totalitarian authority in local affairs.

The stakes were considered to be so high that all available tricks and stratagems were called into play by all candidates and their teams. From the initial five candidates however, only three had strong support from local voters. Two of them were local Masewal men, who fought relentlessly, taking votes from each other and, ultimately, cancelling each other's chances.

Ramiro was a young man who came back from Mexico City with his family after living there for over a decade working in construction. He left town at a young age and had never participated in the circuit of *mayordomías* or occupied a local office. He was perceived as the newcomer without strong economic backers but with the ardent support of a younger generation (25-45 years old bracket) of many other returnees like himself. Lucrecio contrastingly, was an older man who had been in fact municipal president back in the late 90s. He was a known political figure with a robust network of *compadres* supporting him and trusting his vast experience as a public official in the past.

In contrast with Ramiro, Lucrecio had never been out of town except for short periods of time, he was a successful local

merchant and farmer relying on more traditional long standing and established local network of friends, accrued over many years of participation in *mayordomías* and kinship relations. Both Ramiro and Lucrecio scratched to win every vote from the other, appealing to very similar discourses which drew on ideas of locality, old favors, family ties and rejection of the thievery of outsiders.

I remember a meeting one night with Ramiro's supporters, a bunch of seasoned returnees, who have had rough lives in the cities and were aware of the things that the town and the municipality desperately needed. They all ardently spoke about "waking up", "saving the town", "working for the local people" and "stopping once and for all the people from the outside (mestizos) from robbing the municipality". At the end they all walked out in small groups and disappeared in the dark streets of the town.

The next morning, I encountered a few men in Lucrecio's camp at the main store located on the central plaza, and I stayed chatting with them about the coming elections. In opposition to almost all of the members in Ramiro's faction, Lucrecio's supporters were all farmers who have had either less or older experiences with migration and city life. They all claimed almost the same arguments as Ramiro's younger followers on the previous night. However, they made an emphasis on their

commitment and deep knowledge of local politics as a counter argument for the experience “out side” coming from Ramiro’s supporters. These older men spoke more calmly and added an idea of “remembrance” as a political notion: “people need to remember who we are and what we do here” said one of them in the clique.

Neither Ramiro nor Lucrecio won the election. The winner was Teodoro, a schoolteacher, owner of a small drugstore and a *koyotl* or *mestizo*, a foreigner. Teodoro had competed in two previous occasions without much to show for it. People didn’t take him seriously enough for he was too earnest and didn’t have a large enough network of *compadres* in town. Unlike his competitors however, Teodoro went out one night to Puebla city, the state capitol, to offer his candidacy to two different political parties. He then drove all the way to Mexico City to appeal to the National head quarters of each of these two political parties (PRI and PAN), pleading allegiance and asking for their support. The scheme paid off. The night before the elections, a truck arrived with cash and several others rumbled through the surrounding villages paying between 200 and 500 Mexican pesos (15-35 USD) to people for each promise of a vote, and their names noted down on a paper pad. There were several cases in which people that refused to vote where swiftly beaten up at their own homes. The morning after voting day, Teodoro was officially recognized as the winner of the election. In the

following days people in Tepetzintla where very angry and organized around both Ramiro and Lucrecio, threatening to take on the municipal palace and go to Mexico City to denounce the documented cases of corruption and coercion. The movement was disorganized but strong enough until, in a political surprise, Lucrecio's people backed down and rejected any more resistance. Ramiro and his people were furious, as they soon understood that Lucrecio was offered "something" in return for his support to the newly elected Teodoro.

A few weeks later, when things calmed down, I spoke to one of Lucrecio's trusted friends, who, visibly troubled, told me "we know it was wrong but we also know there was nothing we could do about it. The decision came from the outside. We don't know who or why but it was decided there, not here. What can we do?" Democracy is something imported and voting is still a foreign practice for most people. Elected officials and authorities need to be either rooted by thick networks of *compadrazgo* or, as this example showed, just like shamans, be supported by major, external and invisible forces against which Masewal locals are convinced, there is nothing that can be done. Political parties and their unknowable agendas and resources picking people and positioning them operate as the almost unique tentacle of Mexico as a nation in the highlands.

The second example of this tentacular speculation of the external force happened at Ahuacatlán, the neighboring municipality of Tepetzintla to the east. For over five years of failed negotiations, during the spring of 2015 Deselec-Comexhidro (the national electric company) made a final push for the construction of a "micro" hydroelectric power plant on the Ajajalpa river. Local people and organizations, such as "Bios Sierra" y "Campesinos Unidos de San Felipe Tepatlán y Tlapacoya" prepared rapidly against this advance. They argued that drought and polluted water would be the only result of such *megaproyecto* and that the company was, in fact, attempting to destroy the social "community's fabric" or *tejido comunitario*<sup>65</sup>. The company personnel organized feasts and projected videos promising economic wealth and progress. Comexhidro people said the project would only momentarily capture some water, generating energy by releasing it again. They even offered to build a road and to build some infrastructure (although never specified what exactly did they mean by that). However, the fear of losing water by local people was, understandably, too great. In addition, local people have had enough experience with other *megaproyectos*, specifically with open mines, which have created land erosion and severely damaged with their heavy trucks the *Inter-serrana* highway, the main and only operating road into and out of the

---

<sup>65</sup> <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/hidroelectrica-puebla-1-puebla-mexico>

highlands. Comexhidro then offered a feast to the people of Ahuacatlán to present their project and its benefits. The feast was attended by hundreds of locals who enthusiastically ate and drank whatever was offered and then unflinchingly rejected again Comexhidro's plan. However, the company's personnel took photos, video, and names on an attendance sheet that day as registration "for the meal" and falsely presented it as "popular consensus poll" in a later report for acquiring an extraction permit to federal authorities of SEMARNAT (Secretaría de medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales or "Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources". The company's ruse was almost immediately exposed and it only fueled more local resistance. The legal battle continues today with Comexhidro even attempting to bulldozer by force into the land lot and its drivers being beat and sent away by locals.

For people in Tepetzintla, what is happening in neighboring Ahuacatlán is unfortunate and also unavoidable. When I talked with some fellow dancers, over beers after an Apache *danza* rehearsal, they all agreed that there was no way anyone could know why "those foreigners" or *gente de fuera* (no one knew the name of the company) was there. Javier, a young dancer said, for example that "now, what are we going to do if they come here? How can we stop them?" to which José, a senior dancer responded, "If they want something they will just take it, they come from

far away to do it but we don't know why"<sup>66</sup>. What seemed to emerge from this collective conversation was a shared feeling of despair and vulnerability against such an impending and powerful exogenous force. As Crispín once told me "they all have their spirits, even the government and the [mining] companies. They just don't live here, they live over there."<sup>67</sup>.

When a political party sends representatives or when a mining company sends an exploration team or buys some land sanctioned by certain city government officials, people in the highlands can only recount and witness to a small fraction of it as they are almost never involved or even informed about such decisions and initiatives. Moreover, as numerous conversations evidenced, they don't know exactly who these agencies are, where are they located and what is it that they are after. The field is open for speculation. Local anxiety is only aggravated from not knowing what a dam, a micro hydroelectric power plant or a mine ultimately *mean* for their lives.

Based on their historic experience with foreigners and the ways in which they use land and people, people in Tepetzintla fear the worst. This concern and despair is hence not a baseless fear but an anxious speculation as the harm of previous "development" programs is already perceivable in the region:

---

<sup>66</sup> "ora, qué hacemos si vienen, ¿a poco los vamos a parar? [...] Si quieren algo lo agarran nomás. Vienen por allá lejos por eso. Pero nosotros no sabemos para qué." Field Notes 2015.

<sup>67</sup> "Todos tienen su espíritu, ora sí que hasta el gonbierno y las mineras esas. Nopeas que no viven aquí, viven allá." Field Notes 2015.



damaged roads and bridges, dried and polluted rivers, and erosional lands.

### **VII.III. Between local and foreign monsters**

Monsters are magnifications of relations. Thinking about the identity of transnational corporations, Golub refers to those first human 'experiments in bigness' as 'leviathans', or 'dragons', ancient human speculations about the elements and events of gargantuan proportions, such as storms, avalanches, seasons, wars and famine: things that appear to be somehow pitted against humanity (2016). Nowadays, according to Golub, scientific, political and economic infrastructures occupy the place of such ancient portents, and certain institutions (imaginary and real at the same time), such as the market, mega corporations or the state, rule the world, unfolding their innumerable, globalized tentacles.

Based on the study of the effects of mines in Papua New Guinea and the local participation (and resistance) of the Ipili people in them, Golub conceptualizes leviathans as emergent 'social totalities', in the sense that they possess a directive, a discourse, an identity, internal divisions, etc. Such social leviathans erupt from multifarious groups of single individuals to become abstract things that ultimately subsume the persons

who gave them form. Leviathans are therefore gargantuan 'corporate actors', made manifest through powerful institutional discourses that enforce attitudes and practices but, at the same time, become more and more obscure for individual participants. Transnational corporations, nation states and some international social organizations are examples of how such 'bigness' has a tendency towards concealment. Leviathans become 'black boxes' that produce divergent and oftentimes contradictory messages to their individual constituents.

In the case of the Ipili people known to Golub, the aggressive presence in Porgera of a local gold mine with transnational connections provoked the creation of a discourse of indigenous identity for the Ipili people. Indigeneity became an abstract, multipart organization, and eventually a local leviathan created in opposition to the presence of the multinational mining corporation in Ipili territory. Ipili people now find themselves in a forced divergence, where they can side either with "indigenous" or with "mining" corporate groups as a product of these two, local and foreign, leviathans.

I contend that similar leviathans are emerging in the highlands of Puebla, as Masewal and Totonaku indigenous people are increasingly pressed to choose between the contrasting narratives of 'progress' or 'no progress' which are being introduced partly by so-called 'mega' extractivist projects

(*mega-proyectos*) but also through the imaginaries of urban migration and ecological distress. The emergence of a *serrana* or “highland” identity is these days being given salience through a narrative in which local territory is described as an indigenous ‘motherland’; importantly, this discourse is proffered by different local organizations with an active stake in resisting extractivist activity.

However these manifestations of a local territorial identity are not entirely new, and tend to dissolve after specific moments of crisis during which they become part of a rallying cry for local claims and senses of belonging. In this regard, Golub’s leviathans are often as evanescent as Haraway’s tentacles, for they exist only as long as the associations and speculations that produced them are extant. Golub analyzes how tentacular leviathans are ambiguously formed by series of failed or contrasting attempts at opposing some other presence or by the attempt of certain gain (such as gold). Such monsters are always political formations and hence, agglutinated around specific purposes and contexts (Ibid).

I bring Golub’s reflections on Ipili identity and transnational corporations in Papua New Guinea as an analytic image for exploring how ‘big’ corporations can give rise to cross-cultural interactions, thereby engulfing divergence,

generating new conflicts and even creating new and somewhat unexpected corporate actors.

For her part, Haraway invokes a form of 'tentacularity' with which we can perceive and describe life outside the economic, social and natural spheres founded on the idea of human exceptionalism. Tentacularity for her is a marginal model that goes beyond the human and into "life lived along lines [...] not at points, not in spheres."<sup>68</sup> By conceptualizing the *living connections* beyond the human sphere we can also encapsulate both the natural and the social and, beyond this, we can try to understand other non-Western engagements with complex phenomena that always seems "too big" to effectively control, predict or measure, such as traditional farming, extractive capitalism, market fluxes, climate change and spiritual landscapes.

For this research, I have employed such imagery of metaphorical tentacles in order to shed light upon the different levels of relations prevailing in the highlands and beyond. Whether it is by masking themselves and dancing as spirits, or by speculating about the spiritual identity of mines and hurricanes, Masewal people attempt to *see the monster* and to negotiate through these particular instantiations of tentacular complexity. Recent micro-hydro electrical projects in the neighboring municipality of Ahuacatlán (eg.: Deselec or Comexhidro) are suspiciously seen as projections of other, still

---

<sup>68</sup> <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/tentacular-thinking-anthropocene-capitalocene-chthulucene/>  
Alessandro Questa, PhD Dissertation's Final Version, November 2017, V4.0

not settled, extractive industries in the highlands (such as mining, fracking and pipelines), as Juan García mentioned in one of the epigraphs to this chapter.

The benefits of the micro-hydro electrical projects, as described by engineers and PR teams, are quite overtly related to the corollary acquisition of specific areas of lowland for the concentration and piping of water. These benefits are often presented via declarations such as, “we want to create local jobs” or “we plan to develop this region” or “we aim to bring progress and opportunities”<sup>69</sup>, yet these statements remain obscure about the ultimate purpose (and clientele) for the concentration of water resources (is it meant for the production of electrical energy? Is it to be directed to agro-industrial businesses? Is it for mining and fracking expansion?).

People in the highlands are left to guess and fear the broader purposes of such enterprises. It is my contention that they employ dancing ceremonies as a way to address these concerns. Similarly, they climb to the mountains to reconnect with the spirits and caretakers in order to renew old bonds and to find a way out of trouble. Masewal see and address the tentacles but not the leviathan. Such guessing is possible perhaps because Masewal people have their local tentacular monsters: mountains and the numerous beings that inhabit them.

---

<sup>69</sup> Personal interview with PR team of Comexhidro micro-hydroelectric, Mexico City, March, 2016.

Environmental relations are thus reciprocally moral and politically reactive dealings. When people fell a tree, harvest crops, build a road, they know that provokes a warranted if unexpected reaction that will need eventually to be diplomatically addressed through ritual action, dances, and mountain visitations and healing practices.

I propose, following Masewal practice, to focus as they do, on the tentacles and not on the leviathans. What matters for this research, so far, is the Masewal idea of profound interconnections between human immoral actions, spiritual reactions and global consequences of actions towards the land.

Tentacles are representative of progressive, even anxious, relations, as their purpose is ultimately directed to 'feeding'. In other words tentacular relations are invested in the production of a specific kind of future. Through mining projects, a year's harvest, a town's elections, a dance performance, a successful domestic ritual, groups of people at different scales expand their relations and speculate about specific, desired outcomes or, certain kinds of futures.

Disastrous events and Masewal responses can also be recognized as *matters of concern*. According to Bruno Latour (2005) matters of concern are 'compositions', that is, associations of multispecies and multi-scale materials, ideas and events with particular aesthetics enabling them to expand

from the social (or cultural) and to 'bifurcate' in order to be normalized as nature; invention becoming a convention in Wagner's terms (1981). The buzzing of spiritual activity up in the mountain, the lurking presence of mining exploration teams, the dreaming presence of the dead, the winds, rains and hurricanes are all compositions of facts (quantitative traces) and concerns (qualitative affairs).

For Latour, politics is embedded in knowledge production; hence the world has moved from what was traditionally understood as indisputable 'matters of fact' to debatable 'matters of concern'. Matters of fact—like nature—are assumed to be 'simply there' or to have been either created as analytical results in a lab, somehow distorted, detached from reality. Matters of fact contain primarily "research" to obtain "data" and, at a secondary moment generate interpretations about such data. Contrastingly, the world of "matters of concern" moves and changes with similar obstinacy than the "world of facts". It emerges as part of a network of relations that are always relevant to specific groups of people; matters of concern are made manifest as problems to initially interpret only to intervene and to solve, and thus only in a derivative way are they collections of data.

Mountains, climate change, and spiritual grievances are all interconnected matters for Masewal people; the different

possible facts produced are disputed and locally recomposed as potentially common concerns. For Latour (ibid.), matters of fact are things with a trajectory imagined as coming from nature; they are pure, indisputable, singular and fickle. By contrast, matters of concern come from the social, which entails a series of specifications: a) they have to *matter*, that is, they have to have an impact, make a point, b) they have to be *agreed upon*, that is, they have to have a purpose for someone and therefore, they have to be disputable (and *not agreed upon* by someone else), c) they have to be populated, that is, they provoke gatherings of opinions and actions, and d) they have to be *durable*, that is, they have roots, traces and effects in history. For Masewal people, spiritual grievances, economic strife, political corruption and the menace of extractive mining generate interpretations and interventions. When people climb up the mountain to leave offerings for the caretakers to ask for rains, health, and fertility, they speak also of money, of protection from witchcraft and of the need for unity against outside evils (See Appendix). Through collective dances, Masewal people perform spirits in order to visualize the complex, and usually invisible relations of interdependence between people and mountain beings, and the dangers implanted in them. Such endeavors, as matters of concern, invoke and present elements drawn from different scalar contexts.



#### VII.IV. An accumulated environmental crisis. Water and winds

The cumulative effects of decades of intense urban migration combined with the advent of mining, the increase of destructive hurricanes and storms, and the progressive abandonment of traditional cultivation are all perceived by Masewal people as interlinked processes that are effectively destroying the land. These processes are also major grievances to the spirits of the land caused, ultimately, by a collective human 'forgetfulness', leading the world to a perilous state.

In a rather desperate strategy to counter such grim consequences, Masewal people are doing two things. On the one hand, they are attempting to rekindle their relations with said spirits, recovering old practices, words, and celebrations, hoping to reestablish improved narratives of co-dependence. Through such diplomatic reestablishment of relations via ritual practice Masewal people hope to avoid more harm. On the other hand, they are also instrumentally repurposing these cosmological arguments and characters, to enforce a new discourse of disbelief and compensation against the so-called *megaproyectos*. By deployment in media and resistance discourse, *tlaltikpak tata* and *tlaltikpak nana* (the ancestral couple that effectively own the land), entities traditionally kept as part

of shamanic "secret knowledge", are being used by indigenous people in hopes of mobilizing citizens and resources (activists, press, government agencies and NGOs) to their aid.

In the pages that follow, I will organize the main narratives about different kinds of changes and crises occurring in the highlands of Puebla in recent times presenting a series of climatic, political and economic challenges that can be analyzed as four different trends. Together, these different descriptions provide the necessary context to better understand the current relations Masewal people establish with a living mountain landscape. I think of these narratives as tentacles, as defined above, rather than what are conventionally assumed as different spheres.

The first tentacle reaches to climatic changes with the notion of a spiritual loss and the increase of anthropogenic disaster through witchcraft. It could be identified as the shared perception of an *accumulated environmental crisis* in motion, marked by the locally observed increase in the occurrence of destructive rains and winds (hurricanes and tropical storms) in the region. It narrates a succession of tragic climatic catastrophes first. It then brings the local people's memories and associations to a destructive reaction from specific spirits of the land who, in turn, feel

disrespected and forgotten by all humans (Masewal, Totonaku and Mestizo).

The second tentacle grips around growing presence of diverse forms of extractive capitalism and the local perception of opportunity and threat. Indeed, the rising of "Mega-proyectos" bagging a number of extractive enterprises with national and foreign companies, and investing in gold-silver mines, water dams, and hydroelectric power plants has found footing by corrupt and/or inefficient authorities on all levels. Parallel to this encroachment, local and foreign actors of different scales operating in the highlands for different motives are now creating the emergence of an unexpected network of resistance to megaproyectos perceived as a common threat.

Finally, the third tentacle, of which I will just do a brief summary for this dissertation clutches around the recent developments of Christianity, local politics and migration. It could be traditionally labeled as 'social change', with three interrelated processes: a) the arrival and growth of non-Catholic (mostly Evangelical) churches and the consequences their presence has brought to other local social organizations and families; b) the atomization of political parties and the novel "tribal" ways of partisan participation that has brought politics into a dominant state of local power; c) the effects of an important part of the local population permanently moving to

Mexico City but, at the same time, participating and observing what happens locally and the coming of age of a young generation of indigenous professionals educated in the cities.

#### **VII.IV.I. Experience with ancient storms**

For Masewal people the world has always been a place where decent or unkind human actions carry expansive consequences in the land. That is, a world that reacts to human behavior and that is, judging by its conditions, in the midst of a total crisis.

According to one of the main Masewal stories, the world is already broken. It was originally fragmented a long time ago by the envy of an ancient being, called sometimes Nixikol or "the Devil", but is in most cases associated with the local Awewe "Water Elder". This character was the elder brother of Jesus Christ, and was jealous of him, as he wanted people to praise him instead. And so the spiteful Awewe crashed against and tore in half one by one the many pillars that connected the sky and the earth. Until that moment, people would climb up any pillar when they felt old and sickly only to descend from it as children again. In other words, people didn't know death. The crumbling of the pillars didn't totally separate sky and earth as some beings can still go between them. It implied however the

partial segmentation of a combined world and the emergence of two incomplete but nevertheless codependent ones. More importantly, this original end of the world explicates the existence of the current landscape, as the rugged mountains are but the remains of those broken pillars.

The envious Awewe was eventually vanquished, tricked by others to crash against a fabricated pillar of clouds, and ended up buried at the bottom of the sea. To this day, Awewe inhabits the depths of the sea and causes storms and hurricanes with his still thunderous roars, whilst the rest of the ancient gods remained in the sky and people, of course, on the surface of the earth.

The Masewal story about the breakage of the pillars and the emergence of mountains is not an "origin myth" as it does not exactly deal with "the beginning of the world" or with "the source of life" for that matter, but with how its conditions today came to be. The story tells of a vicious conflict between formidable entities, a struggle that engulfed all of the highlands and its peoples and that physically changed the world. It also clearly states who are the driving actors and what are the hidden rules that govern their actions and desires. The story then tells how the world has faced, time and again, destruction and drastic change and how people have changed with it and endured. Hence, even if the world changes dramatically

and death was invented as a radical transformation, there is no possibility of total extermination.

Hurricanes and storms are part of the historical experience of the highland societies (García 1987). One of the main ancient Totonaku deities in the Gulf region was precisely *Tajín*, 'The Hurricane' (Piña Chan 1999, Stresser-Péan 2009). Hurricanes, droughts and storms emerge today as living elements of many stories about the original breakage of the world. Indigenous farmers fear such portents and constantly gage the symptoms of such disasters in the future. Divination and healing practices as well as domestic rituals consider notions of dryness and excessive sun, rains, and winds (including other climatic phenomena such as rainbows and landslides) all as analogic elements to signal damage to the human body.

Rains and winds are vital elements in the reproduction of life in the highlands. All life depends on them, especially on water. For Masewal people water is a "sacred" liquid, or as they say, 'respect' (See Chapter 3 "Reemergence of dances"). Water emerges from the mountain as a gift from the non-human dwellers on its inside to the people and animals on its outside. Water is thus a significant element of every ritual (domestic and otherwise) and of every petition to the spirits. *Aguardiente* or "burning water" (a strong, locally made sugarcane rum) is used as a typical offering to spirits of the mountain in exchange for

water. As my friend Anselmo, a local healer and diviner likes to remind me, "*tipekajomej* [mountain spirits] give us from their water, so we give them their water too. It is the same, but better!".

Traditional farming on the steep slopes of massive mountains impedes most technological machinery and watering systems. Besides, mountain farmers can't afford the money to invest on those improvements. Traditional farming must rely then on careful planning and observation, determined and precise labor and a sort of rhythm that comes from constant scrutiny. The craggy landscape, unlike the valleys on the Mexican plateau or the vast coastal prairies (which where once rainforest), brings certain randomness each season. Winds turn and twist sequestering rains, moving them between valleys. Clouds suddenly become stationary for days on end only to explode into furious rains. To grow corn under these conditions is to speculate. Farmers observe diverse possible connections between birds' chirping, leaves' growth and color, dirt's humidity and also their own actions, emotions and social obligations.

Possibly, it is because of this "potential connectivity"—that can be found either in healing, shamanic discourse or dancing performance as much as in agricultural practices—that rains and winds are intrinsic part of the cosmological apparatus about which Masewal continuously think, visually recreate,

ritually activate and constantly fear. Anthropological accounts that contemplate this so-called form of analogical and animistic scheme of practice (Descola 2013) would propose that rains and winds exist thus not as elements of Nature but as members of Society. I don't think however, that such a binary inversion, as clever as it might be, can reach and really get closer to what Masewal people see in these relations. In fact, in the end, imagining a meta-human society can be as deceitful as to conceive a dehumanized nature.

#### **VII.IV.II. Pauline, 1997**

In recent memory, Masewal people consider hurricane *Pauline* (in 1997) as the start of a long period of peril and disaster. In the words of young Lucio, a local Masewal farmer, Pauline was an ill augur, "it was then it started. Crops were lost all over here. It was the first time again."<sup>70</sup> Since then, subsequent events have continued to damage crops, property and human life, especially Hurricane *Dean* in 2007, *Karl* in 2010, *Ingrid* in 2013 and, just recently, Hurricane *Earl* in August of 2016. Masewal people tend to perceive these hurricanes and storms as a 'chain reaction' not as isolated, or merely cyclic events.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> "Ahí fue cuando empezó. Se perdieron las siembras todo por acá. Fue la primera vez de vuelta." (Summer, 2012)

<sup>71</sup> Hurricanes continue to ravage the highlands as I write this. My research aspires also to become a tentacular form of engagement in time as I am trying to reach and connect events that happened in Tepetzintla before my Alessandro Questa, PhD Dissertation's Final Version, November 2017, V4.0 328



When *Pauline* happened, the hurricane carried destructive winds (up to 60 miles per hour) and 14 days of non-stopping rains. During the second day, the bridge that connected the town with the main road collapsed under rocks moved by the thunderous river. On the third night, a crashing sound announced the terrible landslide. A part of the mountain, the Chignamasatl, was gone, taking houses, people, animals, and trees down into the Cempoala River. An entire family was washed away when a landslide took their house. Their bodies recovered only weeks later. Thousands of people in the highlands were homeless overnight, and hundreds just in Tepetzintla. All crops and most of the stored grains were lost that year. Tepetzintla was declared officially a "disaster area" (Zona de desastre) and the Mexican army flew in resources such as water, medicaments, blankets, and food.

Margarita, a young woman of 27 years old remembers, "helicopters would come every day and my sisters and I would run down the mountain to meet them. My mom immediately started to make and sell *gorditas* [snacks] to the soldiers." Mario was a

---

arrival and that are happening as I write my dissertation in the US, that is, beyond my "ethnographic present." As such, it usually refers to a direct, limited experience in time in which a researcher engages with certain people at a certain place or places. As we know, my own fieldwork experience does not comply with this formula (the frame of which is heavily geopolitically questionable). I have been an ethnographic presence in Tepetzintla since August of 2005. I will go back this year, and the next. I have several assumed commitments and ritual obligations and, a couple of times, my opinion has been locally taken into consideration (e.g. the conservation of the codexes). I have, more importantly, friends and even family, through a ritually sanctioned bond. In short, even if not 'properly' constituting part of my direct experience in the field, the events that I am about to narrate are, quite sadly, relevant verifications of my academic suspicions for the last couple of years, a bad omen come true.

teenager during Pauline, and he has told me how he managed to save some pigs from the rain by taking them into the house, with his whole family, for days.

For weeks, people shoveled mud from their homes trying to rescue their belongings and to fix their damaged properties. The gravity of the town's situation surfaced from the loss of entire crops. Rosenda, one of my main interlocutors remembered once, with tears in her eyes:

*"The mountain was all black and mud was running down of it, with dead plants. No corn in the milpas and no plants; the granaries where all damp, the corn rotten. Just good for pigs. Where were we supposed to get food if not from the mountain? [My emphasis] We couldn't go up and find kilitl [edible wild plants]. They were all washed away, dead. We were very sad. We thought we were surely going to starve."*<sup>72</sup>

Rosenda's assessment was indeed a shared realization in Tepetzintla. Hurricane Pauline showed Masewal highlanders the futility of money, property and even city connections in a time of total strife. Crops were lost, cars were useless, all communications were down, and no relatives could send help or even receive the evicted people. People in Tepetzintla were trapped in the storm. They couldn't leave, they couldn't buy

---

<sup>72</sup> Fieldwork notes, Summer 2012

food, while they all saw the mountain become a terrible and dreadful place.

State and Federal authorities set up a camp that would last for over two years. With the help of the army and local labor, 120 houses were built on the lower slopes of the mountain, next to the old graveyard. The houses were built, in fact, at a dangerous angle, with the risk of being affected by another landslide. The houses were also too small, dark, and too close together, against all the local practices and patterns of inhabitation. They were built as a rural city based on urban "social welfare" (*interés social*). Completely unenthusiastic about such houses, people had no choice but to inhabit them. Today, those houses still exist and are in use by the inevitable flow of young people in need of a place. It is now called *barrio nuevo* or "new neighborhood" or *Analco* "by the water". These houses, built just like urban basic dwellings don't have the traditional patios or open kitchens used by Masewal families. Made of cheap asbestos these houses retain the heat and are unbearable for their tenants during the dry season. Saliently, these houses do not have spirit owners like the rest of the traditional houses and, as they have no hearth, they don't have stones taken from the mountain either. These are "unspirited" houses in the strongest sense of the term.

*Pauline* was a particularly traumatic experience for the people of Tepetzintla. It was a hiatus, as all local people of a certain age differentiate between how the town was before and after it happened. People from the highlands call themselves *serranos*, "highlanders". It is an inclusive category that includes Masewal, Totonaku and Mestizo populations sharing a mountainous way of living. About such a category Ramiro, a young dancer once told me "we are all from here, from many different villages. We already know how it is. You can plant corn, beans, coffee; you can build a fence or a house because you know how these can be done. But we don't know if its going to stick, to grow."<sup>73</sup> "Serranos" have had countless historical experiences with hurricanes. They all know too well about bad harvest years. Nothing in present memory seems more alive and transformative than the tragedy of 1997. *Pauline* was only the beginning though. After *Pauline* many other destructive weather events in the region have followed (from Hurricane *Gilberto* in 2005, *Manuel* and *Ingrid* in 2013 to *Earl* in 2016).

#### **VII.IV.III. Earl, 2016**

At 80 miles per hour (1600–2100 UTC), Hurricane Earl touched land on Belize on August 2 of 2016 coming from the

---

<sup>73</sup> "Somos todos de aquí, de muchos ranchitos. Ya sabemos cómo es aquí pues. Puedes sembrar maíz, frijol, café; hacer tu corral, tu casa, porque ya sabes. Pero no sabemos qué se va a dar, si va a crecer." (Fieldwork notes, 2011)

Antilles<sup>74</sup>. It diminished in speed and for hours it twisted in different directions, until it led northwards crossing swiftly over part of Guatemala and the Yucatan peninsula twisting again, towards the northwest, creating high coastal waves in its wake. Earl followed the Mexican coastline as if possessed by some malign will. On the night of the 4<sup>th</sup>, people in the highlands of Puebla received the full effect of the rain and winds reaching velocities up to 60 miles per hour. Like an angry god, Earl was consumed by its own might after four days and nights of continuous rain that is estimated to have doubled the amount of rainfall expected in one year. The final official toll was 40 dead (with still around 12 more people disappeared at the moment) and at least 2000 more people left without homes and livelihoods.<sup>75</sup> The most affected municipality by Earl was Huauchinango, and the towns of Cuacuila and Xaltepec, less than 35 miles east from Tepetzintla. The damage caused by Earl to wild life, stock, crops, roads and infrastructure is yet unaccounted. Even if diminished in force by the time it hit the highlands of Puebla, Earl was the biggest meteorological tragedy in the last 19 years.<sup>76</sup>

After each hurricane, old problems painfully reappear in the highlands. Flooding fields signal the lack of appropriate

---

<sup>74</sup> <http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/archive/2016/EARL.shtml?>

<sup>75</sup> <http://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2016/08/08/nota/5733396/huracan-earl-deja-40-muertos-su-paso-mexico-ahora-se-forma-javier>

<sup>76</sup> <http://www.multinews.mx/2016/08/tragedia-en-la-sierra-norte-de-puebla.html>

agricultural infrastructure such as silos and granaries or sufficient dry and elevated structures. The number of casualties marks the rudimentary presence of baseline clinics, personnel and medicaments. Faulty communications confirm the reduced number of electric and telephone lines, while rescue and assistance operations are impeded by the poor state and limited number of roads. Finally, the very limited press—basically the same data report repeated on every media—evidences the lack of interest by government and Mexican society about what happens to the people in the sierra. “Why would they care?” Rosenda continued, bitterly, “we are just here. We are poor. Over there [in the city] they don’t even care for us.”<sup>77</sup> The pain of this realization that no authorities action or relief would be given, is evident in many Masewal memories of that time. These seem to be all elements of history repeating.

Reverberations of *Pauline* were then also political. The aftermath of the Hurricane evidenced the incompetence and potential dishonesty of Municipal, State and Federal authorities. According to several interlocutors, millions of pesos specifically addressed to alleviate the catastrophe’s victims disappeared, probably stolen by a combination of government officials at all levels. According to many people in Tepetzintla, the money ended up in the political presidential

---

<sup>77</sup> “¿Porqué les va a importar? Estamos acá. Somos pobres. Allá ni les importa”. Fieldwork notes, Summer 2012

campaign of Vicente Fox (2000-2006). The flow of money and resources, through Hurricane Pauline, inundated, the pockets of local and regional politicians. Masewal people realized the asymmetric relations prevailing in the highlands with the state, the city, and the mountain itself. On the one hand they were painfully “reminded” that the mountain and its numerous resources and inhabitants are vulnerable and profoundly interconnected. On the other, the beginning of this century also started a process in which cyclical political participation could potentially be transformed into economic accumulation for local leaders and groups in power.

The aftermath of *Pauline* left thousands of people without a home and without means to remain, forcing one of the largest migrations to the city from the highlands of Puebla (INEGI 2000). Almost 20 years later, the generation who left the highlands have become part of the urban belts and rural cities around and between Mexico City and Puebla. Their cornfields and houses can still be seen in the mountain, destroyed or in different levels of decay due to disuse. What will be the social and environmental effects in the near future after Earl? We can dare to guess that they be as drastic as those after Pauline.

#### **VII.V. Wind spirits**

In the highlands of Puebla there are different kinds of winds, rains, and storms as well as an indefinite number of invisible spirits called in Spanish *aires* or "winds". Masewal people call storms *ejekakiyowitl* (from *ejekatl*=wind and *kiyowitl*=rain), or "wind-rain", these are not the same as the "good rains" (*kwali kiyowitl*) that mark the start of the planting season in March. "Good rains" are anxiously expected and received with pleasure. "Wind-rains" are much stronger events that mark the end of the dry season and the start of the rainy one every year, in July, although some can happen later, up until September and even October. "Wind-rains" can prove dangerous for cornfields that were planted too late—in mid April—or if they occur in later months as they can be potentially followed by very cold nights, thus freezing crops.

A *tonalejekatl* is an important wind event in the highlands and much feared by farmers. The term *tonalejekatl* could be superficially translated only as "hot wind" (*tonal*=sun/solar/hot/dry, and *ejekatl*=wind), but it means more than this. A *tonalejekatl* is a living if fleeting entity, which is, at the same time, the external manifestation of another living and malicious will, that of a distant sorcerer. Characteristically, a *tonalejekatl* happens in the peak of the dry season (May and June) although, according to Masewal farmers, they can equally manifest at any time throughout the



year. The *tonalejekatl* is a hot swirl that “sits” on the cornfields, on the milpas, and dries them out in less than an hour. If they are there, farmers will try to appease them by pouring *aguardiente* onto the soil, or scare it away by yelling insults at it.

There is another much stronger kind of tempest, which is similar in magnitude to those that climatologists classify as Tropical Storms or Hurricanes, and are traditionally called *ejekanamiktilistl* “wind of the land of the dead” or “wind of the dead”. This is an *amo kwali palabra* or “bad word”, one that can be used as witchcraft and is not supposed to be spoken out loud, as it names and attracts the dead. In fact, this term is seldom used in reference to hurricanes nowadays in Tepetzintla, although it is still in use in neighboring towns and villages (Tlaquimpa, Xochitlasco). The term is however preserved by female healers (*teese*) to name different afflictions caused by invisible yet powerful spirits associated to the wind. Babies are particularly frail to these wind afflictions, as they are “not rooted” beings, they tend to “be felled down onto the earth”, thus more susceptible to be affected by different types of “winds”. However, after asking around, a few elders do remember that in the past *ejekanamiktilistl* was indeed used mainly as a term to refer to particularly strong and destructive storms and tempests, or hurricanes. “That is the old name, the

one we don't remember around anymore. But it is its proper name."<sup>78</sup>

The term *tonalejekatl* has taken over other, more specific terminology (such as *ejekanamiktilistl*). The presence of *tonalejekatl* is associated more commonly with witchcraft—hence anthropogenic—than with spiritual agency. In many occasions, people from Tepetzintla have made clear to me their sense that witchcraft is on the rise. As Anselmo reflected one day, "Before, we didn't have these problems, these shit [*tlalchiwitl*]. Now they [the sorcerers] are all over. Where did they come from? They are not from around here. They come from other towns, from far away".<sup>79</sup> Ill weather is attached both to the dwindling of offerings to spirits and to the growing presence of people from 'outside'. In short, anthropogenic sources through witchcraft seem to be causing more ill events than spiritual sources.

Mountains and Masewal houses in Tepetzintla form together "complete house" reflecting one another, having similar units (animals, people, plots) and suffering from similar afflictions, such as disrespectful behavior, abuse and external forces, as the foreign tentacles of mining corporations, government corruption and bad weather. What happens in the mountain, is locally understood as having rippling effects on people and vice

---

<sup>78</sup> "Ese es el nombre de antes. El que ya no suena por aquí. Pero ese es el nombre." Fieldwork notes, 2014

<sup>79</sup> "*Antes, no teníamos esos problemas, ese tlalchiwitl. Ahora andan por todas partes. ¿De dónde vinieron? No son de aquí. Vienen de otros ranchos, por allá lejos.*" Field work notes, 2014.

versa. Both mountains and houses stand for Masewal people as spaces for reproduction, order and protection that also need constant care and observation.

#### **VII.VI. Megaproyectos**

The so-called *megaproyectos* appeared and multiplied through federal “concessions” in a short period of time, between 2008 and 2010. According to the Mexican Constitution (Article 27, 2<sup>nd</sup> Paragraph) all underground resources (water, oil, gas, and minerals) belong to the nation and are thus, inalienable by market or private ownership.<sup>80</sup> This article is, in fact, beheld as one of the main political achievements of the Post-Revolution regime. The autonomy of Mexico as a sovereign nation is founded on the ultimate authority of the State to control and “own” its natural resources.

---

<sup>80</sup> ARTICLE 27. “LA PROPIEDAD DE LAS TIERRAS Y AGUAS COMPRENDIDAS DENTRO DE LOS LIMITES DEL TERRITORIO NACIONAL, CORRESPONDE ORIGINARIAMENTE A LA NACION, LA CUAL HA TENIDO Y TIENE EL DERECHO DE TRANSMITIR EL DOMINIO DE ELLAS A LOS PARTICULARES, CONSTITUYENDO LA PROPIEDAD PRIVADA. LAS EXPROPIACIONES SOLO PODRAN HACERSE POR CAUSA DE UTILIDAD PUBLICA Y MEDIANTE INDEMNIZACION. [2<sup>ND</sup> PARAGRAPH] CORRESPONDE A LA NACION EL DOMINIO DIRECTO DE TODOS LOS RECURSOS NATURALES DE LA PLATAFORMA CONTINENTAL Y LOS ZOCALOS SUBMARINOS DE LAS ISLAS; DE TODOS LOS MINERALES O SUSTANCIAS QUE EN VETAS, MANTOS, MASAS O YACIMIENTOS, CONSTITUYAN DEPOSITOS CUYA NATURALEZA SEA DISTINTA DE LOS COMPONENTES DE LOS TERRENOS, TALES COMO LOS MINERALES DE LOS QUE SE EXTRAIGAN METALES Y METALOIDES UTILIZADOS EN LA INDUSTRIA; LOS YACIMIENTOS DE PIEDRAS PRECIOSAS, DE SAL DE GEMA Y LAS SALINAS FORMADAS DIRECTAMENTE POR LAS AGUAS MARINAS; LOS PRODUCTOS DERIVADOS DE LA DESCOMPOSICION DE LAS ROCAS, CUANDO SU EXPLOTACION NECESITE TRABAJOS SUBTERRANEOS; LOS YACIMIENTOS MINERALES U ORGANICOS DE MATERIAS SUSCEPTIBLES DE SER UTILIZADAS COMO FERTILIZANTES; LOS COMBUSTIBLES MINERALES SOLIDOS; EL PETROLEO Y TODOS LOS CARBUROS DE HIDROGENO SOLIDOS, LIQUIDOS O GASEOSOS; Y EL ESPACIO SITUADO SOBRE EL TERRITORIO NACIONAL, EN LA EXTENSION Y TERMINOS QUE FIJE EL DERECHO INTERNACIONAL.

In order to benefit from extraction under such legal framework, mining companies need a specific form of contract with the state called "mining or exploration concession." Such permits are hard to obtain and several offices become involved in their making, such as the Ministry of the Environment (SEMARNAT) and the Water Commission (Conagua) to warrantee the feasibility and potential social and environmental risks of each project. Or so goes the tale of the sovereign nation.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Presidential Report of Enrique Peña Nieto, presented to the Mexican Congress in September 1<sup>st</sup> of 2016, acknowledges that over 1.1 million hectares (approximately 2,718000 acres), which represent over 10% of the country's total territory, is now under contract to *concesionarios* or "licensed developers" with exploit permits on mineral resources.<sup>81</sup> Most of the mining activity takes place in the northern states of the country: Sonora, Zacatecas, Durango and Chihuahua. Just in the highlands of Puebla, over 226 such concessions have been granted to large mining corporations as well as to small mining operations. Nearly 370 thousand acres in the Sierra will be under this legal form of exploitation until the year 2065.<sup>82</sup>

## **VII.VII. Resistance and the invention of culture in the highlands**

---

<sup>81</sup> <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2016/09/04/economia/017n2eco>

<sup>82</sup> <http://tierrabaldia.com.mx/noticia/842/24-empresas-operan-concesiones-mineras-del-estado-de-puebla/>

In recent years the growing presence of different *megaproyectos* have met different forms of organized indigenous opposition in the highlands, such as “Red Mexicana de Afectados por la Minería”, Tiya Tlali “In defense of our land”, Tosepan Tiatañiske “United we will triumph”, Organización Independiente Totonakua (OIT), among others. The promises of wealth, development and progress told by engineers, government officials and corporation PR teams are systematically rejected by these organizations on the grounds of an undeniable argument: that what these myriad of investors ultimately want are their land and water. According to Luz Macías, a local Masewal activist and also a renowned diviner, these are all but “tales”, fake stories that need to be disputed with available local knowledge or “real stories”. On August 30 of 2016 a group of representatives of the municipality of Ixcamatitlán, in the highlands of Puebla, presented a formal complaint at the headquarters of the Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH)<sup>83</sup> in Mexico City against Almaden Minerals, for a series of violations and irregularities affecting the local indigenous population and their territory.<sup>84</sup> Specifically they complained about a number of excavations (183 in total) that dug beyond the legal digging limits, threatening

---

<sup>83</sup> National Commission of Human Rights

<sup>84</sup> <https://www.elsoldepuebla.com.mx/estado/presentaran-ongs-a-onu-informe-de-violacion-de-derechos-humanos-en-mexico>

local aquifers.<sup>85</sup> Almaden Minerals is a transnational Mining Corporation with different branches exploration and excavation projects in Mexico and other countries and are the owners of the Ixtaca gold-silver deposit mine, discovered in 2010 in said municipality.<sup>86</sup> In total, just Almaden and its branches, own over 100 thousand acres in the highlands of Puebla, but it is only one of the 24 different Mining Corporations with concessions in the region.<sup>87</sup>

The people presenting the complaint are organized around several activists and leaders, such as Silvia Villaseñor, member of the Consejo en Defensa de la Vida y del Territorio Tiyat Tlali<sup>88</sup>. This organization of Masewal, Totonaku and Mestizo highland inhabitants has gained strength in recent years after its emergence in 2012, in the aftermath of several Federal concessions to exploration projects for mining, aeolic and hydroelectric energy, as well as for the construction of “rural cities” for laborers in the highlands of Puebla region. In 2012, Tiyat Tlali materialized for originally 27 mining concessions, 5 hydroelectric projects and over 50 planned rural cities. Nowadays (in 2016) the Mexican government has approved over 105 mining concessions, 9 hydroelectric projects and an undisclosed

---

<sup>85</sup> <https://www.elsoldepuebla.com.mx/estado/presentan-queja-ante-cndh-contra-minera-en-ixtamaxtitlan>

<sup>86</sup> [http://www.almadenminerals.com/ABOUT%20US/About\\_Us.html](http://www.almadenminerals.com/ABOUT%20US/About_Us.html)

<sup>87</sup> <http://tierrabaldia.com.mx/noticia/842/24-empresas-operan-concesiones-mineras-del-estado-de-puebla/>

<sup>88</sup> Counsel in Defense of Life and Territory Tiyat Tlali. The last two words come from the repetition of the term “earth”, first in in Totonaku, and then in Náhuatl languages, the main indigenous languages historically spoken in the region.

number of hydraulic fracking projects affecting over 35 municipalities, and that is just in the highlands.<sup>89</sup>

That day at CNDH Tiyat Tlali was not the only organization representing the interests of local-mostly indigenous-population, it was accompanied by people from the Unión de Ejidos y Comunidades en Defensa de la Tierra y el Agua (UECDTA)<sup>90</sup>, another local group that gathers hundreds of indigenous and non-indigenous farmers and land owners in the highlands. These organizations had previously approached municipal authorities of Ixcamatitlán, and other municipalities (Jonotla, Cuetzalan and Zacapoaxtla) urging them to take part in the actions for the defense of their territory. Their presence in Mexico City was the result of a chain of failed local and state negotiations.

Probably the strongest ally of these regional organizations is the group FUNDAR<sup>91</sup> (Centro de Análisis e Investigación A.C.) based in Mexico City and led, among others, by a known social activist and academic, Sergio Aguayo. FUNDAR is a transversal organization occupied on research and organization around Human Rights issues (such as gender equality, racism, violence), observation of transparency in governance, as well as on environmental causes.

---

<sup>89</sup> <http://consejotiyattlali.blogspot.com/p/quienes-somos.html>

<sup>90</sup> (Union of Ejidos and communities in Defense of Land and Water)

<sup>91</sup> <http://fundar.org.mx/quienes-somos/>

The very next day, on August 31, Tiyat Tlali joined FUNDAR and over 100 or more NGO's working in the country, which collectively presented a complaint to the UN office in Mexico City, documenting over 60 cases of Human Rights violations by extractive companies (mining, infrastructure and energy) across the country.

This event marks a significant moment in a struggle that has taken place in the highlands of Puebla for the last decade or so. It marks a moment of *Serrano* identity awareness and a declaration of war in all ways except military. The evidence of environmental, social and spiritual harm (indeed ecological) is now the dominant discourse among Masewal, Tutunaku and Mestizo people. If during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the region was seldom molested by capitalist enterprises, it seems now to be at the center of major investments due mainly to its metal and gas deposits, and secondarily to its water and forestry resources. All of which were unknown or unattainable in previous times due to technological limitations and socio historical contexts.

#### **VII.VIII. A conspiracy of spirits**

What is disastrous about a hurricane? Is it the water that drowns the crops and tears the land? Or is it the evidence of vulnerability that it brings? What makes an ecology I argue,



after following Masewal people's specific actions, speech and collective concerns, resides not in the composition of interlocked species and ecosystems in seeming equilibrium, but in the names, ideas and memories that inhabit in it. That is, by the people that constantly produces observations about its possible relations. Such 'ecological thoughts' (Morton YEAR), exceed what could be conventionally framed as environmental. Masewal ecology reaches for and merges with a society of non-human species (animals and plants) as well as with a number of spiritual inhabitants to provide a moral ground to [...] When, then, does an environmental crisis become a social one and vice versa?

Rafael inherited some land down by the river. It is a shared inheritance with his older brother but since the brother moved with his family to Mexico City over a decade ago, Rafael has been left with it. The plot is large but on a very steep and low part of the mountain, it ends almost at the bottom of the ravine. It is cool and dark as it faces the southwest and is covered by a thick forest. It is not a good plot to grow coffee- it is too humid- and it is not great for a milpa garden either, as it doesn't get enough sunlight. Milpas are usually grown in the upper and mid parts of the mountain, while coffee, ideally, is planted facing east and on reasonably cool parts.

The trees on this plot grow tall however and, although Rafael has never quite decided what to do with all that wood, he cuts down some patches of trees every year and sells the wood or uses it for lumber at his own household. The trees are mostly pines (*pinus hartwegii*, *ayacahuite*, *orizabensis* and *cembroides*) some white cedars (*cupressus lusitanica*) and coral trees or 'colorín' (*erythrina coralloides*). The spot of land I am referring to has also been one of the most damaged slopes when a hurricane comes to Tepetzintla. The water rains down from the mountain, bringing tons of dirt and dead trees, animals, and that one time, people as well. People don't like to walk through Rafael's plot because 'the devil dwells in it' and it is also a 'place of witchcraft'.

In his plot there is indeed a strange rock formation covered in grass that emerges from the ground (Image). It looks like a stone hut, and it presents vertical crack in its middle. The rock is called *tescacoatl* or "mirror serpent". According to local people, this place is a *tescatl* or 'stone-mirror', it stands as an analog for the Chignamasatl mountain itself: it is a rock formation, covered with green bushes and divided by a vertical chasm. The use of the word *coatl*, 'serpent', suggests the passing between worlds. It is common knowledge in Tepetzintla, that some serpents are in fact *tipekayomej* "mountain people" that just 'look like' serpents when they

emerge from the mountain. Therefore, *tescacoatl*, beyond being a miniature mountain, is also a connection between the outside and and the inside of the mountain and, therefore, a gateway where sorcerers visit by night to leave "shit", "witchcraft" or *tlachilwit*.

In recent times, unidentified exploration teams have been seen around Tepetzintla, specifically near the river. Since then, *tescacoatl* has become more virulent, spurting more *tlalchiwitl* than before. "That place" Cristóbal Simón, one of the most respected/feared local diviners argued, "is where the 'porquería' [*tlalchiwitl*] goes. For it is also the place where it comes from. Those people from the city knew very well where to go, where the entrance is. But the mountain shoved them off. A bunch of serpents sprung from that place [*tescacoatl*] and they ran. They were very scared. They ran back to the city it seems!"

We were walking back home from the plot and took a dreadful shortcut up the hill with, admittedly, a great view. When we stopped for me to catch my breath, my friend Rafael said, "*You remember the old bridge that used to be down by the river? That one was destroyed by big rocks that came down the mountain when the hurricane came. They came running and there was just too much water with them. They took it down, crushed it. And for weeks we couldn't cross the river again. Why is this? Why now? Some say it is because of what the people in Tetela are doing on*

*the other side of the mountain [a mine]. Or is it because we don't respect the elders, the owners, we don't go visit them [in the mountain]? I don't remember this happening before, when we did [respected them]."*<sup>92</sup>

For many Masewal people, what happens in the world, both in weather and by voracious capitalist endeavors, is a reflection of local—and not so local—human actions. Following Rafael's line of reasoning, I argue that the traumatic collective experiences lived in the highlands of Puebla by Masewal, Totonaku and Mestizo people and caused by disasters associated to climatic change are primarily identified as the effect of a *total* moral crisis. In other words, disastrous weather events are not viewed as "natural phenomena" (unrelatable occurrences, produced and expressed by meta-human conditions), but suspected of being agentive actions of a spiritual someone. As there is no tenable negotiation with a dispirited world, Nature is thus impossibility, in local terms. Hence, whatever happens, which carries some force and impact on the sierra, must be relatable to other happenstances, to other dealings by other, different people.

---

<sup>92</sup> "Se acuerda del puente Viejo que estaba en el río? Ese fue el que se lo chingaron las piedras cuando el huracán. Se vinieron pa' bajo con harta agua. Lo tiraron, lo chingaron nomás. Y luego pasaron semanas y no se podía cruzar. Porqué pasó eso? Porqué ahorita? Unos andan diciendo que es por lo que andan hacienda del otro lado, por Tetela? O major es que como ya no hay respeto a los de antes, a los dueños, que ya no vamos para arriba [a la montaña]? Yo no me acuerdo queesto pasara antes, cuando sí había [respeto]."

This totality of a moral crisis is the outcome of different, specific human ill practices to which spirits of the land respond by unleashing their destructive force. According to Rafael and many other people in the highlands, vengeful spiritual forces coordinate adverse weather effects and through such portents “speak.” Spiritual thunderous and often catastrophic speech has to do with sanctions and omens to humans, reprimands to their forgetfulness. Under this logic, in which land spirits speak via storms, rainbows and hurricanes, rocks and water not only collided on the bridge that night during the hurricane, but they conspired.

Rafael’s reflective statement associating hurricanes to the growing presence of –and resistance to– *megaproyectos* is not casual. These enterprises are locally seen as menacing forces from “outside” the sierra, and with an equally strong spiritual potency. Indeed, mines and all sorts of *megaproyectos* possess their own spirits. The answer was already on my notes.

Two years before, in the summer of 2013, I was surprised by the amount of heavy trucks on the “Inter-Serrana”, the main road that goes from northeast to southwest across the highlands of Puebla, some loaded with dirt while others carried equally heavy excavation and drilling machinery. We were on our way to the Totonaku town of Tepango, to buy the ornaments for our dancer’s costumes, and so I asked Rafael about them, he said that those

trucks were surely part of some "chingadera" (the crude word in Spanish used to refer to witchcraft and all ill things). "Those [mega-proyectos]" continued Rafael "have their own *itekomej*". *Iteko* [sing.] means "owner" and "caretaker" and it is a term reserved to refer to the authoritative and mostly invisible nonhuman beings of the mountain, as well as to those ancestral beings who inhabit and "own" each Masewal household. In short, "owner spirits" or "care taking spirits."

#### **VII.IX. From non-environmentalism to a native ecology**

For Masewal people, human behavior is either understood pro or anti environmental in conventional Western terms, such conceptualization is non-existent in Tepetzintla. That is, the anthropogenic factors causing pollution and climatic events are not locally regarded as the material byproduct of historic capitalism. Throughout this dissertation I have showed how Masewal people consider what we (standard Westerners) call "environment" as part of larger social networks that include spirits and places.

Masewal people throw around organic and inorganic garbage without parsimony. Caps, bottles, bags and all sorts of industrial detritus color the view of green and brown from trees, bushes and dirt. Residues of construction materials and

plastics are part of any and all highland town's landscape. Local people enthusiastically use fossil fuels for their few trucks and they regularly collect and burn plastic bottles and bags in their backyards or even—appallingly—in their kitchen's hearths, as part of their domestic cleaning chores. The vast majority consumes all available chemicals and industrialized goods like detergents, diapers and cleaning products with little mistrust. If anything, these local practices would seem to the environmentalist “burning heart” as the foulest misdeeds against “The Environment”.

Perhaps the most challenging anti-environmentalist practice in the highlands lies in construction. In recent decades the traditional mud and timber houses with palm roofs have been replaced by cement and brick edifices with cardboard and aluminum roofing. The benefits of such materials have been celebrated in the past by local authorities for being more hygienic, modern, cheaper and easier to maintain. Local municipal administrations have encouraged these replacements as part of their assumed administrative, welfare tasks. The distribution of industrial construction materials by authorities is based on the assumption of a patronage relation. People who receive “support” are expected to provide their votes in times of elections.

However, Masewal people's apparent disinterest in the environment should not be assumed as a lack of an ecological attention. For Masewal people, taking care of the surrounding landscape is an important task linked to their survival. Hence, it has to do more with a series of collective ritualized actions of remembrance and with daily practices of observation and labor than with programmed initiatives exalting individual hygiene or conventional forms of conservation. Masewal farmers, for example, carefully observe the growth of both crops and secondary vegetation, humidity of soils in their plots and even the behavior of pests and local fauna. They facilitate the growth of certain plants, clean and unclog water springs near their plots or organize night hunts to kill off badgers and other pests. They equally keep a separation of trash in between plastic and organic at their homes, the latter is commonly reused for feeding pigs or as compost for domestic gardens. Younger local people, going through the standardized school system, are aware that trash can be polluting to water, soils and life forms. But this is hardly an insight for older Masewal people, who came up to similar conclusions by observing peoples behavior. Indeed, Masewal ecology is predicated on social and moral relations rather than on polluting versus hygienic practices.





## **VIII. CONCLUSIONS: THE REEMERGENCE OF DANCES**

### **AND OTHER UNEXPECTED MASEWAL EXPANSIONS**

#### **VIII.I. The end is the beginning**

A story's main purpose is to create other stories, and all ethnographic endeavors are in the end, stories being told to create others across time and space. As an anthropologist I can only aspire to channel other voices and to weave truthful stories with them. I cannot claim naiveté about it though. Ethnographic stories are efforts to artificially bring into textual format complexities that would otherwise be incompatible with 'reality', in their attempt to represent the world. Ethnographies are inherently partial (Clifford 1986), determined by author's biography and, therefore, politically determined (Marcus 1986). However, past the issues of authorship and legitimacy, ethnographic accounts face the challenge of over generalization (Latour 2010). How then to write an honest rendition of other peoples' lives that was directly, if partially, observed?

I have envisioned this research as my own laboratory. In other words, by accepting ethnography as an intervention of its

own (Winthereik and Verran 2012), I have found a bridge between my description and my interpretation of Masewal people's concerns and ingenuity in a particular world. Indeed, ethnographies can constitute cosmoeses well beyond the naïve renditions of 'reality' and past the egotistic narratives of the self. They can also, sometimes, become new spaces where relations can be made and reconfigured, and where the possibility of a generative critique of different realities can exist (Ibid).

Here, I have stubbornly attempted to present Masewal dances as a detailed and complex process in which people are as invested in performance and social practice, as they are in speculation and a public demonstration of morality, via the local concepts of respect and remembrance. Always fallible and never fixed, dances are, perhaps unsurprisingly, as living as the rest of the Masewal notions about their surrounding landscape.

I confess I have written this story as a way to modestly include myself into the lives of the Masewal people and the creative ways in which they are concerned about the world. Writing this is also a call to reassess and inform my potential readers and myself about the real power nested in collective actions and aesthetics, and the knowledge that comes out of these in places often ignored by "standard Westerners".

In this case, Masewal people have created an interconnected world that resonates with others, particularly our Anthropocene, by moving the emphasis from the "us" and "them" divide, they have rather adopted a more inclusive stance, and so have I. In my writing following such Masewal proposition, I hope to be able to expand the former (us) and destabilize the later (them). In a way, I guess, writing this has been my own way of dancing.

The story of Masewal dances is made of many voices, most of which have not been directly invoked in this other research story. I have tried however to weave some of them, across many years of interactions, in between dissimilar people, at different places and in a variety of formats, from one on one interviews and casual exchanges waiting for the bus, to aligid debates and long after dinner conversations by the fire. The story that has emerged here is then a multi-vocal one; and not entirely the product of my sole imagination, as the preoccupations and statements that dominate it, come from the Masewal people, who told their stories to me, or to one another, when I was present and invited me into them.

My main objective has been to understand and appreciate how and why dances have reemerged in recent years without ever truly being forgotten, how people constantly rediscover them, and how they think through dancing about "bigger" issues. Ultimately, I aim to place in text what Masewal people do when they dance in

order for them to stay together, to endure calamity, to collectively inquire about and socialize with a constantly expanding world.

Although I have had an anthropological interest on Masewal people for a long time, I never expected I would end up writing about the local dances. I sadly recognize that for the first few years I consciously avoided them. I don't remember what I thought about them back then anymore, but I guess I thought they were invasive, strident and overly dramatic events. I wasn't entirely wrong, dances are designed precisely to be that and, as I would discover, to be much more. I was put on track by the influence of two people. The first was my friend and later my *compadre* Anselmo, who was probably annoyed by my questions and found that dances were in fact what I should be working on. The second person, was yet more unexpected, it started with a visit to old Ifigenio, probably, the least probable person to inspire me in Tepetzintla.

#### **VIII.II. Ifigenio: the least probable source of inspiration**

My trade often finds me having meaningful conversations with people I would otherwise avoid. Ifigenio López is a *koyotl* not a Masewal, even if he speaks the local language (he arrived at a young age to Tepetzintla, buying land and establishing a

successful general store). He is a proud man, with lighter skin and clear eyes. He is over 80 years old now, and he is still one of the wealthiest men in Tepetzintla. Some fifty years ago, in the 60s, he was Municipal President for two terms and controlled the political decisions and the limited budget flowing from the incipient development programs in the region. Ifigenio was the first *koyotl* municipal president after the Mexican revolution. All the previous majors in town had been Masewal men, illiterate farmers whose main task was organizing *fiestas* and crucially, ascending to the top of the mountain, the Chignamasatl, once per year to talk with Tipetwewe, the mountain's care taker, and negotiate the fertility of the coming year.

As a *koyotl* authority, Ifigenio enforced the assimilation policies of the era emerging from the Federal Government, in the form of standard school education and the secularization of governmental practice. In his zealously, Ifigenio unashamedly persecuted and prohibited several local customs, such as the food offerings and annual ascensions to the mountain, as well as dances, explicitly calling them 'backward' and 'senseless' traditions. He also accumulated a fortune through politics, taking over businesses and land and was, for decades, the *de facto* dictator in town. The progeny of Ifigenio is also vast and, in his family, people tend to be long-lived. His iron grasp on town's affairs is still remembered by Masewalmej who hold no

love for Ifigenio and his sons. Some Masewal friends are convinced Ifigenio killed a man over a woman he wanted, also taking his land. Masewal people, in a typical attitude that I have only begun to understand, are however very courteous to Ifigenio, as he is now an old man and they acknowledge him as the godfather of many mature people in town. In spite of this recognition, Ifigenio is, perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the few men in town who always carries a gun.

For a long time, Ifigenio monopolized the only telephone line in the town, taking it from the mayor's office and strategically installing a booth inside his living room, charging the highest rates, and controlling access while casually listening to all the conversations taking place. Times have changed. Nowadays there are many phone lines in town and Ifigenio's family, although still one of the most influential local lineages, has lost its preponderant role and its commercial monopoly. Ifigenio, a man of habits, still keeps his phone booth, 3 of them actually, in his living room to which less and less people go to place phone calls.

I established a respectful relation with Ifigenio over the years, originating in the days when I had to use his overpriced phone line to call home. I think he appreciates my infrequent visits even when he knows, all too well, that I have little appreciation for his family and no sympathy for him. While my

loyalties are clear, I guess we both have come to accept the fact that I want to know about things of the past and that he wants to tell them.

Ifigenio has a wall with lots of photographs, most of them in black and white. There are images of his ancestors but also of the town, a much smaller place with tiled roofs. There are as well photos that show groups of people shaking hands at local political events, a road being opened, a school inaugurated, and so on. One of the few images in color is from the late 80s, and it shows 8 local men at the main plaza (called "centro") in full Apache dance attire. The first time I noticed this picture I asked Ifigenio about it. "They were the last dancers", he said, "only a few old men and some kids all that remained. Hahaha [...] before that, they were dozens of them". Knowing that nowadays the Apache dance has over 60 interchangeable members—me being one of them—I insisted, asking why he said "the last dancers" when there are so many now. "Well", he scratched his head, "those were the last dancers, back then. The dancers you see here now," he continued, pointing outside and to the photo, while looking at me from behind his green glasses:

"and those Apache [in the photo] are not the same;  
they dance now for different reasons. Not like before.  
They dance for the mountain not for the saints. These



"inditos" are very curious that way. First, they do one thing, then they do another [different] thing, hahaha [...] later they do nothing at all. You never know exactly what they are going to do next."<sup>93</sup>

In subsequent conversations, Ifigenio shared with me his *koyotl* puzzlement about the dances. At times disappearing, dances would reemerge with new people and new elements, being one of those practices that, he regretted, he could not manage to remove from local life in favor of proper modernization. Of course, Ifigenio's discourse has changed with old age, following the major cultural appropriation pattern, and he now sometimes expresses his liking for such local customs, "hahaha, they are pretty [the dances], aren't they? Yes, they are part of our traditions here".

Even as an improbable source for knowledge upon the recent past, I took Ifigenio's observation seriously, as coming from someone with many years of experience being a foreigner in Tepetzintla. For an eerie instant I had an empathic moment with Ifigenio, as two mestizos trying to understand Masewal locals. His statements helped me to think about the fluidity of dances but beyond that, about Masewal people and their resilient and

---

<sup>93</sup> "Y esos Apache no son lo mismo. Ellos hacen la danza por otra cosa. No como antes. Danzas dizque para el cerro no para los santitos. Estos inditos son bien curiosos. Primero hacen una cosa, luego, otras, y luego otra por acá jajajaja [...] y luego acaban por no hacer nada, Usted nunca sabe qué van a hacer luego." Field Notes 2011.

recursive practices and in how such embodied knowledge can be altered. From a local *koyotl* perspective, Masewal traditional dance practice seems to be a resilient and changing one. To dance, in Masewal terms, escapes the conventions around tradition and Catholic religious zealousness.

Ifigenio's thoughts and memories ended up being inspiring to me in ways he didn't intend. He showed me how Mexican mestizos have entitled themselves to judge and dismiss indigenous Mexicans. Moreover, he showed me how "we" (dominant mestizos) are puzzled still, after hundreds of years of abuse, intolerance and exploitation, by indigenous actions and ideas and how we are still trying to understand them. This here is my recognition to those awkward put overly instigating exchanges with the least probable interlocutor in town.

#### **VIII.III. Mountain's bowel movements: summing up what we know so far**

Here a quick review on the questions, topics and experiences I have tried to knit regarding a local Masewal ecology. Three main ideas: Masewal people live in a place in which spirits are an important part; dances act as dynamic models on how those spirits look like and what are the expected alliances that are needed with them; and current conditions have

brought new relevance to both spirits and dances by a local perception of anthropogenic climate change is morally apprehended and associated to spirits, geo capitalism and the effects of migration and urbanization of the population.

In the summer of 2013, Mount Popocatepetl, the biggest active volcano in the North American subcontinent located only a few miles south of Mexico City was fuming furiously. Some minor earthquakes ensued and were felt in the different states around it (Puebla, Morelos, Mexico). I was in the highlands by then and remember that such tremors hardly scared anyone there. My friend Jacinto just chuckled and called them "his bowel movements", "they come and go" he continued, "no use worrying, he'll recover". Popocatepetl is a Náhuatl term, that means "the smoking mountain" and is traditionally regarded as an ancient man, known also as "Don Goyo" in the towns planted on its surrounding slopes. In some level, the biggest volcano in the sub continent, the latent geological menace on central Mexico, is just an old guy with bowel issues.

Seismic events, just like meteorological ones, are closely observed and pondered upon by Masewal people in the highlands. They think about the possible connections between these "different" events, while they also reflect about incidents in the past, all the while worrying about what to do in case of

emergency. Time and space are connected through the observation of climatic patterns, human behavior, and volcanic activity.

I was in Tepetzintla by the time these subterranean “bowel movements” occurred and, when talking about the regularity of such earthquakes, one of my Masewal interlocutors, Juan, a fellow dancer, told me between laughs, “You see now Alejandro? [that is how most Masewal people call me] Now you have to come back to dance next year, to complete”<sup>94</sup> But, to complete what exactly? What made Juan associate volcanic trepidations with dancing? Ultimately, my question was, what does dancing achieve?

Deemed as colorful traditions but otherwise backward or at least “unnecessary” by local Mestizos and Mexican national society alike, dances, as many other indigenous practices, were well on their way out as due sacrifice to a “desirable modernity”. Today, some dances have reemerged from seeming oblivion, as more and younger people are getting involved in one or more of the several local dance groups. Markets and regional “fiestas” are attended by dance organizations from remote villages. There is a local exegesis of revitalization about the reemergence of dances. So, what in recent times brings the dances back?

A series of disastrous climatic events that could be linked to global climate change has had adverse effects in this

---

<sup>94</sup> “Ya ve Alejandro? Ora tiene que venir a danzar el otro año, pa’ completar” Field notes 2013.

mountainous region. As I have described, in the last two decades, diverse hurricanes and tropical storms have taken the lives of people and have made thousands more lose their homes, farm animals, and crops. Especially the hurricanes Pauline (1997), Dan (2007) and Earl (2013) are locally remembered as particularly harmful.<sup>95</sup>

As these and other meteorological changes are affecting the countryside by ruining crops and harming animal and human lives, local Masewal farmers have been looking for ways to come to terms with and to harness such phenomena. While government agencies, in the Municipal, State and Federal levels, continue to fail in delivering adequate explanatory or predictive information or any effective infrastructure program to deal with the disastrous weather, and facing the advent of private exploitation—logging, mining and gas extraction—making their way into their territory, Masewal people have been turning toward more effective forms of negotiation with environmental authorities.

Such authorities are all nonhuman and stand as a local alternative power structure, which favors Masewal people, against the abuses and neglecting attitudes of state agencies, again, locally understood, as Mestizo institutions. Masewal are

---

<sup>95</sup> Consultation of the historical archives of the Mexican *Centro de Ciencias de la Atmósfera* and the *Instituto Meteorológico Nacional*, shows that approximately 24 tropical storms and over 8 hurricanes have impacted the Gulf of Mexico in the Veracruz-Puebla region on the NE Atlantic coast and almost 30 similar meteorological events have struck the Isthmus of Oaxaca from the SW Pacific in the last 30 years (<http://www.atmosfera.unam.mx/>, <http://www.conagua.gob.mx/>).

thus intensifying their negotiations with diverse landscape spirits, who are generically identified as the *wewe* translated both as 'Grandfathers' and as *itekomej* or "owners" of the land, as the local sources of responsible power and ultimate political authority. Ascending to mountaintops to leave offerings, visiting caves and, crucially, dancing are all reemerging practices in the highlands. Why? Why should Masewal people dance and elaborate ritual regalia as an organized response to harmful weather? What could dances do to alleviate such problems?

The answer to this research question has needed a multipart answer. The first part has been an attempt to understand the local theory of perception based in *kixpatla*. This is the key notion for dances, a skill that allows people, and dancers, to "artificially" produce a collective and ritually controlled 'change of vision' or *kixpatla*, in order to render visible an otherwise invisible world. Visualizing by *kixpatla* is a particular Masewal way to address multilayered and possible realities and relations between subjects, usually reserved to *tlatatkimej* or 'those who know', or diviners. Masks and other artifacts briefly provide dancers with such a capacity and allow them not only to 'look like' but also to 'see like' the spirits they embody. Dancers affect their own perception by dancing, heavily drinking and impeding their visual acuity, but also by

programming their behavior into a different code of conduct, that of spirits.

The second part of this answer has to do with local dances. Specific thematic dances, as I have described, are dense collective performances in which costumed dancers embody animal, ancestral and landscape spirits. Dancers as spirits accept food offerings from local authorities, kneel, pray in front of the saints, and merrily perform their elaborated choreographies in their full attire for everyone to see. Highly organized and socially complex, dance groups enable dancers to become spirits in order then to “make them behave” using their own bodies as mimetic traps. When dancers become spirits they also, to some degree domesticate them. Such mimesis, in which spirits are temporarily materialized, allows Masewal dancers to force them to accept food offerings and to enter into exchange relations with humans. If on the one hand, dancing is a form of sacrifice from the individual dancer (his discipline, exhaustion, resources and efforts), what they all together portray is the acceptance of such gift by the spirits and then their submission to the town’s protector spirits: the saints and virgins. Ultimately, dancers propose also a reverse mimesis, in which they show spirits ‘best practices’ as they behave as spirits “should behave”.

When Antonio, for example, clad in *Tipekayomej* attire, kneels in front of a saint's effigy making the sign of the cross and accepts humbly and politely that plate of meat and beans that the *tlanosatl* or "caller" puts on his hands, he does so in part as a pedagogical technique. As he said later on that day, "We do it so because they don't know, poor things. They don't know about Christ. We are now for the town. We can now eat food and salute the saint."<sup>96</sup>

To dance, in Masewal terms, implies then to publicly proclaim and commit to the necessary existing relations with spirits. Indeed, as they say, to "remember them". This public demonstration is a political action, in the sense that it reinstates the hierarchy in which mountain beings and even climatic elements acknowledge their alliance with the town and its inhabitants.

Moreover, as *Wewentiyo* and *Tipekayomej* dance have showed us, by becoming landscape spirits, dancers not only capture spirits but also produce dynamic scale models about the desirable and respectful relations between humans and nonhuman people in order to generate continuity.

Dances, as "living" events provide a body to otherwise invisible spirits by copying their appearance and imitating their language, gestures, and behavior. Copying is both an act

---

<sup>96</sup> "Lo hacemos así, porque ellos no saben, pobrecitos. No saben de Cristo. Nosotros ahora somos del pueblo, ya podemos comer comida y saludar al santito" Field Notes 2015.



of imagination and “remembrance” in which dancers envisage but also recall the appearance and conduct of the spirits being embodied in the dance, based on previous interactions, experiences, and narratives. Such a double act of imagination and remembrance allows Masewal dancers to, finally, bring these embodied spirits into a social arrangement of reciprocity acknowledging their necessary interdependence in food production, fertility and health.

Copying spirits however ends up becoming a creative process in which bodies, characters, and ideas are constantly reclaimed, repurposed, and reinvented to provide explanations for current problems. During my research all of these problems didn’t have to do, for most of my Masewal interlocutors, with environmental damage or with economic distress but with a broken moral pact. Dances thus also appeal to a profound recognition of a shared morality between people and their landscape, as disastrous weather events are triggered by cosmic distress. As I have showed before, *mega-proyectos* and human greed paired to Masewal laziness and unhealthy city habits have been diagnosed locally as the main sources for such disasters.

For Masewal people, environmental knowledge does not compose a discrete sphere, taxonomically segmented from the rest of life occurrences, but it is rather spread in all other activities and forms of relation, because it is precisely about

life and its relations. Hence, ritual kinship, land labor, healing practices, and dancing are all activities in which spirits from the earth are invoked and related to people's activities. Therefore, to understand such form of Masewal environmentalism, it is first necessary to recognize it consists of intertwined layers of integrated information that is spread in many different social relations.

The highland landscape is formed thus by a conglomerate of agentive, focalized forces, ancestors, and primordial beings as living members of an indigenous meta-human society. For example, *Awewe* or "old man water" and his daughters live under the river. *Atlamatzicoatl* the "old water-lady-snake" lives in a precise place, the water spring up in the mountain. *Kwoxiwa* and his people, the *tipekayomej*, live in the forest. *Kosomalotl*, the 'she-rainbow', lives also in a cave on the other side of the mountain. *Kalwewetsin* and *Kaltlamatsi*, the "old house man" and "old house dear female" respectively, inhabit each and every household's fireplace. Beyond these characters, Masewal people know that all animals have their own mountain from which they all originated and to which their souls go after death. Moreover, these spirits are the non-human original inhabitants of the highlands. Spirit must not be imagined as immaterial ghosts but, as Masewal interlocutors insist, they are the

mountain, the water, and the forest and also rocks, places, animals, plants, or even shadows.

#### **VIII.IV. Unexpected images: art, murals and reviving concerns**

Maize plants, maize dough and human flesh and bodies are interdependent and immersed in numerous co-creative relations. During my fieldwork, I came across several representations of such notions in public art all over the highlands (see Image Appendix), depicting maize and humans sharing a body and emerging from the earth together. Indeed, during the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the famed artist Diego Rivera together with other post-Revolutionary Mexican muralists used the same images in State buildings to invoke heritage and appeal for a national ancestral identity. In a manner similar to the the scholarly notion of – past and present– Mesoamerica, nationalistic art, and especially *muralismo* art school was also regarded as favorable and was supported at the highest levels of the Mexican State. Diego Rivera's most powerful murals were petitioned for the National State Palace (*Palacio Nacional*) and the Ministry of Education's main building, for example.

The present recovery of mural art and of some similar images by young indigenous non-professional artists from the highlands of Puebla has little to do with Mexican nationalism

though. It is a regional reinvention having to do more with local narratives and concerns than with over encompassing ideas of nationhood. The current local utilization of motifs where people, maize, and land features (clouds, mountains, and rivers) are visually acknowledged as interdependent is now pointing towards two main local specific ideas. On the one hand the growing notion of a revitalization of a cultural and ethnic identity (Masewal and Totonaku) based on a heritage discourse. On the other, the celebration and protection of the highlands as a mega-diverse and rich landscape, also accompanied by a similar heritage discourse (not cemented by ethnicity but by the broader label of 'serrana' identity). Both tropes are joined when some of these images warn local people about the environmental threats of dams, gas and mining (see Section XX).

In the summer of 2013 I visited the *Universidad Intercultural* located in the neighboring municipality of Ahuacatlán, Puebla, and talked to several students there who proudly showed me the mural at the entrance. An image loaded with scientific DNA chains as well as with depictions of local animals, microscopes and corn plants emerging from brown, indigenous hands: a living landscape anchored seemingly both in some ideas taken from local traditional narratives and also from the scientific tradition (see Images Appendix). One of the students mentioned that this mural was a collective product of

previous students, and reflectively added, "...we know this is not all. It just shows how we see it."<sup>97</sup>

This idea of territorial heritage and interdependence is being pushed by young indigenous people, only a few of which are getting educated in the so-called *Universidades Interculturales*, located in the highlands (in Huehuetla and Ahuacatlán municipalities). These colleges were designed in the last decade, specializing in technical careers (like agronomy, husbandry, and forestry management) to educate students from indigenous backgrounds and to promote less emigration due to education needs to the cities. Over the last few years these programs have, perhaps somehow inadvertently, also helped young students from different villages, languages, and altitudes to tie common threads of concerns regarding their shared history as well as the continuity of their lifestyles and the threats they face.

Another example of these artistic expressions comes from projects in the highlands such as Tejtitsilin or "singing rock", a school located in San Miguel Tzinacapan, in the border between highlands and lowlands. Tejtsitsilin is a primary and junior high school that, for the last 25 years or so, has enforced local pride and identity by adding to the standard curricula courses on local knowledge, teaching courses in Nahuatl and

---

<sup>97</sup> "...sabemos que no está completo. Pero sí se ve cómo lo vemos acá" Field Notes 2013.

Spanish languages. Courses include oral history, traditional music and textile fabrication, as well as dances, and bee keeping. Each year, young Masewal students paint a wall of their school, leaving complex visual depictions of local fauna and plants, characters from traditional narratives and elements of the local landscape and peoples.

The painted walls in other cases come from political organizations, such as *Tosepan Tiataniske* or "Together we will triumph", a group that originated over 35 years ago in San Miguel Tzinacapan and has now presence in over a dozen indigenous municipalities across the highlands. In its beginning it emerged as a local response against land grabbing mestizo ranchers and focused on the control and recapture of land plots by Masewal and Totonaku farmers. Later on, this organization implemented the creation of different productive cooperatives (coffee, textiles, produce). In the last decade or so, "La Tosepan" (as it is locally called) became a real political player backing municipal candidates and influencing local authorities and industries. In recent years however, La Tosepan and other organizations inspired by it have integrated environmental discourses into their agendas and are receiving the attention and help of different scientific experts (environmentalist biologists, hydrologists, botanists, and ecologists) as well as lawyers and other activists.

The art painted on public spaces is now then not only an expression of local heritage and a form of protest invoking people to unite against land grabbing but also seems to integrate current environmental concerns across the highlands.

#### **VIII.V. Remembering and forgetting are ways of being in the world**

Through these varied narratives and experiences, we can start to understand some of the sources for the recent reemergence of dances as a local practice geared towards understanding social practice in connection with ill weather and misfortune. An idea has been developing in the doing of these practices, and is perhaps powerful, as it seems to be transversally running across standardized religion, farming, social participation, and political activism. This idea is being locally rebranded in terms of "tradition" and "culture". It has no proper definition and no leader overtly acting to uphold it. It is an idea merged with different practices and elicited in informal gatherings. It is an idea about caretaking, and about reconnecting what is considered to be a broken world.

Fundamentally, for Masewal people of Tepetzintla region, remembering is a consciously collective and political action. A way to express the connection that needs to be recovered in

order to also regain what has been lost. Masewal people identify generational embracement of modernity in the form of migration, together with the progressive abandonment of traditional farming and even of language use as the main actions of 'forgetfulness.' Dancing, ascending to mountains, and recognizing the spirits in the landscape are, in turn, all actions locally associated to a notion of 'remembrance' or *kilnamitl*. These two tropes—forgetfulness and remembrance—regularly appear in conversations when talking about 'the young' people or 'the old' ways. Beyond being an arguably trite generational conflict, what Masewal people are signaling through these concepts is something much more precise and important. To remember in local terms is to act in a certain ways (to openly speak Nahuatl language and to teach it to children, to be an active member in town's activities, to grow maize or some other produce in the mountain, to collectively dance, pray, feast, and visit the owners of the mountain, to acknowledge the importance of spirits and dreams), while to forget is, equally, to consciously act in some other ways (to depend on cash economy jobs, to emigrate to the city, to stop speaking in Nahuatl language, to convert to other denominations and forms of Christianity, to not work in the mountain). In short, to remember and to forget are thus linked to practices and ideas about personhood, community, and world building.



Dances are tied then to a general preoccupation in Tepetzintla, ignited by catastrophic weather, poor harvests, and economic depression. The local diagnosis has to do with cumulative collective misbehavior, locally spelled as 'forgetfulness.' In turn, such forgetfulness is defined by unthoughtful modernization and abandonment of farming and local engagement with tradition and customs or *costumbre*. Finally, tradition is just a word for a series of practices and discourses around ongoing negotiations with local landscape spirits.

As Hurricanes continue to ravage the highlands and mining companies are established in the midst of conflict and against local resistance, more and more people are performing dances. In some cases, dances have become, as a young local schoolteacher told me, a signature for 'protestas serranas' or 'highland protests.' Indeed, for many Masewal people, dances have become strategic actions that aim to fix a broken place and to prevent more damage by publicly acknowledging the presence and influence of spirits. As Julio, one of the dancers said, "we dance for all the people, not just for the people here. We dance now because we need to remember them, the mountain, the water spring, the forest. If they are not happy, they will just leave. But us, where are we going to go?"

The local awareness of the profound interdependency between human life and the mountain can be now understood as the motivator for dancing. The risks of losing their land to disastrous weather or mining corporations are processes attributed to, by local Masewal, as un-thoughtfulness and forgetfulness. There is a tacit critique of collective participation in modernity (city life) embedded in such social lament. A local recognition of guilt, a pledge for reunion, and a practice of remembrance are all tied together as equally powerful reactions against a seemingly unfavorable process.

#### **VIII.VI. Dances as active models of relations**

Masewal *danzas* are, on one level, animated models of the world, in which different spirits become visible and sociable. As all models -miniaturized and artificial- *danzas* aim to give people a sense of knowledge and control over an otherwise unpredictable world. They show people the spirits they already know and talk about during healing practices, shamanism, land labor or many other spheres. Dances not only parade spirits but also show the relations that interconnect one another and that would be desirable to reproduce. As Marcos, an old *Wewentiyo* dancer told me, during one of our recesses, "This dance we do here? It is exactly how it happens up there [pointing to the

mountain]. It looks the same way [...] They [spirits] have the same face, and they speak like this 'Rooot!' They are looking down! They are looking up! Well, that is how things are, even when we, dumbasses, don't want to see that."<sup>98</sup>

However, beyond this first level of active modeling of the spiritual world, dances are social relations with that world being carried out at that moment, and not merely representations. This is proved by the attention and concern people bring to strategic moments during dances that could bring fortune or ill fortune to the town. A dancer can trip, a musician can forget a song, an artifact can fail to function, etc. Furthermore, dancers embody, during dances, spirits and their behavior and acceptance of food and drink are not representational at all, but factual events. Masewal people take this task seriously by doing their best to maintain masks and costumes on and by governing their manners at all moments, obeying all the orders given by captains and Mayordomos. Dancers are however local people, who take their body resistance to the extreme by hours of dancing, lack of sleep due to vigils and large quantities of alcohol. And they also have friends and preferences just as they have rivals. These living tensions

---

<sup>98</sup> "Esta danza que hacemos aquí, es la misma, igual que como pasa allá. Se ve igual [...] Allá ellos tienen la misma caray así dicen: 'Ruuut!'. Miran para abajo! Miran para arriba! Bueno, así son las cosas, aunque nosotros acá, pendejos, no queramos ver." Field Notes 2014.

after days of dancing create plenty of possibilities for misconduct and conflict.

Masewal people consider that their numerous narratives about spirits and landscape are not “just stories” but are memories about important events and relations. To dance is to go beyond such narratives however, as dancing is not constrained to mere enactment, it brings such stories to life, sometimes in unexpected ways. Masewal consider it necessary to produce costumes and music, garments and tools, and dance, for dances compose not the world “as it is”, but “as it could be”, and in that sense present “ideal relations”. Yet, they also portray active relations between dancers, musicians, audience and Mayordomos, real politics and human-human networks adding up for a great social effort. In that sense, they present the world “as is”. Manuel, my dancing fellow, has had difficulties in the past with different Mayordomos, as sometimes there are conflicts and rivalries that resonate during those occasions. Manuel summarized his own attitude towards such conflicts:

“We never know when is the last time we will dance you know? We never know if we will be called again [by a Mayordomo] or not. Sometimes they don’t like our dance. Those things [masks, costumes] can be hung up (put away) for too long. Sometimes a dance stops for years, like

Santiagueros. [Why?] They don't want to give us food, maybe because they are poor or maybe because they are cheap. Like "you know who" ...hahaha. I say we then must dance with joy. We dance with respect for anyone, anyone [any Mayordomo], even if they treat us bad, even if they don't respect us bad. They will get punished. I have seen this. Remember Francisco? [...] In the end, is not for us, is all for the town."

*Danzas* present renditions of the world, cuts at a given moment, while also enact powerful moments in a distant past and provide a forecast for the coming season. Each dance composes a holography, that is, a multidimensional image formed by technical artifice (masks, crowns, costumes). Dances are the product of a Masewal technology that aims to show relations and to intervene in them.

*Danzas* create a holographic image of how the world *really* works. The image is however more than just an artificial visualization or an enactment; it is real. The effects of poor or well crafted are evidenced when a good year's harvest occurs or a *tonalejekatl* takes down the maize, when disease befalls on someone or when a hurricane strikes the town. The holography proposed by *danzas* is thus more than artifice; it is a technological endeavor looking to affect the world.

Moreover, *danzas* present a condensation of contrasting ideas (e.g. about the origin of maize, the presence of ancestors, the conduct of spirits, or the local hierarchy) that could not be expressed in any other way with the same efficacy (Wagner 1987). In this case, images are also moral in the sense that they facilitate the idea of 'good' relations. According to the testimonies obtained from dancers, *Tipekajomej* crowns, for example, are scale models of mountains, aiming to create a "complete set" as they precisely show what elements are necessary for the system to exist (earth, trees, water, sunlight, winds, caves, mountains, spirits, etc.) and furthermore, to show how such elements are interrelated. As holographic models, the crowns capture not only an ideal image but also an ideal set of relations.

*Danzas* provide the Masewal people with a space for envisioning what is relevant and what is strange in order to organize and prioritize it, decide on its morality. Such significant difference (conceptually framed as alterity, perplexity or otherwise otherness) can either be locally linked to social changes, acts of remembrance, or just traditional renewal of relations with spirits and landscape in order to plant corn, build a house, or stand together against incoming mining companies. Dances are always spaces for the impending just as they conform speculative actions, 'what ifs'. Not

expecting a synthesis, Masewal dancers maintain an open posture towards life occurrences, and beyond that, they probe into it, as the invisible relations become then revealed and reframed in the boundless folding of the invisible world, which allows them to anticipate, perhaps, enduring reciprocity.

## IX. REFERENCES

- ACOSTA, Eliana, "La relación entre *itonal* con el *chikawalistli* en la constitución del cuerpo entre los Nahuas de Pahuatlán" [In press], Presented in the Seminar on Mesoamerican Ethnography, ENAH, Mexico, 2010.
- AGUIRRE Beltrán, Gonzalo *Regiones de refugio, el desarrollo de la comunidad y el proceso dominical en Mesoamérica*, Serie Antropología Social no. 17, INI, México, 1987.
- ALBORES, Beatriz (et al.), *Graniceros. Cosmovisión y meteorología indígenas de Mesoamérica*. Johanna Broda (Ed.). Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico, 1997.
- ALCORN, Janis, OLFIELD, Maerger, "Conservation of Traditional agroecosystems", *Bioscience*, Vol. 37, No. 6, (March) 1987, pp. 199-208.
- ARAMONI, Ma. Elena, *Talokan tata, talokan nana: nuestras raíces*, Conaculta, México, 1990.
- ARHEM, Kaj. "The cosmic food web." *Human-nature relatedness in the Northwest Amazon. Nature and Society. Anthropological Perspectives*. Descola, P. & Pálsson, P.(eds.), 1996, 185-204.
- BÁEZ, Lourdes, *EL juego de alternancias: la vida y la muerte. Rituales del ciclo vital entre los nahuas de la Sierra de Puebla*, SEP, ENAH, INAH, México, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Nahuas de la Sierra Norte de Puebla*, Pueblos Indígenas del México Contemporáneo, INI, México, 2004.
- BATESON, Gregory. *Mind and nature: A necessary unity*. New York: Dutton, 1979.
- BENNETT, Jane. *Vibrant matter. A Political Ecology of Things* Duke University Press, 2010.
- BERGSON, Henri. *Creative evolution*. University Press of America, 1983 [1907].
- BERNARD, Harvey Russell. *Research methods in anthropology*. Rowman Altamira, 2011.
- BIEHL, Joao. "Ethnography in the way of theory." *Cultural Anthropology* 28, no. 4 (2013): 573-597.
- BLANES, Ruy, and ESPIRITO SANTO, Diana (eds.) *The Social Life of Spirits*. University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- BLOCH, Maurice, GUGGENHEIM, S., "Compadrazgo, Baptism and the Symbolism of a Second Birth," in *Man*, New Series, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Sep., 1981), pp. 376-386.
- BODENHORN, Barbara, 'He Used To Be My Relative': Exploring the Bases of Relatedness among Inupiat of Northern Alaska. In *Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of*



- Kinship*, pp. 128-48. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- BOEGE, Eckart, *El patrimonio biocultural de los pueblos indígenas de México*, INAH / Conaculta / CDI, México, 2008
- BUCHLI Victor, ed. "Introduction" *The material culture reader*. Oxford: Berg, (2002): 1-22
- Bonfil, Guillermo, *México Profundo: reclaiming a civilization*. University of Texas Press, (1996) [1986].
- BONFIGLIOLI, Carlo; JÁUREGUI, Jesús, *Danzas de Conquista I. México contemporáneo*, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes; Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico, 2003.
- BRODA, Johanna, and Félix Báez-Jorge. *Cosmovisión, ritual e identidad de los pueblos indígenas de México*. Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Mexico, 2001.
- CARLOS, Manuel, "Fictive Kinship and Modernization in Mexico: A Comparative Analysis," *Anthropological Quarterly*, George Washington University Institute for Ethnographic Research, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Apr., 1973), pp. 75-91.
- CARSTEN, Janet, "The substance of kinship and the heat of the heart: feeding, personhood, and relatedness among the Malays of Pulau Langkawi" in *American Ethnologist*, Vol 22, No. 2, (May 1995) 223-241.
- CASO, Alfonso, *El Pueblo del Sol*, Siglo XXI Editores, Mexico, (1990) [1953].
- CHAMOUX, Marie-Noëlle, "La notion nahua d'individu: un aspect du *tonalli* dans la région de Huauchinango, Puebla", en Dominique Michelet (coord.), *Enquêtes sur l'Amérique moyenne. Mélanges offerts à Guy Stresser-Péan*, inah-conaculta/ cemca, México, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "Persona, animacidad, fuerza", en Perig Pitrou; María del Carmen Valverde Valdés; Johannes Neurath (coords.), *La noción de vida en Mesoamérica*, Centro de Estudios Mayas-Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas-unam/ cemca (col. Ediciones especiales, no. 65), México, 2008.
- COLSON, Elizabeth "Rain-shrines of the plateau Tonga of Northern Rhodesia" in *The Anthropology of Climate Change: An Historical Reader*. John Wiley & Sons, 2013, Pp. 191-200.
- CORSÍN, Jiménez, Alberto, and WILLERSLEV, Rane, 'An anthropological concept of the concept': reversibility among the Siberian Yukaghirs." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13, no. 3, 2007, 527-544.
- CORSÍN, Jiménez, Alberto, "INTRODUCTION. The prototype: more than many and less than one." In *Journal of Cultural Economy*, Routledge, London, 2014.
- COUPAYE, Ludovic. "Ways of Enchanting Chaînes Opératoires and Yam Cultivation in Nyamikum Village, Maprik, Papua New Guinea." *Journal of Material Culture* 14, no. 4, 2009, 433-458.

- COY, Peter, "An elementary Structure of Ritual Kinship: a Case of Prescription in the Compadrazgo" in *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, New Series, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Sep., 1974), pp. 470-479.
- CRATE, Susan A., and NUTTALL, Mark, "Introduction: anthropology and climate change." *Anthropology and Climate Change: From Encounters to Actions* (2009): 9-36.
- DAMON, Frederick H., "On the ideas of a boat: from forest patches to cybernetic structures in the outrigger sailing craft of the eastern kula ring, Papua New Guinea." *Beyond the Horizon: essays on myth, history, travel, and society*, Clifford S., Kartineen, T. (eds.) Studia Fennica Antropologica No. 2, Finish Literature Society, Helsinki, 2008, Pp.123-44.
- DESCOLA, Philippe, and Gísli Pálsson. "Introduction" in *Nature and society: anthropological perspectives*. Taylor & Francis (1996): 1-22.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Ecology of Others*. Prickly Paradigm Press, 2013a.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Beyond nature and culture*. University of Chicago Press, 2013b.
- DEHOUE, Daniele, *La ofrenda sacrificial entre los Tlapanecos de Guerrero Plaza y Valdes Editores*, Mexico, D.F., 2007.
- DOVE, Michael R. "Introduction: The Anthropology of Climate Change. Six Millennia of Study of the Relationship between Climate and Society" in *The Anthropology of Climate Change: An Historical Reader*. John Wiley & Sons, 2013.
- DIRKS, Nicholas B. "Ritual and resistance: Subversion as a social fact." In *Culture/power/history: a reader in contemporary social theory* (1994): 483-503.
- DUMONT, Louis, "Introduction" of *An Introduction to Two Theories Of Social Anthropology: Descent Groups and Marriage Alliance*. Berghahn Books, New York-Oxford, 2006 [1971]
- DURKHEIM, Emile. *The elementary forms of the religious life*. Library of Alexandria, 2000.
- FERGUSON, James. "The anti-politics machine." *the anthropology of the state: a reader* (2006): 270-286.
- FOSTER, George, "Cofradía and Copadrazgo in Spain and Spanish America" University of New Mexico, *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring, 1953), pp. 1-28.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Culture and Conquest. America's Spanish heritage*, Quadrangle books, Chicago, 1960.
- GALINIER, Jaques, *Pueblos de la Sierra Madre, etnografía de la comunidad Otomí*, Clásicos de la Antropología, Instituto Nacional Indigenista, CEMCA, México, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The world below: body and cosmos in Otomí Indian ritual*. University of Colorado Press, 2004.
- GAMIO, Manuel, *La población del Valle de Teotihuacan*, Instituto Nacional indigenista, México, (1979) [1921].

- GELL, Alfred, "The technology of enchantment and the enchantment of technology." *Anthropology, art, and aesthetics*, 1992: 40-63.
- GILLESPIE, Susan D., "Rethinking Ancient Maya Social Organization: Replacing "Lineage" with "House" in *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 102, No. 3 (Sep., 2000) 467-484.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Maya 'Nested Houses'. The ritual construction of place" in *Beyond Kinship: Social and Material Reproduction in House Society*. University of Pennsylvania Press, (2000) 135-160.
- GRAHAM, Huggan, "(Post)Colonialism, Anthropology, and the Magic of Mimesis", in *Cultural Critique*, No. 38 (Winter, 1997-1998), pp. 91-106
- GUDEMAN, Stephen, "The Compadrazgo as a Reflection of the Natural and Spiritual Person", *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, No.1971 (1971), pp. 45-71.
- GUPTA, Akhil, and James FERGUSON. "Beyond "culture": Space, identity, and the politics of difference." *Cultural anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1992): 6-23.
- HARAWAY, Donna J., *The Haraway Reader*, Routledge, London, 2003
- \_\_\_\_\_. *When species meet*. No. 224. University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- HOLBRAAD, Martin. *Truth in motion: the recursive anthropology of Cuban divination*. University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- HORTSMAN, Connie, KURTZ, Donald, V., "Compadrazgo and adaptation in sixteenth century central Mexico", in *Journal of Anthropological Research*, Vol. 35, Issue 3, University of New Mexico, 1979, Pp. 361-372.
- HOUSEMAN, Michael, SEVERI, Carlo, *Naven, Or, The Other Self: A Relational Approach to Ritual Action*. Vol. 79. Brill, 1998.
- HUMPHREY, Caroline, "Chiefly and shamanist landscapes in Mongolia", BLANES, Ruy; SANTO, Diana Espirito (ed.). *The social life of spirits*. University of Chicago Press, 2013, Pp. 135-162.
- INGOLD, Tim. *The perception of the environment: essays in livelihood, dwelling and skill*. Psychology Press, 2000.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Being alive: Essays on movement, knowledge and description*. Taylor & Francis, 2011.
- Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas (INALI), *Catálogo de las lenguas Indígenas Nacionales. Variantes lingüísticas de México con sus autodenominaciones y referencias geoestadísticas*, Secretaría de Educación Pública, Gobierno Federal, México, 2009.
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), *XIII Censo Nacional de Población 2012*.
- ISHII, Miho *Playing with perspectives: spirit possession, mimesis, and permeability in the buuta ritual in South*

- India." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, no. 19 (2013): 795-812.
- ISAAC, Barry L., "The Mesoamerican context of ritual kinship" in *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain*, Vol. 17, Issue 3, 1982, Pp. 555-558.
- JACKA, Jerry. "Global averages, local extremes: the subtleties and complexities of climate change in Papua New Guinea." *Anthropology and climate change: from encounters to actions* (2009): 197-208.
- JAKOBSON, Roman, Linda R. Waugh, and Monique Monville-Burston. *On language*. Harvard Univ Pr, 1990.
- KELLOG, Susan, "'Aztec inheritance in sixteenth-century Mexico City: Colonial patterns, perhispanic influences" in *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 33, No. 3, (Summer), 1986, Pp. 313-330.
- KEMPER, Robert V., "The Compadrazgo in Urban Mexico", *Anthropological Quarterly* Vol. 55, No. 1 (January 1982), pp. 17-30.
- KIRCH, Patrick V. Temples as 'holy houses': The transformation of ritual architecture in traditional Polynesian societies. *Beyond kinship: social and material reproduction in house societies*, 2000, p. 103-114.
- KIRCHHOFF, Paul, "Mesoamérica. Sus límites geográficos, composición étnica y caracteres culturales", in *Tlatoani*, Suplement, Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico, (1960) [1943].
- KIRSCH, Stuart. *Reverse anthropology: indigenous analysis of social and environmental relations in New Guinea*. Stanford University Press, 2006.
- KNAB, Timothy J., and T. J. Knab. *A war of witches: a journey into the underworld of the contemporary Aztecs*. Harper, San Francisco, 1995.
- KOHN, Eduardo. "How dogs dream: Amazonian natures and the politics of transspecies engagement." *American ethnologist* 34, no. 1 (2007): 3-24.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *How Forests Think: toward Anthropology Beyond the Human*. University of California Press, 2013.
- KROEBER, Alfred, *Cultural and natural areas of native North America*, University of California Press, Berkeley, electronic version, (1939).
- LANSING, Stephen. *Perfect order: Recognizing complexity in Bali*. Princeton University Press, 2006.
- LATOUR, Bruno. *Politics of nature*. Harvard University Press, 2004.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Reassembling the Social-An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford University Press, 2005. .
- LEACH, Edmund, *Political Systems of Highland Burma. A study of Kachin social structure*, London School of Economics, Monographs on Social Anthropology, London, 1977 [1964].

- LEMONNIER, Pierre. *Mundane Objects: Materiality and Non-verbal Communication*. Vol. 10. Left Coast Press, 2012.
- LEÓN-PORTILLA, Miguel, *La filosofía náhuatl, estudiada en sus fuentes*. Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, UNAM, 1997 [1959].
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Aztec thought and culture: a study of the ancient Nahuatl mind*. Oklahoma University Press, (1990).
- LÉVI-STRAUSS, Claude, *The elementary structures of kinship*, Eyre & Spottiswode, London, 1969 [1949].
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The savage mind*. University of Chicago Press, [1966].
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Structural anthropology*. Basic Books, 2008 [1974].
- LOK, Rossana, "The house as a microcosm", en *The Leiden tradition in structural anthropology*, DE RIDDER, R. (Ed.), E.J. Brill, 1987. Pp. 211-233
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Gifts to the dead and the living. Forms of exchange in San Miguel Tzinacapan Sierra Norte de Puebla, México*, Leiden University, Leiden, 1991.
- LOPEZ Austin, Alfredo, *Cuerpo humano e ideología. Las concepciones de los antiguos nahuas*, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico, 1980.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Tamoanchan y Tlalocan*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico, 1994.
- LUPO, Alessandro, *La tierra nos escucha. La cosmogonía de los nahuas a través de sus súplicas rituales*, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, INI, México, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "La cosmovisión de los nahuas de la sierra de Puebla", en *Cosmovisión, ritual e identidad de los pueblos indígenas de México*, Broda y Báez-Jorge (Coord.), Conaculta / FCE, México, 2001.
- MARTÍNEZ, Roberto, *El nahualismo*, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, México, (2011).
- MAUSS, Marcel, *Techniques, technology and civilization*. Edited by Nathan Schlanger. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006.
- MILLÁN, Saúl, "La comida y la vida ceremonial entre los nahuas de la Sierra Norte de Puebla, *Diario de Campo* No. 1, Nueva Epoca, INAH, México, 2010.
- MINTZ, Sidney y WOLF, Eric, "An analysis of ritual co-parenthood" in *Man makes sense. A reader in modern cultural anthropology*, Hammel y Simmons (Coord.), Little, Brown and Company, Berkeley University, 1970 [1950].
- McCAA, Robert, "Matrimonio infantil, cemithualtin (familias complejas) y el antiguo pueblo nahua", University of Minnesota, [www.historiamexicana.colmex.mx](http://www.historiamexicana.colmex.mx)
- NEURATH, Johannes, "Máscaras enmascaradas. Indígenas, mestizos y dioses indígenas mestizos" in *Relaciones* 101, Winter 2005,

- Vol. XXVI, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, 2005.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *La vida de las imágenes. Arte huichiol*. Conaculta, artes de México. México, 2013.
- NUTINI, Hugo, "Syncretism and acculturation: the historical development of the cult of the Patron Saint in Tlaxcala, Mexico (1519-1670)", University of Pittsburg Press, 1976.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *San Bernardino Contla: Marriage and family structure in a tlaxcalan municipio*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, 1968.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Introduction: the nature and treatment of kinship in Mesoamerica", in *Essays on Mexican kinship* Nutini, Carrasco (Coord.) University of Pittsburg Press, 1976, pp. 3-27.
- NUTINI, Hugo / BELL, Bety, *Parentesco ritual. Estructura y evolución histórica del sistema de compadrazgo en la Tlaxcala rural*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 1989.
- PALEČEK, Martin, and RISJORD, Mark. "Relativism and the Ontological Turn within Anthropology." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 43, no. 1, 2013, 3-23.
- PÉREZ, Ivan, "Chamanismo y existentes, la relación entre humanos y no-humanos entre los Nahuas de Cuacuila, Huauchinango, Puebla" in *Nuevas perspectivas sobre el chamanismo, el curanderismo y la brujería*, Benemérita Autónoma Universidad de Puebla, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Puebla, 2011.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Incorporación, artefactos e interfase: el dispositivo chamánico Nahua" online text: <http://es.scribd.com/doc/106408470/Incorporacion-artefactos-e-interfase-el-dispositivo-chamanico-nahua>, 2012.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *El inframundo nahua a través de su narrativa*, Etnografía de los Pueblos Indígenas de México, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2014.
- PIERCE, Charles S. "The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings. 2 vols. Nathan Houser, Christian Kloesel, Peirce Edition Project, eds." (1992).
- PURY-TOUMI, Sybille de, *De palabras y maravillas*, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Colección Regiones, México, 1997.
- QUESTA, Alessandro, *Cambio de vista, cambio de rostro. Relaciones entre humanos y no-humanos a través del ritual entre los nahuas de Tepetzintla, Puebla*. Tesis de Maestría en Antropología Social, Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2010.
- RAPPAPORT, Roy A. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Vol. 110. Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- RÍOS Bruma, *Danza y vida. Una etnografía de las danzas devocionales en*

- San Miguel Tzinacapan*, BA Thesis in Ethnology, Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico, 2010.
- REDFIELD, Robert, *The folk culture of Yucatan*, Cicago University Press, 1941.
- RIVIÈRE, P.G., "La couvade: a problem reborn" in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 9, No. 3, (September 1974), pp. 423-435.
- ROBICHAUX, David, "Un modelo de familia para el "México profundo", in *Espacios familiares: ámbitos de sobrevivencia y solidaridad*, DIF, Mexico, 1997, pp.187-213.
- ROJAS, González, Fernando "La institución del compadrazgo entre los Indios de México" *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2<sup>nd</sup> Qtr., 1943), pp. 201-213.
- ROMERO, Laura, *Cosmovisión, cuerpo y enfermedad. El espanto entre los nahuas de Tlacotepec de Díaz, Puebla*, Obra diversa, INAH, México, 2007.
- "Saber ver, saber sonar: el proceso de inicación de los *ixtlamatkeh* de Tlacotepec de Díaz", in *Iniciaciones, trances, sueños... investigaciones sobre el chamanismo en México*, Plaza y Valdéz Editores, México, 2010, pp. 123-148.
- ROSEMARY Joyce, A., GILLESPIE, Susan D. (eds.) "Beyond kinship: an introduction" in *Beyond Kinship: Social and Material Reproduction in House Society*. University of Pennsylvania Press, (2000) 1-21.
- SAHAGÚN, Bernardino de, *Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva España* Porrúa Editores, México, (1999) [1580].
- SAHLINS, Marshall. *Islands of History*. University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- SANDSTROM, Alan, *Corn Is Our Blood: Culture and Ethnic Identity in a Contemporary, Aztec Indian Village*, The Civilization of American Indian Series, Vol. 206, Oklahoma University Press, 1992.
- SCHNEGG, Michael, "Blurred Edges, Open Boundaries: The Long-Term Development of a Peasant Community in Rural Mexico," *Journal of Anthropological Research*, University of New Mexico, Vol. 63, No. 1 (Spring, 2007), pp. 5-31.
- SCHNEIDER, David, *American Kinship: a Cultural Account*, The University of Chicago Press, 1980 [1968].
- SCOTT, Michael W. "The anthropology of ontology (religious science?)." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no. 4, 2013, 859-872.
- SEMARNAT, Consejo Nacional de Población, *Índice de Desarrollo Humano 2000*, 1a edición Consejo Nacional de Población (Conapo), México, 2001.
- SHARMA, Aradhana, and GUPTA, Akhil, (eds.) "Introduction" in *The anthropology of the state: a reader*. John Wiley & Sons, 2006.

- SHIPTON, Parker, "*Parentesco ficticio*" [fictive kinship] in *Diccionario de Antropología*, BARFIELD, Thomas (Ed.), Siglo XXI Editores, México, 2000. Pp. 397-398.
- SIGNORINI, Italo / LUPO, Alessandro *Los tres ejes de la vida*, Universidad Veracruzana, Xalapa, 1989a.
- SIGNORINI, Italo / LUPO, Alessandro, "Las fuerzas anímicas en el pensamiento nahua", *México Indígena*, INI, México, Pp.13-21, 1989b.
- SPENCER, Paul, ed. *Society and the dance: the social anthropology of process and performance*. Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- STEWART, Julian H., *Theory of culture change*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1955.
- STRATHERN, Marilyn, *Reproducing the Future: Anthropology, Kinship, and the New Reproductive Technologies* ("Parts and wholes: Refiguring Relationships," pp. 90-116). London: Routledge, 1992.
- STRESSER-PÉAN, Guy, *The Sun god and the Savior. The Christianization of the Nahua and Totonac in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, México*, University Press of Colorado, Boulder, 2009.
- TAGGART, James, *Nahuat myth and social structure*. University of Texas Press, 1997.
- TAUSSIG, Michael T. *The devil and commodity fetishism in South America*. University of North Carolina Press, 2010 [1980].
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Mimesis and alterity: A particular history of the senses*. Psychology Press, 1993.
- TODOROV, Tzvetan, *The Conquest of America: the Question of the Other*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1999 [1984].
- THOMPSON, Richard A., "Structural Statistics and Structural Mechanics: The Analysis of Compadrazgo," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Winter, 1971), pp. 381-403.
- TURNER, Victor Witter. *Dramas, fields, and metaphors: Symbolic action in human society*. Cornell University Press, 1975.
- URTON, Gary. *At the crossroads of the earth and the sky: an Andean cosmology*. University of Texas Press, 2013 [1981].
- VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, Eduardo, *From the enemy's point of view: humanity and divinity in an Amazonian society*. University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Cosmological deixis and Amerindian perspectivism." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 1998: 469-488.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The crystal forest: notes on the ontology of Amazonian spirits." *Inner Asia* 9, no. 2, 2007: 153-172.
- WAGNER, Roy, *The Curse of Souw*. ("Conclusion," pp. 222-240). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1967.



- \_\_\_\_\_. "Analogic Kinship: A Daribi Example," *American Ethnologist* 4(4), 623-42, 1972.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The invention of culture*. University of Chicago Press, 1981.
- WEIGEL, Sigrid. *Body-and image-space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin*. Routledge, 1996.
- WILLERSLEV, Rane "Not animal, not not-animal: hunting, imitation and empathetic knowledge among Siberian Yukaghirs." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 10, no. 3 (2004): 629-652.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Soul hunters: hunting, animism, and personhood among the Siberian Yukaghirs*. Univ of California Press, 2007.
- WOLF, Erik, "Closed corporate peasant communities in Mesoamerica and Central Java." *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* Vol., 13, 1957, pp. 1-18.