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Otomi Communities of Northern Puebla, Mexico**

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**Sacred Landscape and Settlement Patterns in Nahua and Otomi Communities of Northern Puebla, Mexico**

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**Abstract**

This study analyzes the relationship between the human being and the landscape within the concept of cultural landscape in the Nahua and Otomi indigenous communities in the north of state of Puebla in Mexico. This research was based on comparative ethnography in several communities where the landscape has a sacred connotation and is reflected in the material culture of the towns through the urban layout of some indigenous settlements. These characteristics have their origin in Mesoamerica since prehispanic times, and reflect the cosmovision of the Nahuas and Otomies, contributing to the knowledge of humanity and how the community takes part in the processes of the universe through the sacredness of the environment.

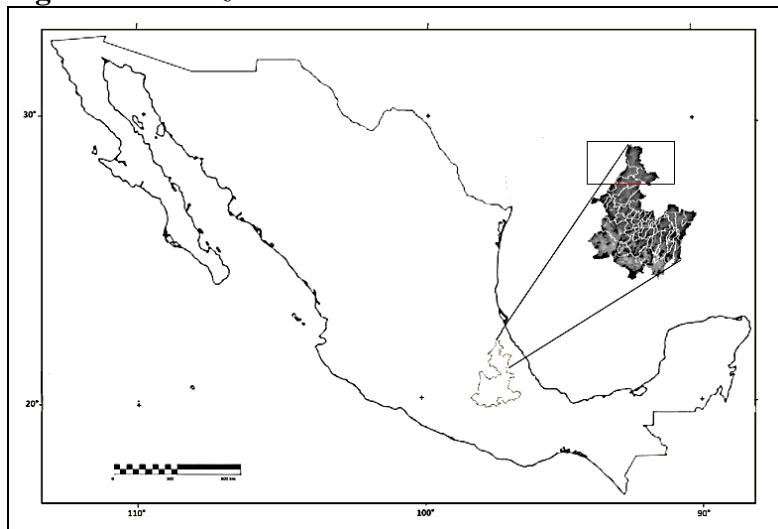
**Keywords:** Sacred landscape, Mesoamerica, settlement patterns, Otomi, Nahua.

## Introduction

There is a deep tradition in the indigenous communities of Mexico visible in everyday life, customs and traditions, and even in the location of their settlements, in which the geography and the sacred landscape are the main axis. That is, some landscape elements such as mountains, springs, caves, rivers, among others, are part of the daily activities of the villages, such as the celebrations of the start of the agricultural calendar. Although during the sixteenth century, in the years after the conquest of Mexico, most of the ritual practices associated with the landscape were suppressed by the friars during the process of evangelization, this was not enough and at present several community rituals related with the landscape still prevail, which due to their characteristics and continuity with the traditional ways of life can be considered as cultural landscapes (Rössler 2002).

Example of the above we find it in the region known as Sierra Norte de Puebla, in the highlands of Mexico (Fig. 1). In a geographical environment composed of intricate canyons, plentiful rivers, with abundant rainfall and vegetation, inhabit several indigenous groups as Nahuas, Otomies, Tepehuas, Totonacos, interacting with mestizos.

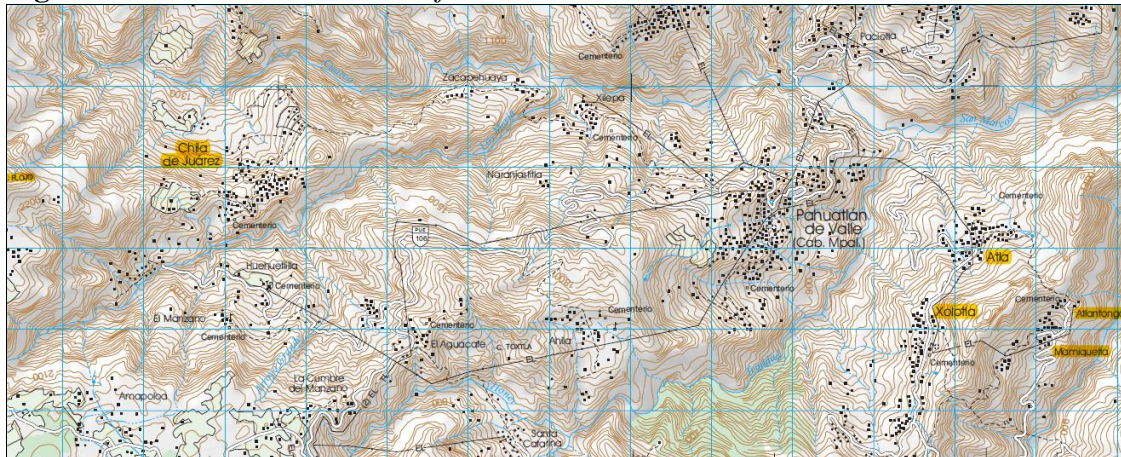
**Figure 1.** *Localization at the Researched Area*



## Objectives

This paper originated from a research whose objective was to know the relationships between contemporary indigenous settlements with geography, to which these groups have given a sacred connotation, and how the landscape around them continues to be part of their worldview and his daily life. Within this cultural landscape we can also observe the presence of prehispanic settlements, which form a well-defined localization pattern by associating with the sacred landscape and contemporary communities. For this investigation it was decided to delimit a geographical area in the western end of the Sierra Norte de Puebla, between the current municipalities of Honey and Pahuatlan (Fig. 2), because in this region the Nahuas and Otomies cultural groups interact, presenting numerous cultural loans (Diez Barroso 2018, 2016).

**Figure 2.** *Detailed Localization of the Researched Area and the Localities Mentioned in the Text*



Source: INEGI 2001. Modified by Diez Barroso 2019

## The Landscape as a Symbolic Cultural Element

The human settlements scattered in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, since ancient times, were drawn taking some elements of the landscape as the main axis of their urbanism, like the mountains, springs, rivers or caves (Diez Barroso 2018), these elements of geography are integrated into the cultural aspects of the communities, who have given them a sacred character, forming symbolic elements that not only justify the existence of humanity around the *kosmos*, but also humanity has the responsibility to cooperate with it, taking the landscape as an intermediary between the human and the sacred (Pérez Diego R., captain Otomi of the Chila flyer dance, personal communication).

The above is conceptualized in the characterization of the territory according to the theoretical methodological aspects of cultural landscape studies, which consider the territory as that region or specific surface of land, in the micro or macro, which in addition to including natural physical characteristics, it also constitutes a socialized and cultured space where the relationships of human societies take place (Proudfoot 1981; Ruiz y Burillo 1988). The previous concept also implies the economic factor, since interculturality in the study region is highly influenced by commercial relationships, constituting in some cases certain cultural loans between Nahuatl and Otomi ethnic groups, as we can currently observe in the iconography of the embroidered designs in some textiles. Because of the above, ethnography will give us the guidelines to understand the symbolic processes of the landscape in relation to culture, without ignoring that throughout history these symbolic processes could be seen in different ways (Caro Baroja 1982).

To illustrate the above, we selected two specific case studies, the first one is in the Otomi community of Chila de Juárez, in the municipality of Honey, the second case contemplates the Nahuatl communities of Xolotla and Atla, in the municipality of Pahuatlán. The selection criteria is that both communities are very close to each other, they are part of the western end of the Sierra Norte de Puebla region, and although they interact culturally and economically, the Otomi and Nahuatl communities preserve their particular uses and customs and their own language. However there is an element in common between both cultural groups, it is their current settlement pattern, which has as its main axis the presence of a sacred mountain which marks the

starting point of its agricultural and ritual activities, so it is ideal to perform a comparative analysis between both cultural groups in order to find concordances between their forms of cosmogonic, symbolic and ritual thought, and this can bring us closer to understanding the ancient Mesoamerican thought as well.

### **The Comparative Analysis as Methodology for the Settlement Pattern Studies**

As already mentioned, one of the communities we selected to carry out this comparative analysis belongs to the mountain Otomies of the Chila de Juarez region. Based on what is observed in the urban distribution of the locality, we deduce that it was planned starting from a cosmological conception of indigenous tradition in which the sacred mountain stands out as the predominant element (Fig. 3).

**Figure 3.** *View of the Sacred Mountain from the Locality of Chila*



When observing the urban plan of the locality of Chila de Juarez from the center, the civic square with the mast of the flying ritual and the greasy pole stands out,<sup>1</sup> two essentials elements for the community (Fig. 4), because both play a key role in the festivities of the beginning of the agricultural cycle and the main festivity of the town. If from this geographical point we draw a straight line towards the west we will observe in the foreground a prominent mountain know in the town as “Cerro Flojo” considered sacred mountain and where the community ascends during the afternoon of May 2 to spend the night at its top and then receive the dawn of May 3, date established by the Spaniards as day of the holy cross, but that in ancient Mesoamerican thought coincided with the beginning of the feast of one of its main gods called Tezcatlipoca, good of the time and the human destiny.

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<sup>1</sup> The mast of the flying ritual is part of a ceremony that took place from prehispanic times, that was classified as a dance, which helped it survive the post-conquest evangelization. This ritual was carried out with four to six participants, who were tied from the top of a mast and descended in a circular manner imitating the flight of the eagles. The purpose of this ritual was to celebrate the beginning of the agricultural calendar, which began among the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica during the month of February. In the same way they raised a big stick, and at their top they placed an idol, the young people try to take the idol, but the stick was smeared with grease. He who managed to take the idol was very celebrated.

**Figure 4.** *Ritual Dance of the Flying among Otomies of Chila*



Returning to the urban pattern and starting again from the civic square but now towards the east, there is an old Otomi chapel of lineage, in whose entrance there are two sculptures of prehispanic manufacture, consisting of a phallic stela and a probable model of the landscape (Fig. 5). Finally, from the center of the square to the north, a hill is located, at the top of which is an archaeological site that older residents refer to as the first temple built by the grandparents. Currently there is no ceremony in place, but the community considers it an important reference, which has allowed it to be preserved.

**Figure 5.** *Ritual Process in Carved Stones before the Dance of the Flyers*

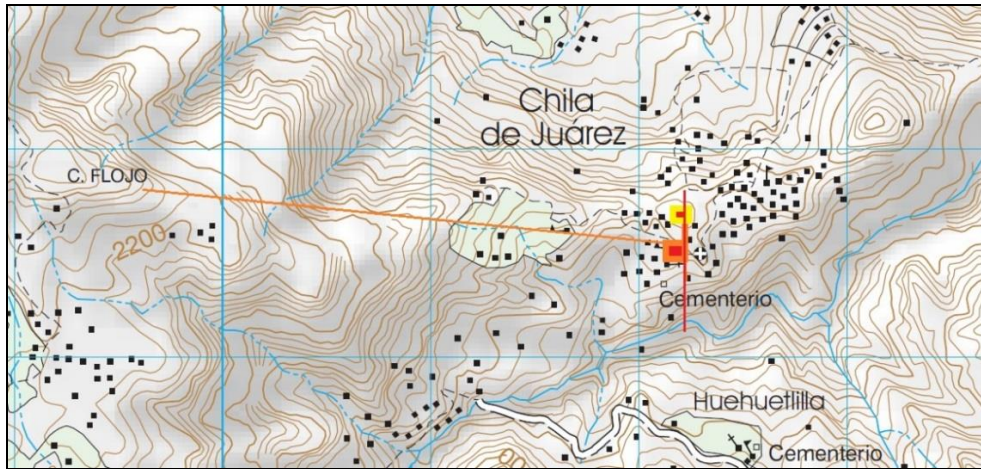


In the immediate southern limit to the central square a canyon is located, what constituted a defensive element in antiquity, which indicates that this settlement in the pre-Hispanic era may have been a garrison fortified by the landscape. Therefore we can detect several elements that make up the cultural landscape of the Otomi population of Chila, the civic square represents the center from which they depart towards the four cardinal points and in each of them an element stands out an element either cultural or natural but endowed with sacredness (Fig. 6).

Something similar, but with other parameters, is observed a scarce 30 kilometers northeast of Chila, in the municipality of Pahuatlan, in the Nahua localities of Atla, Xolotla, Mamiquetla y Atlaltongo. In these communities the settlements took as their main axis the mountain known

locally with the Nahuatl name of Tlazcaltepetl, that mean “lazy mountain” (Montoya 2008, Diez Barroso 2018), the same name as the sacred mountain of Chila. Although the hill of the Nahuas currently has no symbolic charge for most of the communities, there is evidence of incipient rituals performed by shamans of the region, and in one of the walls of the hill you can see the presence of cave paintings representing circles, hands and suns, among others (Fig. 7).

**Figure 6.** *Urban Trace of the Otomi Community of Chila, the Relationship with the Sacred Mountain is Observed as the Main Axis*

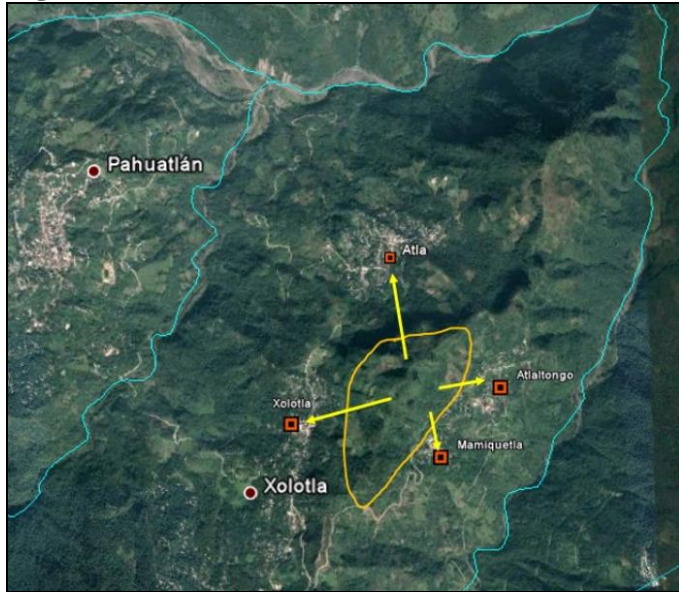


**Figure 7.** *The “Painting Mountain” in the Nahua Community of Atla*



In this case the mountain constitutes the center of which, starting from the four cardinal points, the Atla community settled to the north, Xolotla to the west, Mamiquetla to the south and Atlaltongo to the east (Fig. 8). We begin by describing the Tlazcaltepetl mountain, at the top is an extensive archaeological site consisting of ancient streets and pyramidal structures of more than three meters in height (Fig. 9), with the mountain as the central point, towards the north another archeological site is located, and following a straight line in that same direction we will arrive at the current civic square and mast of the flyer ritual of the community of Atla.

**Figure 8.** *Settlement Pattern in the Communities around the Tlazcaltepec Mountain*



Source: Google Earth, Modified by Diez Barroso 2019

**Figure 9.** *Archaeological Site on the top of the Tlazcaltepec Mountain*



Now, starting from the west side of the hill, we find in that same direction another archaeological site and on the same trace, a few meters in a straight line, the community of Xolotla, the west side of hill is also used by the shamans to perform healings and offerings for the welfare of the crops, but unlike the community of Atla, a large part of the community meets and ascends the hill on March 12 to make an offering to the corn, at the top of the hill called Teoizcuintle next to the main mountain of Tlazcaltepec, where ancient dances are practiced (Fig. 10). Towards the southeast of the hill is the community of Mamiquetla, whose surroundings are also frequented by the shamans. Finally we have the community of Atlaltongo, located towards the east, in these last two communities we have not yet done exhaustive fieldwork to locate the existence of archaeological remains following the pattern described above.

**Figure 10.** *Sacred Mountain of Tlazcaltepetl near to the Xolotla Community*



## Conclusions

The comparative analysis of the settlement pattern of the current Otomi and Nahuas communities discussed above allows us to observe two models of well-defined urban pattern in which the elements of the landscape are the basis for the trace of the settlements, prehispanic and contemporary. Both models present in their composition the mountain as the main factor of the visual of the environment. In the same way, although already hidden in the collective imagination, we have the presence of the prehispanic settlement oriented towards one of the sides of the main square, in a straight line with the mountain, as a possible extension of it.

This urban composition has its origins since ancient times, documented at least for the late Postclassic horizon, between the years 1200 to 1521 AD (Diez Barroso 2016). The elements of the cultural landscape that intervene in the characteristics of these communities are based on the indigenous world view, in which the presence of the mountain as a sacred element for the community constitutes the axis of the agricultural cycle materialized in the components of the urbanism of indigenous tradition, over which the other elements of the intangible heritage develop, such as rituals, dances, music, among others.

Some researches had already mentioned the importance of the central square for the Otomi people, since it represents the community itself as a reduced version of the universe, its “the center of the world”, a place where the cardinal points converge and where the public square represents the ideal point of fusion of the human groups in the sacred experiences and on the other hand the presence of the mountain as the vertical axis of the world (Galinier 2018: 453-460). And it is in the specific case of Chila where the location of the sacred mountain, the vertical axis of the ritual world of the community is strategically located to the west, which, to say the ethnography of several Otomi groups, is the direction where the sun is submerged (*Idem*). In this composition of the thought of the cosmos, the sun submerges in the sacred mountain the vertical axis of the world, or axis mundi.

Unlike the sacred mountain of Chila, the hill that is the central point of the trace of the Nahuatl settlements of Xolotla and Atla, nowadays it does not represent a sacred reference for

the neighboring communities, only the shamans continue to refer to it as an element of intercommunication between them and the superhuman entities. Although the presence of archaeological elements such as paintings and prehispanic architectural remains, allow us to infer that the Tlazcaltepetl hill constituted in antiquity part of a cultural landscape, it was in the same way an axis mundi from which the trace originated for the settlements that were located at its fourth courses. Although this hill does not properly keep a sacred character, we must remember that the mountain cult among the Nahuatl groups has been recorded in other regions of the Sierra Norte de Puebla (Streaser Pean 2011: 135-141), as for example the pilgrimage that takes place annually in the Postectli mountain (Fig. 11), in the municipality of Chicontepec, Veracruz, in this site, according to the ethnographic works carried out, the Nahuas consider that the top of the hill is the place where the spirits of lightning and rain inhabit, and also at the top is the house of the sun (Sandstrom 2005: 7).

**Figure 11.** *View of the Postectli Mountain from the Municipality of Ixhuatlán de Madero, Veracruz*



Another element of great complexity observed in the cultural landscape of the Nahuas of Atla and Xolotla is the “quincunx”, where the center of it is the mountain. This configuration of the urban and ceremonial space with respect to the natural landscape indicates an intentionality of these groups for the constitution of their civic, housing and religious environment based on the precepts of their ancestral worldview. We can conclude that the sacred connotation given to the hill and water in some Nahuas and Otomies communities makes them represent a microcosm within which society is immersed in its totality and contributes to the future of the sacred cycle of the universe, sacralising the landscape itself.

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