# Mountains in the Worldview of the Nahuas of Central Mexico

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**Abstract**

Mountains as reservoirs of water have always been an immanent and crucial part of the Mesoamerican ritual landscape. Considered living beings, mountains are an important component of the core part of the Native worldview, which is particularly observable in Central Mexico, a region dominated by the highest peaks in Mesoamerica. Long before the Spanish conquest, the Nahua people who live in the area adopted and developed the ancient Mesoamerican tradition of sacred mountains, ritual landscapes and the agrarian cycle and have preserved it to this day, despite the efforts of Spanish missionaries after the conquest. This paper deals with the position of mountains within the framework of Nahua ritualism, as it has been preserved in Nahua communities in Central Mexico. The aim is to point out their central role as the structural axis of the Nahua worldview, as places where rituals associated with rainmaking, fertility and the agrarian cycle are performed.

**Key words**

Mesoamerica, Nahuas, sacred mountains, ritual landscape, worldview

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Mesoamerica is a cultural area with environments that are far from homogeneous. This is partly a result of its position in the tropics and particularly the prominence of the mountainous terrain over most of its territory. It is a vertical world where elevation determines the natural conditions and where a wide variety of vegetation and climatic zones are to be found. Elevation also determines precipitation, because for most of the year high mountains prevent the rains from the coast from reaching inland. This is especially visible in Central Mexico, where the high valleys are isolated from the coast by mountain ranges and depend on a regular alternation of dry and rainy seasons. As mountains dominate the landscape in this area, they have become important not only in the everyday lives of the Native inhabitants but also in their conceptualization of space. As these people have traditionally been farmers who depend on the rains, the mountains are perceived as reservoirs of water and have become a central component of their worldview.

The Nahuas, the predominant Native ethnic group of Central Mexico, view the surrounding landscape with reverence. At the same time, their rituals are connected with the environments they have occupied. Mountains caves, lakes, waterfalls, and springs were incorporated into the ritual landscape (as will be explained below) as they have had a fundamental influence on the prosperity of Nahua farmers. In this way mountains have become a principal part of their worldview, as objects worthy of worship.

As the representatives and heirs of ancient Mesoamerica, the Nahuas established themselves in Central Mexico in the Classic period, when they formed part of the multiethnic and multilingual population of city of Teotihuacan (León-Portilla 2011a: 25). History and archaeology have not found any explicit evidence regarding the dominant ethnic group in Teotihuacan or its language, but some point to the similarities between glyphs of Teotihuacan and those of the Aztecs[1] in the Postclassic era indicating the same language – Nahuatl (Whittaker 2021: 174–193). Linguistics is helpful in determining the presence of Nahuatl and its speakers in the Classic period in Central Mexico. According to linguists it is very probable that there were groups in Teotihuacan who spoke a dialect of Nahuatl which lacked the phoneme *tl* (Hernández de León-Portilla – León-Portilla 2002: VII). Glottochronology also reveals that Proto-Nahuatl language was spoken in Central Mexico in the Classic period (Wright Carr 2007: 17, 22–24). Martha J. Macri and Mathew G. Looper (2003: 285–297) believe that there were early Nahuatl words in Maya inscriptions in the seventh

1 I use the term Aztec instead of Mexica (used, for example, by Mexican authors) because the term is more common in Europe, including the Czech and Slovak Republics.

century, from which it could be concluded that Nahuatl speakers were in Central Mexico before AD 500.[2]

In the Postclassic period the Nahuas definitely became the predominant ethnic and linguistic group in Central Mexico. On the basis of ancient Mesoamerican tradition they developed their own distinctive culture and religion, and as a result of their migrations and expansions Nahuatl became the lingua franca of Mesoamerica (Hernández de León-Portilla – León-Portilla 2002: VIII). It was the Nahuas who became the adversaries and later partners of the Spaniards, which led to the extensive documentation of their culture in chronicles and codices in the early colonial era. These historical sources, together with archaeological findings, enable scholars to reconstruct the religious life of the Nahuas in pre-Hispanic times. Colonial documents and modern ethnographic research help scholars understand the mosaic of the Nahua religion and enable them to capture the transformations that the Nahua religion underwent.

## Methodology

The paper is based primarily on my fieldwork in the Nahua communities in the states of Morelos and Puebla. I compare the contemporary situation with the past in order to highlight the long-lasting and continuous existence of Nahua spirituality in relation to the ritual landscape, agrarian cycle, and ritual practices associated with them. The two areas that constituted the focus of my research are the Morelos Highlands on the southern slopes of Popocatepetl volcano in the northeastern corner of Morelos state and the adjacent parts of the state of Puebla, and the area of Sierra de Tentzo in Central Puebla. These areas were chosen for two reasons: The first is due to the different natural conditions. The Morelos Highlands is a wooded zone distinguished by temperate and relatively colder weather and by a sufficient amount of precipitation. In contrast, the Sierra de Tentzo area is semi-desert, much hotter, and with much less precipitation. The second reason is the location of the zones, their relative isolation and accessibility, and consequently the degree of preservation of the traditional culture. The mountainous character of the Morelos Highlands isolated the region from the wider world until the 1990s, while the Sierra de Tentzo area – which is distinguished by broad valleys divided by mountain ranges and situated on

2 There are also other views on this subject. For example, Terrence Kaufman argues that Nahuatl was not in Central Mexico before AD 500 and he believes Teotihuacan was home to multiple language groups. He argues for a relatively late arrival of Nahua speakers in Central Mexico and he does not think they were a major part of the population at Teotihuacan (Kaufman 2001: 1–34).

the principal road leading southward to Oaxaca – has been open to outer influence for much longer. This situation is manifested in various ways, such as the almost complete disappearance of the Nahuatl language in the Sierra de Tentzo area in comparison with the Morelos Highlands, where the language is still alive. With regard to the topic of this paper, the Morelos Highlands also show a higher degree of preservation of the worldview connected with the ritual landscape and sacred mountains.

I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork in these areas over the period of the past decade,[3] with a focus on: collecting stories associated with the ritual landscape and sacred mountains; the sacred precincts where the rainmaking rituals are carried out; the rainmaking rituals themselves; and the ritual specialists responsible for them. Most of my informants were therefore from the older and middle-aged population, who know and remember the most about them. In the Morelos Highlands (Hueyapan and Tetela del Volcán on the Morelos side, Alpanocan and Santa Cruz Cuautomatitla on the Puebla side) I was also able to work with the ritual specialists and healers and I participated in their activities, as they are still present in the area, unlike in the Sierra de Tentzo area (Santa Clara Huitziltepec, Santa Cruz Huitziltepec, Alpanocan, Molcaxac) where the rainmaking rituals and their practitioners disappeared a long time ago.[4] However, the stories collected in the Sierra de Tentzo area and the sacred sites there provided useful information, which can be incorporated into the general framework of the research. A comparison of the data gathered in the two areas and its interpretation reveal a common Mesoamerican tradition and distinctive local manifestations of the core of the Mesoamerican worldview, which will be explained below.

According to historical sources, archaeological evidence and ethnographic records, both areas have been populated by the Nahuas since at least the late Postclassic era. Chronicles such as *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* by the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún and *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e Islas de la Tierra firme* by his Dominican colleague Diego Durán, which were written in the sixteenth century, provide essential

3 More precisely, in 2014, 2017–2018 and 2019. The minimum duration was one month (2019), the maximum was four months (2014).

4 Antonella Fagetti who conducted her fieldwork in 1990s in San Miguel Acuexcomac, a Nahua community on the northern side of Sierra de Tentzo situated about 20 km north-west of the area where I conducted my research, says that only a few decades ago there were some persons in the village who carried out the rainmaking rituals (Fagetti 1998: 207–208). However, they are not there anymore. When I was looking for them during my fieldwork none of my informants even remembered them.

sources of information on pre-Hispanic history and the culture in the region. As sources of information, they are complemented by codices like *Códice borbónico*, *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan 1, 2* and *Historia tolteca-chichimeca* from the same century and by archaeological sites located in many parts of both areas.[5] All of these provide evidence of not only the long history of settlements but also religious ideas associated with research topic in the region.

The ethnographic sources on the Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl area, of which Morelos Highlands form a part, are very rich (e.g., Bonfil Batalla 1968; Friedlander 2006; Álvarez Heidenreich 1987; Glockner 2000; 2012; Rodríguez Vázquez 2009; Juárez Becerril 2009; King 2016), in contrast to the Sierra de Tentzo area from where they are less numerous (e.g., Fagetti 1998; Hlúšek 2013; 2015; Badillo Gámez 2014). They complement the information provided by history and archaeology and demonstrate the long and continuous duration of the research topic. Analogy and comparative method are the most common ways of correlating the data from all three fields. I am aware that such comparison can sometimes be critiqued because of the amount of time that separates the artifacts and chronicles from the ethnographic accounts.[6] Therefore, in an attempt to avoid possibly misleading comparisons, I focus on the core part of the Nahua worldview which, as discussed below, is the most stable and resistant part of the worldview. This is represented by the ritual landscape, sacred mountains, rainmaking rituals, and the agrarian cycle, and in agreement with other scholars I believe that this line of analysis is the appropriate way to avoid questionable comparisons and consequently erroneous results.

Analysis and writing based on a comparison of the data of all three fields is very common in Mexican academic contexts. Because of the external in-

5 For more about the pre-Hispanic archaeological sites associated with the ritual landscape and sacred mountains in the Popocatepetl, Iztaccihuatl and Tlaloc areas, see Montero García 2001; 2011; Iwaniszewski – Montero García 2001; Iwaniszewski 1994; Townsend 1999. Sites like Chalcatzingo in Morelos or Teteles de Santo Nombre and Tepexi el Viejo in Puebla have been excavated and they are accessible to visitors. Together with lesser known sites like San José de Gracia and *teteles* (small temples of pyramidal shape) on the hill above Santa Clara Huitziltepec, (both in Sierra de Tentzo area), or the small platform on the top of Quetzaltepetl hill above Hueyapan visited by myself together with local people and with an employee of National Institute of Anthropology and History (*Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia*), they provide evidence on the pre-Hispanic settlements in both areas and on my research topic.

6 *Los que trabajan con el tiempo. Notas etnográficas sobre los graniceros de la Sierra Nevada, México*, the case study of Guillermo Bonfil Batalla published in 1968 and based on his fieldwork a year earlier, is considered the first article concerning the discussed topic written on the basis of ethnographic research (Lorente Fernández 2009: 208).

fluences Native communities have been exposed to, ethnographic research is a never-ending endeavor and new data can be compared fruitfully with older information. Recent research has revealed the gradual abandonment of beliefs in sacred mountains, and I consider my fieldwork in both regions as rescue ethnography. Moreover, there are still some regions that have not attracted the attention of anthropologists. The Sierra de Tentzo area is one such region, and, because of the lack of scholarly interest, the kinds of things that can still be found in the Morelos Highlands (e.g., the existence of rainmaking ritual specialists) ceased to exist there before they could be recorded, and today there are only stories about the ancient practices. With my fieldwork I attempted to fill in the blanks on the map of ethnographical research, to record what is left and to interpret and compare it with other areas, following the strategy of comparing features that belong to the core part of the Nahua worldview.

## Central Mexico – basic geographical and climatic characteristics

The area is a highly elevated plateau (known as the Central or Mexican Altiplano), the elevation of most of which is 2,000–2,500 meters above sea level.[7] It is surrounded by the Sierra Madre Occidental and Sierra Madre Oriental mountain ranges that isolate the plateau from both oceans and prevent the rains from reaching the region for most of the year. The plateau consists of wide valleys (Valley of Mexico, Puebla-Tlaxcala Valley, Toluca Valley, and Morelos Valley) separated by mountain ranges that often rise to more than 3,500 m above sea level and in three cases (Pico de Orizaba, Popocatepetl, Iztaccihuatl) higher than 5,000 m. Together with the Sierras they contribute to the climate and precipitation in the area. All of them belong to the Trans-Mexican Volcanic Belt (*Eje Volcánico Transversal Mexicano*), which is a 1,200-kilometer-long and 20–150-kilometer-wide zone running from west to east from Nayarit to Veracruz along the 19th parallel of north latitude (de la Cruz Reyna 2009: 35–38). It is distinguished by a very high degree of volcanic and seismic activity. Most of the mountains in Central Mexico are active (e.g., Popocatepetl), dormant (e.g., Pico de Orizaba) or extinct (e.g., Xihuingo) volcanoes, which give the landscape its specific shape. Earthquakes are common rather than exceptional, as are volcanic eruptions. However, excellent conditions for agriculture due to the highly fertile soil compensate for the risk of volcanic and seismic activity, and this area has always been one of the

7 Exceptions such as the Morelos Valley (about 1,400 m above sea level) rather confirm than negate the rule.

most densely populated in Mesoamerica. Apart from the three volcanoes rising to over 5,000 meters, the most dominant mountains/volcanoes of the region are Nevado de Toluca, Ajusco, Tlaloc, La Malinche, Cofre de Perote and Sierra Negra, which are all more than 4,000 m above sea level.[8] Volcanoes, other mountains, and lower hills (not necessarily volcanoes) dominate the landscape of the plateau.

Because of the elevation and position of Mesoamerica in the tropics, the research area is distinguished by a variety of climatic zones, including subtropical, temperate, and even subarctic or arctic at high elevations. Due to its isolation from both oceans, it is also quite dry, and many sectors have a semi-desert character. These different climatic zones very often lie very close to each other, and this fact gives the landscape its highly diverse character.

Even though the division of the year into four seasons is commonly recognized in Central Mexico, the natural conditions are the reason why the inhabitants of the area talk more about two principal seasons – dry and rainy. The latter lasts from June to September and is the crucial part of the year. In fact, the people's survival has depended on the timely arrival and end of the rains. This is the reason why the Native people have been obsessed with controlling the rains and weather and why this obsession can be considered a determining attribute of their religions (Broda 2016: 18).

## Worldview

Worldview can be perceived as a way of looking at and understanding the world around us. Definitions mostly proceed from the fact that worldview is of collective/social, mental, cognitive and historical character. Aerts et al. (1994: 18) point out that "worldview construction is always connected to a culture in which 'meanings' are circulated, types of behavior are passed from generation to generation, socio-political problems are produced, and styles of art confront us".

Alfredo López Austin (2015: 44) defines worldview as "a historical fact, product of mental processes, immersed in the course of very long duration. Its result is a systemic set of relative coherence constituted by a collective network of mental acts. By means of this network a social entity at a given historical moment intends to apprehend the universe in holistic form". It is apparent that he emphasizes the historical, social, systemic, and holistic character of worldview (ibid.: 44–46). He also asserts that it is not just a sum of components but an interconnected structure (López Austin 2016: 20).

8 Except for Ajusco which is a little bit lower.

Johanna Broda (2001a: 16) understands the term as "a structured and dialectic vision, in which the members of a community combine in a coherent manner their notions about the environment in which they live, and about the universe in which the life of a man is situated". She also emphasizes its historical character, and paraphrasing Fernand Braudel she adds that as "a product of ancient cultural inheritances and very often of unconscious beliefs it is deeply immersed in the past and it is transmitted from generation to generation. Its rhythm is a process of long duration" (ibid.: 20). This long-lasting property of worldview might be the reason why its elements are more resistant to change than other parts of the culture (Velasco-Lozano 2009: 118). Furthermore, Catharine Good Eshelman (2015: 141) believes that "worldview is not immutable, eternal or preexisting, rather it emerges in historical, social and specific context and it has been modified through the time in distinct sociopolitical circumstances". In simple terms, the process of creation is always present in every worldview (López Austin 2001: 63).

It is clearly possible to find many definitions of the term worldview. However, I believe that those cited above are sufficiently accurate and appropriate for the Mesoamerican cultural environment. They concur on the historical, long-standing, social, coherent and holistic character of worldview, and on the idea that it is a combination of notions the members of a culture have about the universe and the environment in which they live. In other words, worldview is connected with both time and space. And space is something that can be understood as stable, immovable, and eternal. It is possible that this is the reason why in Mesoamerica the dominant elements of the space, that is, the mountains, became a crucial part of worldview.

Despite the high degree of stability, no worldview is completely resistant to change. Migrations, conquests, clashes of civilizations, missionary activities or just the simple passage of time expose every part of a culture to new influences and consequently to transformations. However, there is still something within worldview that remains more or less resistant and stable. López Austin (2016: 23) calls it the core part (*núcleo duro*), meaning the "fundamental and most stable part of worldview, organizer of the system components, which adjusts the innovations and restores the system after its weakening. Its resilience, however, does not imply immobility". There are "transformations but of long duration" (ibid.). The core part is neither immune nor resistant to time and its limits towards the other parts are blurred (López Austin 2015: 34). Its power lies in its ability to assimilate new cultural elements acquired by a tradition in the process of time (López Austin 2001: 61).

## Mesoamerican worldview

To look for the origin of the Mesoamerican worldview, we need to focus on the time when, figuratively speaking, Mesoamerica appeared on the map. This happened around 2500 BC when hunter-gatherers settled and their lives began to depend on the cultivation of domesticated crops (López Austin – López Luján 2014: 28–31). Sedentism based on agriculture can be considered the starting point of a new cultural tradition, which developed for 4,000 years until the conquest and continued after in a reciprocal relationship with the European-Christian tradition up until the present day. Sedentism and agriculture represent not only the origins of Mesoamerica but also of its worldview.[9] On the other hand, the contemporary Mesoamerican worldview is also strongly influenced by the European-Christian tradition. López Austin (2016: 41) points out that "it is the product of two eras – Mesoamerican (pre-Hispanic) and of colonized societies (since the beginning of Evangelization until now)". At the same time, he adds that the Mesoamerican worldview has a dyadic composition represented by unity (the core part) and by diversity (heterogeneous origins, different languages, geographical environment, and history) (ibid.: 41–42). The arrival of the Spaniards affected both components of this dyad. However, the Christianization, or more precisely the Catholicization, of Spanish friars was inevitably superficial in many cases because of the small number of them,[10] the remote location of rural areas, and the completely different cultural background of the Natives. The result was religious syncretism, a term used very often in Native Mesoamerican religious contexts, which can be defined as "a process in which people pick and choose elements of their indigenous culture and mix them with elements of the invasive culture to create a new combination. It is the process of mixture and hybridity" (Carrasco 2014: 155–156).

As I have already indicated, this process was of a mutual character. We can talk about both the "Mesoamericanization" of the Catholic Christi-

9 At the same time, López Austin (2015: 35) admits that some of the elements that constitute the core part may come from ancestral times of hunter-gatherers, since these elements served the already sedentary cultivators to cement their innovations, to which ancient elements were added, linked to hunting, fishing and gathering activities, which were never completely abandoned because they were an almost essential part of their subsistence.

10 Proceeding from the Franciscan chronicler Toribio de Benavente Motolinía, who in 1536 wrote about 60 Franciscans in Viceroyalty of New Spain (Benavente Motolinía 1995: 85). The number of clergymen in the first half of 16th century was probably only slightly more than one hundred, probably because there were even fewer Dominicans and Augustinians.

anity and the Catholicization or baptism of the Mesoamerican religion and worldview. Within the framework of this paper, it is even possible to specify this process in terms of the "Nahuatlization" of Catholicism and the Catholicization of the Nahua religion. The Catholic part of this process has been manifested in, for example, the baptism of the sacred sites of the Native peoples (crosses on the tops of mountains or in caves), in the adoption and adaptation of the cult of saints, and in the more or less formal adoption of the new faith. The reverse side of this process has been manifested in, for example, the incorporation of Catholicism into pre-Hispanic ritual practices (e.g., Catholic prayers in rainmaking rituals) and even into the mythology and storytelling.[11] The result of this process is a confluence, reinterpretation, resymbolization, and synthesis of both traditions. Within this long-term process the core part of the Mesoamerican worldview represented by fertility and maize agriculture (Astor-Aguilera 2010: 67) together with ritual practices associated with the mountains and rainmaking has shown itself to be resistant, enabling the maintenance of the Mesoamerican part in the new syncretic worldview of the Native peoples (López Austin 2016: 42).

## Ritual landscape and sacred mountains in the Nahua worldview

The conceptualization of space in the Mesoamerican worldview was reflected in such features as cardinal points, considered to be sacred especially in pre-Hispanic times. Although they have remained important, the contemporary Native cultures ascribe to them only secondary importance in relation to the position of more relevant landscape constituents.[12] These are primarily mountains, which have always been the fundamental constituent of the Mesoamerican worldview. Sahagún (2000, Tomo 3: 1134) remarks that "the ancients of this land said that all the rivers went out of the place called Tlalocan which is like a terrestrial paradise… And they also said that the mountains which rise above it are full of water… as if they were big containers of water or houses full of water, and when it is necessary the mountains will break and the water which is inside of them goes out and swamps the land". The association of mountains with water and therefore

11 For example, in 2010 I recorded a story in Santa Clara Huitziltepec, a Nahua village in Sierra de Tentzo area, in which the characters of Jesus Christ, some Jews, and a man planting the maize appear.

12 E.g., in the case of Hueyapan I point out that the importance of the cardinal points in this community depends on the position of Popocatepetl volcano, the source of water and rains, in Hueyapan territory. Since it is situated north of the community, this cardinal point is the most important (Hlúšek 2017: 19).

with agriculture, subsistence, survival and more broadly with the overall way of life guarantees them an exceptional position in the Native worldview.

Due to the process of religious syncretism, the worldview of Native Mesoamericans has survived to this day, despite the strong and continuous efforts of Spanish missionaries and also the perils presented by the modern era (especially since the 1990s). However, in order to develop this discussion further, it is necessary to explain the term ritual landscape. I use the definition of Broda (2001b: 296), who defines it as "the landscape transformed culturally and incorporated into the cultural and social framework". In the same paper she emphasizes that "it has connected political centers with rural and natural localities where shrines of lesser importance have been situated". I would add that "in the pre-Hispanic era political centers were represented by great temples – pyramids,[13] and after the conquest by Catholic churches that replaced the former temples; the shrines of lesser importance but mostly also of pyramidal shape were replaced by chapels and crosses. Ritual landscape can be viewed as something like humanized space" (Hlúšek 2020: 40). It is a territory guarded by celestial, aquatic and terrestrial deities, such as the ancient Nahua god of rain and fertility Tlaloc, who was the most important deity of pre-Hispanic Nahua farmers, because of his close connection with water, agriculture, subsistence and well-being in general. This is the reason why his cult was very popular and widespread among the common people and why he was a crucial figure in the living religion. It was this level of Nahua religion – the religion of the common people[14] – that came into contact with Catholicism and partnered in the process of syncretism. Thus, Tlaloc and other beings[15] have survived in modified form until today and even the term Tlalocan (the Paradise of Tlaloc) or in some places (e.g., in Hueyapan) Tlaloc, a place of abundance, where the god dwells, is still used among contemporary Nahua farmers to denote the interior of mountains, where all the abundance is situated and from where it emerges. Along with Catholic saints the ritual landscape is inhabited by spiritual beings residing in their "houses", such as caves, mountains, lakes, springs, waterfalls, etc. These are places where ritual activities

13 Because of their primary purpose, the term temple pyramids is also used for them. However, some were also used as tombs (Brenišínová – Křížová 2018: 24).

14 The elites remained elites and as such quickly accepted the culture and religion of conquerors.

15 For example, *ehecameh* (*airecitos* in Spanish), meaning "little winds", which are also associated with the cult of the mountains, or *tlaloqueh* – the assistants of Tlaloc who bear the appearance of children, or *chanequeh* – dwarfs living in the ponds and lakes.

associated with the agrarian cycle and rainmaking are performed. Many of them have been visited for the purpose of carrying out this kind of ritual since pre-Hispanic times. The Catholic faith has been incorporated into the Nahua ritual landscape, which in turn has been baptized by Catholicism, reflected most clearly in the presence of numerous crosses in such places and in the Catholic prayers and songs that accompany the rituals. These are generally known as rainmaking rituals, even though those performed at the end of the rainy season are not about petitioning for rain but about thanksgiving for a good harvest and one more good year. However, regardless of the particular purpose, they represent an integral part of the agrarian cycle. This cycle reflects the dry and rainy seasons, the timely alternation of which has been crucial for Nahua communities down the ages. The Aztecs called these seasons *tonalco* (Heat of the Sun – dry season) and *xopan* (Green Time – rainy season) (Broda 2016: 21). They performed rituals associated with the agrarian cycle in both seasons; the *xopan* rituals, however, were more important because the rainy season was the part of the year which determined all aspects of life. The rainmaking ritual activities of today resemble mostly the *xopan* season as well as some of the months of the pre-Hispanic Nahua (Aztec) calendar *xiuhpohualli* (365-day calendar) as it was recorded in 16th century by Sahagún and Durán (Sahagún 2000, Tomo I: 135–169; Durán 2006, Tomo 1: 215–293).[16]

The Aztecs started with rainmaking ritual activities in the month one, which was called *Atlcahualo* (Ceasing of Water/Missing Water; February), meaning in the middle of droughts. In the Catholic liturgical calendar, the rituals took place on Candlemas Day (February 2nd). Month four, *Huey tozoztli* (Great Vigil; April/May), was characterized by the sowing of seeds and by rainmaking rituals focusing on petitioning for rain. This part of the agrarian cycle had a counterpart in the Catholic Day of the Cross (May 3rd). The ripening of the crops and the beginning of harvest took place in month eleven, called *Ochpaniztli* (Sweeping the Path; September), which was reflected in the St. Michael Archangel feast (September 29th). Finally, month thirteen, named *Tepeilhuitl* (Feast of the Hills; October), was characterized by the end of the harvest and by thanksgiving rituals for a good harvest, whose counterpart was the Day of the Dead (November 1st and 2nd) (Sahagún 2000, Tomo 1: 135–136, 141–142, 154–155, 158–159;

16 It is worth noting that both chroniclers used the Julian calendar when compiling the Aztec calendar and correlating it with the Christian calendar. However, in the 16th century it was ten days behind the real solar year (this problem was only solved by the Gregorian calendar reform of 1582). Therefore, for the individual Aztec months referred to and dated by Sahagún or Durán, this difference must be taken into account.

Durán 2006, Tomo 1: 165–166, 251–253, 275–276, 279; Broda 2013: 54–61). It should be noted that I have reduced the number of Aztec feasts to those which have been incorporated into the Catholic liturgical calendar and which are milestones in the contemporary agrarian cycle.

The significance of Candlemas Day in relation to the agrarian cycle has diminished in the researched communities (although it is still present in the Morelos Highlands), but the other feasts have remained closely connected with the rainmaking rituals until today. The Day of the Cross and the Day of the Dead stand out because they bookend the rainy season, the most important part of the year. These two feasts are crucial in the agrarian cycle, because they represent the beginning and the end of field labor and rainmaking rituals. These rituals have ceased to exist in the Sierra de Tentzo area, but they are still present in the Morelos Highlands. In Hueyapan, for example, the rituals held on or around the Day of the Cross are called "Opening the Water", while those held on or around the Day of the Dead are called "Closing the Water". The former focus is on petitioning for timely and enough (but not too many) rains, which are supposed to come at the beginning of June, while the latter focus is on giving thanks for a good harvest and sufficient rains, which are supposed to end by the end of September. This is the St. Michael Archangel feast, when the maize ripens but must still get hard and dry, which means it must finish ripening. This happens by the end of October (the Day of the Dead). During the St. Michael Archangel feast the first *elote* (young, soft and sweet corn) is harvested and the *pan de elote* (cornbread or corn cake) is prepared. Therefore, these different rainmaking rituals are performed a month before and a month after the rains, at the beginning of sowing and at the beginning of harvesting. Native farmers know very well that they cannot attract the rains during the dry season, because, as I was told many times in both research regions, the rains naturally cannot come during the dry season and it is not desirable, because it would break the natural cycle. The purpose of the rituals is to control the weather, to secure the timely arrival and end of the rains, and also an appropriate amount. Delayed rains, an excessively long rainy season, too little or too much water affects the crops negatively and this can have far-reaching consequences. Another reason for performing rainmaking rituals is to avoid hailstorms and thus to protect the fields from destruction caused by hail.

## Mountains as deities

Mountains and hills play a primary role in the Nahua worldview and were deified long ago, as the citations of Sahagún and Durán referred to earlier testify. Nahua farmers ascribed to them various attributes. Firstly, because of their ability to attract and hold the clouds, they were considered controllers of meteorological phenomena and the reason for the above-mentioned Mesoamerican general obsession with controlling the rains and the weather. Due to their deification, they are considered living beings, known by proper names. Thus, the most famous volcanoes in Mexico – Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl – bear the names don Gregorio (Goyo) and doña Rosita. As living beings, they act independently. There are relationships and love affairs between them, which are described in many myths and stories (Iwaniszewski 2001: 117–119). Most of all they are responsible for the well-being of the Nahua communities.

As indicated above, in the Nahua worldview mountains have gender and they are mostly clearly distinguished into males and females. It is not only Popocatepetl (a male, don Gregorio) and Iztaccihuatl (a female, doña Rosita) that are conceived as males or females, but all dominant mountains. The gender difference does not lie in the altitude or the size of the mountains, as might be expected from a European perspective, it is rather their shape and contours that distinguishes them. Conical, trapezoidal, or pyramidal mountains are masculine (Popocatepetl, Pico de Orizaba, Cofre de Perote, Pinal, etc.), while elongated, extended, and rounded ones are feminine (Iztaccihuatl, La Malinche, Nevado de Toluca, Sierra Negra, etc.) (Iwaniszewski 2001: 120; Broda 2009a: 41). There are, of course, a few exceptions, such as Sierra de Tentzo (personified as Tentzohuehue – the Old Bearded One/the Bearded Old Man), which has feminine attributes (an elongated mountain range) but is considered male. As Fagetti (1998: 32) and my own findings in the communities around this mountain indicate, "he had to lie down". The story is about the affair between him and La Malinche who told him he could win her heart if he stopped her urine. This is why he lay down, although he was not successful, as La Malinches's urine flowed under him. We can still observe the place where the urine (the Atoyac river) flows underground and appears again at the beautiful natural spot called *Puente de Dios* (Bridge of God) near Molcaxac.[17]

## Mountains as places of abundance

The Nahuas, like other Mesoamerican ethnic groups, imagine mountains as if they were hollow. This is illustrated by the ancient Nahua idea documented in sources such as *Códice borbónico*, which was written by Nahua

17 According to another story, Tentzohuehue was so tall that he did not fit under the sky. Therefore, God wanted him to lie down, because, as he was so tall, no one could climb up him, which made God sad (Fagetti 1998: 166).

sages around the time of the Spanish conquest. Tlaloc (Fig. 1) sits in his temple on the top of the hill and two priests head for the interior of the hill to perform a sacrifice of a child in his honor. The attribute of being hollow ascribes significant meaning to caves, which are considered the threshold or entry to the underworld or interior of the mountain, that is, to the dwelling of Tlaloc, called Tlalocan, which is perceived by the Nahuas as a "terrestrial paradise" (Sahagún 2000, Tomo 3: 1134).

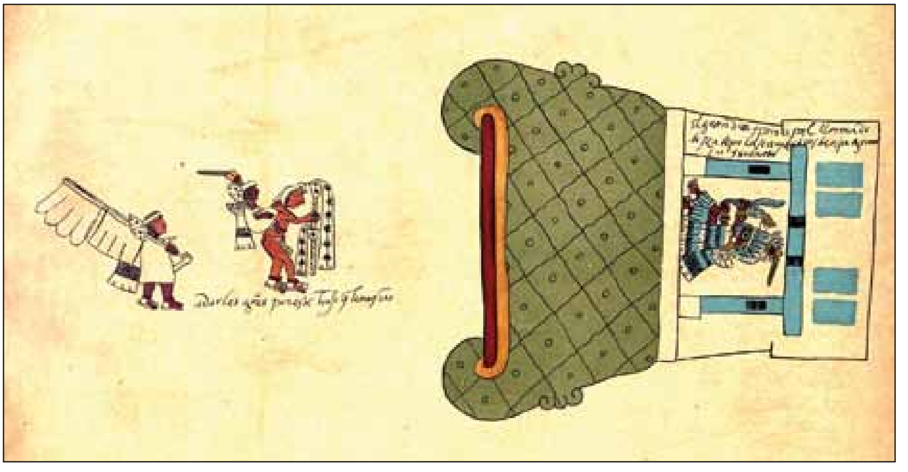

Figure 1 Tlaloc sitting in his temple on the top of the hill. *Códice borbónico*. Available at: http://www.famsi.org/research/loubat/Borbonicus/images/Borbonicus_25.jpg

At the same time, through caves mountains are connected with the sea, the ultimate symbol of fertility, which is the reason why mountains are still called the arms of the sea in the Morelos Highlands area. The idea of the existence of lakes inside mountains also refers to fertility and rain. As the Paradise of Tlaloc, mountains are places of abundance where, besides water, all seeds (maize in particular) are stored. One of the famous Aztec myths recorded in *Códice Chimalpopoca* in the 16th century narrates the story of how the god of wind, life and wisdom – Quetzalcoatl – obtained the seed of maize from the interior of the mountain and gave it to humans (Bierhorst 1992: 146–147). *Cantares Mexicanos*, the largest collection of Nahua songs and poems, also recorded in 16th century, contains a song called *Cuicapeuhcayotl* (Origin of Songs) in which an anonymous Nahua poet sings "into the mountains, to Tonacatlalpan, to Xochitlalpan I was introduced" (León-Portilla 2011b: 16–17). Both of these Nahuatl terms refer to Tlalocan and to abundance (Tonacatlalpan means Land of our

Livelihood, Xochitlalpan means Land of Flowers) and the ancient Nahua poet expresses by means of poetry the role of mountains as containers of water and seeds. The Nahuas of today still see mountains and their hollow interiors as granaries, where not only the seeds but also domestic and wild animals and even wealth in the form of coins, bills, gold or treasures are stored, which was very often emphasized to me by my informants.[18]

In Nahua mythology caves were also understood as places of the origin of people (Henderson – Hudson 2016: 156). *Historia tolteca-chichimeca* talks about a place called Chicomoztoc (Seven Caves) from where the first people emerged (Miller – Taube 1993: 60). The cave under the Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacan is also very famous because of its four-leafed clover shape, which refers to the same concept of origin (Coe – Koontz 2013: 109–110). Even though I did not record any mention of caves as places of the origin of people in the researched areas, there are various explicit associations between caves and the deceased there. According to some of my informants, caves as places of water, abundance and fertility sometimes represent the entry through which the souls of the dead enter the underworld and leave it during the Day of the Dead to visit their living relatives.

## Concept of the Sacred Mountain

The idea of mountains as granaries and places of abundance is connected with the concept of the Sacred Mountain (*Monte sagrado*), reflecting the perception that mountains and hills are germs of life not only of humans but of animals and plants. They belong to the so-called Owner or Spirit of the Mountain, who dwells in the interior and who is usually associated with the god of rain and fertility, Tlaloc, or his local counterpart. This conception has remained alive until today, despite the fact that during the process of Christianization the Owner often turned into the Devil (López Austin – López Luján 2009: 24). This is what happened to Sierra de Tentzo whose owner, Tentzohuehue, is understood today as the Devil, and his dwelling is called *Cueva de Diablo* (Devil‘s Cave). Nevertheless, Tentzohuehue reflects the ambivalence of this process, because even though Devil's Cave is feared, there is a sacred precinct on the top of the mountain with crosses, where people from the surrounding villages go on the Day of the Cross to celebrate mass for the purpose

18 Of course, these beliefs are typical not only for the Nahuas but for all Mesoamericans. See, for example, the remarkable essay by Alejandra Gámez Espinosa about the Ngiwá (Popoloca) people in the south of the state of Puebla (Gámez Espinosa 2009: 79–93).

of securing the rains and a good harvest (Fig. 2). There are also various assistants who live in the mountains with the Owners, such as *tlaloqueh, ehecameh* and *chanequeh* (see footnote 15). In addition, the entrance to the interior of the mountains is guarded by a serpent, which is understood as the guardian of water. The serpent is a symbol of Tlaloc, because of its resemblance to lightning (Miller – Taube 1993: 150) and as such it is associated with the storm and rain as depicted in *Códice borbónico*, in which Tlaloc holds a snake resembling lightning in his hand (Fig. 3). Devil's Cave in Sierra de Tentzo (and many other places) reflects this idea, since when a person wants to enter it to meet the Old Bearded One that person must first pass by the grand serpent, which is often called the Heart of the Hill. This idea resembles the pre-Hispanic idea of *tepeyollotl* (Heart of the Hill), although in those times it was associated with a jaguar, which was perceived as the Owner of the animals (Olivier 2015: 10). However, this idea was also related to wellbeing, as well as the idea of the hill as a granary. Even pyramids in the ritual centers of Nahua city-states were meant to resemble the mountain in its conception of the Sacred Mountain; the Nahuatl word for city or city-state, *altepetl* (water-hill), has the same association (Evans 2013: 139).

Figure 2 Tentzo with its Devil's Cave, Bridge of God and crosses on the first (left) top. Photograph by the author, 2018.

Figure 3 Tlaloc with a snake in his hand. *Códice borbónico*. Available at: http://www.famsi.org/research/loubat/Borbonicus/images/Borbonicus_07.jpg

## Rainmaking rituals

Rainmaking rituals associated with mountains and the agrarian cycle since pre-Hispanic times are the primary feature of religious practices in Mesoamerica. With regard to the Nahuas, their religious practices have been embodied in rituals whose purpose is to secure prosperity in this life (not the afterlife). Their rituals are the manifestation of an omnipresent principle of reciprocity, which is fundamental for Native religions (not only) in Mesoamerica. This means that if someone wants to obtain something from a supernatural being, they must offer it something in return (Broda 2009b: 59). Rituals are the tool by which this goal can be achieved, and they cannot be performed without offerings. From the pre-Hispanic era there is evidence of rainmaking rituals, the most important of which was held on the top of Tlaloc mountain, where there was a temple, the highest construction in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica.[19] In month four, *Huey tozoztli*, the ritual would involve the sacrifice of two children in honor of Tlaloc: The boy would be offered up in the temple on the top of the mountain and the girl would be sacrificed in the Pantitlan whirlpool in the Texcoco lake (Durán 2006, Tomo 1: 83–88). Although human sacrifice disappeared from rainmaking rituals long ago, its reflections can still be traced in the Native stories. In Santa Clara Huitziltepec, (in the Sierra de Tentzo area) the lack of water was explained to me as the result of the unwillingness of the people to offer the two children demanded of them by the hill Huicanetl, which rises above the village.[20] There are also many other kinds of offerings that have formed part of rainmaking rituals, as will be described below.

The concept of power is a very important part of these beliefs and rituals. Power flows among living persons, domestic groups, the community and among a constellation of beings which also have it (e.g., the dead, saints, crosses, the Earth, maize, the Sun, wind, stars, rain, animals, hills and springs). They circulate their power towards humans and the natural world (Good Eshelman 2016: 42–43). This power is something that is always required during the rainmaking rituals[21] by the specialists who perform them. The power circulates, the Earth gives it to people and, in turn, people give it to the Earth.

The specialists who lead these rituals are crucial figures within the Nahua communities; in Spanish they are mostly called *tiemperos* (those who work with the weather), *pedidores de lluvia* (rainmakers) or *graniceros* (a word that comes from *granizo* meaning hail, although its meaning is ritualist of thunder), whereas in Nahuatl they are called *quiotlazqueh* (those who take a shortcut to the rain) (Hlúšek 2017: 25; Lorente Fernández 2009: 209).[22] In the attempt to secure prosperity, they offer up to mountains and their

19 Its elevation is 4,120 m above sea level. For more on the archaeology of this temple see, for example, Townsend 1999; Iwaniszewski 1994.

20 It is not so important that the water in the village and its surroundings started disappearing in 1990s, which the middle-aged and elderly populations clearly remember. What is more significant and characteristic is the fact that before, when water was abundant, the ancient motif was sidelined, while in the times of lack of water the motif has once more gained in importance and serves to explain the current unfavorable situation.

21 The exclamation *¡Dame la fuerza!* (Give me the power!) is very common and I heard it very often.

22 For more on the terms designating the ritual specialists, see Juárez Becerril 2015: 343–349.

Owners beverages (including alcohol), food, clothes, tobacco, flowers, cotton and they even sacrifice turkeys or roosters. These ritual activities are performed in special places (the tops of the lower hills, caves in the higher ones, springs, waterfalls, or lakes) called *altares de petición* (altars of petition). Today these sacred precincts are full of crosses oriented in the direction where people want the water to flow (towards their fields). Most have been used down the ages for this purpose (Fig. 4).

Figure 4 Sacred precinct called *Divino Rostro de Popocatepetl* (Divine Face of Popocatepetl) on southern slopes of Popocatepetl Volcano. The crosses are directed down to the fields. Photograph by the author, 2014.

## Ambivalence and *axis mundi*

Even though mountains are a crucial element in the agrarian cycle and the ritual practices associated with it, they are viewed with a certain level of ambivalence. Their above-mentioned positive aspects (water, seeds, fertility, abundance) are balanced by negative aspects, embodied in storms, hailstorms, bad winds and even diseases. Bad winds (*aires malos*) cause illnesses and, as such, they are a negative feature of mountains. Rainmakers are involved with this aspect because they also work as healers who look after people. They use herbs, holy water, prayers and white hens' eggs to cleanse people afflicted by the negative aspects of mountains. The process of Christianization contributed to this negative dimension by Satanizing many of the sacred precincts, including the above-mentioned cave in Sierra de Tentzo, which was converted into the dwelling of the Devil and which has no crosses inside. However, although the cave underwent the process of Satanization, there are still crosses on the top of the mountain, a factor which balances the bad influence of the cave, and the inhabitants of the surrounding communities view Sierra de Tentzo and its owner Tentzohuehue mostly positively.

Finally, mountains are also perceived as centers of the world, especially the most important ones, in a similar sense as Eliade's *axis mundi*. There is a story about a race to reach the center of the world between Popocatepetl and what is known as Fat Hill (situated southeast of the Morelos Highlands in what is called Hot Land), which provides an eloquent illustration of this point. I recorded it in Hueyapan, Alpanocan and Santa Cruz Cuautomatitla and it goes as follows: "Briefly said this legend tells how Fat Hill and Popocatepetl, as alive and animate beings, were walking towards the center of the world. Since Popocatepetl was lame and hobbling and could not walk fast, Fat Hill decided to have a rest and fell asleep for a while. But when he woke up Popocatepetl had already reached the center of the world, meaning the place where he stands now. Fat Hill became angry and started to throw snakes and scorpions (typical animals of Hot Land) towards Popocatepetl. They did not harm him, because of the Cold Land up there and the snakes and scorpions died of cold. In the end, Popocatepetl threw a bolt of lightning at his opponent, breaking Fat Hill into three parts. The legend not only explains why Fat Hill consists of three parts but, above all, it highlights that Popocatepetl is situated exactly at the center of the world and because of his position he rules over the world as a lord or king." (Hlúšek 2017: 19–20)

## Conclusion

*Mapa de Cuauhtinchan 2* shows the mountains surrounding the area of the central part of the present state of Puebla with the city-state of Cuauhtinchan in the middle (Fig. 5). Popocatepetl, Iztaccihuatl, La Malinche, Pico de Orizaba, Cofre de Perote and Sierra de Tentzo are situated on the edges of the map and serve as markers of the Cuauhtinchan's region. This quite secular or ordinary role the mountains perform in the lives of the Nahuas of Central Mexico has been surpassed by their central role as the structural axis of the Nahua worldview and as sacred places where rituals associated with rainmaking, fertility and the agrarian cycle have been traditionally carried out (Gámez Espinosa 2009: 81). As Broda (2003: 23) points out, "ritualization in the process of Christianization was a fundamental factor which enabled the cultural reproduction of Native ethnic groups in Mexico. We are dealing with long-term processes that continue to this day". Her statement indicates that the significance of mountains/hills in ritual practices and the worldview of the Nahuas has survived until the present day. The fact is that mountains and the landscape have one indisputable advantage – they have always been there, and they always will be. The people, their ideas, religion and even their worldview have been transformed as time has passed, but the mountains have remained in the same places, continuing to attract and hold clouds and water. Technology and access to information in the modern era is a greater threat to the millennia-old tradition of the sacred mountains, ritual landscape and the agrarian cycle than Christianization in colonial times, but since the mountains are still there and never move the people living below them have no choice but to incorporate them into their worldview. As Mexican anthropologist Julio Glockner Rossainz told me in Hueyapan (in person on January 23, 2018), where we met on the occasion of the proclaming of Hueyapan an independent municipality (*municipio libre*), "this tradition has survived the process of Christianization, it will survive the process of modernization, too, and as the Catholic religion was incorporated into the Native worldview, modernity will be, too". Moreover, the mountains will stay with the Nahuas until the end of the world, which, according to the story I was told in Hueyapan and Alpanocan, will arrive in the form of gigantic battle between the mountains.

*October 2023*

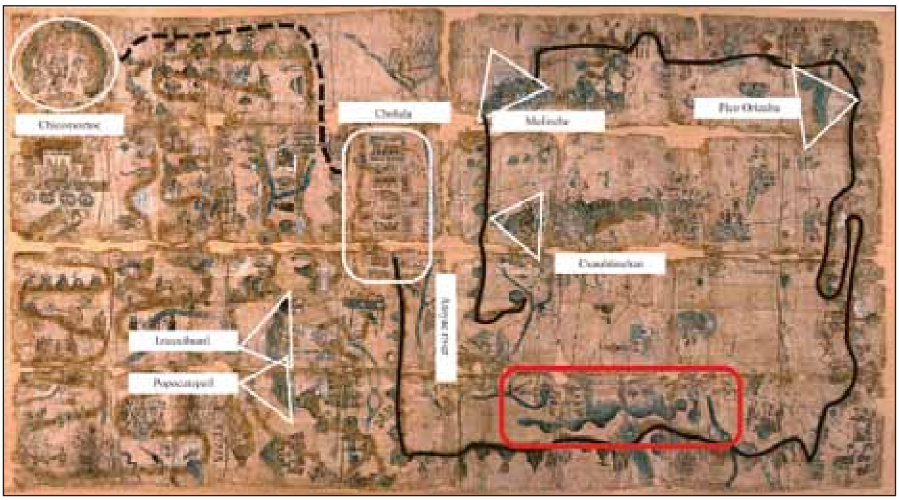

Figure 5 *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan 2*. The red frame was added by the author and it shows Tentzo. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Mapa-de-Cuauhtinchan-numero-2-MC2-The-map-is-a-representation-of-the-story-of-how-the_fig4_321228841

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