



Tiül miüüt, tiül mindek mixejchiiüts

En la tierra y en las lagunas de nuestros antepasados

*Atlas del territorio de los Ikoots de
San Mateo del Mar (Oaxaca, México)*

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(logotipo)

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En las tierras y en las lagunas de nuestros antepasados (Toponymic Atlas of Huave/*Ikoots* of San Mateo del Mar - Oaxaca, Mexico)

1. Outline of the project

This project is based on a corpus of about three hundred indigenous place names, collected in over 15 years of field research by Dr. Cristiano Tallè in collaboration with fishermen, farmers and elderly ritual masters of San Mateo del Mar, an indigenous Huave/*Ikoots* community of lagoon fishermen located along the Pacific coast of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, in the State of Oaxaca (southern Mexico).



The territory that the *Ikoots* inhabit is a hydro-geographic continuum where forms of land and water interpenetrate in a fluctuating way. The alternation of a period of heavy rains (ideally from June to September) with a dry period of strong winds (ideally from November to February) creates a patchy lagoon landscape that can change dramatically within a year or a cycle of several years, depending on the intensity of the rainfall, the strength of ocean currents and waves, and the force of the northern winds that dry the stretches of water and move sand dunes. Lagoon fishing was historically the main way of appropriating this metamorphic land, coexisting, wherever possible, with livestock farming (cattle and sheep) and agriculture. The lagoon fishing is traditionally practiced with dragnet and trammel, and requires an extensive mobility across the territory which involves walking along the banks and through the fords, or moving with canoes into the lagoons.

The territory inhabited by the *Ikoots* of San Mateo del Mar



The appropriation of the territory: fishing, livestock farming and agriculture





All the place names, which have never recorded before, have been collected with GPS and geo-referenced. They are mostly transparent multi-nominal linguistic compounds referring to the specific landscape morphology of the lagoons and the ocean coast, to the forms of life (vegetal and animal) living there, and to specific human activities or historical/mythical events. To give some examples:

ndorrop mbas najkùil /charco frente al iris de agua/ “the puddle in front of the water iris”

mbeaj yow soj /boca del agua de la acacia/ “the mouth of the water (the water’s edge) of the acacia”

mal iüt tüch /cabeza de la tierra del icaco/ “the head of the earth (the ford) of the icaco”

mal iüt indeow win / cabeza de la tierra (donde) muere la tortuga marina/ “the head of the earth (the ford) where the sea turtle dies”

imeay jüm /(donde) duerme el lagarto/ “(where) the crocodile sleeps”

nejants ndok /(donde) se lavan las redes/ “(where) the nets are washed”

akwüüch oleaj monteok /(donde) el rayo dejó su impronta/ “(where) the lightning left his footprint”

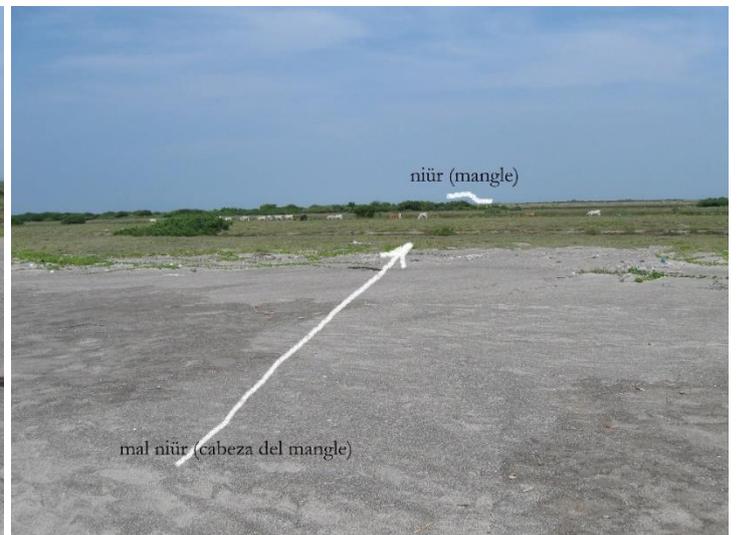
The place names in the landscape: a perspective referentiality



mbas kok / frente al coco / “in front of the coconut”



mbas potson niür / frente al montón de manglar /
“in front of a mangrove mound”



mal niür / cabeza del manglar /
“extremity of the mangrove”

Taken together, these place names form a system of shared references covering the territory with a very high density, footprint of economic activities, ritual practices and ancestral stories, through which the *Ikoots* took control of its territory throughout the centuries. This specific linguistic heritage is an inalienable dimension of economic, social and symbolic reproduction of community life, perceived as a legacy of ancestors.

2. Degree of endangerment

Among the isolated languages in Mexico, Huave is the most endangered. If the other two, namely Purepecha and Seri, are still fairly vital, Huave on the contrary is a language that is experiencing massive borrowing and a swift process of language shift, reaching the point of extinction in certain varieties, leading to the emergence of Spanish as the first language of most children in the majority of Huave villages. Over all, Huave speakers range between 10 and 14 thousand of a total population of 27 thousand dwellers variously distributed among four main villages: San Mateo del Mar, San Dionisio del Mar, San Francisco del Mar and Santa Maria del Mar. If we look at the socio-linguistic data of the four Huave settlements, we find that in San Francisco del Mar and Santa Maria del Mar the local varieties are almost lost, while in San Dionisio del Mar it is still used by people over 40. Only in San Mateo del Mar is Huave still widely used in a local variety (*ombeayiiits* /mouth-our/). However, even if this variety is still in full-fledged use, it is ideologically and practically endangered. When phonological, morphological, lexical-semantic and syntactic interferences are analyzed, they provide an outline of the pervasive presence of Spanish in San Mateo speech, with a consequent significant reduction of Huave repertoires. Before San Mateo reaches the stage of loss shared by the other three varieties, there is an urgent need for documentation there.

In this frame the main and most significant lexical loss has taken place, and is swiftly taking place, in the area of the lexicon related to environmental knowledge. Young people, even in San Mateo, let alone the other three Huave villages, can use only a minimal part of the lexicon of their native language relevant to talking with some detail about their environment: every day abilities of the youth to describe in *ombeayiiits* the morphology of landscape, the meteorological phenomena, a fish's behaviour or the parts of a plant decreases, together with the competence to control the environment. The environmental depredation and impoverishment, together with the gradual loss of control over resources, goes hand in hand with the increasing loss of interest in the linguistic coding of many complex nuances of the environment; consequently, shifting to Spanish rapidly fills up conceptual and discursive spaces perceived as irrelevant, abandoned and left empty.

In the last few decades, this negative escalation (between the loss of control of the language and the environment) has become very fast with more destructive consequences taking place every day. In the last few years this strip of coastal land consisting of a continuum of water, earth and wind, which to date has been very much at the margins of the national economy, has become an arena of the global political-economy, attracting the interest of a joint-venture of transnational Green Economy companies determined to install a network of Wind Farms on a large scale in the region (cfr. *The Indigenous World*, IWGIA, 2013, p. 69-70). This project represents a great threat to the ecological balance of the local environment and, consequently, to the control of environmental resources by the people living there and their food sovereignty. Faced with this critical scenario, it is becoming more and more urgent to document the indigenous place names, before it is too late. If we think of the future generations, the expertise embedded in the use of place names, which is essential in taking control of their territory, are

at risk of disappearing at any time. In our aims, the publication of a toponymic Atlas could be a remarkable learning resource for bilingual school education, promoting in the classrooms the intergenerational transmission of this invaluable heritage, which is severely threatened outside. In a broader cultural and political sense, the Atlas would represent the point of view of those who have lived there for centuries, providing an important tool for strengthening identity and cultural self-awareness, as well as an important political and legal instrument for the public representation of occupation, use and the customary ownership of ancestral lands, facing the huge problem of land grabbing.

3. Editorial plan of Atlas

The Atlas “*Tiül miiüt, tiül mindek mixejchiiüts* - En las tierras y en las lagunas de nuestros antepasados” (In the Lands and Lagoons of our Ancestors), is a bilingual book in *ombeayiiüts* /our mouth/ (the local variety of Huave, with some 11000 speakers - ISO 639-3: huv) and in Spanish, designed to illustrate and document the interweaving of local knowledge and memory anchored to the landscape through the place names, threatened today with disappearance in a couple of generations. The bilingual Atlas (edited by Dr. Cristiano Tallè) will consist of around 180/200 pages. The Atlas is in its final stages. At the moment it is undergoing a final revision of the bilingual texts. The cartographic work was completed thanks to GBS funding. It consists of a large general map (mural) and 22 detailed maps.

The entire book will be divided into four sections: **A) Cartographic Section, B) Textual Section, C) Linguistic Section, D) Online Section.**

A) Cartographic Section

In the first part will be presented a large set of **cartographic materials**, composed of general, thematic and detailed maps of different scale, conventional and satellite, with *ombeayiiüts* place names. Below an example of a detailed map, consisting in a large-scale satellite tables where all the place names are put in the landscape in detail.

D) Online Section

The Place Names will be made available online through Google Mapping Tools (My Maps or Tour Builder) along with some multimedia materials (story maps, bilingual texts, photographs, video and audio recordings).

The Atlas will be accompanied by a wide photographic set (satellite images and some photos collected during field work) illustrating in detail the salient points of the territory, the forms of land use and the correspondence between the landscape morphology and the morphology of place names.

4. Field Work within community

Since 1999 Dr. Cristiano Tallè has carried out his ethnographic field work in the community of San Mateo del Mar, at the beginning as member of the research team of *‘Italian Ethnological Mission in Mexico’*, funded by *Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs* and coordinated by the cultural anthropologist Prof. Alessandro Lupo (University of Rome “La Sapienza”), and from 2006 as part of the *‘Project for Enhancement of Cultural and Linguistic Huave Self-awareness’*, funded by the *Salus Mundi Foundation* (Tucson, Arizona) administratively based at Berkeley, University of California (Prof. William, F., Hanks) and coordinated by Prof. Flavia Cuturi (University of Naples “L’Orientale”) and Prof. Maurizio Gnerre (University of Naples “L’Orientale”). In 9 different stays in the community (1999, 2000, 2001-2002, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2013, 2016, 2017) he studied and documented the daily social, linguistic, economic, political and ritual domains of life in San Mateo del Mar, with particular regard to two topics: the indigenous bilingual schooling on the one hand (subject matter of his PhD thesis), and the use of land and language, the place names and his situated discursive use, on the other. The results of this research can be seen, among the others, in two monographs: *‘Scuola, Costumbre e identità. Un’etnografia dell’educazione nella comunità indigena di san Mateo del Mar (Messico)’*, CISU, Roma, 2009, 448 p. [School, Costumbre and Identity. An ethnography of education in the indigenous community of San Mateo del Mar - Mexico], and *‘Sentieri di parole. Lingua, paesaggio e senso del luogo in una comunità indigena di pescatori nel Messico del Sud’*, SEID, Firenze, 2015, 306 p. [Paths of Words. Language, Landscape and Sense of Place in an Indigenous Community of Fishermen in Southern Mexico].



All the investigations have been carried out in a perspective of active and informed participation, involving a network of local actors in different contexts: children and their parents, indigenous teachers, fishermen and farmers of different ages, municipal authorities, elderly ritual masters, indigenous associations (in business, political and cultural domain). In this perspective the Atlas project must be considered as an open project in progress, part of a broader knowledge (practical, oral and polymorph) shared with many native actors and in constant interchange with local institution, as the bilingual community schools, the municipality and the *Casa del Pueblo* (the House of Village).

Walking with native collaborators to map the place names



5. Target group, benefits of publication

The Atlas project is aimed to support bilingual education in the local indigenous schools and, in a larger sense, to strengthen the cultural and linguistic self-awareness of collective forms of land ownership in the face of global challenges that the community is facing. The Atlas will be a learning resource to compensate for the lack of bilingual teaching materials and should promote the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and memory of territory that is likely to be interrupted within a few generations outside of the school.

The Atlas will be distributed free to approximately 6 bilingual kindergartens, 10 bilingual primary schools and 1 bilingual high school of the San Mateo del Mar municipality (in the center of San Mateo del Mar and in its municipal agencies), among the municipal authorities, the authorities of *Bienes Comunales* (communal agrarian goods), the committee of *Casa del Pueblo* (The House of the Village), as among the teachers, the fishermen, the farmers, the ritual masters, the elders who have personally contributed to the Atlas project and generally to anyone interested. It will be very important to convene a public event for the presentation and distribution of the book as an opportunity to give back to the community the knowledge that has been collected over many years of research.

Bilingual schools in San Mateo del Mar



The homeland painted on the walls of the schools



