

Indigenous Oral Traditions From The Huasteca, Mexico



This paper deals with indigenous oral traditions in Mexico. It addresses issues of indigenous languages and how they can be documented, preserved and revitalized through projects about oral traditions in a national context in which there is a renewed discussion on multiculturalism and cross-cultural understanding.

In Mexico, the discussion of multiculturalism centers on 'indigenous issues', specifically on how indigenous peoples should integrate into the so-called modern, more westerly-orientated rest of the nation. In Mexico, indigenous cultures and languages are still systematically discriminated, as they are often seen as irrelevant remnants of a past that have, at most, mere folkloristic value. Since the 1990's, public policies regarding indigenous issues underwent a change and now focus on concepts of multiculturalism in order to favor a more equal position for indigenous languages and cultures.

The new policies were adopted after national pressures like the 1994 Zapatista uprising, and followed up on international interests in the situation of indigenous peoples, such as shown through the festivities around the 500th Anniversary of the Discovery of America by Columbus in 1992, or in the declaration of the UN's First and Second Decade of the Indigenous Peoples (1995-2014). They enhance a novel discourse that includes concepts like cultural diversity, interculturalism, intangible heritage, and other terms that are in accordance with the terminology of international conventions on indigenous issues.

Of course, discourse is tacit, and the mentality that instigated centuries of discrimination, assimilation and exclusion of the indigenous segment of Mexico's society has not yet vanished. One of the many areas in which indigenous communities will have to demand the fulfillment of their rights and contribute actively to the foundation of a more equal interaction regards their languages.

This paper presents the situation of the indigenous languages in Mexico, which will serve as a context to two projects that have been carried out in the Huasteca

area on indigenous oral traditions. The projects triggered a discussion on the role of oral resources in the documentation, preservation and revitalization of indigenous languages. This discussion includes thoughts on Mexico's linguistic politics, the issue of how to deal with the existing linguistic variants, the well-known problem of fixation of oral material when recorded, and the role of modern technology in the documentation, preservation and revitalization of indigenous languages and cultures.

Indigenous languages in Mexico

Every time a language dies, we have less evidence for understanding patterns in the structure and function of human language, human prehistory and the maintenance of the world's diverse ecosystems. Above all, speakers of these languages may experience the loss of their language as a loss of their original ethnic and cultural identity.

(Language, Vitality and Endangerment, UNESCO Document, 2002)

Language and culture are two phenomena that are intricately entwined. Each language contains unique cultural, historical and ecological knowledge of the group and its vigor is closely related to the strength of the group's ethnic identity. In Mexico, policies on cultural diversity are directly linked to the existence of the indigenous languages that are spoken in its territory today, as language constitutes the main criterion to confirm the existence of a culturally diverse society. In this respect, the reasoning is that because of the fact that there are many languages spoken, there must be as many cultures in the country.

One language, one culture

This criterion 'one language, one culture' is merely operational as it allows the Mexican government to quantify and make a first inventory of the country's many cultures. Academics have criticized the simplistic, rigid, and a-historic procedure: within the same people there may be various languages spoken, and not all Indians still speak their mother tongue. Indeed, the relationship between language and ethnic affiliation is less and less obvious in a world in which indigenous languages are endangered. Mending this erroneous procedure is especially important because of its far-reaching consequences, as it is the starting-point for policies concerning indigenous rights, bilingual and intercultural education, as well as the implementation of all kinds of cultural programs, among others. The pressures have led to a reconsideration of the government position, and now several of its institutions are in charge of designing

new methods of measuring the presence of indigenous languages and indigenous peoples.

It is true, however, that Mexico is an especially rich country as far as languages are concerned. Though estimates vary according to the source and its particular way of defining the means of distinguishing variants from languages, I would like to list a few figures. First of all, the country counts eleven linguistic families – almost 10% of the total number of existing linguistic families in the world –, with sixty-eight linguistic groups that count 364 living languages (INALI 2008).

Regarding the number of speakers, the rather low percentage of speakers of an indigenous tongue – 8% according to *Ethnologue* (Gordon 2005) – is compensated by the rather large number of individuals: in 2005, official figures say, Mexico counted 6 million speakers of indigenous languages from the age of five onward (INEGI 2005), which represents the highest number of people per country in Latin America.³⁰ The indigenous population is mostly concentrated in the center and southern part of the country.

Linguistic diversity

A good example of Mexico's linguistic diversity can be found in the Huasteca area, where our projects were carried out. This rural area, characterized by its multilingual setting in which six different indigenous peoples live among non-indigenous persons called Mestizos, is the scene of six linguistic groups that stem from four different indigenous language families and which contain at least ten different languages. Though not each indigenous people has contact with others, all languages somehow interact, and several cultural features are shared among the inhabitants.

Mexico is not the exception when it comes to the subordinate position of indigenous languages: they are not recognized as official languages, have little speakers in comparison to the dominant language, generally lack standardization, are oral more than written, and have no prestige at the national level, where only Spanish connotes social and economical success. Most of the indigenous languages are endangered and in different stages of a disappearing process. In each particular case, the situation of language loss has specific historical and political origins, yet the result is nearly always the same: speakers change to Spanish as vernacular, i.e. the language of day-to-day interaction, and do not transmit their mother tongue to their children anymore. Some of the factors that contribute to this process are linguistic politics –both within the speaker communities as well as at the national level–, contact with a dominant Mestizo

culture, economic forces, ideology and identity issues.

Language and oral tradition

Not only in order to find a lending ear in the national funding institutions, but also because I am seriously concerned with expressions that enable me to study the relationships between language and culture (or language *in* culture, as several scholars propose), my projects are usually justified in terms of interculturalism, cultural diversity, and preservation and revitalization of indigenous languages.

One of the ways of working with these language expressions is through the study of indigenous oral traditions and, more specifically, oral tales. While at first I was interested in what kind of cultural knowledge is transmitted through tale telling and how this cultural knowledge is valorized by both the narrator and his or her audience, now my interest lies more in the better understanding of the language itself as a vehicle for transmitting cultural knowledge. I want to illustrate this by presenting the experiences of two group projects that I have coordinated about oral tales from traditions of Tenek and Nahua Indians from the Huasteca area.

In 2000-2001 we developed a project on Tenek and Nahua oral traditions in the Huasteca area. In this area, the Tenek Indians, who are the original inhabitants, have been living together with Nahua Indians for almost six hundred years. Just before the Spanish Conquest, this last people - then called Aztecs - came to the region during their last expansion period. Close and constant cross-cultural contact followed, and quite a few Tenek people even became Nahuatl-speaking citizens under Aztec rule.

This process of close contact influenced cultural processes, among these the oral traditions of both peoples. When we saw that many Tenek and Nahua tales drew upon the same themes (like the origin of fire, the origin of corn, or the coming of floods) and followed nearly the same sequence of episodes, we wanted to collect a sample of these tales in order to have a register of the existing production and be able to study the current dynamics of tale telling as a living tradition. This would give us an idea of the existing literary genres, themes, the narration context, valorization, and mutual influences.

Tale telling as a living tradition

Apart from these academic aims, the project pretended to contribute to the strengthening and revalorization of tale telling as a living tradition within the indigenous communities. This more applied part of the project carried out through the organization and implementation of a series of workshops for

children, and was justified as a contribution to revitalize oral traditions. In this context, revitalization was defined as *'the process of favoring the continuity of indigenous traditions, assuring its transmission through the generations within the intimate spaces and extending its use to more and other spaces in order to secure an integral development of its speakers'*. With the term integral development is meant a process that includes economical security, ecological integrity, life quality, and a responsible management of resources.

It was the aspect of inter-generational transmission that determined our choice to work with children; the workshops took place at elementary schools and in other public spaces within the community, such as the communal house, which means that at times we coordinated the activities with schoolteachers and at others with the local authorities. During the workshops the children drew pictures regarding local tales we had previously told them, narrated to us and to each other, and wrote down tales they had heard from family members.

Sometimes we invited elderly persons from the village to join us during the workshop and tell locally known tales to the children. We did not analyze the products of the workshops, and thought that our mere interest and collaborative work with the children would somehow transmit the idea that these tales were appealing and valuable.



Circulation of indigenous oral tradition

When these first two parts of the project – a reasonable compilation and an incipient contribution to revitalization – were covered, we still had to fulfill the third part, concerning the circulation of indigenous oral tradition. We thought it

fundamental to make the tales known, both within and outside the indigenous communities. The work with the children in the workshops were very labor-intensive and time-consuming, and we wanted to be able to give something back to the communities that was more tangible and durable. In the same way, we wanted to address the non-indigenous segment in Mexico, for we think that it is important that this part of the population – the great and dominant majority learns about indigenous traditions, for knowledge is a foundation on which mutual respect might be gained. When talking about Mexico's multicultural society, the subject of interculturalism is always mentioned, and I think that in this respect non-indigenous Mexicans should interculturalize as much as indigenous Mexicans do.

So we published a popular science book with a selection of tales in Nahuatl and Tenek languages, with a translation into Spanish (Van 't Hooft & Cerda 2003). Each chapter of the book dealt with a different theme, which was accordingly introduced so as to further a better comprehension of the tales for non-specialist readers. We hoped the book would contribute to the understanding and positive valuation of indigenous oral traditions, both within and outside indigenous communities. The publisher would take care of its distribution to every public library in the Huasteca, and we did our share through the presentation and distribution of the book in several Mexican States. We considered the third goal of our project to be accomplished.

Oral traditions as a written text

In several ways the mentioned publication can be regarded as a contribution. Academically speaking, the selected tales are singular for their themes, narrative structure, and creativity, and we trust the book to reflect these characteristics. For non-indigenous persons, the book might represent a refreshing change to already known tales. For the indigenous communities, the publication concerns a register of tales that are considered to be important. Their register is relevant in itself, because they constitute a written testimony of a part of the oral tradition of a group 'so it will not be lost'. This way, people have access to material that represents a part of their cultural heritage. Access to one's oral tradition provides a means to get to know and discuss this cultural expression, which is -people say- less and less popular among young people.

Though aware of the disadvantages that exist when turning a verbal source into a written one – in the 1970s Goody (1977) already mentions the transformations in contents, structure and language suffered by an oral tale when transcribed – the

availability of written material permits a discussion about indigenous languages that now can be revised, studied, reinterpreted and reflected on. Despite official discourse about the richness of indigenous languages and its fundamental role in Mexico's multicultural society, the current position of these languages is one of great disadvantage in relation to the dominant one. Mexico's situation of asymmetrical bilingualism stands for a vigorous, prestigious Spanish language, which has a normative alphabet and a solid written tradition. The dominated languages are commonly characterized by their lack of a standardized alphabet and an unfortunate obstruction of the process of standardization e.g. due to multiple dialectal variants, divergent ideologies of their promoters, and their condition of being frequently more oral than written. In this context, written material constitutes a new way to transmit these traditions, which means that the use of both language and the cultural expressions it beholds is extended to more spaces of interaction.

Huasteca area

When we presented the book in indigenous communities in the Huasteca, people were happily surprised by the fact that we had published their tales, and also because we had done so in the indigenous languages. They believe it is important to have this material in a written form, and repeatedly say that this kind of publications prevents their traditions from becoming lost. At the same time, the existence of their tales as a written text makes them 'important', as it places their tales next to the content to be found in other published material in Mexico. From time to time, the tales are taken up as teaching materials during workshops with indigenous children as a part of the program of health brigades or anthropological fieldwork in the Huasteca area, much in the same way as we did during the revitalization-phase of our project.

However, it is a fact that the book as such is not read: indigenous people in Mexico generally do not have a habit of reading, and they do even less so in their mother tongue. The use of the book is found in terms of the material being a symbolical reference to the relevance of the tales depicted in it and of the indigenous language in which it is written. It is usually stowed away as a kind of trophy and is perhaps taken out solely to show it to strangers who arrive and want to know about the local culture. I do not qualify this use as being irrelevant: the existence of published materials about indigenous cultures written in indigenous languages as symbols for the dignifying of indigenous expressions in Mexican society is very important indeed. Due to a series of reasons, indigenous

languages are still greatly underrepresented in Mexican written culture (Montemayor 2001). If our publication contributed to this process of dignifying, we will have, in part, succeeded in our goal.

Yet, the other part of our goal was that people would really use this material in the ways they deemed fit as a means to discuss and thus revitalize and revitalize their oral tradition. Published books were definitely not the indicated means to do so, at least not under the current local circumstances in which reading in the mother tongue is not a common practice.

Orality and the oral traditions

Like any other oral tradition, in the indigenous communities in the Huasteca tales are transmitted as part of an always changing living tradition, in which all tales are adapted to the audience's expectations, the motives for narrating, and the linguistic competence of the narrator, as well as other local circumstances.

Regardless of the general structure of the tale, which generally does not change, and the fact that the narrator cannot deviate from the literary canon of his or her tradition (Jason 1977), oral traditions are characterized by their heterogeneity in representations, versions and possible interpretations, in which every tale telling session is unique and unrepeatable. The tales express and discuss current issues that a community has to deal with, often through tales set in the past. At the same time, the representation (i.e. the act of narrating) is a verbal art, in which elements such as creativity, style and rhetoric become relevant.

In coming to terms with the oral character of this material, we considered that the means of getting this material 'back to the field' in a more fruitful way would have to correspond with the dynamics of these oral expressions. It would have to be something close to the natural setting of telling and based on local habits of representing orality. The thought came up to make an Audio CD with the tales in its original audio recordings in the indigenous languages. This approach would give the indigenous communities a material that was not only familiar to them but also popular-people often listen to the radio and commonly play tapes or CDs with music. Perhaps they would be more inclined to listen to a CD with tales than to read them in a book.

Recreating the verbal representation

A second consideration of creating material in an audio format concerned the advantage of recreating the verbal representation itself, as one would now be able to listen to the oral forms and conventions of the tales, and thus hear ways of

expression, emotions, rhythm, and other characteristics. This might make the material more attractive to both indigenous and non-indigenous audiences, and would perhaps make them more sensitive towards the existence and value of indigenous languages as a way of oral expression.

We set out to achieve this goal in a second project. We wanted the audio material to offer a varied sample, so we selected the most representative tales, as far as we were able to observe during fieldwork. According to the length of an Audio CD, 74 minutes, only the shorter versions of three tales in the Nahuatl language and another three in the Tenek language were chosen, together with presentations of the Spanish translations that had been published in the already mentioned book. The details of the production process of this Audio CD were already discussed elsewhere (Van 't Hooft 2004).

It is relevant to stress that it was not only necessary to record the Spanish translations of the tales, but also to re-record the original indigenous versions because of their poor technical quality. These new recordings or re-recordings were made by professional radio-people who work at an indigenous radio station in the Huasteca, and permitted the audio to accompany the written text literally.

Variants in indigenous languages

The recorded material expresses only one of the existing variants of the two indigenous languages in which they are transmitted. Even though the Huasteca is a relatively compact and interconnected area, both Tenek and Nahuatl languages have several variants. In the western part of the Huasteca (in the State of San Luis Potosi), the Tenek language is spoken differently from the variant known in the eastern part (in the State of Veracruz). Huastecan Nahuatl knows three variants, and even though they are part of a language continuum, linguists enlist them as being not variants but rather different languages (Gordon 2005; INALI 2008).

In this respect it is important to take into account that the defining of a particular way of speaking as either a variant of a certain language or a proper language in itself is often a socio-political matter, and does not rest upon linguistic features only. People say not to understand persons who they consider to be different, even though linguistically speaking their variants might be mutually intelligible. Also, there might be political reasons to distinguish variants as separate languages instead of variants of the same language, as is for instance the case with Danish, Swedish and Norwegian, which, linguistically speaking, are variants of one sole language that are more or less mutually intelligible.

In the Mexican context, the lack of standardization of indigenous languages through available written or oral material is one of the factors that stimulates linguistic diversity. People write the language 'the way they speak it', and the available publications, little as there is, use different orthographies and, at times, even different alphabets. Oral sources, such as the programs transmitted by three indigenous radio stations in the Huasteca, each make use of a specific local variant, mostly the one of the presenters. These programs have little presence outside the micro-regional level, and do not generate a standard way of speaking the indigenous tongue.

The Tenek Tales

In the case of our audio production, the Tenek tales were recorded in the western variant, and the tales in the Nahuatl language were from the eastern part of the Huasteca. In both instances, people from villages where a different variant is spoken say to have trouble with the understanding of the recorded tales. This narrows down the target public that will be enjoying their way of tale telling. On the other hand, the distribution of the CD in the whole Huasteca area also gives the opportunity to demonstrate the richness of both languages and their oral expression to everybody involved.

To get involved in the standardization process of the indigenous languages – in speaking or writing – was not part of the aims of our project. Yet, inevitably we had to take into account the existence of language varieties and make decisions regarding which variants to use and which alphabet to write in. Every publication, in oral or written format, is a contribution to existence of materials in the indigenous languages and, as such, has an impact on the representation of a specific variant or of a particular way of writing over others. The limited production of materials in indigenous languages makes this situation even more noticeable. Standardization processes have symbolic importance and convey ideological interests, and by taping tales that belong to a particular variant and then writing them down in a particular alphabet we had to take a stand.

Orality and fixation

We thought that the audio CD would constitute a means to better represent orality than a written text could do. Yet, during its production we learnt about particular conflicts that exist between orality and its reproduction in an oral format. I want to discuss this point briefly.

As attractive as an audio production may have seemed to our purposes, this

means of transmission of oral tradition suffers the same problem as written sources do: it tends towards fixation of oral tales. Both written and recorded versions, though oral-derived, lose their flexibility, i.e. their faculty to adapt to the circumstances of the moment. While the natural tale telling context is a place of discussion in which all actors may participate to reconstruct a particular tale, the tales on the audio CD are mono-directed tales. Even though they still might be a starting point for the discussion of oral traditions in society, this discussion cannot develop during the narration but has to be held afterwards, without the original narrator being present and in a different setting. Also, recordings that stem from a particular narrating context might not be able to address the interests of an audience different than the one that was present during recording, the variant in which a tale is recorded might not be the one its later audience knows, and this variant might not reflect their particular tradition.

The printed word is the truth

On the other hand, the transmission of a particular tale in an inflexible, published format enhances the idea of 'officialization' of the narrated events. In a society where publications are thought of highly - 'the printed word is the truth' - a recording of a tale that can be reproduced over and over again on CD might make that version an authoritative one. This means that a specific version of a tale, told in a particular context and for particular motives but recorded and distributed on CD, could be considered as *the* tale and taken as a model for its future telling.

The problem of 'officialization' is indeed present in the Huasteca area, where the tradition of publishing materials in the indigenous languages is just beginning. On the other hand, the current situation in Mexico regarding the severe disadvantages of indigenous languages in relation to the dominant Spanish tongue calls for strong actions in order to demonstrate the linguistic and cultural value of these languages. Publications in these languages are an important way of letting indigenous people feel their language is important and making these languages known to a general public. In answer to this possible process of officialization it is necessary to continue producing Audio CD's so as to create materials that contain different versions of a tale, from various narrators, in all language variants. Only when people have access to a diversity of tales can they see that tale telling is a dynamic activity and value this tradition as such. And only then they might want to add their own versions, telling them to family members and friends, and thus preserve their tales as a living tradition.

Orality and the new technologies

These days, new technologies have made it more affordable to carry out projects aimed at language documentation, preservation and revitalization. We can now go into the field, make near-professional recordings and produce materials like written publications or audio CDs without much effort. Technology has also paved the way for the creation of interactive materials on indigenous languages and cultures, like DVD-ROMs or websites with information that is accessible worldwide. At San Luis Potosi State University we are exploring all these technological options and the ways they might be of assistance to further the documentation, preservation and revitalization of indigenous languages.

The production of materials about indigenous oral traditions with the help of these technologies is part of this effort, as tale telling concerns one of the oral expressions that is highly valued within the indigenous communities. It should be noted, however, that written and audio publications are not the only materials we have been aiming to create about indigenous oral traditions. Also, we are making a series of radio programs in which we talk about indigenous oral traditions, transmit recorded tales, and invite people to discuss related themes such as how to recover the youth's interest in tale telling, the importance of the indigenous language as a means of transmitting oral tales, the desired qualities of narrators, and the significance of certain tales, among others. This way, we try to contribute with materials in indigenous languages that stimulate the process of reflection on indigenous languages and cultures, especially in the communities in the Huasteca area but also among other people in Mexico, and thus display part of the cultural and linguistic richness of Mexico's indigenous population.

However, because of the fact that these tales – as well as the languages in which they are transmitted – are primarily oral, the presentation and use of these materials should promote a discussion about orality as an integral part of transmitting knowledge, next to writing. This discussion must part from the linguistic policies of every community, which involves a continuous dialogue among representatives of the communities in order to work on themes such as the valuation of the spoken word and its most adequate ways of transmission.

The joint existence and circulation of all kinds of materials in oral languages – live oral transmissions, published texts, radio programs, video productions, DVD-ROMs, audio CDs, websites, and so on – may contribute to the preservation and revitalization of oral traditions. These materials should be diverse, include different versions of a tale, and represent different linguistic variants, so as to

serve as a basis for the reflexion on and narration of tales within the indigenous communities and thus stimulate the continuity of this cultural expression. The production of materials from oral traditions is a viable contribution to the process of revitalization of both these traditions and the languages through which they are transmitted.

Conclusions

Strategies to document, preserve and revitalize indigenous languages are not neutral, for they interfere in the situation of a particular linguistic variant. The ones to develop these strategies are usually researchers, who consider that there are academic reasons to justify their interference. Yet, indigenous communities are not always interested in the linguistic or cultural bearing of their languages, they might not necessarily welcome the good-will of academics to empower their communities through projects about language, or they might have moral objections to the ways in which the research-aims will be achieved. Also, when they do feel this interest and share the aims of the project, it is not always clear which is the best way to document, preserve and revitalize this heritage (Linguapax 2004).

However, it is crucial to carry out these kinds of projects if we want to contribute to the protection and strengthening of our linguistic diversity. A key factor in their effectiveness lies in the direct involvement of the local people. Each project should be participative in all respects, from the very early stages of its design on until the distribution and employment part of its final products, and should part from an intensive exchange of views between local people and scientific researchers about issues that are important to all participants in the project, and not only to those of scientists. Together with academics, the community should participate in working on language documentation, preservation and revitalization. This can be done through the training of local researchers, whose expertise on their language and culture engage all participants in a process of mutual learning and understanding, which generates results that are beneficial to both actors. A community-based project that includes collective action guarantees a more profound study by focusing on something that is of real interest for the community and, therefore, a better quality of its products (Herlihy & Knapp 2003).

Dialogue

I want to stress again the relevance of the fact that these products do not only

seek an indigenous audience, but also a non-indigenous one, for interculturalism should work both ways. Non-indigenous people will have to learn about indigenous languages and cultures: only when our partner in the dialogue respects us can we start an exchange based on equality and mutual understanding. Our contribution to this process of interculturalism is through the production of bilingual materials, in indigenous languages and in Spanish, which may serve to both population groups. Furthermore, the materials pretend to reinforce ties between distinct indigenous peoples, in this particular case between Tenek and Nahua Indians in the Huasteca area. By joining the two traditions in one publication, the two indigenous peoples involved will know about a different but similar tradition of persons that live nearby. The written format and the options provided by the new technologies (DVD-ROMs, websites) constitute new ways of transmitting these traditions. This situation expands the spaces in which these languages and cultures develop, which is one of the aims of language revitalization. The existence of these materials increases the presence of indigenous languages and contributes to the assessment of their merits. Together with appropriate public politics on linguistic matters and corresponding educational programs to carry them out, revitalization projects that work with local communities create the foundation of the preservation of the linguistic diversity that characterizes Mexico today.

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See also: Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indigenas: <http://www.inali.gob.mx/>

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Jarich Oosten has been a major propagator of the influential Leiden school of anthropology. More than just being inspired by structuralism, this approach stresses the importance of extensive fieldwork, and of the comparison of research findings within a culturally relevant regional realm. Jarich stressed the importance to go beyond preconceived ideas. Essential to his approach was to proceed from the data that emerged in the course of the research. This ensured that the focus was not diverted, as so easily occurs, towards the existing body of academic literature, and remained with what anthropologists call 'the field.'

Traditions, and the way these are interpreted, play a crucial role in people's experience of who they are, what social groups they belong to, how they are connected to the place they live in, and what claims they can advance to their social and physical environment. Consequently, ideas about tradition, bodies of knowledge, not only serve to interpret the past, but have great significance for the relationships that people maintain in the present as well. The contributions to this volume explore various ways in which traditions are created and transmitted. 'Traditions on the Move' allows Jarich Oosten's former PhD students to celebrate his influence on their work