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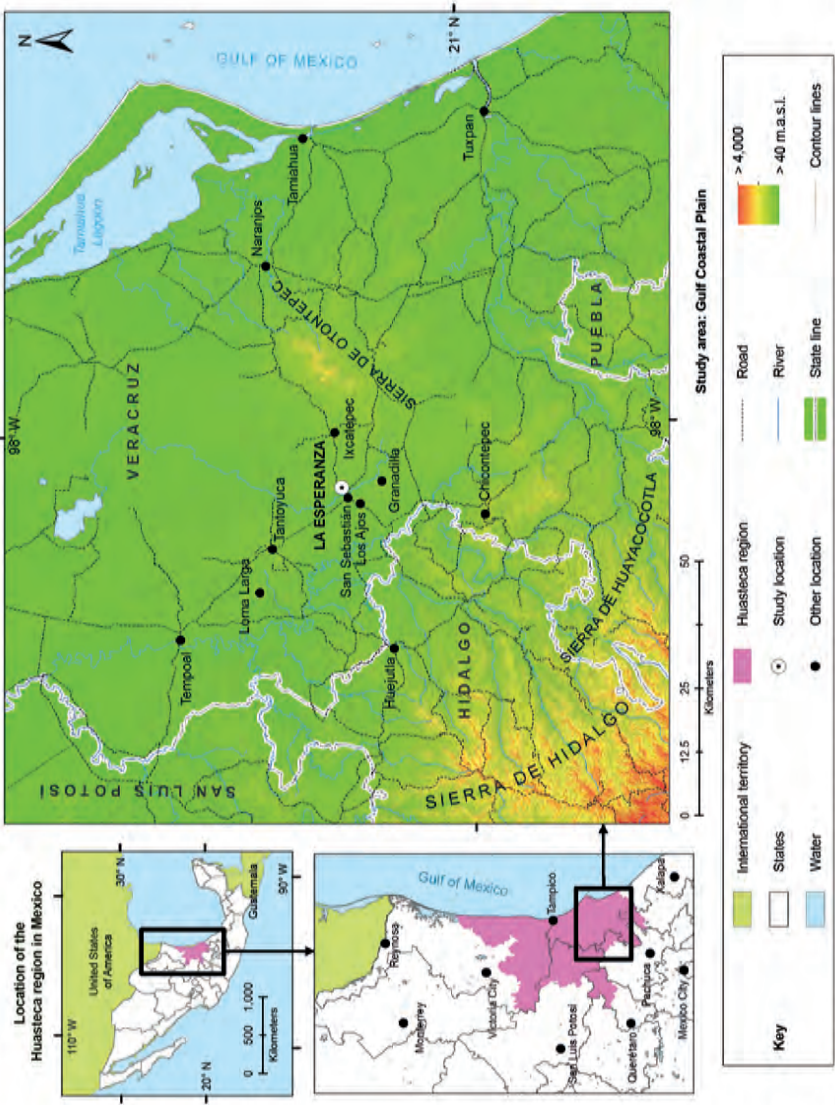
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## INTRODUCTION

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### We Speak to the Tepas Because We Are Indigenous

In January of 2004, I met with the residents of La Esperanza, a small Nahuatl village in the tropical lowlands of the Huasteca in the northeastern state of Veracruz, Mexico (figure 0.1). At that meeting I presented my aim of carrying out research and writing a book about local customs as they are experienced and perceived in these times of modernization. On hearing my intentions, an elder declared that everything they knew was “in the words,” that their youth no longer had an interest in learning about that knowledge, but that with a book such knowledge could be recorded “forever” and new generations would realize that “what the elders used to say was true.”

Through these statements at a public gathering and the general approval that greeted them, I sensed in this man, as in other residents present at the meeting, a certain anxiety to record their oral knowledge in writing. As they saw it, by taking this form their knowledge would acquire greater relevance for the younger generations. Indeed, since the 1990s, due to government programs of development for disadvantaged populations,<sup>1</sup> education has been extended to the middle school (at times even high school) level, away from the community. As a result, a new kind of age group has taken shape in communities like La Esperanza, which no longer helps their parents with day-to-day tasks in the *milpa*,<sup>2</sup> in the kitchen, or gathering fire-

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1 Solidaridad (1988–2002); Progreso (2002–2007); Oportunidades (2007–2014); Prospera (2014–).

2 Term derived from Nahuatl (*milli*, cultivated field; *pa*, in), which denotes the plot where maize is cultivated as well as beans and squash.



wood in the brush. These were activities that previously presented an opportunity to pass local knowledge, practices, and beliefs forward. The general absence of these moments of intergenerational interaction has direct implications for the mechanisms of transmissions of local practices and customs. The insight expressed in the meeting pointed to the need for transformation in modes of cultural transmission. This shift involved a move away from the traditional way of remembering customs and practices, by example and through explanations, toward a more distanced form in which these practices were to be considered as if they were objects that can be studied and should be protected—in this case, through their recording in a book. In sum, what was manifested there was a keen consciousness of the changes introduced by modernization, changes implicating a need to transform the means of transmission of that knowledge considered unique to the community. My project of writing a book about local traditions was, as a result, very timely. In this way, academic and local interests found in this way a common ground of interaction.

Undoubtedly, in La Esperanza I came face to face with a rural society fully integrated into the processes of modernization while maintaining collective cultural particularities tightly bound up with a specific relationship to the land—particularities that, as local residents often observe, set them apart from “city people.” A few days prior to the meeting, I had the opportunity to attend a ritual held at the summit of the *cerro* (a small mountain or large hill) above the village. There a healer made his “promise” or yearly covenant to the local entities or earth beings, offering prayers in Nahuatl and Spanish, burning copal (resin from certain tropical trees) incense, and offering tamales and other foods to the Tepas, guardians of the earth. While the ritual specialist presided over the hilltop rites, the hum of passing trucks could be heard coming from the federal road that runs just below the *cerro*, lending material expression to the porosity that connects coexisting worlds. Back in the village, the neatly laid out gravel streets,<sup>3</sup> flanked by white stones painted with lime and signs with slogans from national health and hygiene campaigns,<sup>4</sup> contributed to the impression that certain external ideas of order and progress were widely accepted in this place. Finally, coming down from the *cerro* after the ritual, my hosts told me that if I wanted to undertake my research in the village, it would be imperative to obtain the permission of the authorities given that “the community is very close-knit” and all must be informed about my project. “People are tight here, if a house or a *milpa* is on fire, the bell is rung and everyone helps each other. That is why we need to arrange a meeting, so that we can come to

3 The streets were laid out in 1991 in conjunction with an electrification program to connect the power grid to each household.

4 Just some examples: “Wash your hands after going to the bathroom”; “Eat fruit every day!”; “A clean community is a healthy community.”

an agreement with you.” Later, the local authority (the “special agent”) welcomed me graciously and, after I explained my project and shared official documents supporting it, arranged the meeting.

Early in my time in La Esperanza, over the course of stays of varying length from January 2004 to November 2008,<sup>5</sup> the residents called me often when a ritual began in one of the homes. Sometimes, the healer would interrupt the proceedings to move a chair or table, or an action would be repeated so I could take “better pictures.” When the healers rested (“We’ll be right back after a brief message,” one of them said as if cuing a television commercial), they would take advantage of the break to give me spontaneous explanations. Occasionally, rituals were scheduled around my calendar of visits. When events were crowded with attendees, I was assigned “the best place” from which to observe, and once, during a ritual in a home, I was even offered a table so I could write my notes with greater ease. Often individuals would suggest to me what was to be photographed or written in my field journal. Many times I was asked which chapter I was currently writing in my journal or how the book would be titled.

These inquiries awakened my interest in the particular attention residents paid to the research that I had begun in their *ranchería* (a small village or hamlet) and also about what they hoped the work would eventually include. Conversations with individuals of all ages and genders helped me see that they agreed in their desire to record the village’s history, traditions, and customs, as well as the unified character of the population, the *fiesta patronal* or patronal festival, and the chapel’s importance for the residents as nerve center and symbolic hub of La Esperanza. To these perspectives, over time others were added by individuals taking critical distance from this local *ethos*, explaining that living there consisted of “nothing but drudgery,” alluding to the numerous duties and cooperative tasks like the *faena*<sup>6</sup> that local residents must perform as a condition of their residence in the community. These differing opinions, and the many suggestions made for the book’s content, conveyed what residents of La Esperanza considered most important in relation to their expressly affirmed values as well as the sources of their collective identification. They thus provided a clue to understanding the singular ethic that governs this social group in their practices and ways of being.

As I would learn during my stays in La Esperanza, the daily life of the residents is marked by an attachment to a social organization in which collective civic action

5 More precisely, I completed 594 days of fieldwork—i.e., an average of four months per year over a period of five years, to which were added about 100 days of additional visits until 2017.

6 The phrase used was “*puras faenas*.” The *faena* is the free labor performed on collective work projects, a duty owed once weekly by residents who are heads of families (adults with children) as a condition of residence in the community.

is of utmost importance, a *sine qua non* of living together as neighbors. Everyday reality is also marked by a series of rituals strongly anchored in local religious convictions, that take place throughout the year at the individual, the family, and collective levels. Locally that, too, is considered to be a condition of living together—in this case, with nonhuman entities that populate the surroundings. It was this dual intensity of relationships within civic, collective acts no less than in ritual practices, that made a deep impression on me in this small locality whose inhabitants numbered fewer than 200. This particularity was also underscored by several residents of the village and the vicinity who saw La Esperanza as a marked contrast with many villages in the region that were experiencing the disintegration of their religious and sociopolitical cohesion—a circumstance driven particularly, in their view, by evangelical religions, political parties, and emigration. If, as many locals said, La Esperanza is a “very united community” within a very different social, regional, and national landscape and in a historical moment of accelerated structural changes, it seemed to me worthwhile to explore the nature of this proclaimed unity and, through this research, seek to understand what it is that they wanted to convey through this book and the significance of this desire to convey it precisely through these means.

#### EXCLUSIVE DICHOTOMIES

At the beginning of my stay in La Esperanza, one young man expressed doubt about the relevance of my work, since the village’s inhabitants “are no longer Indigenous,” because they no longer wear their traditional dress and the new generations do not speak Nahuatl. He invoked the “loss of traditions” and the fact that the residents are already “modern.” On the other hand, another young man (though older than the first), who officiates as a *catequista*,<sup>7</sup> said, “We address God the Father, and we also speak to the Tepas because we are Indigenous.” The premise of this statement, which underlies the general thesis of this book, is that to be “Indigenous” today cannot be reduced to items of clothing or language but rather involves a specific relationship with nonhuman beings. In effect these two young people, both high school graduates—the first eventually left the village, while the other remains, a key figure in maintaining ritual practices—were formulating, each in his own way, palpable local tensions surrounding the issue of continuities or changes of “Indigenous culture.” The first expresses an essentialist perspective, in which the presence or absence of specific visible and auditory, that is, diacritical, traits are constitutive of “the Indigenous”; the second addresses the realm of convictions and beliefs.

7 In the Indigenous villages of the Huasteca region, *catequista* refers to a person who conducts religious ceremonies without being ordained or a member of the clergy.

Therefore, if those who decide to abandon the community and cultural framework progressively distance themselves from effective and affective belonging to a specific, historically and culturally constituted collective, those who remain—as will emerge throughout this book—build this belonging unceasingly within the current historical and cultural context, one often hostile to the convictions reinforced by this type of belonging.

This work will examine the tension between these two positions, exploring them from the second perspective, that of those who have remained and continue to live in the village. Its point of departure is the idea that the elaboration of beliefs and ritual practices in Indigenous contexts, amid hostile surroundings, is the result of a history of violence and discrimination; at the same time, it expresses a specific ethical and ethnic position that does not necessarily relate to demands in the ethno-political arena. Let us remember that, in the American continent, the “encounter of two worlds” resulting from the Spanish Conquest in the sixteenth century was accompanied, from its beginnings, by the massive and violent evangelization of local populations, whose religious practices up until then emerged more from the shared quality of the divine condition of all beings in the universe rather than from the transcendence of a Creator God, unique and revealed. As a result, the liturgy of *el costumbre* (custom)<sup>8</sup>—that is, the practice of making offerings to the earth beings—was compartmentalized within the internal religious register, creating a bidimensional religious system among Indigenous groups, as Catholicism was gradually adopted: the liturgy carried out in the church and *el costumbre* discreetly practiced in the *monte* (uncultivated land with undergrowth; brushland) or atop the *cerros*. This religious system of *el costumbre*, marginalized and denigrated by the ecclesiastical authorities, thus placed those who did not want to abandon it in a position of resistance. Currently, this Indigenous religion “combines,” in the words of the residents of the town of La Esperanza, the coexistence of explicitly differentiated religious elements. A *combinarismo* or “combinationism” that, as will become clear, is constitutive of their singular ethic.

In the contemporary era Indigenous groups are (or, until recently, were) speakers of languages spoken by populations that predated the national entity in which they currently find themselves situated (*fourth-world groups*). They thus became involuntary bearers of an alterity that today constitutes Latin American modernity. In Mexico, historical developments placed these groups in a subaltern social position within the national hegemonic society, a situation characterized since colonial times

8 Note that the gender of the noun *costumbre* (custom) in standard Spanish is feminine—*la costumbre*; the usage *el costumbre*, using the masculine article, is distinctive to the Indigenous context. The topic of *el costumbre*, a term designating a body of customary rituals relating to the earth and of paramount importance in this book, will be addressed in depth in chapter 7.

by religious, cultural, and linguistic impositions, with their profound economic and social effects. This “colonial division” can still be observed in a certain sort of Mexican cultural anthropology and its treatment of specific Indigenous cultural practices. Generally, studies in this vein do not address the tension between tradition and modernity. Rather, they explore whether practices considered traditional and observed in contemporary Indigenous religious customs, are pre-Hispanic reminiscences across more than five centuries—later syncretized with Christian elements within a context of resistance—or whether they are cultural survivals rooted in colonial contributions that originated in sixteenth-century popular Catholicism on the Old Continent.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, in both perspectives, whether the emphasis is on continuity or acculturation, the singular ethic of Indigenous groups is always discussed in relationship with a past, a habit that does not seem to prevail in ethnographic studies of ethnic groups from other cultural regions. In analyzing a contemporary Amerindian group, the attempt here will be not to fall into the *denial of coevalness* (Fabian 1983). To avoid that trap, the initial assumption is that the group can develop different and at the same time synchronic world views that allude to other ways of relating to the world and its social order. This position does not imply ignoring possible pre-Hispanic sources of certain observed practices; rather, the emphasis is on the way contemporary actors view those practices.

At first glance, a classic theme of anthropology would appear to be in play, that of the changes experienced by a “traditional Indigenous society” in its march toward “modernity.” From this perspective, modernization is often conceived as an “occidental” process that displaces tradition, which is seen as characteristic of archaic (in contrast with “modern”) societies. With the advance of mechanized, industrial wage labor, along with such phenomena as formal education, commercial exchange, the consumption of manufactured goods, a closer relationship with the state and its agencies, multiparty politics, plurality of opinions and credos, and individuation, comes the loss of certain bodies of knowledge, social practices, and values and the adoption of others as society comes to be organized differently than before. The integration of rural and Indigenous collectivities in these processes of modernization inexorably brings with it, in this view, the loss of their specific cultural traits, since these latter belonged to a system of social organization closely intertwined in the past with a specific agricultural system and to the natural surroundings on which its reproduction depended. These traits, then, are now undergoing processes

9 This debate involves principally researchers who work within autochthonous societies that were subjected to European colonial influence more intensively, and earlier, than was the case with communities in rainforest or desert regions. See, for instance, the special issue of *Diario de Campo* (2007) as well as Medina 2000.

of transformation due to the diversification of sources of income, life divided between country and city, migration, and so forth.<sup>10</sup>

This mono-oriented, assimilationist, and progressive evolutionary approach, pioneered in particular by Robert Redfield (1950), has been strongly criticized for its idealized and hypostatized aspect. Indeed, these distinctive and contrasting characteristics between “traditional” and “modern” societies, ideal types of social systems, simple or complex,<sup>11</sup> have been transformed over time, as James Carrier (1992, 204) emphasizes, into absolute characteristics, in the process essentializing or stereotyping the social groups in question. It is from this perspective that an “orientalist” approach, that is, one that renders collectivities as exotic Others, crystallized into a codified and fixed type considered as a model of reality. Put differently, this opposition between “traditional” and “modern” societies embodies an essentialist approach, a spatio-temporal *othering* that places on one side the “Others” and on the other side “Us.” The “Us,” in this context, is an invention of “Western society” (“Occidentalism”) with the aim of constituting itself in contradistinction to other human groups, situating those groups along an evolutionary span stretching between two imaginary poles—from nature to culture—and always under the idea of progress characteristic of the concept of modernity (Osborne 1992, 75; Wagner 1981).<sup>12</sup>

To avoid this strict opposition between traditional and modern society, but nevertheless without denying historical and cultural difference—whether colonial or (in many cases) existential in nature—it is useful to define the words used to characterize these differences. To begin with, *modernization*, an evolutive process, must be distinguished from *modernity*, an aspirational idea.<sup>13</sup> For Bruno Latour, modernity is the ideal horizon resulting from the social and technological evolution induced by the separation, in the world view of a specific society, between social conventions and external laws of nature (i.e., scientific laws) (Latour 1991). It thus leads to objectification and distancing of natural phenomena, separating them from social rules and values. In other words, modernity is a social ideal in which scientific rationalism predominates, bringing about a critical break with unanimous forms of thought and belief, instead opening up space for individual choice of credo and way of life.

10 For a historical description of the political and economic processes that affected the Mexican countryside beginning in the last decades of the twentieth century, and particularly the Huasteca region, see Ochoa Salas and Pérez Castro 2011. For other regions of Mexico, see, e.g., Baños Ramírez 2003 and Sieglin 2004.

11 These models fit within the dialectical distinctions between types of societies advanced by such classic works as those of Karl Marx on “precapitalist and capitalist societies,” Ferdinand Tönnies on “*Gemeinschaft*” (community) and “*Gesellschaft*” (society), Émile Durkheim on “mechanical and organic societies,” and even Claude Lévi-Strauss on “hot” and “cold” societies.

12 With regard to the questioning of the notion of “Western culture,” see Appiah 2016.

13 See, e.g., the synthesis proposed in this regard by Solé 1998.

## IN SEARCH OF THE LOCAL ETHNOTHEORY OF A SINGULAR ETHIC

This “modern” tendency of separating social life from nature, the human in opposition to other species, as Philippe Descola (2005) reminds us, is just one possible way among others of conceiving the world and its inhabitants, both human and nonhuman. Moreover the world—or, better yet, worlds—as Martin Savransky (2012, 359) adds, “are not there to be represented but are shaped by ongoing negotiations among entities involved in mundane practices.” In this sense, “reality does not precede the mundane practices in which we interact with it, but is rather shaped within these practices” (Mol 1999, 74–75, quoted in Savransky 2012, 360). Understanding these different worlds in the terms appropriate to each is rooted in a translation of ontological categories. An ontology, in this context, is “a fundamental set of understandings about how the world is: what kinds of beings, processes, and qualities could potentially exist and how these relate to each other” (Harris and Robb 2012, 668). In this manner, Descola identified among human societies four great models (“ontologies,” in the sense of systems of qualities) for the grouping of the distinct elements of the world into specific categories: objects and beings, visible and invisible, through four ways of distributing certain types of qualities between humans and nonhumans. These categories are organized according to two notions, which Descola identifies as physicality and interiority, which correspond approximately, and in certain contexts, on the one hand to the body, and on the other to the soul or mind. Thus, in accordance with “modern” thought, the human being differs from other beings or entities in possessing a distinctive interiority, while its physicality is subject to the same “natural” (biological and physical) laws that govern all nonhuman beings. Descola refers to this way of organizing the world as “naturalism”—humans on one side, nature on the other. In the other three models of grouping, social relations also embrace nonhumans, that is, nature is not a domain separate from human social life. Thus, in “animism” it is considered that nonhuman beings, that is, the other existents or living things, have an interiority analogous to that of humans, while their physicality is different. In “totemism” it is considered that all existents share physical and spiritual qualities. Finally, in “analogism”—the model that most closely approaches what can be observed in La Esperanza—it is considered, to the contrary, that every kind of nonhuman existent is different in both its physicality and its interiority, from which springs the need to assemble this universe through a specific relational system.<sup>14</sup> These four ontological models or modes of classification of existents, human and nonhuman, propose schemas for understanding modes of organizing action in the world, each of which, in turn,

14 Alfredo López Austin would characterize this approach more as “socialized animism” (see López Austin 2013b). See also a critical examination of Descola’s analysis in Bartolomé 2015.



generates a singular ethic. In practice—and that, precisely, is the focus this book adopts—depending on the social and historical context, each of these ethics can coexist with others in a hegemonic hierarchy of ontologies, and, of course, they are subject to incessant processes of change.

Understanding naturalism as the foundation of modernity, the generalized use of this last term again becomes problematic since, as Peter Osborne (1992) emphasizes, it consists of the homogenization through abstraction of a form of historical consciousness associated with an array of socially, politically, and culturally heterogeneous processes of change (see also Ariel de Vidas 2006). To grasp the nature of these variations, Osborne continues, we must differentiate the sense of modernity as a chronological category from its sense as a qualitative category, ideological in character, that is to say, a form of social experience to which not all those involved in the processes of modernization subscribe (see also Magazine 2012a). Put differently, *chronological* modernity is not necessarily or intrinsically associated with *qualitative* modernity, a circumstance that allows for the unfolding of varied ways of experiencing contemporary processes of change, including through “traditional” or “nonmodern” (ideologically) ethics. Recognizing this distinction allows us to contemplate the possibility, for a society, of acting in accordance with a variety of different ontological postulates within the “modern” world.

The analytical challenge of this approach lies, therefore, in understanding the modes of societal transition and of conceptual transformation (which will be referred to in this book as “transition-transformation”)<sup>15</sup> or dialectization that these societies display in their interrelations with a hegemonic naturalist ethic that tends to autonomize the economic, political, social, and religious domains (see, e.g., Ariel de Vidas 2008; Vilaça 2015). For this reason, a growing number of researchers, with whom this work stands in dialogue, are no longer satisfied with binary descriptions, suggested by the “tradition-modernity” framework to analyze the cultural differences found in rural or urban areas of Mexico. They examine, rather, the relations between the ethnographic data encountered, not solely in contrast with the pre-Hispanic or colonial past, but also in relational categories connected with the surroundings, both natural and political, categories present not only in the rituals and myths but also in the social relations among humans and between humans

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15 “Transition-transformation” expresses a central theme of this book: Over time, the inhabitants of La Esperanza have experienced *societal transition*—manifold shifts in economic, political, social, cultural, and religious life, whether at the national, regional, or local levels—and have responded to those shifts through a complex and creative process of adaptation. These adaptations have resulted not only in the refashioning of everyday practices, customs, and rituals of all kinds but more profoundly in the reshaping of the local understanding of human life in the world—that is, in *conceptual transformation*.



and nonhumans (see Monaghan 1995). These relational categories make it possible to understand local social ethnotheory, that is, a group's own understanding of itself—what constitutes it, its relationship with the world, its singular ethic, and its differences with respect to other social groups.

This approach touches on the notion of *comunalidad*, or “communality,” developed by a group of Indigenous intellectuals with origins in the state of Oaxaca and gradually spread to other regions peopled by ethnic groups, regions such as la Huasteca, through the work of the Pastoral Indígena (a current within the Catholic Church that recognizes Indigenous religious practices as “seeds of the Word”). It alludes to a set of relationships that includes the earth as well as the humans implicated in these relationships, thus constituting the collective as it is conceived locally. Indigenous communality, as defined by Floriberto Díaz Gómez, is not an “arithmetical” array of individuals (i.e., the sum of the inhabitants of a locality) but rather a “geometric”—that is, relational—one. This notion envisions a space in which the earth is conceived as a place of work and of rituals, both individual and collective.<sup>16</sup> In order to understand this relationship, it is important to grasp what is thought locally of the notions of work and of ritual, closely tied to the idea of the collectivity, both human and nonhuman.

Catharine Good-Eshelman has devoted a number of articles to the Nahuatl notion of “work” (in the Mexican state of Guerrero) as it governs social organization and, underlying the latter, an entire cosmovision that is still very much alive (see, e.g., Good-Eshelman 2015). Cora Govers (2006) investigated how community is performed in a Totonac village of the Sierra Norte de Puebla, revealing the mechanisms implemented locally to build and maintain the shared idea of what a community should be in a context of explosive migratory, political, economic, and religious change. Roger Magazine (2012b) analyzed the *cargos* system and family organization in a “rurban” locality near Mexico City, viewing it as an integrative social system. Marie-Noëlle Chamoux (2011) took on, in a Nahuatl setting in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, linguistic categories denoting local concepts as to what a person is and what makes her interrelate and interact with other existents. Nicolas Ellison (2013) has shown that commercial coffee production in the Totonac villages of the Sierra de Puebla is shaped by the ritual relations they maintain with their natural surroundings and with the multiple entities it contains, surroundings tightly interwoven with the production of the social and with local notions of communality. For his part, Perig Pitrou (2012a) examined the system of offerings among a Mixe group in Oaxaca through the concept of coactivity between humans

16 See, e.g., Díaz Gómez 2001, 2005; Maldonado Alvarado 2003; Martínez Luna 2003.

and nonhumans as reflected in local political and juridical organization.<sup>17</sup> These are some examples, among others, of studies that attempt to grasp the relationship that is interwoven between social, political, and ritual organization and that involves both humans and other beings—that is, what Pitrou (2011) calls the “notion of life” as it is conceptualized in local terms. This approach allows for an appreciation of emic structures that are peculiar to the singular ethic that characterizes these collectives. The modes of appropriation and transmission of these categories relating to communality appear to construct the collective, in its local sense, in which humans and nonhumans take part. In spite of, or perhaps because of, the continuous imposition of other ethics, the practical implementation of these categories, in addition to the internal explanatory structures of their local conceptualizations, are what is at stake in moments of significant structural change—and not the fact that they undergo modification or that they are or may be the hybrid product of influences arising from contact with societies and cultures having different ethics.<sup>18</sup>

Summing up this point, we can affirm that any society should be called “traditional” if by that term we understand the practices that confer meaning, a scale of values, which are its expression within a specific collectivity. The distinctive practices found in each society, typically referred to as “traditions,” should therefore be understood less as a fixed array of shared beliefs and customs transmitted through a common past than as a daily reinterpretation of certain values by the current generation of social actors who practice them. It is not the manner of using the past, or the (in some instances pre-Hispanic) past itself that implants the practices, and therefore the differences between traditional society and modern, but rather a singular ethics that is constantly renewed and that organizes the scale of values and the social sphere peculiar to each group. It is into this ethic, each time it is expressed anew, that we must delve in order to understand the particularity of a collective or its way of distinguishing itself from others. The analytical differentiation between societies is not found, therefore, between “tradition” and “modernity” but rather between each collective’s scale of values, ways of socializing with its human and nonhuman surroundings, and, therefore, its ways of fashioning practices that express those values and ways, dependent at all times on a specific historical context. My previous analysis of a Teenek village in the same region of the Huasteca (Ariel de Vidas 2004) was already pointing in this direction. Nevertheless, in this book we will see how the Nahua singular ethic, founded on modes of sociability quite different from those of their Teenek neighbors, makes it possible to develop a radically different posture in relation to the world beyond the community.

<sup>17</sup> See also Dehouve 2007.

<sup>18</sup> On local conceptualizations of the changes, particularly those involving religion, in a Nahua community in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, see Lupo 2013a.

## APPROACH

The village of La Esperanza does not possess “ancestral” depth. It was formed gradually beginning in the early twentieth century out of individuals from various localities in the region, displaced by the upheavals of the Mexican Revolution.<sup>19</sup> Over time, there was constituted a substantial body of particular customs that today lend the place its specificity, though without any local claim to the antiquity of those customs. Through an analysis of everyday life in La Esperanza, the attempt will be made to analytically transcend the opposition implicit in such binaries as “tradition” vs. “modernity” or “continuity” vs. “acculturation,” focusing rather on the ethic of living together among human neighbors or as humans with other beings. For there exist acting, nonhuman entities, recognized by the community through cycles of ritual exchange. It is in this ethic where the difference can be located with societies in which the adopted scientific rationality expresses no relationship between social rules and the natural order. In La Esperanza, despite its modernization, the scale of values as expressed through sociopolitical and ritual practices privileges certain types of relationships that intertwine the social world and the natural surroundings and that are anchored in specific meanings. As we will see in this book, ritual practices related to the earth are explained in the village as part of a specific relationship that must be maintained with the social and natural surroundings and with all other beings. This relationship brings with it a vision of the world that incorporates into the social realm nonhuman beings who ensure the health of all, the prosperity of the fields and the wells, and the resulting well-being of the individual and the collective. We are in the presence of a complex of shared practices, that is to say, practices that are collectively marked, situated both locally and historically, and that express an interpretation of living in community and a set of values for doing so. We are in the presence, too, of an ethical complex, although the group’s experience is very much affected by its relationships with the world beyond the community, a world governed by other systems of values.

The distinction between the singular ethic of a given *modernized* society (that is, one characterized by a chronological modernity) and that of a *modern* society (marked simultaneously by both chronological *and* ideological modernity) does not imply a compartmentalization between the societies or their respective ethics. There is a mutual interaction between the different scales of values that entails a permanent option of adhering or not to that of the minority (or minoritized) cultural group, which, in addition, is often stigmatized. To grasp the meaning of this singular ethic within the stigmatizing context and to understand how it differs from others, it seems pertinent to inquire into the details of ritual offerings to earth

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19 See further details in chapter 1.

beings. At the same time, it is important to examine how these principles manifest themselves in other social contexts, helping constitute the social unity of which the residents so often speak as distinguishing them from the “Others.” Comprehending this mutual interaction highlights the particularities of the group and allows us to explore the reigning ethic in La Esperanza and its modes of perpetuation as well as its limitations and its degree of resilience.

The eight chapters in the book progressively highlight the principle of the singular ethic that animates social life in La Esperanza. The first, “Where There’s Life, There’s *Esperanza* [Hope],” introduces what archival documents tell us about the history of this village and the local agrarian and political systems dependent on administrative structures located beyond the community. It also describes local economic life, the demographic effects of migration, and the civic-political organization that forms the foundation for the socio-religious configuration that will be described in the subsequent chapters. The second chapter, “The Miracle of the Maize,” recalls a foundational event in the village, one that took place in the middle of the twentieth century and out of which the ritual practices central to local religious and collective life were forged. The analysis of this event, contextualized within a particular historical moment, allows us to understand the close interrelation between symbolic representations and environmental, economic, political and social circumstances. The third chapter, “The Three Layers,” relates ritual practices, following the day-to-day tasks of healers (*curanderos*) in their intimate relationship with the La Esperanza *cerro*. It is through the personal practices of ritual officiants that other rites conducted in the village are forged as they unfold socially and spatially, integrating in this way various social, human, and nonhuman realms. The fourth chapter, “Fulfilling the Covenant,” details how the ritual of the *cerro* is reproduced through its declensions across the array of individual and family rituals, propitiatory as well as expiatory, that secure the inhabitants’ means of subsistence, the promises both prospective and retroactive, and the rituals of healing. To these rituals are called *compadres*, *comadres*, and other residents, who participate actively in their performance, since it is a matter of simultaneously activating the “work-power” sought of humans and nonhumans. The fifth chapter, “On Earth as It Is in Heaven,” analyzes how the common background of the rituals mentioned above is overlaid onto Catholic liturgical practice surrounding the crucial moments of life passage, that is, the rituals relating to birth, marriage, and death. The sixth chapter, “The Patronal Festival: The Patron and the Pattern,” analyzes how the same principle that underlies all of the individual and family rituals is further amplified at the collective level through the patronal festival (*fiesta patronal*). This festival brings together all of the rituals performed in the village throughout the year in a fusion of the political and the religious that forges community. To conclude the

ethnographic and analytical demonstration of rituals, the seventh chapter, “Flowers Are the Most Important Thing of All,” examines the role of blossoms, a marked presence in both religious and civic rituals. The chapter shows how their powerful symbolic charge creates a “flower principle” deeply intertwined with the Nahuatl concept of power and work, which in the end facilitates ritual activation and, through it, the particular form of community unity so valued by the inhabitants. The eighth chapter, “The Earth Unites Us and Custom Brings Us Together,” analyzes the status of customs in the modality of “*el costumbre*” born in the colonial era. At the same time, the chapter explores the processes of transition-transformation that convert customary practices into “traditions” through the politics of ecclesiastical and other institutional recognition—but also by means of historical changes that modify the inhabitants’ intrinsic relationship with the earth, the basic foundation of the rituals analyzed in the book.

The concluding chapter, “The Tepas Are Bilingual,” summarizes the analysis of the nature of community unity as posited by the villagers through their civic and cultural life. Common property in land and the collective labor that gives access to it, as well as the ties of affinity and *compadrazgo*, are bound up in La Esperanza with the local conception of the earth and its beings to create an axis of shared life—or a “center,” to use the language of Martin Buber (2018), within the community’s own space. Those components, activated in the everyday life of the villagers, in the end bestow on them their framework of identification in relation to the world beyond the community in which they are irretrievably enmeshed.

The simultaneity of meanings and practices across different religious horizons—characteristic of analogical ontological systems—thus enables us to transcend the “tradition-modernity” dichotomy. Instead, it can be proposed that rituals—far from being conservationist type practices, are, rather, vital elements in the processes that make and remake social facts and collective identification within a plural and ever-changing social and political environment.

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This admitted simultaneity of meanings, which forges the singular ethic of La Esperanza, was remarked on by an elder in a rain petition ritual that invoked Catholic saints while offerings were left to the earth: “Everything comes from the earth. Water falls from the sky, but it’s the earth that gives it its savor.” Let us turn now to how the inhabitants of La Esperanza set out to join these relationships together: the one with the earth and the one with the sky.