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# TERRITORIES OF WATER AND SAND. THE CONFIGURATION OF THE HUAVE TERRITORY BETWEEN TIME AND SPACE IN SAN MATEO DEL MAR, OAXACA, MEXICO

TERRITORIOS DE AGUA Y ARENA. LA  
CONFIGURACIÓN DEL TERRITORIO HUAVE ENTRE  
EL TIEMPO Y EL ESPACIO EN SAN MATEO DEL  
MAR, OAXACA, MÉXICO

TERRITÓRIOS DE ÁGUA E AREIA. A  
CONFIGURAÇÃO DO TERRITÓRIO HUAVE ENTRE  
TEMPO E ESPAÇO EM SAN MATEO DEL MAR,  
OAXACA, MÉXICO



**Figure 0.** Wind farm landscape  
seen from Santa Maria Xadani at  
one end of the lagoon. Source:  
Author's archive, 2023

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## RESUMEN

El pueblo huave de San Mateo del Mar, Oaxaca, está ubicado en la barra de arena dentro de la zona lagunar del istmo de Tehuantepec. Desde una aproximación de metodología horizontal, a través de la teoría fundamentada se identificaron diversas categorías y una de ellas es el territorio, que, a partir de su geografía lagunar, dio origen a un tejido tangible e intangible entre el tiempo y el espacio, a través de las relaciones entre el agua, la arena, los vientos y las estrellas, creando una cosmovivencia y convivialidad que aún persiste en nuestros días, y que se manifiesta en el habitar a través de la pesca, la fiesta y la vivienda. En situaciones muy particulares de esta cultura, entidades naturales transforman el territorio y permiten nombrar paisajes ancestrales de sublime poética. Esta manera de habitar entre el agua y la arena es la materialización de los procesos de territorialización de una cultura como la huave/ikoots.

**Palabras clave:** territorio, arquitectura vernácula, patrimonio material e inmaterial, teoría fundamentada.

## ABSTRACT

The Huave town of San Mateo del Mar, Oaxaca, is located on the sand bar in the Tehuantepec isthmus's lagoon area. Diverse categories were identified using a horizontal methodology approach and grounded theory. One of them is the territory, which, from its lagoon geography, gave rise to a tangible and intangible fabric between time and space through the relationships between water, sand, winds, and stars, creating a cosmo-existence and conviviality that persists today, manifesting itself in living through fishing, partying, and housing. These are particular situations of this culture that, through the natural entities, transform the territory and allow the naming of ancestral landscapes of the poetic sublime. This way of living between water and sand is the materialization of a culture's territorialization processes, particularly the huave/ikoots.

**Keywords:** territory, vernacular architecture, tangible and intangible heritage, grounded theory

## RESUMO

A aldeia Huave de San Mateo del Mar, Oaxaca, está localizada em um banco de areia dentro da área lacustre do Istmo de Tehuantepec. A partir de uma abordagem metodológica horizontal, por meio da teoria fundamentada, foram identificadas várias categorias, uma das quais é o território, que, com base em sua geografia lacustre, deu origem a um tecido tangível e intangível entre o tempo e o espaço, por meio das relações entre água, areia, ventos e estrelas, criando uma cosmovivência e convivência que ainda hoje persiste, que se manifesta no habitar por meio da pesca, dos festivais e da moradia. Em situações muito particulares dessa cultura, entidades naturais transformam o território e permitem nomear paisagens ancestrais de poética sublime. Esse modo de habitar entre a água e a areia é a materialização dos processos de territorialização de uma cultura como a dos Huave/ikoots.

**Palavras-chave:** território, arquitetura vernacular, patrimônio tangível e intangível, teoria fundamentada.

## INTRODUCTION

### THE MAREÑA LIFE OF THE HUAVES OF SAN MATEO DEL MAR, OAXACA.

The municipality of San Mateo del Mar is located on the sandbar to the south of the Laguna Mayor of the Tehuantepec isthmus in Oaxaca, Mexico. This is the municipal seat and houses settlements, neighborhoods, branches, and communities that have broken away from the original or foundational people (Bailón, 2001), which originates when the Huave/*ikoots* divided into four large groups, giving rise to San Francisco del Mar, San Dionisio del Mar, Santa Maria del Mar, and San Mateo del Mar, all around the lagoons of the isthmus. San Mateo del Mar, or *Tikambaj*, as its inhabitants call it in Huave (*ombeayiüts*), the native language, has existed for more than 500 years according to some oral chronicles of its inhabitants, who claim that they came by sea from distant lands in the south and that they populated the entire Isthmian territory lagoon (García Souza, 2017), from the rugged mountains to the coast. Their language has no linguistic kinship with another language in Mexico, making them carriers of unique knowledge in Isthmian life and an equally unique world vision.

The geographical condition of this place in the sandbar somehow evokes a body of sand crossed by water; an island, of an infinite horizontal landscape bordered by sea mist and that see, in the distance, the sacred lagoon of the north (Lower Lagoon) and the dead Sea (Upper Lagoon) that, in Huave/*ombeayiüts*, are named *kalüyndek* and *Tsolyüw*, respectively (Tallé, 2020). The mountains that give rise to the upper part of the isthmus can be glimpsed in front of them as the large fans of red windmills that Don Quixote himself would lash out

**Figure 1.** Map of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, pinpointing San Mateo del Mar. Source: Preparation by the Laboratory of Traditional Construction Procedures and Systems (LABPYSCT), 2023. Based on an aerial image taken from Google Earth.



at, and that has transformed the lagoon landscape in search of an environmental responsibility that should be reviewed.

On the other hand, the dominance of winds that enter from the south (*kwak*), bringing rain from the coming together of the white woman (*Müm Nucherrec*) and the north wind (*Teat lünd*) (García Souza, 2017), is part of the temporary markers that change the seasons (Campos, 2016) and determine the daily life of the Huaves/*ikoots*. In another season, the force of the north winds changes those activities in the dry season. This force slowly advances the sand dunes over the sandbar, transforming the landscape into great desert expanses (Tallé, 2020).

In the vastness of the living sea to the south, the Pacific Ocean (*Nadam ndek*) is where the most skilled fishers throw their kites to the wind in the dry season when fish and shrimp are scarce in the lagoons. These cross the sky and meet schools of fish, and at the appropriate distance offshore, they drop the net they carry as a passenger to collect the catch in a strong and violent sea. From the shore, on the sand, they pull the ropes that weave the net until they manage to take out the precious fish that will feed families or be sold in the market.

Meanwhile, the misty limits of the east (*nonüt*) and west (*noleat*) give rise to the vast body of sand and earth, where the other activities marked by the walking of the sun and the moon are configured (Lupo, 1991), with livestock and agriculture being the main ones. Both activities configured the territory in the past (Zizumbo & Colunga, 1982b), and now they have lost teachers and apprentices transforming the way of living in the sandbar.

The rain and dry cycles mainly govern marine life in San Mateo del Mar since the transformation of the territory from the presence of water is very marked, both in the sandbar and the lagoon area. This, in turn, marks the possibility of carrying out productive and ceremonial activities throughout these cycles. The presence of water in the sandbar generates significant changes in the landscape, mobility, and daily activities. The emergence of these water bodies, in some points of the territory, is determined by their location and relationship with the high or low ground, giving rise to saltwater bodies such as the southern lagoon or Quirio Lagoon (*kawak ndek*) and other freshwater ones like a shoal that they call *wajyow* (water at the nape of the village), (Tallé, 2020).

It is seen that the territory is configured by these liquid presences and their relationship with the sand bodies that make up the bar, as well as the transformative and mobile presence of the sand dunes that roam the bar, driven by the force of the north winds, has already in the past generated the abandonment of houses and villages because it devours them and leaves them hidden within its sandy body.



**Figure 2.** Boats without water in the Quirio Lagoon (kawakndek).  
Source: Prepared by LABPYSCT, 2023



These geographical and climatic conditions have given rise to the Huave/*ikoots* culture of San Mateo del Mar, particular and very different from the other three Huave peoples of the region, generating domestic landscapes of a lot of privacy and intimacy through the delimitation of the plots (*nden*) (Diedbold, 1966), using natural reed fences that defend from the strong winds and keep the eyes of curious people away from the heart of the palm houses (*iümnit*). (Herrera & Hernández, 2017).

The rainy and dry cycles have shaped Huave/*ikoots* life in two large groups, the first related to the economic and productive part due to its relationship with fishing, and the second with ceremonial or religious activities. These are ordered for the process of requesting rain, well-being, and abundance for all the inhabitants (Campos, 2016), a task that will be entrusted to the cloud-body men (*mombasoic*), the religious hierarchy, and the *montag ombas* (those of the large body) (Millán, 2007; Ramírez, 2009), the civil authority, who are in charge of offering and making the petitions together with the inhabitants and their saints,



among the waves of the living sea that reach the beach, on the shore that joins the water and the sand. (García Souza, 2017)

The set of social, political, religious, productive, and cultural aspects have given rise to and traced the way, making the most of an adverse wasteland, appropriating the good things of the place, and gradually transforming the bad ones. These practices have marked the territory, leaving traces and indications in many ways, but always guided by the lunar and celestial time (Lupo, 1991).

These conditions of the sea-based territory have brought wind energy companies closer (Zanotelli & Tallé, 2019) to install several wind farms in the region, transforming the landscape and contributing to the change of routes of some of the region's birds and their nesting places. It is also a point of conflict between the communities, as some have benefited but have lost the use and transit of their territory, altering how they inhabit the region that not only impacts the Huaves/*ikoots* (Zanotelli & Tallé, 2019), Montesi, 2022), but also other neighboring municipalities that have yielded to the pressure of these companies and have pawned their territory for a century, establishing contradictions between their own landscape, full of symbolism and relations with culture, and the other vision, where the environmental benefit is the flag in the occupation of a territory whose use does not immediately consider the inhabitants (Zanotelli & Tallé, 2019).

**Figure 3.** Wind farm landscape seen from Santa Maria Xadani at one end of the lagoon. Source: Author's archive, 2023

## METHODOLOGY

### RECOGNIZING LIVING AND THE TERRITORY BETWEEN THE WATER AND THE SAND.

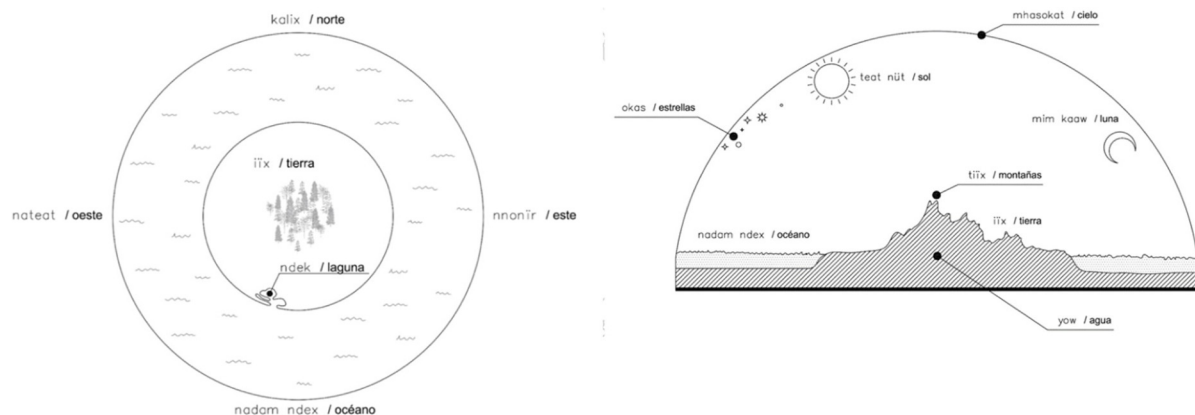
To recognize and characterize the living of the Huave/*ikoots* community of San Mateo del Mar, visits and stays were made that allowed carrying out fieldwork in different seasons over nine years, interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and a strong confrontation among the same community, which had a disastrous outcome and that strongly marked them.

On the other hand, the review of documentary material provides indications and inquiries from multiple contexts and disciplines on how the territory, housing, daily activities, and religious festivities are organized, allowing crossing information in a more complete and complex way through seminar discussion and contributions on maps, product of participatory cartographies (Castaño-Aguirre et al., 2021) and photographic records, as evidence of the phenomena on how original peoples live, from their system of beliefs and actions concerning the marine environment, where the Huave culture and the Isthmian territory have been shaped symbiotically (Ingold, 2002).

In 2021, the transdisciplinary CONACYT boundary science project, "Study of the philosophy of the original peoples to inhabit the territory. Cultural landscape, vernacular and biocultural knowledge," started. They have been discussing the different phenomena of living and territory from a horizontal methodology (Corona, 2019) and grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2002), which throw out some codes and categories that have been explored from a holistic view, as several of the categories and codes are intertwined because life is not fragmented. However, everything is a set of actions and beliefs that configure the inhabiting of and appropriate territory (Giglia, 2012).

Within the different categories that emerged from the horizontal methodology and the grounded theory is the territory, territoriality, and territorialization (Castaño-Aguirre et al., 2021), which will be the subject of this article, as the particularities of their belief systems and the characteristics in how the Huaves/*ikoots* of San Mateo del Mar have lived, and have managed to appropriate a wild and abandoned place, which in previous centuries, other native peoples despised. For those same characteristics of the territory, the Huaves/*ikoots* were displaced to this inhospitable region throughout their history, first by the Zapotecs and later by the Spaniards (Bailón, 2001), thus giving a very particular sea-based culture, due to their relationship between the lagoons of the isthmus of Tehuantepec and the enormous forces of the Pacific Ocean or *Nadamndek*, the great sacred sea in *ombeayüts* (Tallé, 2020).

Through the maps, drawings, and photographs made with members of the community, interviews, and workshops, the manifestations of the processes of territorialization and territoriality were recorded, which configure and establish order and a sense in the territory from the inhabiting of the Huaves/*ikoots* of San Mateo del Mar.



## TIME, SPACE, WATER, AND SAND IN THE CONCEPTION OF HUAVE OF SAN MATEO DEL MAR LIVING.

“The world is round like a coin; the sky is like a gourd upside down over the world. And through the inside of that gourd pass the sun, the moon, and the stars. There is no more room below the world; there is a tall, long girl named jal nüch. She carries the Earth; when she gets tired, she settles down, and that’s why she trembles. When she trembles, they don’t get scared; they just say that the girl is making herself comfortable.”  
(Ramírez, 2009, pp. 14-15)

The presence of Huaves/*ikoots* in the lagoon area of the Tehuantepec isthmus, mainly on the sandbar facing the sea, has generated a reticular layout of the town. This is not only the organization of the plots (*nden*) related to the water bodies that cross it, but it also has the reference between the relation of the village and the water bodies at its northern (*kalüy*) and southern (*kawak*) ends. This is due to their absolute frame of reference, which they have to locate themselves in the world (Campos, 2016), namely, based on their relationship with the world and the different directions it comprises, and not as an anthropocentric reference, as they are named that way; north heading-*kalüy*, south heading-*kawak*, east heading-*nonüt* and west heading-*noleat*, configuring a first mesh in the territory, where elements such as water, animals, trees, plants, mountains, wind, rain, the way of the moon, the way of the sun and the way of the winds are related; where everyone acquires a sense or direction depending on the phenomenon that moves them, for example, the north wind (*teat iünd*). Its direction goes from north to south, and with its 120 km/hr. force, it mobilizes the sand dunes (*wiüd*). It is said that its forehead (*ombas*) or face, goes to the south and its back (*pech*) to the north (Tallé, 2020). This follows the system of meronyms<sup>1</sup>, where they give characteristics of body parts, metaphors, or geometric projections to every entity with which they relate. From this condition of identity that the artifacts and the ecofacts have (Pérez De Micou, 2013), from the Huave vision/*ikoots*, we can also talk about the presence of agents and agencies (Ingold, 2007), which are considered by the native peoples in a

## RESULTS

**Figur 4.** Representation of the sky, according to the Ikoots concepts. Based on Alessandro Lupo. Source: Prepared by the Author, 2019

<sup>1</sup> Meronyms are terms that lexicalize parts of objects as such. That is to say, it has the part-all relationship as part of its meaning. In Mesoamerica, meronyms are often terms for body parts, but they can also refer to geometric features of objects and spatial regions. In Huave, meronyms are parts of the body; therefore, they behave in some way like them. (but not for counting).  
(Herrera, 2013)



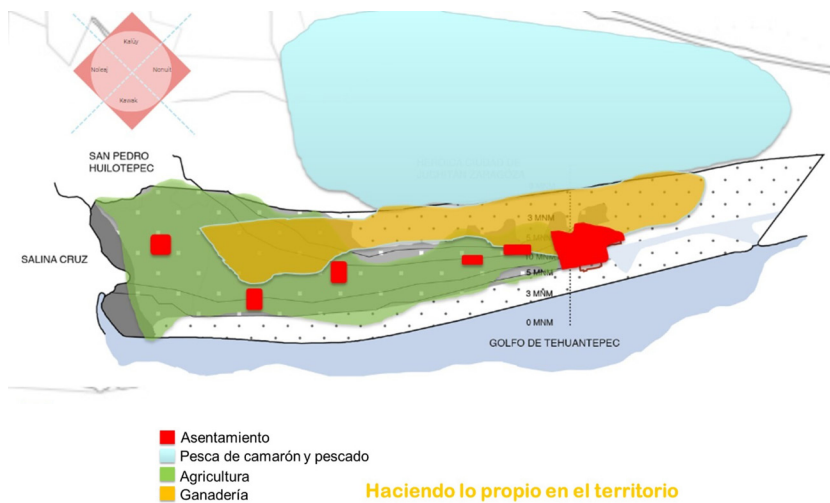
**Figure 5.** San Mateo del Mar in the rainy season. Source: Campos, 2016. Sound Symbol



more everyday and ancestral way, unlike the Central European vision, that is, the otherness generated from everyday coexistence. Through what the language or Huave language *ombeayiüts* has, these characteristics talk about what surrounds them and thus build a cosmo-experience and conviviality where all the worlds are touched, as mentioned by S. Yampara (2011).

The dual force is vital for the Huaves/*ikoots* within his cosmo-experience (P.Yampara, 2019), since it maintains the balance between the parts. Social practices are governed following this conception, where the masculine is associated with the north (*kalüy*), with the cold, the dry, and the lightning, and the feminine is associated with the south (*kawak*), the humid, the warm, and the wind. In both cases, these are concepts linked to the natural elements involved, in rain and water processes, which transform the landscape at each change of cycle and open the door to different activities that are done in the previous cycle. (Campos, 2016). The dual condition is so important that when a baby or a new member is born, the placenta is buried in the plot depending on the sex according to the corresponding direction. The pantheon of the south side is destined for women, and the north side is destined for men. This also contributes to the conception of the complementary dualities of balance, a concept present in many of the original peoples of Mexico (León-Portilla, 1980; P.Yampara, 2019).

On the other hand, the presence of cycles is something very marked in the daily life of San Mateo del Mar's Huaves/*ikoots*, since they are the ones that maintain the balance between rains and droughts, agricultural activities and fishing activities (Zizumbo & Colunga, 1982a), in addition to marking the end and beginning of religious festivities, an issue that has been diminishing with the presence of religions other than Catholicism. These have disrupted these festive activities, which go beyond the Judeo-Christian cults, but rather a syncretism of the Mesoamerican practices of the Huaves/*ikoots* in their conception of the relationship with the world.



**Figure 6.** Configuration of the territory. (2023) Source: Preparation by the Author.

These cycles are so important that good living or living healthily depends on them (*monapaküy*) (Tallé, 2020.), given their close relationship with the productive activities that feed the population, such as spiritual food and participating in religious holidays.

At the same time, the cycles also mark the territory with time and space because, with the presence and absence of rain, the landscape is transformed significantly; not only the limited vegetation that lives on the sandbar but also large bodies of water appear that you can even navigate. Some change the roads, going from one side of San Mateo del Mar to the other. Depending on these aquatic presences and the amount of rain, these bodies of water also become conducive or not to shrimp (*tixem*) and mullet (*mil*) fishing, also linked to the lunar time that makes the tides of the ocean and the lagoons coincide, giving way to the arrival of shrimp into the lagoons and water bodies that are formed during the rainy season along the sandbar. Within lunar cycles, three times are considered; from dusk to dawn, the new moon and the full moon, since, years ago on fishing nights, they marked the rhythm of work with the atarraya and the chinchorro for fishermen who were great celestial observers (Lupo, 1991). On the other hand, the full moon changes the tides in the sea, and the lagoons illuminate the night paths to go to Tehuantepec and Salina Cruz (García Souza, 2017) and promote night activities by moonlight for the families of San Mateo del Mar. These encounters, between time and space, are also borders for social and economic activities since setting the time from the Huave/*ikoots* cosmo-experience implies a way to enter into synergy with the world. For the Huaves/*ikoots*, time belongs to God, while the activities that are carried out in the territory, such as fishing, agriculture, or others, are governed by respect and synchronicity with the other worlds, marking the territory (S. Yampara, 2001) through the presence of the cayucos, the sticks for the nets, the fishermen's shelters, and which act as processes of territorialization. In other words, how they have appropriated the territory tangibly and reciprocally, with the inhabitants and the environment coexisting synchronously.

**Figure 7.** House in San Mateo del Mar. (2023) Source: Personal file of the Author.

**Figure 8.** Routes of the pilgrimages on the feast of Candlemas (female) and Corpus Christi (male) Source: Prepared by LABPYSCT, 2023



In its layout, the village's reticular network has the particularity of building a series of corridors or walkways that run east (*nonüt*) to west (*noleat*) to connect the central and oldest parts of the village. These corridors are crossed by the living fences of trees, shrubs, or reeds that make up the boundaries of the plots (*ndén*) and the houses, generating a protection mechanism for the inhabitants (Herrera & Hernández, 2017) that, in the dry season, while the sand moves with the strong north wind at high speed, can hurt the inhabitants. These corridors, in turn, offer a pedestrian mobility system, which is used more intensively in the dry cycle without disturbing the privacy and intimacy of the daily life of the inhabitants of the central area of San Mateo del Mar.

As part of the participatory mapping work (Castaño-Aguirre et al., 2021), a network of crosses was found around the central hub of the town of San Mateo del Mar; referring to how its inhabitants protect the town from the devil. This series of red crosses are used as places of prayer but also

to make offerings, identified as markings on the territory, which establish a boundary, a central body (*ombas*) with the church as the head (*omal*) (Tallé, 2004; García Souza, 1999), for the town of San Mateo del Mar (Millán, 2007), from where the rest of the town is organized from the plot (*ndén*). This is the basic family unit, which grows like arms and legs in the territory, giving rise to the neighborhoods that make up the founding village (Diedbold, 1966). At the same time, this network of crosses serves as a spatial limit for the pilgrimages of the saints, who only go out to tour the central part of the town; a boundary that is only passed when they perform the ritual of asking for rain at the seashore, which is one of the most important in the Huave */ikoots* calendar.

It was seen that a phenomenon happens in the streets of the center of San Mateo del Mar during the feast of Corpus Christi in Holy Week, according to the Catholic calendar. Three ephemeral constructions that are ideally located appear in the middle, as they have the preparation for the setting of pitchforks, which will give body to the *Ninemok*. These stations are built for the pilgrimage, set up and dismantled in one day, with the region's traditional palm (*nit*) construction techniques (Ingold, 2012). It is also important to mention that this ephemeral architecture arrived much earlier than the streets, since the road is barely 15 years old, accelerating the transformation process of San Mateo del Mar.

Therefore, these are a brief account of the phenomena of time and space, which give rise to the appropriation and configuration of the territory in a cyclical and changing way with each season, between the mixture of social, productive, and religious activities, where territorialization is part of the process in the way of inhabiting the sandbar and water.

## THE TERRITORIES CONFIGURED BY LIVING BETWEEN TIME AND SPACE IN SAN MATEO DEL MAR.

We can start by considering one of the most complex concepts or categories, which is the territory, from which several phenomena arise that intrinsically relate it to other elements of the sea-based culture of the isthmus of Tehuantepec.

The territory can be considered a multidimensional category that links appropriation and identification with a physical space and delves into everyday social, political, and symbolic constructions (Illicachi, 2014).

For the Huaves/*Ikoots*, the territory is as follows, according to the Atlas of Place names of the *ikoots* of San Mateo del Mar, made by Tallé (2020):

*IÜT*

*Niüng akül wüx meawan leaw almajlüy, palpalwüx nipilan, xiül, soex. Alkiqaj nadam kambaj, nine kambaj, rüñch, korrül, at ndek nine ndek, nadam ndek. Ajlüy arej ombas iüt: wiüüd, chikot iüt, ndeor.*

## DISCUSSION



Land, terrain

“Where everything that exists lives, different types of people, animals, trees and plants. There are big and small towns, ranches, corrals, seas, lagoons, and oceans. There are three forms of earth: sand, friable earth, and mud” (Tallé, 2020, p. 12).

Through this definition, we can find the essence of the way to relate and consider everything that surrounds them, entering the complex dimension of cosmo-experience and conviviality that S.Yampara (2011) borrows from the Andean perspective, and states that there are four worlds living in parallel and that all have beings, presences, and entities with which we coexist when that coexistence occurs respectfully, a situation shared by the Mesoamerican indigenous peoples, and in this case the huaves/*ikoots* from San Mateo del Mar (P. Yampara, 2015), in addition to constituting a natural eco-biotic community, that breaks with colonial thinking about the relationship with nature, and reinforces the practice of coexistence among all those who inhabit the universe of the sandbar and the sacred seas, as proposed by S.Yampara (2016), hence the importance of doing it from, or from the colonial-thought (Boaventura de Sousa, 2010).

At the same time, these daily practices and habits (Heidegger, 1997; Azevedo Salomao, 2010; Giglia, 2012) shape the way of living in this place of water and sand, generating actions on the material space (territorialization), transforming it according to the way they perceive the territory (territoriality), thus generating a particular symbiosis between the inhabitants and their natural environment. (Ingold, 2002; S.Yampara, 2001)

On the other hand, these networks or meshes that are woven between the different beings that inhabit the territory, a widespread practice among the original peoples of Mesoamerica and of which there are few ancestral documentary records, although there is enough ethnographic documentation preserved today, they can be referred to the explanations that he raises (Ingold, 2002; Ingold, 2007; Ingold, 2012) in his different publications about inhabiting, where this consideration of agents and agencies arises, in how the territory is transformed with the presence since human beings are conditioned by their relationship with the territory, from this approach for new anthropology (Ingold, 2002), where it is possible to systematize how the relationship of the worlds of P. Yampara (2015) and the local presence of San Mateo del Mar is recorded.

CONCLUSIONS

The way the territory of San Mateo del Mar is configured seems obvious. However, the depth of these decisions by the community is based on centuries of inhabiting the sandbar flanked by the seas, where the syncretic practices of five centuries of living have been transformed as everyday life has been, and where there is a risk of the disappearance of their cosmovision, due to the loss of traditional knowledge, the force of nature, through climate change, the exploitation and pollution of aquifers that have marked the last twenty years of San Mateo del Mar.

It is evident that, faced with a landscape that transforms cyclically into territories of sand and water; its identity is built from the stars, the lunar and the solar paths, which are presences that do not leave or transform but instead, have accompanied the Huave/*ikoots* culture of San Mateo del Mar for centuries, now in the face of light pollution, the forgetting of the language *ombeayüts*, the changes in the designation of authorities, among other situations that currently affect greetings and learning, is at risk of losing ancestral knowledge, to navigate and walk among the landscapes of *Tikambaj*.

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