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Music, Participation, and the Mountain: Rain Ceremonies in Chicontepec, Veracruz, Mexico

Verónica Pacheco (University of California, Los Angeles)

Resumen

En los pueblos Nahuas del Norte de Veracruz, México, la música ritual está entrelazada en las ceremonias agrícolas, en donde los devotos piden al paisaje natural y las montañas sagradas que provean con lluvia y otros beneficios. Este artículo examina los aspectos participativos de estructuras musicales largas en el contexto ceremonial. Argumento que la experiencia de las secuencias de tales estructuras musicales habilita la interacción entre individuos así mismo entre congregaciones y los entes sobrenaturales que habitan montañas, vertientes de agua, y cuevas. A través de análisis musical, entrevistas, y descripciones de la vida secular y religiosa, este artículo muestra que los aspectos participativos del performance musical refuerzan el concepto local de reciprocidad comunal ya que los participantes trabajan conjuntamente para asegurar bienestar individual y colectivo.

Palabras clave

Música ritual Nahua, música participativa, secuencias musicales, paisaje natural, reciprocidad comunitaria

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Abstract

In the Nahua towns of Northern Veracruz, Mexico, ritual music is rooted in agricultural ceremonies, where the practitioners ask the natural landscape and sacred mountains to provide rain and other benefits. This article examines the participatory aspects of large musical structures in this ceremonial context. I argue that the experience of such musical sequence enables interactions between individuals as well as between the congregation and the supernatural that inhabits mountains, springs, and caves. Through musical analysis, interviews, and descriptions of secular and religious life, this article shows that the participatory aspects of musical performance reinforce the local concept of communal reciprocity as participants work together to secure individual and collective wellbeing.

Keywords

Nahua ritual music, participatory music, musical sequences, natural landscape, communal reciprocity.

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Music, Participation, and the Mountain: Rain Ceremonies in Chicontepec, Veracruz, Mexico

Verónica Pacheco (University of California, Los Angeles)

Music is integral to the rituals of the corn and rain cycles in the Nahuatl towns of Chicontepec de Tejedá Municipality, Veracruz, Mexico. In the local religion, *la costumbre* (lit. “the custom”), marking the beginning of the cycles, is inaugurated by two rain ceremonies, in which the organization of the musical pieces create a large musical structure. My focus in this article is to examine the participatory aspects resulting from the experience of this musical sequence throughout the performance of the *chicomexochitl* (lit. “seven-flower”), one of the rain ceremonies offered to the mountains. The rain ceremonies are prominent at the south site of the municipality where the Postectli Mountain, a ceremonial center, is located. In several Nahuatl towns in this area, I traced principles of participation—which I denominate communal reciprocity—in religious and secular settings to illustrate how the experience of sound, the musical elements, and the musical sequences highlight cooperation that govern interactions not only among the people, but also between congregations and the supernatural that inhabits the natural landscape.



Figure 1: Musicians leading the procession to the Postectli Mountain during a *chicomexochitl* ceremony, Ixcacuatila (Photograph by Veronica Pacheco, February 2011).

Similar to other indigenous societies in Mesoamerica, the inhabitants of the Nahuatl towns in Chicontepec have an ancient relationship with the natural landscape, where mountains, springs, and caves have been, and still are, the foci of religious ceremonies. In the social economy, the major interaction with the natural landscape is still taking place in order to secure rain and wellbeing for the people in the towns.

Numerous studies of indigenous music have shown that music is utilized to communicate with the supernatural (Olsen 1996, 2000; Roseman 1984, 1990, 1991). While contributing to this literature of music and sound in indigenous ritual settings, I further elucidate how the experience of the musical sequence is inextricable from the local concept of cooperation as an essential element for a successful ceremony. Moreover, the pieces in the sequence consist of small melodic phrases of one or two units carried in the violin and rhythmically accompanied by the *jarana* (small guitar) and *huapanguera* (large guitar).¹ There are no lyrics and the sound of a bell and a rattle are constantly employed throughout the pieces, while the participants dance in turn. The musical

¹ This instrumentation corresponds to the Huastecan trio, which is used in *son huasteco*, the most prominent regional musical genre in the area.

analysis below shows how both rhythmic and melodic elements in repetition create cyclical structures with ostinato rhythmic accompaniments. I argue that these features of the musical elements further facilitate participation. Therefore, in order to explicate the characteristics of Nahua ritual music in the chicomexochitl ceremony and its relevance to life in these towns, I propose to explore the large musical structure as a participatory synchronized activity, where the meaning attributed to the performance and the relevance of the order of the pieces are essential for the sequence's effectiveness. This approach combines insights about participatory music performance examined by Thomas Turino (2008), and the effectiveness of musical sequences analyzed by John Blacking (1967, 1973) and Anthony Seeger (2013).

Several researchers have noted the role of Nahua music in enabling participation in religious ceremonies (Gómez Martínez 2012; Nava Vite 2012; Sandstrom 2005). Following the same line of inquiry, I use here "participatory music" to refer to the way that people interrelate with the musical performance in synchrony, either by playing (in the Huastecan trio, shaking the bell, and the rattle), dancing, or listening. Even if the musical performance shares conceptualizations of active interaction that take place in performative musical events between the performers, the public, and others involved (see Small 1998 for the concept of *musicking*), it also presents characteristics of particular synchronization in the performance (Turino 2008). I concur with Turino that synchronization in musical performance creates a sense of belonging for groups actively engaged in music making, where cyclical structures and ostinato melodic and rhythmic patterns are active, integrative characteristics of "participatory music" (ibid.: 29-50). In the chicomexochitl ceremony, synchronization takes place when people dance or shake a bell and a rattle, attentively listen to the music as they partake in specific events and tasks, or pace their walking to the rhythm of the music while embarking on a pilgrimage to the mountain summit. The synchronization is further a result of the effective music structure in this rain ceremony.

The Nahua towns of Chicontepec

The Nahua towns of Chicontepec de Tejeda Municipality are located in Northern Veracruz in an area known as the Huasteca.² The municipality encompasses 332 rural Nahua towns with populations that vary between a hundred and a thousand people. While some inhabitants are Nahuatl monolinguals, the majority speaks both Nahuatl and Spanish.³ The Huastecan Nahuatl is one of the eastern variants spoken in more than fifty municipalities in the states of San Luis Potosí, Hidalgo, and Veracruz (Valle Esquivel 2003), where the highest percentage of speakers reside in Chicontepec (INEGI 2010).

In 2010 and 2011, I conducted a multi-sited (Marcus 1998) ethnomusicological research project in the Nahua towns of Ixcacuatitla, Tepeica, Alaxtitla, Tepecxitla, and Tepeco. These towns are located in the south side of Chicontepec and in proximity to the Postectli Mountain, one of the ceremonial centers of the area. I primarily followed musical performances in ceremonies of the religious calendar in private and public settings, healing rituals, and rites of passage. Although I moved around, I was based in the town of Ixcacuatitla, located at the foothills of the Postectli Mountain (see Fig. 2), which enabled me to witness the involvement of several Nahua, Otomí, and Tepehua speaking people in the religious life surrounding the Mountain. The ceremonies dedicated to the natural landscape and associated with the corn and rain cycles were some of the most prominent public gatherings.

² The Huasteca region extends throughout the Mexican states of Tamaulipas, San Luis Potosí, Veracruz, Hidalgo, Querétaro, and Puebla.

³ Nahuatl is a Uto-Aztecan language spoken by approximately 1.5 million people, the largest ethnolinguistic group in Mexico (INEGI 2010).



Figure 2: Ixcacuatitla town on the foothill of the Postectli Mountain (Photograph by Veronica Pacheco, March 2010).

At the time of my visit, Ixcacuatitla had a population of 677 people.⁴ The town is divided into two political organizations—Ixcacuatitla and Ixcacuatitla Los Pinos—and both follow the traditional *usos y costumbres* (lit. “uses and customs”) system of local governance. Under this system, every male member of the town over the age of eighteen occupies a political position in a hierarchical order. Furthermore, every man and woman, as representatives of each family, serves in *tequio* (voluntary work) for the benefit of the town.⁵ The governmental funding is distributed through Chicontepec’s head city; much of the decision about resource distribution is nonetheless made internally between the two political divisions. The main educational institutions in the south side of Chicontepec, from kindergarten to high school, are located in Ixcacuatitla, where many students lacking schools in their home towns commute daily. Moreover, the *tianguis* (the traditional mobile market) arrives each Tuesday in the town. All of these activities make Ixcacuatitla a center of mobilization for students, teachers, and merchants.

The economy in Chicontepec is still based on agricultural production and cattle ranches. Some have developed commercial production of agricultural goods—such as is the case of Cuatro Caminos, a town that produces citric fruits—while others have converted their land into large cattle ranches. Even with such economic growth, most of the population maintains agriculture and farming for household production alone. Without a system of irrigation, local farmers still actively engage in the religious ceremonies associated with rain where corn is a sacred element.

The evangelization of Chicontepec has shaped the religious practices from the time of the Spanish colonial period to the present day. A Catholic church and Evangelical and Pentecostal temples exist for different congregations, while Jehovah Witnesses, unpopular in Ixcacuatitla, only started to appear at the end of my fieldwork in 2011. In Ixcacuatitla, the Catholic Church is perceived

⁴ The information about the population in Ixcacuatitla was provided by the local health clinic that maintains registers of the population of each house in the town.

⁵ *Tequio* comes from the Nahuatl word *tequitl* (work). Alonso de Molina translates *tequio* as “cosa que tiene o da trabajo” (“something that has or gives work” my translation) (Molina 1970 [1571]: 105). In Mexico, *tequio* represents a system of labor as a civil duty that characterizes the socio-political organization of many indigenous communities.

as having two different trends: one associated with the Old Church—which is probably a reference to the Colonial practices—and the other a New Church, associated with a more recent incursion which began in the 1980s. Ixcacuatitla lacks colonial architecture but contains a Catholic chapel, which was constructed, in the last few decades, together with a large cross located on top of the Postectli Mountain.⁶

The old division of the Catholic Church is only associated with an animistic type of religion that—beyond the Christian Saints, Jesus, and the Virgin Mary—also includes a large pantheon of deities, some of which inhabit mountains, springs, and caves. This religion is locally known as *la costumbre*, which is identified in the regional studies as the Nahua religion (Gómez Martínez 2002, 2012; Sandstrom 1991), or associated with agricultural rituals (Nava Vite 2012; and Hooft 2008).⁷ *La costumbre* is the oldest religion of these towns. Like other Mesoamerican indigenous religious practices, mountains, springs and caves are sacred places and foci of religious congregation. The temple for these celebrations is the *xochicalli* (lit. “flower house”), and its organization follows the cargo system.⁸ The pantheon of deities, represented with cut-paper images of mainly humanoid features known in Nahuatl as *tlatecmeh* or in Spanish *recortes* (lit. “cuttings”), are believed to intervene in the life of the towns for good and for ill (see Fig. 3). A series of ceremonies based on giving offerings are performed to balance life, while interacting with the pantheon of deities classified into two polarities of good and bad (*los buenos y los malos*).⁹ This binary opposition, rather than representing the Christian dichotomy of good and evil, embodies two sides that interact to maintain a balanced existence.¹⁰

During the two seasons of the year—*xopamitl* (rainy) and *tonalmitl* (dry)—the main ritual dates follow celebrations in the Catholic calendar such as Carnival or the Day of the Dead. The associations with the land and the sacrality of the corn are central to the ritual calendar of *la costumbre*; therefore, other celebrations mark turning points in the agricultural cycle that often take place on Saints Days. In private settings, farmers often perform small rites when plowing their fields or harvesting their corn, and two larger public rain ceremonies take place at the beginning of the rainy season: the *chicomexochitl* ceremony (offered to mountains) and the *atlatlacualtia* (offered to the various sources and manifestations of water).¹¹ Both rain ceremonies occur at the beginning

⁶ A colonial Catholic Church is located in Chicontepec’s head city. Andrés Pérez Pardavé, the local chronicler, identifies different dates for the construction of the building, from as early as 1592 to the eighteenth century (Pérez Pardavé 2006). The church’s features, however, resemble those of Franciscan churches of the seventeenth century. Further research is necessary to determine the origins and dates of this colonial building.

⁷ *La costumbre* includes a particular set of beliefs and practices. Some of the celebrations take place on dates of the religious Catholic calendar, while others mark different instances of the agricultural cycle. The multiple uses of a cleansing rite known as *tlaochpantli* (lit. “sweeping”) in both healing rituals and agricultural celebrations suggest a still existing relationship between the healing system and public ritual life.

⁸ The cargo system is a pan-Mesoamerican hierarchical organization of religious positions (cargos), occupied by men and women to fulfill obligations as their civic duty (Chance and Taylor 1985). This type of civic-religious organization is commonly found among indigenous societies in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America. In Ixcacuatitla, the cargo system still structures the political organization of the town and the *xochicalli* temple.

⁹ Historical studies on Mesoamerican religions greatly inform the ethnographic endeavor. However, the problem of aligning contemporary Nahua religions with pre-Columbian beliefs and practices resides in the efficacy of identifying similarities and change through the centuries. Principles of equilibrium and disequilibrium in life of Mesoamerican societies were central to the religious practices (Lopez Austin 1988), that together with the sacrality of the landscape and agricultural cycles, suggest a perennial maintenance of Indigenous beliefs through time and a clear distinction from Catholicism.

¹⁰ This dual principle is also rooted in pre-Columbian religions: see Gómez Martínez (2002) for a discussion on *Ometeotl*, the Mexica God of duality and opposition; Gomez Martínez (2001) for the binary nature of the God *Tlacalecolotl*; and Báez-Jorge and Gómez Martínez (2000) for a comparison of several Nahua Gods in Chicontepec and pre-Columbian deities. Alan Sandstrom’s studies suggest that for the Nahua of Amatlan, the pantheon of deities partakes in a unity, which is a pantheistic trait of the religion where everything and everyone belong to a Spirit. The main deities are classified into four “Realms of the Universe”: Sky, Earth, Water, and Underworld (1991: 256-257). Similarly, Sandstrom observes a dualistic principle that is neither good nor bad, as everything depends upon the interactions that people have on each side. These interactions are highlighted in the rituals that take place throughout the year.

¹¹ *Chicomexochitl* is an agglutinated Nahuatl word compounded of *chicome* (seven) and *xochitl* (flower) and corresponds to the name of the corn deity and the rain ceremony. *Atlatlacualtia* comes from *atl* (water) and *tlacuallia* (to feed) or *tlatlacualtilistli* (to feast). *Tlatlacualtia*, drawing from the Nahuatl root *tlacuallia*, as a concept, is associated with the main offerings of food that congregations provide to the pantheon of deities. *Tlatlacualtia* is also the name that identifies the *chicomexochitl* and the *atlatlacualtia* rain ceremonies. Moreover, the concept of feeding is also indicated in the offerings for the rites of the “seed’s tradition” (*costumbre de semilla*), where different stages of corn development are named *tlacuallia* or *tlatlacualtilistli* as a suffix. That is, the word *xinachtlacualtia* is the rite for germination (where *xinachtli* means seed), and *miltlacualtilistli*,

of the rain cycle when the fields are ready for planting.

A major feature in the *chicomexochitl* ceremony is to work together and, in fact, this participation is one of the basic principles of social interaction in the towns. I call this form of socialization *communal reciprocity*, building on Marcel Mauss concept of reciprocity and the local civic duty, *tequio*. In his seminal book *The Gift* (1950), Mauss examines reciprocity as one of the three principles in the system of “social exchanges and contracts”: the necessity to give, the necessity to receive, and the necessity to reciprocate. The exchange of gifts that appeared to be voluntary, in fact, are social

contracts that function on the basis of these three principles. In Nahua society, the system of labor exchange is one of the reciprocal principles of social interrelation, a characteristic of still being self-sufficient for their basic economic needs. Thus, following Mauss’ ideas, communal reciprocity is a collective contract based on the necessity of individuals to cooperate with each other with small and large tasks in private and public settings. For example, women, who generally are responsible for

their own houses, share labor by taking care of children or washing clothes. In the case of men, they often share their work while cleaning, plowing, harvesting the cornfields, taking care of cattle, or building houses. For larger tasks such as cleaning, constructing roads, or repairing the water system, the people in the towns cooperate under the civic duty of *tequio*. This ideal of working together further exists in the rites of passage. In funerals in particular, neighbors, friends, and family arrive to share the pain of the family’s loss, where they often bring food such as chili, salt, corn, or corn-dough and prepare large amounts of food.¹² The same principle of working together, as a social contract, takes place in the *chicomexochitl* ceremonies. In fact, communal work, which is highly demanding in the ceremonies, is essential in the context of placing offerings and enabling the participants to interact with the pantheon of deities and the sacred landscape. Working together, thus, represents the expression of unified effort that strengthens the petitions of individuals and the congregations at large. It is extremely relevant and desired that even working together becomes an offering in itself.¹³ Below, I examine the music of the *chicomexochitl* ceremony and show how



Figure 3: Master of ceremonies arranging the cut-paper images (tlatecmeh) on an altar on top of the mountain, near Cuatro Caminos (Photograph by Veronica Pacheco, June 2011).

is the word denoting the rite for plant growth (where *millah* means the cornfield). Even if the name *tlatlacualtia* refers only to ceremonies associated with the corn and rain ceremonies, other contexts exist in which the concept of feeding is present such as in funerals and in the Day of the Dead.

¹² Similarly, Catherine Good Eshelman (2015) points out that one of the characteristics of Indigenous *cosmovision* in Mesoamerica is that collective work (*tequitl*) creates the social individual, which gives membership and strengthen the community. The interchange explained as *tequitl* and strength (*chicahualiztli*) takes place among the living and the dead, farmers and the land, humans and maize, saints and the town, and between the communities as collective entities and points in the sacred landscape (2015:151). See also Gámez Espinosa and Alfredo Lopez Austin (2015) for a discussion on the concept of Indigenous cosmovision and Indigenous collectivity.

¹³ Alfredo Lopez Austin (1997) discusses the dual nature of offerings in Ancient Mesoamerican societies as being both the bridge between this and the other world, and a form of expression that people used to speak to the Gods (Lopez Austin 1997). Following Lopez Austin, in the context of the *tlatlacualtia* rituals in Chicontepec, people communicate together with the Gods and the communal work becomes an expression of their social contract as a congregation.

the participatory aspects of the music informs the interactions of the people and their sacred sites, the centrality of corn, and the relevance of the rain cycles. In the cultural settings of communal reciprocity, sacred music and sound are actively used to articulate individual and communal interactions among the congregations, and with the sacred points in the town and the natural landscape.

Participation and music in the *chicomexochitl* ceremony

The *chicomexochitl* ceremony is a public religious gathering of *la costumbre* that marks the beginning of the rainy season. It takes place between the months of April and May and, in Ixcacuatitla, often on the day of the Patron Saint, San Isidore the Laborer (May 15). It is offered to the mountains in petition for rain, where the central character is the corn deity of the same name. The Chicomexochitl deity is represented with eight cut-paper images of two children, female and male, and two bundles that contain maize cobs. The ceremonies vary in length between four to twelve days, and culminate with a pilgrimage to the mountain's summit.

Throughout the ritual many events take place, which conclude with the offering in altars for the pantheon of deities in the *xochicalli*, water sources, caves, and the mountain (see Fig. 4 and Fig. 5 for examples of altars and offerings). The congregation engages in different activities to prepare the offerings that include marigold flowers (*cempohualxochitl*) and palm (*coyol*) arrangements, food, and chickens and turkeys, whose blood is essential for the offerings. The ritual specialist cuts the paper to give shape to the numerous deities, which are eventually displayed on the altars (see Fig. 3). While the images of Catholic saints, Jesus Christ, and the Virgin Mary are maintained in the *xochicalli* temple, only the cut-paper images representing the pantheon of deities are displayed in the other altars located in the springs, caves, and the mountain. The music is ubiquitous in the process of preparing the offerings, when the ritual specialist cuts the paper, and while the congregation makes their offerings. In the diverse religious activities that characterize the Nahua towns with the presence of several Christian sects, the *chicomexochitl* ceremony still remains an active public ceremony where many arrive to peregrinate to the mountain summit.



Figure 4: The congregation from the Nahua town of Limon placing offerings and lighting candles at the altar located on the foothills of the Postectli Mountain in the *chicomexochitl* ceremony (Photograph by Veronica Pacheco, June 2011).



Figure 5: Altar located at the foothills of the Postectli Mountain containing offerings placed during the *chicomexochitl* ceremony (Photograph by Veronica Pacheco, June 2011).

It has been observed in several Nahuatl towns in the Huasteca region that congregations actively get involved in *la costumbre* rituals through music (Gómez Martínez 2012; Nava Vite 2012; Sandstrom 2005). Sandstrom's descriptions of a *chicomexochitl* ceremony at the Postectli Mountain frequently highlight the role of music in engaging participation. Similar to the case presented here, in Sandstrom's accounts people engaged with music while dancing at the *xochicalli* temple, paced their walking in pilgrimage towards the mountain, caves, and springs, or danced in front of altars while presenting offerings. Among the descriptions of the congregation's engagement in the *chicomexochitl* ceremony, Sandstrom also describes the happiness felt while people successfully finished the ceremony together.

A remarkable example of the relevance of music to participation is described in a *chicomexochitl* ceremony from the towns of Ixhuatlan de Madero, a municipality located to the southwest of Chicontepec (Nava Vite 2012). In these towns, Nava Vite describes a ceremony where the

musicians arrived late and the congregation passively waited for the musicians and "happily" started their activities as soon as they heard the music. Nava Vite further suggests that ritual music provoked joy on the part of participants and enabled them to communicate with the pantheon of earth deities, where the main intention was to chase away the bad winds, or *ehcameh*, that might come to destroy the cornfields and cause disruptions in everyday life. Like Sandstrom, Nava Vite stresses the importance of communal work in the context of Nahuatl ceremonies, where music is an intrinsic element that articulates and informs participation.

During my research in Chicontepec, I also observed many associations between music and participation. In this context, one of the particular characteristics I found was that the structure of musical pieces was integral to the different instances of the religious celebrations. I will present a musical analysis below to show the organization of the musical sequence in the *chicomexochitl* ceremony. Music was present while people were occupied with different tasks such as cooking, cleaning, preparing flowers, *coyol* arrangements and offerings, walking towards the altars, climbing the mountain, and dancing. The music was also valued by the ritual specialist for its presence when cutting the paper to shape the deities or entering into deep states of concentration while presenting the offerings. In all instances, music was an integral part of each activity.

Emotions were further associated with the correlation of music and participation. In particular, sadness and happiness were often performed for the *Chicomexochitl* deity for comfort

and to ease the adversities of life.¹⁴ Emotions predicated of the image of the Chicomexochitl are also in evidence among members of other Nahua towns, some of which referred to the deity as a happy boy, while others described the perilous circumstances as that of a child. The deity is understood to confront adversity while being alone, outside, and without protection. Anuschka van 't Hooft, who has extensively worked with the Nahua towns of San Luis Potosi, describes a myth of the Chicomexochitl deity as a happy boy who likes to play music and sing. The deity is remarkable because he created the writing system and was born on the Postectli Mountain (Hooft 2008). Furthermore, from the Nahua towns in the Ixhuatlan de Madero Municipality, Rafael Nava Vite (2012) also recorded a story of fish that ate the deity's body and left the bones crying in the river.

In Chicontepec, similar myths exist that involve emotions of happiness and sadness in relation to the Chicomexochitl. My conversations with the congregation revealed that the performance of such emotions in the context of the ceremony were presented as offerings to various deities as a commitment. I often heard expressions such as: "I dance so the Chicomexochitl deity is content"; "I dance to make him happy"; or "if I don't cry, they [the deities] don't believe me, and they will not give me the rain." Pedro, a farmer who lives in the town of Ixcacuatitla and has been an active contributor to political life and religious activities, explained to me that such associations of happiness and sadness in the performance of the ceremony originate in the nature of the deity's duality and the adversities that s/he undergoes while growing up in the cornfield.¹⁵ As Pedro elaborated:

Do you see, the seeds we will sow of the Chicomexochitl [deity] are the seeds of the child. That is the reason the Chicomexochitl stays in the cornfield; he grows there. We break him into pieces, and there we put four grains of corn, there he is born. If we clean him up, he grows well. If we do not clean him, he stays there under the grass. He suffers from its bonds, suffers from the wind, the child that is the Chicomexochitl. Also, the girl stays inside here because all women do their work at home. Therefore, the one who goes to the cornfield is the boy, who is the Chicomexochitl. For this reason, when the corn plants grow, when we see that the corncobs are ready we have a *tlamana* [celebration for the sweet corn]. Because he gave us the corncobs, and the plants of the cornfield have already grown. This is the reason we are bringing him offerings, because the corn certainly takes care of us, and without him, we can never be happy, and we will go hungry. (Interview, October 2010)

The myth that Pedro narrated describes the struggles that the deity undergoes and the necessity of the community to place their offerings. The imagery of the myth creates an affective response in the ceremony. The conversations with the participants revealed that this association was the reason people cried in the context of the ceremony, where the meaning attributed to the weeping was often associated with the rain.¹⁶ In this context, violinists were often praised for their ability of using dynamics and melismatic figures to move the audiences to tears. Luis, who is a farmer and a violinist well versed in ritual music, explained the associations of music and sadness in the Chicomexochitl ceremony as follows:

¹⁴ As explained above, this deity is characterized by having both sexes and it is generally represented with the image of two children: a boy and a girl.

¹⁵ In this article I employ pseudonyms to protect the identity of my collaborators. The only real name that appears is of a violist who provided information about the tuning system, which is described below.

¹⁶ Some of the weeping, however, was also associated with personal situations where people cried for family members that had passed away, or for those that were far away, working in nearby cities or the United States. The ceremony, therefore, was also a place where one might deal with and share personal matters, as long as they did not disrupt ritual precepts. In the case of emotions, sadness and happiness were welcome since they symbolized commitment.

It hurts a lot. I have felt and seen [a great deal] with the others when we have la costumbre; it has to be from the heart, or part of our heart, we put a chicken or whatever it is that they need. And we do that not because we want to, but because we have la costumbre, because it does not rain...Now, the rain is about to arrive, but if it does not rain? We are now in May; June will come and there is no rain. The fields are ready, but there is no water, how are we going to sow? No one can sow...Therefore, if someone says, let's have la costumbre, all of us who support it, it is like we feel it. Meaning, we want the rain, but it does not come. It is then that it hurts because we have no rain.

In the town where my father learned, the elder from Ixhuatlan prohibited him to sing. He did not like that someone would sing [the ritual music]. It is not a tradition of happiness... but rather it is a tradition of sadness because it does not rain. There is no water. That is the reason [the elder] didn't want us to sing. (Interview, May 2010)

Luis's explanation for the sorrow in the *chicomexochitl* ceremony suggests a dramatic performance as a sign of commitment on the part the participants who recognize the necessity of rain for their cornfields. Thus, following the idea that the performance of emotions is a result of social constructions (Abu-Lughod 1986), the association with the music suggests a particular characteristic of sentiment attributed to the sound (Feld 1982). In the context of the ceremony, the Nahua religious music is an emblem of religiosity deeply associated with the struggles that people undergo while dealing with difficult times during periods of drought.

While weeping and happiness were often expressed in relationship to the Chicomexochitl deity, the emotional associations attributed to music were further valued as a positive means by which to interact with the deities. As was explained to me, this interaction takes place between polarities. On the one hand, the performance of sadness and happiness embody the offerings for the providers, among which the Sacred Mountain is the most powerful sacred entity. On the other hand, music is also played to offer food for the deities associated with anger, jealousy, and sickness.¹⁷ In the complex interaction with the pantheon of deities, music is considered a means or mechanism that opens channels for communication with the supernatural. This faculty of ceremonial music restricts its performance for religious purposes.¹⁸ I propose to use musical analysis to further illustrate how—in the attempt to establish an interaction with the supernatural—the musical elements and structure of the musical pieces, create a sonic narrative of the ceremony. These characteristics of the music in the context of the musical performance further facilitate participation, which is a principle in the dynamics of interactions. The efficacy of the musical sequence, therefore, is highly valued in the ceremony.

Uses, form, and structure of Nahua ritual music

Attending a *chicomexochitl* ceremony was one of the most rewarding experiences I had while conducting fieldwork. Walking towards the *xochicalli* temple, I remember first hearing the sound of the violin in the distance. Upon arriving and entering the ceremonial precinct, the smell of copal and marigold flowers spread throughout the room, candles were illuminated, and musicians sat calmly and played music while the ritual specialist busied himself cutting the paper. These moments

¹⁷ A cleansing rite named *tlaochpantli* (sweeping) is performed to remove the unwanted entities from the body. These entities are called *ehcameh* (winds) which are believed to be able to cause sickness. The rite also encompasses divination and is an essential part of the healing system and the performance of the ceremonies and rites for the corn and rain cycles.

¹⁸ Musicians of ritual music are often well versed in many other popular genres, and in particular with *son huasteco* and repertoires of weddings or *lava manos* (i.e., a godparents' acceptance ceremony). Looking for jobs, many musicians visit local bars to play popular music for tips. In this context, ritual music is never played as a sign of respect and for its power in activating communication channels with the supernatural.

inspired a deep sense of beauty within me. Some of the main contexts to encounter ritual musical performances are the rain ceremonies. Rather than a detailed description of the ceremony itself, my intention here is to elaborate the characteristics of the music featured the *chicomexochitl* ceremony. In particular, I illustrate the role of music in relationship to each event, including the comparative analysis of two pieces, and the associations of the experience of the large structure of musical pieces with the concept of communal reciprocity.

Xochitl sones (lit. “flower-musical pieces”) or *sones de costumbre* (lit. “musical pieces of the tradition”) correspond to the numerous pieces of ritual music in *la costumbre*. The primary contexts for the performance are the public rituals associated with the corn and rain cycles. Among these, are the two rain ceremonies of *chicomexochitl* (for mountains) and *atlatlacualtia* (for water sources); in addition, the *tlamana* (a ceremony performed when the sweet corn is ripe) is enacted. Furthermore, ritual music is often utilized in “cleansing rites” for healing purposes. Due to the roles that musicians play in *la costumbre*, they are also considered ritual specialists.

The series in the *chicomexochitl* ceremony consists of roughly 150 musical pieces.¹⁹ In such a large structure, each piece carries the name of the particular instance that is taking place in the ceremony, the name of a deity, or a flower.²⁰ In one of the ceremonies I attended in the Nahua town of Las Silletas, I interviewed Carlos *in situ*, a violinist who explained the classification and *sones* (musical pieces) for the rain ceremonies as follows:

We play 150 *sones* for all the celebrations. Twenty-five *sones* for 25 mountains including Chiapas, Oaxaca, Popocatepetl, and other local mountains. We have to play 25 so it will rain. Otherwise, it will not rain. The *sones* for the altars differ between those that are performed for the upper section and those for the lower section [indicating the places in the altar]. There are *sones* for the *Tlitl* (deity of the fire) and *sones* for other deities. (Interview, May 2010)

The numerous pieces vary in character and tempo as if they were dramatizing the mood of the different events that take place. To illustrate the characteristics of the music in relationship to the instances, I include the transcriptions of two pieces (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7) to make a comparative analysis. The pieces belong to a single ceremony I attended in Ixcacuatitla-Los Pinos in February 2011.²¹ Figure 6 exemplifies a fast-tempo piece played at the moment the ritual specialist finished cutting the paper (the process of giving shape to the deities). The piece is named “When Finishing Cutting the Paper,” and in this event all gathered dancing around the ritual specialist carrying baskets of flowers, candles, *coyol* (palm) arrangements, chickens and turkeys, and other items for the offerings. The celebrant loudly recited his prayers in front of the cut-paper images.

¹⁹ The number 150 only represents a rough approximation since most musicians and ritual specialists always referred to the pieces as being numerous without identifying the number. In addition, the ceremonies vary in length between four to twelve days, which might also indicate a variation on the number of the pieces that are played. With the Trio Nuevo Amanecer, one of the professional trio groups from Tepeco, I was able to make a clean recording of 30 *xochitl* sones. We also recorded a collection of *son* Huasteco.

²⁰ Series of musical pieces also exist in the rites of passage such as weddings and *lava manos* (i.e., the ceremony for the godparents’ commitment). These pieces are called *canarios* and are similarly integral to the celebrations. However, as music performed in secular rites of passage, they lack any association of communicating with the pantheon of deities.

²¹ This was an unusual date to celebrate the *chicomexochitl*, being in the middle of the dry season. It took place at the special request from the town of Ixcacuatitla-Los Pinos.

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "Xochitl son 'When Finishing Cutting the Paper.'" The score is arranged in five staves. The top staff is for Violin, written in treble clef with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 6/8 time signature. The second staff is for Jarana, also in treble clef with the same key signature and time signature. The third staff is for Huapanguera, in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature. The fourth staff is for Bell, in 2/4 time signature, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The fifth staff is for Rattle, also in 2/4 time signature with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The music consists of a melodic line for the violin and a harmonic accompaniment for the Jarana and Huapanguera, with rhythmic patterns for the Bell and Rattle. The piece is marked with repeat signs and a double bar line at the end of each staff.

Figure 6: Xochitl son "When Finishing Cutting the Paper." Transcription by the Veronica Pacheco. Pitch adjusted to A440 for transcription ♩=140

The characteristics of the piece illustrate the form of the musical pieces, considering melodic and rhythmic structures as well as a rhythmic and harmonic accompaniment. In this piece, the descending melody in a disjunct motion consists of two small symmetrical melodic units: the first one is open, moving towards the fifth, while the second closes back to the tonic. The major key is suggested even though the melody lacks the seventh in the upper tetrachord. The *jarana* and *huapanguera* rhythmically accompany the melody in a compound duple meter with chords corresponding to the tonic, dominant, and subdominant. The bell and rattle are set in a simple duple meter. This hemiola produced by this combination is a very characteristic of polyrhythmic combination in the repertoire, where dancers followed both meters. While some participants marked the tempo with the compound duple meter, others maintained the simple duple meter with their bodies. The entire rhythmic accompaniment maintains these ostinato rhythmic patterns, creating a cyclical structure in the pieces.²²

The rhythmic structure features characteristics of the repertoire at large, varying between the compound and simple meters including 6/8, 3/4, and 2/4. Considering the melodic structures, similar to the musical piece in figure 6, most pieces contain two complementary units that constantly repeat, whereas some are asymmetrical. A narrow melodic range within an octave is common where most of the melodies vary between major pentatonic scales. All melodies are played with a bowing technique in the violin while the accompaniment of the guitars follows a double strumming technique. The melodic characteristics together with the ostinato rhythm create a timeless feeling in the performance.

To show a different instance of the sonic representation, figure 7 is the transcription of the piece named "Walking Towards the Mountain." This piece was played when all the participants commenced on a pilgrimage to the mountain summit after placing the offerings to water sources such as springs and rivers. While the melody and harmonic accompaniment are similar to the previously transcribed piece, the tempo here is slower, which illustrates the pace of walking towards the mountain.

²² The hemiola or sesquialtera is a common characteristic in the repertoires of regional *sones* across Mexico. Considering the ubiquity of this rhythmic form, it has been argued that such rhythmic structures are inheritances of Medieval Spanish folk dances as well as of African music that arrived in Mexico during the Spanish colonial period (Pérez Fernández 1990; Stanford 1972). I would add to this discussion that polyrhythm is also a characteristic of indigenous music (cf. Chamorro 1991).

The image displays a musical score for a Xochitl son titled "Walking Towards the Mountain." The score is arranged in two systems. The first system includes staves for Violin, Jarana, Huapanguera, Bells, and Rattle. The second system includes staves for Vln., Jar., Hua., Be., and Rat. The music is written in a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 6/8 time signature. The Violin part features a melodic line with eighth and quarter notes. The Jarana and Huapanguera parts provide harmonic accompaniment with chords and eighth notes. The Bells part consists of a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes marked with 'x'. The Rattle part consists of a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The score includes repeat signs and a double bar line at the end of each system.

Figure 7: Xochitl son "Walking Towards the Mountain." Transcription by Veronica Pacheco. Pitch adjusted to A440 for transcription. ♩=115

Figures 6 and 7 are two examples that illustrate how the large structure of musical pieces mirrors the instances and moods that take place in the ceremony. The differences are marked by variations in the melodies, tempo, and dynamics. Even if each piece employs a different melody, some of the melodic variations are subtle to the point that, for the untrained listener, they are difficult to discern. Furthermore, the melodic units repeat several times for the period that an instance is taking place, and in some cases, these take a long time. Repetitions are also divided among the melodic phrases. For example, in one of the pieces structured with two melodic units of four measures each, the repetitions were different for each unit. The first part of the melodic phrase repeated seven consecutive times, while the second section repeated six times. This cycle resulted in a structure of 52 measures, which returned several times. Considering the endless possibility of repetitions of the melodic units, I identify this form as cyclical, which I believe also contributes to engaged participation. I will later return to this characteristic of the music structure and its association with participation.

Another characteristic of the ritual music is the sound quality. The music of the trio in Nahua

ritual music differs from other popular music such as Huastecan *son* in the type of instruments used, virtuosity, and the tuning system. The violin, *jarana*, and *huapanguera* used in the Nahua towns are much more rustic instruments that musicians are accustomed to acquiring in urban centers, through other musicians, or as family inheritances. During my visits to the Nahua towns, most violinists were concerned with tuning their instruments while the other musicians were often more flexible and let the instruments sometimes get out of pitch without re-tuning. On some occasions, the violinist either encouraged the other musicians to tune or did it himself during breaks. Rather than a defined pitch, a relative one is employed, and it varies according to the performers. Often, the violinist tunes first and the other instrumentalists follow. To tune, musicians identify the intervals between the strings without a specific pitch. The tuning is specific to the *xochitl sones* and differs from other musical genres such as the *canarios* (musical pieces often played in rites of passage such as weddings) or Huastecan *son*. While the tuning for ritual music was identified as *xochitl sones*-tuning and lacked any reference to a particular pitch, the *canarios* and Huastecan *son*-tuning was often referred to as being in G, which corresponds to one of the tuning systems for son Huasteco instruments (see Hernández Azuara 2003).²³ The table below (Fig. 8) contains an example of both tuning systems :

<i>Xochitl Sones</i> Tuning	<i>Canarios</i> and Huastecan <i>son</i> Tuning
Violin: four strings	
4 th — F#	4 th — G
3 rd — B	3 rd — D
2 nd — F#	2 nd — A
1 st — C#	1 st — E
<i>Jarana</i> : five strings	
5 th — F#	5 th — G
4 th — B	4 th — B
3 rd — Eb	3 rd — D
2 nd — F#	2 nd — F#
1 st — Bb	1 st — A
<i>Huapanguera</i> : six strings including doubles	
6 th — F#	6 th — G
5 th — B	5 th — D
4 th — B	4 th — G (lower octave)
3 rd — E	3 rd — D(middle)
2 nd — G#	2 nd — B
1 st — C#	1 st — E

Figure 8: Tuning systems commonly used in the Nahua towns of Chicontepec for the trio instruments for *xochitl sones*, *canarios*, and Huastecan *son*. Collected by Veronica Pacheco in conversation with the violinist Enrique Martinez Cruz. Las Silletas, June 2010.

²³ The tuning system for the Huastecan trio varies in both the ritual and secular settings, being the above only one example.

Moreover, most of the musicians are farmers, so their hands have calluses, cracks and other signs of their work in the fields. Perhaps this is another element that adds some rough qualities to the performances. In the towns, however, the ability of ritual music performers is recognized not necessarily for any particular virtuoso talents, but rather for the feeling that they transmit when playing their instruments. This feeling responds to the articulations, vibratos, or small melismatic notes added to the performances of the *xochitl sones* that characterize the personal style of each performer. In particular, the violinist is often recognized for his contribution to the performance in the ceremony, and for his individual ability to interpret the music and move the crowd.

I return to the value attributed to the concept of Nahua communal reciprocity to understand the importance attributed to the participatory qualities of this ritual music. In the ritual context, ample amount of work is divided among the participants so that each member contributes labor for the realization of the ceremony. Furthermore, these celebrations are expensive and require many days of work. While the towns' economy continuously changes, agriculture and cattle farming still represent the base of the household income. Without a system of irrigation, the relevance of a successful ceremony to bring the rain is still a commitment to many families. In this endeavor, music and agriculture are fundamentally associated.²⁴

To examine the interrelation between the communal reciprocity and the participatory qualities of the music, I proposed to consider the meaning attributed to interaction, which is the ultimate objective of the celebration. In different levels, each action contributes to the interaction with the spiritual entities. For example, in the ceremony, the ritual specialist concentrated all efforts on the task of achieving such interaction while invoking the deities to arrive, cutting the paper while simultaneously placing the offerings. The musicians, also considered ritual specialists, closely followed each of those stages while the congregation was occupied with different tasks. In this context, the copal smell and marigold flowers, and the sound of *xochitl sones*, the bell, and the rattle, were all particularly useful in the dynamics of interacting and further enhancing the sensorial experience.²⁵

In this interaction, the value attributed to music was represented by the place the musicians occupied in front of the congregation while the offerings took place or while all walked in pilgrimage up the mountain. When I asked the musicians why they walked before everyone else in the procession, many replied that their playing, and the violin's sound in particular, could reach the mountain and announce that the people had arrived with their petitions. The ritual specialist always walked ringing a bell or shaking a rattle, and I have seen some that blew a whistle in specific places. Sound in these agricultural ceremonies is associated with characteristics that aids in the quest to establish the desired interactions with the supernatural. This perception is further reinforced by the design of the structure of musical pieces, and the disassociation from the other secular genres, which is evident in the specific tuning system (as shown in Fig. 8). While my conversations with the ritual specialists and musicians revealed the explicit intention of using the sound of the violin, the bell, and the rattle to interact with the supernatural, the experience of the musical sequence was more implicit and is examined in the following section.

²⁴ Henry Stobart (1994) documented a similar case in which musical expressions and experiences were intrinsically related to potato cultivation in a small town in the Bolivian highlands. Similar to the sacrality of the corn among the Huasteca, potatoes in Bolivia are seen as animated entities with humanoid characteristics, who are able to "cry."

²⁵ See Camacho Díaz (2010) for an example of the uses of music in interactions with the supernatural. Examining Nahua ritual music from the town of Piedra Labrada, Cerro Azul Municipality, Veracruz, Camacho Díaz explains that similar to the smell and incense, music enables the "cosmic tree" (*árbol cósmico*), which is an *axis mundi* where the deer and the corn meet (2010: 72).

Experiencing the large musical structures as participatory music

My central concern is now to examine the sequences as participatory music and the categorization of the musical pieces suggests participation in two ways: a) names and variations of the musical pieces according to each event highlight the specificity of the music in relationship to a moment in the ritual so people can take part in reinforcing the concept of communal reciprocity; and b) engaged in participation, the congregation interacts with the spiritual entities utilizing musical pieces to interface with both polarities of the pantheon of deities. In the process of the ritual, therefore, one might argue that a successful ceremony heavily depends upon the efficacy of the musical sequence.

The effectiveness of the large musical structures has been observed in different studies. Blacking (1967, 1971, 1973), for example, argues that the organization of music, the “sonic order,” is a result of the relationship that people have with the musical tones and its meaning is associated with social organization since both belong to the same cognitive system. In his extensive analysis of Venda children’s songs, Blacking examines the logic of musical organization in relationship to the context where the music is produced and meaning is attributed to the performance. As Blacking notes, “four, five, and six-tone melodies could not be understood out of context as ‘sonic objects’: their melodic patterns became intelligible only in the context of other . . . organized sound within Venda culture” (1971: 93). He argues that “the effectiveness of the music depends upon the context in which it is both performed and heard” (1973: 44), and that the value attributed to music results from the “quality of the relationships that must be established between people and tones whenever it is performed” (ibid.: 51). While the homologies between social and musical structures are far from being a persuasive analytical approach to understand Nahua ritual music practices, it is worth pointing out that in Blacking’s terms, the relationships that people have with sound—either with the trio, the bell, or the rattle as well as with the order of the sequence—highlight the concept of communal reciprocity and their communal interactions with the divine. In a ceremonial context, therefore, the effectiveness of the musical sequence responds to the participation of the people in relationship to a particular event.

The details of the sequence reveal a conscious set of choices in which melody, tempo, rhythm, and dynamics—even if some are very subtle—create a sonic narrative of the ceremony. Moreover, the strategy of naming each piece according to the instances in the ceremony or a name of a deity highlights the character and relevance of each piece in relationship to the activities that are taking place. How then do these characteristics of the sequence enable participation?

Similar types of musical structures have been examined as systems of communication among Nahua, Otomí, and Tepehua towns in the area (Alegre González 2004; Boilés 1967, 1969, 1982), which contribute to the larger discussion about the participatory characteristics of the musical sequence.²⁶ For example, in a case of musical structures in the Nahua town of Chilocuicil, San Luis Potosí, Lizette Alegre González (2004) examines the *vinuetes*, which are a series of musical pieces played in funerals and on the Day of the Dead (*Xantolo*).²⁷ This musical performance of sad character accompanies the “shadow” of the deceased. Similar to the ritual music in Chicontepepec, the instrumentation used in this case study is also the trio Huasteco. Alegre González argues that the significance of the musical sequences is dynamically constructed in the moment of the performance, as interrelated with visual (objects, gestures, conducts) and verbal (name of the *vinuetes*, prayers, and petitions) systems. The musical sequence is one of the “languages” that interrelate to the other

²⁶ See Camacho Díaz and González Aktories (2000) and Camacho Díaz (2008, 2010) for a symbolic analysis of Nahua ritual music from San Luis Potosí. While these case studies possess similar characteristics to the one analyzed here, large structures of musical pieces are not discussed.

²⁷ See Camacho (2013) for a similar case of large music structures in harvest ceremonies among the Nahuas from Chilocuicil, San Luis Potosí.

systems by inter-textual meaning evident in the way pieces are named following each instance in the rite. Alegre González's analysis stresses the context and moment of the performance for the music's signification to participation. In Chicontepec, the relevance of the *xochitl sones'* sequence is intrinsic to the ceremony where its signification is actively constructed in the time and place of the performance. Therefore, interacting with the music performance in the context of the *chicomexochitl* ceremony is not only a reflection of communal reciprocity but it is also formative of social relations (Roseman 1984; Seeger 2004).

In another example, Boilés (1969) examines large structures in the instrumental music (violin and guitar) of the Otomí community of El Zapote de Bravo, Veracruz. Boilés establishes the concept of semantic signaling to discuss the system of sonic communication that exists while participants act in the religious ceremonies. Similar to the case of the *chicomexochitl* ceremony, the Otomí music structure that Boilés analyzes is organized according to the events that take place in a ceremony. He observes that such a sequence engenders participation and informs ritual action. To access the cognitive system, Boilés approaches the ritual life of the Otomí by identifying the principles that govern actions and comparing them to the messages that the music conveys in melodic and rhythmic units and in the form of entire pieces. Similar to the *xochitl sones*, this ritual music lacks lyrics. Even with such a painstaking analysis, it is unclear how the semantic meaning of the music works in the system of communication. However, Boilés' documentation of the sequence posits the relationship of music and participation as a type of association between the actions that take place and the music.²⁸ In Chicontepec, such associations are illustrated by the categorization of the musical pieces and the subtle variations that identify each piece in relationship to the event. Rather than communicating a message, these variations signal a moment of coordination in the narrative of the ceremony. In this association, the order of the pieces in the sequence creates a particular experience of the ceremony.

Drawing from the effectiveness of large structures of musical pieces to participation, Anthony Seeger (2013) examines four different cases of sequencing.²⁹ While different types of sequencing take place in each case, Seeger shows how the conscious selection of the pieces in terms of dynamics or rhythm, in conjunction with the feeling of audiences, engenders participation. Following Rafael Jose de Menezes Bastos's statement that in the Xingu region in Brazil "isolated pieces don't make much sense" (qtd. in Seeger 2013: 32), Seeger inquires as to whether the capacity of large structures of musical pieces constitutes an "essential part of music's ability to move people and for people's ability to—when moved—take part in the music" (ibid.: 33).

Like the effectiveness of sequential orders (Seeger 2013), and the relevance of the context to the musical performance (Alegre Gonzalez 2004; Blacking 1967, 1973), synchronization is another particular characteristic of the sequence of the Nahua ritual music. The particularities of synchronization highlight the conceptualization of participation as communal reciprocity. Thomas Turino (2008) argues that synchronization in participatory performances creates social interactions. Basing his analysis of Edward Hall's *Beyond Culture* (1977) synchronization for Turino departs from the analysis of corporeal movement as a "choreographic" activity, adjusted to create social harmony. Rhythm perception and body movement, are thus fundamental principles. Perception takes place because synchronization in body movement is perceived as "icons and dicent indices . . . [which] operate directly and do not require symbolic assessment" (ibid.: 42). In this

²⁸ Nahua, Otomi, and Tepehua people have common rain ceremonies such as the *chicomexochitl*. During my fieldwork I witnessed many processions from these remote communities that arrived to offer to the Postectli Mountain, and in particular during extensive periods of drought.

²⁹ Seeger presented this article originally in the John Blacking Memorial Lecture in 2011, where the main theme was "taking part." The seminar was honoring the work of Blacking and his contributions to our understanding of the relationships between large musical structures and participation.

synchronization, the interactions with musical elements are harmonized to achieve engagement.

In the case of the Nahua, the musical elements such as rhythmic and melodic patterns, together with the character of each piece in the sequence, create a sense of synchronization. Additionally, ostinato rhythmic patterns and the cyclical forms provide a frame without a defined moment of beginning or end during each event. When the musicians carefully followed the ritual specialist to play each piece, they also created a sense of the event within the narrative of the ceremony. Thus, while each participant was occupied with different tasks, the music alerted everyone about what was happening and allowed people to coordinate their activities for each event. Considering the nature of these ceremonies, synchronization is a necessity of coming together to dance, shake the rattle and the bell, or engage in any other activity, while musicians constantly play the *xochitl* *sones*. If considering synchronization as the principle of coordination, the design of the musical structure enables a constant interaction between the participants who are involved either by playing an instrument, dancing, or listening. These characteristics suggest a high degree of participation in the music performance.

In the Nahua towns in Chicontepepec, the relationship to the natural landscape is still intrinsically associated with their economic dependence on natural resources. The participatory aspects of the music contribute to the principle of communal reciprocity as the people undertake their tasks in the performance of the ceremony. In so doing, individuals interact with each other and together they place their offerings on the different altars located in the *xochicalli*, among the water resources, caves, and the Sacred Mountain. By following this precept in empathy to the Chicomexochitl deity, the congregation expects that the rain will eventually fall, indicating that the offerings were well received.

Music and the local interactions

I have shown how the effectiveness of the organization of the musical pieces in the rain ceremonies for the Postectli Mountain is strongly associated with the meaning of participation as a principle of communal reciprocity. I have argued that given such a conceptualization, all participants interact with the musical performance by playing an instrument, dancing, or listening, to perform and communally coordinate the numerous tasks in each event. This sign of communal commitment ultimately enables an interaction with the supernatural that inhabits mountains, springs, and caves. Furthermore, the ceremonial sound that includes the string instruments, the bell, and the rattle, together with the voice and prayers of the ritual specialist, is believed to reinforce the interaction between participants and the pantheon of deities. Therefore, in the *chicomexochitl* ceremony, musicians walked in front of processions and people shook the bell and the rattle calling the deities while dancing, praying, or placing offerings. The effectiveness of the series of musical pieces and the meaning attributed to the musical performance in the context of the ceremony enhances the concept of communal reciprocity where participatory music creates social synchronicity.

While *xochitl* *sones* have characteristics that are associated with the history of the people in these Nahua towns, the sequence further shows the relevance of participatory music as a cultural practice. This case further exemplifies how the musical elements and the structure of sequences contribute, shape, and reinforce the interactions we develop with each other and with the places we inhabit. What is invaluable in the Nahua tradition, however, is that such design of the musical sequence is already interwoven with basic social principles of communal reciprocity, where the sacred landscape constitutes an important element of their cultural construction.

A feature of the indigenous identity of the Nahuatl people in Chicontepec is the relationship with their land. Kristina Tiedje, who conducted research in San Luis Potosí among Nahuatl, Tenek, and Pame towns, examines how land is strongly associated with indigenous identity (Tiedje 2005). For these groups, the protection of their sacred landscape motivated collective mobilizations against tourist companies and governmental institutions that used sacred places to develop a business or destroyed them while constructing new roads. Musicians, together with the ritual specialists, were the leaders who mobilized the population and regained control over the land and their sacred places. The case in San Luis Potosí is not an isolated example of the different struggles that the indigenous groups confront while defending their sacred land in the context of the Mexican economy. Pemex, the Mexican National Oil Company, identified a source for oil extraction known as the Chicontepec Palaeochannel. In 2012, Pemex digitally published the new contracts for oil exploration and drilling, where Ixcacuatitla and the Postectli Mountain are in a division identified as La Soledad (Pemex 2012). The Chicontepec Palaeochannel was founded in the 1920s, and this along with several other oil sources have been actively drilled (Pemex 2007). During my visit, I often heard discussions on a location of oil wells in and around the Postectli Mountain and the strategies to undertake while protecting this sacred site from external exploitation. Most discussions addressed the degradation of such projects to this ceremonial center relevant not only for the people in Ixcacuatitla and other neighboring Nahuatl towns, but also for other groups that annually go on a pilgrimage to the Postectli. I often heard people commenting that: "the Postectli is not only our mountain but it is also the place for the others to come and ask for the rain." The interaction with the natural landscape in this religious context is perhaps one of the most ancient expressions of religiosity for the Mexican indigenous groups. In this interaction, ritual music is one of the most integrative expressions that illustrate the complexities of Nahuatl musical composition.

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Veronica Pacheco is currently a lecturer at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her research focuses on participatory aspects of religious music among indigenous groups in Mexico, intersections of Indigeneity and cultural and environmental sustainability, performativity and historical narratives, and colonial musical repertoire written by Amerindian composers in Mexico during the Spanish colonial period.

Cita recomendada

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