

# INTRODUCTION

## **Anthropology and the Gulf Nahuas**

For more than three thousand years the Olmec statue of the Maize God sat undisturbed in the thick cloud forest atop the volcano San Martín Pajapan. In 1968 this 3-ton statue was dragged down the slope and transported to the Museum of Anthropology in Xalapa, Veracruz, where it now sits on a marble pedestal. Without the power of the Maize God, agricultural yields in Pajapan have fallen, rains are no longer sufficient and the land has dried. This is the belief of native villagers who associate the removal of the statue with the decline of *milpa* cultivation and the period of rapid growth in the local cattle industry when forests were destroyed and farmers pushed off the land by grazing cattle.

This act of archaeological rescue highlights a basic contradiction in Mexican society and in the Western world as well: the relentless pillage of native territory, labor and wealth combined with a romantic idealization of an Indianness frozen in time and confined in museums, in glorified cemeteries of history and storage rooms of colonial spoils. This book is not a romantic account of native culture and history. Like most other aboriginal populations of the late 20th century, the Gulf Nahuas cannot be portrayed as a people living in a pristine state of social and natural unity, the kind that heirs of Rousseau will use as a moral exemplar to critique the many evils and disenchantments of modern life. Noble savages are lifeless puppets of romantic rhetoric. However fascinated they may be by unfamiliar modes of life, students of other cultures should know that native societies have never been immune to the tragic in life and have generated tensions, struggles, inequalities and conflicts of their own. Ethnicity is never simply the world of sharing (ideas, values, resources) it is made out to be: collective identities thrive on the constant production of both internal differences (genders, age groups, kin positions) and external interactions and claims directed against other groups (Stephen 1991; Urban and Sherzer 1991). Also, anthropologists should remind themselves and others that first peoples have been radically transformed by centuries of incorporation into broader domains ruled by capital, state and church. Indianness has been defined and manipulated for 500 years by outsiders: religious orders, colonial officers, landlords, legislators, bureaucrats, tourist agencies, intellectuals and academics.

These lessons of history, however, should be qualified lest we reinforce another abiding legacy from Romanticism: the commonplace imagery of a tragic fall from grace. As Clifford (1988: 333, 341-4) and Sahlin (1985) have argued, the either/or logic of assimilation vs survival does little justice to the complexity of native history. While exploited through state and market mechanisms, the Indians of today have not turned into

ethnic classes fully absorbed by capitalist society, let alone ethnic groups integrated within the pluralist state.<sup>1</sup> Nor are they victims of history that have become "our Indians" at best, counterfeit images or pale reflections of the authentic "others" they used to be (see Bonfil Batalla 1991: 125). Although anthropologists should eschew the temptation to portray first peoples as living fossils of a glorious past, they should be wary of the opposite strategy, which is to treat current manifestations of Indianness as false appearances, vestigial claims marred with problems of authenticity. Our case-study speaks to the profound changes that have affected Gulf Nahua society since conquest, yet we also take care to document the resilience of this southern Veracruz population and their active resistance to full incorporation into broader domains.

There is another legacy of Romanticism that keeps haunting the discipline: the confession of ethnocentric guilt. Anthropologists constantly fear viewing other cultures through terms and concepts that are too familiar, hence language fashioned by their own surroundings. Objective science was an answer to ethnocentric assumptions haunting the discipline. In recent decades, however, ethnographers have challenged the scientific approach to anthropology, pointing out that science is also a value-loaded product of Western history, a discourse that cannot be applied to other knowledge systems and ways of life without imposing our own modes of thinking. Post-modern ethnography offers an alternative to the scientific approach, a radically new perspective involving a de-centered, self-critical and anti-authorial exchange between informants, writers and readers. The basic implication of this new anthropology is that human experiences are so diverse they can never be transcended through grand theoretical syntheses, objective representations of reality, or any other similar exercise of scientific authority (Clifford and Marcus 1986).

The exploration of alternative literary genres, less analytical and more intersubjective, is an important contribution to anthropology. But when pitted against all other modes of discourse, post-modern ethnography can reduce a highly varied corpus to a few outdated tropes: visual perspectivism, the classic Polynesian arrival scene, the realist scientist-was-here rhetoric, the holistic organism imagery, the deep structure metaphor, and so on. With post-modernity, cultural masochism becomes second nature for a discipline that turns intolerant of its own origins and shows guilt for having chosen premisses of its own – for having pursued sound knowledge, the right to speak the truth, and the obligation to do it with discipline. When pushed too far, this new attempt at freeing the ethnographic enterprise from habits of Western speech amounts to no more than a will to listen to all possible voices coupled with a verbose will to speak no more. The polyphonic acceptance of all voices that clamor for expression suggests a reversion to Rousseau's all-too-familiar herd instinct: an absolute democratization of all possible worldviews, hence truths that are so interchangeable as to become an object of supreme indifference to all parties concerned.

This book is not a post-modern exercise in ethnographic dialogue

mixed with an overdose of self-distrust. Cognizant of the controversial nature of the issues we wish to raise, we have chosen to take our own stand on central questions such as the impact of state and capital on native society and the environment. These questions cannot be addressed through individual life stories and personal anecdotes, nor can they be resolved in a falsely dialogical style that reflects the interests of all parties concerned. Our research is informed by the work of other social scientists and by countless discussions with natives from all segments of Gulf Nahua society. All the same, we do not wish to present our findings as anything but our views on the subject. Nor do we wish to apologize for the biases built into the analyses offered throughout the book. Actually, our intention is to make these biases as compelling as can be to convince the reader of what we think to be the causes and deplorable effects of underdevelopment and unequal power relations in contemporary Gulf Nahua history. With this end in view, we have collected and processed field observations, made use of specific analytic methods, and developed conceptual frameworks that may contribute to the pressing debates raised throughout the text. Although dialogical theorists may view authorship as an authoritative institution in its own right, we consider ourselves to be personally accountable to the Gulf Nahuas, our readers and colleagues for the information, methods and arguments presented below.

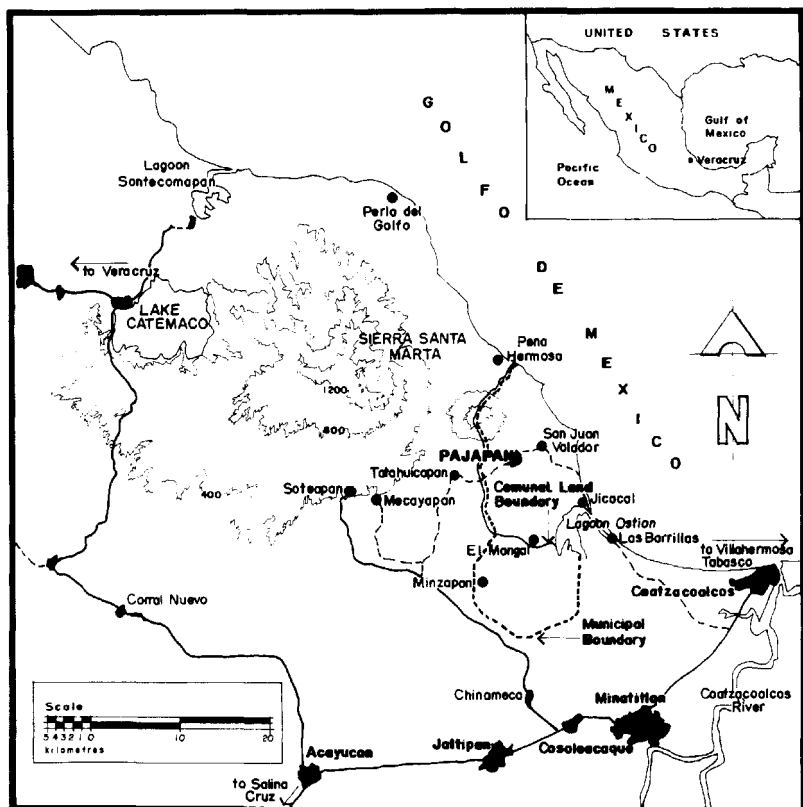
On the theoretical plane, we have drawn on the contributions of different schools of thought to state theory, underdevelopment studies, ecology, gender analysis and semiotics. In our view, however, there is more to interdisciplinary research than the total sum of disparate perspectives and fields of investigation applied to one particular population or subject matter. Some analyses are more convincing than others, and some arguments will not let themselves be peacefully juxtaposed within a loosely written, multi-sided text. Faced with an array of theories and models that often ignore one another or that may be irreconcilable, anthropologists must exercise their own judgment and select or develop those analyses and levels of generalization that can combine to produce a higher-order approach to social phenomena. The final product need not be a dialogically eclectic language but rather a mode of discourse that breaks new ground within the discipline, a contribution to an ongoing "argument between styles of language" or "struggle among sociolinguistic points of view" (Bakhtin 1981: 76, 273). To paraphrase Heidegger (1968: 178), dialogue between disciplines and perspectives is worth pursuing only if it leads speakers into the unknown and the unspoken.

Before we sketch out the methods and theories developed in this book, more should be said about our case-study. The present-day people of Pajapan are all Nahua speakers. They inhabit a remote corner of southern Veracruz wedged between the Gulf of Mexico and the massive petro-chemical complex of Coatzacoalcos and Minatitlán (see Map 1). Their territory is part of the Olmec heartland, a hot, humid region where Mesoamerica's Mother culture developed between 1200 and 400 BC. The Pajapan village is the administrative center (*cabecera*) and largest

village in the municipality (*municipio*) of Pajapan.<sup>2</sup> It is also the center for an agrarian community whose members live mostly in the *cabecera* but also in the nearby village of San Juan Volador and the hamlets of Jicacal, El Mangal, Palma Real, and Tecolapa. While some 8,000 people live in these congregations, the *comuneros* form a much smaller group that holds title to 19,158 hectares of land between the Laguna del Ostión and the peak of the volcano San Martín Pajapan.<sup>3</sup> Together with their Mecayapan neighbors, the people of Pajapan are among the last of a large group of Nahuatl speakers in southern Veracruz, many of whom were displaced from the best agricultural land in the region and gradually absorbed into the wider mestizo society. The Gulf Nahuatl language is a variant of the language once spoken by the Aztecs and the people refer to their own dialect as *Mexicano*. Similar variants of the Gulf *pipil* or eastern Nahuatl dialect are spoken throughout southern Veracruz and eastern Tabasco (García de León 1969: 280). Sierra Popoluca, a Mixe-Zoquean language, is spoken by the neighboring people of Sotepan. All in all, the Gulf Nahuatl and Popoluca population numbers some 30,000 scattered in small communities in the mountainous area known as the Sierra de Santa Marta.

Beyond the Gulf Nahuatl area lie the cities of Coatzacoalcos, Minatitlán and Jáltipan which have a total population of over one million. These cities have grown rapidly in the past 30 years as a result of their strategic position between the oil-producing southeast and the industrial Valley of Mexico. They are ideally located on the narrow isthmus that divides the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. Some 70% of Mexico's petrochemical industries are concentrated there. To the west of this massive and highly polluted urban industrial complex lies the bustling cattle ranching and commercial city of Acayucan. The cattle industry has a long history in the region and is the economic mainstay in rural areas. Stimulated in recent decades by favorable national policies and growing national demand for low-quality beef, this land-extensive cattle economy has expanded rapidly, encroaching upon tropical rain forests and agricultural land and causing countless violent confrontations in the countryside. Thousands of peasants have lost their land, forced out of agriculture into unemployment or other poorly paid sectors of the rural and urban economy. As we shall see, the story of Pajapan is an illustration of the ravages of modern economic history on rain forest environments and Mesoamerican native society.

The expansion of state and capital profoundly altered the slash-and-burn subsistence economy and the rain forest environment that used to support it. It also brought radical changes to the native government process and traditional family structures. In order to understand such critical transformations, it is important that we look back over past events and broader forces that have shaped modern Gulf Nahuatl society. These factors are discussed in Chapter 1. They include land settlements of the colonial era, municipal divisions and the lot system created in the 19th century, the PRI apparatus established after the Revolution, the collective landholdings promoted under Cárdenas, and the post-war expansion of



Map 1 Study area in southern Veracruz, Mexico

a cattle industry controlled by the powerful *caciques* (political bosses) of southern Veracruz.

Set against this background, municipal politics and the concentration of wealth in land and cattle in 20th-century Pajapan are explored in Chapters 2 and 3. Our account of Gulf Nahua economics and politics is informed by a theoretical approach that recognizes the convertibility of the two forms of power: authority over land has been used to acquire wealth, and wealth in cattle to achieve positions of authority. These conversions, however, have been performed within limits and under conditions that have varied through history. Even when controlled by a dominant bloc, wealth and office are never fused into a single system and continue to be managed through different institutional arrangements, those of capital and state. Moreover, the concentration of formal power in the hands of the few is offset by divisions between dominant groups and struggles launched against the ruling interests. Finally, power is exercised under conditions that are liable to change: the analysis shows

how connections between power systems change over time. In Pajapan, the dominant regime has evolved from a brutal exercise of PRI rancher hegemony prior to the 1980s to an ethno-popular coalition of peasants and ranchers struggling against state capital in the early 1980s and a recent outburst of factionalism.

In Chapters 4 and 5, we address issues of agricultural economics and rain forest ecology. The analysis shows how Indian peasants have been divided and exploited through an unequal distribution of the factors of production (land, cattle) and the returns of labor. Our case-study stresses the various ways in which peasants and their rain forest environment have been exploited and impoverished by ranching capital, through means other than outright proletarianization and industrialization. But while ranching activities have radically altered previous relations and forces of production, they have fallen short of taking over the whole economy. Some older patterns of slash-and-burn farming and subsistence production have survived. Two important factors account for this distorted reproduction of older productive patterns: the weaknesses of local capital and peasant resistance. We argue that the local property system and the overall conditions of production have been shaped by struggles over land and a whole range of peasant survival strategies, from modifications of *milpa* agriculture to the intensification of complementary subsistence activities (e.g., lagoon fisheries).

Finally, we demonstrate the inefficiency and shortsightedness of Pajapan's hinterland ranching industry, a poorly managed breeding economy harnessed to urban-based operations controlling the more profitable processes of finishing and commercialization. Cattle ranching in the Santa Marta area creates few jobs and imposes poor-quality pastures on diverse rain forest ecosystems. The industry has had a negative impact on *milpa* productivity, causing a loss of food self-sufficiency. A highly constrained pastoral economy has spoiled the area of its natural riches and undermined long-term prospects for sustainable agricultural production in Pajapan.

Capitalism is adaptable and aggressive but it is also a stupid machine bent on creating obstacles to its own growth. In Pajapan, the expansion of the regional cattle industry has depleted resources and created poverty, unemployment and economic stagnation. These deplorable effects of capital accumulation in agriculture reflect chronic problems of mismanagement costly to the current profitability and future prospects of local and regional capital.

Our claim that older relations of production have survived the growth of the cattle economy is made in Chapter 6. Kin-based power and exchange relations continue to play a key role in current forms of Gulf Nahua adaptation to the rain forest environment and the market economy. Productive activities and the allocation of wealth are still founded on divisions and struggles of gender and generation that escape the control of broader domains. Actually these customary relations form a domain of their own, a bilateral descent system consisting of nuclear households governed by patrimonial rules of residence, marriage and inheritance

(polygyny, brideservice, male ultimogeniture). Unlike the state and the market economy, patrimonial organization is highly decentralized, centered as it is on nuclear family activities. But it is also subject to broader requirements of reciprocity mixed with a strong dose of social hierarchy, the kind that favors men, older generations and wife-givers. Finally, the system is dynamic, a terrain of struggles, strategic actions and cyclical changes that create important differences and shifts in the domestic economy. Variations in household organization are the outcome of negotiations between genders and age-groups and also the transformation of power relations and productive activities linked to the market economy.

From the patrimonial domain emerges a particular view of relations between humans and the universe, a worldview conveyed through narrative discourse. Chapter 7 explores this subject matter through a close reading of the story of the Corn God known as Sintiopiltzin. Interactions between men and women, the old and the young, are thus situated against the background of native discourse on problems governing all life forms, including plant spirits. The analysis shows how native myths address two basic questions: the exigencies of hierarchy, but also the obligations of reciprocity and self-sacrifice that life places on human, animal and plant spirits alike. The concept of death as a condition of reproduction is central to this discourse and touches on all aspects of Nahua culture. While echoing prehispanic notions of asceticism, images of the offerings of life imply a native *Weltanschauung* that goes beyond Aztec sacrificial rites performed with a view to reinforcing structures of domination (Séjourné 1957: 35; González Torres 1985: 37), limiting population growth (Cook 1971), feeding the gods (Seler 1963, 1: 155; Caso 1953: 22), or providing protein food for humans (Harner 1977). We shall see that folk tales also ponder the ravages of modern history, external forces robbing the land of its gods and natural riches. The Maize God, underworld *chaneques* and the plumed servant have suffered yet they will not let the land, the waters of life and their native custodians be pillaged with impunity. In the long run, all segments of society and the universe lose from humans who refuse to behave ascetically and with regard for all those reciprocities that feed into the web of life.

The Conclusion specifies the common denominators underlying our discussion of agrarian politics, hinterland capitalism, rain forest ecology, gender relations and the narrative process. The conceptual frameworks and methods of analysis applied to different aspects of Gulf Nahua history converge on what we call the *processual* nature of social reality. The term "process" is often used to evoke changes occurring over time. Accordingly, our case-study speaks to the dynamics of native politics, economics, kinship and symboling. A process-oriented view of history, however, must also speak to the question of order and established methods of doing things in society, whether they be habits of family life, a narrative tradition, a mode of production or a government process. Not that these "orderly processes" are invariable and unchanging. As readers will soon realize, our intent is to emphasize the variable properties and internal contradictions of each process: some degree of indeterminacy

and irrationality is built into all rules of social activity. In keeping with these comments, the term "process" is used to imply a battle over rights. Social life is a power struggle involving the imposition of a ruling order (capitalism, *caciquismo*, patrimonialism, asceticism), an unequal distribution of the proceeds of social activity, and the confrontation of classes, kin groups and signs – forces constantly "serving a process" on each other.

### Research methods and data base

Our exploration of Gulf Nahua society began in 1984 with a three-month stay in the fishing village of Jicacal. The research project was eventually supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The purpose of the project was to gather and analyze detailed information on the impact of the Mexican cattle-raising and petro-chemical industries on both the economy and the socio-cultural fabric of the Indian population located in the Santa Marta area. Following this initial plan, a wide range of information was collected by ourselves (with the help of Dominique Caouette and local field assistants)<sup>4</sup> every year since 1984. Stays in Pajapan and nearby villages were frequent and extended from several weeks to three months at a time. Daniel Buckles (1989) developed a PhD dissertation and Dominique Caouette (1989) an MA thesis from this material.

The analyses presented in this book are based on information gathered in the Pajapan area, the state capital Xalapa and Mexico City. Data were obtained through a variety of methods: surveys, interviews, archival research and participant observation. One key source of information consists of a general household survey conducted in 1986 following several months of informal interviews. The survey deals with household composition, access to land, property in cattle and occupational profile based on a random sample (N 592) of people in the village of Pajapan and surrounding hamlets. A team of ten local assistants did the interviews in the Nahua language under close supervision by the researchers. Additional interviews with peasants, fishers and Indian ranchers were carried out over the course of several years. Twelve case-studies provided supplementary information on cattle ranching enterprises and 50 structured interviews with farmers covered in greater detail aspects of local farming practices not examined in the general survey. Sales statistics obtained from the local Rancher Association dating back to the early 1960s allowed us to add some historical depth to our quantitative analysis of Pajapan's cattle industry. A census of all households in the fishing village of Jicacal (N 74) was also undertaken in 1984 along with a survey of fishing activities involving over 200 lagoon fishers from Pajapan, San Juan Volador and Jicacal. Through participant observation and numerous discussions with native informants, information was collected on the labor process in most sectors of the local economy and on general features of local soil, water, land and forest resources. Finally, a census of all stores in Pajapan, lengthy interviews with eight store-owners in the village, several



studies of petty trade in fish and fruit and a series of discussions with key informants on the history and concrete conditions of commerce in the area form part of the ethnographic material amassed over the years. Other data include interviews of craft workers, construction laborers, taxi drivers, carpenters, butchers, bakers and midwives.

Our history of politics in Pajapan is the product of extensive archival research and countless discussions by Dominique Caouette and ourselves with peasant leaders, Indian ranchers in Pajapan and outside bureaucrats as well. The researchers were present in the village during some important political events. Many government documents and published materials referring to Pajapan were also collected. Archival material includes Pajapan's primordial land titles stored in a wooden chest held by a village elder. The primordial titles are copies, hand-made in the mid-1880s, of documents dating back to 1605. Correspondence from 1932 to 1992 between the village of Pajapan and government officials, contained in the communal chest and various national archives, details local struggles between peasants and ranchers for control over land and the local land commission. We also consulted all the letters exchanged over the last 60 years or so between the village of Pajapan and the Office of the President of Mexico, letters full of rhetoric and description of land conflicts prevailing in the municipality.

Another aim of the project was to obtain primary data on the cultural and social aspects of life among the Gulf Nahuas, with a view to exploring the relationship between economy, society and culture in the Santa Marta area. The material collected over the years touches on household budgets (19 cases), the sexual division of labor, rules of descent and inheritance (six cases), patterns of marriage and residence, and fluctuations in brideprice from the 1940s onwards. Demographic trends were reconstructed with the use of our own 1986 survey and national census statistics published by the Mexican government from 1900 onwards. As for the cultural side of things, lengthy interviews were carried out with two local healers. Linguistic material of a semantic nature (Nahua words and meanings related to the imageries appearing in the corn myth) was also collected in May 1991 with the help of two local informants.

We have consulted and referenced all the secondary sources that contain information about the Gulf Nahuas. The works of Stuart, García de León, Nahmad and native researchers of *Culturas Populares* were helpful in filling gaps in our own data base. Some recent findings of the Sierra Santa Marta Project, an interdisciplinary research team initially launched in 1989 and funded by the International Development Research Center, are reported.

During our many trips to Pajapan we were always received by the local population with hospitality. Our interest in the language was an important factor facilitating our rapport with villagers. Most people we met did not perceive us as a threat to local interests and spoke with us very frankly, even about delicate issues. The absence of any affiliation with local, regional or national interest groups also made it easier for us to conduct interviews with peasant organizers, municipal politicians and

government bureaucrats. Over the years, however, our involvement in the Sierra Santa Marta Project (see Conclusion) has changed our personal relationship to people in the region. While permanently residing outside the area, we are actors firmly committed to supporting local and regional efforts to resolve problems of poverty and resource depletion in the Santa Marta highlands. Our research has played a useful role in orienting some local initiatives; moreover, support for these actions has directly influenced our research process and the analyses presented below. Our sincere hope is that we continue to have this opportunity.

### Notes

1. Authors who subsume Indianness under class include Harris (1964), Stavenhagen (1965), Pozas and Pozas (1971), Herbert, Guzmán and Qan (1972). In recent years, Mexicanists have preferred to emphasize the interplay of class and ethnicity (Stavenhagen 1979; Campbell 1989; Schryer 1990).

2. The municipality includes numerous hamlets and *congregaciones*: San Juan Volador, Minzapan, Coxcapa, José María Morelos (founded in 1960, an *ejido* since 1974), Benito Juárez (founded in 1971, an *ejido* since 1973), Lázaro Cárdenas (founded in 1975, an *ejido* since 1981), San Miguel Temoloapan, Ursulo Galván, Lorenzo Azúa Torres, El Mangal (1950s), Batajapan (1957, annexed to the *cabecera* in 1982), Jicacal (1970), Palma Real, El Pescador (1980) and Tecolapa (1940).

3. Throughout this book, reference will be made to three main groups: Indian peasants, Indian ranchers and mestizo ranchers. While the Indian ranchers live in Pajapan, mestizo ranchers live in urban centers. Only Indians (but not all of them) living in the municipality are *comuneros*, i.e., holders of communal land rights in Pajapan.

4. Gustavo Antonio, Chabelo Antonio, Adelina Jaúregui, Saturnino Hernández, Francisco Salas, Leonardo Salas and Roberto Salas.