

# On Nahuat-Pipil hermeneutics: a Salvadoran native language under erasure

Sobre la hermenéutica náhuat-pipil: una  
lengua nativa salvadoreña bajo supresión

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*[Historical Memory] has as a silent vocation to erase the archive and to impel us to amnesia.*

J. Derrida

## Resumen

En este artículo se examina cómo el canon literario nacional se ha consolidado excluyendo el estudio de la lengua nativa más importante del país. Al adaptar a los nativos a una figura folclórica y asimilar la alteridad con la igualdad, se ignoró el legado lingüístico náhuat-pipil durante el siglo XX. El artículo revela una inmensa disparidad entre la lingüística extranjera y la nacional. Delinea una discrepancia científica al mismo tiempo que traza una perspectiva nacionalista que tímidamente se acerca al estudio de la lengua náhuat-pipil; por ejemplo, los trabajos de P. Arauz (1926/1960) T. Fidiás Jiménez (1935), J. Todd (1953), M. de Baratta (1959) y P. Geoffroy Rivas (1961). El canon artístico nacional inventa la figura del nativo sin lengua materna. De hecho, dos extranjeros han logrado las principales compilaciones gramaticales y mitológicas: Leonhard Schultze-Jena (1935) y Lyle Campbell (1985). Por esta razón, el avance de los estudios náhuatl mexicanos—con más de cuatrocientos cincuenta trabajos (M. León-Portilla en Sullivan 1996)—apenas han afectado el canon monolingüe salvadoreño. Al borde de la guerra civil, la imagen del nativo se redujo a la de un antiguo habitante de la Atlántida (Salarrué 1974) o a la de un guerrillero (Dalton 1974), según la filosofía y la orientación política del autor. En el presente, a pesar de una nueva esfera intelectual, los trabajos actuales sobre lingüística nativa (R. Andrews (2003), M. Launay (1994), J. Lockhart (2001), etc.), y etno-historia (L. Matthew y S. Romero, 2012) aún no han producido cambios radicales en el punto de vista que la historia intelectual salvadoreña le confiere al idioma y la literatura náhuat-pipil. Como ser político—pero apenas dotado con lenguaje—todavía hace falta la investigación náhuat-pipil, a pesar del incremento de estudios culturales en Centro América. Su hermenéutica, sus categorías gramaticales, su sintaxis y su poesía continúan sin ser exploradas.

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**Palabras claves:** lingüística nahuat-pipil, cánones salvadoreños artísticos y lingüísticos, lingüística nativa.

### **Abstract**

This paper examines how a literary national canon is consolidated excluding the study of the most important Native language of the country. Adapting Natives to a folkloric figure and assimilating Otherness to the Same, Nahuat-Pipil linguistic legacy was ignored during the 20th century. The paper reveals a huge disparity between foreign and Salvadoran linguistics. It outlines a scientific discrepancy, as well as it sketches the nationalistic perspectives that timidly approach the study of the Nahuat-Pipil language: P. Arauz (1926/1960) T. Fidias Jiménez (1935), J. Todd (1953), M. de Baratta (1959), P. Geoffroy Rivas (1961). Salvadoran artistic canon invents the figure of a Native without a mother tongue. Indeed, two foreigners accomplished the main grammatical and mythological compilations: Leonhard Schultze-Jena (1935) and Lyle Campbell (1985). For this reason, the advance of Nahuatl-Mexicano studies—with more than four hundred and fifty works (M. León-Portilla in T. Sullivan, 1976)—has barely affected Salvadoran monolingual canon. At the verge of the civil war, the Native's image was reduced to an ancient inhabitant of Atlantis (Salarué, 1974) or to a guerrilla fighter (Dalton, 1974), according to the philosophy and politics of the author. Nowadays, despite a new intellectual sphere, current works on Native linguistics (R. Andrews (2003), M. Launay (1994), J. Lockhart (2001), etc.), and ethno-history (L. Matthew and S. Romero, 2012) have not yet produced a radical change in the viewpoint that Salvadoran intellectual history bestows on Nahuat-Pipil language and literature. As a political being—but barely gifted with language—Nahuat-Pipil research is still missing, despite the rise of Central American Cultural Studies. Its hermeneutics—grammatical categories, syntax and poetics—continue to be unexplored.

**Keywords:** Nahuat-Pipil linguistics, Salvadoran linguistic and artistic canons, native linguistics.

## **0. Purpose**

The essay is divided in three main sections and a concluding remark. The first unit sketches a renewed interest in Nahuat-Pipil studies in the 21st century. The second part describes the exclusion of native language(s) from the Salvadoran literary canon in the 20th century. Finally, the third rubric proposes a brief introduction to Nahuat-Pipil hermeneutics. A concluding remark hopes a renaissance of Nahuat-Pipil studies will provide a cornerstone for a 21st re-volution: the restoration of ancestral land of Natives.

## **1. Inventing a New Nation**

After the Peace Accords of 1992, El Salvador entered into a new era. This novel epoch cannot only be characterized in political and social terms. It is true that the old guerrilla movement—Farabundo Martí for National Liberation (FMLN)—became a political party and, nowadays, it rules the country for a second presidential term until 2019. But this radical change also describes the cultural arena. If during the civil war (1980-1992), testimonial novel and protest poetry were the main genres of artistic expression, in this paradoxical period of violent peace, those literary categories declined. There is not only a rise of a novel in a modernist and post-modernist sense, but also of an introspective poetry that was supposed to disappear during the commitment to a socialist revolution in 1980s.

This return —revolution in its original meaning— involves a search for roots with a very different emphasis that most Salvadoran studies prescribed before 1992. A disdained historical figure arises to the main scene of history: Nahuat-Pipil natives. For both sides in the conflict Natives were supposed to be extinct, if not since the beginning of the 20th century, at least since 1932 after a terrible massacre to be commented later. Nonetheless, after 1992, Nahuat-Pipil language and culture becomes an emblem of renewal in a nation in crisis. Not only is a program of language revitalization organized —sponsored by a Salesian University, Universidad Don Bosco (UDB)— but also poets and anthropologists decide to center their research on a new fieldwork activity. The purpose consists in recovering native language and culture as a renewal of nation. This quest of identity does not differ from the endeavors of the most violent groups in the country, transnational gangs whose personality is inscribed in the skin as glyphic writing onto a parchment. Following an ethnographic command, experience substitutes sociological statistics as measure of science and knowledge. Perhaps a new concept of testimonio arises by which rational knowledge (*mati*, “to know”) implies direct observation of an eyewitness (*ix-mati*, “to eye-know”) account (*ixpantilia*).

## 2. Beyond Theosophy and Revolutionary Nationalism

Nahuat-Pipil belongs to the Uto-Aztec family of languages, which expands from the states of Utah and California in western USA to Nicaragua. Its most well known language is Nahuatl-Mexicano (x = sh in ancient spelling), spoken in central Mexico, whose social and literary prestige compels to identify Nahuat-Pipil as its “vulgar” or childish (*pipil*) and inferior dialect. During the whole 20th century, Nahuat-Pipil studies were marginal to the imagined nation of Salvadoran intellectuals. Based on the capital city, artists only portrayed the natives in painting, literally, as well as accordingly to a French coined sentence: *La vérité en peinture/The truth in painting* (J. Derrida, 1978 y marte.org.sv). Despite multiple nationalistic references to their language and culture, foreigners wrote the two most important linguistic works, regardless of their brief sojourn in the region. The German anthropologist Leonhard Schultze-Jena (1930/1935) wrote the first oeuvre; the American linguist Lyle Campbell (1970s/1985) authored the second masterpiece.

These foremost scientific studies on Nahuat-Pipil by outsiders of the cultural sphere supplanted all Salvadoran works on the field. From the rise of modernism and regionalism in 1880 (V. Acosta, A. Ambrogi, F. Gavidia, etc.) to the beginning of military dictatorship in 1931 (A. and M. A. Espino, C. Lars, Salarrué, etc.), only Schultze-Jena compiled a reasonable amount of texts and wrote a modern grammar of the native language, published in German in 1935.<sup>1</sup> For the first Salvadoran avant-garde linked to President Manuel Enrique Araujo (1911-1913), communal land represented an obstacle to implement a modern society. Native “*ejidos*” exemplified “*los males y el atraso de la industria agrícola, como lo comprueba la Economía Política y Social* (the wickedness and delay of agricultural industry as Political and Social Economy demonstrates)”. For that reason the “extinction, el 2 de marzo de 1882 (its extinction March 2nd 1882)”, “*ha dado un gran halón en los destinos del*

1. The first grammar is *Arte de la lengua vulgar mexicana*, 17th century: *Art of the Mexican Vulgar Language*, in which “art” translates the Greek *tekhne*, i. e., the specific techniques used to encode universal logical categories or natural phenomena, since language “complicates the facile postulation of a natural allocation” of given “entities” and facts (Haviland, 21), or the problematic passage from universal cognition to linguistic particular (de León Pasquel, 120); “vulgar” translates the Greek *demos*, in its double meaning: rude and popular.

*país por la ruta indefinida del progreso* (has provided a great push to the national purpose through the undefined way to progress)" (*Revista del Ateneo de El Salvador*, Año I, No. 1, 1 de diciembre de 1912: 24).

The founder of the National Museum, David J. Guzmán, verified this intellectual viewpoint claiming that such a "*raza decadente* (decadent race)" (*Apuntamientos*, 1883: 505) opposed the "eternal" principle of private property, origin of the "idea" of "*patria* (homeland; republic)" (*Comentarios*, 1914: 194). Concurrently, Guzmán thought Nahuat-Pipil language had a "pueril (childish; *pipil*)" pronunciation, lacking "*voces abstractas* (abstract words)" (Guzmán, op. cit.). Therefore, its contribution was irrelevant to human knowledge in general, and to national identity, in particular. For half a century (1880-1931), literary and linguistic research on Nahuat-Pipil rarely exceeded random lists of words (Guzmán, 1883: 447 (perhaps a hidden quotation from E. G. Squier, 339-340), Arauz, 1924, and Masín 1926), except for the work of María de Baratta, published three decades after (1959).

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1932 was a tragic year for native culture. An uprising was severely repressed in name of anti-Communism and hundreds of natives died, killed by the army under the direction of General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez (1931-1934; 1935-1939; 1939-1944). Although Salvadorans usually maintain that Martínez's regime was responsible for eliminating Nahuat-Pipil language, historical events in the country are always more complicated than straightforward on one side of the political spectrum. Indeed, the first grammar written by a Salvadoran —Tomás Fidas Jiménez's *Idioma pipil* (1937)— was dedicated to General Martínez and published by the National Library as a token of its commitment to promote nationalism. Its introduction —by David Rosales h., a member of the Academia Salvadoreña de Historia (Salvadoran Academy of History)— established the other philosophical parameter that motivated the grammatical approach. All Natives descended from the remote and extinct continents of Atlantis and Lemuria, according to prevalent theosophical views in almost every intellectual strata of society. From the guerrilla fighter, the Nicaraguan César Augusto Sandino at the left-wing side, to the Salvadoran middle ground artist Salarrué, and General Martínez at the extreme right, close to Fascism, theosophy was the prevalent and most influential belief of the period.

Its principles continued to dictate Salvadoran *Indigenismo* until the second half of the 20th century when María de Baratta published her vast work *Cuzcatlán típico* (1959), the single masterpiece written by a Salvadoran, which included a considerable amount of texts in Nahuat-Pipil. Predictably, Baratta participated in Martínez's regime organizing the most popular event on Natives dances — with 30.000 spectators— at the National Stadium "Flor Blanca", during the capital festivities in August 1937 (*El Diario de Hoy* and *Revista El Salvador. Órgano de la Junta Nacional de Turismo*, 1937). She also contributed to the Comité de Investigaciones del Folklore Nacional y Arte Típico Salvadoreño dedicated to compile oral literature and tradition in the Native regions of the country (*Planes*, 1942, and *Recopilación*, 1944).

The peculiar combination of nationalism and Eastern mysticism eluded a deep scientific approach to the study of native language. In consequence, none of the modern linguistic theories ever influenced Salvadoran views on Nahuat-Pipil: early 20th century historical linguistics, Whorf-Sapir hypothesis on language as a worldview, its formalist counterpart L. Bloomfield, functionalism and typology searching for language specific or universal logical categories, even less Chomskyan formalism. At least until mid 20th century, Squier's ideas (337) concerning an original Nahua migration from Central America to Mexico were prevalent among Salvadoran intellectuals (Jiménez (1936: 1), Lardé y Larín (150), Toruño (26), Salarrué (145), etc.), despite early results of American and Mexican historical linguistics about several Uto-Aztec migrations from Arid America to the south. Similarly, during the fifties and sixties, Nahuat-Pipil linguistics never analyzed language structure beyond morphology or word level, dismissing the complex syntactic domain, as well as the mythical and poetic legacy of its culture (J. G. Todd, 1953 and P. Geoffroy Rivas, 1961). "*Rescatar del olvido las expresiones culturales* (Saving cultural expressions from oblivion)" excluded their transcription into native languages as one of its linguistic requirements (Herrera Vega, 7). In some canonical works, Natives were transformed into a *spectrum* (Lindo). Exactly the same ghostly figure that haunted European history—from W. Shakespeare to K. Marx according to Derrida (*Spectres de Marx*, 1993)—returned to mortify Salvadoran literature as their "nombre [...] no debe pronunciarse (name shall not be spelled)" (Lindo, 96).

Despite a brief insight to Nahuat-Pipil administrative legacy during the Colonial regime (Geoffroy Rivas), its status as a vehicular language was ignored until the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Matthew and Romero). Historical linguistics has not yet proposed a comparison between 17<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century grammars. Random lists of words—inventories of conjugated verbs—continued to offer the prevalent approach to Native linguistics, even during the renewal of the educational sphere under the leadership of Walter Béneke in 1967. Béneke's modernizing project did not affect Nahuat-Pipil poetic and linguistics studies (compare the arbitrary lists in A. Rochac, *Revista El Salvador*, 1935 and F. Lazo, *Cultura*, 1968, No. 50). The native language remained out of the literary realm: "el náhuat más lleno de nosotros nunca se escribe (full of ourselves Nahuat language is never written)" (C. Lars, 349; Director of *Cultura* in 1968); "le llegó el tiempo de ser historia (it was time for Nahuat-Pipil to be part of history)" (J. F. Toruño, 55); "no queda nada escrito (on Nahuat-Pipil there is nothing written)" (L. Gallegos Valdés, 11). Even the rise of anthropology excluded the transcription of Nahuat-Pipil considering its study irrelevant to the development of social sciences: "se conservan canciones, refranes y dichos en idioma náhuat (songs, proverbs, and sayings are maintained in Nahuat-Pipil Language)", but are omitted from the concerns of ethnography (Marroquín, 430). Finally, only a timid pedagogical approach directed to children surpassed the word level, teaching simple sentences without any analytical tool (A. S. Latin, 1982 and J. M. Bonilla Alvarado, 1992).

The belatedness of Salvadoran linguistics persisted almost at the beginning of the civil war (1980-1992), as the most influential artist, Salarrué, conclusively attested in his final novel, *Catleya luna* (1974): the origins of Nahuat-Pipil are in Atlantis denying any linguistic theory not contained in the "fuentes iniciáticas (initiation sources)" (145). Exactly during that epoch the authority of Marxism and a revolutionary agenda supplanted any consideration on ethnic and linguistic studies focusing on testimonial novel and protest poetry in terms of class struggle. In "counterpoint" to Salarrué's



theosophy, Roque Dalton's most influential book —*Las historias prohibidas del Pulgarcito* (1974)— transformed Natives into predecessors of his own guerrilla project in a *long durée*. Besides this everlasting “guerra de guerrillas (guerrilla warfare)” (3), the study of Nahuat-Pipil was useless to legitimize a revolutionary agenda. The assimilation of *Otherness* to the *Same* disregarded the most elemental linguistic and poetic legacy of Nahuat-Pipil language, as well as its specific contribution to universal knowledge. Until 1997, a recent example of Salvadoran literary canon —“*Biblioteca Básica de Literatura Salvadoreña* (Basic Library of Salvadoran Literature)”, thirty (30) volumes — excluded all native influence on national identity from a poetic and linguistic perspective. Identity was thought —Castilian only— as monolingual in its essence.

The following section reviews some key concepts for understanding Nahuat-Pipil culture from linguistic and hermeneutic methods, that is to say, reveals the erasure that historical memory imposes over the archive.

### 3. Nahuat-Pipil Hermeneutics

The subsequent six lines of reasoning summarize Nahuat-Pipil contribution to linguistics, to poetic, as well as to philosophy in general.

- A Nahuat-Pipil is an omni-predicative (word-sentence, without simple nouns ( $\emptyset$ -*takat*, “he is a man”) and infinitives ( $\emptyset$ -*chuuka*, “(s)he cries”) since almost all words are conjugated), head-marking (grammatical functions internal to the verb-word-sentence (*ni-chuuka*, “I cry”), including transitive (*ni-ki-kwa*, “I eat it”), ditransitive (*ti-nech-mik-ti-lia se ni nu pila-uan*, “you killed one of my sons; you-me-die-causative-applicative one the (it is) my son-possessive”), and motion verbs (*yajki i-chan ne xuret*, “he went (to) old man’s house; he-went (it is) his-home old man ( $\rightarrow$ |)”) vs. *ni-kis-ki i-chan*, “I went out of his house (I-go/ out-preterit (it is) his-home) (| $\rightarrow$ )”, reiterative (conjugated verbs in series (*ti-k-chiwa ti-nemi*, “you are doing it; you-it-do you-are”); *ni-k-neki ni-taketsa*, “I want to talk; I-it-want I-talk”), and paratactic language (lacking a case mark in all presupposed noun phrases (NPs) ( $\emptyset$ 1-*k<sup>2</sup>-tsutsun ne te-kwa-ni<sup>1</sup> ne ten-kal<sup>2</sup>*, “the jaguar hits/knocks the door; “he-it-hits/knocks, the one who is a jaguar, the thing that is a door”), counting source, path, and goal of motion verbs, except in the complex verb-word-sentence (*ni-kis-ki chan yejemet*, “I went out/left, it’s their house (| $\rightarrow$ )”). Beyond the word-sentence, Nahuat-Pipil syntax operates by equative and possessive cross-reference of NPs and the head-marking verb (see sub-indexes above). NPs are not simple phrases but real sentences in themselves ( $\emptyset$ -*ten-kal*, “door, “it is opening/mouth-house”), and regularly cross-indexed with the head. Its most elementary nominal categories continue to be unknown for a Hispano-centric mentality projecting its own nominal classes of gender and number: absolutive (*aa-t*, “(it is) water”; predicative function of nouns), possessives (*nu-aa-w*, “(it is) my water (that I drink)”; *nu-aa-w-yu*, (it is) my water/secretion”), locatives (*a-pan*, “(it is) in (the) water, river”), vocative (*xulé*, “iah, old man!”). Forming philosophical concepts —such as *Homo erectus* for example— is achieved through a system of prefixing grammaticalized body parts (*ix-mati*), and object pronouns to a main verb-word: *ketsa*, “to stand”; *ix-ketsa*, “eye-stand; to think, to imagine; to stand something by vision”; *ta-ketsa*, “to speak; to stand something by words, by naming

it" ("the human body in its upright position" provides "the canonical encounter model" (de León, 3); "the Greeks understood Being from the upright position"(Dastur, 1994)).

- B** Nahuat-Pipil offers a deviant arithmetic system from the vigesimal one (base 20) of all Middle American languages. Its hybrid way of counting combines a quintesimal system (base 5; *ma-kwi-l*, "five; what is main-tain or hold at hand") with the vigesimal native norm (*kaxtuuli* (15) = *yey puwal* (3 x 5) = three hands). For this reason, it clearly differs from Nahuatl-Mexicano, its closest and most influential language due to its Pre-Hispanic relevance in center Mexico.
- C** Nahuat-Pipil conceives the concept of person or "soul" —as the early friars called it— as a quantity of energy scattered along the whole body of any being, but concentrated in several privileged energetic centers, yet to be determined: *tuunal*, *yuulu*, *ijiyu* at least. The body parallels a fractal entity —a post-Cartesian or Lacanian subject— in which each section reproduces the whole. A dismembered woman body —parallel to the Mexica Coyolxauhqui— offers the paradigm of a fractal being, whose limbs possess their own particular energy. The body parts names work as prefixes of verbal stems to change their meaning, as well as relational nouns instead of prepositions, *-ix-pan*, "in front of; eye-locative". As complements of a motion verb, most relational nouns —derived from a body part or not— are self-locative lacking a case mark for source, path or goal, encoded only in the verb as prescribed by its omni-predicative and head-marking axioms.
- D** Space-Time is divided in a dual helix —in a DNA shape— which replicates the opposite and complementary seasons: winter-*xupan* and summer-*tunalku*. This duality contains the transformations, which convert the contraries into each other, like a *yahual-yawal* or piece of cloth used by women, carrying baskets in their heads, in an equivalent torsion to the Moebius band. The key dates of their conversion are 3rd May, Day of the Cross, and 2nd November, Day of Death, which mark the natural revival by Rain and its demise by the Sun. Linked to this universal motion, a predatory biological cycle starts on the earth and the stars, as sustenance of every being that exists on Taltikpak (on the surface of the Earth), and it concludes in the reciprocity that human beings offer to their existential providers, i.e., *sacrum-facere*.
- E** Nahuat-Pipil sexuality gives priority to psychic desire over the physical body. By supporting the idea of fluid identities, maleness and femininity are located at zenith and nadir of gender theory, whose transformations reproduce those of the seasons, *tunalku* and *xupan* in 4, male and female principles respectively. The political question is located at the center of sexual liminality or gender mutation, for example, the remission of the vanquished and enemy to passive homosexuality or provider of an orifice (i.e., "the stick in the anus" of "the priest", Argueta, 26).
- D** *Descenso ad inferos* defines the central mythic-poetic motives in Nahuat-Pipil literature. Following the proposal of Russian formalist Vladimir Propp, Nahuat-Pipil tales can be compared to Dante's *La divina commedia* and Russian folktales, in order to underline its regional particularity: a ritualistic initiation of young males by the imaginary descent to the center of the earth through the caves or orifices of Earth's body (i.e., the current Salvadoran migrants aiming to reach the American Dream or realm of wealth). Universals are not limited to the hard core of "conceptual organization of the grammatical sphere"

(Launay, 1994:22), since there are also narratological models which transcend any cultural diversity.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

A simple visit to two prestigious Salvadoran museums —Museo Nacional de Antropología “David. J. Guzmán” (MUNA) and Museo de Arte (MARTE)— confirms that Natives have been frozen into a truth in painting. The artistic canon celebrates their imageries, but neglects they are being gifted with language (*zoon logos ejon*). The question is simpler than the OIT Convention 169 concerning the Rights of Native People to their Ancestral Land —the most recent UN Declaration in 2007— although it establishes a current utopia. The predicament asserts the substitution of language by cultural images in conforming national identity. Salvadoran museography exhibits an example of overextending a complex matrix of pictures above words and social reality. It is not the case that “an image worth a thousand words”, and “a thousand meanings”. It is the case that a canvas replaces Nahuat-Pipil speech and human competence to language. Recognizing that there is no *zoon politikon* without a *zoon logos ejon* establishes perhaps a previous ground to any social agenda. Perhaps...

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