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What's in a name? A typological analysis of Aztec placenames

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1. Introduction

Adopting a methodology that has been fruitfully applied to Inuit placenames, I analyze a catalog of Nahuatl toponyms in order to understand the motivations behind placenames development and placenames distribution in pre-contact Central Mexico. The focus of this paper is Nahuatl place names in Central Mexico during the Post-Classic period. To contextualize the findings of my analysis of Nahuatl toponyms, I compare and contrast my results with data from the Southern lowland Classic Period Maya and from modern era Inuit culture. Using the Inuit research as an analytical framework, I suggest that the motivations for "place naming" are different between the Maya and Nahuatl regions and suggest that those differences are caused by unique culture histories. Specifically, I propose that the role of season migratory patterns within Central Mexico led to the creation of placenames that emphasized available resources.

The naming of landscape features is an ancient human practice that organizes nature via language and conditions the categorization of environs via a subtle and implied web of social practices and cultural standards. The naming of spaces is an important part of the creation of places that resonate with the people interacting with the landscape. Names preserve spatial relationships and allow nature to be integrated into history via language. They also document characteristics of the land, events in the past or otherwise imbue the landscape with meaning; meaning that is powerful enough to warrant its encapsulation in a name. Names are bounding agents that isolate a space and give it identity. This process of "bounding" is partly responsible for the transformation of a physical landscape into a cultural landscape. That cultural landscape is a dynamic reflection of the people who created the placenames.

My focus is on the linguistic construction of names and their relationship to the actual landscape. That relationship links the ideational landscape to the extant geomorphology. This linkage is worth critically examining because it is an epistemologically bounded conceptual space, with actual geography (archeological evidence) on one side and linguistic (epigraphic evidence) on the other. In between lies a rare opportunity to observe emic data that can be insulated from the investigators cultural preconceptions via archeological and epigraphic information. As Tokovinine rightly observes in relation to Maya toponyms, the epigraphic approach insulates the archeological data from issues of phenomenological interpretation (Tokovinine, 2008).

The binary interaction of landscape and names metastasizes a unique meaning to the consumer of the placename. Keeping in mind that the groups discussed here are not monolithic cultural units, but nuanced and historically complex aggregations of people with some commonly constructed identifying features, the *meaning* of placenames serves to expand our understanding of historical events and potentially extract common and novel features of landscape interaction. The historical interplay between cultural priorities related to the landscape, diachronic changes in language and geospatial permutations results in a relationship between toponyms and their nominal locations that far surpass simple labels for the land.

2. Methods

Because of the history of onomastics in the New World, I take my inspiration and methodology from studies of Inuit. To explore the motivations for placename genesis by Nahuatl speakers, I cataloged a set of Aztec toponyms using similar categories as Henshaw and Keith in their work on Inuit toponyms (Henshaw, 2006; Keith, 2000). Henshaw's (Henshaw, 2006) informative and perceptive study of Inuit placenames points out the various motivations that create individual toponyms. Of the several hundred names she examined, approximately 175 were directly related to the subject of landscape. She follows Keith in the categorization of toponyms based on their linguistic content; a process of etic subjection and typological analysis.

My analysis of 261 Nahuatl language placenames (Table 2) utilizes the 1920 publication by Frederick Starr (Starr, 1920). His work is an excellent catalog of largely Central Mexican valley toponyms with full descriptions and translation into English. I reviewed the orthography of each name and assigned it a category per the definitions in Table 1. The complete data set is documented in Appendix A. While the categories are partly take from the Inuit study by Henshaw, the assignment of a Nahuatl placename to a category was based on my judgment alone and followed the translation from Starr's catalog. In a small number of translations, I added additional categories that filled an analytical gap.

I then reviewed Tokovinine's in-depth analysis of Southern lowland Maya placenames and used his dataset to better understand the types of names created for Maya places as a comparative data set. Tokovinine created a tremendously detailed and well-designed database of Maya placenames that was made available through Dumbarton Oaks (Tokovinine, 2007). I performed statistical analysis of various

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Table 1
Category criteria.

Category	Definition
Ecological	Related to the presence of animals and plants
Topographic	Landscape, geomorphological features
Metaphorical	Myths, stories, zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, history
Economic	Task based or production areas
Routes	Travel
Peer	People, ethnic groups, placed bounded by social function
Anthropogenic	Landscape modified by people or defined by relation to a constructed landscape
Other	Other
Deities	Related to a named deity
Anthroponym	Named after a person

Table 2
Percentages of Nahuatl placename categories.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Anthropogenic	19	7.3	7.3	7.3
Climate	1	.4	.4	7.7
Deity	12	4.6	4.6	12.3
Ecological	107	41.0	41.0	53.3
Economic	14	5.4	5.4	58.6
Metaphorical	33	12.6	12.6	71.3
Other	6	2.3	2.3	73.6
Peer	15	5.7	5.7	79.3
Routes	3	1.1	1.1	80.5
Topographic	51	19.5	19.5	100.0
Total	261	100.0	100.0	

categories and compared the results for Nahuatl to the data from Maya and Inuit purely for contextual purposes. The emphasis of this project was Nahuatl placenames.

The creation of categories is a difficult exercise because it overlays a collection of qualitative information with a system of quantitative values. Many names can be interpreted in different ways. An example is *Chilapan* “In the water of the peppers.” Is that place categorized as Ecological (flora, fauna) or Topographic (landscape feature)? Another example is *Amaitlan* “Where the water divides.” Is it Topographic or a Route? In each case I had to assign a primary category for analysis. To do so I relied on my estimation of the role of the names focal point.

In my judgment, *Chilapan*'s focus was a feature of landscape that emphasized a faunal resource. Since it was complex landscape feature I categorized the toponym as Topographic. In the case of *Amaitlan*, I judged the name to emphasize a feature important to movement and travel (as opposed to just describing the landscape). There are countless places where waterways split, but this one was apparently *worth naming* for a reason that transcends its appearance. Therefore, I categorized it as Routes.

I performed the task of categorization separately from the statistical analysis and did not modify any categories once they were in place. In summary, I performed four sequential tasks: transcription, validation of the given translation, categorization and then statistical analysis. I did not update the orthography of Starr's list. For the examples above, and other entries, scholars could reasonably disagree about the categorization. Changing the categories would change the statistical analysis but I hope that the raw data I provide is useful to the community. Any faults in the categorization are my own.

3. Background

The study of toponyms has a long tradition of anthropological inquiry but arguably matured in the New World through the research of Franz Boas. Since the late 19th century, the study of toponyms has waxed and waned as an academic pursuit but remains a productive avenue of inquiry. It inherently links people to landscape and thereby encompasses the intellectual foci of archeology while bypassing archaeologies extensive concerns with human material remains. While the study of toponyms has been admirably summarized (Thornton, 1997; Bright, 2007) the American tradition largely starts with Boas. His ethnographic research among the Eskimos of Hudson Bay and Baffin Land was partly focused on the connection between landscape and cultural patterns (Thornton, 1997:211). His data from British Colombia observed the highly descriptive naming practices that are also apparent in my study's catalog of Nahuatl names (Boas, 1934). He also highlighted the connection between language and placenames and argued that the creation of toponyms was not an entirely empirical process but was strongly influenced by the structure of the spoken language (Boas, 1934:14). The emphasis that onomastics should place on language or landscape is debatable but the debate itself is rooted in the intellectual resonance created by placenames retention of cultural meaning and reinforces their importance.

Boas' work resonated with several scholars who focused on the etymology of placenames; cataloging them and placing them in cultural contexts. Among others, Alfred Kroeber and John Harrington created documentation of placenames. Harrington cataloged Tewa placenames extensively (Thornton, 1997:213). This theme of carefully cataloging toponyms has been carried forward by William Bright and expanded to the entire North American continent (Bright, 2007). Thomas Waterman established a topology in the early 20th century of cataloging names by their content that is evident in this study and others. Such a typology is philosophically connected to etymology and the overall goal of “figuring out” names. It also highlights a weakness of etymology and classification of placenames; namely that direct translations may miss the point of a placename. As Bright points out, many North American placenames are “morphologically complex and semantically ‘descriptive’” words that can belie meanings that are literally lost in translation (Bright, 2007:14).

The typological approach is one consequence of the historical roots of anthropology and its emphasis on “gridding a visible space in such a way as to make its occupants available for observation and information” (de Certeau, 2011:47). Anthropologists (and Western science in general) have extended this principal of landscape organization to the metaphorical and often apply “grids” of meaning to non-spatial observations through quantitative topologies. Typological approaches are therefore valuable, but must not privilege translated names as becoming the only source of data for indigenous toponyms. Boas' observation about language influencing placename semantics is important because the original semiotic object of toponymic sign is partly a construct of the sign's language. Calques may lack the nuance that is often present in toponyms because they lack the nuance of the source language. Therefore, translations are appropriate mechanisms to focus on actual landscape, ecology and physical movements through the world since the meaning of translation may often be related in a testable way to the real world.

Such translations are the focus of this paper but I would caution that the indigenous language of a toponym is a critical aspect of the name and should be the principal unit of analysis. The reason for this is the cultural importance of toponyms and their intrinsic connection to the language of the namers. Toponyms are particularly difficult onomastic targets of examination because they link physical land to cultural and social mentalities. They are modified in meaning through their interactions with people and do not maintain consistent qualities over time. If they were inherently quiescent, there would not be so many mechanisms to preserve them. The importance of learning names is indicative of the value toponyms have in preserving cultural knowledge. In many societies, the names of places, the history of the names and their instructive meaning is something that is privileged and passed on through generations. The Inuit call this process *maliqattarnikkut iliniarniq* (Henshaw, 2006). Inuit placenames have a myriad of purposes besides the labeling of land. The Western Apache documented by Basso also have a ritualized process wherein the placenames and associated