

Life story of a ritual musician

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— Abstract—

This article presents a qualitative and phenomenological research study of a life story about music. In this exercise, parts of Gabriel Montejo's autobiography are assembled, which show his vicissitudes regarding his apprenticeship as heir to the lineage of the mysteries and nambujú, related to the music of the most important traditional rituals. Gabriel's life, in context, offers a glimpse into the social and spiritual life of the town of Suchiapa, in Chiapas, Mexico.

Keywords:

Biographical method; life story; mysteries; nambujú

Dicen que cuando los cuentos sueñan,
las plantas no se ocupan de crecer y los pájaros
olvidan la comida de sus hijos.

Eduardo Galeano, *Las palabras andantes*.

Anthropology, from its task of shaping ethnography as a method of great help in its research task has required the biographical method to design the narratives shared by the people with whom it dialogues. This discipline gives it scientific importance. Among all the methods used in qualitative research, life stories are effective in understanding how subjects create and reflect the social world around them. The meaning that people give to their actions and their experiences is found in social spaces and in the way in which the events of reality are narrated. Storytelling gives access to these senses. A narrative can be understood as a reflection on the human condition (Bruner, 2002). That is, what is not structured narratively, it's at risk of being lost in memory since it is a living experience, as Eduardo Galeano (2001) expressed; it is not found in a dream or fantasy; it travels in the voice which continues after coming out of the mouth.

There is no more genuine interest in people than that which stems from self-knowledge. Giving meaning and making sense becomes a path, especially when applying it to a theme that involves the cultural life of a person located in a given context and, at the same time, is an ontological pretext. From this perspective, the story, hand in hand with the ontological conception, is conceived as a mobilizer of consciousness, in a process that more than times or literary objects, deals with the roots and actualization of each being. The autobiographical story is an element for the creation of knowledge that seeks the configuration of life senses and the social involvement of subjects (Pujadas, 2000; Ferrarotti, 2007).

The story path allows us to get to know someone by revealing their life experience, to appreciate in it the changes of their story and the permanences inscribed in the subjectivities that impact on their cultural insertion. The life of Gabriel Montejo José is a common thread (Fig. 3), through which we will know a little about the life of his father. There are moments when this thread stretches and tightens and others when the seemingly disconnected joins. Experiences that bring the narrator closer to the dead and the living. This continually recreates the social contexts to which the biographer belongs, those that cannot be separated from the behavior, explained by himself, according to his experience and his ability to remember. We are facing a logical practice of his life, naturalized, since his communication has been primarily through words.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this work is to offer some methodological tools applied to autobiographical research, mainly through in-depth interviews for the construction of a life story. This allows the translation of life into experiences, anecdotes, memories, and symbols, reproduced in narratives, to define significant elements that allow this analysis.

When Gabriel (Fig.4) shares his memories and perceptions, he aims to collectivize through music, once he performs them in traditional festivities. In this sense, the following pages recreate a journey between the experiences of his musical learning with the transverse flute for the interpretation of the *nambujú* typical of each of the religious rituals of his community, and how he interacts with his natural, symbolic, and social environment, which is printed in the gaze of his listeners for the creation of narratives. They are shared language games, where the lines of time and space are diluted to show us the perspective from which Gabriel situates his world and his human condition. Blacking (2003), who has defined music as "a humanly organized sound," has argued that "we should look for relationships between patterns of human behavior and patterns of sound produced as a result of an organization's interaction." The author explains that "to find out what music is and if a man is a musician, we need to ask who is listening, who is playing, and who is singing in a given society, and ask why." (p. 149).

CONTEXT

A group of cholutecas and chiapanecas emigrated from central Mexico to the coast of Soconusco, where they lived together for a long time and, under pressure from other groups, were forced to leave that region. Some migrated to Nicaragua and Costa Rica, and others to the center of Chiapas. Thus, after their separation, they formed two distinct groups. Considering the moment of this separation, it is believed that they would have eight hundred to one thousand years of being settled in the heart of Chiapas, on the right bank of the Rio Grande, in a town called *Napiniaca* or Pueblo Grande, the same one that foreigners knew as Chiapa, currently called Chiapa de Corzo. The latter town, together with *Suchiapa* -where this research is located- and *Acala* are the oldest towns in the Chiapas cultural region. Their language, which belonged to the otomangue linguistic family, has already become extinct. However, there is still a large collection of place names and surnames, which make these villages places with a shared identity.

In 1993 we traveled to Suchiapa, invited by a friend, to go to the celebration of *Corpus Christi*, one of the most important of this town (Fig.1). We were greatly impressed by the two dances represented by dozens of people: the

dances of *Calalá* and *La Reinita*, part of this religious festival. Since without music, there is no dance, we could also listen to the compositions that gave life to the event. We learned, by the voice of those who accompanied us, that Don Miguel Montejo Toalá (Fig.2) was the most respectable person in musical matters, that knew over eighty *mysterias* interpreted for the saints. These are musical pieces performed during religious rituals, and there is the idea that because there is no author, they were taught by *charms* and, therefore, are *mysterias*.

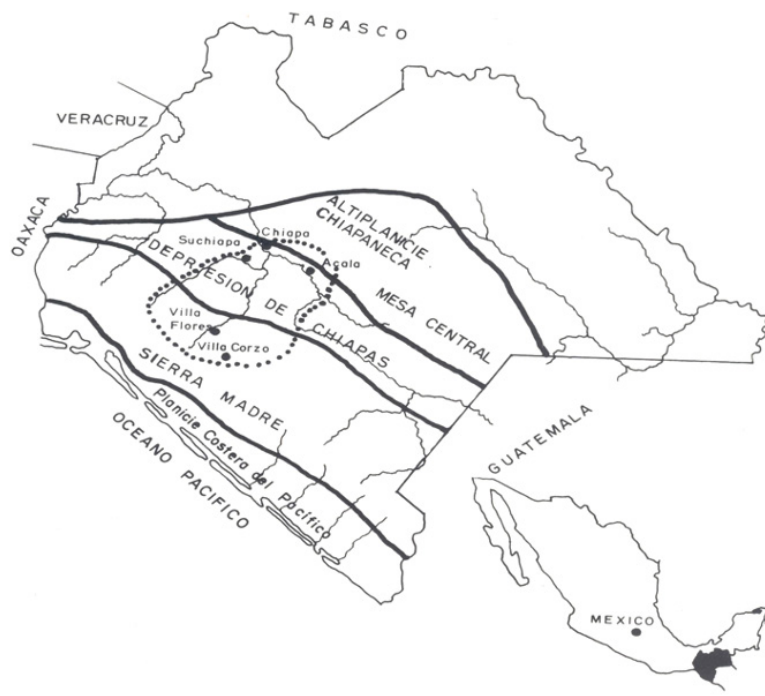


Figure 1. The dotted line indicates the Chiapas cultural region, in the Central Depression of the State of Chiapas, Mexico. Source: Carlos Navarrete, 1966, p. 2

On that occasion, we could not talk with Don Miguel Montejo, and his death would prevent us to do so afterward. However, in 2006, when we returned to Suchiapa on the occasion of an investigation about the *nambujú* - a word that in Chiapas language means prayer, invocation, ritual singing-, and the *mysterias*, we met Gabriel Montejo José, the youngest of his three children, with whom we exchanged long conversations about his father, mainly about the way he had been instructed in the music for which he was recognized in the town and it was his occupation until the end of his life. We also chatted about how he had become an apprentice, becoming heir to the *mysterias* his father had responsibly and zealously guarded. Implicitly, these notions (*mystery* and *nambujú*) related to ritual music also connect with the idea of *charm* - alluding to what is alive and

has power, even when it comes to objects, hills, mountains, springs, caves - to give an explanation of its origin and the complexities in its learning.



Figure 2. Don Miguel Montejo Toalá, performing a mystery with the reed transverse flute. Source: Personal file

THE CONTINUITY OF THE LINEAGES AND THE RECOVERED *MYSTERIES*

In Suchiapa, kinship or lineage relating cultural practices, and even mental health, is an issue that has not been addressed. When it comes to music, it is crucial. Beyond their social and environmental implications, the lineages of musicians imply a commitment to the continuity of musical productions. This commitment involves them learning the handling of instruments and musical pieces, the latter transmitted by ear, turning apprentices into teachers at some point in their lives. Oral transmission is also related to its religiosity because the one who teaches does so through the dictates of its *charms*, that is, of its ancestral spirits and, who receives the knowledge does so by contacting those forces. Don Miguel became one of the masters of ritual music.

An example of the task to be done of lineages-musicians, in the preservation of knowledge, is the story around the celebration of San Nicolás. According to the story that Don Miguel told Gabriel, it was approximately in 1940 when he was twenty-six years old, that the "celebration of the stick" was held for the last time. In Navarrete, we found a note about religious celebrations in Chiapa, which mentions <<... we must add a manuscript from

the early eighteenth century where the participation of a *calpul* is discussed in a party called the Pregon in which "el palo" was danced... (1991, p. 145)>>. Since everything has arrived late in Chiapas, the disappearance of the Dance of the Stick will likely be placed in the context of the anticlerical movement in Mexico. Faced with the threat that their saints would be burned after closing their temples, the families organized to hide them and thus avoid action. They continued to perform the *mysterias* at the celebrations, albeit in secret. They could not do the same with the dances, because their public condition denied them the possibility of carrying them out, and by not doing so, they forgot them.

The celebration of San Nicolás was also named "de los alférez" or "de los negritos", for what Miguel Montejo remembers, because together with Don Pedro and Don Abraham-men older than him and musicians-, they not only knew the mysteries to be played when this saint was celebrated but the *nambujú* in which this ritual was inscribed. These friends died, and only Miguel continued to play some mysteries without transmitting them to anyone else, until after years he told his three children the idea of recovering the mysteries that they no longer knew, but that he still remembered. However, only Gabriel (Fig.3) was prepared to take on the challenge, because they had to play them with a reed-crossing flute, and his brothers did not learn how to play it.

He told me one day, when he was already old - look, son, we do not play the full mystery of San Nicolás - and it was there that, I am sure, he decided to teach me the mysteries. Since I was the most outgoing, I asked him – and why haven't you taught us everything?– My older brother did not play the flute because he is left-handed, nor did the other one either, but I do because I am also left-handed, but not completely, because I can throw stones with my right hand. I trained with my dad when he had lung issues and could no longer play.

The mystery is missing, he told me, because, with my friend Pedro or Don Abrahamcito, we played here for lieutenants, knights, and everyone danced. The lieutenants danced with "a stick buried in the earth", but only one danced up there and four down. They rolled up crepe paper and wrapped it around the stick. They were entangling it while dancing on the ground. When the first part of the mystery started, they began to root the trunk with a ribbon of crepe paper and danced. And those who danced did not know the lyrics, it was pure intelligence, pure mentality. They finished wrapping the stick halfway through the mystery of San Nicolás. Then, they would untangle it in the second half of the mystery. The dance required a lot of skill, even more so because it was taught through words, by looking, and by listening.



Image 3. Gabriel Montejo José plays the mysteries with the reed cross flute. Source: Personal file

The second part of the *mystery* of San Nicolás is where the flute comes in. That part is quite difficult. The flute is played and the reed enters again, in two parts, ending in the mystery of the dove. Thus, accompanied by flute music, the dancers unwrapped the colored paper ribbon. My dad was able to see it up until he was 26. At the end of the dance, some knights passed by, and the people told the men on horseback that they were "jimbando"¹ fruit to the people and distributing red scarves. I did not get to see this, but my father and grandfather told us, and I thought, how did it not occur to them to continue teaching it? Because only someone special can climb the stick.

Unfortunately, we do not have more than the data provided by Don Miguel to his son Gabriel, together with the scarce memories of the latter. However, it is interesting to know that Gabriel still retains knowledge of the *mysteries* learned from his father. A father who forged his son's character to understand the *nambujú* and the *charms* that would guide his life. As happened with the

1 Throwing them fruit.

musical productions for the celebration of San Nicolás, they also recovered and transmitted those that accompany the two dances of the celebration of *Calalá* (del Gigante and La Reinita), during the celebration of *Corpus Christi*, and those of Los hojeros, travelers of May 3 to the *Nambiyuguá* Hill, with bulrush leaves for the celebration of the Holy Cross. These are the most important festivities of the village of Suchiapa. It is in this way that “an outstanding individual musician comes into contact with the strength of spirits.” (Blacking, 2003, p. 159).

THE MYSTERIES AND THE NAMBUJÚ IN GABRIEL'S WORLDVIEW

When Gabriel asked about the origin of music and dances, his father always answered - it was the charms who had the intelligence and mindset to create something so powerful-. In the course of his life experience, Gabriel already has the possibility of defining what is "charm", mainly to understand it as the creator of the mysteries, considering that they are alive and have power. Not all music is called a mystery, only that which relates to compositions for important rituals. Sometimes, when they are not part of a lineage, the old musicians choose the disciples, who meet certain requirements to assume such a commitment. Gabriel needed fourteen years to master the reed transverse flute, necessary for his intervention in the mysteries of the ritual.

According to my grandfather and my dad, charms are the ones that are always alive and have power. Because before, as my father taught us, the charms lived here in the holy land, in the village, together with the humans, when Suchiapa began to grow. They were the ones who gave people intelligence, because they didn't know anything, nor did they know how to read. Because it was knowledge that couldn't be found in any book.

Ah, you'll see, I was already about eighteen when I understood better because my mind had changed. My father was very strict; for us to wander around, we had to fill three bottles with water before leaving, and with that, since we are three brothers, we gathered nine bottles of water, and not only that, when we returned in the early morning we had to fill another nine. And we filled them in the river. Everybody bathed naked, all the women, and we didn't see them, we had respect, not like now when there's violence. This began to change when I was in my twenties. That's why one day I asked my dad where the music came from if it was already known from my great-grandparents, if he thought that ordinary people had created it. I'm playing because the charms made this music, he told me. It couldn't have been human.

Thus, once a friend took me to El Estoraque hill, where the people of San José Terán go to bring bulrush² and wanted me to play. I waited for it to get dark to rehearse because I kept messing up and I did not want them to hear me, I was ashamed. My dad was temperamental, I didn't ask him to teach me. Our job was to go to the hill, pick up a wand and stick and palm to make brooms; then tan the shell and make our huarache. And that's where I asked again - when I already knew more about music. Who composed the music? Did someone tell you who composed this music? I told my dad, I have been thinking about it since I spoke to my grandfather, I think it was the charms. What are you saying? he asked me. Because this is what my uncle and several old people told me, it is not easy for someone dull to want to compose music for the image. An uncle of mine cleared it up and told me that the charms composed it. Well, yes -my dad said-, your uncle is right, the charms composed music. Not everyone played *nacalí*, which is played in *Corpus Christi*, or the mystery of the chapulin, the mystery of the tiger and the deer, and that of the chamula.

I don't question what my father taught me. Life on the Hill helped me to understand it and to know that it is true. He always used that word: it was the charms that helped them. These people must have had power. How they made music, and how they taught it because not everyone has the power to create it so that it remains for future generations. I have composed music with the boy that comes with me to gather bulrush, we make some music to play with the reed or with the drum, but it is not music that has power. That music is different. Among them lived the charms, they walked together with them in this land, but as the generations passed and the young people began to have no respect and to be spoiled, they went away. Some remain in caves, but I don't know if there are any left if they have children like us. But some live forever in the cave.

By the way, ritual musicians express themselves, it is meant that "the effect of music depends on the context in which it is interpreted and heard. But ultimately it depends on the music itself" (Blacking, 2003, p. 155), of the person who plays it and of its belonging to the lineage of heirs of this knowledge. Gabriel's memory is creating his world as he hikes the hill. He contemplates the place, in turn, it contemplates him. Text and context are unified for the vision of his world. From dawn until sunset, for fifteen years, day by day he walked the roads and paths that led him to the hill. Even every

2 On the feast of Santa Cruz, from April 26 to 30, a group of men travels to the Cerro del Nambiyugá (Cerro Brujo) to collect bulrush leaves (*Dioon merolae*, Zamiaceae), an endemic, ancestral, and sacred plant, specially brought for this devotion.

day was extraordinary in that solitude of the mountain when the work of planting ended and the collection of "wand, stick, and palm" began to make brooms, because from those lands not much was expected in the harvest. When the silence is big, the murmurs are intense. Gabriel knows that the charms perform their parties inside the caves, he has heard music coming from there several times. Undoubtedly, mountains and hills are abodes of memory. They are spaces in which both immaterial domains - myth, worldview, memory - and material domains - the hill, the cave, water, and some objects - are inscribed, and arranged according to different cultural and symbolic patterns (Palacios, 2016). Some agricultural communities assume their history as part of a living process that makes the past a reference for the present and its natural places their own memory (Cassigoli, 2011).

But you'll see, I made milpa about fifteen years there on the hill. I had a few donkeys. Since my son was studying, I used to walk that hill alone, always alone. Once at about half past eleven o'clock in the day, I was carrying water with a boatload and I was going very fast because I had my donkey and I was worse than a donkey carrying water from a puddle of land,³ with a boat that loaded them like two blocks and so, all day long, to irrigate three hectares of land where I planted. I made the last trip already late when I started listening to the music set. You could hear it in a distant stream that we knew as El Jocotillo or the descent of La Cieneguita. No car would go up there because it was a large rock! From time to time, the air reached my ear; the music also approached me. The bass could be heard and I even wanted to go and look. I loaded the pump I was watering with and got on a glide because curiosity killed the cat. I was going with the pair of gallons and I kept hearing it louder, and I kept walking. Only my machete and my dog accompanied me until I reached the stream that was about fifteen blocks away. When I was in the stream you could hear in another, in the cave of La Cotorra, and you could already hear the music closer and louder, but I had to enter the cave. I wasn't there anymore, it was too late, I had to go back. One day I was talking to a friend who takes me about five years and who has hiked the hill like me. Hey, friend - I said - you who have walked the hill, have you ever heard music inside the cave? I have heard it, he told me. "But I did not dare to go to the cave because the charms make their parties inside, where they are living.

Gabriel's questions revolve around music, certainly motivated by his heritage of ritual music. Many events that occurred in the hill and its caves, where

3 As a memory of their native language, Chiapanecas tend to unite words creating extensive, very peculiar linguistic forms.

his life developed for many years, were giving him some answers, or at least possible answers. The charms have attracted musicians to the caves, to play as if they were normal village parties, but when they come out of there, they have lost track of time, and believe they have been absent for a few hours when in fact it has been weeks or months. It seems that the dimension of time is very different from what we humans live in as if the cave were the access to a level in which time is eternalized. Inside the cave, there are all kinds of fruits and dishes, and beautiful landscapes, like a paradise image. Many musicians have wished to stay there, where the sorrows of the human world are diluted in the eternal feast.

My father and grandfather said yes, that they open a path, well, some type of path, to bring some marimba from the town to play at their party. They carry the marimba with their musician and after they send them away. We don't know how they do it because it is a rock the height of a great tree; it is a stream full of mountains, a *mujular*⁴, a dark shade of green. But then inside the cave, they say that it is a very large room where the party is held. My grandfather said to my father: never look inside son, because the charms are throwing a party. He also listened to music. It's just that there are several caves, not just that one. We have respected them because the charms still live there.

The charms that lived in the hills (Fig. 6) in meteorological ways, granted or controlled rain in Suchiapa. There was a time when they existed in human form, having the power to transform into lightning. The fact that they still exist is not ruled out (Palacios, 2010).

There was a dryness of about twenty-five days, the milpa was already about to die. I was about fourteen years old and was on the hill "jimbando" palm to make brooms. The hill of La Cotorra was above and the hillside below where we cut the palm, when my father approached me and said - look, son, tie your palm, let's drink pozol but tie your palm because it is going to rain. I couldn't believe it, because the sky was very clear, there wasn't a single rain cloud. What do you mean it's going to rain? I asked if the sky is clear. It's going to rain, look at the cave, the cloud that will bring the rain is there, hurry up. I listened and started tying my palm. I finished tying it up when I got a glimpse of La Cotorra. I saw the fire that came out of the cave and then the Cerro Brujo or the Zanate that is in Copoya, another fire came from there. And in the middle of the sky, they crossed each other, and we could hear the thunder

4 It refers to an area covered with *muju* trees (*brosimum alicastrum*), endemic to Mesoamerica.

that went into the cave. Hurry up son, because on our way down it will start pouring, my dad told me. And so it was, it started pouring halfway. When we came down the hill, the rain stopped. You see son, the charms that live here have always had contact with the charms of Cerro de Copoya. Also with those of Cerro Mactumatzá.⁵ That's what my dad told us. When the lightning charms went away, that's when things changed. Look, these are the charms that the mysteries gave us, but they also took many of them away because we no longer know how to read the sky or the earth.

We found ourselves sitting in front of Gabriel, in small chairs, almost at ground level. His eyes are not looking at us, they are lost in the abyss of the sandy floor in which he drew small spirals with a wand held in one of his hands, like a mirror that reflects the images of him and his father. He was absorbed in his thoughts and spoke and spoke and, for a moment, we felt that Miguel Montejo was present.

WHEN THE DRUM STARTS PLAYING IT'S BECAUSE THERE'S GOING TO BE A PARTY

For the musicians of this town, not all music has the same value. It is the process of creation of musical productions, and the kinship of the musician, that makes them grow; they represent human experiences that merge directly with social life, as indispensable instruments for the transformation of the human being and his environment.

Gabriel is the youngest of the three sons of Don Miguel Montejo Toalá. He lives with his brother Guillerman, also a musician, in a small house on the ground floor. His brother Rosendo lives almost next to his place. At the back of Gabriel's house, there is a rustic table that serves as an altar. On it are several saints they inherited from their parents, and their grandparents; we also observe a tiger mask used to represent one of the characters of the dance of *Calala*; in addition to some *chamales*⁶ of withered flowers. At the top, stands a poster of when CONECULTA organized a tribute for Don Miguel, his father, the best drummer and reed flute musician of Suchiapa, in 2000, two years before he died at the age of 88. In his old age, Don Miguel had a lung issue that, according to Gabriel, was due to his father playing

5 Zoque word is interpreted as Stone Hill or Eleven Stars Hill.

6 Chamales are pieces made with leaves and flower petals, circular. With these materials, they design animal figures, flowers, and some religious forms. For this purpose, men and women gather during the festivities of Easter and Santa Cruz. Once finished they are offered to the saints of the hermitages, or they are taken to the altars of their homes.

throughout his life in most of the festivities of the town, and the streets were not paved, producing a lot of dust when walking, while he played his instruments.

However, his illnesses could have been derived from working in the field, to which he devoted himself at the same time as music, where the use of pesticides has been alarming and without knowledge of the consequences on his health. Gabriel says about this:

I do not know if it was because he played among so much dust that sometimes he would choke, that my dad damaged his lungs. He couldn't play the flute anymore because he would start coughing. Or if it was because he worked a lot on the hill. But he died because of it.

Next to the altar, on the ground, and protected with fabrics and plastics, rest the three large drums (Fig.4) that accompanied the entire life of Don Miguel performing the music for the "images", whether invited or paid for by those who fulfilled their devotional commitments. The drums used to belong to Pedro Flores Nucamendi (Fig.5), an important character in the history of ritual music in this town, who lived in El Amatal, a town near Suchiapa, and who was the last man to play the Tinco, an ancient and large teponaztle currently on display in the hermitage of the Blessed Sacrament⁷ as a sacred figure.

It is known that Don Miguel became a disciple of this musician from a very young age, and he traveled constantly to the place where he lived with the interest of being instructed in the mysteries that he knew. None of Don Pedro's children was interested in this knowledge, which motivated the decision not only to entrust the music to him but to sell him the drums for a symbolic price, giving him the privilege of being the next guardian of the music of the most important religious festivities of Suchiapa. The drums currently belong to Gabriel and retain the original materials, although it is unknown whether the skin is beef or deer. What Gabriel is sure of is that the wood with which they were built is fine mahogany. "Come in, he said, I'll show you my dad's drum. You know, they are alive because inside them they have his and of all our ancestors' strength". The drums emit strange sounds to warn them that soon they will be the main protagonists of the holiday. When they are played, it is because someone will come to ask for their occupation's gifts.

7 There is an interesting relationship between this character and the Tinco of Suchiapa. For more information on the subject, see Palacios, 2010.



Images 4 and 5. Gabriel and the drums he inherited from his father Miguel, and Mr. Pedro Flores Nucamendi, his teacher, who granted him the instruments and *mysterics*. The image shows the Tinco and the Tinajita, with which he performed the ritual music of Suchiapa. Source: Personal file

My father began playing at the age of sixteen, almost like me, and at twenty-three Mr. Pedro Flores Nucamendi sold him the three drums that had been his ancestor's. Look, these drums, you won't believe it, but when the party is near, they sound loud in the early morning. Sometimes I think it's because of the heat. But other times, at four in the morning, I swear to our God, the drums are playing. My dad would tell me: when the drums are playing, it's because there will be a party or you're going to be invited to play for an image. And in a couple of days, I'd be invited to one. Whether as a guest or paid, there was a celebration. Sometimes I come to uncover them because they sound loud.

One by one he uncovered them from the plastics with which they were covered. He stacked the smaller ones on top of the larger ones (Fig.4). "Play them Gabriel" we said, and his eyes shone like a child's, as he struck the intense, prolonged blows that occupied the space of sound, of energy, of intense energy that transformed not only space but time. The sound flowed from Gabriel's hands, as it must have flowed in the ancient times of Pedro Flores and Miguel Montejo, transmitting this emotion to our bodies! The drums sound is a gate to infinity.

ALTHOUGH WE HAVE A GIFT FOR MUSIC, LEARNING IT REQUIRES PATIENCE

Of the three brothers, although musicians all, Gabriel overcame the rigor imposed by his father, Miguel Montejo Toalá until he gained the confidence to play the flute that is played "traversed", as he himself refers, that is, a transverse flute, traverse or transversal, of reed. To play it there must be specific conditions of the body to hold your breath for long periods. Gabriel confesses that his mastery of it provided him with the will and patience necessary to be the heir of the knowledge for which his father was guardian throughout his life.

In the following lines, Gabriel Montejo recounts his experiences with the execution of this instrument. At times, the narration is emotional, showing us its impotence in the purpose of bringing music to Cerro *Nambiyugá* during its religious rituals. In the story, we discover a stubborn young man, full of courage and passion, whose life transformed into a thoughtful, serene, and patient man, who prepared himself for more than a decade of his life to master the flute. The virtue of patience had been his father's condition for granting him the right of the Montejo lineage: that of being the guardian of the mysteries in the *nambujú*.

I studied, but I didn't finish sixth grade, and that's why I couldn't be a teacher anymore. Before, if you finish elementary school you were able to become a teacher. Because I wrote love letters to women, I didn't learn math and failed sixth grade. I used to love the bulrush flute, the transverse one, but I didn't know how to play it; I could play a reed flute and even the drums, I learned when I was eight years old, but not that flute. I learn how to play the reed by myself, and my father improved me, I was able to play from two holes, but not six. I learned that until I was sixteen. But I wanted to play the flute because I had been carrying the bulrush one since I was ten years old. I would get upset when I saw my dad playing at the celebrations, I would look at his fingers, but I couldn't play it.

Then, time went by about six years. I watched my dad play sitting by the altar. Where the saint was. If he was rehearsing and I dared to get close, he would hit me with it. I wanted to learn. He had long benches of mahogany wood. My grandfather gave them to him, they were even polished even after being made so long ago. That's where I sat and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't play it, and one day I threw the flute on the floor and broke it. The second time, I did the same thing and my dad saw me. He came to me and slapped me twice. –Why did you break the flute? - my dad yelled at me. Because it doesn't work! -I replied. You are the one who does not work! -he yelled at me again. I was so upset that I didn't cry.

So I went to the hill (Fig. 6),⁸ I would fall and hit myself because of the heavy load of palms, rods, and shells. It was worse when it rained, we would fall with everything and had to reload three or four times. And I was stubborn. One day I told my dad I wouldn't go to the hill anymore. He asked me why. I'm bored, I told him, of all the bruises, injuries, and scratches on my knees. Then we go to Tuxtla to sell brooms from early morning until three in the afternoon, we didn't sell anything, and we could only have breakfast until then, we would only drink pozol. My father demanded a lot of us and we didn't eat until really late. Since I had studied, I became more rebellious and reflected more. Well, I'm not going to the hill anymore, I told him, and if you want to kill me, do it because I'm not going anymore. I wanted to work in roofing,⁹ making mud and shingles. Try another experience. If you want to hit me you can do it, I won't dodge it, but I'm not going to go to the hill anymore.

I didn't tell him the real reason I didn't want to go to the hill anymore. I was determined to learn to play the flute, I wanted to carry a third of bulrush on the journey to *Nambiyuguá* and the only way was to dedicate more time to that, to learn to play well. That was my mindset, that I wanted to play that flute. We came home from the hill late at night and tired, not wanting to do anything else. It was terrible, it was late at night and we barely ate! We were suffering! Sometimes I think about it again. Thanks to them: my grandfather, my mother, and my father, we learned to work, to be responsible for our children because we have always cared for each other.

Since I quit school, I decided, in addition to everything I learned on the hill, to learn to play music, and you won't believe it, but playing the flute took me fourteen years of my life. So I could learn to master all music. It wasn't easy. I don't know how long it took my dad, but it took me fourteen years. Don't be eager, he would tell me when I wanted things to go faster. One of my friends would tell me the same thing when we were working on road construction. I wanted us to work fast on a fifty-meter-long section of the road, and my friend would tell me, calm down, Gabriel, this requires time! That's when I learned that he was right, anything goes wrong if you do it violently, and I continued

8 During the agrarian reforms, Don Miguel Montejo obtained the land he worked hard for with his children. For the poor peasant, there is only the option of the hill, of the thin lands... He has had to draw strength from his spirituality and from his connection with the beings that inhabit every hill, every cave, every river, and tree. It may have been the only food nature has given him.

Suchiapa has distinguished itself by the craft of weaving and making bricks, as it has important clay banks to achieve the clay. However, with the use of industrialized materials in construction, the almost artisanal production of these others has been affected and, therefore, the economy of families dedicated to this trade.

9 Suchiapa has been distinguished by the craft of weaving and brickmaking, as it has important banks of clay for making fire clay. However, with the use of industrialized materials in construction, the almost artisanal production of these materials has been affected and, therefore, the economy of the families dedicated to this trade.

learning. Until one day, my dad gave me a chance. I used to leave at three o'clock in the morning to make brick and tile. I had to make seven hundred bricks a day. I started working with an ambitious family. I think they wanted me to finish the whole earthen wall to make so many bricks and tiles. But since I was learning, I didn't say anything and it forced me to work a lot. But when a few months passed I was already a master of making mud.

My dad kept pushing me to go to the hill, but in my new job, if I left at three in the morning, I was back and in a hammock by noon, I dedicated myself to rehearsing the flute hours and hours until I got tired, and I fell asleep. I was rehearsing with my dad's flute, I rehearsed because I didn't have one. My mother looked at me and laughed. About three months later, I knew five mysteries. I jumped happily because I was going to carry bulrush at the next party playing my flute. I listened to my father's plays, and they practiced many times until I played right. He did not tell me anything, but when he heard that I already knew five mysteries, he told me - Come here, this is how it's played. That's when he started teaching me! Here, near the saint - he said. That's when my dad started teaching me, and I started to learn all kinds of music. I am the youngest of the three brothers and I can say that my father loved me very much. I was his favorite (he stops the conversation when he starts tearing up, remembering).

This is a long story, I tell my boys (his children) how much we suffered. My dad was very strict and very nervous. So I told him one day, why can't everyone play the mystery of the Holy Cross? Why are you, Uncle Tranquilino, and Uncle Abrahamcito the only ones who can? Because we come from all our musician ancestors, he told me, because it's difficult, it takes time, but mainly patience, and not everyone has patience. It's true, we have a gift, but it requires patience. I understand I told him, that's why I haven't been able to play the flute, I haven't had patience. I've been rushing things, I haven't taken my time. That's when I realized that I was building my character. But it took years.



Figure 6. Suchiapa, scene of Gabriel Montejo's life. Source: Personal file

I LEARNED BY WATCHING, JUST AS I LEARNED EVERYTHING IN LIFE.

Gabriel is a thin, frail-looking man, but he has the unwavering strength of his will and his hands. He's sixty-three years old. In addition to playing the mysteries, at present (Fig.7), he builds flutes and drums, a profession that his father also taught him. He earns his living with it. In front of his small house, there is a corridor where the materials to carry out his work are scattered.

Of the three brothers, I'm the only one who learned how to make drums. I learned by watching, as I have learned everything in life. I saw how he put them together and disassembled them, and then I tried to do it because I thought if I played music, I had to build the instruments too. On one occasion, I heard my dad arguing with one of my brothers who was helping him make the drums. My brother was very "outgoing" and did not pay attention. Since he didn't go to school, maybe that's why it was harder for him to learn how to do things. He had cut some **pieces of leather** to tie him up but they were too short and my dad got angry and was scolding him. I was able to hear him say, "Go get that brother of yours. He will put it together well. You'll see that he'll be able to put it together"- . When I arrived I told my brother, why don't you let him teach you? If you'd pay attention, you would've cut it well. Look, I learned because on one occasion we were with my dad on the hill and he told me that since I was already encouraged to play the drums, I should learn to measure well because the drums are like a weapon. You have to disassemble it so that

it is cleaned and oiled, and put everything in place. –Are the drums like a gun? My brother asked. Yes, I replied –They have their differences, their details.

That day, with my dad's teaching, I put together the first full drum. Afterward, it was easy because that's where I got to experience, the intelligence to do everything, not only on drums, but also flute, reed, whatever. Now I dedicate myself to that too. Thanks to my grandfather and my father, I learned all that. I put together all kinds of instruments for the people who participate in the parties.

He commits to this task with greater intensity on the eve of the village festivities. It is common to see him accompanied by a young man interested in this art. In the courtyard he cuts the skins in the sun and gathers the wood necessary to build drums; he also collects the reeds for the flutes on the bank of the river. As we talked, we moved to both points of the courtyard of his house, adjacent to the space that, in times of rain, becomes a stream. There are huge stones to prove it. The shadow of a mango tree sheltered us in that afternoon of memories, of nostalgia. "Look, these mango seeds are ready to sow," Gabriel said. He brought us back to the present, while in the distance the hill seemed so close and alive.



Figure 7. A few instruments that Gabriel built. Source: Personal file

FINAL THOUGHTS

Roger Bastide made a detailed analysis of Maurice Halbwachs' work on collective memory, arguing that memories are so caught up in the fabric of human groupings that they can only be reconstructed or re-established on their ancient foundations. We thought about Bastide's reflection after questioning a group of black Brazilians participating in an indigenous popular religion, about the reasons that had driven them to abandon their own ritual systems to adopt others. The answer was unanimous: the nature spirits that they worshiped in Africa were bound to a certain landscape that they had not been able to transport with them in the slave ships. These were the spirits of a mountain, a river, or a sacred forest (Bastide, 2005).

In this way, the importance of space was underlined, according to Bastide, as a place where memories are hooked to be preserved. Many reflections precede us now for a better understanding. This is moving from material space to spiritual space. We will then say that the images of the memory use a double mechanism: they are based, in the first place, on the morphology of the localized group, on the inscription of the religious in a field, as Halbwachs proposes. If someone else is always required to remember, as this author refers to it, it is not because "me" and "someone" is immersed in the same social thought but because our memories are articulated with the memories of other people in a well-regulated set of complementary images. This explains why these images are evoked each time the community meets again and can recover, through the intercommunication of roles, the vocal or gestural mechanisms learned from the ancestors. But it is the present that operates as a filter that lets only that part of the memory adaptable to the circumstances, into place. Above all, it reminds us that tradition does not survive, or at least is not evoked, but insofar as it can be inscribed in the practice of individuals or groups.

The story of Gabriel's life and the memories that make it up had an axis that we wish to comment on in these lines. In Suchiapa, the conception of *charm*, of hidden, attributed to music in this same condition. Thus the mysteries arose, but the restlessness is not derived from who the authors were, but from how this creation was possible, having the connotations of spirituality, complexity, the healing power of the soul, strength, collective convocation, nostalgia, of joy. The force of drums and flutes could only have been transmitted by those special beings who still exist: charms. For when they emit sounds, the soul rejoices in a timeless dimension, as in the caves where they remain alive. Then it becomes the ancient word, that of its mother tongue: the *nambujú*, which integrates everything. *Nambujú* is the mystery, the charm, the prayer, the song, the strength of your spirituality, of your vital world. Ritual words and music establish the most perfect combination

to reach all geographical places and all cardinal points, both of the bodily microcosm and of the cosmos in which man exists.

These "openings", as Eliade (1981) considers them, have been interpreted from different perspectives. One of them is that they introduce the sacred, which is located within one of the multiple realities that the human manifests in terms of its spiritual life, around some natural spaces and devotional practices. The World allows itself to be grasped as a world, as Cosmos, insofar as the sacred world is revealed, is real par excellence. We are intimately connected to the source of all life. In this way, "consciousness arises only when understanding is capturing common patterns" (Grinberg, 1976, p. 129). To talk about this is to let go of certainty, according to Maturana (1996), it is a change of gaze. To be in the sacred place is to find a relational sense in living, to continue having faith in the human being, in a kind of spiritual poetics of living. It is the realization of continuous self-production that makes us "alive". Therefore, according to Maturana, there is no reality, but we live in multiple realities, and each of them arises as a coherence of experience. We generate a world of behavioral coherences, therefore, the created world is not arbitrary, each one reproduces a world with its living. Everyone is the center of the cosmos. In this way, consciousness is an "awareness", a "seeing", like the spiritual experience, which is an expansion of consciousness, of belonging to a larger area. In the musical production of the rite, what really "moves" those who listen is the human content of the humanly organized sounds... In a very similar way that magnetic waves conduct a telephone conversation from one speaker to another. (Blacking, 2003, p. 150). The musical terms are those of their society and their culture, as well as those of the bodies of human beings who listen to, create, and interpret them (Blacking, 2006, p. 13).

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