1. Introduction

The language of a people is the key to its culture, including its worldview, technology, art, memory and social organisation. The diachronic development of a language, and its expression in different stages of writing and literature, tells us much about the historical experiences and successive synchronic relationships of the community that uses it, from early archaeological times until today. It is not a pure immutable “essence” that we are looking for, on the contrary: it is the dynamics of development, the complex interplays of continuities, changes, creativities and internal contradictions, which are the most interesting, as they bring us in contact with the human condition of a community and its journey through time and space, its “nomadic identity” (cf. Braidotti 1994). A guideline for this interest and research endeavour is the cultural vocabulary of the people in question, which can help us to connect the present to earlier phases. This is particularly relevant in the study of the Mesoamerican cultural and linguistic heritage, which often includes ancient and colonial forms of writing and communicative visual art, as well as oral traditions. This heritage is not just a curious collection of objects and artefacts from the past, to be enjoyed or fantasized about by outsiders, but is of direct value to living descendant communities.

1. This contribution is a result from on-going research on Ñuu Dzaui (Mixtec) language and culture, being carried out at the Faculty of Archaeology and the Centre of Non-Western Studies, Leiden University, with the support of the Netherlands Foundation for Scientific Research (NWO). We gladly acknowledge here the many years of fruitful cooperation with Willem Adelaar, who has played a central role in constructing an area of expertise and research on Native American languages and cultures at Leiden University.
2. Mixtec civilization

The Ñuu Dzaui or Mixtec people in Southern Mexico are one of the Mesoamerican peoples that play a central role in cultural historical and linguistic research at Leiden University. Ñuu Dzaui (also pronounced Ñuu Savi, Ñuu Sau, Ñuu Davi and Ñuu Dau, according to dialect variation) means “People or Nation of the Rain”, ñuu being a comprehensive term for a place (town, city, country) and the people that live there, and Dzaui (in colonial orthography: Dzavui or Dzahui) is the word for “rain”, as well as the name of the Rain God (the Tlaloc of the Aztecs and Chac of the Maya). The term “Mixtec” is derived from the name the Aztecs gave to this people in their language, (Nahuatl): mix-teca, “inhabitants of the land of the clouds”.

The Mixtec land, referred to as ‘La Mixteca’ in Spanish, is located in the south of Mexico, in the western part of the State of Oaxaca and neighbouring areas of the States of Puebla and Guerrero. Ecologically this region is subdivided in three zones: 1) the Mixteca Alta, a mountainous area, mostly over 2000 meters above sea level, with a relatively cold climate, 2) the Mixteca Baja, lower but still quite mountainous, hot, dry and eroded, and 3) the Mixteca de la Costa, humid and tropical lowlands bordering on the Pacific Ocean.

The Mixtec language, Dzaha Dzaui (Sahan Savi, Sahin Sau, Daha Davi etc.) or “Language of the Rain”, is reported to be spoken at present by more than 450,000 people, most of whom, however, are over twenty-five years of age. It belongs to the Otomangue family and is a tone language.

A rich heritage of archaeological sites, monuments and visual art bears testimony to the autonomous development of Ñuu Dzaui culture from the first millennium B.C. onward till the Spanish invasion (1521). Summarizing the complex and fragmentary archaeological data, we see between approximately 500 BC and the Spanish conquest of 1521 AD the rise of a village-state culture, with impressive ceremonial centres of stone architecture (pyramids, plazas, tombs, ball-courts etc.), dispersed over the mountainous countryside, hardly known, less protected, and consequently subject to erosion and/or destruction.²

The development of a graphic register accompanies this development. Leaving aside the even more ancient rock paintings, we find in-

² Archaeological information about Oaxaca is synthesized in The Cloud People, edited by Flannery and Marcus (1983) and in the monograph by Spores (2007).