ENGLISH SUMMARY

The central question of this study is: How are the ideas and values of a culture, specifically of the culture of Nuu Savi (the Mixtec people in Southern Mexico), transmitted and perpetuated? This prompts exploration of a specific genre of oral literature, the Sa’vi or “ceremonial discourse”, which plays a prominent part in the construction of community and cultural memory. Although this genre is obviously important for many studies of Mesoamerica, it has so far received little attention. Consequently our first task was an adequate representative documentation, both of the texts and of their contexts, with their linguistic and anthropological dimensions. With the help of many local people a corpus of discourses (“parangones”) from Yutsa To’on (Apoala), situated in the Mixtec Highlands in the Mexican State of Oaxaca, was taped, transcribed, translated and commented upon.

An important aspect of this research is the historical dimension, because from the same region a number of precolonial pictorial manuscripts has been preserved, in which Yutsa To’on also appears prominently. As these manuscripts must also have functioned as a basis for public discourses and performances within a ceremonial context, the question arises whether there is a relation and continuity between the pictographic scenes in those codices and the Sa’vi of today, in composition, style, contents and social function.

The ceremonial language is employed in solemn acts of family or community life – such as baptism, compadrazgo, asking the hand of a woman, traditional weddings, the receiving and honouring of municipal authorities, thanksgiving for the harvest to Mother Earth, healing ceremonies, mayordomías etc. In all of these events the discourse invites reflection through counselling and exhorting respect and mutual support among the individuals, searching for solutions to problems by making explicit or implicit references to the ancestors and their norms of conduct and living together. The Sa’vi is also the language in which to address the gods, and to refer to different sacred symbols, such as the Tukukua, Itakutsa, staff of office, mat and throne (el Yuhuitayu analyzed by Kevin Terraciano and Angeles Romero), the Rosary, and the authorities themselves (Tade’e), as those who carry the responsibility for the well-being of the people.

Thus the discourses fulfill several objectives at the same time, expressing normative and explicatory ideas about nature, religion, history, politics, morality etc., and exposing the knowledge of earlier generations and different segments of society. The Sa’vi is interactive: on the one hand it may be an opening discourse or a responding one, on the other there is always the relation between the canonical message and the specific moment in which it is pronounced (cf. RAPPAPORT 1999). Susana Cumming y Tsuyoshi Ono stress that discourse and context generate and limit each other (van DIJK 2001:174).

As a specialized speech genre Sa’vi is the reserved domain and competence of a the group of elders known as Tanisa’nu, who have accumulated social prestige and moral authority because of their community services, i.e. by passing through the hierarchy of social, communitarian municipal and ecclesiastic offices (cargos), which has provided them with a detailed knowledge of customs and prestige because of their positive
interventions in village life. Doing all this work for the community has also schooled them in the use and meaning of Sa’vi. For those who do not know how to read and write, the process starts with the office of Mayor de Vara del Ayuntamiento. For those who do, with that of Síndico Municipal. In these offices they start speaking the Sa’vi, when delivering messages to the citizens. If one does not have the necessary experience or knowledge of this special way of oral expression, one asks the immediate superior in the same line of duty to help out and teach it. If that is not sufficient, one goes to a trusted experienced and respected elder in the community to learn from him the usages, times and places of this discourse. The apprenticeship commences with short messages, e.g. thanks for an invitation.

These discourses are characterized by an art of combining words, phrases and clauses, specific ways of contrasting and stressing certain aspects, and elaborations to make the speech more flowery and elegant. The orator speaks of daily life, of collective experiences, of the relationships between the human world and nature, between humans and the divine forces of the universe, of morality and religion, of social cohesion and mutual support (da’a / guesa), of honesty and virtue. The listeners manifest their attention and interest, looking for confirmation of deviation from what they already know. This we may call “the art of speaking well” which reflects the speaker’s capacity to order his thoughts and construct an elegant, convincing exposition of ideas and memories as the result of his life experience.

The structure of the discourse is such that it can be organized and translated as couplets (quartets). Typical of its construction is the use of paired terms and phrases, complementary or contrasting parallelisms, and/or word pairs that express a single notion (difrasismos) implying comparisons and metaphors, or being just repetitions. This style strongly suggests that those expressions belong to tradition and have the corresponding authority. Similarly, the participation in the ritualised events during which these texts are pronounced reinforces among all involved a commitment to the expressed values (cf. RAPPAPORT 1999). This dissertation identifies and lists the most important word pairs, consisting of nouns, verbs or composite expressions (chapter I). The same form of ‘speaking in pairs’ is also manifest in ancient texts, such as the account of creation written down by friar Gregorio García (1607), and in the pictorial manuscripts themselves. Notably many elements in the contemporary mentality, organisation, and worldview are of precolonial origin.

The use of Sa’vi accompanies the individual as a form of socialisation from birth onward, both in the traditional ceremonies associated with childbirth and the care for mother and baby, including bathing in the temazcal, and in the creation of spiritual kinship by soliciting godparents. In all this, the elders (Tanisa’nu) play a dominant role, connecting this crucial life’s event with the traditional norms of the people (Chapter II).

The Sa’vi is of primordial importance in the construction of the social nucleus, the family, and consequently prominently used in the preparation and realisation of matrimonial rites. The Tanisa’nu is the crucial “ambassador” who with his words establishes the official connection and alliance between the two families (that of the groom and that of the bride), for it to be a correct and permanent union. The discourses in which the hand of the woman is asked serve as an example to analyse more precisely the use of the language and its terminology (Chapter III). The wedding itself, with its discourses and accompanying acts and paraphernalia is described in detail (Chapter IV).
From the familial and personal environment we move on to the social and political life of the town, focusing on the discourses pronounced at the occasion of the change of municipal authorities and discussing the meaning of the symbols used and referred to in this context, e.g. the bush of flowers (Chapter V). We pay attention to the complex social organisation, which is connected to the worldview, rooted in the precolonial period but remodelled later under Catholic influence. This aspect of syncretism is even more present in the religious festivities with their corresponding *mayordomías* (Chapter VI). All these activities imply also the participation of family members, *compadres*, authorities, neighbours and other helpers, which has to be solicited and for which thanks is given for by a *Tanisa'nu* with adequate phrases. Obviously the *Sa'vi* is also used during ceremonies that clearly have a precolonial background, such as the celebration of the Days of the Dead.

The abovementioned social contexts, with their corresponding symbolisms, are, indeed, also present in the Mixtec codices. With a deeper understanding of the form, function and contents, we may achieve a more adequate reading of the pictorial scenes and propose new interpretations of specific elements. In Chapter VII the following important examples are analysed:

- the staff of office as symbol of power,
- the throne and the mat as signs of the unity of the community and civil authority recognising the seated couple as *Tade’e*, “father and mother of the people”,
- the flint knife as symbol of justice,
- the processions of protagonists as an expression of social organisation, comparable with the contemporary authorities lined up with their staffs,
- the symbolism of the four directions that is manifest in the so-called Venus Staff, corresponding to the contemporary wooden frame known as *Tukukua*,
- the bush of flowers (*Itakutsa*) as part of the public recognition of power,
- the Sacred Bundle as a container of abstract force and luck,
- elements of the sacred landscape of Apoala itself, which appear in the codices,
- the symbolic meaning and ritual use of maize, epitome of the Mesoamerican cosmos.

Each of the chapters of this dissertation moves us to reflect on the use of the language: this analysis makes us understand its grammatical richness, but the focus on ceremonial speech is especially significant as it makes us aware of the persistence and continued transmission of cultural memory and philosophy among our peoples. Observing that this is the very language which our ancestors used to express their thoughts in the different codices they painted before the Spanish conquest, we not only discover that through the surviving manifestations of this special language, *Sa’vi*, we understand better several important passages of those ancient books, but also the continuity of that ancient thought and worldview in our present-day perspectives and identity.

On the other hand, this language is dwindling: the new generations generally do not know and do not want to speak the common Mixtec language, much less the *Sa’vi*. Among the causes we may point to poverty (exploitation), discrimination, migration, alienating education with its modernisation ‘Western’ style, the mass media, acculturation to ‘Western’ thought, the lack of transmission and teaching of our own language and other
factors that together provoke the displacement and extermination of the Mesoamerican languages, and in fact endanger the languages of all indigenous peoples of the planet.

In this context we may understand the lack of consciousness and even apathy among the cultural descendants, which contributes to the further erosion of forms of knowledge, meanings, historical and philosophical values still existent in indigenous communities. To confront this problem, the challenge is that those of us who are conscious of our culture take an active approach, creating more reflection and understanding of this matter and of our cultural heritage. It is with that aim in mind that this dissertation was written.