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# INDIGENOUSNESS WITHOUT ETHNICITY IN THE SIERRA NORTE OF OAXACA, MEXICO: NATIVES, OUTSIDERS AND COMMUNITY-BASED IDENTITIES\*

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**ABSTRACT** This article analyses the relationship between ethnic, indigenous and community-based identities in the communities of Ixtlán and Guelatao in the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca, Mexico. Local identities and sense of belonging to the communities prevail over ethnic identification amongst the inhabitants of these communities. The strengthening of local (community-based) identity has been achieved through an internal social organisation and categorisation of the inhabitants based on their origin as a mechanism of integration, particularly in diverse communities with large numbers of outsiders. Parallel to this, new ways of defining indigenousness, without ethnic claims, are emerging through making reference to the practice of *comunalidad* and attachment to localities/communities.

**KEY WORDS:**

Ethnicity, indigenous identities, community-based identities,  
*comunalidad*

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## SER INDÍGENA SIN ETNICIDAD EN LA SIERRA NORTE DE OAXACA, MÉXICO: NATIVOS, FORÁNEOS E IDENTIDADES COMUNITARIAS

**RESUMEN** En este artículo se analiza la relación entre identidades comunitarias, indígenas y étnicas de las comunidades de Ixtlán y Guelatao en la Sierra Norte de Oaxaca, México. Entre sus habitantes, las identidades locales y el sentido de pertenencia prevalecen sobre la identificación étnica. El fortalecimiento de la identidad local -fundamentada en la comunidad- se ha logrado a través de una organización social interna y de la categorización de sus habitantes con base en su origen como mecanismo de integración, particularmente en comunidades diversas con un gran número de foráneos. Paralelamente a esto, han emergido nuevas formas de definirse como indígenas a través de la práctica de la comunalidad y del sentido de pertenencia a las comunidades, sin hacer referencia a la etnicidad.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:**

Etnicidad, identidades indígenas, identidades comunitarias, comunalidad.

## SER INDÍGENA SEM ETNICIDADE NA SERRA NORTE DE OAXACA, MÉXICO: NATIVOS, FORÂNEOS E IDENTIDADES COMUNITÁRIAS

**RESUMO** Neste artigo analisa-se a relação entre identidades comunitárias, indígenas e étnicas nas comunidades de Ixtlán e Guelatao na Serra Norte de Oaxaca, México. Entre seus habitantes, as identidades locais e o sentido de pertencimento prevalecem à identificação étnica. O fortalecimento da identidade local — fundamentada na comunidade — foi alcançado através de uma organização social interna e da categorização de seus habitantes com base na sua origem como mecanismo de integração particularmente em comunidades diversas com um grande número de não nativos. Paralelamente a isto, emergiram novas formas de se definir como indígenas através da prática da comunalidade e do sentido de pertencimento às comunidades, sem fazer referência à etnicidade.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:**

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# INDIGENOUSNESS WITHOUT ETHNICITY IN THE SIERRA NORTE OF OAXACA, MEXICO: NATIVES, OUTSIDERS AND COMMUNITY-BASED IDENTITIES\*

ROSA GUADALUPE MENDOZA ZUANY

**T**HIS ARTICLE EXPLORES THE PRE-EMINENCE OF LOCAL (community-based) identities over ethnic identities in Oaxaca, Mexico, and new ways of defining indigenousness in the specific case of two communities in the Sierra Norte – Ixtlán and Guelatao de Juárez – through the naming of the practice of *comunalidad* (comprising the indigenous way of life and social organisation in the communities). Here, the sense of belonging to the community is stronger than that of belonging to an indigenous group (the Zapotec people) or to the Zapotec people as an ethnic group. Instead, local identities have been strengthened by internal processes of categorising inhabitants based on their origin and integration into the socio-political organisation of the community, particularly in these diverse communities where large numbers of outsiders have become residents in recent years. This happens in a context in which some indigenous activists of the region are working both politically and academically to achieve new definitions of indigenousness, which are no longer related exclusively to speaking an indigenous language or to the emergence of ethnic identification amongst the Zapotecs, but rather to the practice of *comunalidad*, the core elements of which are *tequio* (communitarian work), *fiestas* (festivals or parties), assemblies, the *cargo* system (public jobs performed by the inhabitants of the communities) and territory (Rendón Monzón 2004).

Methodologically, I conducted fieldwork in these communities for seven months in 2004 looking at their experiences, attached meanings, perceptions, behaviours, thoughts, values, attitudes and beliefs about ethnic and local identities, through a qualitative study focused on observation of the daily lives of the inhabitants of these communities and carrying out 120 unstructured and semi-structured interviews with a multiplicity of actors.

The state of Oaxaca is composed of fifteen indigenous peoples – taking into account the linguistic criterion – and mestizos, being the most diverse

state in Mexico, in which 38 per cent of the population speak an indigenous language (INEGI 2011). However, these indigenous peoples classified in terms of language do not constitute ethnic groups, and the indigenous community has been the primary space of coexistence, loyalty, cultural ties and exercise of de facto autonomy for a long time (Barabas 1998). The Zapotecs of the communities studied— Ixtlán and Guelatao – have been called de-characterised indigenous people by Maldonado (2002), which means that their auto-ascription to the Zapotec people has disappeared as long as they have stopped speaking Zapotec because their own definition of being indigenous has corresponded to that of the official Mexican *Indigenismo*. This fact has weakened the emergence of an ethnic identity in contrast to the mestizo population or to other indigenous peoples of the region such as the Chinantecs and Mixes. However, some indigenous activists of the region have developed new ways of defining indigeness – although this does not mean the activation of ethnic identification and ethnicity as a result – not only as an strategic step to obtain the support of Indigenist policies and to become integrated into the debate on indigenous rights since the 1990s, but also to name the shared cultural practices of people in the region. This new definition relates to their internal organisation in the communities and their “indigenous way of life”, which have been called *comunalidad*. In fact, indigenous leaders are naming the daily cultural practices of the inhabitants of these communities, trying to capture the least politically visible part of “indigeness” occurring on the ground.

This article presents, first, an overview of the communities of Ixtlán and Guelatao. Second, it explores the existence of ethnic identities amongst indigenous peoples in Oaxaca and the pre-eminence of local identities. Third, it presents the ideas of indigeness in the Sierra Norte and finally, it analyses how the communities of Ixtlán and Guelatao de Juárez strengthen their local identities by the categorisation of their inhabitants and the actual practice of what has been called *comunalidad* by various indigenous leaders of the region.

## OVERVIEW OF THE COMMUNITIES

This article analyses the cases of Ixtlán and Guelatao de Juárez, two Zapotec communities in the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca. The Zapotec people are the most numerous indigenous group in the state. The Zapotecs of the Sierra Norte, who are also called ‘bene xon’, live mainly in the Districts of Ixtlán and Villa Alta.

The inhabitants of the communities of Ixtlán and Guelatao de Juárez have defined themselves in terms of their belonging to their communities, which have a peculiar way of life and social organisation called *comunalidad* by some

indigenous leaders and activists of the region. However, the shared practice of *comunalidad* has not promoted the development of ethnic identification as Zapotecs, but only the sense of belonging to their communities.

These are indigenous communities located in the District of Ixtlán at the entrance to the Sierra Norte, 60 kilometres from the state capital, Oaxaca City, and within a five-minute drive from each other. Their location exposes them to intense interaction with other communities in the region, as well as with the outside world since they are the points of departure for roads connecting the Sierra Norte towns. Many outsiders, mainly from neighbouring communities, have come to settle in these communities and become residents. The most important *usos y costumbres* (customary practices) in these communities are the *cargo* system and the assemblies. These constitute some of the most important elements of their distinctive political organisation. Indigenous leaders of the region have argued that what makes these communities indigenous is not the use of an indigenous language, but rather their social and political organisation, which is the product of the preservation of their own institutions and the combination and appropriation of external ones. In this sense, people in the region recognise that the *usos y costumbres* are not static, but dynamic institutions subject to external influences and the product of dialogue between political and cultural approaches.

Assemblies are spaces of internal dialogue that have rejected external influence in decision-making regarding internal affairs and the election of authorities, even when municipal authorities were registered as *Priístas* (partisans of the Institutional Revolutionary Party) before the legal recognition of their own ways of electing authorities. There are two types: the Assemblies of *Ciudadanos* and the Assemblies of *Comuneros*, both of which are stages for the practice of dialogue, the election of municipal and communal authorities, and decision-making processes. Assemblies are exclusive for *ciudadanos* (people, either natives or non-natives, who enjoy full political rights and have to fulfil responsibilities in the community) and *comuneros* (members of the *comunidad agraria*, which is a type of land ownership), who are mainly natives and constitute the less externally influenced institution of all *usos y costumbres*. Contrary to the still vital *cargo* system and assemblies, *tequios* have been weakened with the arrival of federal funds to the *municipios* (lowest political-administrative unit in the federation according to the Constitution).

An important distinctive feature of Ixtlán is the existence of a very successful *comunidad agraria* dedicated not only to timber extraction but to other diversified economic activities as well; the *comunidad agraria* owns a sawmill,

a gas station, a transport company, a furniture factory, an ecotourism company, etc., which is a sign of the community's power to organise itself and to run community-owned enterprises. Economically, this *comunidad agraria* gives significant dynamism to both the community and the region. Besides, it covers a considerable territorial area and is very rich in natural resources. Guelatao also has a *comunidad agraria* but its activities are very limited because of the reduced communal territory and insignificant natural resources, where the main source of employment derives from governmental offices in the town and jobs in Ixtlán and Oaxaca.

### ON ETHNIC AND LOCAL IDENTITIES IN OAXACA

The assumption that all indigenous peoples can be regarded as ethnic groups is very common amongst scholars, indigenous organisations and leaders. But, should indigenous peoples always be considered ethnic groups? Are ethnic identities always present amongst indigenous peoples? Are there other more significant identities shared by indigenous peoples? I will argue that indigenous identities are not always related to ethnic identities, and community-based (local) identities – on which indigenous identities are based in Oaxaca – do not constitute ethnic identities.

Some scholars, such as Lynn Stephen, who has extensively studied indigenous peoples in Oaxaca, have considered indigenous groups as ethnic groups, even when their identities are circumscribed to a specific community. Nevertheless, Stephen recognises that local identities related to the community are particularly important for indigenous people in Oaxaca and points out that:

... not only anthropological analyses and historical accounts but Zapotecs and Mixtecs themselves, albeit for different reasons and from different perspectives, have emphasized the community-based orientation of ethnic identity. (Stephen 1996: 20)

Furthermore, based on the works of Rubin, Campbell and Binford, Stephen also concludes that Juchitán Zapotec identity is an ethnic identity “building and sustaining a grass-roots political movement for land/labour rights and re-appropriation of Zapotec culture from Juchitán's elite for the poor majority” (Stephen 1996: 26).

With respect to local ethnic identities, Campbell also recognises their centrality when he reminds us that Nagengast and Kearney (1990) have pointed out that even Mixtec ethnic identity is primarily village-centered, and hardly existed before Mixtecs migrated to the United States and the north of Mexico and acquired a transnational character.

I understand ethnicity as a kind of social categorisation and self-ascription related to the social construction and maintenance of boundaries through diacritical cultural elements taken from a specific context and history (Barth 1969 and 1994; Eriksen 1993). From my perspective, ethnicity has to be linked with a political project, which depends on building boundaries based on cultural markers and a shared identity. This identity is activated strategically having as its basis a shared history, context and experiences. Nevertheless, I do not believe that a local or community-based identity constitutes an ethnic identity as Stephen and Campbell do.

I agree with Kearney, who considers the case of the Mixtecs as one in which ethnicity was activated by processes related to migration and the community-based identity has been superseded, but not with Stephen, who regards the case of Juchitán and Teotitlán del Valle as one in which the inhabitants possess an ethnic identity because their identities remain circumscribed to their localities and are therefore limited in scope. Mixtecs, also having a community-based identity, have organised themselves around a pan-Mixtec ethnic identity, which has been used to achieve political objectives and negotiation with the government on both sides of the border. This Mixtec ethnic identity has participated in a broader sphere of activity and influence, without affecting loyalty to specific Mixtec communities, as Stephen recognises:

The Mixtecs in northern Mexico and in California have largely abandoned historical constructions of local ethnicity and have re-created their identity as a pan-ethnic category... The localist nature of Mixtec identity has not, however, been completely abandoned in this new context. Rather, the notion of community and the style of political negotiation associated with community have been transferred to an international political arena. The meaning of being a Mixtec from a particular town in Oaxaca is clearly different now than it was in the 19th century, but certain features of that local meaning (particularly the style of political negotiation and allegiance to a community) are transferable to the present. (Stephen 1996: 33)

I consider that, on the one hand, ethnic identities are activated strategically for political purposes in broader spheres than the community, as it is

... not an ontological given, a natural fact of life, but a social construction... there is nothing automatic about ethnicity; it is one way (among others) in which people define themselves and are defined by others who stand in opposition to them. (Kearney and Nagengast 1990: 62)

On the other hand, local identities are created by everyday interaction – promoting a self-identification and common interests – and by the necessity of having a social, political and economic organisation, which is evident in the living-together

process. Kearney and Nagengast, specialists on the Mixtecs, who have studied “the highly contingent emergence of a self-conscious and deliberate elaboration of ethnicity by Mixtecs themselves as they migrate north from Oaxaca” (Kearney and Nagengast 1990: 62), recognise that,

... in the homeland in the Mixteca, ethnicity is not usually a form of self-identification, but in the frontier, it has become the basis for political activism and a means of defending themselves socially, economically, and politically. (Kearney and Nagengast 1990: 62)

In this sense, no observable ethnic identities existed amongst Mixtecs in their homeland before migration; and these authors affirm that “the primary political opposition emerges between villages, and ethnicity is only occasionally salient” (Kearney and Nagengast 1990: 69).

In this respect, specific conditions derived from migration have motivated Mixtecs to create an ethnic identity for political activism and resistance, which has not happened in the Sierra Norte where only community-based identities are evident. I found that the Zapotecs of the Sierra Norte do not share an ethnic identity like Mixtecs do; it is crucial to say that neither inter-village conflicts in the communities studied in the Sierra Norte nor extreme levels of migration are common nowadays as they are amongst the Mixtecs.

Within the debate on ethnic and local identities, some other authors also consider that these local identities could be regarded as ethnic ones. For instance, Dietz (1999) suggests that, particularly in the Latin American case, one ethnic category is that related to the local community (as opposed to the extra-local); the other categories are related to the ethnic-linguistic group (as opposed to other ethnic groups) and to the indigenous group (as opposed to mestizos and other non-indigenous peoples). Consequently, local identity is also a type of ethnic identity for Dietz.

On the other hand, Bartolomé (1997) refers to these communal or local identities as “residential,” which is a crucial factor in the study of indigenous peoples in Mexico because the community is the basic sphere in which social identities appear within daily life. However, for this author, the conjunction of residential and ethnic identities becomes problematic if Barth’s organisational approach is applied to the extent of considering each community as a distinct ethnic group. From Bartolomé’s perspective, residential identity is not ethnic identity but closely related to it in the case of indigenous peoples in Mexico. For him, indigenous groups are trying to supersede communitarian ascriptions and categorisations, to re-constitute comprehensive ethnic identities that are more viable in the current social and political context.



I consider that “residential” or local identities are not exactly ethnic identities expressed at the local level. Local identities are merely one more type of identity amongst the many that people have. As Wade affirms, “rather than having a single and univocal ethnic identity, most people have multiple identities depending on whom they are interacting with and in what context”, so all identities are “contextual, situational and multivocal” (Wade 1997: 18). I will therefore consider community-based identities not as ethnic identities at the lowest level, but as another type that is closely related to ethnic-linguistic and indigenous identity in general, as Bartolomé does.

In this respect, I also coincide with Jeanette Edwards who studies local identities and senses of belonging – without relating them to ethnicity – in an English town, focusing on:

... the way in which residents of an English town, towards the end of the twentieth century, bring histories and origins, and other features analysed by some scholars as integral to ethnic identity, in and out of focus without claiming ethnic identity for themselves. They do so by making explicit their belonging, or not, to a locality which itself is conceptualised in the process. (Edwards 1998: 162-163)

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This author prefers not to associate ethnicity and locality because ethnicity seems to be very rigid when compared with ethnographic data, as well as ephemeral, emerging, and disappearing depending on the alternatives available to people. Taking this into account, my analysis will neither regard locality nor senses of local belonging as ethnicity. With regard to belonging, it is important to highlight that it may also be instrumental, as Lovell argues:

... belonging to a place is viewed as instrumental in creating collective identities. But such identities may themselves be instrumental in forwarding particular political claims on territory, and may therefore be only temporarily mobilised to justify such claims. (Lovell 1998: 4)

I did not find essentialisation of culture or construction of boundaries as part of a strategy used by people in the Sierra Norte to establish ethnic differences at the structural level. In fact, Maldonado (2002) regards Zapotecs of the Sierra to be “de-characterised indigenous people.” Essentialisation seems to appear more frequently in the political discourses of the government “recognising” the indigenusness of the Sierra population, and also amongst some indigenous organisations and leaders demanding autonomy and cultural rights; in these political discourses we can find an image of indigenous culture as something static and permanent. In contrast, I found that culture is something dynamic and subject to changes and influences – even in the central elements

of *comunalidad* – which results in cultural hybridity, especially because dialogue encourages interaction between people. In this respect, Lovell (1998), following Fog Olwig and Hastrup (1997), argues that culture

... is not necessarily tied to particular places, but is rather created at the interstices between people in their interaction with one another in everyday discourses which may be localized. (Lovell 1998: 5)

But, given the fact of the existence of strong senses of belonging to the community, is it possible that a specific community's culture – even a hybrid and dynamic culture – may be a starting point for the development of essentialist discourses or marking cultural difference? I found that, in general, neighbouring communities share a common indigenous culture; however, some distinct elements are overemphasised by people to function as markers related to local identity and belonging to the community, but are far from generating an ethnic identity related exclusively to the community.

The important use of these categories related to birthplace is linked to the most relevant self-identification category which is being “Ixtleco” (people from Ixtlán) or from “Guelatao;” people have a strong sense of belonging to their communities, so local identities prevail over regional identities such as Serrano (people from the Sierra Norte), ethnic identities such as Zapotec, and even as Oaxaqueños (people from Oaxaca). The importance of community identities has made people emphasise the differences between communities in their daily lives, which has been especially important in the relationship between Guelatao and Ixtlán.

The relevance of local identities to the detriment of broader identities makes it difficult to achieve the regional political organisation necessary for a regional level of autonomy. However, some regional events and fiestas such as the Fiesta of the radio station XEGLO that can be listened to across the region is one factor that has contributed to building up a sense of what being “Serrano” is, as one commentator has put it:

In the Sierra we identify ourselves as Serranos, as lovers of music and sports, and in the *fiestas* even more. Here the religious activities, *bandas*, handicrafts dominate because they are things from the Sierra. The culture of the Sierra is expressed in those things, and also in traditional food, *tepache*, as part of the *fiestas*. The radio station's *fiesta* is with *banda* music and many people participate. Chinantecs participate with dances and music, the Mixes also participate, but the Zapotecs are the most numerous because it is the region with more coverage. Because of the long distances some people cannot participate, even though they would like to. (Imelda 2, XEGLO radio commentator, Guelatao)

*Fiestas* have been spaces of dialogue between people that share an indigenous and regional culture, although without political results. In the political field, the Liberal Union of City Councils (Unión Liberal de Ayuntamientos, ULA) has helped to bring together “Serrano” municipalities of the District of Ixtlán, though their activities remain at the authorities’ level without much impact on the population’s sense of belonging to an organised region with common objectives.

Despite the existence of community boundaries, dialogue and interaction take place between communities and with the outside world. These communities are not isolated but in constant contact with external actors, and recognising this fact makes it possible to avoid “the dangers of confining ‘local’ discourses into isolated and alienated hinterlands bearing little connection with the wider world” (Lovell, 1998: 4) in the way Fardon (1990) suggests. If incipient signs of ethnicity emerge, it is not amongst the Sierra Norte population who build autonomy at the structural level, but amongst extra-communitarian political actors at higher levels as part of a political strategy, or some indigenous leaders whose influence on this issue amongst the population has not been particularly successful.

Kearney (1996), using the case of the Mixtecs in particular, illustrates how their strategy to promote a new and positive ethnic identity as “indigenous people”, has empowered the group and has unified them in a single social and political category, capable of political actions and alliances within a context of power asymmetry. However, this is not the case amongst the Zapotecs of the Sierra Norte.

People in the Sierra Norte have strong local identities but not ethnic identities such as those the indigenous peoples in other regions of Oaxaca have developed in their quest for autonomy. I believe that local identity is not a type or stage of ethnic identity, but a different form of identification, which can co-exist with ethnicity. Local identities and a sense of belonging are the motors of community-based autonomy, and no signs of ethnic reorganisation have been perceived; consequently, regional autonomy has not been an option for the Sierra population. Although there is an identity shared by people of the Sierra Norte as “Serranos”, I do not believe it is strong enough amongst the population, since it appears only during festive events such as *fiestas* or sports tournaments.

## INDIGENOUSNESS AND ETHNICITY IN THE SIERRA NORTE

The people of the Sierra Norte do not share an ethnic identity as Zapotecs, Chinantecs or Mixes. Furthermore, their identity as indigenous people has been affected not only by external influences but also by internal processes of re-defining what “indigenusness” means. The widespread use of Spanish by

indigenous people was a basic element of the indigenist policies introduced in these communities with primary schools and outsider teachers in the 1940s. A common account from inhabitants in the region is that attending school was synonymous with forgetting Zapotec and starting to speak Spanish; teachers prohibited the use of the Zapotec language because of government policy and obliged parents to speak Spanish to their children. Physical punishments were even imposed on children who spoke Zapotec in class, such as Emilio, *caracterizado* (a person who has performed most *cargos* and is respected for his/her experience) of Ixtlán, relates:

Unfortunately in the times when primary school began, there was a mistake. The majority spoke Zapotec, but it was harder for the teachers to be bilingual, so they obliged students not to speak Zapotec, and parents not to teach Zapotec to their children. We were marginalised as we spoke Zapotec, they even beat those who spoke it. Later nobody spoke it, we lost the language, just some of my generation speak it. (Emilio, former municipal president, *caracterizado*, of Ixtlán)

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People refer to the Zapotecs as their ancient ancestors in the distant past with whom they have neither a strong nor palpable connection. An example of this is the monument in Ixtlán to Jupaa and Cuachirindoo, prehispanic Zapotec warriors who fought against the Aztecs, which has not promoted as positive an identification with the indigenous way of life as was intended. Furthermore, the inhabitants of these communities have been subjected to innumerable ideas from the outside relating to development, which are often opposed to the indigenous way of life. One former municipal president, a young *caracterizado* of Ixtlán and employee of the Secretariat of Indigenous Affairs (SAI) points out:

Amongst the youth there is no Zapotec identity, external culture has overwhelmed us. There is no Zapotec identity and the language is being lost, mainly because many young people go to Oaxaca to study and many outsiders come here and influence the youth. In reality we all want development, there are very few that want to preserve their traditions. For example, I have been in indigenous towns and I have told them that we cannot be so radical as to want to have a school to teach indigenous languages. It won't happen. Another example is *Indigenismo*. We have to be realistic, the young people won't speak Zapotec anymore, they want to speak English. (Guillermo 2, former municipal president, *caracterizado*, employee of the SAI, Ixtlán)

I found that most of the people neither consider themselves to be Indians nor use the concept *mestizo* to identify outsiders from cities or other regions. Some people are reluctant to use the word indigenous or Indian

since they prefer to be considered the same as any other citizen of the country; this avoidance of being identified as or called Indian is more common amongst the young population, even amongst those who study in the Integral Communitarian High School (Bachillerato Integral Comunitario, BIC), a secondary school whose main objective is to promote indigenous values, as this student indicates:

I think that culture has to change, it's going to go on changing slowly, we are going to forget the past, however, the government and many people are going to maintain alive the indigenous culture as in the case of Chiapas. Many people, more specifically, our government wants us, without pretext, to continue using the word indigenous and to keep the related traditions. Why? In order to have control over you, your community, because they are a more developed culture. Indigenous, me? Yes, I am Zapotec but outside Mexico, where people value it, people would treat you in a better way, they may even award you a scholarship. But here, people don't care, why make a fool of oneself, here people don't speak Zapotec, I have never spoken Zapotec, neither has my mom. To be indigenous you need to have an indigenous heart, which implies remaining in your community, collaborating with it, performing cargos. If you ask me if I consider myself to be an indigenous, I imagine myself always claiming my rights. I consider myself to be an indigenous, but not so profoundly, and it's not because I don't want but because I was born in a less indigenous community in comparison to others, I am indigenous but not as much as the people in Chiapas, in the jungle [Lacandona] they really are indigenous, and now people started placing value on being indigenous, whereas before it was something pejorative. (Jorge, BIC student, Guelatao)

It is interesting to see that this student thinks that the government wants to preserve indigenous traditions and that being indigenous implies remaining in your community, and constantly claiming respect for your rights as an indigenous person, within the context of what at times may appear to be a hostile environment outside.

Ethnic indigenous identities are not widespread in the region. Besides, the meaning attached to indigenous identity is neither positive nor desirable amongst a part of the population of communities such as Ixtlán and Guelatao. However, more remote and poorer communities which have fewer links to the outside and still have a lively Zapotec culture and language are normally considered by the government, and themselves, as indigenous. The main indicators of indigenousness for governmental institutions working in the Sierra, such as the CDI, are poverty – measured using a marginality index – and traditions, whereas language is becoming a less important indicator. For communities like Ixtlán and Guelatao, indigenous extra-communitarian identity has been

used more strategically to obtain benefits from the government, non governmental organisations, etc. Some indigenous activists' ideas of indigeness and autonomy are unpopular in the communities studied here, even though the most important activists are natives of Guelatao. Therefore, these activists prefer to work in remote agencies and adapt their discourse to deal with the more immediate concerns of their population, and only secondarily promoting ideas of autonomy and ethnic identification. However, they acknowledge that the most important source of identification is the community, rather than an ethnic region or indigenous language.

Maldonado (2002) gives us an example of the type of identities found amongst indigenous peoples in the Sierra Norte. He points out that Zapotecs, Mixes and Chinantecs living in the Sierra Norte share a Serrano identity, which is not an ethnic identity but a geographical and even "Priista" one; he continues by saying that each group recognises itself as distinct, but not in ethnic terms. People of these communities do not perceive themselves as indigenous groups having common grounds on which to act in a political or strategic way. Talking specifically about the Sierra Norte, in 1994, when the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, EZLN) uprising provoked great commotion amongst indigenous peoples and intellectuals, a "theoretical" proposal of organising a multi-ethnic regional autonomy for the Sierra Norte was put forward by Jaime Martínez Luna, a Zapotec intellectual and activist, in a document called "Declaration of the Serrano Zapotec and Chinantecs Peoples of the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca". This Declaration followed a tendency at that time to demand regional autonomy, but it did not cause any reaction from Zapotecs or Chinantecs.

Indigenous leaders and intellectuals have adopted alternative ideas about being indigenous, such as that of being indigenous because of an indigenous way of life. This idea is becoming an alternative for inhabitants of the region and can also be used strategically, particularly by those who do not speak any indigenous languages. This is an opportunity to "build" group identity in a context where self-identification as indigenous people in communities such as the municipal centres of Ixtlán and Guelatao is declining as the number of Zapotec speakers decreases. Now, the alternative is being indigenous because of having a particular way of life – *comunalidad* – and this would promote self-identification as indigenous amongst even more people, particularly those who do not speak Zapotec. Furthermore, this idea of indigenous self-identity has also been embraced by the federal and state governments.

The concept of *comunalidad* clearly portrays the indigenous way of life and social organisation in the communities, having *tequio*, *fiestas*, Assem-

blies, the *cargo* system and territory as their organisational core or central elements. It defines the indigenous way of life in which being part of a community depends on active participation in its economic, political and social spheres. In the economic sphere, this means doing communitarian work and assuming *cargos* for the benefit of the community; in the political sphere, performing *cargos* or roles of authority and participating in assemblies as the main responsibilities of a member of the community; and in the social field, both participating in the organisation of fiestas and enjoying them are an equally important part of being a community member. All of this takes place in a territory that belongs to the community as a whole and is defended by its members. Active participation and commitment to *comunalidad* define membership and belonging to the community. Participation is not only an obligation or consequence of community coercion, it is also an example of its willpower. The central elements of *comunalidad* are surrounded by other cultural elements which can be defined as dynamic and hybrid. This cultural hybridity does not contravene being indigenous because every culture is dynamic and subject to a variety of influences. Nonetheless, attacks on the central cultural elements, such as those emanating from Protestant churches and individualism, can affect indigenous logic (Rendón Monzón 2004). The question of who can be considered Indian arises when observing people living in these communities, especially because many of them do not consider themselves to be Indians. Maldonado (2002) argues that we need to look at the essence of being an Indian – *comunalidad* – to define who is Indian and who is not. He says that Indians are communal beings, and that *comunalidad* survives both the loss of indigenous languages and de-territorialisation. Even migrants continue to have a sense of belonging to their communities, and express it by participating in important moments such as *fiestas* or by performing *cargos*. Furthermore, *comunalidad* does not imply having closed localities characterised by harmony and lack of conflicts. Despite internal contradictions and political, economic and social conflicts, people in these communities share a social organisation, a common local identity (Méndez Morales 2001).

### **STRENGTHENING LOCAL IDENTITIES: COMUNALIDAD AND CATEGORISATION**

In Jeannette Edwards' study and also in this case, local identities are defined primarily by belonging to the community, and belonging is primarily determined by whether a person is a native, or not. Parkin (1998) highlights that in Jeannette Edwards' study of Alltown in England, people "distinguish between those who are born and bred there and those who are incomers, echoing an

earlier sociological distinction between locals and cosmopolitans” (Parkin 1998: xi-xii). This classification has considerable consequences, as Lovell points out:

Identity can crystallise around a sense of belonging predicated on hierarchically defined rights of access to territory, which then serve to stratify social groups according to perceived origin. (Lovell 1998: 6)

Furthermore, the presence of incomers has an influence in reshaping these communities, and as in Alltown, sometimes incomers can become almost natives. In this respect, Parkin highlights:

The external, cosmopolitan or global may, paradoxically, be not just the contrastive measure by which locals define themselves but also the transformative means of their own further localisation: they may incorporate incomers’ lifestyles and objects as an accepted and in due course indispensable badge of internal membership. (Parkin 1998: xi-xii)

In the case study explored, the pre-eminence of local identities in Ixtlán and Guelatao is expressed by the actual practice of *comunalidad* – not in a discursive sense – and the categorisation process by which natives and outsiders of these communities acquire specific rights and responsibilities. The existence of strong local identities is possible due to the practice of *comunalidad* and the fulfilment of obligations derived from it. The sense of belonging is reinforced by integration in the political structures through the *cargo* system and assemblies. There are specific categories used in daily life by common people in these communities such as *ciudadano*, *comunero*, *avecindado* (non-native resident), native, non-native etc., which have distinct statuses, rights, responsibilities and forms of integration. Categorisations of inhabitants of the communities are mainly based on birthplace and the main outcomes of this are related to the right to have access to land and to integration of the population into the socio-political and economic structures of the communities. Natives and outsiders should comply with the obligations of being part of the community and the latter should adopt *comunalidad* as a way of life. It is important to emphasise what Maldonado (2002) has to say on this matter:

Through “*comunalidad*” indigenous people express their willingness to be part of the community. Doing it is not only a duty, but an experience of belonging: to fulfil a duty is to belong, so being part of the community in the real and symbolic way implies being part of the communal, of *comunalidad* as expression and recognition of belonging to the collectivity. Someone can be monolingual in Spanish, not wear the traditional clothes, not perform rituals, but cannot fail to serve the community. Furthermore, those who have



migrated and live in another place... express their willingness to be part of it by sending money for *fiestas*, looking for people that can perform their *cargos* or returning when they are elected. (Maldonado 2002: 10)

So, the adoption of *comunalidad* as a way of life is an important decision on the part of outsiders who want to become part of indigenous communities and the most important marker of belonging. In this section I will concentrate my analysis on outsiders' practice of *comunalidad* and the development of their sense of belonging to the community.

Dialogue between natives and outsiders begins when the members of the community communicate the *usos y costumbres* to the newcomers, and, of course, in their daily interaction once they are settled in the communities. Dialogue is a continuous process necessary for newcomers to learn how to interact according to the social, political and economic organisation of the community and to find out how natives will accept them as part of the locality; but it is also necessary for natives to be open and to adapt themselves to new ideas. For example, although it is contradictory, *comuneros* often emphasise the difference between *comuneros* and *avecindados* on the one hand, while calling for the creation of mechanisms of integration and dialogue on the other hand.

Although the process of integration varies with each person, it is possible to identify some common characteristics. The first is that the communities are willing to establish dialogue with the newcomers in order to promote "integration", as they call it. The most important setting for dialogue is daily life in which people interact, learn and teach each other how to live in *comunalidad*. I would like to point out that people do not use the word "*comunalidad*" but constantly refer to its elements when speaking of the way of life in these communities. However, as one foreign woman married to a native of Guelatao has made clear, the assembly is a crucial factor for integration into the life of the community:

Wisely, since the beginning, my partner introduced me to the assembly and since that time I've been participating in the assemblies, which is very important because I'm not native and this is the fastest way to become integrated into the daily life of this community. (Magdalena de Martínez 1, Venezuelan, *avecindada*, Guelatao)

The assembly of *ciudadanos* is a space for debate and interaction, and outsiders may participate once they become part of the community as *avecindados*. In fact, I did not have access to the assemblies as a researcher, but was allowed to listen from outside the building, precisely as an outsider. Thus, participation in the assembly is a big step forward towards integration into the life

of the community. Another important form of integration is the performance of *cargos*. With regard to the integration of newcomers into the *cargo* system, it is important to say that non-natives are not allowed to perform the highest *cargos*, such as *regidores* (aldermen), municipal president, *síndico* (prosecutor), *alcalde* (mayor or judge), etc., which is a point that was highlighted by an ex-municipal president of Ixtlán:

We ensure that the municipal authorities are natives, not *avecindados*. *Avecindados* perform *cargos* because it's an obligation but only up to the *cargo* of mayor. In general the higher *cargos* are only performed by native *ciudadanos*. (Guillermo 2, former municipal president, *caracterizado*, and employee of the SAI, Ixtlán)

This restriction ensures that natives keep political control of the community and the municipality, and therefore *usos y costumbres* are not in danger of changing or even disappearing. So, normally the first test that non-natives have to face is that of performing the lowest *cargo* (*topil* or policeman) or forming part of a commission. However, this first test does not result in comprehensive integration, as this example of an *avecindado* of the municipality who managed to become a *comunero* due to succession shows:

I performed the *cargos* of policeman, police chief, keeper of the keys, in the *fiesta*, neighbourhood and patriotic commissions, even though people don't consider that I'm native but *avecindado*. I've always tried to make people understand that no matter that I'm not native, I wasn't born here, my father was born here, and because of that I should have and I have rights, because our Constitution says that after a period of time living in the state one becomes a member with all the rights. It's hard for people to understand, but some say that it's OK because I'm protected by law. Then I've had the opportunity to perform *cargos* because of my own interest, but also to serve the community, because I live here and have public services, then it's good to collaborate. (Pablo, *comunero*, *avecindado*, Ixtlán)

In small communities such as Guelatao, where there are not enough people to perform all the *cargos*, *avecindados* can become part of the highest hierarchy, as in the following case:

I've been here in Guelatao for 20 years always participating with the community, I performed *cargos* of *topil*, mayor, in the health commission, then in February I was elected as Secretary of the Commission of Communal Property, and it's an obligation. (Carlos, XEGLO radio commentator, Guelatao)

The experience of integration has recognised that there are many pressures from within the community for newcomers. This experience can be par-

ticularly difficult for mestizos or people coming from other countries and parts of the country, but communities are very clear and explicit about their expectations. The warning about what the community expects is generally communicated informally through daily interaction; settling in these communities supposes the newcomers' willingness to fulfil the natives' expectations which can be summarised as commitment to the community and its *usos y costumbres*, which at the same time implies living the *comunalidad*. As this *avecindada* explains, becoming integrated means full commitment and acceptance of the way of doing things in your new town:

They are going to impose things on you, because they don't ask you, do you want to get involved or not?, you are not allowed to do things by halves, you have to assume that if you are *ciudadano*, if you buy a plot and decide to become *ciudadano* then you have to perform *cargos* from the bottom or to pay someone to do it in your place. You have to participate in the *tequios*, commissions and contributions for the fiestas...when someone becomes a *ciudadano*, it doesn't matter where he/she comes from, there isn't discrimination. They have to make an effort, and some people say it's very complicated, but it's not if you know how to integrate into the community, to share, to join its efforts. (Magdalena de Martínez 1, Venezuelan, *avecindada*, Guelatao)

Non-natives living in these communities for a relatively long period of time have developed a sense of belonging and achieved almost full integration into the community as this *avecindado* relates:

I love Ixtlán more than the place where I was born. It's difficult but slowly people have begun to accept me, one integrates to the customs, the food, even to the way they speak. (Pablo, *comunero*, *avecindado*, Ixtlán)

However, it is important to mention that each authority has a different approach to greeting newcomers. In general, there is a welcoming ambience; however, there are cases of suspicious authorities that would like to keep their towns free of outsiders and their influences. The paradox in this case is that most of the people living in Guelatao are non native in the sense that many of them have non-native ascendancy. A Chinantec teacher in the BIC based in Guelatao explains the paradox resulting from the position of the authorities:

In the meetings organised by the municipal president, he sometimes says that Guelatao is losing its culture because of the arrival of outsiders to live here. But it's hard to find natives or something original from here. This has always been a town that has taken in people from other places, and the municipal president said that outsiders come to bring bad customs, and that situation has broken their cultural ties. (Oscar, Chinantec teacher working at the BIC, Guelatao)

This example poses the paradox of underestimating outsiders in a community that has depended on them for its virtual survival as such. As one inhabitant, the daughter of non-natives says, outsiders have come to populate the community and their children are now considered natives based on their birthplace and no longer on ancestry:

If we talk about natives, none of the people living here are natives, for example my mother is not native, she is from the centre of Oaxaca, she arrived here when she was 17 years old, my father was from Natividad (community in the Sierra Norte), they arrived here later, but their children, we were born here. If people hadn't arrived from other places, there would be nobody here, because the majority is not native. (María, municipal secretary, Guelatao)

The kind of discourse of the municipal authorities of Guelatao provides an example of the problems with dialogue, when groups elaborate positions related to exclusion based on essentialist discourses. Some natives have even adopted negative attitudes towards non-natives, as one *avecindado* relates:

[The natives] are more protective of their things, even here there is a cold war between natives and *avecindados*. Natives say that everything belongs to them, the whole of Guelatao, all the benefits arriving here, but this isn't something very public. This situation has been happening since 6 years ago, there was a secret meeting where they planned to kick out all the non-natives, they wanted only natives from Guelatao, but these plans went public very soon, but we don't care, because we *avecindados* are the majority, let's see what they can do without us, because there are maximum 10 people who are natives. (Leonardo 1, *avecindado*, Guelatao)

Problems with the native population have also derived from newcomers' refusal to become integrated, but this also relates to their ties to their hometowns or simply because they prefer to be separate whilst being aware of the consequences of this action. One example of a person who decided not to be part of the community is that of Imelda, a commentator for the XEGLO, who recalls:

I've been living in Guelatao for 13 years, but I can't give my opinion because I've not been involved with the community, because my community is only 10 minutes from here and I'm serving there with *cargos*, services, assemblies, we are renting a house here, and people who rent don't get involved in the community. Generally speaking, I've not had any problem, they've respected me, and I respect them. (Imelda 1, XEGLO radio commentator, Guelatao)

This person decided to continue having strong ties to her community, so she continues being a *ciudadano* of it. An interesting position defended by her and other informants is that of people who rent a house to live in; they argue that the fact of paying to have somewhere to live exempts them from having responsibilities to the community. However, some people who rent also recognise that enjoying the community's services makes them liable to be asked to perform *cargos*, commissions, etc., as in the following example:

I'm here because of my job, I rent a house to stay with my family, and nobody tells me anything, because I can rent a house. But now my daughter is attending school and then I feel the obligation to perform a *cargo*, and I have to do it because I'm using a service of the community. I think people will elect me for a *cargo* in the future, I'm not asking for it, but it'll be my turn... they've not told me directly, but when someone has 6 years living in the community, even renting, they can give a *cargo*, I don't agree with that, because we are paying rent. (Alberto, XEGLO radio commentator, Guelatao)

Non-integration may result in other problems for newcomers when they need help from the authorities, who sometimes refuse to help them, saying that they are not responsible for people who do not serve the community. One example of this was given by the president of Integral Family Development (DIF) of Ixtlán, who deals with social services for families:

There was a girl who got lost, and I talked to the *síndico* because her mother told me that the *síndico* didn't support her when she asked for help. And the *síndico* told me "but they're not from here, when they need something, they bother us, when we need something, they are not available", and then he told me "she should go the prosecutor for district criminal and civil affairs, you don't have to get involved and have problems with her, later someone will ask you why you're helping her if she is not from here. (Paula, president of DIF, Ixtlán)

The *síndico*'s position is shared by several people in the community, who consider that *ciudadanos* and *comuneros* have built the town and all the public services are a product of their efforts, and that providing public services to newcomers is thus unfair because many of them do not cooperate with the community. One *caracterizado* points out the following in this respect:

Natives are used to support with their work, whatever it is, unfortunately outsiders don't know our customs if they are not from the region. They don't support us, but they get the public services which are a product of the community's efforts and projects. I have been one of those opposed to what the community is giving to them. (Emilio, former municipal president, *caracterizado*, of Ixtlán)

The arrival of non-natives in the community has been increasing in recent years, and this has produced differences between the way newcomers became part of the community in the past when they arrived in smaller numbers as compared to now. As one *caracterizado* explains, some years ago it was easy for newcomers to be accepted as *comuneros*, but nowadays natives are more suspicious of accepting people as part of the community:

People come from different places, places close to Ixtlán, mainly from the agencies, but we don't know about other people, there are people who came from Michoacán a long time ago and our people at that time were very noble, welcoming, they arrived and said "I like it here", they went to the assembly or to the authorities, applied to stay and that was all. The community was naïve accepting them, even as *comuneros*, our people are not bad and accepted, but those people have caused many problems, they don't want to cooperate, they are the most conflictual. That's why there is no chance to settle here unless people have all their documents in order. (Emilio, former municipal president, *caracterizado*, of Ixtlán)

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A widespread idea in the community is that newcomers have displaced natives from the centre of the town to other parts where public services are not available, and that they have changed the culture of the community. Natives are therefore suspicious about these new arrivals:

I consider that in some communities, even Ixtlán, if natives have a plot of land in the town centre, they're displaced by people with money from other cities, then we begin to have another culture. We begin to lose our culture and then we find ourselves displaced, with more necessities, and those displaced begin to migrate to the United States and come back with totally different ideas. (Ernesto 1, a young *comunero* and *ciudadano*, former municipal secretary, of Ixtlán)

## CONCLUSION

The idea of the existence of ethnic identities amongst indigenous peoples is challenged by the cases reviewed in this article. While they lack an ethnic identity as Zapotecs, the community stands as the main source of identification and sense of belonging. At the same time, local identities are sources of boundaries and constructed difference, but without reaching the level of ethnicity.

The traditional relationship between being indigenous and speaking an indigenous language has been challenged in these communities. Indigenous leaders are therefore finding new ways of naming indigeness, without ethnic claims, through the concept of *comunalidad*. Being indigenous is becoming a matter of self-identification and the actual daily practice of the core elements

of *comunalidad*, while speaking an indigenous language is becoming less relevant. Although people do not speak about *comunalidad* as such, they practice it daily and constantly refer to its elements when categorising the inhabitants.

Diversity is a reality in these communities. The strengthening of local identities has thus been achieved through the practice of *comunalidad*, not only by natives but also by outsiders who have become residents in the communities. The categorisation of the population in the communities studied is a strategy for strengthening local identities, and fulfilling an important function in defining the rules for access to political power and economic resources, as well as in the integration of outsiders into the communities. Degrees of belonging have been defined and regulated in the communities' internal rules. In fact, local identities become strengthened by integrating newcomers and maintain a sense of community albeit with differing degrees of belonging. Diversity has not impeded interaction amongst the whole population and the creation of strong local identities. Local identity is built up by natives' openness to welcoming outsiders and the outsiders' appropriation of *comunalidad*.

At the same time, diversity has not hindered the practice of *comunalidad* as the new way to define their belonging to an indigenous group. Dialogue within communities amongst members of different groups has helped to strengthen community institutions and to take advantage of positive influences introduced from the outside without affecting their core institutions. The open attitude of these communities has not resulted in a loss of community identity. Obviously, interaction implies a cultural dynamism that has helped natives to adapt themselves to new times and challenges related to the diversity of their communities. ✨

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