

Beyond Politics:
The Cultural Significance of Indigenous Governance in Oaxaca, Mexico

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Abstract: During the last thirty years, Mexico has endured a significant restructuring of its economic and political landscape, resulting in political cracks for indigenous people to become key political players during this time of transition. They now participate in a dialogue regarding the nature of citizenship in that country and struggle to redefine citizenship in a way that reflects cultural diversity and supports indigenous self-determination. Political autonomy represents a key mandate of the indigenous rights struggle there. In an effort to connect the national-level indigenous rights movement with governance practices in indigenous communities, this study sheds light on the cultural significance of indigenous governance. I argue, using evidence from a rural Zapotec community in Oaxaca's Sierra Norte, that autonomous political systems operating in indigenous communities play an important role in Mexico's period of transition and serve as vital mechanisms for the maintenance and reproduction of indigenous culture and identity.

INTRODUCTION

“Nunca más un México sin nosotros.” This declaration, made by representatives of indigenous peoples and organizations who gathered in the National Indigenous Congress in 1996, has since become a rallying cry of the indigenous rights movement in Mexico. This statement reflects the key demands made by indigenous people in Mexico that echo demands represented in a wave of indigenous movements that have swept across Latin America in the last several decades: the right to control over land and natural resources; the formal recognition of a distinct indigenous ethnicity and collective rights; and the right to self-representation. These movements occur in the context of significant economic and political restructuring in many Latin American countries, particularly neoliberal economic reforms, political decentralization, and democratization. In Mexico, such shifts have created “political cracks” for indigenous people to become key political players during this time of transition. Indigenous people struggle to be recognized as both fully Mexican and fully indigenous at once (Van Cott 2003). Their demands for political autonomy are not demands for political isolation, but rather to engage in local, state, and national political systems in a manner that both permits them to continue to govern themselves according to local traditions and customs and have their voices represented in the national dialogue over the nature of citizenship, to ensure that new definitions of citizenship reflect cultural diversity.

I argue that autonomous political systems operating in indigenous communities play an important role in Mexico’s period of transition and represent important components of indigenous ethnicity. My study, which is based on ethnographic field research in a rural, Zapotec village in central Oaxaca, demonstrates that indigenous self-governance informs residents’ experience of contemporary Mexico, especially with regard to citizenship and political representation, and serves as an important mechanism for the maintenance and reproduction of

indigenous culture and identity. In this village, governance is more than just about politics. Rather, it is part of a way of being, representing an extension of indigenous identity, culture and values to the political sphere. Here, governance unites with identity, kinship, local beliefs about virtue, cultural values, and morality. In this way, self-governance serves as an important vehicle for achieving the aims of the indigenous rights movement, which include securing the right to an indigenous identity, political and territorial autonomy, and the ability to maintain and reproduce indigenous culture and traditions that are part of their way of life. The study demonstrates the embedded nature of culture in governance and governance in culture in this community.

THE “INDIAN QUESTION” REVISITED

The issue of indigenous self-governance is rooted in the longstanding “Indian question” which stems back to the Spanish Conquest in the 16th century and pervades Mexico’s history since the Conquest. That question has been, and continues to be, are indigenous people unique as a people? Are they different enough from the *mestizo*, the majority, to deserve special recognition? Mexico has tried long and hard to present itself as having one society with one people. But the story of this nation that has unfolded is consistently marked with contestation, as indigenous people have struggled to maintain a sense of identity that does not match the one purported by the State—the *mestizo*—and a way of life that traces back to pre-Hispanic origins. Granting indigenous rights would mean acknowledging that Mexico is, and has been, ethnically heterogeneous, and supporting that reality through granting rights to land and to self-governance. The provision of such recognition and rights would signify profound and extensive changes for this country.

On a macro-level, within this issue of the “Indian question”, discussions have emerged over the relationship between ethnicity and citizenship in Latin America (Smith 2007; Garcia

2005; Little 2004; Postero and Zamosc 2004; Yashar 2005; Troyan 2008; Harvey 2001), the emergence of cultural politics (Rubin 1996, 2004; Hale 1997) and the nature of citizenship itself (Fox 1994; Tulchin and Ruthenburg 2006; Armony 2004; Helmke and Levitsky 2006). The reconceptualization of citizenship occurs within the context of democratization throughout Latin America (Avritzer 2008) as well as the context of neoliberal ascendancy, which has its own “cultural project” of the recognition of cultural rights (Hale 2002, 485).

Some scholars have worked to demonstrate the connections between macro- and micro-level processes of citizenship, democratization, and indigenous political autonomy, linking processes of indigenous governance in rural communities to the larger economic, social, and political contexts. Korovkin (2001) demonstrates the important role that Andean communities in Ecuador have played in processes of democratization and decentralization occurring at the national level. Roper argues that the degree to which significant legal reforms in Bolivia that aim to directly benefit indigenous communities actually translate to the local level “depends on the way in which they are implemented at local administrative levels and the degree to which local indigenous actors are able to take advantage of them” (2003, 139). My study contributes to these types of efforts to link macro-micro processes by providing additional empirical evidence to the claims that other scholars have made about the significance of indigenous governance for the indigenous rights movement in Mexico. It sheds light on why indigenous governance is seen as an important aspect of indigenous ethnicity and identity, and why political autonomy is a crucial component of indigenous rights.

Examining the ‘Indian question’ on the ground in rural indigenous communities has illuminated how ethnic citizenship translates to the local level in terms of how indigenous governing systems operate. In particular, studies have explored the political practices associated

with *usos y costumbres* in Oaxaca (Velásquez 2000; Eisenstadt 2007) the historically rooted *cargo* system (Mathew 1985; Chance 1990; Dow 1996) and *compadrazgo* and kinship systems in Mexico (Schnegg 2006), as well as other forms of indigenous social organization at the community level (Carlsen 1996). There is need for greater and richer understanding of the forms and functioning of indigenous governance in the context of the current economic, political, and social landscapes of Mexico and this study offers another case to consider.

There also exist studies that include discussions of forms of indigenous governance for their practical implications, including their role in community based forest management in Mexico and the development of “environmental governance” (Mitchell 2006), in the creation of cooperatives in rural Mexico (Mutersbaugh 2002), as well as their compatibility with high migration rates (VanWey, Tucker, and McConnell 2005). Forms of indigenous governance have also been discussed for their importance in acquiring prior informed consent for the use of traditional knowledge (Rosenthal 2006) and for approving research conducting within autonomous municipalities (Simonelli and Earle 2003).

Studies on indigenous governance, including this one, have shown that these local social and political forms of organization are flexible and adaptive, not static; that indigenous communities are constantly evolving, not trapped in the past; and that indigenous people are active agents in these changes. Eisenstadt proposed that *usos y costumbres* practices ought to be viewed “as a set of evolving instrumental processes rather than as fixed, static, and essentialist conditions” (2007, 53). While rooted in specific traditions, indigenous governance processes have emerged and evolved into new patterns in different historical and social settings, as indigenous rural communities “have developed their own ways of coping with modernity” (Strobele-Gregor 1996, 74).

Indigenous governance can also be seen in the context of a “new rurality” in Mexico. Indigenous people, through their systems of governance, construct alternative solutions to strengthen their communities and improve their quality of life in rural Mexico as they adapt to changing circumstances (Barkin 2006). Bebbington made similar observations in Quichua communities in the Ecuadorian Andes, suggesting that transformations in governance and livelihoods have allowed people to build economically viable livelihood strategies that “allow people to sustain a link with rural places, and in turn allow the continued reproduction of these places as distinctively Quichua” (2000, 495). The findings from my study indicate that both indigenous culture and indigenous governance in this community are adaptive, and that the mutually reinforcing relationship between culture and governance that I observed works to enable both the cultural and governing realms to cope with changing forces and circumstances that originate inside and outside of the community. In this way, indigenous governance is a mechanism not only for the maintenance and reproduction of culture, but also the adaptation of culture. The indigenous governing system in this community is rooted in tradition and yet it provides community members with the freedom to move into the future with the ability to change and adapt, continually recreating and redefining the meaning of an indigenous identity and way of life on their own terms.

MEXICO’S POLITICAL CRACKS: NEW SPACES FOR INDIGENOUS ACTORS

Much of the scholarship on indigenous rights, culture, and governance frames its analyses within Mexico’s national political and economic history. During the last thirty years, Mexico has endured a significant restructuring of its economic and political landscapes and scholars widely agree that Mexico is currently in a period of transition. This restructuring is illustrated most clearly by a number of key events that have resulted in “political cracks” that create new

opportunities for indigenous people to become key political players during this transition. The significance of indigenous governance on local and national levels needs to be understood in this context.

Neoliberal Restructuring and Political Decentralization

Mexico has gone through a dramatic period of neoliberal restructuring, with the most significant changes beginning in the early 1980s. The economic reforms, including the reformation of Article 27, the section of the Constitution that articulates the system of land tenure in Mexico, which legalized the privatization of *ejido* land, and the implementation of NAFTA, created greater political decentralization. Much has been written about the negative and positive consequences this political and economic restructuring has had for indigenous people (Harvey 1996; Stephen 1996; Otero 2004a, 2004b; Thiesenhusen 1996; Cornelius and Myhre 1998; Wilson and Thompson 1993). On one hand, this neoliberal shift forced the state to essentially break its historically strong alliance with its largely indigenous peasantry (Thiesenhusen 1996; Otero 2004). For seven decades, the state was regarded as key for the survival of peasant farmers (Doremus 2001; Cornelius 1996). This shift has left the peasantry abandoned in many ways.

Conversely, as the government at the national level withdrew from economic regulation on the local level, it handed over greater amounts of power to the state and municipality. The Municipal Reform of 1984 modified Article 115 of the Constitution. This reform essentially allowed municipalities to enjoy the autonomy that they were entitled to under the Constitution but had never before obtained, and was intended to “strengthen the municipalities and, in so doing, to strengthen Mexican federalism by making local government more independent of state and federal government” (Rodríguez 1997, 73). This created vacuums that resulted in the

creation of new regulatory institutions at the state level (Snyder 2001) and invigorated many subnational governments on the state and municipal levels, creating a diverse political landscape (Beer 2002; Snyder 2001; Fox 2000; Cornelius et al. 1999; Rubin 1997). This allowed for the possibility for greater political autonomy of indigenous-majority municipalities. One provocative example includes the 1998 reform in Oaxaca that permits the existence of a dual electoral system in the state, under which indigenous municipalities are allowed to elect municipal authorities according to local customary practices (*usos y costumbres*) rather than through political party elections. Oaxaca's unique political reforms have generated a great amount of discussion over the significance they have for the national indigenous rights struggle for greater political autonomy (Brysk 2000a; Hernández Navarro 1999; Muñoz 2004, 2005; Esteva 2001; Stephen 2003) as well as analyses of the defining features and functioning of *usos y costumbres* (Kearney and Besserer 2004; Hernández Nararro 1999; Velásquez 2000).

The Zapatista Rebellion

On January 1, 1994 Mexico was preparing to celebrate the beginning “of a new era of dynamic, export-led economic growth and prosperity” as this marked the day that NAFTA was to take effect in the country (Cornelius 1996, 1). But instead of celebrating, the state had war declared against it by approximately 2,000 primitively armed peasant Indians in Chiapas. The rebels took control of four municipalities, demanding that which indigenous people have demanded for centuries: control over land and resources and the right for self-representation and political autonomy (Otero 2004a, 2004b; Yashar 1998).

The rebellion put indigenous rights and issues on the national agenda and made indigenous people central actors on the Mexican political stage (Zugman 2005, 135; Stavenhagen 1998), forcing the Mexican state to pay attention to this neglected sector of the

population. Scholars point to the ways it reinvigorated the indigenous rights movement, as it articulated its demands in new ways (Harvey 1998; Hernández Navarro 1999), opened a new space for indigenous ethnic organizations (Mattice 2003) and gained sympathy from a cross-section of the citizenry in the country (Cornelius 1996, Rubin 2004), while others have highlighted the fact that tensions do still exist between local forms of resistance and the national strategies proposed by the EZLN (Hernández Castillo 2006). They proposed the formal addition of community-level governance that would exist between individual communities and the state government (Harvey 1998; Stephen and Collier 1997).

The rebellion can be seen as significant political crack in Mexico, challenging previous notions about the meaning of citizenship and identity (Zugman 2005, 135). It can also be seen as one case in a wave of indigenous movements that have emerged in Latin America over the last several decades, a phenomenon that has been written about and analyzed extensively (see, for example, Eckstein and Wickham-Crowley 2003; Maybury-Lewis 2002; Warren and Jackson 2003, 2005; Assies van der Haar and Hoekema 2000; Brysk 2000a; Yashar 2005; Postero and Zamosc 2004; Selverston-Scher 2001).

The 2000 Elections: The End of a One-Party State

On July 2, 2000, the election of President Vicente Fox of the *Partido Accion Nacional* (PAN) party marked an end of one-party rule in Mexico that had defined the country since the Revolution. Since the elections of 2000, the nature of political discourse has changed significantly. Unlike the PRI-ista era, when challenging the PRI was considered treason, a genuine political dialogue can now occur (Pérez Herrero 2001). Furthermore, the PRI's defeat represents "an undoing of a way of conducting politics" that opens a door for an entirely new political system (Pérez Herrero 2001, 292). Scholars have debated whether the 2000 elections

marks a permanent turning point for Mexican politics and a transition toward democracy and analyzed the key actors and conditions that explain this shift (see, for example, Cornelius and Shirk 2007; Hughes 2006; Magaloni 2006; Shirk 2005). We see the discourse on democratization in Mexico in context of trends towards democratization occurring throughout Latin America. In fact, the development of democracy in the region is one of the most widely studied topics in Latin America currently (see, for example, Philip 2003; Garretón 2003; Montero and Samuels 2004; Nun 2000; Payne, Carillo, Zovatto 2002; Brysk 2000b).

This democratic transition in Mexico represents yet another political crack for the indigenous struggle: a new political system is in the making, and indigenous peoples are participating in this process (Fox 2000; Pérez Herrero 2001). The value for democracy that has emerged challenges the State to acknowledge that true democracy must include indigenous rights (Fox 2000). My study enriches our understanding of how these indigenous rights might translate to the local level in indigenous communities.

RESEARCH SITE AND DESIGN

My research site was a small, rural, Zapotec, Spanish-speaking village called Santa Lucia Almeda,¹ located in the central region of the *Valles Centrales* in the southeastern state of Oaxaca that I had visited before, building on previous contacts. It sits at 10,000 feet in the thickly forested highlands of the *Sierra Norte* that form the northern boundary of the *Valle de Tlacolula*, situated two-and-a-half hours northeast of Oaxaca City (pop. 250,000), the state capital, and 45 minutes southeast of Ixtlán (pop. 2,800), the commercial center of the *Sierra Norte* region. It is home to approximately 400 residents, who identify themselves as Zapotec, one of the three most populous ethnic groups in Oaxaca. It is a *campesino* village, as almost all families are subsistence farmers, with a 45 percent out-migration rate.

¹ A pseudonym

I chose to focus my study and conduct my fieldwork in the state of Oaxaca because Oaxaca is a hotbed for indigenous politics. It is one of the most ethnically diverse regions in Mexico, with at least sixteen distinctive indigenous groups, speaking dozens of different dialects and representing over 52 percent of the total population in the state. It is the only state in Mexico in which indigenous people form the majority of the population. In part because of its diversity, Oaxaca has made recent policy changes that allow for greater political autonomy of indigenous communities.

Methods

I conducted fieldwork during the summer of 2005 using participant-observation and conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 30 adults who reside in the village. All interviews focused tightly on one particular but key component of the village's governing structure, the *cargo* system. The *cargo* system is the manner by which the community organizes the unpaid service work that all adults in the village must do. Because I was particularly interested in governance, focusing my study on the *cargo* system enabled me to understand how this community meets its needs, gets the necessary work done, organizes labor, and distributes power, as the *cargo* system is integral to all of these processes as well as to Santa Lucia's overall system of governance.

The purpose of this study was to achieve greater clarity of the components of indigenous self-governance in Oaxaca, Mexico and thus a greater understanding of the role that indigenous governance plays in shaping contemporary Mexico. With this study, I wanted to answer three questions:

- 1) How does the system of indigenous governance function?
- 2) What structures and sustains indigenous governance in Oaxaca, Mexico?

3) To what extent are indigenous governance arrangements meeting local needs?

THE INTERTWINED PROCESSES OF INDIGENOUS CULTURE AND INDIGENOUS GOVERNANCE

Santa Lucia's overarching governing system is part of *la comunalidad*, which refers to the notion of Indian collectivism (Rendón Monzón 2003). *La comunalidad* is a structural component of indigenous villages and is "the logic by which the social structure functions and the form that defines and articulates social life" (Rendón Monzón 2003, 14). In many indigenous villages in Oaxaca, *la comunalidad* manifests as what Santa Lucia calls "the four pillars" of social organization: 1) communal government (the village assembly); 2) communal work (*tequios*); 3) communal celebrations (*fiestas*); 4) communal service (*cargos*). Implied in this framework is the important presence of communal land.

What is unique about the forms of governance that one finds in indigenous communities such as Santa Lucia is the fact that they represent governing systems that run parallel to the official system of the state and federal governments. While, certainly, indigenous municipalities are accountable to state and federal governments and interact with those levels of government, they do maintain a degree of autonomy to provide basic services and support their communities on their own terms. Indigenous communities will argue that this degree of political autonomy allows them to meet their needs more effectively and preserve indigenous culture and identity. Thus, indigenous self-governance is integral to the indigenous way of life.

Santa Lucia's way of governing is deeply embedded in the lived experiences of the members of this community. Governance is not just about politics in Santa Lucia. It extends Zapotec identity, culture, and values into one particular aspect of social organization there. If the manner of governance changes, in a certain way, everything changes. Given this, governance

can be seen as not only a function for meeting the basic needs of the village, but also serves as an important vehicle for sustaining and reproducing local culture and identity. Santa Lucia an effective example of illustrating not only how self-governance works in Oaxaca, but also, why it is so important to the lives of Indians who reside there.

The fact that the villagers refer to their governance structure as a whole as “the four pillars” illustrates two key features of that structure: first, that there exist four distinct facets of governance; secondly, that those facets are inherently interconnected, and *together* support the village’s overall goal of meeting the needs of its people. The assembly serves as the ultimate authority in the village, delegating power and tasks to individuals. The *cargos* are the means by which individuals receive power and mandates from the assembly to serve the community. The *tequios* serve as the vehicle by which necessary work projects are completed and material life is addressed. The *fiestas* can be understood as the reproduction of village culture and reaffirmation of the community’s identity as a people. I found that all adults have high involvement in the system of governance but are engaged in it along gendered lines.

The Cargo System

This study focused specifically on understanding the village’s system of *cargos*, an intricately designed system of community service in which all adults are obligated to participate. The community needs people to fill particular roles to keep the community running, which the system of *cargos* provides. For this reason, the *cargo* system can be seen as serving as the backbone of its governing structure.

The word *cargo* can be literally translated from Spanish as “burden”. A *cargo* is an obligatory community service position that a person is assigned to through a majority vote. *Cargos* include a wide range of duties, such as serving as municipal president, running the local

health clinic, conducting an annual census for the village, maintaining the infrastructure of the church and local schools, organizing community work projects, handling village finances, as well as many other activities that help keep the village running. There exists a strict separation between men's and women's *cargos* which means that the village has essentially two *cargo* systems, which are accompanied by a number of different assemblies.

The administrative assembly, which is composed of all adult men in the village, votes on men's *cargos*. The women's assembly, composed of all adult women in the village, votes on women's *cargos*. Women serve a variety of different *cargos* but are not allowed to serve in high ranking *cargos*, such as municipal president.

All *cargos* related specifically to the municipality entail a one-and-a-half-year commitment. All other *cargos* require a one-year commitment. Directly following the completion of a *cargo*, a person receives a period of rest, or *descanso*, from *cargo* service, which directly correlates to the amount of time the person served in his or her preceding *cargo*. Men and women engage in the *cargo* system cyclically, required to do a set number of *cargos* throughout their adult lives: men must complete between nine and twelve *cargos*, while women must complete at least three.

I identified from my interviews with people five discernable categories under which all *cargos* in the village fall: 1) *cargos* related to territory; 2) the municipality; 3) the school; 4) the church; 5) women's *cargos*. The municipal, school, and church *cargos* all fall under the jurisdiction of the administrative assembly, attended only by adult males. Except for the position of municipal secretary, all administrative *cargos* are filled only by men.

Serving an assigned *cargo* is considered one of the most important and fundamental obligations a man or woman has to the community as a whole. Refusing *cargo* service occurs

rarely, for, under normal circumstances, it can result in terminating one's rights in the community. As Aline Desentis, a researcher who has studied indigenous governance in this community and others in this region and who served as my gatekeeper to this village, described, if a person refuses to serve the community, the community's response will be: leave, we don't want you. She explained, "if you don't fulfill your obligations, you forfeit your rights." Doña Camila, an elder in the village, illustrated the fundamental nature of *cargo* service in Santa Lucia by saying adamantly, "you cannot decide to not do *cargos*—it's basic. If you don't want to do them, you cannot have the same rights as everyone else. You cannot have both." Here, *cargo* service and rights go hand-in-hand. Or, put another way, *cargo* service is the social capital that a person must consistently obtain in order to maintain rights.

I observed the presence of both a formal and informal, or social, hierarchy associated with the *cargo* system. The formal hierarchy refers to the organization of *cargo* positions that a person must follow in order to reach the top of the hierarchy. This organizational flow is adhered to strictly by the assemblies who designate *cargo* assignments by vote. The social hierarchy corresponds rather tightly to the formal hierarchy, but discrepancies do exist among people's perceptions of the most difficult, important, or prestigious *cargos* in the community.

The community has specific, yet largely implied, expectations of *cargo* performance, and clear consequences exist for negligence of duties during one's period of *cargo* service. Villagers demonstrated an awareness and knowledge of what is required for serving *cargos* as a whole, but also for each specific assignment. They also knew of the consequences for not serving well, which largely manifest as not moving up the formal ladder to more prestigious and important *cargos*, but, in extreme cases, could include expulsion from the village.

Esteban, a young man in his early thirties, who had already served a number of important municipal *cargos* explained his understanding of the expectations and consequences related to *cargo* performance. He said, “this is how the system functions. If you don’t do a good job, you won’t receive harder *cargos*, *cargos* with more prestige.” When a person performs poorly, he added, “everyone knows. The assembly knows...it’s a very small village. People talk. It’s obvious when a person doesn’t do a good job.” I asked if he thought people ever purposefully did poorly with their *cargos* duties to ensure that they never had to be assigned to difficult positions in the future. He response was essentially that such a move would be social suicide. He said people don’t practice this, explaining,

it’s not good to never receive a hard *cargo* because then you’d never receive respect or prestige from the community. Because, the whole community remembers, it knows who has which *cargos*. It’s worth the pain to do a really hard *cargo* and do a good job at it because then you will receive prestige and respect. This is a very good thing.

Cultural Elements of Governance

In Santa Lucia, culture and governance are not autonomous aspects of social life, but rather, intertwine, constantly influencing, shaping and reinforcing one another. Together, they provide the basis for social organization. Here, I will provide an analysis of five key cultural elements I have identified from interviews and observations that help organize people’s relationships to one another and prove integral to the particular way in which the system of governance functions here. They include: obligation, service, sacrifice, power, and accountability.

These cultural elements serve as “glue” that holds people and their way of governing together. Thus, an appreciation for the roles they play in maintaining village governance, particularly the *cargo* system, is necessary in order to achieve an accurate understanding of how

the village's way of governing functions, why it works, and why its people see it as not merely a means of "getting things done", but also a means of maintaining and reproducing their way of life and their identity as a people on their own terms.

Obligación, or obligation, refers to the sense of duty that people feel here to serve their community through doing *cargos*, as well as the sanctions associated with the system of *cargos*. The village seemed to be governed by the philosophy: "*primero obligaciones y entonces derechos*." First obligations, and then rights. More than simply doing something good for the community, by serving *cargos* people actually continually earn their right as *cuidadanos*, or citizens of this village. In exchange for their labor in the *cargo* system and via *tequios*, they are essentially granted permission to stay, recognized as a community member. Membership to the community as adults is defined by one's participation in the assemblies. Official village policy holds that a person does not have the right to attend assemblies unless he or she has begun service to the community, by way of *cargos*, *tequios*, or *fiesta* commissions. It is a social contract that applies to everyone and, for this reason, fulfilling one's obligations can be understood as the defining feature of being a village resident.

This sense of obligation to serve one's community had a rather strong presence for many of the people with whom I spoke. When Doña Camila confided that the president of the health center was not doing a good job, she shook her head in disgust, saying, "such a high *cargo* and she can't do what is necessary! It's her *obligation*." Isa, who has already completed her required three *cargos*, spoke at length about the meaning of *cargo* service and the importance of obligation. Quite vehemently, she said, "*cargos* are difficult but it's your obligation to your community".

Essentially, the *cargo* system would not function if people did not feel obligated to fulfill *cargos* and do them well. People need the social pressure and social control associated with the *cargos* in order to do the work in the way it needs to be done. The social pressure is not just positive for the community as a whole, but also for individuals, who demonstrated a sense of pride they felt when speaking of the obligation of *cargo* service. The notion of obligation becomes valorous; here, virtue emerges from doing what is asked of them, expected of them.

Servicio, or service, reflects people's sense of commitment to and contribution toward the common good. When I was in Oaxaca City, I spoke with an elder named Sebastián who was from a small, Zapotec village not far from Santa Lucia. His village had a similar political structure as Santa Lucia, with assemblies and a *cargo* system. As he explained the role of the village president to me he said, "the village doesn't serve him, he serves the village." While he was from a different village, I believe his words echo the fundamental assumption that Santa Lucia has regarding the role of the *ciudadano*—it is a role of giving, serving, not receiving or expecting. If everyone serves each other, then everyone's needs can be met. That people are engaged in genuine *servicio*, and call it that, demonstrates a commitment on the behalf of all villagers to a higher good, a common good. By insisting on service, the village calls on people to recognize that they are part of something greater than exists on the individual level. The focus is on helping the community, doing what is best for the community, rather than on oneself. Practically speaking, this ensures that the work that needs to get done gets done. Normatively, it provides social cohesion and group identity.

Cargo duties are rightfully considered service for a number of reasons. It is unpaid work. It is work done for others. It is a contribution that people make for the benefit of everyone. People don't do *cargo* work because they particularly want to, or because it is particularly

enjoyable but because it helps the community as a whole. Because so many people stressed how difficult *cargo* duties are, how much work they are, the degree of sacrifice made, I began asking people if there was anything enjoyable about doing a *cargo*. Many responded with blank stares. Ignacio, the *síndico*, said, “there’s nothing good about *cargos*. Everything is heavy, hard, there’s nothing good about it.” Gerineldo echoed this sentiment, stating, “no, they’re heavy, difficult, and nothing more. There’s no part that’s enjoyable.” The general agreement that *cargos* are *pesados y duros*—heavy and a lot of hard work—combined with the fact that they are unpaid makes it clear to me that this work is genuinely done in the spirit of serving others—and to keep their rights as citizens of this community. The two are connected, because it is through serving the community that one maintains rights to it.

The notion of *sacrificio*—sacrifice—reveals the burdens and the adjustments that people make to their personal lives in order to serve their community. That in Spanish, *cargo* means “burden” clearly illustrates how people understand the nature of their service. During one of my conversations with Fernando, he told me that the system of *cargos* is, “a system of sacrifice”. Implicit in people’s obligation to serve is the obligation to make sacrifices. Sacrifice is a necessary component for the proper functioning of village governance. The municipal government cannot afford to pay people for their labor in *cargos*, *tequios*, or *fiesta* commissions. Yet the system requires people to commit to these duties, sometimes for as long as a year-and-a-half, even though they prevent people from working in their fields or engaging in other income-generating activities for long periods of time. Sacrifice thus becomes part of one’s obligation—people would not voluntarily make such heavy sacrifices to their personal lives, under normal circumstances, and so, because it is recognized as necessary for the good of the community, they are mandated to do so.

Because sacrifice is tied to the common good, it is more than just an obligation to fulfill; it has become a value, a virtue in this community. The sacrifices that people make do not go unnoticed, but are indeed recognized and the person who gives of himself or herself to a high degree is honored and revered widely in the village. In this way, sacrifice is directly connected to social compensation. Furthermore, it seems that the degree of sacrifice a person is recognized to have made tightly correlates with the degree of honor, respect and prestige one receives from the community. Quoting Esteban again, “it’s not good to never receive a hard *cargo* because you’ll never receive respect or prestige from the community...the community remembers, it knows who does what *cargos*. It’s worth the pain to do a hard *cargo* and do it well because you will receive prestige and respect.” Sacrifice and social compensation are the means by which people are rewarded for serving well and are punished for being inadequate.

The term *poder* (power) also came up frequently in interviews, especially with regard to the village authority and, particularly, the presidency. That many people acknowledged a concentration of power within the position of municipal president but also spoke vehemently against any desire to become president indicated to me a particular understanding of, and relationship to, power here.

If power is associated with serving *cargos* then it is subjected to the same pressures and implicit rules that regard *cargos*. This is to say, those with power, too, participate in the social system that governs village life and are entrenched in the cultural principles that serve as the foundation for that system. In fact, it could be argued that the values of obligation, service, and sacrifice apply *especially* to those with concentrated power in the village. Those with power are held to heightened expectations regarding their obligation to serve their community well, to make personal sacrifices that benefit the good of the whole. The president—the figurehead of

the village—is held to the highest standard regarding these principles, responsible for setting an example for the entire community about what it means to truly serve, sacrifice, and fulfill one’s obligation.

The general assembly keeps the president accountable to the explicit and implicit expectations of him. And so, while in practice, power is largely vested in one man of a certain age, the true source of power and authority lies in the general assembly. As the ultimate organ of power and authority in the village, the role of the general assembly is to maintain accountability among those individuals to which it distributes power.

It is important to stress that the administrative assembly, not the general assembly, does the majority of decision-making in the village, such as the assignment of all village authority positions, including the president, and so the administrative assembly plays a more direct role maintaining accountability within most *cargo* positions. But the administrative assembly is given its authority from the general assembly. For this reason, the general assembly can still be seen as the ultimate source of power and authority in the village, even though it plays a lesser role in the on-the-ground happenings of the *cargo* system. This is a key distinction, especially when noting that women cannot participate in the administrative assembly, but are part of the general assembly; while they are not directly involved in much of the critical decision-making in the village, they do represent a sector of the ultimate authority in the village. The recognition of the power embedded in the general assembly is what brings Maldonado Alvarado to the conclusion that *poder comunal*—communal power—is one of the defining features of many indigenous communities in Mexico (2002: 15).

A high concentration of power can also be found in the village authority, the small group of men who hold the highest cargo positions within the municipality, including the president,

who is considered to have the most concentrated power of any individual person in the village. The village authority is centrally involved in the highest order of business related to the municipality. This group of men engage in some of the most important decisions and difficult work related to the well-being of the village and are thus given this particular recognition as the village authority.

The president is recognized as having the maximum authority within the community and as the individual who serves as the principle—though not sole—representative of the community as a whole to outsiders (Maldonado Alvarado 2002). When villagers spoke with me about village governance, they—especially men—frequently brought up the topic of the municipal presidency. The most striking feature of their comments regarding the president was the overt resistance they displayed to the notion of ever serving as president. When I asked Ignacio, the *síndico*, if he hoped to be named as president someday, he responded resolutely, “No! I do not, not, not want to. Never, never.” And if he were named president, “I won’t accept it. I will not serve. I have a vote, too, I can resist the vote of the assembly.” Jaime, the communal representative, also said that if he were named president, “I’m going to say, no, no I cannot. I will refuse to serve.” Gerineldo, a village elder, explained to me, “nobody wants to receive *cargos* of president or *síndico*. They’re difficult, hard...in these positions, they have to care for the whole village.” Nicolás, a middle-aged villager, declared, “I don’t want to be president—*nobody* wants to be president!”

This indicated two things to me: first, that the *cargo* of municipal president is widely seen as a very challenging, labor-intensive, high risk *cargo*, making it an undesirable one; secondly, that because the duties related to the president *cargo* are made undesirable, in effect, power is

made undesirable since the president *cargo* represents the most powerful individual position in the village.

Accountability is the mechanism that regulates power, works to minimize corruption and holds people to the explicit and implicit policies and standards set forth by the village. In Santa Lucia, I identified a variety of mechanisms that play a role in maintaining accountability among all villagers, perhaps most importantly regarding those with concentrated power such as the *síndico* or president, but extending to *all* who serve the community formally through doing *cargos*, *tequios* and organizing *fiestas* via commissions. Perhaps it is because accountability can be found in many places, both overtly and covertly, taking on both structural and cultural features in the community, that people rarely discussed accountability in an explicit sense, and refrained from using one term to refer to all of these processes. I would argue that the lack of presence of the term “accountability” in people’s language and descriptions points to a ubiquitous nature of accountability here rather than an absence of it altogether. In my understanding, the rather elaborate system of accountability serves as the overarching mechanism for the proper and continued functioning of Santa Lucia’s system of governance and, for this reason, is the most important.

It seemed that the system of accountability stemmed from two main sources: structure and culture. Both arenas of accountability had sets of related consequences. In this sense, people exhibited both an adherence to explicit policies (structure) as well as a moral commitment to the community and its customs (culture) and in doing so, helped to maintain the proper functioning of communal governance here.

The structural features generally manifested as formalized village policy as it related to both villagers and the state and federal governments. Concrete consequences existed for non-

compliance with formal policy. For example, if a person were to refuse cargo service, they could be banished from the village. Jaime told me about two different treasurers who lost and mismanaged village funds, and both spent time in jail. If a person doesn't meet the requirements of a particular cargo, he or she will not be given by the assembly cargos that are higher on the hierarchies which have greater prestige and importance.

The cultural manifestations consisted of both social pressure and the traditions in the village related to governance and social organization. People exhibited a moral commitment to the community as a result of these pressures and traditions. One village told me, "There's a lot to lose if someone does something bad and the village learns about it," as he explained to me the high stakes of serving in the village authority, especially as president. For most villagers, the majority of their extended family lives within the community and family serves as the cornerstone for the life of a rural person. For these reasons, these people, in effect, have nowhere to go if they are banished for committing some act against the community. An understanding that is implicit but ever-present, those people in "high places" know that they are being watched and are entrusted with the well-being of the village. If all goes well during their period of service, it can bring great status and prestige to them; if something bad happens during this time, be it a scandal or poorly handled crisis, it can bring great shame upon them and their families and could result in banishment. Because people's blood is in this village, it arguably represents the strongest force to maintain accountability. Aline reported to me that this community is essentially composed of three extended families. Here, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that everyone's related—if not by blood, then quite often through marriage.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Three main conclusions emerged from my study. First, it seems that indigenous people have a unique culture, separate from *mestizo* culture. Secondly, indigenous self-governance appears to be an important vehicle for cultural reproduction and maintenance of indigenous identity. Third, indigenous self-governance is important for Mexico as a whole, meaning that indigenous people are significant political actors.

Indigenous People are Unique

It can be argued that indigenous people are unique because at the time of the Conquest, indigenous people were never assimilated into Spanish culture and, thus, Mexico was created as a split nation (Bonfil Batalla 1996). This split has persisted over centuries and now, two cultures—one indigenous and one *mestizo*—continue to exist, parallel to one another.

Contemporary indigenous culture can be characterized by *la comunalidad*, or communality.

There, the focus is on the collective, not on the individual, and identity is about being part of a whole. Gustavo Esteva, a Mexican intellectual who knows Santa Lucia explained,

For most of the people of [Santa Lucia], they do not belong to [Santa Lucia], they do not belong to that community, they *are* that place. For them, there is no difference between the people of [Santa Lucia] and the place [itself]. And they can be out of [Santa Lucia] for 20 years, or 30 years, and still that is home, that is the place they will come back to. They carry it with them, that place, and live with that place, that point of reference. They cannot think otherwise.

Conversely, in *mestizo* culture, the focus is on the individual, as Benjamin Maldonado Alvarado, an anthropologist based in Oaxaca explained to me,

The fundamental difference between indigenous societies and non-indigenous societies is the difference of the communal way of life and the individual way of life. [In indigenous communities] everything is part of the collective.

This indigenous village demonstrates that the way of life in communities that identify as indigenous is qualitatively different than most *mestizo* communities in Mexico. If indigenous people truly are different, then it should follow that they deserve the right to ensure their continuation *as* a people, on their *own* terms. I asked Aline why only indigenous people should be granted such autonomy, rather than *mestizos*, to which she responded, *mestizos* don't need autonomy because the law makes sense for them. To indigenous people, the law doesn't make sense because they have their own laws. "That's why they want autonomy, because they have another culture," she explained. "The *mestizos* do not have another culture."

A Way of Governing is a Way of Being

Indigenous self-governance is an important component of the maintenance and reproduction of indigenous culture and identity. In indigenous communities like Santa Lucia, governance is more than just about politics. More than simply a system, it represents a way of life that is indigenous in nature. I realized that in communities like Santa Lucia, the way of governing is part of the way of being. For this reason, the right to self-govern is a defining feature of an indigenous way of life for which people struggle.

Because governance is inextricably intertwined with culture and identity, it is a necessary component of the process of maintaining that which is indigenous. Governance in Santa Lucia, thus, serves as a key mechanism for transmitting and reproducing local culture. This happens because culture and governance engage in a mutually reinforcing relationship. While the cultural elements of the community serve as cohesion and help keep the system functioning, the

governing structure reinforces the culture, through maintaining values for fulfilling obligations, serving the community, recognizing sacrifice as valorous and power as undesirable, and remaining accountable to one's people. In this way, this form of governance meets the cultural needs of the community. As a result, it is recognized as valuable to the community because it reinforces culture and is reinforced by it.

If indigenous people deserve and obtain rights that ensure their continuation as peoples on their own terms, they will do it in part through their systems of governance and, I argue, could not do it without them. In Santa Lucia, their way of governing is part of their way of being Zapotec.

Indigenous People are Important Political Actors

Just as indigenous governance is not a separate process from indigenous cultural transmission and reproduction, nor is the indigenous experience separate from important processes that shape and define the Mexican experience. Thus, indigenous self-governance is important for Mexico as a whole, making indigenous people important political actors.

If the demands made by indigenous peoples are met, the impacts, both cultural and political, will be far-reaching. Granting rights that are specifically indigenous in nature and include political and territorial autonomy arguably threatens both the foundation of Mexican as a nation of *mestizos*, one people, as well as the political system as a whole. They challenge status quo definitions of what it means to be Mexican, infusing the notion that one can simultaneously be fully Mexican and fully indigenous.

Politically, those who defend and promote indigenous rights represent key players in Mexico's current contentious and transitional period, pulling the country into the opposite direction of neoliberal economics and politics, one of political decentralization and a forth level

of government that consists of autonomous indigenous regions. Depending on the level of success by the indigenous rights movement, significant changes to the Constitution may occur. Also, indigenous people are redefining the meaning of political participation, demonstrating that autonomy does not equal isolation. They argue that governing themselves still means participating in regional and national politics. They challenge the nation to recognize that autonomous, collective governance can be a valid and successful form of governing.

Looking Forward

More research is necessary that continues to track significant changes in Mexico, the strength and nature of the indigenous rights movement and the relationship between the State and indigenous actors. My research aids in deepening our understanding of the role of indigenous people and their way of governing in shaping the contemporary Mexican experience. But soon, the context may very well change dramatically once again. Continued research is important because it can deepen our understanding of this sector of Mexico's population which has been underrepresented, pushed to the margins, and left behind by the nation's agenda to entrench itself in a global economic and political system.

Even though systems of self-governance in indigenous communities like Santa Lucia are not perfect, they do provide the opportunity for indigenous people to meet their own needs, and turn what began as negligence by the State into hope for better lives. Such systems of governance allow indigenous people to cultivate lives of integrity that are rooted in tradition and something of substance, yet provide them with the freedom to move into the future with the ability to change and adapt, continually recreating and redefining the meaning of an indigenous identity and way of life on their own terms.

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