Territorial Practices:

An Anthropology of Geographic Orders and Imaginations in the Sierra Mixe

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Declaration of Originality

I, Emiliano Zolla Márquez, confirm that the work presented in my thesis is my own work. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated.

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Introduction

The thesis presented here pursues a triple purpose; first is to present an ethnographic account of those practices and conceptions that intervene in the production of the territory and space of the Mixe, an indigenous group that inhabits a mountainous region of the state of Oaxaca in Southern Mexico. A second objective is to contribute to a wider anthropological discussion on Mesoamerican indigenous communities by examining a number of geopolitical processes that help to shape Mixe communitarian life. Finally, a third but equally important aim is to explore the non-hierarchical and decentralised forms of social organisation that, as I propose in this research, lie at the core of Mixe society.

Anthropological interest in territorial and communitarian aspects of Mesoamerican indigenous peoples is certainly not a novelty. The indigenous community has been the privileged space for empirical research and the main source for theoretical reflection since Robert Redfield published his monograph on the village of Tepoztlan (Redfield, 1930). While less prolific than community-oriented studies, research on indigenous territoriality has proved to be a fertile ground for scholarly investigation whose importance has increased under the impetus of contemporary indigenous struggles for autonomy and self-determination (Liffman 2000; Gledhill, 2004; Bartolomé and Barabas, 2005; Orobitg, 2008;).

In contrast to the attention conferred to community and territory, the study of stateless forms of organisation has received virtually no consideration by scholars of Mesoamerican indigenous societies. Furthermore, the idea that among Mesoamerican peoples there might be "stateless" modalities of social organisation has been generally ruled out due to the dominance of a civilisational discourse (Scott, 2009) which emphasises the continuities between different modalities of the state (pre-Hispanic, colonial and independent) and the indigenous community. Nevertheless, there is enough empirical evidence to affirm that

stateless forms have existed and still exist among certain indigenous groups. Gonzalo Aguirre Beltran's *Regions of refuge* (1967) proved that among Mesoamerican peoples there is a long history of rejection and avoidance of state authority and there is a still small and predominantly historical literature on the subject, focused on the strategies employed by indigenous communities (especially from the Maya region) to flee from state domination and economic exploitation that confirms that statelessness, both as practice and political category, have been important components of the life of many Mesoamerican peoples (Sullivan, 1991; Caso-Barrera, 2002; Patch, 2002; Rugeley, 2009; Alcantara and Navarrete, 2010).

Nevertheless, the anthropology of Mesoamerican societies still lacks proper theoretical tools to accurately identify and describe processes of statelessness as well as the development of non-hierarchical political forms. The anthropology of Mexico and Mesoamerica never conferred much attention to classic scholarship on acephalous, decentralised societies and was rather indifferent to the foundational works on segmentary systems of Fortes and Evans Pritchard (1940). The latter can be attributed to the fact that lineage theory as formulated by Africanists had little effect on Mesoamericanists, who historically "have minimized the importance of kinship as an organizing mechanism of Indian and Mestizo culture and society" (Nutini, 1980). On the other hand, the synchronic orientation and the emphasis on the internal equilibrium of African polities made it hard to apply the concepts of Africanist anthropology in a context where the disruptions and transformations caused by the Spanish conquest are a central ethnographic element. Finally, Mesoamerican anthropology (and especially the Mexican anthropological tradition) is prone to see in the literature on acephalous and stateless societies as part of ethnocentric and evolutionist traditions that were to be rejected. Andrés Medina (1995) has described how Mexican anthropology was born as a result of an attempt to challenge L. H. Morgan's thesis on the Aztecs, which stated that the latter had no proper

state organisation but a type of hierarchical order in the fashion of the Iroquois, in which, authentic political centralisation was an absent feature.

Mesoamerican anthropology also paid little attention to one of the milestones of classic British anthropology, *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1954) the fundamental work on the dynamic and interrelation between state and stateless political forms. This book was never translated into Spanish, while Latin American and American ethnographers working in Mexico or Guatemala do not appear to have been familiar with Leach´s book (World War II somehow severed the somewhat tenuous links between the heavily Americanised Mexican anthropology and the British anthropological school). Leach, although surrounded by undeniable prestige, was probably better known in Mexican intellectual circles for its later dialogue with Claude Lévi-Strauss and in the Mexican case, *Culture and Communication* (1976) was far more influential than Leach's ethnographic work on Asia.

Mesoamericanists´ lack of familiarity with Leach´s major ethnographic work is something that can only be regretted. If the book would had circulated more and if the provincial attitudes that come with regional hyper-specialisation were not so great, the study of Mexican indigenous societies and especially the theory of the indigenous community, would have certainly benefitted from Leach´s sophisticated insights on space, hierarchy and social transformation. Both the context of Leach´s work (a mountainous region of great cultural, linguistic, ethnic and ecological diversity) and the type of problems studied by him are certainly close to many of the themes and preoccupations that Mesoamericanists constantly find in their own work.

Leach demonstrated that the problems of cultural continuity, political hierarchy, ethnic definition as well as the ritual logic of the Kachin Hills region (one that puzzled British colonial officials, missionaries and anthropologists for more than a century) could only be

understood through a view capable of incorporating space and geography as part of the explanation on the social. In Leach´s work, space and geography are not part of a static background, scenery or as a simple container of social life, but they appear as changing, unstable and fluid dimensions with a fundamental role in the creation and shaping of different hierarchical and political forms. Among the great contributions made by Leach in *Political Systems…* was not only introducing the problem of structural change as a main concern for anthropologists, but to illustrate how the process of structural transformation becomes rooted in geography, expressed in a movement that takes people back and forth between hierarchies but also through different spaces.

The loose hierarchies, horizontal social structures and non-coercive authority that define Leach´s *gumlao* model is the outcome (according James Scott´s gloss of Leach´s text) of "the migration of families and lineages from more stratified villages to found new, more egalitarian villages" (Scott, 2010, p. 215). Statelessness as found in the *gumlao* model not only implies a transformation of the inner working of specific societies, but foremost, a spatial trajectory that takes villagers from small Lowland Shan states or from places in which separations between aristocracy and commoners are emerging (that is, the formation of the *gumsa* model) to seek refuge in the Kachin Highlands, far from taxes, forced labour, cash cropping and hierarchical rituals. For Leach, both the creation of non-hierarchical villages and the structural changes experienced by societies (that is, the back and forth alternation between gumsa and gumlao) is never a definitive process and therefore, structural transformation becomes a matter not of linear history, but an oscillation between unstable poles. Leach recognised the mutually constitutive relationships between social and cultural groups, demographic dispersion and ecological diversity.

Leach's study on how Burmese social structures oscillate between different hierarchical forms paved the way for critique of the static models of society of functionalist anthropology, and also eroded the evolutionism that dominated most theories of the state.

Leach's ethnography of the Kachin allowed anthropologists to understand discontinuities of state presence and to see how people are able to move back and forth between different hierarchies and regimes of power. Perhaps indirectly, *Political Systems…* opened the way to a powerful critique of the teleological narratives of the state, allowing seeing statelessness as an ever-existing political possibility of certain societies (including hierarchic ones) instead of a primitive survival condemned to extinction. Leach's arguments are not only helpful in terms of understanding how fissions within hierarchical groups lead to the creation of relatively horizontal forms of association or to see how languages of power are expressed by ritual means; in the Mesoamerican context, Leach's work can be employed to revise some fundamental premises of the classic theory of the indigenous community. Although Aguirre Beltrán observed a similar phenomenon to the "fleeing from the state" registered in Highland Burma, his own theory was limited as it relied on an argument that states that indigenous groups that escaped to the *regions of refuge* (isolated and remote areas with little or no state control) were fundamentally parochial or closed corporate communities that maintained non-hierarchical political modalities as long as they remained isolated or until penetrated by the state. Aguirre Beltrán did not contemplate the possibility that stateless forms were contained *within* society or that they could emerge as groups became more hierarchical. The more or less lineal evolution of indigenous political development proposed by Aguirre Beltrán was highly problematic, as is it did not allowed to consider exchange between different polities while reinforced the hiper-provnicialism of Mexican anthropology.

A similar argument on statelessness as a political possibility contained within the very structure of states and societies immersed in some process of "verticalisation" (similar to

Leach's *gumsao* model) can be found in the works of Pierre Clastres, especially, in the seminal essays contained in *Society Against the State* (1974) and *Recherches d'anthropologie politique* (1980), which deal with the political constitution of societies in the Amazon basin and the Paraguayan Chaco forests. In these works, Clastres introduced an important distinction for the anthropological analysis of Amazonian groups, which consisted in seeing acephalous communities in terms of "societies *against* the state" rather than societies *without* the state.

Clastres' work provided evidence that the absence of centralised and coercive as well as the existence of a paradoxical figure which he labelled as "the chief without power", were not products of historical isolation, unawareness of complex state forms or, as early anthropologies had it, a political atrophy characteristic of "primitive society". For Clastres, statelessness was an ever-present internal political feature of many Amazonian groups, a fierce social force directed to avoid the hierarchical split of society and to impede the creation of a clear-cut division between an autonomous sphere of power and the rest of society. For Clastres, the indigenous body-politic was organised in such a way, that it made difficult to produce what he saw as a foundational sociological split that lay at the foundations of state forms.

A political and methodological anarchist active during the turmoil of 1968 Paris, Clastres was scientifically and ideologically committed to highlight a rebellious quality common to many Amerindian societies. As in the case of Leach's *Political Systems...,* Mesoamerican anthropology could greatly benefit from Clastres' work as it offers a way to escape the interpretative circularities and the analytical dead-ends that characterise the study of political transformation in Mesoamerican and Mexican contexts. By replacing *society without state* (or primitive society) with the concept of *society against the state*, it is possible to explain the rejection of vertical political models and changes in hierarchy without having to surrender to

teleological or linear models of social transformation. Both Leach and Clastres opened the possibility to see hierarchical transformations as oscillations rather than as linear evolutions in which societies increasingly move to form increasingly complex forms of hierarchy. These authors also paved the way to see the presence of state technologies, practices, rituals in contexts dominated by non-hierarchical political forms as something more than evidence that the state has planted its seed, irremediably displacing horizontal arrangements and non-hierarchical social forms.

The latter was also recognised by James C. Scott, both in his Gramscian analysis of peasant strategies of resistance (Scott, 1987, 1992) and in the more recent (and historiographic) *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), in which he recuperates the works of Edmund Leach, Pierre Clastres (and offers a fresh re-reading of Aguirre Beltrán) to use it as a theoretical framework to understand the political dynamics of the peasant societies of Upland South East Asia, especially the long history of contact between Highland "anarchist" societies and the more centralised Lowland polities.

Scott calls attention to the fact that (what he calls) the "history of deliberate and reactive statelessness" is often embedded in ritual, kinship, oral traditions, cosmologies, ecological strategies that are inscribed on landscapes rather than in the written documents produced by the state. Statelessness and deliberate rejection of state-like hierarchy often appear in places shaped through practices that involve a direct engagement with the physical environment, including shifting cultivation, hunting and gathering, pilgrimages, trade, rituals of exchange as well as in the telling of myths and sacred narratives. Such practices which can constitute evidence of statelessness, cannot be fully recognised by exclusively recurring to historical or sociological methods and theories, but rather, they require employing an anthropological and ethnographic perspective (Scott, 2009, p. X).

The theoretical framework provided by the works of Leach, Clastres and Scott offer a possible analytical route for the study of the relationship between stateless and state political forms in Mesoamerica (and in the case of the thesis, for the study of the Sierra Mixe).

Developing an ethnography of that type, is certainly a hard task, but luckily there is an interesting and ample literature on non-Western landscapes, a properly established anthropology of space, landscape and geography that provide guidance on how to approach the geographic diversity of Mesoamerica and more specifically, to the space of the Mixe. Thus, there is an anthropological (and archaeological) literature on the multiple ways in which non-hierarchical and non-Western societies experience, live, think and imagines space, capable of revealing angles of native peoples that are not possible to see only with the tools provided by the political anthropology of space. Anthropological literature on space landscape and geography often tends to (intentionally) privilege ethnography over theory or, better said, it attempts to make ethnography the privileged source for theoretical reflexion. It is generally a literature that tends to be poetic and experiential and where senses, sensations and sensuality play an important role in building both explanation and analysis. Not surprisingly, a considerable part of that literature is phenomenological o has a phenomenological orientation. As Chris Tilley shows in *A phenomenology of landscape* (1984), landscape and the social experience of it, cannot be understood without alluding to textures, to the plasticity of human settlements and to physical inscriptions left by multiple peoples on the different surfaces of the earth. Tilley´s Heideggerian but also deeply ethnographic work on landscape, shows how the interweaving of physicality and sociality that takes place in space, is absolutely crucial to understand the "social" and especially the sociability of small-scale (and usually stateless) societies, either in the forests of Zaïre, in the desert climates of Australian Aboriginal peoples or in the monuments of the Neolithic inhabitants of Britain.

Although the anthropological and archaeological literature on landscape and space (especially, phenomenological one) tends to be a poetically charged one, we should not think that its concerns are located outside the sphere of politics or that it is indifferent to basic questions on the social. The description of landscapes (a central task of archaeologists) and the recording of native views of geography (a characteristic undertaking of ethnographers) is in itself, a reflection on power and on the nature of the social, capable of revealing radical forms of political alterity and different ontologies.

In *Wisdom sits in Places* (1996), Keith Basso describes the way in which the Cibecue Apache conceive relationships between ancestors, kin, spirits and gods and the "social group" through means of an oral tradition built upon on very localised spaces. Basso´s ethnographic narrative, provides evidence on how Western Apache peoples constantly refer to specific landscapes through a language that is continuously exploring the minutiae of places (creeks, mountains, springs, trees, hunting grounds), registering even the smallest transformations of local geographies and linking those elaborated observations into to a peculiar understanding of time in which spatial transformations are integrated both to the immediate and the immemorial. A considerable part of Apache life consists, according to Basso, in a long and patient observation of landscapes; an activity which, although contemplative, is far from being passive. This patient and almost motionless observation of the Apache of their landscape constitutes an active and dynamic process, that entails integrating and relating the endless observations with the events everyday life and its human and non-human inhabitants.

In Basso´s ethnography, Apache landscapes are portrayed as a colossal mnemonic device, which serves not only as navigation tool, a "cartographic" instrument to traverse a challenging and complex territory but as a privileged medium for extending links and social relationships (including kin ties) and for a vast range of operations including creating identity, establishing and erasing hierarchies and for the interweaving of everyday life and the

cosmological systems of the Apache. Indigenous groups in North America clearly understand their landscape not only in terms of a physical geography but as a moral, genealogical and political one. It is also an ontological one, given that person and society only achieve their consistency through a complex game of associations between life-histories and places. Basso emphasises Apache practice as cognitive and linguistic strategies to apprehend an ethnically defined space, but he is also points the fact that space becomes *created* through that social practice. Evocation, naming, remembering as well as also walking, working and praying are strategies to generate a sense of place, belonging and identity. Apache spatial practice appears to have an important metaphysical content, but this might be, due to our own tendency to alienate being from place.

Martin W. Ball, another ethnographer of the Apache, takes Basso´s perspective even further, as he claims (based on the work of Native American intellectual, Vine DeLoria Jr.) that "in contrast to Western cultural and religious traditions that are primarily 'history' and 'time oriented', Native traditions are almost uniformly space and event oriented" and adds that "American Indians hold their lands –places- as having the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind" (Ball, 202, p. 436).

Although Basso and Ball are referring to the Apache context, their insights on place and space can be employed as a way to think of space and geography in the Mesoamerican milieu. The ethnographic approach of scholars of the Apache should serve to remind Mesomericanists that is not possible to understand indigenous spaces from a perspective that considers space or geography conceived as an objective background on which life develops. Anthropological literature on space (see Bender, 1993; Feld and Basso, 1996 and Hirsch and O'Hanlon) constantly draws attention to the culturally and historically specific and reveals the multiplicity of social geographies and cartographic imaginations (Craib, 2004). Different ways of conceiving imply the existence of

different ways of organising society and structuring power and hierarchy. Here is becomes necessary to bear in mind Penelope Harvey's observation that inquiries on the nature of non-western conceptions of landscape should not ignore their historicity and the role that political struggles and confrontations have in their creation (Harvey in Bender and Winer, 2001).

The latter should be attractive to anyone interested in a critique of power and the state, but it is especially relevant in the Mexican context, where a great deal of scholarly attention has been put on the vertical, centralised character of Mexico's post-revolutionary territorial order.

While the examination of coercive and centralised forms of power and authority is crucial to understand the history of Mexico's rural and indigenous societies, such a task will be condemned to failure if it is not accompanied by an explicit examination of non-coercive forms of authority and of those spaces that are not shaped through the hegemonic action of the state. In that sense it is also necessary to recur to some of the strategies provided by post-colonialist and post-nationalist views on space and geography, as they allows relativising the reach hegemonic and dominant discourses on geography and on the hierarchical organisation of space.

In that sense, it becomes productive to explore Raymond Craib's (post-colonial) spatial history of the Mexican state (2005), as it constitutes a clear example of the possibilities of integrating an ontological perspective on geography that does not renounce to consider the role of power relationships and political struggles in the making of places and territories. This author coined the term "cartographic routines" to describe the state-building technologies employed by the 19th century liberal state to demarcate the borders of the Mexican Republic, establish boundaries between communities, establish regimes of property and political hierarchies and for the overall organisation territorial order of the Mexican Nation. Such

"cartographic routines" were mainly bureaucratic practices for political disciplining as much as instruments for the creation of a spatial ontology, a specific mode of "being in the world" and relating to a territory. For Craib, the use of such "cartographic routines" was mainly directed to "fix" the "fugitive landscapes" inhabited by peasant and indigenous who, from the perspective of liberal elites, needed to be "regenerated" and brought into the order of the state.

Although Craib's study offers an in-depth examination of the cartographic imagination of XIXth century Mexican liberal elites, his research is not in the position of explaining the precise nature of those "fugitive landscapes" that still challenge the coherence and power of the modern Mexican territorial order. Craib's research is a work of history that is obviously constrained by the inherent limitations of archival sources produced by state officials and state institutions. As a result, he can only infer that behind the apparently vague, disordered and void spaces that state surveyors were trying to classify, organise and fill, there were other orders whose internal logic remained unnoticed or that were denied any legitimacy or rationality and, therefore, portrayed as sites of conflict and "endless dispute".

My research on the Mixe consists precisely in an attempt to understand those geographic orders that state ideologies make invisible, distort or depict as archaic or even as abhorrent. The following chapters are a description of the "cartographic routines" through which a Mexican indigenous group make sense of the spaces they inhabit. To fulfil such a task, it is required to take some distance from dominant, hegemonic perspectives on indigenous communities, territories and regions as a previous step to recuperate native view on geography.

Conventional monographs on the Mixe (Nahmad, 1965; Kuroda, 1987; Torres-Cisneros, 2003, 2004) coincide in depicting the region inhabited by this group as a relatively homogeneous ethnic region, formed by nineteen municipalities and approximately 290

communities distributed in a large portion of the Eastern Sierra Madre known as the Sierra Mixe. Although such descriptions are useful and accurate in general terms, they carries a fair amount of problems, as they take for granted fundamental spatial categories such as community, territory or region. They presume (without demonstrating it or making it explicit) the existence of a cultural continuity in the area while pay little attention to the way in which spaces and places are framed within social relations or to the mutually constitutive relationship between cultural and ecological diversity.

This thesis questions those accepted notions about space and seeks to highlight the processes through which communities, territories and regions are constructed. I explore how local practices and conceptions intervene in the creation of specific geographic orders and the way in which local traditions relate to the territorial order of the Mexican post-revolutionary state.

My main goal throughout this thesis is to approach to an anthropology capable of recuperating the distinctiveness of non-western conceptions of space without isolating them from wider historical processes as I consider that it is a legitimate and interesting route recuperate the history of indigenous political forms without recoursing to exoticisation or evolutionism.

Chapters I and II of the thesis describe and analyse the way in which the Mixe conceive of the community, the process through which people gather and create a sense of collective belonging as well as the reverse process, which consists in the way in which communities become fragmented and the role of what I call "centrifugal forces" that play a fundamental role in Mixe sociability. Chapter I focuses on local notions of distance and proximity, isolation and gathering and then it moves to explore the manner in which the Mixe conceive of differences between local forms of mapping and modern Mexican cartographies. The chapter provides an ethnographic portrait of the ecology of the Sierra, of the cosmological

view on geography and also explores agrarian rituals and a cycle of rituals associated to the ancestors of the village of Tamazulapam, one of the communities studied. The chapter also emphasises the important role played by an animist cosmology in imagining and shaping places and underlines the crucial link between ritual and geographic knowledge.

Chapter II specifically focuses on the political aspects that intervene in the creation of Mixe communities. Here I turn my attention to the alternation between different modalities of social hierarchy by examining a continuous cycle of geographic dispersion and gathering that takes people from living in isolated *rancherias* or hamlets to bigger villages and head towns. The chapter also focuses in the way that political authority is constructed through practices (mainly *fiestas* and collective labour) aimed to congregate people in villages and on the role played by reciprocity and mutual obligation in the making of territories.

The second part of the thesis shifts its attention from local practices of community building to the way in which Mexican post-revolutionary nationalism erupted in the Sierra Mixe creating new ways of conceiving the geographic order of the region, as well as a competing view on the relationship between the Mixe, their territory and the space shaped through "traditional" spatial practice. Chapter III begins with an examination of the unstable presence of the state in the Sierra Mixe, first by looking at the attempts of the Spanish colonial order to create a permanently centralised order and then, by concentrating on the way in which the post-revolutionary state encouraged the creation of an authoritarian elite of *caciques* or political bosses whose role was to establish vertical forms of control in order to create a unified and centralised indigenous region. The chapter then moves to see how a nationalist conception of ethnicity clashed with local notions of belonging and identity and finally, explores mythical narratives on the Mixe "cultural hero" and their role in expressing tensions between different geopolitical imaginations.

Chapter IV continues the examination of state-led attempts to modify the geographic rationale of the Sierra Mixe by looking at the political and cultural role of the teachers and educators who came along with the expansion of rural schooling. The instalment's argument suggests that schoolteachers are at the centre of a clash between a conception that sees the link between society, space and authority as essentially homogeneous, unified and static and another that affirms that such relationship is discontinuous, variable and fragmented. Through ethnographic attention on teachers and schooling I depict the way in which different conceptions of history influence the spatial distribution of power, the place of orality and literacy in the constitution of boundaries and frontiers between communities and the overall role of schooling in redefining categories of native and foreign.

Finally, chapter V returns to the analysis of local practices and conceptions of space by looking at the role of musicians and bands in the creation of a regional identity and in forging links between different communities. The chapter explores how reciprocal obligations are mediated by music performances and the way in which bands make possible the alternation between dispersion and gathering, activating the spatial dynamic of the Sierra. I also examine the ambiguous place of musicians within Mixe society, in which they appear as essential protagonists of social life as well as deviant and potentially disruptive characters who need to be socially controlled. Close attention is paid to Mixe views of musical performances as transcendental and constitutive social acts rather than symbolic representations of previously established social arrangements.

The majority of the data of this thesis comes from Santa María Tlahuitoltepec, a Mixe town situated in the Highlands. Here is where I based my study and established my residence during the fieldwork season. During the latter, I visited the nineteen municipalities of the Mixe region and established contacts and made regular visits to the towns of Espíritu Santo Tamazulapam, San Pedro y San Pablo Ayutla, Santiago Zacatepec, San Juan Cotzocon as

well as in smaller villages mainly in the Highlands and Midlands. In Tlahuitoltepec I regularly attended to five of the thirteen rancherias located in the terrains of the community where I participated of numerous fiestas and accompanied locals to sites of pilgrimage and other important places. These continuous trips allowed me to collect oral histories, myths and gather data on land use and property regimes, sacred sites and to observe the way in which the Mixe use and take advantage of the different ecological niches of the Sierra. Throughout the research, I met and spent time with a vast range of people including musicians, teachers, authorities, healers, political activists, shamans and numerous peasants, who opened their homes, fed me and shared their views of the world with extreme generosity while expecting no retribution. Thus, all mistakes, inaccuracies and misinterpretations of this thesis are entirely my responsibility.

Looking beyond the State: the ethnography of Mixe space

In a period of thirty years, from the 1950's to the 1980's, the anthropology of Mexico experienced a dramatic transformation in which the Nation went from being the privileged framework of anthropological analysis to become the main object of study of the discipline. Nationalist anthropology (that is, *indigenista* anthropology [1]) was replaced by an

[1] The precise definition of *indigenismo* is still a contentious subject both in history and anthropology (Villoro, 1987; Favre, 1998). Mexican philosopher Luis Villoro (1987) traced its origins to the colonial period and created a indigenista genealogy that went from the works of Bartolomé de las Casas on the rejection of indigenous slavery in the Americas to the "proper" indigenistas of the Mexican post-revolutionary period. Other authors (Favre, 1988; Lomnitz, 1992) think of *indigenismo* is a modern creation of Mexican nation with only imaginary links to the past.The term was coined by Mexican anthropologist Moisés Sáenz in the 1930´s and it soon became a political programme incorporated to President Lázaro Cárdenas' revolutionary platform in 1938. Unlike other Latin American countries where indigenismo basically refers to an artistic and aesthetic current that recuperates iconographies of pre-Hispanic origin and incorporates the subject of contemporary indigenous peoples as a central locus of literature, music, architecture and painting (that was the case of José María Arguedas in Peru or of Miguel Ángel Asturias in Guatemala) in Mexico, indigenismo was also an instrument of the state, an institutional policy and a discursive instrument of national elites. Like Orientalism, which Edward Said defined as a "style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient (and most of the time) the Occident" (Said, 2003, p. 2) the core of indigenismo is the distinction between "Mestizo" and "Indigenous". Indigenismo glorified the indigenous past and the contemporary indigenous groups as depositaries of a sacred national heritage, but at the same time, the

anthropology of nationalism, sometimes identified as a post-nationalist anthropology, that saw in State and Nation a legitimate object and field of ethnographic inquiry[2]. Such transformation (that ran parallel to the decline of the post-revolutionary state) has probably been the most significant theoretical change experienced in the field of Mexican anthropology during the XXth century.

In contrast to the Marxist and *campesinista* interpretations, which in the end were incorporated as part of the apparatus of representations of the Mexican State, the anthropology of nationalism from the eighties made a successful break with the central categories of the *Nacionalismo Revolucionario* and with the Redfieldian and Wolfian models that served as the base of the classic ethnography of Mesoamerican peoples. Through the deconstruction of the basic notions of the ideology of *Mestizaje* and of the representations of ethnic relationships, post-nationalist anthropology managed not only to reveal the mechanisms employed by nationalist ideology to "naturalize" the order of the State and its conception of a National social subject (Lomnitz, 1991, 1992), but also opened the door to a powerful critique of hegemonic notions on indigenous peoples (the privileged Other of Nationalist thought) that dominated the classic period of Mexican anthropology.

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explicit purpose of indigenismo was to integrate and homogenise the Mexican population by eliminating cultural, linguistic and ethnic particularities. The objective was to construct a modern Mexican identity, conceived as predominantly mestizo and Spanish speaking. Indigenismo's goal, according to the anthropologists that formulated their definition was to lead indigenous groups towards "acculturation" and to "accelerate the transition from the caste society to the class society" (Aguirre-Beltrán, 1957)

[2] This "post-national turn" occurred both in the fields of anthropology and history; it was characterised by a critique of the great narratives of Mexican nationalism and of the "rigid teleology of centralized authority" (Banister, 2007, p. 456) that distinguished most historical and anthropological literature on Mexico throughout the 20th century. The works of Claudio Lomnitz (1992) and Roger Bartra (2002) can be considered landmark works of this "revisionist impulse" that came along with Mexico's abrupt turn to neo-liberalism and the trans-nationalisation of its economy. Both the works of Lomnitz and Bartra and the literature produced by a large group of anthropologically oriented historians in the United States and Mexico (Joseph and Nugent, 1994; Rubin, 1996; Vaughan, 1997; Vaughan and Lewis, 2006) were heavily influenced by a modern form of American cultural history of Foucaultian inspiration and by an overall post-modern ethos. With a more structuralist orientation but equally important in terms of de-centring the state are the works of Michael Kearney (1996;2004) and John Gledhill (1991; 1995).

The preferred targets of the critiques of Nationalism were those concepts that stressed the historical and geographical isolation of indigenous peoples, their alienation from National processes and the generalised evolutionist tendency to locate native groups outside history or in a different phase of social development. The lineal, evolutionist and ultimately teleological idea of history that dominated Nationalist anthropologies, was then replaced by a more complex and nuanced portrait of the Nation, which presented the latter as a discontinuous and heterogeneous field of multiple and contradictory stories in which indigenous peoples were agents of the nation building process in their own right.

If, following a trend that dates back to 19th century, *indigenista* thinking persisted in placing indigenous peoples outside the nation, critiques of post-revolutionary Nationalism rushed to prove the opposite, engaging in an ethno-historical investigation aimed to situate *campesino* and indigenous peoples back in the track of Mexican history (Mallon, 1995; Van Young, 199; Chassen-López, 2002). While previous ethnography and historiography were dominated by images of isolated communities populated by distrustful Indians immersed in practices preserved since "immemorial times", post-National critiques opened the way for a new form of representing indigenous peoples, who were seen as part of complex regional, national and transnational systems characterised by a permanent negotiations between ethnic, class and political groups that kept little resemblance with the idea of indigenous communities as closed and isolated societies.

Under this new perspective, indigenous practices and ideologies were now conceptualised as the result of long and sustained interaction between national and local entities, whose outcome was the creation of a type of alternative and "hybrid modernity" which permeates all social relationships in Mexico (Mallon, 1995; Chassen-Lopez, 2004; Garcia Canclini, 1995). This idea of indigenous peoples as modern actors has become dominant among scholars of

Mexico and much of current anthropological and ethno-historical literature consists in contributions to this style of interpretation.

Undeniably, the pluralisation of historical experiences has been productive as it contributed to a more subtle and sophisticated understanding of the Nation and of the various ways in which indigenous peoples relate to hegemonic powers. Nevertheless, I consider that post-Nationalist approaches have reached their explicative limits while revisionist critiques of Nation building processes are at best insufficient and at times, simply inadequate to describe those aspects of indigenous societies located outside the state's sphere or where state intervention is not significant or decisive.

The political purpose of the anthropology of Nationalism was to formulate a radical critique of hegemony under the National State that could open the possibility of recuperating the historical experience of subaltern subjects, particularly of those situated in rural and indigenous contexts. However, it is my impression that the post-nationalist urge to present indigenous and peasant groups as actors fully engaged in modernity (even if it this was a "hybrid modernity) not only is incapable of accomplishing the task of "de-centring" the state, but it has reverted to a form of state-centrism that denies alterity and sets the State as the authentic social and historical subject.

If we examine the anthropological and historic literature that came after Lomnitz' *Exits from the Labyrinth*, it is clear that the agency of indigenous and peasant societies is usually represented as a set of transactions whose ultimate goal is to obtain a place within the Nation or gain access to State resources. My main objection to such perspective is that it introduces an instrumental approach that in the end, reduces indigenous cultures to a variety or local expression of National culture. In post-nationalist theory, the State is, in last instance, behind every action performed; socio-historic agency ends being located in terms of its proximity or

distance with hegemonic powers and, as a consequence, every action and ideology becomes a manifestation of a (National) power struggle. The latter, invariably leads to see all processes in terms of a domination/resistance dualism in which social action is ultimately directed to maximise power.

In the post-nationalist framework (contrary to previous anthropological perspectives) the existence of peasant and indigenous peoples in spaces outside the sphere of the community is clearly recognised, mainly through a more or less explicit rejection of the *classic* anthropological thesis that stated that crossing the limits of the "parochial" community could only be inevitably followed by a process of acculturation (Aguirre Beltran; 1992; first ed. 1957). Nevertheless, this re-conceptualization of regional and national spaces fails to identify that the articulation of spaces inside and outside indigenous communities does not necessarily takes place in terms of the spatial logic of the Nation-State or as result of a consequence of territorial arrangements of the capitalist market.

In most post-national anthropology, space is conceived as an equivalent of National space, which implicitly presupposes the existence of a single national market, a sole political system and least but not last, of a common understanding of geography. Michel Foucault's opinion that "space was [historically] treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile and time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic" (Crampton and Elden; 2007) describes accurately the attitude that has prevailed among most anthropologists of Mexico in relation to spatial issues, especially in indigenous contexts. In Mexican anthropology, space is conceived not only as static but also as unified, and therefore, as homogeneous. It is also assumed that the circulation of people as well as material and symbolic goods occurs within a dimension characterised by a strong cultural continuity, in which all contacts are structured around common principles that allow actors to engage in a great social network regardless of their cultural, historic or geographic differences. The outcome of this homogenization of

space conveys great difficulties to account for social and cultural diversity and therefore, constitutes an obstacle to understand the variety of processes that lead to the articulation and production of space.

Thus, the anthropology of nation and nationalism (although it claims to be opposed to the hegemonism and homogenisation of indigenista anthropology) can only recognise diversity from an ideological point of view but it cannot describe it accurately, failing in the process to understand how concrete forms of spatialization take form (Gordillo, 2004; Lefebvre, 1991).

The view proposed in the following pages is that in Mexico (itself a contingent space), there are networks, practices of exchange, forms of circulation and processes of territory making that respond to conceptions whose organizing principle is different from those of nation or market. That there are spaces, space-building strategies and geographical imaginations which are distinct from those that have historically shaped our understanding of what is Mexico and how it is integrated in historic and geographic terms. There is diversity of "spatial worlds" or "spatialities" which are particularly rich in indigenous contexts, where notions of community and *pueblo*, regions and territories do not correspond to the spatial rationale of the State and do not always reproduce (in small scale) the geo-political order of the Nation. To think in terms of a single, unified space implies to internalise a fundamental principle of every National (ist) ideology: that the space contained within the official borders of the Nation is effectively subjected to its control. It also means accepting without criticism the idea that "the map is the territory" (Korzybski, 1994) and as a consequence, to legitimise the teleological narratives of the State and its self-representation as a Cartographic Leviathan, capable of surveying and charting everything inside its borders. It is necessary to bear in mind Raymond Craib's assertion that "an overweening emphasis on history at the expense of space is, ironically enough, ahistorical. Space does not merely display itself to the world, as if it were somehow ontologically prior to the cultural and semiotic codes through which its existence is

expressed. Such myths of mimesis turn the historical into the natural, concealing its social, cultural, and political underpinnings" (Craib; 2004).

In order to advance towards a critique of hegemonic forms of spatial representation and to give account of the plurality of spatial orders in Mexico, it is necessary to turn to ethnography rather than history. The dependency of historians on archival sources (including cartographic ones) necessarily presents the encounter between different spatial rationalities in terms of a conflict or contradiction (as sources are mainly concerned with land struggles, conflicts over territorial limits and disagreements over jurisdictions). Ethnography, as I attempt to demonstrate, shows that different spatial orders are overlapped, often complementary and not necessarily contradictory. An ethnographic approach to space provides an insight into spatial alterity that can only be inferred from genealogical standpoint. Thus, the ethnographer is in the position to reveal the spatial dimension of discourses and practices that are not geographic in strict terms since they belong to a realm different from that of written culture.

This thesis attempts to depict a specific set of indigenous conceptions and practices of space from an ethnographic point of view. Its focus is on the way in which the Mixe of Oaxaca understand the space in which they live, the spaces inhabited by others, the articulation between nature and society as well as the conceptual and concrete mechanisms that allow them to move between different religious, political and cultural territories.

Central to the ethnographic description that I will further develop is the notion that space among the Mixe is conceptualised in a way that is radically different from the idea of National space. These differences will appear as a recurrent theme throughout the chapters which follow, with the aim of allowing me to re-think central themes of Mesoamerican anthropology such as cargo-system, the concept of community and the nature of indo-catholic religions. It also will open the possibility of an in-depth examination of other cultural devices

that have been traditionally neglected or considered as secondary components of bigger ritual, political or economic structures (particularly music and the activities of what the Mixe call philharmonic bands).

I expect to demonstrate that the Sierra Mixe is a cultural, historic and geographic region in which life is organised around a deep form of political alterity and that such otherness is not a product of a lack of historical contact with other societies but is (partially) the product of a transformative capacity of Mixe ideologies that, without ignoring it, can think of the State without putting it at the centre of its political worries and aspirations.

The marginal place occupied by State and Nation in the political imagination of the Mixe was probably one of the most surprising and perplexing things that struck me during my fieldwork season. The Mixe attitude toward the State constantly made me think of the anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltran's declaring with total conviction and without hesitation that "indigenous cannot think the nation". I always thought of this phrase as the quintessential expression of *indigenista* ideology in relation to indigenous populations, since it appeared to reflect the historical evolutionism, ethnocentrism and the identification between cultural diversity and social danger that characterised most post-revolutionary thinking.

Nevertheless, during fieldwork I started thinking that behind the ideology contained in the phrase there might be an ethnographic fact worth thinking about. Throughout my conversations with Mixe people, the subject of isolation and the remoteness of the State appeared constantly, even obsessively. Much of people's discussions revolve around issues of distance and the difficulties of getting from one village to others in the Sierra or to cities outside the mountains. Furthermore, the Mixe often refer to Mexico as a distant point located in an imprecise "out there" and they often use the term the "the State of Mexico" which implies a certain strangeness and is different from the term "Mexico" or "República

Mexicana" which most people employ[3]. Conversations about time invested visiting relatives or friends at a distant *rancheria* (hamlet) was an omnipresent topic; when self-definitions of the Mixe were discussed, it was typical to hear phrases like the one pronounced by my friend Leovigildo who bluntly stated that "Everyone knows that we, the Mixe, came to live here running away from civilization". I first thought of this attitude simply as a manifestation of resistance while the notion that "the Mixe were never conquered", which can be heard all the time in every village, appeared to me as an instrumental use of narratives of the conquest to represent a contemporary antagonism between the Mexican State, regional elites and the Mixe.

It was not until I began to understand the patterns of spatial distribution, land use and the way in which *fiestas* and political hierarchy are integrated, and especially after I started to realise the role that music and musicians have in Mixe society, that I could see in their ideas about remoteness and distance something more than a discursive expression of social contradiction or a symptom of the gulf that separates the mestizo and the indigenous.

Concrete geographic isolation is a pervasive feature of the life of the Mixe. People spend considerable time alone or with a few relatives working in fields that are hours and sometimes days of distance from their villages. Trips to collect wood can take half of a day and they often turn into journeys of days, simply because people decide to check the state of a distant *milpa* (land plot) or visit a relative or friend who lives far away or just because they choose to wander around in the forest. More importantly, isolation is an important category through which to think about the world, about self and other.

[3] The use of the term the "state of Mexico" was slightly confusing since one of the federal states that compose the Mexican Republic is the "Estado de México" located north of the Distrito Federal. At the beginning I thought that the Mixe used the phrase "el estado de México" to refer to the province whose capital is in Toluca. However it became clear that they were referring to Mexico. This apparently minor detail was revealing of the different way of categorising space between my informants and I. While for me it was obvious that the Sierra Mixe was located in Mexico, they saw

Mixe societies are highly de-centralised ones: the coercive capacity of authority is rather thin and hierarchy, although generally portrayed as pyramidal, is quite loose; territorial conceptions as well as ideas about borders and frontiers do not resemble those of the National state and history as teleology is unknown. In an environment like this, Aguirre's phrase do certainly acquires new, deeper meaning. Nevertheless, it also needs to be reformulated, since it is expressed in purely negative terms. I think that a more positive approach would be to ask whether if indigenous peoples cannot think the Nation, then what is that they can actually think.

Certainly it is not possible nor desirable to turn to the answers given by Aguirre-Beltran (the *parochial community*) Robert Redfield (the *little tradition*) or Eric Wolf (the *closed corporate community*) since they have been proven to be inadequate as they ignored the presence of indigenous people outside the "regions of refuge" (as post-nationalist studies rightly pointed out). The Sierra Mixe is a place where isolation is important but such category can only be understood in terms of a dialectic relationship with contact. Throughout the thesis I will try to show how the Mixe create extended networks and become immersed in forms of exchange that take them far from the borders of their communities. I will also develop an ethnographic argument to show that Mixe do not exclusively jump into larger spaces constructed by others, but that there are elements in their culture that make possible the systematic encounter with other peoples, their polities and economies.

CHAPTER I. SPATIAL COSMOLOGIES AND TERRITORIAL PRACTICES IN THE SIERRA MIXE

Isolation, remoteness and popular images of the Sierra Mixe

In the weeks prior to my first trip to the Sierra Mixe, whenever I mentioned my intention of doing fieldwork in the Mixe Highlands, I was confronted with a series of remarks which illustrate the type of place occupied by the Mixe in the popular imagination of the inhabitants of both Oaxaca and Mexico. A first common reaction consisted in people trying to persuade me that there was "nothing" in the Sierra Mixe and there were more amicable and interesting places to be studied in Oaxaca. Others would warn me against visiting the Mixe Mountains, as they regarded this place as a dangerous one, plagued with drug traffickers, bandits and suspicious peasants whose pastime consisted in ambushing those strangers that ventured in their villages. An alternative answer, which came up with striking frequency, was to confuse the term "Mixe" with "Mixteco", the name of a different ethnic group located in a different region of the state of Oaxaca.

In a more dramatic fashion, an old Zapotec lady suggested never accepting an invitation to a steam-bath (*temascal*) in the Mixe Highlands as the Mixe would lock the unfortunate guest inside the bath in order to cook him. Similarly, I was also told about the Chatino[4] perception of the Mixe as cannibalistic people with a fondness for eating babies (although this may be attributed to the Lowlands' Mixe habit of eating monkey, an animal considered to be an ancestor by the Chatino people (Maria Luisa Acevedo, personal communication). Narratives

[44] Chatino is the name of an indigenous group of the State of Oaxaca, the term is the Spanish corruption of the word *Cha'tña* which is the language spoken by the *Kitse Cha´tño*, the name that Chatino peoples give to themselves. Most Chatino communities are located in the District of Juquila in the Southern Sierra of Oaxaca. Although Mixe and Chatino communities are not located next to each other, they have always been in contact. Mixe communities from the Midlands and especially from the Lowlands, have exploited lands also used by the Chatino and both groups are regular attendants to celebrations dedicated to the Virgin of Juquila. The expansion of coffee plantations in the Southern Sierra of Oaxaca during the 19th and 20th centuries renewed links between the two groups and created a common historical memory (Greenberg, 1981, 1989; Bartolomé and Barabas, 1982)

involving cannibalism were certainly rare; instead, it was common to hear opinions that stated that the Mixe were authentic Indians, often monolingual and "very traditional".

Throughout the first weeks of my fieldwork I sustained conversations with academics, government officials and individuals with some experience in the Sierra, who shared some of the popular perceptions about the Mixe. Many referred to the difficulties of working in the villages, where hostility towards strangers was ubiquitous and anthropologists were not exempted. I heard stories of anthropology students from Mexico City who were expelled by local authorities and I was also told about a group of researchers working on an education project who were, according to one of them, "humiliated by the authorities" of one of the towns when asked to take bucket and broom and clean the local school classrooms as prior condition for discussing the project; the academics opted to go to a different community.

The images that emerged throughout my conversations with people from outside the Sierra are revealing of the peripheral condition of the Mixe and represent classic examples of the way in which many indigenous groups without evident links to an archaeological pre-Hispanic past are often represented (although there is evidence of Pre-Columbian settlements in the Mixe Lowlands, the sites have scarcely been excavated and are set beyond the usual academic and tourist routes).

The Mixe, in contrast to their Zapotec neighbours and other indigenous peoples from Oaxaca, have been relatively left outside the apparatus of representation employed in the making of Mexican national identity. Zapotec and Mixtec peoples, for example, enjoy a distinctive place in the national rhetoric as heirs to great pre-Columbian civilizations and their cultures are constantly used in regionalist images of Oaxaca as well as in representations for tourist consumption. Contemporary Zapotec handicrafts are praised for their quality and beauty while traditional costumes worn by Zapotec women from the Isthmus have entered into the

national iconography as paradigms of indigenous femininity and authenticity. In contrast, the plain pottery of the Mixe and their textiles from rough, dark wool scarcely attract the interest of those looking to acquire pieces of "colourful cultures". In the same way, references to the Mixe in public discourses are almost nonexistent; the Sierra Mixe is a place where the tourist presence is quite rare, few mestizos live in the villages and the small number of traders who go to the Sierra are poor peddlers who tour the highland day-markets selling cheap Chinese tools, second-hand clothes from the United States and pirate CD's and DVD's.

Isolation in the ethnography of the Mixe

This sense of marginality, isolation, danger and distance from civilization that permeates the popular understanding of the Mixe has its correlate in the modest body of the ethnographic literature on this indigenous group. Ralph Beals, working in the early 1940's in the Mixe Highlands, wrote a rather unsympathetic ethnographic account of "aboriginal survivals". in which he constantly regretted the hostility and "deceitfulness" of his Mixe informants ("a town drunk who worked for mescal, and educated deviant suspected by the community and the local political boss" (Beals, 1945) who denied the existence of *mayordomias* and were consummated gossipers and paranoid about witchcraft. Beals not only felt uncomfortable among informants who presented him with what he saw as fragmented and dubious information, but also with the Mixe culture in general. He regarded the Sierra as an "inhospitable area of the State of Oaxaca" and the Mixe as a people badly adapted to their environment, with an "impoverished material culture" that could only be labelled as "primitive".

Fifty years later, in a study that attempted to demonstrate the Mixean origin of Mayan pre-Columbian glyphs, linguistic anthropologist Brian Stross referred to the Mixe in similar terms, describing the Mixe as "retiring, suspicious of strangers, fearful of leaving [their] territory

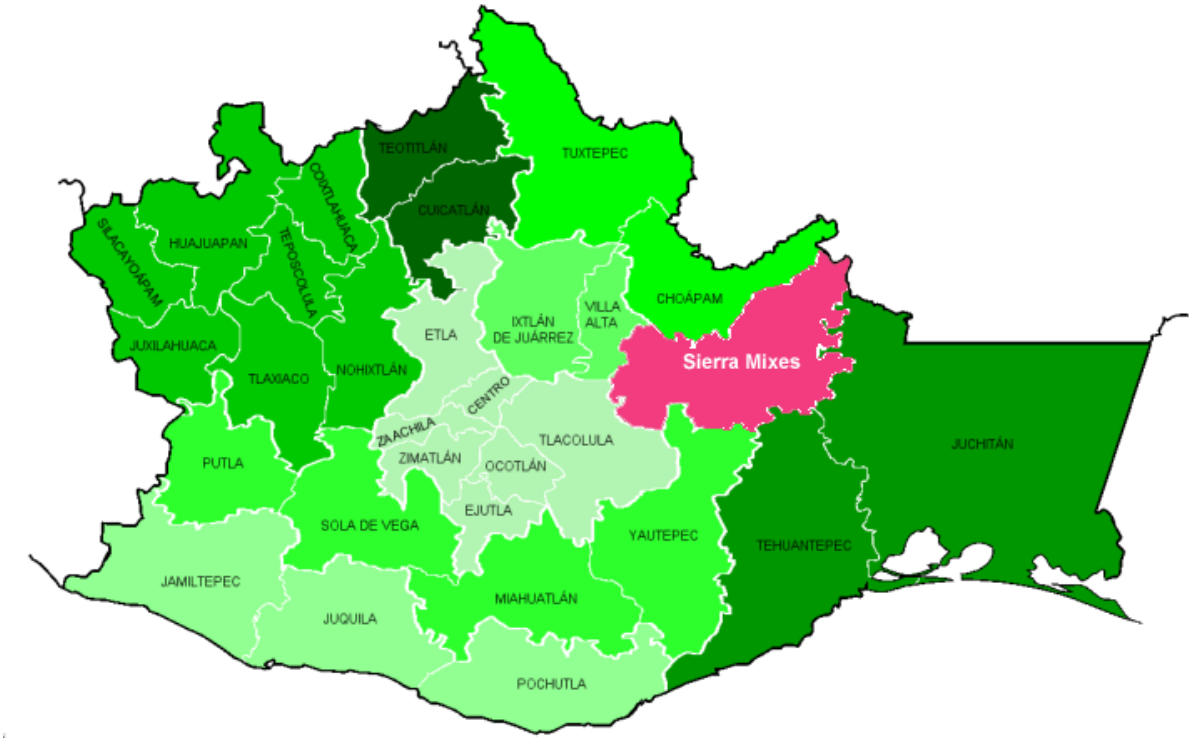
and feared by their neighbours as powerful transforming witches and intrepid fighters" (Stross, 1982). For Stross, it was striking that people with a "crude material culture" and a "simple" religious life such, could have had a role in the development of the writing of a "high civilization" such as the Maya. In his view, the Mixean speaking peoples (the Popoluca from Veracruz, the Mixe from Oaxaca and the Zoque from Chiapas and Tabasco) were little more than a survival of distant past, whose value resides in the fact that it could hold many linguistic keys to understanding early Mesoamerican history.

A similar stress on the isolated character of the Mixe can be found in Salomón Nahmad's ethnographic study of the Sierra (Nahmad, 1965). During the mid 1960's ,Nahmad was commissioned by the *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* (the Mexican agency for indigenous peoples) to carry an ethnographic survey of the Mixe region. This author travelled across the whole Sierra at a time where there were no paved roads and few mestizos visited the pueblos. Nahmad's perception of the Sierra Mixe was heavily influenced by the concept of "region of refuge" as formulated by Aguirre Beltrán and in many passages of his ethnography are filled with the epic tone tone of much of the *indigenista* narrative, in which anthropologists serving as government officials were portrayed not as academics or bureaucrats, but as modern missionaries whose task was to bring the fruits of the Mexican Revolution to a peasantry in need of redemption.

In Nahmad's ethnography, the Mixe region is regarded as a country corner frozen in semi-colonial relationships, where oppressive mestizo and Zapotec middlemen were the sole links of the Mixe with the outside world. An interesting aspect of this ethnography is that it was written at a time of great social unrest in the Sierra Mixe, when echoes of the bloody struggles between the caciques from the towns of Zacatepec and Ayutla were still perceptible and armed skirmishes between villages were not uncommon. The violent history of the Sierra is only peripherally referred in Nahmad's book and his position towards the caciques was

ambiguous if not openly contradictory. In some passages the caciques are mentioned as "indigenous leaders" praised by the efforts to modernise and bring progress to the Mixe region while in others they are portrayed as oppressive and violent characters. The ambiguity of his treatment of the caciques can be attributed to the historic inclination of *indigenista* anthropologists to self-censorship and with the standard compliance with the ideology of social peace and stability imposed by the post-revolutionary state, but it also reveals a tendency to see indigenous politics as a village-centred matter, without regional depth and to overlook or ignore the complexity of inter-village exchanges. For Nahmad, violence in the Sierra Mixe was mainly the result of antagonisms between communities whose profoundly localist identity necessarily put them in a succession of endless confrontations with their neighbours. Such violence, it followed, could only come to an end through the intervention of an outside power with enough authority to mediate the conflicts and effectively impose its authority over societies that were essentially atomised.

Finally, Etsuko Kuroda, a Japanese anthropologist who worked in the Highland villages of Ayutla and Tlahuitoltepec in the 1970's, portrayed Mixe culture as one preserved by long lasting isolation and saw her ethnography as an attempt to document a culture that was going to be radically transformed by the presence of Mexican government agencies, road building, socioeconomic differentiation and the renewed activism of the Catholic Church. In a similar manner to her predecessors, Kuroda saw Mixe ritual life as "poorly developed and unelaborated" (Kuroda, 1984) and their political life in terms of a closed corporate community.



Regions of Oaxaca, including the Sierra Mixe

Cosmology and political process

Although the subject of isolation appears as a recurrent theme in ethnographic accounts of the Mixe, the conceptual instruments used to describe this society are, paradoxically, the same of those employed for the analysis of any other Mesoamerican people. The remoteness that supposedly characterises the life of the Mixe and that has been used to explain or (it would be better to say) to justify why their culture is the way it is, has not been accompanied by a theoretical effort to develop specific analytic instruments for a people relatively disconnected from other cultures. On the contrary, the social life of Mixean peoples has been assimilated into the same overarching categories and cosmological models employed in the interpretation of other Mesoamerican cultures. Mixe political forms are commonly regarded as a local variant of the cargo system; religion is conventionally portrayed as a result of a syncretic process between Catholicism and indigenous religious practices while local economy is

described in the same way as other peasant societies of Mexico. The contradiction implied in this characterization is blatant; if these are societies whose development has been disconnected from other polities, then how can they be studied using the same analytic framework employed in relation to other peoples? The later is mainly a historical problem for which anthropological analysis cannot make great contribution as it implies answering the difficult question of when did indigenous political systems acquired their defining features. It also poses complex problems relating to discontinuities and on the coexistence of different temporalities and historicities in the indigenous world.

For decades, ethnographers, historians and ethno-historians have engaged in debates on the nature of local indigenous hierarchies (what is known among Mesoamericanists as the cargo-system) without reaching an agreement about its origins and the reasons for its persistence throughout time. What is surprising about this ongoing debate on the political nature of indigenous communities is the linear character of the arguments, the persisting functionalism that permeates the discussion and the narrow importance given to native interpretations in the construction of the different typological models. Every new interpretation of indigenous political systems has generally been announced as definitive and as a substitute for previous ones; critics of the early thesis on the pre-Hispanic genesis of the cargo system asserted instead, the colonial basis of civic-religious hierarchies and this hypothesis was, in turn time, rejected by those who claimed that indigenous political systems were effectively reshaped during the XIXth century (Tax; 1937 Cancian, 1965; DeWalt, 1975; Friedlander; 1981, 2006)

More recently, authors who engaged in the historical revision of revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods claim that their predecessors were misguided, and what it is usually categorised as *usos y costumbres* or cargo-systems were creations concocted during decades of *Priista* rule (Rus and Wasserstrom, 1980; Joseph and Nugent, 1994; Knight and Pansters, 2005). What this succession of interpretations shows, is that most scholars of rural and

indigenous Mexico (regardless of whether they hold to classic ethnographic models or to more recent models of interpretations) still stick to the notion that transformations in indigenous societies occur mainly when the " outside world" (usually the State or some other hegemonic power such as the Catholic church) experiences a structural transformation that modifies the way in which external forces intervene on the communities. The role reserved for indigenous peoples in these theoretical models consists simply in being passively modified by such external forces or in having a *reaction* against those changes imposed from the outside. In that sense, most models of the cargo system, from the early ones formulated by Redfield or Wolf to the most recent as proposed by Rus or Wasserstrom, see indigenous "agency" (if they see it at all) as a purely reactionary characteristic. Certainly, this narrow understanding of agency could not be different as most models tacitly or explicitly establish a separation between political process and cosmological dimension, the latter being reduced to a fixed and static structure marginally connected with the social transformations that occur within the community and which gradually fades as time goes by and contact with the outside increases. With the notable exception of Chance and Taylor (Chance and Taylor, 1985), most models of cargo-systems imply a progressive and linear growth of external influences, only Chance has seen the relationship between hegemonic powers and indigenous communities as having a discontinuous history.

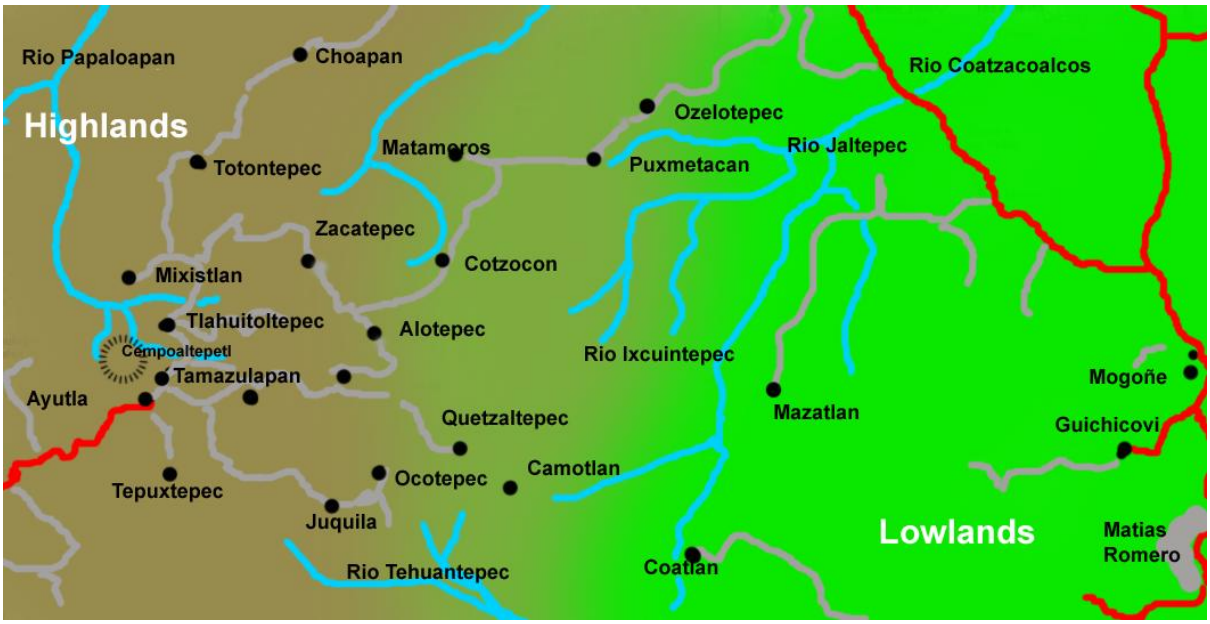
Discussions concerning indigenous political systems are also permeated by an unrevised and simplified form of functionalism, expressed in the notion that the cargo system has a single structuring principle, which is consistently maintained until modified by some external force. Moreover, in this account native symbols and discourses are only superimposed on a structure that works independently of them. Thus, indigenous systems are seen either as mechanisms of resistance to defend peasants from losing political rights and land or to reduce social inequality and impede capital accumulation (Wolf, 1957; Nash, 1958, Gledhill, 2005)

or by contrast, to legitimise social differentiation and to subordinate communities to colonial or national hegemonic powers (Cancian,1967 Friedlander 1981, 2006, Rus, 2005).

What anthropology is in the position to achieve, is to contribute to overcoming the circularity that characterises discussions of indigenous communities by bringing into analytical scope the way in which people relate to the multiple traditions, tensions and internal debates that shape their communities. An anthropology committed to understanding the political processes of communities, including the cosmological dimension through which a different ontological model is expressed, can show how different temporalities and spatialities overlap, merge and collide. It can also shed light on the strategies that indigenous peoples follow in order to make sense of the plurality of processes that have configured their life. No less important, anthropology is in the position to break from the false dichotomy faced by scholars of Mesoamerica of characterizing the community either in terms of a closed community or as integrated (and subordinated) to a wider society. The latter can be achieved by showing how ideas about autarchy, autonomy and independence interact with forms of exchange, the desire and need for contact and the interrelation between "own" and "foreign".

In order to move away from rigid models that simplify subjects and subordinate local meanings to abstract typological models, we require a type of "ethnographic enquiry that treats the culture of indigenous people in a way that does not immediately reduce it to class, economic position, structure or some marker in an ethnic field" (Monaghan, 1995; 11). To attain this goal, it is necessary to think of the community not as a given order or as subordinated space shaped by an external hegemonic rationality, but as an unstable reality and a flexible category, a "force field" (Nuijten; 2003) in which a diversity of histories and geographies coexist and are regularly reinvented through the conciliation of the contradictions that emerge in the encounter between different ways of conceiving the world. By making use of this perspective it may be possible to overcome the long standing divorce

between studies of Mesoamerican cosmologies and those scholarly traditions whose focus is on agrarian practices, state building processes and histories of domination and resistance**;** that is, to seek the conciliation of cosmologies and politics. However this can only be achieved if we renounce the comfort provided by the traditional way of seeing indigenous communities as entities with clearly delineated borders.



Highland and Lowland Communities of the Sierra Mixe

Place and Space in Santa María Tlahuitoltepec

The multiple and fragmentary trajectories followed by different histories and temporalities in the Sierra Mixe can be better perceived by approaching concrete landscapes and the specific practices which take place in the sites that are visited and used by local people and constitute the community. In the following pages I will describe how Mixe space is organised and how distinctions between spaces and places are established, by drawing examples from the village of Santa María Tlahuitoltepec (the town where I based most of my fieldwork) and from other pueblos of the Mixe district I regularly visited during the year of the field research. I will show how Mixe communities understand and practice the establishing of common boundaries between *pueblos* or villages and how such practice is crossed by the boundary making of the State. In other words, I am looking to understand how Mixe geographic orders are built and how is that they interact with the cartographic orders delineated by the Mexican state.

Santa María Tlahuitoltepec Mixe is the official name of a pueblo in the Mixe highlands about three and a half hours drive from the City of Oaxaca in the heart of the Northern Sierra. The Mixe often refer to the village by using the apocopate "Tlahui" or they call it *Xaam Kexpee*, which is Mixe for "Cold Land". Like many other villages of the Mixe highlands, it is built upon the steep slopes of a mountain and because the strips of land that are adequate for building or cultivating are so narrow, buildings and *milpas*[5] are irregularly distributed along the hills. Within the village there are just a few unpaved streets and to go from one place to another it is necessary to use roughly carved paths in the mountain that often go through small cultivated patches of land or even through someone's garden.

[5] [5] In the Sierra Mixe *milpas* are scattered through different altitudes of the mountains some of them located at 300 and 500 MASL while other are situated beyond the 2,500 MASL.

The village is located three or four kilometres from the paved road that links the Mixe highlands with the town of Mitla and connected by a steep dusty trail that during the rainy season (from April to August or even mid-September) becomes muddy and is often cut off when the little stream that runs along the road becomes a wild river dragging down rocks, tree trunks and the odd dead animal. The trail leads up to the town centre (*el centro*) where the Catholic church, the municipal building, the market and the basketball court are located on what is probably the flattest piece of land in Tlahui. Like many Mexican sierra towns, Tlahui is built upon a vertical axis and it is not uncommon for the ground floor of a house to be at the same level as the roof of the next one. The sense of chaos produced by the distribution of the village has been reinforced by the expansion of electric cables and lampposts that have added a strange urban feature to this rural town. Access to cement, concrete and other non-traditional materials, such as ironmongery and tin roofs has opened up new architectural possibilities, changing the way in which houses are built. Similarly to other urban and rural communities in Mexico, Tlahui seems to be always under construction as people add new rooms and even complete floors to old houses to house families as they increase their size; metal rods covered with plastic and glass bottles coming out from the rooftops are a ubiquitous sight. Communal buildings, on the other hand, spend a long time unfinished as they are constructed through *tequio*, the collective, unpaid work to which all inhabitants of the village have to contribute. This is done on a sporadic basis as it is difficult for local authorities to gather all the workers at once and funding is often insufficient to finish the works. The asymmetrical character of the buildings seems to reproduce the irregularity of natural spaces; the forests that surround the village are cleared following uneven patterns, *milpas* are also distributed in an odd manner which makes difficult to tell the difference between those patches of land which have been left to fallow and those which have simply been abandoned, either because they are too eroded to be cultivated or due to the fact that

people have left them to work in other sections of the mountains or because they have been temporarily left by those who have gone to work in the cities. Thus, limits between urban and rural spaces appear to be blurred and it is not uncommon to see milpas and gardens inside the town or fields in which some urban type construction has been added. Probably, the image that best approximates to the feeling of Tlahui is to think of a city painted by a cubist artist.

This sense of irregularity and asymmetry extends to the population of the village; according to the Mexican national census of 2000, Tlahuitoltepec has almost 8,000 inhabitants (INEGI; 2005) but the permanent population of the *cabecera municipal*[6] fluctuates constantly and it is hard to tell who is actually living there. In my very first visit to Tlahuitoltepec, the village was almost deserted as I arrived during school holidays and at the time when new authorities were being named and most people were in their rancherias, working in the fields or attending the long ceremonies for the new *servicios*. At the the two-story building of the *Presidencia Municipal*, a place generally burgeoning with people, I could only find four drunk men who told me it was going to be very difficult to talk to someone before the new authorities had finished with the fiestas. They recommended that I come back in two weeks.

In an environment like this, creating a network of people to help with my research became a challenging and sometimes exhausting task. People are moving constantly not only to take care of the multiple and scattered plots of land that they have throughout the mountains (sometimes in the middle of the forests or in the lowlands down the valley, an area that the Mixe call *tierra caliente*, warm land), but also because sometimes they were in other villages visiting relatives, making businesses or helping friends and neighbours in the preparation of a

[6] In Mexico, municipalities (*municipios*), especially in rural settings, have a head-town, called *cabecera municipal* which usually corresponds to the biggest village of the *Municipio* and by then by minor settlements that can be villages of smaller size or hamlets composed by only a few houses called *localidades* or *rancherias*. Rancherias generally comprise a small number of families or a single extended kin group. Rancherias, unlike villages, are frequently temporary settlements. In the case of the Sierra Mixe, most people have land in rancherias that are situated far from the *cabecera municipal*, some of them situated hours and even days from the head-town.

fiesta, building a house or delivering their community service. In other cases, friends and informants were often away, carrying on some paid job in Oaxaca or Mexico City or engaged in some more intimate tasks that involve consulting a *curandero*, a *xemabie* (a shaman or diviner), fulfilling a promise made to a saint or virgin in a sanctuary outside the Sierra or making a pilgrimage to one of the many sacred places of the Mixe region.

Doing fieldwork in the Sierra Mixe became an exercise in following the trajectories of people, understanding the rationale of their itineraries and the way in which connections between places were established. This immersion into the forms of circulation of the Sierra Mixe made me question the validity of ethnographic images that portray the community as a static entity, but in a different way from those who have challenged this idea by criticizing its lack of historicity or its separation from wider national or transnational networks (Kearney; 1996, 2004).

By following the Mixe in their multiple routes I became aware that the *pueblo* is a much more unstable and fluid reality than has been previously recognised. Such instability is not exclusively the expression of the political contradictions between the indigenous local culture and the potentially disruptive influence of Mexican and Western powers. It is also the result of movements between sites governed by different logics that change the position of individuals by altering their relationship with other social, natural and supernatural entities.

The Mixe community must not be characterised as an irreducible unit that remains stable, but rather as an oscillation between centripetal and centrifugal forces that gather and disperse people within and outside the mountains. This tension between contact and isolation is made explicit in the relationship between the village centre and the little hamlets (*rancherias*) that surround it. The ongoing movement that gathers and disperse people, the tension between becoming part of a larger community and drifting apart to the intimacy of the *rancherias* is

something that is mediated and expressed by a cosmological and ritual language. Thus, the cosmological dimension of Mixe culture cannot be separated from everyday politics. Cosmology is, more than an *imago mundi* or a form of representation, a dimension of experience. Cosmology is an indivisible tie between humans and physical geography rather than a purely intellectual model that reproduces itself with autonomy from the external world. In this sense, the cosmological is a classificatory device and a fundamental instrument for "mapping" reality, but its taxonomic possibilities are not given prior to the thing classified. In this sense, the cosmological for the Mixe always refers to something concrete that human beings can interact with and can be affected by.

Mixe cosmology is intimately linked to practice; it is a cosmology built on the terrain and shaped through concrete interaction with places, objects and beings that are both visible and invisible. In the next section I will describe how cosmological notions of space are put into practice. My aim is not only to describe a set of cultural practices that are of great importance to the Mixe but to set the foundations of a political explanation that will allow me to show why this indigenous group has maintained a decentralised political practice in which authority has a limited capacity for coercion and how they have adopted a type of social organization that does not reproduce the model of the state.

The distance from the state and the laxity of Mixe political hierarchy cannot be explained exclusively in terms of the historical difficulties faced by centralised orders to reach and impose their hegemony in the Sierra. Although there is sufficient historical evidence to prove that the history of the state's penetration into this area of Mexico has been discontinuous and full of interruptions (Chance; 1989) this is not enough to explain why the Mixe have not adopted a pyramidal and centralised model of authority. It is only by looking into native practice that we can understand the tensions between centrifugal and centripetal forces and

the way that elements that come from a hegemonic "outside" are transformed, stripped of their hierarchical content and laterally incorporated to a network of endogenous elements.

The vertical archipelago

In order to understand the spatial conceptions of the Mixe, I think important to revise certain aspects of the landscape and ecology of the Sierra that play a key role in shaping the social, political and cosmological aspects of local communities. I am aware that descriptions of geography or the environment presented as a prelude to explanations of the social convey the risk of creating deterministic interpretations which presents physical and human geography as autonomous fields, which in turn, reinforce a problematic although pervasive separation between nature and culture. In order to avoid this split and to understand the subtle relationships through which "physical" and "human" geographies are produced, it is useful to bear in mind Christopher Tilley's observation that "landscape" is "an unstable category, sitting uneasily between opposed 'naturalistic' and 'culturological' approaches to human society" (Tilley p. 37) and that such instability, far from being counterproductive, makes of "landscape" a powerful tool to "draw together approaches that tend to be held apart in the literature or are conceptualized as occupying radically different domains of human action and experience which are only tangentially related". Tilley's observation becomes even more relevant when considered at the light of the observation made by Martin that "for indigenous peoples, interaction with the land is always defined by conceptions of the sacred, the spiritual, and the power of the land and the beings that live within and on it. The land is not a passive and inert object upon which consciousness and human cultures inscribe meanings purely of their own making. The land is alive and able to interact with humans in profound ways (…) In contrast to Western cultural and religious traditions that are primarily 'history' and 'time' oriented, Native traditions are almost uniformly space and event oriented. For Native cultures,

place becomes the primary referent for all formulations of meaning and value within the culture. To fail to understand this primacy of place and what happens or has happened at specific places is to fundamentally misunderstand Native traditions. (Ball, 2002, p. 474)

The latter is of utmost importance to understand the mutually constitutive relationship between landscape and society, especially in cultural contexts where no radical epistemological and ontological separation between nature and culture exists. The Mixe, similarly to other Amerindian peoples (Descola, 2005; Viveiros de Castro, 1995, 1998; Clastres, 1987), perceive nature-society relationships as a continuum, and firm distinctions between the two become meaningful only during certain occasions while split between both categories have a rather contingent character. Since the days of Pierre Clastres' research on the Guayaki Indians (Clastres, 1998), anthropologists have been increasingly aware of the ontological continuities between humans, plants and animals established by Amerindian peoples, a discovery which has lead to a serious reflection on the consequences that this worldview has on how the social order is conceived and constructed. In the case of the Mixe and other Mesoamerican peoples, the nature-society relationship not only presupposes an ontological continuity between individuals of different species and orders of reality but such continuum is extended to the landscape which is regarded not only as a dimension in which societies are contained but as social/natural agents whose actions affect the course of human life.

Mixe landscapes have an indisputable metamorphic quality; they are subject to constant modification not only due to human intervention but because they are imbued with their own spirituality, will and agency. Mountains, for example, serve as reference points to locate villages and sacred places, fix boundaries between communities and as navigational instruments, but they are also conceived as fluid and mobile entities, with the ability to transform themselves into other beings and participate of the social life of different

communities. Mountains are protagonists of an "everyday mythic life", where hills and peaks become persons, animals or meteorological phenomena and then travel around the Sierra engaging in social activities such as talking, trading, fighting, drinking and marrying mythical beings, people and animals.

The landscape is a complex dimension in which the social, natural and supernatural spheres are entangled and interweaved in such a way that boundaries separating the secular from the sacred, the quotidian and the extraordinary, the material and the metaphysical are not predetermined but constantly need to be redraw through different practices which serve to define limits, fields of action, spatial hierarchies and ontological domains.

Atmospheric phenomena

The Mixe landscape is traversed by multiple forces, both human and non-human whose actions constantly reconfigure the "socionatural" order. The most salient of these forces are atmospheric phenomena such as wind, rain, thunder and earthquakes whose presence is fundamental for the success of agriculture, the constitution of the person as a well as a source of gifts and a cause for illnesses and misfortune. Among the Mixe, places and geographic features are rarely described without making references to the climate; winds, rain, temperature and the colouring of the sky are regarded as basic components of the landscape. Furthermore, people do not depict places or landscapes without taking into consideration the time of the day or prevailing weather conditions. Sites which contain large stones or megaliths are considered to be dangerous during certain hours of the day, generally at dusk, when the fading light changes the colour of the terrain and long shadows are projected on the ground, sheltering spirits and other supernatural beings. Exposure to the full moon's light, for example, is considered unsafe for pregnant women who can give birth to children with palatal

deformities, especially if contact takes place while taking a bath on a spring or standing on a crossroad.

Similar to that of the Mixtec and Zapotec of Oaxaca (González, 2001) the Mixe landscape is one characterised by its socio-ecological complexity. Most Highland villages (including Tlahuitoltepec) make use of lands vertically distributed throughout the Sierra located in different levels that range between 3,200 to 400 meters above the sea level. Such lands are not simply distributed through a descending slope but spread through the interstices of a system of mountain ranges that converge in the Sierra Mixe. The landscape is composed by ascending and descending slopes whose inclinations vary from 10˚ to 75˚ degrees, full of cliffs, caves, small interior valleys, creeks, streams and waterfalls.

Ethnographic accounts of the Sierra usually describe it as a three levelled region divided in Lowlands, Midlands and Highlands which roughly correspond to three different types of climate (hot, temperate and cold). Nonetheless, such classification does not reflect in its entirety the environmental and climatologic diversity of the Sierra. Because of topographic and climate variations, the Mixe region comprises a wide range of highly specialised ecosystems which compose a heterogeneous landscape. At the upper echelons of the Sierra cold temperatures (which can reach -5˚ and even -10˚ during the early hours of the day from December to January) and a dense cloak of mist that covers the land during a third part of the year (Torres Cisneros, 2003) foster thick forests of pine trees (*pinu* in Mixe), red oaks (*quercus reticulate* or *yük xoj* in the local language) and ocote (*pinus montezumae* or *tsin* in Mixe) Nevertheless, it is not uncommon to find areas populated by species which generally grow in *tierra caliente* (for example, certain types of cacti) or to stumble on gigantic ferns that typically develop in the humid and temperate Midlands. Inversely, species that are endemic of the Highlands can be found at lower altitudes where certain geological features (rock walls, crevices or cliffs) and climatic variations permit their reproduction.

Such ecological contrasts are the result of complex interactions between the rugged topography and meteorological factors. In the Sierra, wind currents from the Gulf of Mexico meet with those coming from the Pacific Ocean; depending on the season and on the origin of the streams, these can be dry or humid and their combination results in significant variations both in temperature and rainfall. As currents penetrate the Sierra, they circulate in irregular ways, creating complex patterns whose behaviour is difficult to understand not to say to predict. In some cases, winds are channelled through cliffs and canyons carrying great masses of water during the Gulf of Mexico's hurricane season or blowing hot air that "burns" the land, especially during the dry period that runs from September to May. In other cases, winds are caught within valleys creating a hazy atmosphere where gentle drizzles allow the fast and abundant growth of the vegetation.

Mountains also act as natural barriers for wind and rain; depending on their orientation and shape, they impede the circulation of certain streams and allow the flow of others modifying the distribution of rain and the direction of watercourses. Thus, it is not uncommon to see mountains where one face is green and fertile while another is arid and sterile. Likewise, this combination of climate and topographic variations affect the composition and allocation of water bodies. Mixe villages obtain most of their water from springs and from a system of streams that flow from the mountain tops to the Northeast, becoming tributaries of the Papaloapan and Coatzacoalcos rivers in the Gulf and of the Tehuantepec River on the Pacific coast. Changing rain regimes create a dendritic pattern of streams that do not follow the same route but are subject to constant modifications.

The complex interplay of winds, water bodies and orography has been fully incorporated into Mixe cosmology; locals conceive the landscape as a flow of forces that are both spiritual and natural, which are constantly affecting the earth and the beings that inhabit it. Both the earth´s surface and the atmosphere are viewed as dynamic entities with agency and personality.

Although the climate and surface have certain regularities which can be apprehended through careful observation, expertise in the use of the 260 day calendar and by "reading" changes in the landscape, there is also a deep-rooted notion that entities of "nature" need to be treated as if they were people, making use of instruments employed for the construction of cultural and social relationships.

One of the most prominent of these agencies is wind or *poj*; both locals and ethnographers seem to be undecided about its precise nature as sometimes *poj* is described as a single entity, (*poj'enee* or wind-thunder) that manifests in a variety of forms, while in other occasions, winds are considered as individual creatures. The Mixe have a complex typology that classifies air currents according to direction (north, south, east, and west), humidity and temperature (dry, wet, hot and cold), type of movement (whirlwinds and "confused winds"), colour (green, red gray, purple and black), moral character (evil, good or "trickster") and gender (male and female). These categories are combined in order to indicate the peculiarities of an air current; thus, the north wind can be green (*pu'tspoj*), hot (*jokspoj*) and evil (*ampik'poj*) in June and then change its colour, temperature and become beneficial in November.

The landscape of the Sierra Mixe is not only diverse in ecological terms but there are also chronological differences on the terrain, which are indicative of diverse degrees of human intervention. The upper sections of the Sierra (between 2,700 and 3,200 m.a.s.l) are usually populated by primary forests with tall trees, covered in mosses and which foster a great variety of bromeliads, orchids and ferns. These are sections that are covered by mist and clouds most part of the year. The Mixe try to take good care of these forests and avoid cutting them own as they play a vital role in providing water to the Highland villages and are also important in ritual and cosmological terms.

Secondary forests are located in the next ecological stage (between 2,500 and 1,600 meters), where traces of human activity are evident in the form of *milpas* or *cafetales* (coffee gardens) and cleared sections of the forest employed either for lumbering or for agriculture. Here, the sight of donkeys, cows or horses is not uncommon (although the Mixe have little cattle or beasts of burden) and it is also possible to see shacks to keep tools, fertilisers and seeds which also serve as temporary residence for those working in the fields or collecting firewood. It is around these highly intervened forests (and often heavily over-exploited) where the nucleus of most Highland villages are located and the location of plazas, churches and basketball courts where much of the social, political and ritual activities of the communities take place.

Down the mountains, towards *tierra caliente* (hot land), settlements become dispersed and human presence is less evident. Most rancherías are located near secondary paths which often are mere trails created by the constant movement of people and animals. While travelling through the roads of the Sierra Mixe, evidence of human activity is perceptible in the way of smoke columns rising from improvised kitchens or from the calculated burning of fields, in the rhythmic sound of axes and electric chainsaws employed for lumbering and in the manmade structures that emerge in the middle of desolated places, usually employed by those working at the milpas. The a landscape full of abandoned sites where signs of human life are nothing but silence; crumbling *adobe* walls, decaying fences, uncultivated milpas gradually swallowed by the forest remain as evidence of the mobility of Mixe agriculture; their stillness is, paradoxically, proof that the landscape and the people who inhabit it are in constant motion, relentlessly changing locations and altering the morphology of the land.

The way in which the Mixe move through their territory implies a constant interplay between the populated and the inhabited; milpas in which people has sacrificed chickens, turkeys and even dogs in order to reciprocate the gifts given by maize, where mescal and cigarettes have been offered to seal an alliance with the spirits that populate the forest and with the plot itself,

eventually become abandoned, losing both their social and sacred character, which can only be regained as they are re-incorporated to the social world by means of work and ritual.

This process of occupying and creating places, of moving from one place to the other constitutes the backbone of local agricultural practices. In Tlahuitoltepec for example, pickup trucks (*camionetas*) depart every day to transport people from the centre of the town to Rancho Nejapa, the town's most distant *rancheria*, located at the lowest part of the communal lands (around 600 meters m.a.s.l and about an 1.5 hours from the centre by car or a four hour trek) and only accessible by a dirt road. These trucks usually depart at dawn and most commuters are women who carrying axes, buckets full of maize meal (used to make tortillas, tamales or a semi-fermented beverage mixed with water) and accompanied by babies and small children travel to collect wood, medicinal and edible plants or to plough their milpas. Not all passengers travel as far as to Nejapa, some of them stop at the diversion that leads to a rancheria called El Frijol (1,400 m.a.s.l) while some other descend at some desolated point of the road and disappear into the forest.

Having small plots of land scattered through the region (often in desolated places) is a common practice that has been maintained despite the demographic pressures experienced by the Mixe since the 1960's which has created severe restrictions to land access. Such a practice is still possible due to the great extension of the municipal territories and a consequence of the property regime existing in most Highland villages, which allows free access to any unoccupied portion of land. Cultivating plots vertically distributed through the mountains is a necessary practice given the relative low productivity of each milpa, especially of those situated in the colder sections of the Sierra. Due to the steep gradient of cultivated lands, the poor quality of soil in certain areas and to the accelerated erosion caused by the lack of terraces, moving between fields has to be done periodically as the majority of milpas become exhausted after three years of ploughing. Using different micro-climates and

ecological stages allow the Mixe to take advantage of the steepness of the Sierra in order to produce more and reduce the risks of having a bad harvest. If, for example, a crop from the cold land milpas is lost due to hail, rain or plague it is always possible to take advantage of the fields in the lowlands and vice versa. The use of the vertically distributed ecological niches has the advantage that people can access a large variety of agricultural products as well as to different types of game.

The use of different ecological stages has created a certain degree of specialisation between *rancherias*. Cold land hamlets in Tlahuitoltepec produce potatoes, peaches, *tejocotes* (*crataegus mexicana*), plums, pears and apples as well as certain varieties of maize, beans and squash which are adapted to cold weather and high altitudes. In the hamlets of Tejas (at 2,800 m.a.b.s.l and the highest of Tlahui´s *rancherías*) and Santa Cruz, locals produce tepache (a fermented drink made of cold land agave which is extensively used in ritual occasions); the rancherias of El Frijol and Guadalupe located in the midlands produce coffee while the hamlets of Flores and Nejapa (both in the lowlands) are specialised in the cultivation of citrus fruits, bananas, mamey (*pouteria sapota*), sugar cane and mescal (a distillation from species of agave adapted to hot climates).

The Market: diversity and exchange

The wide range of agricultural products of the Mixe can be observed in the markets that are set up in a specific day of the week throughout the towns and villages of the Sierra. Especially in the Highlands, markets rely heavily on barter and despite products can be purchased with money, people usually prefer to exchange goods for things they have made or cultivated themselves. In Tlahuitoltepec, market day takes place on Wednesday when the roofed basketball court and the plaza in front of the municipal offices are occupied by stalls burgeoning with people that come from the rancherias and neighbouring towns to buy, sell or

exchange, visit relatives, attend to church or consult local authorities. The market has a very orderly distribution; industrial goods such as carpentry tools, electric saws, clothes and DVD's are sold in stalls set in front of the municipal offices; next to these traders (usually Zapotec or mestizo peddlers that follow the market day circuit of the Sierra), women from Tlahui sell fresh food, soft drinks, *champurrado* (a corn-based drink with cocoa, peanuts, annatto and cinnamon) and sweets. In this segment of the market commercial operations are done mostly with money and Spanish is the language employed in most dealings (interestingly, not only with foreign merchants but also among Mixe people). Butchers and cheese sellers are separated from the rest of the vendors on a slope down the market near the municipal music school while chickens, turkeys, goats and even cows and bulls are sold outside the market on a street in the neighbourhood of El Calvario, in front of a chapel of the same name.

Following a non-written but carefully observed norm, the centre of the market (located in the basketball court) is reserved for products of the region. Within this section there is an additional subdivision; the concrete steps that surround the court are occupied by men selling furniture and wood handcrafts who also accompany the women who stand at the centre of the court. At this exclusive area, elderly women display medicinal plants, fruits, vegetables, corn cobs and pieces of pottery on large pieces of cloth extended on the floor. Women conduct trade sitting on their knees or on diminutive wooden stools called *konyt,* which remain concealed under their long skirts. Here, barter constitutes the dominant form of exchange and commercial operations are predominantly carried out in the local dialect of *ayuuk.*

The centre of the court is an important site, not only because here is possible to found specialists in different therapeutic practices (herbalists, mid-wives, and bone specialists called *hueseros*) but also because this is where Lowland and Highland products are exchanged allowing the articulation and gathering of a community whose inhabitants are dispersed and

who spend a considerable amount of time in relative isolation and without much contact with neighbours or relatives.

The market offers a visual and sensorial representation of the ecological diversity of the Sierra. The intense perfume of sugarcanes, pineapples, mamey, passion fruits, bananas, avocados and limes from *tierra caliente* blends with the smell of potatoes, apples, peaches and pears from the cold lands. One cannot miss the contrast between the dense and dark wool fabrics (made from cold land sheep) employed to make *gabanes* (a long type of poncho used by men) and the bright coloured cotton textiles from the Lowlands. The market also serves as a standpoint to observe the diversity of people and the particular ethnic and geographic origin of the attendants, who differentiate from each other by their costumes and clothes. Thus, women from Tamazupalam (one of the four villages neighbouring Tlahuitoltepec) attend the market wearing their long blue skirts (*ixmuk*), red cloth belts (*wëën*) and a blue head garment (*kopa'an*), while those from Tlahui are dressed in long white skirts and embroidered blouses. Sometimes, distant visitors from the eastern corner of the Mixe region come the market, wearing heavily decorated blouses in the fashion of Zapotec women, and displaying an open and candid attitude which contrasts with the quiet and guarded style of Highland women.

Differences are also noticeable in the hats and shoes of men. Elderly men typically wear a white short-winged hats (*kojup*) and leather huaraches (*kë'ëk*), while younger people privilege wearing Texan style hats and pointy cowboy boots. Hats are often decorated with images of saints and virgins or with logos of popular music bands from northern Mexico. Age groups are also distinguishable as young men have popularised punkish hairstyles, tennis shoes, baggy trousers and "hoodie" sweaters acquired while working as migrants in urban centres or in agro-industrial regions. Market days constitute a display ecological, linguistic and cultural diversity; they show how external influences are embodied in the material

culture of the place as well as the constellation of micro-areas that constitute the village and the region.

Maize varieties

Nonetheless, it is the exchange of corn cobs which illustrates at its best the interaction between cold and warm lands and they way in which different ecological stages are integrated into Mixe life. Highland Mixe cultivate at least four different varieties of maize: *yuuk* (which means "high" or "above"), *apa'd*, *kac* and *p'inuk*[7] which are adapted to different heights, pluvial regimes, type of soils and plagues. *Yuuk* maize can be either white (*po'b*) or yellow (*puuk*) and it is planted in the cold lands (between 1,500 and 2,600 m.a.s.l) due to its resistance to harsh weather and plagues, although it has drawbacks, since it grows quite slowly (it requires between six and seven months per harvest), its ears are small compared to other varieties of maize and it rarely yields more than one harvest per year. *Apa'd* and *kac* are both varieties that grow in hot areas, although the former is better adapted to higher altitudes. Like *yuuk*, *apa'd* can be white or yellow while *kac* comes in a large variety of colours (purple, black, reddish and white) and it is used to make "blue" tortillas which are greatly appreciated and consumed mostly during rituals occasions. *Apa'd* and *kac* are, in contrast, fast growing varieties; a full size plant can take as little as four months to grow depending on the temperature and the variety is widely appreciated as it they can grow on sandy and rocky soils. *Pinu'k* is also a fast growing variety (around four months per harvest) although it requires large quantities of water and intense humidity and therefore, plantations of this variety are uncommon among the Highland Mixe. There are also different varieties of squash

[7] In his study on the Mixe, Frank Lipp (1991) distinguishes a fifth variety of maize which he identifies as *agac* and describes it as "variegated in colour (yellow, white, and black), planted in intermediate, temperate zones, and very resistant to rain […] it may be grown in hot and cold lands. *Agac*, "foreign", is an introduction from Zapotec hot lands" (Lipp, 1991, p. 14). During the course of my own research I did not come across with such variety and I had trouble matching his data with mine, not only because my informants did not recognised such variety but for the reason that Lipp changed the name of the village in which he worked, although is clear that it must be located in the Midlands.

and beans which are cultivated together with maize. Around Tlahuitoltepec (an area comprising the villages of Tlahuitoltepec, Tamazulapam, Ayutla and Yachochi) there are at least three varieties of beans, known as *petxijk*, *mikeejnya'an* and *aatsna'an* and three of squash and a diversity of other plants such as peas, chilli peppers, green beans, broad beans and even green tomatoes.

The maize piles displayed on the floors of the market of the Sierra are a point of reference which provides information on the mountains' geography through the origin of the varieties of maize and people . The atmosphere in the markets of the Sierra, is a quiet and calm a exercise of observation, in which people observe the corncobs and match this information with those other indexes described above, peasants are able to trace a cartography of the region made of correlations between production and the social and ecological origin of people and plants. Exchange of maize does not depend exclusively from markets as people frequently travel to visit neighbours or relatives in other rancherias and villages to acquire seeds or kernels of an specific type. These two strategies, combined with the individual selection of seeds that takes place in households after the harvest are essential to maintain and extend the diversity not only of maize but also of beans and squash that are planted together with corn[8].

The combined use of different ecological niches and the exchange of seeds and plants is a mechanism that increases production, creates safeguards against the risk of poor crops, contributes to generate efficient seeds adapted to specific environments, diversifies food access and allows a non-intensive but important type of trade that is crucial to create and

[8] Anthropological and biological literature on the knowledge and selection of varieties of maize in the Mesoamerican context is large and research on the subject is constantly expanding. Nonetheless, since the classic piece by Anderson on Guatemalan maize (1947) *In situ* and *Ex situ* studies coincide on the importance of human intervention in the maintenance of the diversity of maize germplasm and on the anthropogenic character of maize (Benz, 1987; Bretting and Goodman, 1989; Brush, 1992, Bellon-Corrales and Schmidt, 1988, Sanchez and Goodman, 1992)

extend. Nevertheless, we should not think of these strategies only in terms of ecological adaptation or economic strategy. Geography, landscape as well as the different strategies to relate with the environment have a profound cosmological content and deeply interweaved with the social sphere. The Mixe regard places, sites and ecological niches both as background and agents given that they do not establish categorical distinctions between being and place. The latter does not implies that they perceive the world as some type of ontological mishmash where no boundaries can be established between objects and subjects, but that categorisation of places and beings is conceived as a a process in characterised by continuous redrawing, expressed through a highly ritualised social practice. Thus, the purpose of the following chapter is to provide detailed etnographic examples to illustrate the constant interrelation between different spaces and beings.

Milpa rituals

As we have seen, the Mixe agricultural system relies on occupying different ecological niches and on the adoption of a range of strategies which permit to take advantage of the particularities of each environment. Establishing distinctions between places, knowing their ecological and social peculiarities is essential for the survival of the Mixe. In order to obtain a successful crop a good *campesino* requires a detailed knowledge of vegetal and animal species, soils, rain regimes, temperatures and to carefully administrate the timing of ploughing, seeding and harvesting. Nonetheless, the Mixe do not see ploughing or the use of ecological stages as a merely technical or economic issue, but as a social activity which leads to the creation of relationships of mutual dependency with other human beings but also with plants, animals and spiritual entities which participate of the agricultural process. The latter can be better understood by revising the way in which the milpa comes to life and becomes a

specific place, endowed with an internal logic which connects people with their kin, but also with neighbours, animals, plants and spirits.

After the terrain for the milpa (*kam*) has been cleared and is ready to be cultivated, it is necessary to perform a series of rituals aimed to secure a good harvest and ensure the harmony of the beings that live in it or that will benefit from the corn. Agrarian rituals of this type usually begin with the sexual abstinence of the married couples that will cultivate the field (three, nine or fourteen days of abstinence are prescribed, depending on the custom of each village) followed by a ritual bath, preferably in a *temazcal*[9] whose purpose is to commence planting without impurities of any kind[10]. During the first day of work, a ceremony known as *Mook mijotikey* is performed, frequently with the assistance of a *xemabie* or shaman although this is not essential. The attendants to the ceremony are generally the family of the *campesino*, his neighbours (if any) and those friends and relatives who will help him planting the milpa. After sending fireworks called *chifladores* to the sky (which serve both to mark the beginning of the ceremony and to call the attention of the rain-providing divinities of Thunder *–enee-* and Wind *–poj*) the attendants gather in a circle containing candles, three lighted cigarettes[11] and a sack of beans and maize seeds. The leader of the ceremony (either the xemabie or the owner of the field) brings a hen or a turkey (*tutk*) that is

[9] Temazcal is the name of a steam bath spread through all Mesoamerica. The temazcal is generally a building made of stone or concrete, with no windows, an arch for the door and a hole on which heated stones are placed and then covered in water to produce steam. Other types of temazcal are made with blankets, wood, or animal skins, but the procedure is the same as the one used in the stone type.

[10] Alessandro Lupo, working in the Northern Sierra of Puebla, found a similar sexual prohibition among the Nahua but this author explains the abstinence of sexual intercourse as a measure aimed to transmit the physical vigour of the peasant to the milpa. (Lupo, 2001)

[11] During fieldwork I attended to numerous rituals of the same kind and in all cases I found variations in the number of candles, sacrificed animals, cups of mescal passed between the participants and prayers said. The only constant were the three lighted cigarettes and the three shots of mescal poured into the earth. The ethnography of Lipp (1991) describes these rituals as if they had a defined and constant form and then suggests that there is a sequential regularity in the number of offerings employed in rituals. Lipp claims that the number 13 occupies a salient place in the Mixe ritual and that he found calendar specialists who count days in groups of thirteen. Although I tried to confirm such information, none of my informants knew of a 13 day count. In contrast, I found that that the "calendar priest" (*calendario* in Spanish or *kukxpee* in Mixe) employed the more standard 20 day count used by many other Mesoamerican peoples.

held aloft in three directions and then recites a prayer in which he presents his respects to the bird and apologises for the sacrifice, explaining that it is necessary so the maize can eat and grow strong and the family can have an abundant crop. Then the neck of the animal is twisted and the blood poured on the seeds. Subsequently, a new prayer is recited to ask for the assistance and benevolence of wind (*poj*) and thunder (*enee*), two entities that are bearers of prosperity (in the form of rain) but which can also bring harm that materialises as sickness (*pa'am*), hail (*tëtsuu*) and plagues. After the bird has been sacrificed, three shots of mescal (*nï*) are poured on the ground and then a glass of the drink is distributed among the attendants. Meanwhile, the assistants open a hole on the ground where they place the bird's head and feathers, tortillas or little balls of maize dough and sometimes a bottle of mescal. The rest of the animal is cleaned and cooked either on the site or at home. In certain occasions the meal is accompanied by a music band, although this is not frequent since musicians need to be fed or paid and this can be quite expensive.

Milpa rituals are susceptible of being interpreted in three different levels; the first implies the creation of a network of relationships between humans and non-humans. The milpa is not only the productive basis of the local economy but a place in which different beings relate to each other in a way that reproduces that of communitarian life. Maize, beans and squash are regarded as animated beings with a soul and a social life of their own. Maize is not a simple vegetable but a complex creature with flesh, emotions, will and the ability to communicate with people, helping them when they behave correctly and punishing their misconducts. The Mixe often refer to maize with the word *aap* which stands for "ancestor" or "grandfather" or by employing the term *ajtsy*, older brother, which clearly denotes a genealogical bound between humans and corn. Beans and squash, the other plants cultivated at the milpa, are also regarded as animated beings, although locals do not seem to attribute a kin tie to these plants. The milpa not conceived as the exclusive property of humans, but as a space shared with

other natural and supernatural beings that intervene in the growing of maize, share the daily chores of agriculture and, therefore, are entitled to a share of the harvest.

The milpa provides sustain to a large variety of animals such as opossums (*mokx*), snakes (*can'y*), crickets (*tsiktsy*), badgers (*tsik*) and ants (*tsuk*) and it is also the dwelling of spirits such as wind (*poj*) and thunder (*enee*). These beings co-exist within a microcosm, linked to each other through ecological, social and cosmological relationships. However, the milpa is not a harmonious, idyllic site; plants, animals, humans and other entities collaborate but they also compete for the same resources wile predatory relationships are not unknown and tensions are ever-present. Ants and crickets, for example, have a triple role as pollinators, delicacies and potential plagues since in excessive numbers, they can eat and rot the maize. Opossums and badgers are regarded as legitimate visitors to the milpa, esteemed for their mythical qualities (the former is also regarded as an ancestor or *aap*) but they also need to be killed if they destroy too many plants or eat too much maize.

Many of my informants claim that it is necessary to be cautious while dealing with badgers and opossums, since they can be the *tona* or *tso'ok* (fellow animal or zoomorphic double) of a person and killing them could bring dangerous consequences. Careful treatment also applies to snakes (*can'y*), which are viewed as the double of Kong'oy (the most important mythical figure of the Mixe and the lord of mount Zempoaltepetl) or as the *tso'ok* of a powerful individual, frequently a potent witch. Some other informants maintain that the three animals are the property of Kong'oy, who keeps them inside the mountain working at his services as horses or beasts of burden and when killed, peasants need to compensate their loss with sacrifices in order to avoid Kong'oy's anger and restore good relationships with him. Such gifts require consulting a xemabie who by means of divination (usually "reading" maize seeds that are throw on the floor during ritual séances) prescribes the right type of offering to calm the hostility of super-natural beings or to nullify the destructive action of witchcraft.

Offerings usually consist of eggs, bundles of pine sticks, cigarettes, tepache and mescal which are left either left on the spot where the killing occurred or in a different location indicated by the diviner.

Both the notion of *tso'ok* and the idea of animals as property of the lords of the mountain are important to understand how the Mixe conceptualise the milpa. Far from being a human creation which simply serves to the reproduction of the household, the milpa is regarded as a micro-society with a social life of its own, which nevertheless, can only be partially perceived as it comprises a concealed dimension from which humans are partially excluded. Such secret life is predominantly a nocturnal affair which revives once peasants have finished their chores and return home. As darkness falls over the fields, maize, beans and squash commence to grow, Kong'oy sends his cattle from its refuge inside the mountain in order to graze on the surface as all sorts of spiritual entities gather at the cornfields. Rainfall is regarded as the visit of thunder (*enee)* and the sound of the wind shaking the dry leaves of corn plants is, in the words of an old peasant from San Juan Cotzocón, evidence that those who populate the milpa "are having a little fiesta" (*están teniendo su fiestecita*) with music and dance, just like humans do.

During night hours, non-humans work, eat, talk, make music and sometimes quarrel. The milpa becomes a place which mirrors the logic of the village; it is an equivalent of human life, a parallel world in which humans can insert themselves by means analogous to those employed in the making of the community (communal labour, reciprocal debt, ceremonial meal and *fiestas*). The rising and maturing of plants are considered to be *tequio* or collective labour offered by maize, beans and cucurbits and the same principle applies to the actions of thunder and wind, who collaborate by bringing rain. Animals also contribute with tequio, although their link is not as straightforward as in the case of plants. The action of species that feed from weevils (like crickets) or which are suitable for eating can be easily explained as a

contribution in labour, but in the case of maize-eaters (opossums, badgers or deer) their role as tequio givers can only be understood through indirect association with the lords of mountains and caves. The latter, have the ability to unfold and appear in the form of people, animals or meteorological phenomena such as wind, lightning thunder and earthquake. When transformed into wind or thunder, the lords of the mountains bring rain and a benevolent form of wind, which then helps the maize to grow. In retribution, they sent their animals to graze in the milpa, entering into a relationship of exchange where humans need to reciprocate the gifts obtained. The milpa is the result of the collective effort of different types of beings; it is a place which assembles the human, the non-human and the supernatural and, if things are done correctly, they create a mutually beneficial space.

It is within this context that the sacrifice of turkeys and chickens and the sequence of the ritual have to be understood. The ritual follows a rationale that is not very different from those ceremonies organised when new authorities are designated (*cambio de autoridades*) or when a man becomes a full member of the community or a *ciudadano caracterizado.* By pouring the turkey's blood, food is being shared with the plants, whilst the head is left to feed the animals and spirits that visit the field. Offerings of tobacco, drinks and food are aimed to extend the links of peasants with other beings that transform the milpa into a community in which human and non-humans are expected to participate and help each other.

The latter coincides with the materials of other anthropologists working in Mesoamerica; while doing fieldwork in the Nahua village of Tepetzintla in Puebla, Alessandro Questa found that the ritual offering of a turkey is aimed to invite non-human entities, known as the *tlalokanchanekej* to become *compadres* (ritual co-parents) and cultivate the milpa together (Questa, 2010). Such operations transform the milpa into a moral space that requires following a certain code of conduct and the observation of certain rules. Being careless with

the milpa, having sexual intercourse or using the field to defecate are all offenses against the other dwellers of the milpa and a potential source of misfortune.

By equating milpa with community the Mixe not only establish a "multi-natural" alliance aimed to guarantee the success of farming, but they also create a place with boundaries that are recognisable to others and which permits to legitimate possession and assert the right of holders to the products of their work. Through inviting other people to ritual meals, land plots that were vacant become identifiable places, incorporated to a particular genealogy, socialised by communal labour and mutual debt and therefore, integrated to a wider cosmological system. Farming rituals create neighbours and allow widening and reinforcing kinship ties; guests who attend to ritual meals also help with farming chores either working on the fields or lending seeds, fertilizers or tools. Such tasks are considered to be *pupejtpë* or *gozona* (a Zapotec term widely used by the Mixe), a mechanism of reciprocal help[12].

Milpas and the link between worlds

Milpa ceremonies can also be regarded as rites of inclusion and connection, sacred operations which bring others into the productive dimension of the household, transforming guests into debtors bounded through a cycle of gifts and counter-gifts. The rite inscribes the milpa within the world of humans, the inhabitants of the surface, who gradually communicate to others the identity of the possessor allowing the rest of the *comuneros* to categorize the place and locate it within the territory, and through a symmetrical operation, to link it to the non-human dimension of the world. By burying the turkey, fields become bonded to the *muku amm* or underworld, a place that some identify as Hell or the Evil Place while others think of it as the

[12] According to González (2001) "*Gozona* may be carried out between two villages (for example, when musical groups are exchanged for fiestas) or between families in neighbouring villages (for example, when one hosts another during a fiesta). Furthermore, reciprocity might be related to *mantenimiento* to te extnt that It involves the maintenance of social relationswith supernatural actors who can help the household successfully sustain itself." (González, 2001, p. 16.)

residence of spirits and the dead and not necessarily the dwelling of sin[13]. *Muku amm* is often described a fantastic place, full of hidden treasures, rivers and caves where dead ancestors live along with the already mentioned spiritual entities of wind, thunder, lightning and earthquake. To some extent, the underworld replicates the world of above; similar to the world of men, it has villages with authorities and their dwellers engage in similar activities to those of humans. But this replica is also an inversion of the social and environmental order of the upper world. At the mountains' interior, the ecological and social order is put on its head; humans are transformed into preys and animals into hunters and in other cases, humans become beasts of burden in an alteration of the surface's hierarchical order. In this interior world, the lords of the mountains enslave people as punishment for failing to reciprocate a pact aimed to accumulate money, succeed in business and gain the love of a woman or an extraordinary musical talent. *Muku amm* is an extension of everyday life, not only because its order maintains strong resemblance with the upper world, but because the many beings that dwell in the surface are duplicated in the underworld. People´s tso'ok, which in the exterior appear as comets, thunders, wind, snakes, tigers, vultures, eagles or other animals adopt the form of people when they penetrate into the mountains.

[13] Variations in the meaning attributed to the underworld can be understood as the result of different ways of approaching to Catholicism. Although authors such as Lipp (1991) and Torres Cisneros (2003) affirm that despite the presence of native elements both in ritual and mythology the Mixe should be considered as Catholics, from my perspective it is far more productive to think of the Sierra Mixe as a place in which various religious traditions coexist and of Catholicism as vector within which people moves back and forth. While many of my informants think of themselves as (good) Catholics, others see this religion as a thin veneer covering (and distorting) "authentic" native beliefs. Furthermore, one cannot ignore the importance of anti-clerical and anti-Catholic currents in Mixe history. While some of them were aimed to diminish the political power of the Church by restoring communal authority (even over Catholic temples) there have been moments characterised by the radical questioning of the theological basis of Catholicism. In Tamazulapam, for example, an influential teacher, Fortino López is known for his active questioning of Catholic theology. He has even wrote a book on Tamazulapam´s religion which can be regarded in many ways as an anti-Sahagun in the sense that reverses the operation through which colonial and post-colonial priests have criticised the "idolatries" and tried to expurgate religious practice of unorthodox elements. Fortino denounces the syncretism of Catholicism by referring to the works of historians of religion and even to Dan Brown, which the author considers an authority on religious issues.

Despite its proximity, entering this other reality can be a difficult task and crossing its threshold is not recommended for the lay. People can glimpse this world in dreams or in the visions of hallucinogenic mushrooms, which are populated by fellow animals and dead ancestors. Encounters with personified mountains and with beings of the underworld can also take place on the surface usually at crossroads, while walking in the wild (Sp. *el monte*) or in caves or holes that unexpectedly appear on the surface of the earth. Nevertheless, those who venture in the mountains; interior usually get frighten (Sp. *se asustan*), lose their souls and if not cured, become mad or die. Only shamans and witches are able to go into the depths of earth without suffering harm. Despite the apparent inaccessibility of this enigmatic and nocturnal dimension, the underworld remains connected to "human reality". Thus, the landscape is conceived as a space characterised by the constant flow of beings and most geographic features are regarded as located within a diffuse frontier between the human and non-human realms. Springs, caves and mountains are viewed as gates leading to this secreted space while certain human-made structures such as altars or certain parts of the house serve as receptacles where spirits come to rest and eat. Family shrines, for example, are visited by the dead during *Aap Xëë* (Grandfathers' or Ancestors' Day, celebrated in November) although ethnographers report that in villages like Santa María Alotepec, domestic shrines are visited by the ancestors every morning[14] (Torres Cisneros, 2003).

[14] Almost every household in the Sierra Mixe has a family altar, whose composition varies depending on individual allegiance to Catholic saints, the nature of the requests made by the domestic unit and the aesthetic sensibility of each family. Torres Cisneros, employing analytical resources from structural anthropology and following the work of Vogt in Highland Chiapas, suggests that domestic shrines should be understood as small scale models of mountains, which *represent* a three levelled structure that appears in cosmological depictions of Mesoamerica (Torres Cisneros, 2003). Although this analysis is suggestive, since in certain festivities offerings are put on the floor, on the altar´s table and on the top of the shrine (generally flower or weaved figures made of fruits, I consider worth thinking of altars as flexible devices that connect the household with important spiritual places and direct links with the world of dead instead of representations of this places. The altar at the house of my landlady in Tlahuitoltepec was full of religious objects collected during her journeys within and outside the Sierra. Together with different saints, she also had rosaries bought in pilgrimage sites, flowers and photographs of dead and living relatives (usually those who were travelling). One of the most salient objects were several coloured glasses with depictions of African Potencies (*Potencias Africanas*) acquired in a market in Mexico City.

In the case of milpas these are linked to the underworld through the roots that penetrate the soil and also, through the opossums and badgers that commute among realms. Once again, this information coincides with the findings of Questa for Puebla's Northern Sierra where his informants referred that the milpa grows towards the interior of the earth, like if it was a mirror image of the surface and there is guarded and harvested by underground dwellers (Questa, 2010).

Milpa rituals as cartographic actions

In previous paragraphs, I described how milpas becomes socialised places and the way in which relationships created through farming are extended both into the human and non-human sphere, cementing social ties and linking places of agricultural production to a wider mythic and ritual landscape. Nonetheless, farming rituals also produce an opposite effect; by creating an identifiable place, distinctions between "own" and "foreign" are reinforced, leading to the creation of a territorial limit from which strangers are excluded. Rituals associated with the milpa can be regarded as cartographic operations, which configure a geographic order which provides certain "solidity" to an ever changing landscape in which property of land is never definitive. These ceremonies, repeated on every field, inscribe plots within a general category (the category of "milpa") but at the same time, the particularities of each piece of land are asserted through a procedure that highlights the concrete character of the actors involved in its creation and the intimacy of the links established within the place. Thus, the agricultural landscape is viewed as a multiplicity of small units, a constellation of milpas linked through mutual obligation but which are also autarchic entities with their own history and character.

The way in which a milpa comes to be also reveals the logic that regulates tenure in a region where land is held as commons. Considering the social relationships involved agricultural

practices, it is not strange that the milpa is equated with a community; like any other pueblo, the milpa has its own territory, rituality and a moral economy of reciprocity which allows to consider, far beyond metaphor, that plants and animals as tequio givers or to see the wind shaking the dry leaves of corn as a fiesta of non-human beings. An additional coincidence is that the milpa, like the community, is an ephemeral entity, with a beginning and an end. It has a cycle mediated by rituals in which strangers and relatively unconnected beings become kin, friends and neighbours which after having reached a certain point, need to depart and become separated. Thus, it should not be surprising the widely repeated analogy between communities and fields which establishes a parallelism between letting a fallow milpa and the municipal head-town that is temporarily abandoned while people go to the rancherias, or between the liminal moments (always spiritually and politically dangerous) in which new authorities replace the old ones.

Land without fences

An important aspect that should be stressed, is the high degree of autonomy with which all these rituals are conducted; although sometimes a xemabie leads the prayers and indicates the number and distribution of ceremonial objects (candles, cigarettes, food and mescal), rites can be conducted without assistance of a shaman and they certainly do not require the intervention of local political authorities. Possession over land is an act originated within the domestic space, which is then accepted by the rest of society and only then recognised by local authorities. The latter, have little power to deny the clearing of new milpas and can only intervene as mediators when conflicts over tenure appear and have little authority to confiscate, tax or transfer land to other people. During conversations with *comuneros* (commoners) of the Highlands, it was frequent to hear them celebrate the absence of fences and the open and free character of the landscape. *¡Aquí está libre!* (Here is free!), was a much

repeated phrase during talks on land and property or about differences between the *Mixe alta*, Oaxaca´s Central Valleys and the Mixe Lowlands.

People in the Highlands regard fences not as technological, practical devices to protect fields or cattle but as signs of communal land loss and as proof of the transformation of property that threatens the way of life of Mexican indigenous peoples; whenever the subject of San Juan Guichicovi (a community in the lowlands with a history that diverts from that of other Mixe villages) was discussed, my informants observed with sadness that the land was full of *alambradas* (wire fences) and that it was impossible to move freely from one place to other. Many in Guichicovi agreed with such remarks and considered fences a reminder of the enclosures imposed by an alliance of foreign ranchers, loggers and local caciques that depleted the forests and altered the native ecosystem beyond recognition[15]. Erecting fences is considered to be the quintessential practice of the *agät*, who, unlike the *ayuuk*, do not have rituals nor reciprocate, regard the land as something that can be bought and sold and conduct farming by hiring workers and paying (low) salaries. Highlanders also feel a mixture of condescendence and disdain towards *ejidatarios* and private owners who, according to their view, need the government´s approval to cultivate the land and cannot wander through the mountains looking for a suitable piece of terrain (an activity that the Mixe found most

[15] San Juan Guichicovi is one of the few pueblos that remained outside the Distrito Mixe (see chapter 3 in this thesis) and its development has been quite different from the rest of Mixe villages. Guichicovi has probably more contact with the surrounding Zapotec communities that with the Highland villages, even its name derives from a Zapotec term which means "new town". Guichicovi has no lands in the mountains but extends through the fertile prairies of the Tehuantepec Isthmus, where it has been entangled in a complex agrarian and political history. Since the 19th century it was at the centre of the colonisation plans of the Porfirian regime and much of its communal lands were turned into private holdings in the hands of immigrants from Veracruz, Michoacán and Chiapas as well as foreigners who acquired land through American surveying companies that invested large amounts of money in the region. Colonisation was also the result of the village's proximity with the railway that connected the Pacific Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico (Escalona, 2004). Fertile lands, large quantities of water and exuberant rainforests attracted Mexican and foreign capitals interested in exploiting precious woods and expanding cattle breeding. Especially during the 1950's Guchicovi witnessed the almost complete extinction of the jungle. The process of enclosure encouraged by landowners and local caciques was challenged by popular movements increasingly organised along ethnic lines. Grass-roots organisations have been struggling to recover lands lost to cattle ranchers, reinforce the use of Mixe language, end the political party system and adopt the "traditional" political mechanisms of Highland and Midland villages.

pleasurable, although it is not free of risks). Additionally, they also manifested great perplexity with what they saw as an obsession of lowland (non-indigenous) ranchers with acquiring properties next to the other filled only with cattle or some monoculture.

From the perspective of Highlanders, milpa rituals make fences unnecessary, since the rituality transforms the milpa in a sacred space recognised as legitimate by others. In sum, what we are witnessing here is the constitution of a different type of geopolitical order, one in which ritual cannot be considered mere protocol or a representational act, but a constitutive action which simultaneously configures places and beings and defines their relationship to others; that is, a series of actions aimed to create a territory. While it is true that there are ways to articulate different spaces and that much of the ritual and political life of the Mixe consists in developing practices to link one place to another, these are perceived as autonomous, singular and specific. In the Sierra Mixe the understanding and perception of landscape maintains certain similarities with the mapping practices of the Anggor of Papua New Guinea described by Peter Huber (1979). According to this author :

> "The Anggor coordinate system, in contrast with those of the West, does not contain particularities of the landscape but rather is contained by them. The Anggor coordinates form no coherent, abstract system that integrates the landscape as a whole, but they are integrated at the local level by the concrete and familiar facts of landscape. To understand the hidden topography of an Anggor village […] it is necessary to be familiar with local peculiarities of terrain and history. There is no Anggor geography in general; there is a number of Anggor geographies, several for each village, in fact" (Huber, 1979, p. 136).

The reference to the Anggor of Papua New Guinea is useful as it illustrates a type of "geographic pluralism" in which mapping, navigation and conceptualisation of space is achieved through every day practice and cartographies result from the interaction of different types of beings and geographic features. In the case of the Mixe, the pluralisation and

particularisation of landscape becomes evident when we consider how sacred geographies are shaped. With the exception of certain geographic features and human-made buildings that all Mixe recognise as sacred (i.e. Zempoaltepetl Mountain, the catholic temples of each village and certain sites of pilgrimage sites located outside the Sierra, including the sanctuaries of Guadalupe and Juquila in Mexico City and Oaxaca respectively, and the churches dedicated to the Black Christ in Veracruz and in Esquipulas in Guatemala) the rest of places are sacred only to specific villages, rancherias, families and individuals. Sacredness is not necessarily a permanent attribute of places or an essential quality of sites, but the result of a certain type of set of relationships established between places and beings and a possibility contained within any geographic feature and landscape. Thus, it is nearly impossible to make a general cartography of sacred sites in the Sierra Mixe since every person, rancheria and village can trace a complex itinerary of places of spiritual and social importance which are not necessarily shared by others. Far from being uniform, geography is heterogeneous and intimate, shaped by experience and practice but also produced through the everyday encounter between the fantastic and the mundane.

The ethnographer can trace different sacred routes whose importance vary in relationship to individual biographies and collective histories, indicating different ways of linking everyday activities with the world of myth and the sacred. These are trails formed by the landmarks left by individuals seeking gifts from gods and spirits, sites which commemorate the encounter with a fantastic creature or which mark the spot where someone suffered some type of damage. The landscape is sprinkled with places where hunters make offerings to the lord of the forest and ask permission to take the life of their prey, with caves and springs where witches perform magical ceremonies, fields where healers collect powerful medicinal plants or sites that have been incorporated to personal geographies when for example, people were struck by lightning or suffered an accident. Throughout the Sierra, ribbons, crosses and coins

are attached to trees and rocks to indicate sites where relevant events took place. These places, often decorated with paper flowers, images of Catholic saints or candles, serve to indicate locations where deadly accidents and illnesses occurred, to warn against potentially harming spirits that dwell in transitional places (crossroads, bridges and village boundaries) and as reparations for offenses caused to dead ancestors. These marks are ways of drawing individual biographies on the landscape, but they also have a social role, acting as mnemonic and moral devices which reinforce social rules and behaviours[16].

Communitarian space and ritual: the cult to the Kigaapj

Having reached this point, it is necessary to say that despite the intimate and domestic character of many ritual practices related to the landscape, it would be a mistake to think that the geographic order of the Sierra is exclusively composed by places shaped through individual or familial experience. The "geographic *habitus*" of the Mixe comprise a wide range of communitarian practices whose purpose is to incorporate the landscape into the collective experience of the village and vice versa. There is a myriad of collective rituals (to ask for rain or a prosperous harvest, to set limits between neighbouring villages, to honour mythical ancestors or to renew political authorities) which involve traversing sacred routes across the landscape, whose effect is to link different geographic features and scales of dwelling by linking villages, households and communal lands or aimed to assert territorial rights or to establish relationships between neighbouring villages. Thus, the following materials, collected in the village of Tamazulapam del Espíritu Santo (a village neighbouring

[16] Here it is worth to cite Christopher Tilley's comment on Keith Basso's research on Apache landscapes (1984). According to Tilley, the [Apache] landscape "is full on named locations that act so as to fuse time and space. Through the use of historical tales events are located at named points, and the tales themselves are about correct codes of moral conduct […] Stories are intimately connected with physical places on the land, fused with geological elements […] Features of the landscape become deeply symbolic of cultural lifeworlds, omnipresent moral forces rather than mere physical presences (Basso 1984: 46). Through narratives conceptions of the land affect the way in which the Apache think of themselves and vice versa. (Tilley, 2004, p. 33)

Tlahuitoltepec), will serve to illustrate a cycle of community and inter-community rituals known as The Cult to the *Kigaapj*, which provide evidence of the communitarian dimension of Mixe territorial practices.

The Kigaapj are a mythical couple, formed by a male and a female ancestor which, according to some of my informants, are the original pair from which the people of Tamazulapam descend, although others think that all the Mixe are related to them. It is difficult to establish the precise nature of the Kigaapj, since it is unclear if they are spirits, humans or if they belong to some intermediate category. Some narratives of the Kigaapj attribute them an explicit human status and regard them as the "biological" parents of King Kong'oy, while other accounts claim that the Kigaapj lacked the ability to reproduce and fostered Kong'oy after he was born from a serpent's egg along with Tajëëw the snake, his twin brother or *tso'ok.*

The Kigaapj, always according to the people of Tamazulapam, originally dwelled in a remote location known as *Apytikam* ("Place of the Elderly" or "Where the Old Man Lives") located on a site which nowadays corresponds to a small hamlet in the boundaries of the village called *Rancho Pescado*. The ancestors left Apytikam to found the village, where they erect a shrine that became the centre point of the pueblo and which was destroyed and replaced by a Catholic Church during colonial times. After the shrine´s destruction, locals managed to save the Kigaapj who were left in care of a woman who kept them concealed in her kitchen. Although prohibited by the priests, locals continued visiting the Kigaapj to ask for rain, to earn good fortune in commercial matters and to present the new authorities that formed the local government each year. Such visits were ritually conducted by the keeper or guardian, a widow or unmarried female whose duties included dressing and feeding the ancestors and the only person allowed to see the Kigaapj.

It is not necessary to dig too deep into the narrative to see many classic anthropological themes emerge from it. The story of the Kigaapj can be explored under the scope of kinship since genealogy and affinity come out as central elements, from the perspective of ethnohistory given the presence of classic Mesoamerican and colonial narrative patterns or from the point of view of hierarchy and political legitimacy, due to the evident links between ancestry, authority and resistance to political and religious domination. Additionally, the Kigaapj´s ceremonial cycle is susceptible from being understood from a geo-cosmological perspective, due to its importance in terms of generating the territorial order of Tamazulapam. It should be highlighted that the complex links established between ancestry, genealogy, hierarchy and territorial order are not accomplished exclusively through mythical narratives but also through ritual or, to recur to Turner's idiom, by making use of a technology of action (Turner, 1979).

The cult to the Kigaapj has a fluid and dynamic character whose purpose is to create reciprocal identifications between territory, ancestry and political order by connecting different spaces which are relevant in religious, ecological and social terms. The cult of the Kigaapj is aimed to establish a link between various scales of space and time, eroding the distance between mythical and "secular"[17] chronologies and by diminishing divergences between "natural" and "cultural" orders[18]. Kigaapj´s rituality also involves establishing unity, continuity and coherence within a geography distinguished by its diversity and heterogeneous

[17] Here is worth bearing in mind R. Wagner´s observation that in "nonstratified, decentralized peoples accommodate the collectivizing and differentiating sides of their cultural dialectic in an episodic alternation between ritual and secular state" (Wagner, 1981, p. 58)

[18] Unlike Amazonian societies where distinctions between nature and culture are blurred in a radical way and a form of "multi-naturalism" prevails (Descola, 1992, 1996, Viveiros de Castro, 2002), the Mixe do establish certain distinctions which are analogous to the way in which Western anthropologies separate the "social" from the "natural" (and which are quite extended among peasant societies). Nonetheless, such separation is not regarded as central for the constitution of the self as in Euro-American thought; it is precisely the purpose of the ritual to reduce the distance between these two spheres, to establish ways of communication and exchange between them and to approach as much as possible to the moment of myth, in which the different species that populate the world (including those who now appear to be metaphysical) shared the same language.

character, in which every significant place is a force field, with its own rationale, order and character. Ceremonies dedicated to the ancestors pursuit creating a communicating vessel between different types of beings and different states of existence, a process lead and directed by the female keeper.

The cult of the Kigaapj comprises a series of ceremonies dominated by an exuberant rituality which combines sacred meals, offerings to supernatural beings, pilgrimages to sacred places, the renewal and disposal of certain objects, the sacrifice of animals, the reciting of prayers, the exchange of sacred objects and the ritual demarcation of boundaries. All these operations constitute a ceremonial sub-cycle within Tamazulapam's major ritual system. While the "big" cycle begins in January with the transferring of ceremonial batons between old and new authorities, the cult to the ancestors starts in early March, right before the first rains of the year. The cycle starts when the new keeper of the Kigaapj travels to different sacred places in preparation to receive the ancestors at her house while the incumbent custodian celebrates the "Farewell" ritual which marks the end of her ritual obligations; these ceremonies are followed by a second ritual, which consists in moving the Kigjaap from the household of the old custodian to the new one.

The precise mechanism employed to select the keeper is surrounded by secrecy, but it entails choosing from a group of candidates formed by widows or unmarried women who enjoy considerable prestige among the community. The final decision however, is taken during séances[19] which involve the use of divinatory practices that involve "reading" maize seeds and possibly the use of hallucinogenic mushrooms (*nashwinmush*). Throughout the séance the maize "identifies" that woman who has had a vision, an encounter with a powerful

[19] The question of who participates of these séances remains unclear, I can only speculate that they are attended by the incumbent custodian and the xemabie, but I was unable to obtain provide more information on this topic.

supernatural entity or has dreamt about carrying a heavy stone on each hand. It is said that the discarded candidates had the same dream, but they were unable to hold the rocks.

The keeper´s pilgrimage

After being designated as custodian of the Kigaapj, the chosen woman must begin a pilgrimage which includes visiting and making offerings in different sacred places. My informants disagree both on the number of sites and on the order of the pilgrimage's route, but five places appear to be indispensable for the sake of the ritual. Four of these, *Nïwy'okpj* (Willow´s Place), *Jïmpatnï* (Water Running Uphill), *Apytikam* (Place of the Elderly) and *Xu'uxnï'ïm* (Chuparrosa Hill) are located in the limits between Tamazulapam and the villages of Ayutla, Cacalotepec, Tepantlali and Tlahuitoltepec, while the fifth site, *Epx Yukp*, corresponds to Mount Zempoaltepetl and its located beyond the boundaries of Tamazulapam´s territory. These places are the dwellings of spirits or forces whose intervention is required to ensure the prosperity of the community, to avoid drought, famine, sickness and conflict between villagers. Some places are linked to genealogical myths of the community (such is the case of Apytykam and Epx Yukp), while others are related to the ïnee or spirits of water, wind and thunder.

The sacred route culminates with a visit to Epx Yukp or Mount Zempoaltepetl, the only sacred site visited by all the villages of the Mixe region. The new keeper climbs the mountain accompanied by a xemabie or diviner who instructs her on the type and number of objects that must be offered to the Lord of the Mountain. Visiting the mountain is a way of linking the previous sites with the ethnic territory to which all Mixe communities belong. Thus, the pilgrimage traverses different types of places: sacred sites within the community where powerful divinities dwell, boundaries between pueblos, places of mythic origin where the village´s ancestors came from and a site regarded as sacred by all Mixe communities.

The pilgrimage has the effect of transforming sites considered to be *inëëpataakj* into *kïyäkjktaajk,* two categories employed to distinguish places that are important in cosmological terms. *Inëëpaataakj* is a term composed by the agglutination of three terms: *inëë* (gods, spirits or sacred), *paat* (a verb which means to encounter or to meet) and *taajk* (place or site) which can be translated as "spirits' dwelling", while the former category results from the combination of *kïyäky* (offering) and *taajk* (place) and can be translated as "place of offerings" or "site of gifts". While the majority of "natural" sites such as caves, mountains, trees, rivers or boulders fall in the category of inëëpaataakj, they only reach the status of kïyäkjktaajk if offerings are regularly placed at the sites. Spiritually charged places become kïyäkjktaajk, when they are socialised through practices that bring their sacredness into the sphere of human activity. Alternatively, the term kïyäkjktaajk implies establishing reciprocal ties between those who make the offerings and the spirits of the site; it is a way of establishing alliances and relationships with a place in a way analogous to that of the rituals associated with the milpa, since the pilgrimage helps to build a sense of locality and inclusion through the recognition of the boundaries between villages. At the same time, the ritual serves the opposite purpose, helping to identify and exclude foreigners and to negotiate the unstable nature of communitarian frontiers.

An additional but crucial outcome of the ritual is the effect that has on the keeper, who will emerge ontologically transformed from the pilgrimage. The journey will put her in contact with ancestors and prominent natural/divine elements, giving her the ability to mediate between these and the community, conferring her influence over the community's territory and its climate. The reconnaissance of the sacred sites prepares the forthcoming keeper for the ritual adoption of the mythical parents of Tamazulapam, imbuing her with a power that is different from that of the political authorities designated by the communal assembly but that many recognise as the authentic source of communitarian legitimacy.

Visiting and coming into contact with the sacred sites is a difficult and dangerous task; the inääpataakj are thresholds to the world of spirits and death as well as the dwelling of potentially beneficial forces but whose potency is such that they can also be destructive. In order to bring such forces into the communitarian sphere it is necessary to tame and domesticate them. Thus, it is not surprising that the task of dealing with potentially dangerous entities rests on the shoulders of a woman[20], given that she is capable of engaging with the inëë by means of exchange, speech and cooked food, all of them paramount elements of sociality. The constant interaction with the inëë transforms the keeper in a "sacred being" (that is the actual term employed by my informants to refer to the keeper. Sp., *ser sagrado*), who has absorbed part of the sites´ force, becoming a potency on the process. The journey through sacred places is also a type of initiation; it confers great power to the pilgrim but also implies great risks and responsibilities. The profane, for example, generally avoid visiting the inääpataakj and if passing by is necessary, all kind of precautions need to be taken. The inääpataakj are sites where it is possible to lose one's soul, catch an illness or suffer an accident and therefore, visiting many of them on a single day requires considerable physical and spiritual strength.

The relocation of the Kigaapj

The second part of the ritual of the Kigaapj comprises the physical relocation of the ancestors to the new keeper´s house. Similarly to the pilgrimage described in previous paragraphs, the relocation requires following a ritual trajectory which leads to the creation of a "force field" within the house of the new keeper. This part of the ritual begins with the *Despedida* or

[20] The centrality of women in the Kigaapj´s ritual challenges much to the received wisdom on cosmological conceptions of gender among "small scale" and politically decentralised societies. It poses serious questions to those who propose a structural opposition that equates womanhood with "nature" and manhood with "culture". Rethinking such opposition becomes especially urgent if we attempt to provide elements to defend the validity of the thesis of the relative absence of a strict dichotomy separating nature from culture in Amerindian contexts.

Farewell ceremony and involves the participation of the old custodian, the former municipal and Church authorities and their respective wives. The ceremony constitutes the final task for the civil and religious authorities of the previous year, who despite having surrendered their ceremonial staffs in January, still need to complete the cycle of Kigaapj ceremonies[21]. Thus, the old keeper prepares a ritual meal for the Kigaapj and for all the assistants to the ceremony, following a sequence that will be replicated by the new custodian throughout all the feasts that she will offer during the year.

The Farewell ceremony regularly takes place in the keeper´s kitchen[22], where there is a pinewood chest containing the Kigaapj. The chest, a rudimentary coffer of about two meters length and seventy centimetres width, is considered to be the "house" of the ancestors and it also serves to maintain the couple hidden from the view of the assistants to the ceremony. In addition, the chest is covered with bundles of dried leaves of maize (sp. *milpa seca*). The keeper sits at the right of the chest in front of which there are two clay pots sectioned in half, making four containers of about eighty centimetres of diameter. The setting is completed with candles and *copal* (an aromatic resin) burning on a ceramic heater.

The ritual meal or *uujy kyk* begins when the keeper throws thirteen handfuls of corn flour into the containers, starting from left to right of pots' line. Following this, the custodian handles a

[21] My informants claim that the reason behind the ex-authorities´ participation in the Farewell ritual, is that they it is necessary to conclude the agricultural cycle. My main informant, referred to the cycle as "the Autonomous Calendar" (*el Calendario Autónomo*) to distinguish it from what he called the "Fiscal Year" (*el Año Fiscal*). I prefer the term "agricultural cycle" instead of recurring to the idea of the "260 day calendar" employed by by Torres-Cisneros (2003) or the term *sit'u* used by Lipp (1991). Although it is possible to suggest that the ceremonies to the Kigaapj are celebrated following the Mesoamerican agricultural calendar I do not have conclusive evidence of this and my informants did not offer a solution to this problem. Furthermore, I think there are founded reasons to distrust the mechanical transferring of a paradigmatic Mesoamerican calendar to the Mixe context (an over-exploited strategy of Mesoamerican anthropology), since the idea that the Mixe use the twenty and thirteen day count to plant and harvest does not take into consideration the variations in the maize cycle that result from planting in different altitudes.

[22] Houses in the Sierra Mixe typically have a separated area for the kitchen, but this form of distribution is changing, due to the introduction of a urban style of housing in which the kitchen and the bathroom are contained within the main building.

similar portion of maize flour to the former *Regidor Primero* of the Catholic temple[23] (a religious authority in charge of maintaining the Catholic altar that also changes every year) who pours the corn into the vessels with his right hand, followed by the rest of the Church authorities (except for the priest, who is systematically excluded from participating in the ceremonies) and their wives. The same operation is performed by the municipal authorities and their spouses, following a strict order which begins with the former *topiles* (the communitarian policemen), the former *Presidente Municipal*, the *Alcalde* of the previous year, the ex-members of the council and their deputies. In sum, almost eighty people participate in the preparation of the ancestors' food.

After the pots have been filled with maize flour, the keeper instructs the authorities to add coloured tamales, fresh eggs, small tablets of uncooked maize dough in sets of thirteen and sixteen as well as edible figures of snakes[24] (made either of corn or wheat bread). When all the ingredients have been added, it is necessary to sacrifice a certain number chickens or turkeys. The keeper recites a prayer, apologising to the birds for their sacrifice and asking the Kigaapj to accept the warm blood of the birds and begging them to help the community to have enough rain and maize. Four birds are killed and the ex-authorities pour the blood on top of the vessels and on the coffer. The concoction is completed when the keeper empties a jar with atole (a drink made of corn mixed with water or milk) dyed with annatto, which is considered to be the maize's blood and then drops three trickles of tepache and mescal on the floor, right in front of the pots.

[23] During rituals dedicated to the Kigaapj there is a confluence of civil and religious authorities which, at first sight, appears to represent the classic Mesoamerican model of civil-religious hierarchy, although I would claim that such convergence Is exceptional and that most of the time both spheres are not merged but can be clearly distinguished. Among Mixe villages it is possible to find different degrees of "secularisation", while in Tlahuitoltepec, for example, competences between Church and Municipal authorities are clearly demarcated in Tamazulapam those limits were slightly blurred and it was possible to hint an ambiguity in the local form of government.

[24] The Kigaapj are protected by snakes, which are under the rule Kong'oy, whose *tona* or animal companion is also one of these animals.

When the food for the Kigaapj is ready, the keeper burns more *copal* and then starts singing, accompanied by the Church's *cantores* and the municipal band´s musicians. The ex-authorities peel off the rest of the birds brought for the celebration and cook them, so all the attendants and the Kigaapj can eat. Following this operation, the keeper offers tepache to each one of the assistants, who then approach the coffer pouring three drops of the beverage on the floor and asking the Kigaapj to listen to the keeper´s prayer and ensure the wellbeing of the community. The meal then develops like many other fiestas, with the band playing *sones* and *jarabes* and the guests dancing and drinking.

The culmination of the Farewell ceremony consists of an operation from which everyone is excluded, except for the keeper and the wives of the former *Primer* and *Segundo Regidor* of the Catholic Church who serve as assistants to the custodian. The three women leave the fiesta at midnight and move to a secret location where they change the Kigappj's clothes with garments tailored by the helpers. Afterwards, the assistants carry the Kigaapj on their shoulders (the wife of the *Primer Regidor* takes the male Kigaapj while the *Segundo Regidor´*s spouse carries the female ancestor) and walk towards the house of the new keeper. When they reach the new place, the women send a messenger to the ex-keeper´s place to inform the musicians that the ancestors have settled at their new home. The band then leaves the (now) ex-keeper's house, leading the rest of the audience with their music to the new location. When the band arrives, the new keeper sacrifices a hen, pouring the blood on top of the coffer that she has prepared to house the Kigaapj.

The following day, the ex-topiles clean the house of the former keeper, take the old clothes used by the ancestors, the clay pots with the food and the heads of the sacrificed birds and walk to a sacred site known as *Tdza Duun* or *Loma de Piedra* (located in the eastern section of the village) where they recite prayers, drink mescal and discard the objects.

The Kigaapj at their new home

Once the Kigaapj have been placed at the new house, the new keeper will commence a cycle of five ceremonies which run throughout the year and coincide with the start of the rainy season (*Maduug*), the planting of maize, the cutting of the first tender ears (*Mëekum*), the harvest (*Tsejkaats*) and concludes with her own Farewell ritual in March, when she will hand over the ancestors to a new keeper.

The first of these ceremonies, known as *Maduug* (which can be translated as *Inauguration* or *Celebration of the Third Day*) consists in the preparation of a meal that will be shared between the ancestors, the keeper and the guests to the house and whose main purpose is to introduce the new authorities (who received their office in January) to the Kigaapj, to ask for an abundant rainy season and to have enough maize during the year. If rain is not enough or it is coming late, the keeper will conduct an additional rite known as *Tuuwabjp* which is aimed to avoid drought[25]. Both Maduug and Tuuwabjp are performed within the house of the custodian, following a carefully choreographed sequence which replicates the preparation of the meal described during the Farewell ceremony.

The difference between the Farewell ritual and Maduug is that the latter is a ritual celebrated in two parts. The first part concludes when the clay pots have been filled with food and the guests abandon the house, leaving the mixture of maize, eggs, tamales, blood, atole and mescal to ferment. The ritual will resume three days after the food was put on the vessels, when the religious authorities (*regidores*, *capillos*, *cantores*, *capitanes de fiesta* and *mayordomos*) gather at the Church's front to return to the keeper's place accompanied by the municipal music band; as they march across the village, pyrotechnic fires are throw into the

[25] Tuuwabjp is celebrated only in case of extreme urgency. The keepers fear having to conduct the ceremony given that if it does not rain after performing the ritual, they can be blamed of not taking proper care of the ancestors.

air to announce the culmination of the celebration; before arriving to the warden's house the religious authorities are joined by the municipal authorities who departed from the Muncipal offices and paraded around the town carrying their ceremonial batons decorated with red, yellow and green ribbons.

As it fills with the intense smell of fermented maize, copal's perfume and wild flowers, the kitchen's mundane and quotidian character is replaced by a powerful atmosphere; the modest fire pit, the plain tables and the crude chairs that furnish the regular Mixe kitchen now share the space with the chest containing the Kigaapj, which has now acquired the imposing features of a shrine, covered with bundles of flowers and dry maize leaves, illuminated by candles and stained with the hardened blood of sacrificed birds. Meanwhile, assembled around the keeper, in a deceivingly disordered way, the political and religious hierarchy of the pueblo, stands solemnly in groups which preserve the different ranks; the *capitanes* stand with the topiles, flanked by the *Presidente Muncipal* the *Síndicos* and the *Alcalde* and on the back of the room, the *Regidores* of the Church stand with their deputies. The wives of all the men who hold a position within the local hierarchy stand on a side, observing how their husbands bow to the keeper and humbly follow her instructions. The silence grows as the audience sinks in a darkness pierced by the dim sunlight filtering through the timber walls of the kitchen, listening to the prayers and observing the keeper's hands disappearing into the chest, touching and handling the ancestors in imperceptible ways.

The quiet mood only starts to change when the monotonous intonation of the keeper's prayer is replaced by the voices of the *cantores* who fill the air with high pitched chants. These songs, accompanied by flutes and clarinets are gradually suffocated by the band's trumpets, tubas, bass drums and cymbals which impose the energetic rhythm of the *sones* and *jarabes*, dragging the audience to the exterior of the house. The hushed atmosphere of the ritual

disappears amid the joyful, loud environment of the fiesta, where people eat the sacrificed birds, distribute the tamales and drink copiously.

Tuuwabjp, Mëëkum, Tsejkaats and the influence on climate

Throughout the cult to the Kigaapj one of the keeper's main tasks consists on exercising a metaphysical and socionatural (Viveiros de Castro) influence on the inëë of weather to persuade these to intercede for the community, to allow the prosperous growth of milpas and an abundant harvest, something that is achieved by performing the already ceremony of *Tuuwabjp* and two additional rites know as *Mëekum* (First Cut of Maize Ears) and *Tsejkaat*s (Harvest).

As it was mentioned before, Tuuwabjp is celebrated only if rains are not arriving on time; the rite follows a similar sequence to those of the Farewell and Maadug ceremonies, including the customary preparation of a sacred meal in the pots left in front of the Kigaapj´s chest and by a pilgrimage, which in this case consistis in visiting spring located about four kilometres from Tamazulapam´s centre known as *Mmbadt Nijt.* At this sacred place, the keeper helped by the wives of the *comandantes de policía* in charge of the topiles and the spouses of the Church's *regidores* (the same women who helped carrying the ancestors during their relocation) leave an offering for the inëë of the water source which is placed on four wide leaves of maize or banana (similar to those employed to make tamales) and sacrifice four birds which will be cooked after returning to the warden´s house.

In contrast to Tuuwabjp, Mëëkum or the *First Cut of Maize Ears* is an obligatory rite. It is celebrated when the first tender grains of maize appear on the corncobs. The purpose of the

ritual is to ask the inëë and the ancestors to bring prosperity, the right quantity of rain, verify that the milpas are growing well and prepare a ritual meal of tamales made with the maize from the first rains. Mëëkum is celebrated not on a fixed date, but in one established by the keeper. In order to set the right time for the ceremony, the custodian must put in practice a form of geographical and ecological knowledge which comprises examining the texture, smell and colour of the milpas, to follow the course of the clouds and to observe the variations in the humidity and colouring of soils. The ritual has to be celebrated when the maize is set between two stages of growth, one known as *Xu'ux* when the corn ears are small and milky and *Xogukum*, corresponding to that stage in which the ears have acquired a thick consistence, firm enough to make tortillas with them[26]. Such stage is a rather subtle one and lasts only for a few days, thus, if the maize collected for on the wrong date it will be unripe or too hard and the tamales for the ritual meal will lack the expected quality.

Mëëkum begins when a group of *topiles* from the municipal offices and another one from the Catholic church (both groups composed mostly by young men) ramble through the lands of Tamazalupam in order to gather two bundles of thirteen maize plants which will be taken to the keeper´s house and placed next to the ancestors´chest. At dawn, both groups take a long walk through the undulating trails of the village, inspecting the different milpas and selecting individual plants of maize according to their quality and then cutting them without asking permission to their owners.

[26] Highland Mixe identify 25 stages in the development of the milpa, which correspond to the slowest growth cycle which takes place in the milpas located at the highest altitudes. Such stages receive the following names: 1. Mook (corncob), 2. Mooktomnt (seed), 3. Tyimm (water absorption), 4. Myuk (germination), 5. Tuukjts taatsk ("mice ears" which indicates the appearance of the first leaves), 6. Amyatsk (two leaves), 7. Atyoojk (three leaves), 8. Matsyum (corncob can be clasped), 9. Jee´p (first work, when dirt is reaffirmed on the plants´ bottom), 10. Ixkapaa (second work, when dirt is reaffirmed on the plants´ bottom), 11. Yukpigek (curled leaves), 12. Ko´menkap (spear shaped leaves), 13. Tukpoo'xa (first male flowers), 14. Majpxinmpuux (many male flowers or spikes), 15. Tuykpuja (appeareance of jilote or female flower), 16. Maajpxyinmpej (lots of female flowers), 17. Pujkida'aky (end of flowering period), 18. Bindoo´tso'nup (grain rows appear), 19. Xu'ux (milky grains), 20. Mëëkum (grains suitable for tamales), 21. Xogukum (to make tortillas), 22. Juu'kxan (mature corncobs), 23. Tuuktusip (drying begins), 24. Tu'ujtsan (corn is dry), 25. Tutsnaxy (corn is too dry).

This part of the ceremony can be regarded both as a pilgrimage and as a display of political authority. The topiles not only visit the ancestors´ dwelling but they also attend the milpas which, as we saw before, are highly ritualised places. The walk is a way of recognising and asserting authority over the village´s fields, of indentifying the limits and frontiers that define the communitarian space and a mechanism to emphasise the communal character of land tenure.

Once the groups have gathered the maize, they return to the keeper´s house to leave the offerings. At this stage, Mëëkum develops in the same fashion of the rituals described above; the custodian recites a prayer to thank the inëë and the ancestors for the maize and proceeds to take a portion of the corncobs to prepare the dough for the first tamales of the year which will be shared by all the attendants to the ceremony.

The tender, sweet and relatively small tamales of Mëëkum are important because their presence at the table is an auspicious sign, indicating that the milpas are developing strong and well, that a good harvest lies ahead and that every household in the community will be able to establish good relationships with kin, friends and neighbours. Mëëkum is a ritual of a refined and delicate spirit; unlike ceremonies involving eating meat and heavy drinking, this celebration emphasises gastronomic refinement, the intimate nature of kitchen and cooking as well as the role of the keeper as a protector of the community and her ability to bring the inëë into the social sphere.

Four or five months after performing Mëëkum, it is customary to celebrate *Tsejkaat*s or the Harvest ritual. This follows the same sequence of Mëëkum; the civil and religious topiles roam through the communitarian lands collecting two sets of thirteen maize plants from the fields to make an offering to the keeper and the ancestors, the custodian recites the

standardized prayers to the inëë before and the audience shares the usual meal. There are only two variations during Tsejkaats; the first is that the corn, now mature and strong, will be used to prepare *tortillas* and not tamales. The second consist in that after leaving the Kigaapj's house, the two authorities will return to the Church and to the Palacio Municipal carrying a fraction of the tortillas made with the corn offered to the Kigaapj. The tortillas and a few corncobs are placed at the altar inside the Catholic Church while the rest are left at the municipal office. Tsejkaaats involves redistributing the gifts of corn brought by the inëë and transformed into food by the keeper and expanding their circulation by taking them them into the sphere of two other importance "force fields" that form the community. By placing the food in the altar, the maize produced through the covenant between different beings and mediated with the help of the keeper will also be shared divine dwellers of the Catholic Church and by the ritualized men that serve in the civil hierarchy.

In terms of the relationship with the inëë, *Tsejkaats'* aim is to ensure that the inëë will help to have enough maize for the rest of the year, so the community can eat and save enough seeds for the next planting season. Tortillas, like tamales in Mëëkum, are a symbol and an index of prosperity and a prelude of the times that lie ahead for the community; their quality and abundance will be determinant to know if there will be hunger, conflict or if the vast number of fiestas that take place during the dry season (from September to March) will be celebrated as deserved.

The way in which the custodian acquires the power to influence the weather is not entirely clear, nevertheless, Mesoamerican ethnography on ritual specialists known as *graniceros* provides a framework for comparison through the studies[27]. The term granicero designates a

[27] The word *granicero* derives from *granizo,* the Spanish term for hail and it is used in many different Mexican regions (both indigenous and not) to. The pioneer study of the *graniceros* was carried by Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil (1968) who found a wide range of weather specialists among the rural villages located at the slopes of the Iztacihuatl and Popocatepetl volcanoes in the Highland Plateau. Known as *aureros,*

form of ritual expertise in which the initiated are capable of manipulating the weather, either by bringing or making rain and exercising control over certain meteorological phenomena such as hail, winds and thunder. According to David Lorente, *graniceros* "functionally integrate the most varied aspects of Mesoamerican cosmology" (Lorente, 2009, p. 208) by merging the "human", "natural" and "supernatural" orders including the cult mountains and the dead, water, rain and thunders as well as the veneration to caves, rivers, sanctuaries and crosses. Although most graniceros were granted the gift of interceding with meteorological forces after being struck by a lightning, the ethnography reports cases in which the specialists received their power while dreaming, through ingesting hallucinogenic plants or mushrooms or by means of divination (including the use of Spanish cards or *baraja española*, maize seeds or the yolk of an egg). Most graniceros have the ability to transform themselves into animals or in meteorological phenomena; they are beneficial characters who serve as guardians of their communities, are capable of healing (many of them are women who also serve as midwifes) and fundamental for propitiating the growth of plants, although they can also inflict damage to individuals and villages, drying up their wells, rivers or waterfalls (Albores and Broda, 2007). The parallels between graniceros and the keeper from Tamazulapam are remarkable: similarly to the Nahua experts, the Mixe custodian also connects different spaces and places as well as a diversity of

Both the march of the religious and civil servicemen and the gathering of the maize can be considered a pilgrimage and an exhibition of political authority. The trek implies a reconnaissance of the village´s lands, while taking maize from random plots without asking

quialpequi ("Rain Makers" in Nahuatl), *teotlazqui*, *tiemperos, aguadores, claclasqui* and even as *misioneros del temporal,* researchers have registered the presence of graniceros in the states of Tlaxcala, Puebla, Morelos, Estado de México and in the periphery of Mexico City. While studies on *graniceros* have been carried predominantly among Nahua communities, there are good reasons to think that they must be a phenomenon extended throughout Highland Mesoamerica. A detailed account of the historical and ethnographic literature on the subject can be found in David Lorente, 2009.

the owners´ permission can be seen as way of stressing the communal character of property and a manner of reinforcing a language of sharing and reciprocity. Additionally, the ritual congregates the "civil" and the "religious" ladders the hierarchy under the authority of the keeper and the ancestors. The latter is important because it is a moment in which the hierarchical structures, developed through the long and problematic history of contacts with the Catholic Church and the State bow

Women's rituality and communitarian landscape

Previous descriptions make evident that one of the salient aspect of the Kigaapj's is the centrality of women. Although Mixe women participate of ritual obligations and have positions within the communitarian hierarchy these spaces tend to be male-dominated[28] and during the major public fiestas, women are generally confined to the cooking area which is set at the margins of the celebrations and they are also excluded from reciting long ceremonial speeches and banned from dancing at the beginning of the band's performance as the first dance is usually reserved for men. Furthermore, during blessings at the Catholic temple or in events held at the main square women usually occupy a quiet, subordinated place. In contrast, throughout ceremonies dedicated to the Kigaapj, women acquire a distinct ritual character whereas predominantly female spaces, activities and objects (household, kitchen, cooking pots) become imbued with sacred power and elevated to a ritual status. The masculine audience[29] in turn, occupies a subordinated position, acting as kitchen assistants to

[28] From a purely impressionistic point of view and considering conceptual and historical differences, I would risk saying that the proportion of women and men participating in village´s local governments in the Sierra Mixe is not too dissimilar to national rates of political distribution at party level.

[29] The audience can be quite large as it is formed by the total number of individuals who hold a position within the community's government, each one with their wives, the band of music (between 12 and 40 performers), the keeper' nuclear and extended family, her friends and a large array of ex-authorities including relatives and helpers of the warden of the previous year. The ex-keeper abstains from visiting the house of the new custodian as a way of preventing rivalries, avoiding potentially damaging envy and as a sign of respect to the new keeper´s authority.

the keeper who coordinates the way in which food is added to the pots in which the ancestors are fed.

In Mixe ceremonial life, cooking is commonly subordinated to food consumption which occupies the spotlight throughout the course of most rituals. Most fiestas contain a subtext which praises eating and drinking and exalts such activities as ways of establishing alliances and as major social and political mediators. In contrast to this dominant emphasis on eating, Kigaapj´s ceremonies incorporate food preparation as a central theme of the ritual. The wise and patient preparation of the meals, with its combination of magic and gastronomy, is a powerful practice since it leads to the creation of genealogical and synchronic relationships that connect mythical ancestors, sacred beings and powerful climatic forces with the (human) community. During the Kigaapj's ceremonies, cooking is transformed into a practice capable of linking the household, local sacred sites and the regional-ethnic location of Zempoaltepetl, (a site that all Mixe villages recognise as a sacred element of their geography).

Kigaapj´s ceremonies constitute a ritual (re)creation of the community and the communitarian landscape; they merge sacred places, weather (which is the result of the agency of the inëë of wind, thunder and lightning) and the political hierarchy of the village through a complex sequence formed by pilgrimage, speech, cooking, eating and celebrating. The cult to the Kigaapj permits to establish a language of reciprocity capable of giving birth to a network of relationships formed by places and beings characterised by their ontological differences, such network is the community; a not entirely human space but one formed by the interaction of all those different sacred beings and places.

Ceremonies to the Kigaapj generate a force that links the kitchen's intense human sociability with the dominion of the milpa (another space characterised by the constant interaction between animals, plants, spirits and humans) and with places whose domesticity is less patent

and where contacts between humans and non-humans are less frequent but important for the reproduction of social life. Places to collect wood, water, mushrooms and medicinal plants or used as hunting grounds[30] need to be treated with care, due to the physical and metaphysical risks implied in their management and the same occurs with places such as village´s boundaries, common lands shared by two or more pueblos and other transitional areas where fierce, dangerous and mischievous spirits dwell. However, the untamed and risky nature of these places does not exclude them from the social sphere, on the contrary, the creation of the communitarian territory demands to establish reciprocal relationships between the different beings that populate the landscape. In that sense, the Mixe community is not anthropocentric territory (defined through ethnicity, language or history) but a space formed through interactions between multiple centres and multiple natures.

The role of the keeper consists precisely in abridging distances and tensions between places and beings. She is able to do this because of the pilgrimage undertaken at the beginning of the cycle but also due to her abilities as a cook, a peasant and a strict follower of the local custom. The keeper is someone with the knowledge on how to make offerings to the inëë and with the necessary abilities to take care of the ancestors, an equivalent of being able to deal with the death. She is a human person, but an exceptional one, with supernatural alliances which allow her to intercede between people and powerful non-human entities.

[30] While hunting is still important for the Mixe, it is a practice that is in decay and retreat, due to evident and worrying ecological pressures. Young people for example, do not recall seeing many wild animals which appear constantly in the narratives of the elderly and they have a zoological knowledge considerably less rich than that of their seniors.

Maps, mapping and place-making in the Sierra Mixe

'La géographie est plus qu'une base ou un élément. Elle est une puissance. De la Terre montent des forces qui attaquent ou protègent l'home, qui son comportement propre, qui se mêlent a sa vie organique et physique, a telle enseigne qu'il est impossible de séparer le monde extérieur des faits proprement humains'.

Eric Dardel, L'homme et la terre

Having considered the significant amount of time that the Mixe invest moving between villages, from one plot of land to the other or travelling to work in cities and towns outside the Sierra, one of the first tasks that I attempted during the initial phase of my research consisted in asking people to draw maps of the lands and places they visited. Candidly, I thought that creating a sort of "native cartography" could be employed as a useful tool for understanding people's itineraries as well as certain aspects of the Mixe conception of the region and of the geography of the Sierra in general.

Nevertheless, my request for maps proved to be a conversation stopper that invariably led to a dead-end and was often seen as a pointless task by the Mixe. My initial interpretation of this resistance towards maps consisted in thinking that the act of mapping could reveal existing or potential conflicts over land ownership that my informants were reluctant to reveal. However as time went by, it became clear that the attitude of the Mixe towards maps could not be understood solely in terms of power relations, or as manifestations of agrarian conflicts, but as part of a distinct way of perceiving space whose rationales is different from that of western cartographic practices and from written culture in general. One should not think that in this particular context, maps and mapping were disconnected or absent from political and territorial struggles. As in other peasant settings in Mesoamerica, cadastral records, land titles and maps have always been at the core of conflicts for land and similarly to many other parts

of Mexico, they are privileged spaces in which to observe the clash between hegemonic and subaltern interests and logics (Craib, 2004).

Mixe highland villages are no exception in this sense. Conflicts over land exist within villages and also with neighbouring towns (although they do not manifest with the intensity and violence that characterised them in past decades) and quite often, disagreements over possession have been worsened when people turned to Mexican government agencies that often produced imprecise and contradictory maps. These imprecise cartographies only exacerbated existing conflicts and opened the door for government officials interested in exercising power and political cooptation to intervene in intra-communitarian conflicts. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the Mixe are well aware of the manipulative, contradictory and often incoherent strategies followed by Mexican government agencies in relation to land issues, this was not enough to explain their indifference towards maps as people rarely refused to show me their plots and most of the time, they would talk unreservedly about land quarrels between relatives or with other *pueblos*.

What the Mixe found difficult to conceive was that maps could be considered proof of the existence of land and even stranger, that they could be considered as undisputed evidence of property. For locals, maps were regarded as abstract instruments utterly disconnected from reality and without relationship to the practices through which places are socialised and integrated into the life of the communities.

Having reached this point, I should emphasise that the Mixe attitude towards written maps should not be considered at any time the result of some type of lack of cartographic culture or the product of a naïve attitude to the ways of the *mestizo*. Maps are certainly not unknown to the Mixe and in many communities authorities have traditionally served as custodians of land titles granted by colonial powers. They have a robust knowledge on how the state negotiates

and exercises its power by employing cartographic instruments and also, that much of the relationship between the Mexican government and indigenous groups is mediated by maps that are part of an intricate bureaucratic apparatus.

Despite this awareness of the importance that maps have played in the history of the relationship between indigenous communities and the (colonial and independent) state, the idea of geography implied in scientific maps and the type of hierarchisation that is consubstantial to national cartographies has not been internalised by the Mixe, who have developed a different type of geographic knowledge that rejects the type of representation used in Western geography while employs other categories and practices to think, create and localise places.

This "geographicity" is rooted in a different type of epistemology that, in its turn, entails the existence of a distinct type of power and society. The geographic conception of the Mixe must be understood in the context of a cosmology in which human societies are seen as part of a wider network of relationships that involve the participation of non-human communities formed by natural and supernatural beings. This form of understanding the links between humans, natural beings, spirits and even objects, resembles the "multinaturalism" and "perspectivism" that –according to Viveiros de Castro- characterises the thought of Amerindian peoples (Viveiros de Castro, 1992, 1998). In a similar manner to the peoples of the Amazon basin, the Mixe recognise continuities between the souls of humans and other beings; they think that bodies are different but souls are similar. The Mixe, like other Mesoamerican peoples (Guiteras-Holmes, 1961; Pitarch, 1996), consider that humans have multiple souls and that in some cases, human and non-human beings share the same essence. This identification of humans with flora and fauna and other natural phenomena is clearly expressed in *nagualismo* and *tonalismo,* the Mesoamerican complex of beliefs which roughly described, holds that some powerful individuals –the *naguales*- have the power to transform

themselves in lightning or thunder or in birds, dogs, snakes and other animals. T*onalismo* is a wide-spreaded Mesoamerican conception according to which every person has a fellow animal (or some climatic phenomenon), called *tona, tonally* or tso'ok in Mixe, with which it has a shared identity and whose destinies are linked to the point that if the *tso'ok* dies, the person will die as well (Kaplan, 1956; Gossen, 1975; Signorini, 1979, 1989; López-Austin, 1980; Báez-Jorge, 1998; Galinier, 2004)[31].

However, in the Mesoamerican context continuities and correspondences between humans and non-humans are expressed not only through embodiment but also through a form of multi-locality in which interactions between different types of beings are intimately linked to space. To understand what this multi-locality is and how it is incorporated in social life, it is important to bear in mind that for Mesoamerican indigenous groups, in a similar way to North American native peoples (Ball, 2002), the physical space is also considered to be animated; having a soul (or many of them), being part of a community and participating in relationships of exchange and reciprocity, are attributes that are not exclusive of humans, animals and plants, but they are seen as qualities of geographic features and landscapes such as mountains, caves and rivers. The latter interact with the humans, plants and supernatural creatures that inhabit them or visit them (either to cultivate, gather food, lumber or any other activity) in the same ways as any other social actor would. Places give and receive gifts; they communicate with other beings and react like animated creatures do; a place can damage a person if it is offended or does not receive an adequate treatment.

[31] According to Zolla (1994) the terms *nagual* and *tona* have two different meanings which nevertheless, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In some cases, the nagual or tona is associated with witchcraft and illness. Among different Mesoamerican peoples, there are *brujos* (witches) with the gift of transforming themselves into animals or meteorological phenomena and they usually employ this power to take control of the soul of other people and cause them some type of harm. In other cases the nagual and the tona are considered to be the alter-ego of every individual. In most cases, people do not know who their nagual or tona is, with the exception of healers (*curanderos*) who can tell the identity of their alter-ego by means of calendaric interpretation or by dreaming. In the case of the Mixtecs of Oaxaca, the identity of the nagual of the person is determined by the midwife who marks a place near the house of the newborn and then sees which animal left its track. Regional variations on nagualismo are multiple, but It appears to be a phenomenon present throughout all Mesoamerica.

Physical places are not restricted to a mere background on which social life takes place but have their own agency and history and therefore, affect the course of human activity. Additionally, places are seen not as static bodies fixed in the landscape but as entities that are subject to constant change, not only in the form of ecological modifications but because geographic features can move from one place to another (and have a social life beyond their specific location) due to their ability to unfold and adopt the form of humans or natural beings. For example, Kong'oy, the cultural hero of the Mixe, is a figure who can appear in the shape of a human being, as a thunderbolt or a snake but he also in the shape of Zempoaltepetl Mountain, the highest peak of the Mixe region. The animated quality of physical spaces is not restricted to major ritual and mythical places, but every geographic feature and even man-made buildings are capable of transforming themselves.

An interesting characteristic of this understanding of places is their simultaneous character as both individuals and communities. On the one hand, places have their own biography and relate individually to other beings, but as places, they contain other beings within or on top of them and as such, they are considered to be communities. Every place constitutes a type of microcosm provided with its own hierarchy, ritual life and economy which makes it distinct and unique from other places.

When, for example, the Mixe from the town of Ayutla visit the cave located at the top of the *Cerro de la Cruz*, they enter into a sacred space governed by rules different from those of everyday life. The cave is the sanctuary of the *Señor del Rayo* (Lord of Lightning) where he lives accompanied by other deities that are subordinated to him. Inside the cave there is an altar with images of catholic saints, candles and flowers left by the pilgrims who visit the site. The cave is used to ask for gifts or protection by the Lord of Lightning or to perform rituals of divination. Visitors to the cave, helped by a *xemabie,* take different offerings to the resident divinity; small tortillas are used to request money or to have good fortune in

commercial operations, little balls of cornmeal dough to ask for rain or a bigger tortilla used to predict the fortune of a child. Sometimes people will sacrifice a turkey or chicken, spreading the blood on top of a secondary altar made of stones. Part of the food (or a squirt of blood in the case of animals) is left on the altar to be consumed by the gods of the cavern and the rest is taken to the house of those who made the offering to be eaten in a fiesta. These offerings are ritual exchanges aimed at establishing relationships of reciprocity between humans, gods and natural beings and forces which create a form of communion rooted in a specific site.

At the same time, the divinities of a specific place can transform themselves into animated beings and move throughout the geography. Thus, for the Mixe is not uncommon to see the *Señor del Rayo* transformed into a snake, or to meet mountains that have changed into humans or bulls that ramble in paths and roads. The Sierra is filled with places where the ground opens to reveal the existence of hidden treasures, of stones that are sleeping giants waiting to awake, of tunnels that communicate caves with ancient villages.

This notion of places as individuals and communities exposes a completely different approach to geography and place-making. In contrast to written maps and western cartographic notions that locate and fix boundaries between places through abstraction and by simplifying their particularities, the Mixe way of "mapping" is achieved through the reverse operation; knowing a place and other territorial procedures such as assigning land rights or establishing borders (religious, ritual and political spaces) is the result of a process that consists in recognizing the particularities of each terrain in order to distinguish it from others.

Places are not only defined solely in terms of their physical characteristics (a necessary but not sufficient condition) but by the totality of relationships that are established within and with them; a mountain is different from another mountain because of its shape, for the type of

flora and fauna that can be found on it but also because a group of individuals have established a certain type of link with the place through work and (ritual) exchange. Thus, a mountain is different from another one as it is inhabited by a specific god, because it has certain ecological traits and also, because the people that inhabits or visits a mountain is implicated within its mythic, historic and cultural features.

The Mixe resistance towards written maps can be better understood in this context; maps are not only instruments developed by outsiders who are constantly looking to impose their rationality and fix limits, jurisdictions and property rights that do not recognise the rationale of human and supernatural links established through ritual, but they are regarded as tools that attempt to represent what cannot be represented but that is lived and performed. The map brings with it a type of stillness and a form of abstraction that does not accommodate to the Mixe understanding of space. The Mixe see space as a dimension that is unstable, heterogeneous and variable and defined through the actual relationships that are established on and with the land. Probably, the only map that could fit into the Mixe conception of space would be a map similar to the one described by Borges in *On exactitude on Science* ("...a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point by point with it") (Borges; 1999) but this one should include not only what is visible but also every invisible thing.

This vision of places as animated entities, immersed in variable relationships with other beings has the effect of blurring distinctions between physical and human geography (the territorial expression of a wider separation between culture and nature). In this way, rigid separations between human and non-human are substituted by a dynamic form of circulation that enables the communication between different forms of existence. Communications between worlds is possible through sacrifice, offerings and exchange of gifts (including

fiestas with music, dance and drinking) and also by the actions performed by those powerful individuals capable of transforming themselves into other creatures.

Interactions between humans, flora, fauna, climate and places should not be understood in terms of a unity of principle or as a form of monism. Space, geography and landscape are not stable dimensions in which relationships take place under a unique form. Rather, the Mixe see space as a fragmented element and geography as an unstable and contingent field. Setting rules of conviviality and establishing frontiers amid human and non-human orders are regarded not as definitive and concluding operations but as tasks that need to be constantly re-elaborated.

Once again, the Mixe understanding of geography differs from Western geographic notions as it sees space as having a type of heterogeneity and instability that cannot be represented through the means a static cartography. The Mixe sense of geography resembles the spatial ideas of the Plains Indians from South-western United States described by Lee Irwin, according to this author: "the topology [of Native Americans from the Plains] is not determined by the physical structure of the world, in the western scientific sense, but by the way in which the world incorporates a variety of mysterious powers, beings and realms. Physical boundaries are not rigidly distinct, nor are they classified according to any predetermined analytical schema [...] there is a strong sense of the continuum between human perception, the natural world and the mysterious appearance of visionary events –a sense, that allows features of the lived world to blend, transform, or suddenly reveal new dimensions of meaning and power. A stone might speak, an animal change into another creature, a star fall to earth as a beautiful woman [...] The collapse of physical boundaries is a consistent feature of the visionary topology. Thus the world constitutes itself as permeable, transformative, mysterious and powerful" (Irwin, 1994, p. 27).

Rituals and place-making

Whenever I discussed issues related to maps with people from different villages, they often would tell me that anyone could produce a piece of paper and claim a piece of land as their own. "Anyone can have their own map - a friend told me while he was ploughing his *milpa*- and say, this is my land, this belongs to me. What is more difficult is to tell what is *within* the land. If you have been working on your milpa then you will know that here is a peach tree and over there there's this rock and who is working the land next to you". What my friend was saying cannot be understood solely as a form of hostility towards theoretical knowledge nor as a sceptical attitude towards written technologies or as a lack of recognition of forms of property fixed in maps and land titles. What he was implying was that in that particular *milpa* not only was he the one who knew what things were around but also that he was the one who had sacrificed the turkeys inside the field to ask for a good crop, that it was he who maintained relationships of reciprocity with neighbours and with animals and supernatural beings that inhabited and visited the place. In the *milpa*, my friend was not only working or performing an economic activity, he was also performing important ritual operations that made him part of a community where he had obligations to others and was expecting to be reciprocated; this sociological relationship was not tacitly implied or merely distinguished by the anthropologist, but was something that my friend was fully aware of and his acts were guided according to this idea.

This principle of places as societies or as intersections between different human and non-human orders can also be observed in the rituals that are annually performed at the boundaries of villages. Tlahuitoltepec, like many other villages in Oaxaca, was a *pueblo mancomunado*, a village that held its lands in common property with other communities (in

this case, with the villages of Santa María Yacochi, Tamazulápam del Espíritu Santo and San Pedro y San Pablo Ayutla). In the year I spent doing fieldwork in the Sierra Mixe, Tlahuitoltepec left the commonwealth after agreeing its common limits with the neighbouring villages, obtaining an agrarian title from the government and handing over a piece of land that Tamazulapam claimed as its own. Nevertheless, they still performed the annual ceremony at the *punto trino*, where a boundary stone marks the limits of the lands. In this ceremony a ritual specialist from each village known as "*cuidador de linderos*", or boundary keeper, makes an offering. This offer usually consists in sacrificing a chicken or turkey whose blood is spread on top of the stone, lighting candles and putting a pot of *tamales* at the base of the rock and then distributing cigarettes, mescal and *tepache* reddened with *achiote* (fermented maguey juice with annatto) to the village authorities and the elders who act as witnesses to the ritual. The boundary keepers, who in most cases are also the "day counters" (*contadores de días)* or "calendars" (*calendarios* as they are called in villages outside Tlahuitoltepec), gather around the boundary stone and recite a prayer in which they ask for enough rain and a good harvest, to demand the wind to be clement and not to carry illness with it/him, to ask for the success of the new authorities of each town and to avoid quarrels and fights between neighbours. After the prayer, the mescal or the tepache kept in bottles by the authorities in their rucksacks is served to the audience in bowls or in plastic glasses and three cigarettes are given to each person.

The purpose of the ritual is not only to reaffirm links between villages and to establish the limits between them, but also, it is an offering for the *poj*, a divine entity who is simultaneously a being who lives in the area near the boundary stone but also the stone and the place itself. Poj means "wind" in *ayuuk* language and it is one of the most important gods of the Mixe pantheon. Like most deities for the Mixe, it has a dual character than can be beneficial as it carries rain, words and music with it but it is also dangerous since it can cause

sickness and hunger and erode the land. In the case of the boundary stone, the *poj* that lives there is different from the more generic god of wind, is its personification but he also belongs specifically to that place. The *poj* from the *punto trino*, I was told, can appear to people in the form of a five year old child with yellowish hair and eyes. He is the servant of the mountain's god and can be treacherous and harmful if people do not treat him with respect and consideration. Like most divinities among the Mixe, the *poj* is both this elfish boy (similar to the *chaneque* of the Nahua. the Maya *aluxe* or the *la'a* of the Mazatec) (Incháustegui, 2000; Greenberg, 2002; Montemayor and Freischmann, 2005) and also the very place where it lives. It can appear in its semi-human form and be found wandering in the fields and more frequently at a crossroad, but what is important here is that he *is* the place. The tamales, the sacrificed poultry and the trickle of mescal that is dropped by the audience on the earth are for the *poj*, to keep him pleased so that he does not create trouble among the villages.

The relationship between the villages was modified in the legal terms of the state, as Tlahui is now a community with its own land title (*Título Agrario*), which formalised its separation from the commonwealth. Nevertheless, people and local authorities from Tlahuitoltepec and the surrounding pueblos do not see the new legal framework as a definitive act. They consider that boundaries are not something that only involve human communities but a field in which other beings and forces intervene and therefore, need to be ritually recognised and given adequate treatment. By making the offering to the *poj* the village authorities were reaffirming the conviction that humans are not exclusive owners of the land but they share it with natural and supernatural beings that have rights over it just like humans do; the latter are obliged to coexist with them and follow similar rules to those that apply for any member of the community. Property and possession of land are not defined *ad perpetuum* through legal mechanisms but established through constant negotiations between human and non-humans. In that sense, the Mixe do not have a legal framework that establishes *a priori* who can access

land or how land rights are exercised, beyond what the status of communal land (*bienes comunales*) that rules most Mixe villages states (which is basically a framework that prohibits buying and selling land while it leaves possession to be defined in customary terms). If conflicts over land appear, people will consult elders, elected authorities and shamans who will act based on custom to mediate between quarrellers or they will try to reinstate balance with spirits and gods.

In the Mixe villages private property and *ejidos* are quite rare and most land it is held as communal property (Díaz; 2007). The main criterion for demonstrating possession over a plot of land is based on custom. People will claim and recognise as their own those fields that their families have been cultivating for a long period of time or places that were cleared in the forests by them (i.e. lands in which they invested hard work). The same applies to those areas used to pick up wood, collect mushrooms or fruits. Nevertheless, possession of a plot of land that is used for an economic activity also populated by multiple entities that inhabit trees, plants and rocks and therefore, people are obliged to share these places with them and establish a relationship that implies mutual obligations between humans and supernatural entities.

Failure to fulfil with obligations towards the deities that inhabit (and are in themselves) a specific place brings illness, bad crops and it affects relationships between families and with the community in general. Fright (called *susto* in Spanish and *tsijki'* or *tsoko'o mach* in Mixe language) is a disease which generally has a place-related origin. *Susto* can be caused by crossing a road without crossing oneself, by standing in a river or entering a cave alone or in someone's else house without permission and very often, in the cemetery. Its source is also attributed to a third person who, intentionally or not, "damaged" the sufferer through various means or because the latter witnessed something traumatic such as a fight or a death, but even in this cases the healer (*curandero)* will ask the patient or his family to reconstruct his latest

itineraries in order to recognise where fright occurred. Subsequently, the *curandero* will attempt to bring back the soul that is being kept by a spirit, usually a minor divinity or a dead ancestor.

One of the families with whom I spent more time in Tlahuitoltepec, told me a story about how the father suffered what probably was an aneurism or some type of cardiovascular stroke that left him unable to speak or walk and very close to death. After spending a couple of months in a hospital in the city of Oaxaca, the doctors gave no hope to the family but following a doctor's suggestion, they decided to take him to a prestigious *xemabie* in the neighbouring town of Tamazulapam to see if he could do something to cure the man. After being reprimanded by the *xemabie* for taking the patient to the doctors in Oaxaca and not to a Mixe healer and spending a fortune in hospital bills, the *xemabie* interrogated the family at length about the whereabouts of the father before he became ill, he then threw twenty-one maize seeds and recited a prayer in order to see where the soul was taken. He came to the conclusion that the man's spirit was taken by some angry dead relatives and that they were very close to taking the father's soul "to the other side".

Following these procedures, the *xemabie* drew a scheme or map of places at which the family should make different offerings and he also calculated the amount of candles, tamales and chicken that should be offered in each place. The seriousness of the man's ailment demanded the presence of the *xemabie* during the whole ritual, something unusual given that in most cases, the shaman will let people perform the ceremonies by themselves. The ritual not only required following a precise route that went through several sacred places but also demanded strict timing. It should start at dusk at the limits of Tlahuitoltepec and finish exactly at twelve o'clock at the top of mountain Zempoaltepetl, about four hours walk from the village's centre. Thus, the family accompanied by the *xemabie* placed offerings and lit candles at the beginning of the path that leads from the highway to the village, at the chapels of Santa

Cecilia (the musicians' patron saint) and El Calvario (the Calvary) in the centre and from there to the cemetery and to the altar dedicated to San Antonio and finally to the peak of the mountain where they sacrificed some turkeys. In each place the *xemabie* asked the ancestors to release the soul of the father, sometimes by begging and sometimes angrily demanding that the patient be freed. After finishing the ritual the *xemabie* told the family that after fifteen days he would start to recover and that effectively happened. The father started walking again and his ability to speak, although diminished, was restored.

Transitions between spaces

What previous ethnographic examples have in common is that they show the spatial fragmentation with which the Mixe perceive the world around them. Moving from one place to another consists in a permanent transition between places governed by different logics and where (political, social and religious) orders and hierarchies are constantly altered. Places such as the *punto trino* but also the intersections of roads, streams, rivers and caves demand a careful treatment as they are transitional and ambiguous places in which one exits an area governed by a god to enter the place ruled by a different deity and where the world inhabited by humans comes in contact with the supernatural order. A similar principle applies to journeys to other villages and cities. The latter are considered to be places in which different (often unknown) rules apply and where the outsider is always in a vulnerable and risky position, therefore, it is essential to behave with caution, courtesy and discretion. The Mixe are people who are always extremely diplomatic and even overcautious and distant in their treatment of strangers. When they are in a place in which they are unaware of the rules they tend to feel uncomfortable when they have not been properly introduced or do not know in which exact place they should be located.

The Mixe distributions of places is clearly asymmetric or at least, it is so diverse and mutable that it can hardly be seen in terms of the harmonic, fully ordered and symmetrical set of oppositions, as stated by classic Mesoamerican cosmological models (López-Austin, 1988; 1993; 1996; Galinier, 2004). In contrast to scientific geography, space and places are not fully cognoscible; there is always a range for ambiguity which makes it difficult to distinguish where a place ends and where it begins and sacred places contain a hidden dimension that only powerful ritual specialists can access. The transitional places mentioned in earlier paragraphs are considered to be dangerous as they occupy some sort of grey zone where sovereignties are uncertain and definitions are unclear. Whenever I asked the villagers about where Mount Zempoaltepetl's limits were, there was always disagreement; while some said that this question did not make any sense because the mountain was connected with caves and with different peaks, others said, that they were located somewhere around the base, where the road ends and still others never had thought about it but they believed it posed a difficult problem. The question about the limits of Zempoaltepetl could be extended to other natural/supernatural places and even to the distinction between human groups and settlements.

The Mixe regard mountains as places in which there is always something hidden, an unknown path, a secret cave, a mysterious village. When the Mixe observe a mountain they are aware that there is a side of it that cannot be scrutinised. The world is conceptualised as an irregular polyhedron whose faces cannot be entirely described except through means of inference. Phrases such as "we don't know what pueblos might be there" (*No sabemos qué pueblos pueden estar ahí*) or "we don't know what might be in that mountain" (*No sabemos qué puede haber en ese cerro*) were repeated with striking frequency and I think that they were not only expressions of a lack of knowledge but also kind of resistance against making categorical statements about a geography that is considered to be mysterious, boisterously diverse and even chaotic.

Ritual experts as geographic specialists

Although this element of uncertainty permeates the Mixe understanding of geography and despite the fact that space appears as a dimension that cannot be fully known or completely understood, we should not think that the Mixe are indifferent or give little importance to what happens in familiar and strange places. On the contrary, the Mixe dedicate a considerable part of their daily life to choosing "the right spot" in a complex exercise that involves making distinctions that are ecological (in the case of tasks such as cultivating, gathering food and hunting, selecting medicinal plants and lumbering) but also political and ritual as they involve a careful treatment of the relationship with human and non-human beings.

Places cannot be chosen arbitrarily or based on purely pragmatic or utilitarian reasons; curing an illness, naming a newborn child, asking saints and gods for gifts, visiting relatives and meeting strangers and a vast range of other political, economic and religious activities demand an adequate selection of the sites in which they will be developed as much as they require proper timing. In the Sierra Mixe geographic knowledge is always social knowledge. Not surprisingly diviners (such as the *xemabie*), healers (especially herbal-specialists) and ritual experts in charge of keeping count of the days (*calendarios, contadores de días* or *si:tu'*) (Lipp; 1998) are all specialists in identifying the specific areas that are spiritually powerful and where offerings and sacrifices can maximise their potential in order to bring greater benefits. In the village of Ayutla, for example, I accompanied a *curandera* to collect a herb that was going to be used to cure a man who had been injured by a bull. After locating the area in which the herb grew, the healer proceeded to select an adequate spot to pick the plant, avoiding places near stones, cultivated fields and trees. After selecting the right place, the *curandera* recited a prayer in which she politely explained to the herb why she was being taken out (by this time the healer was talking to the plant as if it was a feminine person) and

asking her to have the strength to cure the man. When I asked her why she did not gather the first plant that she found I was told that it was important to select a place in which there is no interference of spirits that inhabit other things or that could be using the same resource she was looking for.

What the previous example shows, is that ritual experts need to be considered as "geographic" specialists, even the *contadores de días,* responsible of keeping the count of the 260 day calendar, cannot perform their tasks correctly without a detailed knowledge of the terrain in which ceremonies need to be performed. This territorial aspect has been scarcely explored, as the literature on the subject of rituals mainly focuses in time, highlighting the continuity of contemporary calendar systems such as the prehispanic *Tonalpohualli* of the Nahua and the Mayan *Tzol Kin*[32] (López-Austin, 1993; Torres Cisneros, 2003).

Having reached this point it is necessary to take a pause in order to clarify certain aspects of this conception of geography. Until now I have attempted a description of how space and places are inscribed within a cosmological imagination that conceives social relationships as a constant interaction and dialogue between humans, natural and supernatural beings. I have depicted a conception that sees physical space and geographic places as animated entities with a sociability of their own and the way in which interrelations between human and non-human spheres are understood to be place-specific. Nevertheless, I think that this vision of

[32] In pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica there were two calendar systems, one with 365 days (a solar calendar) and another with 260 days. The latter was a ritual and agricultural calendar associated with the cycle of rain and the growth of maize. It is composed by 13 months with 20 days each. Each month was indicated with a number and a symbol that corresponded to a specific god. Ethnographic research carried by Suzanna W. Miles in the 1950's gave evidence of the existence of the ritual calendar among contemporary Mesoamerican peoples (Nash, 1957) especially in Highland Guatemala and in the Mexican state of Chiapas. Research carried by Lipp (1991) and Torres Cisneros (2003) and by the American archaeo-astronomer Anthony Aveni (1980) maintains that the 260 days calendar is still used by the Mixe. The calendar receives the name of *ŝi:tu'* and it is used to establish the appropriate moment to carry rituals for planting or harvesting, hunting and healing. The calendar also serves to indicate days of misfortune, when it is better to abstain from undertaking any task. Ritual specialists called "Day Counters" or "contadores de dias" in Spanish use the calendar to determine the source of an illness or to make sense of certain events such as the sighting of a wild animal. In a similar way to the Maya Tzol kin or the Nahua Tonalpohualli, the Mixe calendar assign to each day a name formed by a number (from 1 to 13) and a name (a total of 20 for each day of the month) (Zolla, 1994)

space not only reflects a vast animistic and almost pantheist form of religiosity, but it must also be understood as a set of principles for understanding, apprehending and relating to the complex natural and social diversity in which the Mixe are continuously involved.

The fragmentation and individualization of space that comes from this form of "geographical animism" cannot not be grasped if we do not take into consideration the ecological diversity that characterises the Sierra (the Mixe mountains resembles a smaller version of the Andean "vertical archipelago" (Murra, 1968, 1980; Mazuda, 1985) in which variations between ecological niches and the existence of contrasting differences in the age of forests are of fundamental importance), the multiple strategies employed by people to work the land, the striking physicality with which different climates and changes in landscape manifest themselves, as well as the exuberant plurality of dialects and historical experiences that can be found in the region. The Sierra Mixe has a rich history of cultural interactions with Zapotec, Chinantec, Mazatec and Mestizo peoples. Although the Mixe do not do not think of "the Other as its destiny" or show "the passion for exteriority" with the intensity of the Araweté described by Viveiros de Castro (Viveiros de Castro, 1992), they certainly recognise multiplicity, open-endedness and otherness as fundamental components of their ontology. That which is different (*lo diferente*) is something that is in a close proximity, but its strangeness along with the ritual importance derived from its alterity, does not becomes attenuated or dissolved due to closeness. The *different* and the *other* are always there, next to you, either as the unknown or as the mysterious. Furthermore, otherness is not necessarily something that belongs to those located outside or that remains stable since everyone is susceptible to become other, either by being physically transformed into a different creature or simply by crossing the threshold between different places that are subject to different rules. Self and identity are necessary unstable, both are categories that cannot be fixed in an environment in which cultural and natural diversity are so closely linked and interconnected;

otherness is a permanent possibility of every social arrangement and this is fully recognised by the Mixe.

Seeing space as fragmentary opens the possibility for a multi-centred society or one in which centres of power and (as we will see in a latter chapter) and knowledge have only a temporary and contingent existence. It rejects the existence of an all-encompassing hierarchy and a single, vertically integrated cosmological order. By making use of such operations, the Mixe explain their relationship with institutions and powers that came from outside their culture but have become incorporated within the space of their communities. Thus, in every Mixe village the Catholic Church is considered to be a (spiritually and politically) powerful place, with its own internal hierarchy that links divine beings (virgins and saints) with temporal authorities represented by the priest, the *sacristanes*, *capillos*, singers and *topilillos*. Nevertheless, the Mixe (including those who consider themselves to be faithful and rigorous Catholics) were very clear that the power of the Church (both as a physical space and as a ritual entity) was limited to the more or less defined limits of the building and to the temporality of its particular rituals. Other religious spaces such as the natural sites described throughout this chapter but also family altars, shrines and crosses were considered not as part of the Catholic religion but as autonomous spiritual sites, with their own order and specific rituality. This atomization of religious places contradicts another of the foundational thesis of Mesoamerican anthropology: that indigenous religiosity is the result of a syncretic process that gave origin to a form of indo-Catholicism in which European and native elements were merged to the point of being undistinguishable, at least at the eyes of faithful (Thompson, 1954; Vogt, 1969, 1993; Nutini; 1976, 1980; Reifler-Bricker, 1981; Gruzinsky, 2001).

The fact that the Mixe establish clear distinctions between the spaces of Catholicism (and in some villages with Protestantism) and those of "*el costumbre*" (literally, the custom, as they refer to the "traditional" or "native" religion) means that the faith brought (and sometimes

imposed) by outsiders has been situated not at the top of the local cosmological hierarchy, subsuming all native gods to the political order of Catholicism (as syncretic models hold) but it has been laterally located in relationship to other sacred spaces. Catholic spaces (and nowadays, Protestant ones) have been given their own locations, a specific field in which Christ, the Virgin and the Saints can perform miracles, sanction marriages and act as moral regulators, but their power is far from being absolute and their authority is restricted to specific moments and places ritually regulated. My friend Leovigildo brilliantly summarised this idea by saying: "in Church we burn candles and in the Mountain we make sacrifices".

Observed from the optic of Western cartography, the spatial distinctions of the Mixe may appear as purely ideological elements without the ability to give an account of the political and economic realities of the Sierra. From the point of view of a teleological history and from the perspective of the evolutionist narratives of the Mexican nation, the native geographic model appears to be a marginal (and marginalised) complex of beliefs and rituals that progressively deteriorate as the state and other hegemonic power impose their own rationality and their particular cosmographic visions. Nevertheless, in following chapters I will attempt to show that the Mixe understanding of space is much more than a mere intellectual concept or a residual form of rituality. My purpose will be to explore the ways in which this cosmological principle should be taken into consideration if we are to understand the inner flow of political and economic forces that shape the local community as well as the tensions that derive between those forces that push the Mixe towards a life based in the intimate spaces of the *rancherías* and those that bring them back to the life of the *cabecera municipal.* I will try to demonstrate that the life of the Mixe is not only a fluctuation between the hinterland and the centre, but that there is a third level of this flux which corresponds to the between the pueblo and an "outside" populated by different peoples.

My objective will be to analyze the way in which the Mixe understand "space" and to support that this serves not only for thinking about internal relationships and make sense of those places that result familiar to them, but that it is also a basic element for thinking and learning about what is located beyond their pueblos. Mixe cosmology, far from being a survival of pre-Hispanic times or an atavistic mechanism of resistance in which a marginal people can find (an almost secret) refuge, it is a fundamental tool for dealing with and actively engaging with powerful forces that originate in the centres of the Mexican State and with capitalist economies. In some ways, local ideas of geography, time and power are tools for engaging with the other without losing autonomy; for thinking of the modern without necessarily being modernised and to coexist with the state without embracing it.

Chapter II. Centripetal and centrifugal forces in the Sierra Mixe

Indigenous communities and the omnipresence of the State

IS IT CONCEIVABLE THAT THE EXERCISE OF HEGEMONY MIGHT LEAVE SPACE UNTOUCHED?

HENRI LEFEBVRE, *THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE*

The present chapter attempts to describe and interpret the Mixe model of power, the local conception of authority and the mechanisms employed in the formation of the local political hierarchy. Since I will be dealing mainly with what most anthropologists identify as an indigenous political system it is necessary to begin by referring to previous literature on political forms of government in the Mexican indigenous context as well as to classic discussions that have shaped our understanding of how past and present Mesoamerican societies are governed. Thus, I would refer in this chapter to seminal texts on the cargo-system (Rus and Wasserstrom, 1980; Collier, 1975; De Walt, 1975; Friedlander, 1975; Aguirre-Beltrán, 1981) and landmark debates on the political nature of the indigenous community (Carrasco, 1961; Wasserstrom; 1978; Chance and Taylor, 1985), indigenous Catholicism and syncretism(Vogt, 1969; Nash, 1970; Diener, 1978) and on the role of the state in the maintenance and transformation of indigenous forms of power (Aguirre-Beltrán, 1967; Wolf, 1955, 1957, 1959).

The reason for this constant referral to anthropological texts and scholarly traditions that many anthropologists now consider to be outdated if not anachronistic, is justified by the fact that, regardless of the criticisms made to classic conceptions of the indigenous community and despite the refutation of the Wolfian models of peasant society that dominated the

anthropology of Mexico during its *indigenista* phase, there is a fundamental notion that remains unaltered and still influences the way in which we understand power relationships in indigenous regions: this notion consists in the belief that indigenous forms of government are a mimesis of the state, that local forms of organization are either by-products of the imposition of state hegemony or remnants of ancient state formations of colonial and pre-Hispanic origin. More importantly, this underlying conception of indigenous political systems as state forms understands transformations in local societies mainly as echoes of wider changes that take place in the sphere of the state (either the colonial or the contemporary national state).

The identification of the indigenous community with the state has been a central and pervasive characteristic of the anthropology of Mesoamerican societies. Andrés Medina (1995) has explained that to a large extent, the anthropology of Mexico was born as an attempt to challenge L. H. Morgan's thesis that held that the Aztecs did not have a proper state but that it was a confederacy of tribes in the fashion of the Iroquois of North America, in which no proper centralisation existed. Thus the "search for the state" became a central and primordial concern of Mexican intellectuals and of scholars interested in Mexico. In a similar way to Peru, Mexico evokes in most social researchers images of high civilizations and complex social organisations; several generations of writers and artists (some of them working directly or closely in relation to anthropology) have systematically portrayed the history of the country as a continuous succession of states. Nationalists discourses have also represented Mexican history as an incessant struggle to restore an idyllic, subjacent (and therefore, eternal) nation-state whose origin goes back to the glorious days of Mexico-Tenochtitlan and the Mexica empire (Perez-Montfort, 1994; Tenorio-Trillo, 1996; Sheridan; 1999; Palacios, 1999; Smith, 2002).

The importance attributed to the state (as a historical and anthropological reality) has meant that there has been little room for the study of non-state forms of power or a recognition of significance that political and social arrangements outside the state have for the life of many rural and indigenous peoples. Moreover, the idea of a stateless society in Mesoamerica if accepted, has been seen as evidence of the existence of a primitive stage of human evolution or as an unusual condition of remote and peripheral peoples such as the Tarahumara of Chihuahua or the Lacandon of the Chiapas' rainforest. The fixation with the state in Mexican studies is an old and persistent trait; an in-depth history of this obsession would certainly be fascinating; one would probably have to return to the early colonial chronicles of Chimalpahin and Tezozomoc to locate the origins of this need to demonstrate that indigenous peoples in Mexico were builders and heirs of high civilizations and therefore, that the state was not a colonial imposition but a natural attribute of Mexican peoples and the inescapable (and desirable) fate of its history.

Although such a genealogical project is not entirely relevant here, it is important to bear in mind some characteristics of this dominant form of state-centrism that guides (and often contaminates) all representations of Mexican cultures. The widespread notion among Mesoamericanists and scholars of rural and indigenous Mexico is that some type of state formation has existed at least since the Mesoamerican pre-classic period[33] and that both past and present indigenous communities have organised their life following some form of centralised and pyramidal model of power, characterised by the presence of relatively specialised and permanent bureaucracy, forms of taxation (either in labour or in specie), a correspondence between ethnicity and territory and a vertically integrated religious system

[33] For an exhaustive discussion on state of formation and the interrelated problems of the development of the state from the point of view of archaeology, history and political theory with strong reference to Mesoamerica and Mexico see Gledhill and Benders, 1995.

that is present through all Mesoamerica and that constitutes the ideological basis of local social systems (Lopez Austin, 1988).

The particular development of such state formations, the type of transformations that they experienced after the introduction of colonial rule and the specific modes of articulation between the "indigenous political systems" and the different historical expressions of the Mexican modern state, are all topics that have been the subject of complex and intense debates. At the centre of these discussions there are questions about the egalitarian or hierarchical character of the indigenous community, on the autonomous or subordinated nature of its relationship with other powers[34]. Controversies have also revolved around the civic or religious character of local hierarchies, on the role of indigenous forms of government in maintaining or dissolving local ethnic identities and in relation to the function of local elites as agents of acculturation or as creators of cultural resistance (Cancian, 1967; De Walt, 1975, Chance, 1990). More recently, scholars interested in the subject of caciquismo and on the nature of power in the post-revolutionary regime have centred their debates on the degree of autonomy and dependency of rural and indigenous hierarchies in

[34] This classic debate on the political and economic nature of the indigenous community was somehow inaugurated (in the English speaking world) by Eric Wolf and Marvin Harris. On his celebrated article of 1957, Wolf established the basic features of an ethnographic current that sees in the indigenous community a response against colonialism and external intervention, a protective device to defend land, maintain equality among its members and ensure the cultural continuity of the ethnic group. Wolf's position was contested by Marvin Harris (1964) who saw the indigenous community as an "repressive and abusive" tool established by the catholic church , that does not provides effective defence against outsiders and does not redistributes wealth but pumps it out from the community, reinforcing a relationship of dependency with non-indigenous elites. These two opposing visions have endured and still be traced in contemporary ethnography and ethno-history. During this thesis I continuously refer to Jan Rus' work on the cooptation by post-revolutionary political machine of the local hierarchies of Chiapas' highland communities (Rus in Joseph, 1994) as a recent example of this perspective of the community and its "cargo-system" as a subordinated tool of hegemonic power. In contrast, Scandinavian anthropologist Leif Korsbaek, has continued the "Wolfian" tradition by stating that both the cargo-system and local hierarchies have reinforced their protective character as a response to neo-liberal policy (2009). While some of Korbaek's argument on the meaning of "defense" are debatable, it is interesting that he focused on indigenous police institutions (the *Policía Comunitaria* from Guerrero in Mexico, the *Ronda Campesina* in Peru and the *Guardia Tribal* in Colombia) to reinforce his view of cargo-systems as protective devices.

relation to presidential power and *priista* political power (Lomnitz,1991; Pansters, 1997; Knight and Pansters; 2006).

Nevertheless, regardless of differences in the definition of indigenous political systems and disagreements about its precise political and economic functions, the range of interpretations of cargo-systems and other indigenous political forms tends to see local hierarchies as small scale reproductions of the state that imitate (either through imposition or voluntary adoption) the political mechanisms and the overall social order of a higher form of political hegemonic structure. Furthermore, interpretations rarely acknowledge the existence of forms of political organisation that might differ from those of the (colonial and national) state. At the most, they see native hierarchies as hybrid political forms that amalgamate colonial and post-colonial mechanisms of authority combined with indigenous elements that although they are different from political institutions of European origin, are too distorted and subordinated to be considered distinct from the encompassing and dominating political structure. (Friedlander, 1981, 2006). In certain historical and anthropological narratives (Carrasco, 1961; Lockhart, 1992) the origins of the indigenous hierarchy are located in the merger of the pre-Hispanic *altepetl* with the Spanish *ayuntamiento* that became the dominant form of political and territorial organisation in the early colonial period while others consider that it was during the 19th century when local systems acquired their defining and central features and that evidence and question the evidence of its pre-Hispanic origin (Chance and Taylor, 1985; Chance, 1990; Friedlander

Most historiography and a considerable part of the ethnographic literature holds that power in Mesoamerican societies should be understood at the light of the process through which the *República de Indios* was imposed. It is considered that defining features of the model imposed by the Spanish colonial regime and adopted by the natives under the guidance and administration of catholic missionaries are still prevalent among most indigenous political

traditions, and therefore, that local government systems should be understood as a by-product of the formation of the colonial state.

An additional element that characterises most scholarship on Mesoamerican power is that it identifies indigenous governments with authoritarian and even despotic structures. Consequently, in various ethnographies indigenous governments are described as if they were bureaucratic and pyramidal orders that reproduced the vertical religious order of Catholic hierarchy, the centralised bureaucratic organisation of the colonial regime and the social stratification of the pre-Columbian society represented in the distinction between commoners and nobles.

A more recent ethno-historic literature has contested such interpretations by presenting indigenous local systems not as products of colonial or pre-colonial history but as societies reconfigured by the action of the modern Mexican state. The paradigmatic expression of this view can be found in Jan Rus' influential study of Highland Chiapas (Rus in Joseph and Nugent, 1994) in which he criticised past conceptions of native communities as closed societies, whose enclosure served as a protective mechanism against the intervention of mestizo people (mainly landowners avid for labour and land and national elites seeking to eliminate indigenous languages and culture through cultural assimilation). In contrast, Rus sees the communities of Highland Chiapas and their cargo systems as instruments employed for the expansion and consolidation of the post-revolutionary state in the indigenous south. Differently from previous depictions of local elites, in Rus's work the members of local hierarchies (including municipal officials, scribes, elders and other cargo-holders) are represented as brokers who mediate between modern corporate populism and an indigenous-catholic structure whose function consisted in keeping political control over the peasantry, opening the possibility for capital accumulation, political centralisation and class differentiation. An important attribute of this perspective is that it conceives the cargo system

as an institution subordinated to the national state without capacity to represent the interests of dominated groups and where the traditional political language acts as a cover up that fosters the post-revolutionary political machinery.

In order to summarise the prevailing argument, it could be said that in most literature, the political systems of indigenous communities are portrayed as extensions of the national state and local hierarchies are understood as instruments that allow national elites to impose their hegemony in settings in which the legal mechanisms that constitute the formal face of the state are not recognised or are difficult to implement as a result of the existence of societies historically and culturally distinct from the *mestizo* majority. In the end, the main concern of most scholarship on Mesoamerican political forms is related to the articulation of state hegemony and regional political processes (Lomnitz; 1991). We could assert that regardless of the subtleties of the debates, they are all characterised by the fact that the state not only constitutes the main analytical and empirical point of departure but also the horizon and limit of all research.

Such preoccupation with the links between state building and local political processes has been a preponderant feature of political anthropology during the last twenty years (see Comaroff, 1993, Mamdani, 1996; Bénéï and Fuller, 2001; Nuijten, 2003). Undeniably, such orientation has proved to be extremely productive as it has improved our understanding of the microphysics of state hegemony. Nevertheless, the sometimes exaggerated focus on the "everyday forms" of state hegemony carries with it the danger of seeing history exclusively as the history of the state and of turning anthropology into an account of state formation. The latter not only places obstacles to the recognition of counter-hegemonic processes but also to the observe the limits of the state and the boundaries of its influence; as Pierre Bourdieu affirmed: "to endeavour to think the state is to take the risk of taking over (or being taken

over by) a thought of the state, i.e. of applying to the state categories of thought produced and guaranteed by the state and hence to misrecognise its most profound truth" (Bourdieu 1994).

Statelessness and decentralization among the Mixe

In contrast to a vision that focuses on state process, the argument that I will develop in this chapter is that Mixe society cannot be fully understood if we do not recognise that its model of power and governmentality does not necessarily imitates the political rationale of present and past forms of the state and that its transformation is not always the result of pressures exercised from the "outside" or exclusively the outcome of a dialectic process between domination and resistance. The point that I will try to make here is that Mixe political dynamics move in the opposite direction to centralisation and that there is an ideology but also a political practice that rejects the state as the only possible (and ideal) type of social organisation.

Trying to demonstrate the existence of stateless political order might possibly be regarded as an attempt to depict Mixe communities as pristine political objects untouched by the ways of the west. However I do not propose a revisionist argument that denies the weight and influence of colonial and post-colonial political forms in the formation of contemporary indigenous politics. I am certainly not interested in reproducing Guillermo Bonfil's idea of the ontological opposition between "the millenarian agrarian culture of Mesoamerica and another Western and capitalist, civilization" (Bonfil, 1987; Lomnitz, 2001). Such separation romanticises indigenous culture by presenting it as a form of subaltern consciousness that is impermeable to all forms of hegemony and more dangerously, presents as a contribution to de-colonization and liberation what in reality is the imposition of the political and epistemological hegemony of nationalism. Rather, my aim is to provide ethnographic

evidence of the existence of a way of thinking about power and of a set of political practices that run parallel and frequently against the process of state formation. I hope to show the existence of a type of political alterity that requires thinking outside the sphere of the state and with categories that are distinct from those of western political thought in order to be understood.

Since we are used to thinking about stateless societies in evolutionist terms (Clastres, 1987) it becomes difficult to accept that a stateless society can exist in a peasant setting (as statelessness is usually considered mostly a trait of hunter gatherers) and especially among conquered and colonised societies. We tend to think of the presence of elements of western political institutions as an irrefutable proof that the state has come to transform social life in a definitive and total way and of centralised power as an inescapable historical condition. Such position ignores the discontinuous history of the state and the instability and limited character of its geographic scope (Scott; 2009). In regions where geographic and ecologic conditions make it particularly difficult to consolidate state rule (Braudel, 1976; Scott; 1998), the presence of the latter has always been irregular and moments of relative absence of state institutions are not rare (Chance and Taylor; 1985). Nevertheless the "stateless society" does not emerge only with the weakening or encroachment of the state but because (for certain societies, including Mixe society) it is an ever-existing possibility of social organization.

Thus, the fundamental concern of this chapter is not to establish whether or not the political arrangements of the Mixe are imposed from the outside or if political forms are foreign or indigenous, but to show that the presence of centralised forms of government that imitate the state's rationale or that are intervened or controlled by it are just one aspect of the political process of Mixe society and that such rejection of state forms is often achieved by transforming elements that come from centralised political traditions.

Indigenous politics: from systems to space

In order to recognise those processes in which the state does not have a central role, it is necessary to think of indigenous politics not in terms of a system that performs a defined and explicit function or as a stable structure in which every political practice is encompassed; rather, it is more useful to think of power in terms of a series of spaces where different political interests, traditions and forces relate to each other. We should think of such spaces both as political force-fields[35] (Nuijten, 2003) but also in the more literal sense of the word, as concrete geographic locations in which the political acquires its concrete dimension, authority is embodied and power materialised. It is precisely at the level of physical geography that crucial aspects of the "double movement" that characterises Mixe politics can be observed. Roads, milpas, shrines, houses and squares are specific locations where the interplay between centrifugal and centripetal forces becomes visible and where the existence of non-state configurations of power arose.

If we admit that the formation of the state and much of the process of political centralisation is expressed as a territorial dimension and a practice of geographic normalization (Craib, 2004; Scott, 1998) then we should be willing to recognise that this is also true for the opposite process. The creation and maintenance of spaces separated from centralised hierarchies and from state institutions depends largely on the geographic and ecologic conditions of the Sierra Mixe. Therefore, it is important to insist in the close links between

[35] Throughout this chapter I use the concept of force-field in a similar way as employed by Monique Nuijten (Nuijten, 2003). For the sake of conceptual clarity, I reproduce a footnote from her book in which the use of "force-field "is made clear: "In anthropology the concept of the social field has a long history (Kapferer 1972, Long 1968, Mitchell 1969, Turner 1974). It has been used to show that 'individuals and groups do not operate in clearly defined institutional frameworks but rather construct fields of action which often cross-cut formal organisational boundaries and normative systems' (Long 1989:252).

power, politics and geography that characterises indigenous regions; to underline that the political (and the cosmological, as I explained in the previous chapter) has a tendency to be place and environmentally specific. The importance given to spaces among Mesoamerican indigenous societies is a characteristic that has been observed by other anthropologists such as Daniéle Déhouve who, studying the Tlapaneco municipalities in the state of Guerrero came to the conclusion that among indigenous peoples "all politics are geopolitics" (Déhouve 2001).

Throughout this chapter space will be used both as a theoretical and ethnographic resource, hoping that moving from "system" to "space" will permit us to see how different political traditions, institutions, conceptions and practices of power intersect, clash and relate to each other. A spatial conception of political relationships allows us to incorporate in the ethnographic narrative the dispersed, fragmentary, often particularistic and frequently metaphorical information on politics given by local people without sanitizing and presenting it as a coherent and consistent account of social life. Trying to present native accounts as coherent narratives has been a procedure sometimes excessively employed by anthropologists interested in the politics of indigenous peoples; perhaps due to the necessity of offering models that can be applied to all indigenous groups regardless of their geographical, ethnic and historical differences or to the urge of presenting anthropology as a consistent scientific discipline, the anthropology of Mesoamerica has a tendency to reify its categories; thus, ethnographies tend to present concepts such as "cargo-system", "cosmology", "community" and even "indigenous" as if their existence was self-evident and as if local people referred to them in unambiguous terms.

In the case of the Mixe, it is precisely in the contradictory, vague and oblique statements about politics that many aspects of their vision about hierarchy and ideas about power can be grasped and it is in the gaps in the information about the formal organization of government

(in the accounts of the cargo-system and the precise organisation of local hierarchies) that the movement towards stateless forms of organization can be glimpsed. Moreover, contradiction and ambiguity play a fundamental role in the organization of the political space; the Mixe do not seek to solve political contradictions or to replace ambiguity with certitude, on the contrary, they see these as basic elements with which to maintain their own social order.

Formal accounts of local politics and many of the representations that anthropologists constantly come across during fieldwork are part of a "discourse for foreigners" that most indigenous communities and especially local authorities employ when discussing political issues with outsiders. These are highly standardised and even ritualised discourses expressed in a diplomatic language that is usually employed with government officials and religious authorities in which carefully selected and very limited information on the community is given; it is a type of discourse that presents a vision of the community that tries to accommodate itself to what locals think are the outsider's wishes and expectations.

During the first months of fieldwork I heard those schematic versions repeated by all kind of people in different communities; people regularly described their towns and villages as ruled by a pyramidal hierarchy in which at the top was the mayor (*alcalde*) followed by a long list of unpaid public servants (the *servicios* as people in the Sierra Mixe call the cargo holders) with the *topiles* (a group of around 20 young men between the ages of 14 to 21 who were starting their community service) in charge of policing the community at the bottom and it was not uncommon to hear people draw parallels between the local and national hierarchy (" here, the *alcalde* is like the president of the Republic" was a commonly heard phrase).

These narratives were also characterised by a conscious effort to highlight the peaceful, safe and united character of the community ("we haven't had a murder in years" or "there are very few robberies, mostly by outsiders" were usually heard and not less frequent were those

assertions about communitarian unity expressed in phrases such as "here we are fine because we are united" or "we have no divisions like in other places, here we are one"). Questions on religious practices also received similar homogeneous answers. On different occasions, my suggestions that the Mixe might have gods outside the catholic pantheon were dismissed as nonsensical and my interlocutors always made sure of stressing that the Mixe were good Catholics and there was no god but one. As my knowledge of the *ayuuk* language improved and "informants" became friends, the standardised narratives of politics and religion were gradually replaced not only by richer and more complex descriptions of local life but in many cases, by accounts that entirely contradicted what I was been previously told.

In the newer and more intimate versions of local politics the existence of other types of authorities emerged (mainly shamans and elders) whose power competed with those of the members of the formal hierarchy of the *presidencia municipal*. The recognition of the existence of rituals alien to the catholic tradition, the acceptance that the Mixe have many gods and that some of them (as an old man told me with an air of cheeky complicity) were even more powerful than Jesus Christ also came to the surface. Some description were more obscure and even esoteric; on several occasions my informants referred that the community was in fact a headless body and that the reason for that was that it could not be decapitated by the state; eventually, it emerged that people considered that the *presidente municipal* and the *alcalde* were not as important as appeared to be. These ideas struck me as presenting a completely different view of power in indigenous contexts. Suddenly I was not facing the vertical (and some will say, authoritarian) order traditionally attributed to the Mesoamerican community but a much more diffuse, horizontal and decentred form of social organization.

What I am interested in drawing attention to is to the important role that unspoken rules, silences and secrecy play in indigenous politics. While it is important to pay attention to the "formal" aspects of local hierarchies and to public self-depictions of indigenous political

structures, it is also crucial to focus on the hidden dimension of power and on the ambiguity that permeates much of the exercise of politics in indigenous contexts as it is in those spaces where many "stateless" aspects of Mixe life can be recognised.

Here it is important to make clear that I am not suggesting that the "discourse for foreigners" simply masquerades the "authentic" (although veiled) political process from which outsiders (including the Mexican state) are excluded; rather my interest lies in pointing out the complex interplay between legal-bureaucratic structures and institutionalised political forms and the more decentralised, loose and less normalised sphere of politics.

Rancherias and Centro

Although boundaries between different types of political spaces are not necessarily fixed or stable but overlapping and variable, it is still possible to distinguish two great spheres in which the contrasts between forms of organization are more pronounced and clear. Formal, public and more hierarchical spaces of power are mainly located in the town centre (*el centro*), in areas corresponding to the *cabecera municipal* (the town's square, the basketball court, the school, and the local assembly) and especially the Catholic Church while less structured and decentralised spaces are mostly (but not exclusively) found in the *rancherias* and hamlets that surround the village, in milpas and in sacred (and secret) sites such as caves and mountains.

It is around these two spheres that Mixe politics articulate. Each sphere has its own political rationale that demands individuals to behave differently in relationship to other people, the interaction between political forms is always accompanied by a considerable degree of tension and much social life (including the elaborated ritual life) consists in trying to balance and conciliate the contradictions that emerge from living amid two political models.

The Mixe face a permanent political dilemma which consists in having to choose between being part of a wider community in which individuals enjoy a higher degree of protection from the social body, but at the same time, requires to fulfil constant demands of time, money and labour from a centralised authority or, by contrast, to spread throughout the mountains in order to live in small social units where coercion is minimal, obligations are restricted to the nuclear family and time and resources can be disposed more freely; nevertheless, such way of life has disadvantages as individuals and their families are more exposed to the vulnerabilities of a self-subsistence economy and have only limited access to material goods and services that are available only in the town's centre or provided exclusively to those who collaborate in the local hierarchy.

Choosing between different social models constitutes a central concern of the Mixe; people are frequently evaluating benefits and costs of opting for one life style over another. Villager's conversations often revolve around the advantages and drawbacks of participating in the local hierarchy (which includes working without payment in the multiple committees and offices of the municipal government, sponsoring fiestas as *padrinos* or *mayordomos*, or contributing with some other type of community service such as volunteering as a *topil* or policemen and playing music in the municipal brass band) as opposed to living in one of the surrounding hamlets and working in the fields or taking a paid job in a city.

Space, morality and social order

The challenges implied in choosing between models, the tensions that arose from privileging one life style over another and the logic behind people's options will be better understood through the following examples which give an account of the different manners in which people from Tlahuitoltepec establish their relationship with the local authorities and with the community in general.

The first case involves the members of a family with which I maintained a close relationship. When I first met them they were just beginning to take part in the community's rituals after years of being distanced from most religious celebrations and civic acts. The mother, a woman in her sixties, was now a regular attendant at the town's assembly, one of the sons was involved in the high school committee and two others played clarinet and trumpet in the municipal band. In previous years, they took part or contributed to the fiestas and none of the male members was ever involved in becoming a *ciudadano caracterizado*[36], took the responsibility for paying for the expenses of a celebration or held any important office in the local government.

Initially, I interpreted their distancing from the ritual and political life of Tlahui as a result of certain scepticism towards "traditional" culture and to the ritual obligations that all members of the community are supposed to follow. The mother, a witty and intelligent woman used to refer to myths of the Mixe as "simple stories" (*puros cuentos*) and she always showed an amused scepticism towards my interest in local divinities, ceremonies and narratives. Whenever I asked them about details of the rituals performed in the Zempoaltepetl Mountain they usually told me to look for someone with more knowledge on the matter, as they just recently started to fulfil the custom ("*cumplir con el costumbre*") and were not familiar with many aspects of the rituals.

One day, however, while we were talking about how certain rituals failed and why people got ill, they mentioned that the reason for not taking part in "*el costumbre*" was because for many years, they considered that it was too risky to become involved in fiestas and other rituals since they lacked time, resources and sufficient knowledge of how to carry them out. Rituals, they claimed, were highly demanding matters and performing them without the conviction

[36] *Ciudadano caracterizado* is the term employed to refer to a "distinguished citizen" who has become a member of the community with full rights and that can participate

and precision required meant that they could become ill, damaged and exposed to envy (*envidia*) (Kearney; 1972); "if you go to the mountain (*cerro*) to ask for something and pray and without being convinced of what you are doing or do not conduct the ritual according to the instructions of the xemabie, it is likely that you will get sick or bring bad luck to your home" were my friends' words.

Their assertions obviously were revealing of local people's conceptions of rituality and causality, but they only acquired their full significance when I became familiar with their life history and was able to provide a context for such information. This family, like many others in Tlahuitoltepec, had a long history of seasonal migration which went back to the days in which the maternal grandfather ("a crazy man who could not stay in one place" according to her daughter's description) left the community to work as a farm labourer in the United States as part of the Bracero Program[37] at the end of the Second World War. After some years working in that country, the grandfather continued his life as a migrant taking his family to pick tomatoes and grapes in fields throughout Sonora and Sinaloa and from there to cotton plantations as far as Chiapas; their wanderings even lead them to the northern parts of Mexico City in which they lived through different periods while the mother's husband worked at a large factory of porcelain tiles.

The family's constant displacement and their relative distancing from Tlahuitoltepec was an obvious obstacle to fulfilling their ritual obligations and collaborating with community service, both fundamental requirements for communitarian membership. Nevertheless, they always tried to maintain their links with Tlahuitoltepec and to do so they had recourse to pay

[37] The Bracero Program was established between the governments of Mexico and the United States in 1947 for the importation of Mexican contract workers mainly to the agricultural sector where the American workforce was insufficient, it continued until 1964 (García y Griego, 1990). The programme mobilised workers from all over Mexico, especially from the states of Michoacán and Guanajuato but also from Oaxaca. In the Sierra Mixe many remember the "Bracero" as the first time that people from the region left Mexico.

for someone to perform the tasks required of them by the town's authority. However, such practice results problematic for those who cannot fulfil their obligations in person, not only due to practical difficulties but also because paying to be substituted during communitarian chores (*tequio*) is considered to be a morally dubious and even dangerous practice since it is seen as a way of evading communal responsibilities by using money that in some cases, might have an unlawful or even evil origin[38].

The relationship between this family and the community was an extremely complicated one; they could not engage in the life of the community because of their need to work outside the town, but at the same time they were willing to keep the links with Tlahuitoltepec, something that could not be fully achieved without taking part in collective works and in the various fiestas. At some point, the family decided to return to the town but by this time four of the children had settled permanently in Mexico City and the returnees continued working temporarily in the city particularly after the end of the maize harvest when the most important fiestas take place.

Though they have re-settled in Tlahuitoltepec, their relationship with the local authorities was still uncomfortable as their involvement in communitarian issues continued to be precarious. Since their ties with the centre were relatively curtailed, they opted to go to live in a rancheria located four or five hours from the centre, where they carried on a fairly isolated life that make easier for them to avoid giving tequio and other servicios and just visiting the town (*cabecera municipal*) every once in a while.

[38] An account of Mixe notions of the morality of money can be found in the work of James Greenberg. In an ethnographic study of the highland village of Tamazulapan (a neighbouring town to Tlahuitoltepec) this author found that money has an ambivalent character, expressed in the distinctions between good and evil money or "wind money" ("*dinero del viento").* While the former is earned through legitimate means, mainly through physical labour, the latter comes from dishonest sources such as selling land to outsiders, lying, stealing, betting or from usury. In some cases, "wind money" is earned by establishing a contract with the devil or with the Mountain's lord (*Señor del Cerro*). Greenberg adds that money of unknown origin has to be purified through ritual means (Greenberg, 2002).

The family was not forced or coerced to give tequio or to sponsor a fiesta, but there was always a quiet but constant pressure from authorities and fellow villagers who urged them to fulfil their obligations. Thus, it was not uncommon that during their visits to the town centre (during market days or when there was an important religious festivity) to be approached by one of the major officials (*presidente municipal, alcalde, capitán de fiestas or mayor de vara*) and be interrogated at length on the reasons for not giving their *servicio* and lectured on the perils of the lack of common solidarity.

The family's distancing from the local hierarchy (and their decision to live in the relatively isolated world of the rancheria) was not the result of a modern or secular approach to local religion as I originally thought, but a genuine preoccupation with not being able to perform tasks that could be dangerous if wrongly performed and with the concrete difficulties posed by their condition as migrants. The family was in a situation that involved not only a tension with the centre and the local authority but also implied an uncertain relationship with divine and supernatural beings that could damage them. Thus, they only decided to re-integrate in the communitarian life after a healer who cured a member of the family from a serious illness explained to them that the cause of the disease was due to angry ancestors who had taken his soul as punishment for not being treated properly. Following this experience, the mother felt that they had spent too long avoiding their obligations to others (including dead ancestors) and that it was now time to correct such behaviour or face ominous consequences.

The second example involves Benito, a man in his forties who worked in one of the town's schools and Anatolio, his brother in law. Although both were appreciated by most people as cheerful and gentle people, they were also the object of a considerable degree of mockery that sometimes turned into plain hostility. Like many other men of their generation, Benito was fully convinced of the necessity of autonomy for indigenous peoples and of the need of strengthening communitarian life and so he had served as a secretary in the *presidencia*

municipal with some of the most prestigious men of the community. Nevertheless, Benito, like Anatolio (who was not as politicised as his brother in law and was more interested in taking care of his own business) had never been in charge of any of the committees and had only performed menial services and neither of them had ever sponsored a fiesta.

The latter was a fact well known to most men in Tlahui and was the source of constant jokes. At the beginning of the year, when the local assembly assigns tasks and duties and people are proposed to head the committees of the local administration and organise the celebrations, Benito and Anatolio were subject to a collective joke which consisted in assigning them the position of drivers, one of the lowest *servicios* and considered by many to be an extremely irritating position as the person in charge has to use his own vehicle during the whole year or borrow one if they do not have one. Throughout the meeting, one person after another would raise from their seats shouting "I propose Benito and Anatolio for drivers!" causing the hilarity of the usually solemn audience and despite the joke was repeated every year it always caused the same effect.

Benito and Anatolio accepted the situation with humoured acquiescence, nevertheless, on certain occasions in which only men were present and especially if they had been drinking, the jokes acquired a bluntly aggressive tone. On more than one occasion I witnessed Benito being lectured in a humiliating fashion about his lack of commitment to the community by a man younger than him while in front of a group of men who gave their silent approval, something that was extremely unusual given the deference with which the Mixe treat their seniors. My friends were considered by many as petty men at the antipodes of the communitarian ideal of the prestigious man, self-sacrificed, fully committed to serving his people and permanently involved in gaining prestige by acquiring higher responsibilities.

Whenever I discussed issues related to the hierarchy and the reasons for not getting involved in the more important and prestigious tasks, Benito and Anatolio (who for some reason were together most of the time) used to complain about the large number of committees and positions that existed and the amount of time that people had to invest to perform a *servicio*. Benito thought that many of them were completely useless and that they had been created just to give people something to do and he considered it necessary to get rid of a considerable number of them. However, the explanation for Benito and Anatolio's "lack of commitment" to communitarian issues was not necessarily that they were indolent or lacked communitarian spirit, but interestingly, it was related with the role played by their wives.

The wives (a couple of sisters) were both strong and energetic characters (Bentio's wife was a primary school teacher with a full time job) who were not enthusiastic about having to work to sustain their families while their husbands held a *servicio* for a whole year. Holding a position, especially at the top of the hierarchy (such as *presidente municipal* or *alcalde*) or being in charge of organizing a fiesta (as *capitán de fiestas, mayordomo* or godfather of a music band) not only implies vast expenses, but more importantly, it demands to investing great amount of work from kin and particularly from women.

During the time in which men have a cargo or are giving any type community service they usually have to reside in the town's centre, often without their families and travel to other villages and even to Oaxaca and Mexico City for celebrations, religious pilgrimages or to solve bureaucratic matters with state authorities. Most the time, people are required to cover their own expenses and the *servicios* leave little time to take care of milpas and animals; those in charge of a fiesta need to acquire great amounts of food, drinks and fireworks for guests and musicians and even to hire *maromeros,* the acrobats and clowns who perform in the biggest festivities. Consequently women and children's workload is doubled as they have to substitute for the men in the fields; those who cannot obtain support from the women of

their family have great difficulties in undertaking an important cargo or gain prestige and power.

On one occasion, a man who was thinking of organising a fiesta in order to begin his political career estimated that the total expenses for one of the bigger celebrations could be around $150,000 Mexican pesos (£7,000 GBP) for a big celebration, a sum equivalent to a year's salary of a fairly well paid professional in Mexico City. He also estimated that a good organiser could manage to make the fiesta for half the amount, as long as he could persuade a large number of relatives, friends and neighbours to help him with the work and the expenses required.

Our conversation took place while we were drinking at a fiesta that had lasted for three days. Here, a group of around ten or twelve women had spent days with little sleep, standing around a steaming cauldron preparing tamales and *barbacoa* (pit-roast meat) and keeping the fire only stopping to dance a little when the band was playing. The organiser, a young man who was commencing his career to be a "ciudadano caracterizado" was being blessed along with his wife by his godfather (the *padrino* who supported his entry into the citisenship and will advise him on how to behave in order to be a respected character); part of the blessing was dedicated to thanking the women for helping with the food during the celebration and to ask for their safe return to their homes, as most of the were from the distant rancherías outside the town and from other pueblos.

Throughout my year in the Sierra Mixe I met a number of women who like the wives of Benito and Anatolio, resisted taking part of the ritual obligations as much as they could but I also observed the opposite phenomenon; women who supported the political careers of their husbands and also some of them even managed to reverse the traditional gender roles through holding positions in the committees, acting as fine politicians capable of gaining resources

and mobilising people to organise fiestas whose size exceeded by far the economic capacity of their own families.

The ethnographic literature on Mesoamerica has paid little attention to the role of women in local politics, perhaps due to the fact that it has emphasised the formal and normative aspects of the hierarchy leaving behind the *process* which leads to the formation of political power and to a generalised tendency to see women as powerless characters that rarely transcend the threshold of the household. While observing the course followed by those who aspire to become 'ciudadanos caracterizados', the relevance of women in politics emerged with total clarity. It was evident that despite most of the ceremonies and the most important *servicios* were in men's hands, none of them will have acquired any position without having help from women.

The previous examples are relevant as I consider that they reveal important aspects of a permanent tension between domestic groups (particularly nuclear families) and the community as well as of the intricacies of the process of formation of political authority. In Mesoamerican anthropology it is commonly assumed that kin groups are simple sub-units vertically integrated to the larger community (Mulhare, 1996); while this might be true for Nahua and the Highland Maya communities where there is a clear territorial division in barrios or calpules[39], in the Sierra Mixe kin groups are not necessarily fixed to a specific territory or place of residence and therefore, they cannot be considered a sub-level of the communitarian structure.

[39] In the Mixe highlands, people use the term *barrio* to refer to certain areas of the villages, but my impression this division does not implies the existence of descent groups or any kin-based structure. Although I looked for data on the matter, I did not found any correlation between the term barrio and any type of collective organisation such as the *cofradia* and despite some of the barrios in Tlahuitoltepec and other villages and towns have Catholic-related names (such as El Calvario, Santa Cecilia or Santa Cruz) I did not find evidence of a strong link between urban residential areas and mayordomias related with the cult of an specific saint.

The great mobility of people, the dispersed distribution of milpas, the distance between rancherías and head town are all elements that reduce the authorities' power to control and discipline people. For the Mixe, becoming a member of the community is, to some extent, a voluntary decision. Since leaders and "high officials" of the hierarchy have little capacity to exercise coercion, the community can only rely on extending a network of relationships based on reciprocity, debt and mutual obligation to assure its continuity and avoid disintegrating in a constellation of small units dispersed through the mountains.

Thus, the community is not something that the Mixe take for granted; people in the Sierra do not conceive of belonging to a community as a primordial condition and consider that membership, rights and recognition of a *pueblo* do not precede concrete, existing relationships. For the Mixe, identity is not necessarily the result of having a common history, territory or language but the product of an involvement with concrete practices that create obligations between individuals.

In a similar way to the Vezo of Madagascar described by Astuti (1995), the Mixe "ethnotheory" is linked to practice rather than to a "geo-deterministic model of identity" in which the territory constitutes the elemental base of identification. The idea of identity as practice was clearly outlined during a conversation that I had with a group of men on the origins and meaning of the term *ayuuk*, the ethnonym uses by the Mixe.

Commenting on versions that translate *ayuuk'jaay* as "people of the clouds", "people of the flowery language" or as "people of the language", my interlocutors affirmed that although these definitions were not necessarily incorrect, they thought that anyone could become *ayuuk*. One of them mentioned that "maybe the Tarahumara of Chihuahua are also *ayuuk*" as they probably share similar ideas about fiestas, tequio and respecting the elders. Being ayuuk, I was told, consisted in establishing certain reciprocal obligations with nature and with other

people, while being *agääts* (usually translated as foreigner, *mestizo* or outsider in most ethnographic literature) is simply someone with whom there are no reciprocal ties, regardless of its ethnic, linguistic or cultural origin. Such claims explain the fact that, with the notable exception of primary school teachers, the Mixe rarely employ categories such as "*mestizo*" or "*indígena*" and, in general, they show little interest in discussing differences between them and other indigenous groups of the Sierra (Zapotecs, Chinantecos and Chatinos).

In a latter chapter, I will return to this conception of identity based on practice as it will be essential for understanding how the Mixe transcend the limits of the community and articulate their relationship with other peoples and places, however, here I am exclusively interested in exploring the specific practices from which the community emanates and the way in which local people relate to them.

The fact that communitarian membership is conceived of as a the result of participating in a network of reciprocity has profound consequences for the political life of the Mixe; therefore the fact that identity is a product of practice, means that the community is not a fixed space in which life takes place but an unstable body, with variable limits that expand or contract depending on the condition of the relationships among people. It also means that the community is permanently facing the possibility of secession; that the inhabitants of a distant rancheria can create a network of reciprocities and a hierarchy and by doing so they can also create a rituality of their own that works independently from that of the main town.

When a rancheria acquires a certain degree of autonomy from the centre, the relationships with the original community are disrupted as ties become weaker, the number of people who contributes to the *servicios* and the fiestas is reduced and it puts also obstacles to access land for those who, without being residents in the rancheria have milpas near it or exploit resources in its vicinity.

The tensions that govern the relationship between rancherias and the *centro* can be illustrated through the following example, obtained during a conversation with Don Abraham, an old musician who I frequently visited. Don Abraham often complained that the people from a rancheria located two hours from the centre of Tlahuitoltepec, were putting obstacles to his use of a plot of land that he had been cultivating for a few years. He acquired rights to use the plot through her wife's family who used it for a few years but were not living at the rancheria anymore. The rancheria had grown in size during the last twenty years and now had a population of two or three hundred individuals. The locals had organised health and water committees and built a *telesecundaria*[40] and a chapel with collective labour. Their community was becoming more organised and sophisticated, and now the rancheros were less interested in giving their *servicio* in Tlahuitoltepec and were unwilling to have people from other parts working in the neighbouring fields. Periodically, Don Abraham found his corn plants intentionally destroyed and often had bitter discussions with people who told him he did not have rights over the plot. Nevertheless, what concerned him the most was that the people from the rancheria were thinking of organizing their own music band, a manifest and unashamed proof of the rancheros' separatist intentions.

Having their own band meant that the rancheria's inhabitants would be able to perform their own fiestas, to organise their own ritual calendar, adopt saints of their preference and that they could relate on their own terms to other villages without consulting Tlahuitoltepec; in brief, that they would have gained autonomy over the *tequio* and the fiesta, the main mechanisms that mediate exchange relationships in the Sierra Mixe and where power and authority originate.

[40] The Mexican *Telescundaria* is an educational television-based middle school program that serves communities of under 2500 inhabitants that cannot support a conventional school (Durán, 2001)

The significance of the previous examples is that they illustrate both the way in which the Mixe resist political centralization by dispersing in order to live in the relative isolation of the rancheria, or by exercising a quiet opposition to participating in the communitarian rituals and obligations, a type of self-marginalization that although is not persecuted or openly repressed by the authority, is censored through the use of a moral idiom that permeates the social relationships of the Mixe and whose objective is to maintain the integrity and unity of the community. Such morality is expressed in different ways: in the first example, the family's distancing from ritual life is objected to by the *xemabie* who sees it as the source of a disease brought by angry and revengeful spirits; the men in the second example are subject to the permanent scorn of the community and ridiculed by their peers who see them as petty men, incapable of leadership and without commitment to the pueblo[41]. Finally, the third case illustrates the way in which a rancheria become the target of suspicion for of trying to withdraw from the network of reciprocities of the original community by gaining autonomy over its rituals and collective work.

Centralisation, leadership and fiesta

The centrifugal movement described here, the tendency of the Mixe to disperse from their villages; the proclivity of communities to become atomised and fragmented cannot be taken as conclusive evidence of the existence of a type of political organization different from that of the state.

On the contrary, it would be justifiable to think of dispersion and resistance to participation in the ritual life of the community as a manifestation of a conflict between a centralized,

[41] In these examples, the role of humour, insult and ridicule is similar to that described by Victoria Reifler Bricker (1980) in the town of Zinacantan in Highland Chiapas. According to this author, "Zinacantecos believe that ridicule has the function of deterring people from violating norms, and they deliberately employ ridicule as a weapon to punish malefactors and make an example of them to the rest of the community" (Bricker, 1980).

coercive and extractive authority and subaltern groups under its hegemony. After all, historians and anthropologists have provided a clearly defined picture of how in other Mesoamerican contexts the growth of the post-revolutionary Mexican state's presence in the countryside resulted in a violent process of power concentration that gave birth to local *caciques* (political bosses) who monopolised the "ladder system"[42] and became elites in control of large parts of indigenous regions. In many regions, the rise of the modern *cacicazgo* derived from communitarian fractures that took many people out from their communities to form new villages in places far from their pueblos, to become migrant workers in the cities or to split from the original *cabeceras* to create new municipalities.

Nevertheless, this is not the case of the Sierra Mixe; although, powerful cacicazgos existed, they have been weakened and in many villages and towns have disappeared, especially in the Highlands. The reasons that explain the decline of caciquismo and the process that led to its replacement by a different type of authority are complex and will be explored in the following chapter; in the meantime, it is sufficient to establish that authority in the Sierra Mixe is not the authoritarian bureaucracy that many authors (including most liberals and a good number of Marxists) imagine that populate the entirety of the Mexican indigenous landscape.

Among the Mixe, dispersion is not a consequence of a social fracture caused by a contradiction between elites and subaltern groups but a strategy whose aim is precisely to preserve the community's cohesion and a relative degree of equality among its members

[42] The process in the Sierra Mixe is different from the one that took place in the Maya Highlands of Chiapas, where (according to Frank Cancian and other authors) traditional cargo system ceased to be a mechanism of economic redistribution and social leverage to be transformed into a bureaucratic structure dominated by local elites to allow and legitimize land and capital accumulation and the subordination of the community to the Mexican post-revolutionary state. Such process has been extensively described by Jan Rus (1994). Jan de Vos' study of the Selva Lacandona (2002) built upon the previous work by illustrating how segments of the population marginalized by the caciques of Highlands Chiapas abandoned their communities after suffering religious persecution (especially converts to Protestant religions but also Catholics opposed to the local "*costumbre*" and identified with the indigenous theology of the San Cristóbal de las Casas's diocese) to colonize the rainforests of the Lacandona

through avoiding political centralisation and concentration of power. It may seem a paradox that in order to assure the continuity of the community the Mixe disperse from it, but the contradiction disappears when we take into consideration that the Mixe think of the community as a flexible body and not as a fixed and permanent geo-political entity. The latter does not imply that conflicting interests are absent from the Mixe societies, rather, it indicates that the tensions that arise between authority and society and the frictions derived from centralisation and decentralization are handled in a different manner from other indigenous societies in which the structure of local power and the type of authority that exists is closer to that of the state.

My premise is that the Mixe deal with the contradictions inherent in hierarchy not by confronting and contesting authority as occurs in the case of factional and class struggles, but by *dissolving* it. In order to clarify what this *dissolution* is and why it differs from contestation, it is necessary to explore the role of the local authorities, the way in which a "ciudadano caracterizado" comes into being, how power is transferred and, finally, the manner in which important and prestigious characters are hampered in exercising coercion. The aim of the following pages is to illustrate the process through which power emerges and then is dissolved; by focusing in the path followed by a group of men ho were in route to becoming authorities, I expect to show the gap between the accounts of hierarchy (the discourse for outsiders that I referred to in previous pages) and the actual practice of authority.

The creation of leadership

According to Pierre Clastres (1987), authority among Amazonian societies is characterised by the dissociation between power and coercion; lacking coercive power means that chiefs can only rely on their prestige, fairness and verbal ability in order to build their leadership (p.30).

Leadership among the Mixe is constructed upon similar foundations but in contrast to the Amazonian context described by Clastres, Mixe leadership is built upon an additional element which consists in the ability to mobilise people which implies a movement towards political and economic centralisation, although as I will show this is not permanent and it weakens rapidly.

Among the Mixe, one of the main routes to acquiring prestige and authority is through the display of an ability to convince people to participate in the fiestas, to contribute with tequio for collective works of the community and to take part in the local administration as unpaid officials. A leader is someone capable of attractig people to the main town; he is a figure who acts as a centralizing agent whose actions are aimed at creating a wider form of social solidarity through establishing ties and obligations among people which transcend the sphere of the hamlets. Among the Mixe, the exercise of authority is directed to create the community rather than to govern over a given entity; power is less a matter of control and ruling than an exercise of articulation and mediation; such difference, although subtle, is essential for understanding how power concentration, permanent inequalities and the emergence of a permanent bureaucracy (or of an elite) are avoided in order to maintain a relative degree of equality among the members of the community.

Fiesta and leadership

The chief mechanisms for attracting people are the fiesta and the *tequio*, although the former is implied in the latter, as every collective work usually ends up with a celebration with mescal, food and music performed by a brass band, whose size varies depending on the size of the community, the importance of the fiesta and the amount of resources available. Most ethnographies of the Mixe (with the notable exception of Frank Lipp's study of the Highlands) have focused only on the institutionalised celebrations to the catholic saints and virgins that

have a fixed date in the ritual calendar; nevertheless, for the Mixe almost every social activity is susceptible of being transformed into a fiesta. The naming of a child, a funeral, the birth of a calf, the clearing of a field or the building of a house and even unusual events such as a book's presentation (an episode that will be further described) are occasions that are transformed into rituals in which relatives, friends and neighbours are invited to dance, drink and eat. Such is the importance of the fiesta that for most of my informants it was this that explained the society and not the other way round.

Mauro Delgado, a renowned musician and prominent citizen of Tlahuitoltepec explained that people gather because of the promise of a celebration: "The people of the Sierra are constantly looking for a place in which they can leave their worries behind; that is why they go to someone's place even if that implies walking for hours or even days. We will help building a house even if that means working hard because everyone knows that later there will be a celebration, with tamales, tepache and beer, with music. Those who organise a celebration will invest a good deal of money, to feed the musicians and all the guests. That is why [when we have a fiesta] we said *agüük jotjuk,* this is for you to dance and to sing". Mauro translated the phrase *agüük jotjuk* as "a space in where everything is right, open, where everything exterior and interior is happy, harmonious, calm."

Even Mauro's words are particular (musicians' opinion on the centrality of the fiesta is somehow disputed and it contrasts with the political views of authorities and other important figures especially teachers), they reflect an understanding of the community that differs deeply from the way it is conceived under the logic of the national state and by most theories of ethnogenesis (Bartolomé 1997; Cardoso de Oliveira; 1992); here the fiesta is not a symbol of communitarian cohesion or a component of a civic-religious liturgy that serves as a collective reminder of a polity already constituted; neither is it a mechanism to reinforce a

pre-constructed identity but the very space and moment in which community itself comes to be; it is the source of political power and the ground on which authority materialises.

The fiesta is the culmination of a process that generally begins several months before the celebration takes place. The organiser of a celebration and his family need to visit relatives and friends, a task that often requires walking for hours to reach distant rancherias in order to talk to people and let them known of the visitor's aim of sponsoring a celebration and to discuss things such as the expenses that will be made, the number of people needed to support him and the size of the band that will play at the site. Like so many other things in the Sierra Mixe, this is a process that requires time and patience; it is extremely slow and even silent. Straightforward questions and answers are never given, and all conversations have an elliptic tone, information is carefully guarded. Convincing people to help with the fiesta requires making several visits; the first meetings usually take place in a quiet, nearly exasperating silent atmosphere; people would never say yes or no and no immediate commitments will be made. At the most, there will be a silent exercise of mutual observation only interrupted to ask about a common relative or to mention the need of clearing a field or building a house. It is an exercise of diplomacy aimed at establishing the terms of the help and the kind of exchange that the organiser is seeking.

Organizing a fiesta also has other interesting implications, such as to retrace people's biographies. It is an opportunity to resolve quarrels, repay old debts, fulfil commitments and renew alliances. The preparation of a fiesta allows the organiser to become familiar not only with relatives and friends but also with the physical terrain, it creates the opportunity to know who is working which lands, who has left the community to work in a city or has moved to another part of town. As visits become more frequent, a capable and persuasive organiser will obtain the promise of a case of beer or soft-drinks from a friend, a load of wood from other people, the assistance of a group of women with the cooking or a sum of money from a

neighbour. In many cases, no goods or money are given, arrangements are limited to convince someone of going to the fiesta even if an enemy or adversary is coming.

We can see now the complexity involved in organizing a fiesta and how a form of leadership can emerge from preparing a celebration. Preparing a ritual implies recreating a common memory; it is also a manner of surveying changes in the territory, carrying information from one place to the other, solving conflicts, exchanging goods and collecting stories. Sponsoring a fiesta means being involved in a set of trajectories from which a deep knowledge of the geography of the community is acquired. Such territorial knowledge has a crucial importance in a social environment as dispersed as the Sierra Mixe in which no private property in land exists and where the exact location and distribution and rights over plots is not fixed or codified through legal or written means.

Travelling constitutes act of surveying and witnessing and well as an accumulation of knowledge. The traveller becomes a sort of living cartography of his pueblo; he does not produce maps but he *is* the map. The latter is not necessarily a metaphor but the description of a precise function; a man of great prestige, by organizing many important fiestas, mobilizing great numbers of people and expanding his own network of mutual obligations during the years, transforms himself into a source of knowledge of the community and a reference for solving conflicts. If there is no clarity on who has the right to use a milpa or if two people fight over an area used to collect wood, they will turn to him for advice or to act as a mediator.

The knowledge from which authority emerges is not purely empirical or exclusively a matter restricted to agrarian issues but an extensive social knowledge about the way people interact between themselves and with the geography. A *ciudadano caracterizado* not only knows that X has been using this piece of land and that Y just recently start to collect mushrooms or

firewood there, he also knows how their families are related and their genealogy and histories. His knowledge is geographic but in the context of the Mixe, "geography" is a field in which human, natural and divine beings relate to each other through a multiple, discontinuous and fragmented means. Much of the task of those looking to become *ciudadanos caracterizados* consists precisely in articulating those relationships, in creating (even it is for a few days) a common space for the encounter for beings that are only partially connected and the favoured space for to do so it is precisely the fiesta.

Having reached this point I think that is essential to go back to Mauro Delgado's ideas on the fiesta. In his narrative, it is taken for granted that the fiesta is a moment of harmonious conviviality, of joy and balance. Nevertheless, the phrase *agüük jotjuk* expresses only a desire, for the fiesta is also a moment of danger, it represents a considerable risk for all the audience but especially, for the hosts and his family. It is a moment in which the powerful forces of drunkenness and sexuality are released through music and where the possibility of being damaged through envy and resentment and even witchcraft are exponentially increased.

Alternatively, fiestas are moments in which human society comes in close contact with divinities and where pacts between (different types of) humans and spirits are sealed. In some rituals such as the one known as *Jä'xjp* or "The Carrying of the Wood" ("*La traída de la leña*") or (a small, almost domestic ritual which is important as it inaugurates a long series of celebrations that culminate in the great fiestas dedicated to the patron saints of each community (Torres Cisneros, 2003) guests acquire a supernatural status that transforms them into "witnesses" (*testigos*), the personifications of the *inee*, the divinities of the mountain, thunder, rain and wind. The host concludes the ceremony reciting a blessing in which he thanks the participants for coming to his house and asks them for his family's prosperity, wellbeing and success in exactly the same way used to make petitions during the pilgrimages to Mount Zempoaltepetl. Attributing to the audience the role of divinities is more than using a

metaphor to underline the sacred character of the fiesta; seeing guests as thunders, wind or rain, means a concrete interaction with forces they can potentially bring into the household the beneficial as well as the destructive attributes of such entities. As an offering for people as well for gods, the fiesta require carrying out with utmost care and therefore, it is necessary to follow a strict etiquette, to please the guests, avoiding offending anyone practicing the rituals with sincerity and conviction.

Having a fiesta at home implies opening the domestic space to the interaction of humans and spirits and transforming it into a convoluted moral stage in which all conduct is subject to careful observation and where bounds between people are tested. The fiesta is a complex moment in which to strengthen relationships of solidarity and affinity but also a place in which tensions and conflicts arise with an almost theatrical intensity and an openness that does not exist (or is not expected to take place) in other orders of social life. The fiesta can serve as a space for expressing hostility or resentment towards someone as much as affection and solidarity. For the former purpose, there are formalised codes; refusing to dance, leaving half-eaten food on the plate or spitting inside the house are typical signs of contempt that are performed in a nearly choreographed manner.

This moral use of the fiesta is reproduced at a different level during the great fiestas dedicated to the patron saints. In these celebrations the whole community plays the role of hosts and people and music bands from other pueblos becomes guests. Those grand fiestas are moments for celebration but are also occasions for neighbouring and often rival towns, to observe each other, trying to decipher the other's intentions and to assess the state of their relationships. During the days that follow a fiesta, people's discussions are dedicated to commenting on visitors' behaviour, the quality of the hosts and to evaluating how successful the celebration was. Music bands that perform poorly, musicians who get excessively drunk and male visitors who try to seduce local women or steal things are interpreted as obvious signs of a

deteriorated relationship between villages or as provocations aimed at creating conflict. The visitors will do similar evaluations; they may complain about not being feed properly, of women refusing to dance and of the general lack of courtesy and friendliness of the organisers; by contrast, a fiesta that runs smoothly augurs a peaceful and prosperous coexistence with other villages or interpreted as a sign of a good will and of the existence of strong bounds between villages.

New authorities during their inauguration ceremony in Tamazulapam.

Men and women hold the ritual batons and bottles of mescal

Tequio and leadership

If the fiesta concludes well, if violence and quarrels are avoided, people enjoy their time and no one suffers an accident while returning home, the position of the organiser will be strengthened. Those who attended the celebration will have established a bond of loyalty with the host and acquired the moral obligation to reciprocate in the future, whether through inviting him to their own fiesta, contributing to the expenses of any other celebration or

assisting him with their work. This newly created network of mutual obligations is important as it gives the emerging leader the possibility of controlling the flux of the redistributive movement generated by fiestas[43] and more importantly, it confers him influence over *tequio* or collective labour that Mixe communities employ to maintain the communal infrastructure (roads, communitarian buildings, irrigation canals and wells). The leader is someone who is in position to guarantee that people will work for the community, either by attracting them due to his prestige and ability to create connection between individuals or because their fellow citizens have some type of debt to him.

Tequio is a practice that is not only important in economic terms but is also a fundamental political and social instrument that allows the articulation of the relatively "informal" and decentralised system of fiestas with the more institutionalised and normalised municipal hierarchy[44]. *Tequio* allows the relating of two mutually exclusive and contradictory principles around which Mixe society is organised: the horizontal reciprocity implicit in the fiestas and the vertical hierarchy through which the *municipio* is governed. Linking the two spheres is achieved when those who have gained prestige through organizing increasingly bigger and more complex celebrations become authorities in charge of any of the positions of the official hierarchy. Positions such as *capitán de fiestas*, *fiscal*, *mayor de vara*, *presidente municipal* or

[43] In his work on Mesoamerican redistributive models, John Monaghan has highlighted the importance that Karl Polanyi's idea of the three types of transactions involved in redistributive systems has for the Mesoamerican fiesta complex. According to Monaghan, *"re- distribution is more than just the movement of goods from a centre (in the Mesoamerican case the fiesta sponsor) out to a periphery (the fiesta guests). It also involves two other transactions. The first of these is the movement of goods from some outside contributors into the centre. This transaction has not been a focus in discussions of the Mesoamerican fiesta, since it has been assumed that the sponsor's accumulation of goods through exchange is unimportant, as most sponsors finance their fiestas out of surpluses accumulated by their individual households. The second transaction occurs between those who contribute goods into the centre and those who receive these same goods in distributions*." (Monaghan, 1990).
Exchange among the Mixe has a similar logic, the organizer of the fiesta (the centre, following Monaghan) receives goods and labour from the periphery (friends, relatives and neighbours) and at the same time, he gives a considerable part of his wealth. Both parts (the "centre" and the "periphery") participate in the model knowing that at some point their roles are going to change, the periphery moving to the centre and vice versa.

[44] Neurath, Johannes, "El don de ver. El proceso de iniciación y sus implicaciones para la cosmovisión huichola", *Desacatos,* Invierno, 5, 2000. CIESAS, Mexico, p. 58,59.

alcalde are obtained as the result of suggestions made to the communal assembly by a group of citizens or because a man of prestige asks the elders and the *caracterizados* to have a cargo.

Candidates to any of the offices need to demonstrate that they possess enough authority to accomplish the difficult task of convincing people to leave their rancherías and fields to work without payment and often for several days on collective tasks that go from basic ones such as painting the schools' walls to more complex, physically demanding and even dangerous ones such as paving roads, digging water wells or installing electric lines.

Directing the *tequio* is a most complex task; authorities are subject to a considerable amount of pressure when conducting collective works. They have to persuade people of the usefulness of the duties involved, guarantee that labour demands are just and that no one feels exploited or that is being requested to do more than other people; at the same time, an authority is required to be good planner and administrator; if, as often happens, money from contributions or state funds is involved, authorities are responsible for it and need to ensure that the *síndicos* and *tesoreros* (councillors and treasurers) who assist them in the municipio's chores administrate the funds correctly and with integrity.

Demands of honesty and efficiency in the management of *tequio* are not the only reasons why being an authority is an extremely demanding activity; its main complexity lies in the fact that by becoming a municipal authority, the horizontal and symmetrical relationships of reciprocity created through the fiesta are turned into a vertical and asymmetrical type of association. The transition from being a fiesta sponsor or *mayordomo* to becoming an authority (*kutunk*) involves acquiring real and concrete power; it transforms a man of prestige into an authority with an influence situated beyond the discursive abilities and the position of mediator through a process that entails the centralization and control of other peoples' work.

For my informants the nature of tequio was clearly ambivalent; on the one hand they see it as the epitome of social solidarity, as a useful instrument for creating wealth and providing services and infrastructure that would be difficult if not impossible to obtain for an indigenous community (in the Highlands' villages most public infrastructure is built with collective labour, in Tlahuitoltepec alone at least four schools, a music conservatory, a market, a basketball court, roads, irrigation canals and wells and even a radio station were built with tequio).

Tequio is regarded as a practice of great social and educational value that allows neighbours and relatives to keep in contact, a manner of transmitting values and knowledge from adults to children and a fundamental tool for levelling social relationships and reducing moral and economic inequalities. People expect their authorities to participate in *tequio* in the same way as they would do; "during tequio", I was told by a friend "everyone has to carry cement sacks. Here there is no *licenciado* or authority of any kind [*Aquí nadie es licenciado, ni autoridad, ni nada*]. Even the children need to do some work, even if it's carrying just a brick, that way they learn [*Hasta los niños tienen que cargar su ladrillito, así se van enseñando*] Only elders don´t need to give tequio as they have work on this for many years [*Nomás los viejitos no dan tequio, por que ya dieron muchos años*].

On the other hand, the Mixe are also aware that under certain political conditions, tequio can become an exploitative instrument and that a leader with authority over people can become a cacique by using people's labour for his own benefit, mainly by transforming reciprocal obligations into interest based debts (that is, again, a verticalisation of horizontal relationships). The latter is not necessarily a theoretical notion but a result of historical experience; those who lived during the days of the great *serrano* caciques, Luis Rodriguez of Zacatepec and Colonel Daniel Martínez of Ayutla (between the 1930's and the late 1970's) still remember the constant demands for tequio used to develop an infrastructure controlled

by and at the service of the bosses and their entourage. The inhabitants from Rancho Tejas, a rancheria in the highest peaks of the Sierra, notorious for the quality of its *tepache* and also the mescal producers from Rancho Nejapa, recall the continuous extraction of their products while old musicians refer to time of the caciques as "the time of slavery", bringing back memories of the obligation to serve for an entire year playing at fiestas. Similar memories can be found among coffee growers in the Midlands and Lowlands, many of whom abandoned their communities exhausted by debt and tired of having to work for free for the big men of the Sierra.

Thus, it is not surprising that both the practice of tequio and the exercise of authority are constantly surrounded, almost besieged by an egalitarian ideology expressed through a form of social vigilance aimed at preventing the potential deviations of tequio and its transformation into an instrument of taxation or a form of tribute for the benefit of an individual or a group. This social pressure exercised on authorities operates in a very similar way to the forces put in motion when someone resists participating in ritual life. The gradual rise of a leader and then of an authority, the increasing aura of prestige and honour that comes with the organization of the fiestas has its counterpart in the suspicion, mistrust and doubt that surrounds the actions of the cargo holders. In certain situations the would-be *ciudadanos caracterizados'* motives and morals are thoroughly although cautiously questioned, rumours about leaders and authorities hiding money or gold inside the mountains or making dubious pacts with spirits are not uncommon. A considerable part of people's conversations are debates on the fairness of requests made for fiestas and tequio and comment on the behaviour of leaders and their families; the acquisition of unexpected and expensive goods and other signs of an incipient accumulation of wealth are taken as indications that an ethical deviation is taking place.

As with those that elude participation in the ritual and political life of the community described at the beginning of this chapter, relationships between leaders and the community are mediated by supernatural beings, the disciplining force of *envidia* and the actions of the xemabie and other curanderos; accidents, illnesses and other misfortunes suffered by powerful characters are often attributed to punishments by offended ancestors or supernatural beings acting against those who fail in fulfilling their obligation towards the community, as vengeances from those who were not properly reciprocated or as a damage caused by competitors that have use witchcraft in order to harm rivals.

The relationship between leaders, authorities and the xemabie is an important component of this moral economy; authorities and men seeking power consult healers with considerable frequency, either to use their divinatory powers or to be cured of afflictions associated with their duties. The xemabie dedicate substantial part of the divinatory and healing sessions to determine the moral and physical condition of the authorities through establishing the causes of the *envidia* exercised against the patient, the context in which the sufferer's souls were lost and the reasons that explain a particular illness. In most cases, the xemabie diagnosis are expressed as a narration that tells of the patient's tona's wanderings and of its struggles against other similar beings; this stories take place in a nocturnal almost abstract dimension; here, human souls materialised in the form of thunder, comets serpents and other animals, reproduce the human society (they have fiestas, tequio and make sacrifices like regular people) though in a slightly fiercer way, as tonas eat each other, or get killed in ambushes in depths of the mountains.

Although relationships between shamans and authorities should not be reduced to their political aspects, I think it is important to reflect on the way in which they relate to the general tension between powerful men and the community. The divinatory and healing sessions are not exclusively medical acts but experiences related to this egalitarian pressure

collectively exercised against leaders; by linking illness to moral transgression the xemabie stress the virtues of communal service and warn against abusing power; stories of *tonas* fighting at night serve to illustrate the relative and the limited character of human authority; by giving an insight to a world relatively inaccessible to ordinary people, the xemabie reveal the presence of multiple spheres of power distributed throughout a sacred geography of caves, mountains and rivers.

The latter are the narratives of a polytheist and pluralist political and religious tradition; stories of tonas always emphasise the multiplicity of power figures and the horizontal relationships between them. The head figures of the Catholic Church or the national and state governments and other highly centralised structures are never portrayed as unique; Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary are equated to other gods with which they interact and the same happens with the King (a figure still present in many myths), the President of the Republic or the Governor of Oaxaca, there are always other kings, presidents and governors living in palaces within caves and inside the mountains. The narratives of the xemabie work as a parable to caution against the centralising potential of leadership and authority, as a way of showing that municipal authority and communitarian leadership are limited and far from being exceptional; although healers are not necessarily a counter-power (their function is neither to balance nor supervise the actions of authorities) part of their role is to reaffirm a politico-religious ideology that emphasises the de-centred and multiple character of power and therefore, rejects centralization and with it, political hegemony.

The moral economy constructed around authorities, the tensions derived from the alternation between horizontal and vertical modes of relationship becomes apparent only once we recognise and incorporate in the ethnography the ambiguous character of tequio. Most ethnographies on the subject (Warman, 2003; Cohen, 1999) have opted to portray this practice in unambiguous terms or as a stable institution with a single and precise function. By

expurgating native visions of their contradictions in order to stress the coherence of the indigenous tequio, Mesoamerican anthropology tended to produce rigid explanations that present tequio either as a practice that is essentially a redistributive and "socially levelling" (Wolf, 1957, 1986; Brandes, 1981) one or, by contrast, as one that concentrates wealth in the hands of the cargo holder and therefore reinforces inequality (Cancian, 1992; Bartra, 1992; Warman, 2003) which o as mutually exclusive but actually, both are dealing with phenomena that are part of the same process and that simultaneously occupy the same space.

Two positions have dominated the discussion; the first conceives tequio as an essentially egalitarian and redistributive while the second conceives it as a form of taxation, usually coercive and imposed from the society's top to the bottom. Arturo Warman's view on tequio clearly represents the latter position, he characterised tequio as a regressive tax, that imposed equal contributions to all community members regardless of their capacities and that was rarely employed to redistribute wealth[45]; by contrast, Adelfo Regino, a Mixe lawyer, founder of SER (*Servicios del Pueblo Mixe*, an important regional organization) and renowned indigenous rights activist referred to tequio as a the mechanism that links people with land

[45] In Warman's own words: ""El tequio […] pocas veces se usó para redistribuir la riqueza o los recursos dentro de ellas. El tequio, general e igualitario para todos los hogares de la comunidad, en términos de su aporte a la formación de la riqueza pública es regresivo en la medida en que todas las unidades entregan lo mismo con independencia de su solvencia o posición. Cuando además del trabajo era necesario aportar cuotas en dinero para la electrificación o la operación de maquinaria pesada por ejemplo, se conservó la igualdad en los pagos pese a que el aprovechamiento del servicio estaba claramente diferenciado. Incluso cuando llegó a permitirse que el tequio pudiera desempeñarse por un peón contratado por la familia titular, se mantuvo la uniformidad de las cuotas. El tequio es una de las instituciones más vigorosas para la cohesión y persistencia de la comunidad, incluso está sustentado por un discurso igualitario y equitativo que es importante, pero por sí mismo no es un instrumento de redistribución."(Warman, 2003:235-236).

Tequio has been scarcely used to redistribute wealth or resources within the community. Because it is general and equal for all households within the community, it has a regressive character since all units contribute with the same amount regardless of their wealth or position. When, for example, in addition to labour it was necessary to contribute with cash either for electrification or to hire heavy-machinery, payments were the same for all despite the use of the service was clearly differentiated. Even when households were permitted to hire a worker to give tequio, the uniformity of payments was maintained. Tequio is one of the most vigorous institutions to maintain the cohesion and persistence of the community, it is even sustained by an egalitarian and equitable discourse that is important, but by itself is not an instrument of redistribution [translation, Emiliano Zolla]

(*tierra*) and nature, essential for building the community and he charged against those "foreign ideas" (referring mainly to protestant religions) that seek to substitute collective labour by individual, paid work causing the destruction of the communities in the process[46].

Both visions are equally problematic although for different reasons. Warman's view of tequio as a regressive tax ignores the important link between social networks and collective labour and the ritual process that leads to the creation of a leader capable of directing the tequio. On the other hand, equalising tequio with a fiscal instrument presumes the existence of state authority, of a bureaucratic and legal apparatus responsible for administrating the contributions and of a considerable degree of centralization. Nevertheless, it is clear that tequio is not simply extracted by an anonymous rational-legal entity from a undifferentiated,

[46] According to Adelfo Regino: "La manera en que los pueblos indígenas nos relacionamos con la tierra y la naturaleza en general es mediante el trabajo comunal. El trabajo que desempeñamos comúnmente los indígenas se da en dos niveles: El primero se ubica en el nivel familiar y propicia fundamentalmente el sustento económico en ese ámbito. Aquí observamos formas internas de colaboración como la *mano vuelta* o la *gozona*, que de alguna manera han propiciado el fortalecimiento de la economía de las comunidades.(...) En el segundo nivel podemos hablar del trabajo comunitario, denominado comúnmente tequio. Es a partir de esta institución como se ha logrado construir en las comunidades la infraestructura hasta hoy existente. Los servicios comunitarios de agua, luz, caminos y otras necesidades, han logrado ponerse en marcha de manera oportuna gracias a la colaboración colectiva. Pese a lo anterior, han comenzado a llegar del exterior ideas que pretenden socavar y destruir totalmente esta institución, bajo la idea de que dicho trabajo colectivo es atentatorio contra las garantías de libre trabajo de los seres humanos. A partir de estos argumentos, las sectas religiosas y los partidos políticos pretenden que los comuneros y comuneras evadan los compromisos comunitarios, y para ello se disfrazan los problemas de otra naturaleza. Por ejemplo, es muy común oír que a las sectas protestantes se les persigue al interior de las comunidades por motivos religiosos, cuando las razones residen en el incumplimiento de estos trabajos comunitarios. (Regino in Zolla and Zolla, 2004)

The way we indigenous peoples relate to land and nature in general is through communal work. The work we indigenous commonly carry out occurs on two levels: the first is located at the family level and it primarily promotes the economic livelihood in this area. Here we see internal forms of collaboration such as "mano vuelta" and "gozona" which led to strengthening the economies of communities (...) At the second level we have communitarian work, commonly known tequio. It is through this institution that the infrastructure that today exists in the communities has been built. Community services, water, electricity, roads and other needs have been put in place in a timely manner through collective collaboration. Despite the above, communities have begun to see the arrival of foreign ideas that seek to undermine and totally destroy this institution, under the view that collective work attempts against the right of individuals to free work. By using these arguments, religious sects and political parties encourage commoners to avoid their commitments, and for that purpose, they disguise communitarian problems as if they were from a different nature. For example, it is common to hear that Protestant sects are being persecuted within communities on religious grounds, when the reasons for this lie in their failure to fulfil community service [Translation, Emiliano Zolla].

equally anonymous citizen; in any case, tequio is a "false taxation" analogous to the *false commodities* described by Polanyi (1957) since it is a type of contribution that cannot be divorced from the social relationships embedded in it. An additional problem of identifying tequio with a levy and of granting it the status of a legal mechanism, is that relationships between leaders, authorities and the community that mediate collective labour can only be understood in terms of clientelist or patrimonalist politics, as a deviation for legal rationality and even as a socio-pathology (Nuijten and Anders, 2009) from which corruption and authoritarianism are derived, including the phenomenon of *caciquismo* (Knight and Pansters, 2005).

Interestingly, from the perspective of the Mixe, corruption and despotism arose exactly from the inverse situation; it is the absence (or the betrayal) of reciprocal links and the abstraction of social relationships that allows the creation of caciques; much of the rejection of the presence of political parties in the Mixe region (which is particularly strong in the towns of the Highlands) follows this type of reasoning. The Mixe are sceptical of having candidates and authorities whose strength is partially associated with being part of an institution (the political party) with no direct or organic links to the communities, voting is seen as an empty act, incapable of creating a mutual obligation between leaders and the people; the Mexican version of electoral democracy appears as a facile manner to place authorities that are set outside the control of the community, of transferring power to the *agääts*, to those who do not reciprocate.

In the Sierra Mixe, authorities are always limited, they never gain control over the totality of the community due to the fact that their legitimacy is based on a network of kin, friends, debtors that does not span the whole population. Men in the hierarchy are competitors, struggling to increase their social base, to "capture" their rivals in their own network. This type of political logic which from the point of view of liberalism cannot be but a distortion of

representation and of universal citizenship, is provided with an additional element that, ideally, it should guarantee the maintenance of egalitarian relationships. If the networks are dynamic enough everyone should end up being in debt and obliged to reciprocate everyone else. Certainly, this is not always the case and determining the equivalencies of contributions and gifts exchanged constitutes a problem that often leads to quarrels and frictions; additionally, there is always the possibility of accumulation by any of the political actors, but this is precisely what constitutes one of the political tensions that put Mixe society in motion.

By looking to the unresolved tensions between reciprocity and hierarchy, its temporal cycles and its spatial distribution, it is also possible to escape the static dualism that is implied in most models of the indigenous community and to explore the interaction of local practices and conceptions of politics with an "outside" where one of the main actors is the state; I am entirely conscious that until now, my treatment of Mixe politics has ignored the presence of the State in the Sierra Mixe and the insertion of the Mixe in the wider context of Mexican politics, but this has been deliberate. In the next chapter I will focus on several historic and contemporary attempts to centralise the social and political life of the Mixe and to incorporate the populations of the Sierra into the nation state, hoping that having provided an outline of local practice, this processes will not be portrayed as the incursion of an external actor but as a development in which the Mixe have been proper social and historical agents.

Chapter III. Centralising the Sierra: State, Caciques and the origins of a nationalist spatial imagination

The formation of state and nation in the Sierra Mixe has not consisted in a process in which a fully structured political order expanded into a rural and indigenous periphery in order to fill a political void. Rather, this has been an intermittent and incomplete process characterised by the ambiguity and contradictory nature of its results. In the Sierra Mixe it is therefore impossible to find a moment in history in which the state is finally consolidated, nor is there a sign that indicates that the Sierra has definitely entered in the sphere of the colonial order or the space of the modern nation. In this region, the state resembles a tidal wave that now floods the Mixe region and then retreats again.

The state in the Sierra Mixe is an elusive entity, often incomplete and impermanent. During the 20th century and still today, its presence sometimes manifests in the form of a cultural discourse or a political ideology promoted by local teachers in revolt against the knowledge and beliefs they were supposed to disseminate; at times it materialises in the form of infrastructure or services such as roads or health clinics which deteriorate after a few years and often end up abandoned or are retaken by locals who re-orient their function and modify their original purpose. On other occasions, the state

appears as subsidies, in an almost abstract, monetary way. Sometimes, it shows a more sinister face appearing in the villages as police or military forces. And sometimes, the state is no more than promises made periodically by functionaries (including anthropologists), candidates and elected officials who visit the communities and then vanish with the same speed with which they came.

It could be argued that being historical entities all states have a certain degree of discontinuity and that even the more solid and longstanding institutions expand and contract through time. However, the Mixe context is one in which the irregularities and discontinuities of the state manifest with particular intensity. The rugged geography of the Sierra is an obstacle for consolidating a permanent territorial hegemony, local culture appears to be too diverse and even impenetrable for bureaucracies accustomed to dealing with simplified subjects and despite the efforts, no colonial or Mexican administration has managed to resolve the challenges posed by linguistic and ecological diversity

Nevertheless, we should not think that the state does not leave traces behind or that the Mixe are immune to its influence. Despite its authoritarian nature (or maybe due to it), the state has always possessed an undeniable ability to seduce, to incorporate the most disparate actors and in certain occasions, it has even been capable of redistributing wealth, providing services and delivering justice. The promises and aspirations contained within nationalism and the (imaginary and real) power that is attached to the state certainly stimulate the imagination and modify –even if it is only modestly- people's subjectivity. In that sense, both state and nation are fantasies (Navaro Yashin, 2002) capable of surviving deconstruction and which can endure even when institutions fail or enter in crisis.

The latter should serve to avoid seeing Mixe society as an impenetrable space for the state. The fact that in the Sierra there is a strong political tradition that rejects political centralisation and seeks to build relationships that are as horizontal as possible, does not exclude the presence of other traditions that follow exactly the opposite. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, there are segments and individuals in Mixe society who aspire to create a highly hierarchical and concentrated power structure, to establish a single mechanism to govern society and to centralise the space in which this exists. Even further, this desire to create a vertical social order is a possibility contained *within* those

decentralised and diffuse political practices rather than an element originating in the sphere of the state or in other hierarchical structures. The Mixe, have not remained isolated or unaware of the existence of the state, their decentralised social structures, their relatively loose hierarchies are, in some way, the result of a history of living in close contact or within states. Thus, we should not think of centralised power and processes of centralisation as magic bullets shot from a remote "outside" from which the Mixe are unaware, or that originates entirely in an "external" culture that seeks to dominate and impose its hegemony.

Debates on the advantages and drawbacks of the state, on the viability of having a different type of social organization, as well as discussions on centralization, decentralization, power, state or hierarchy are constantly present in daily life, and they are expressed in terms that are fairly clear for any outsider with a certain degree of political awareness. Most Mixe are conscious that the mechanisms that allow their communities to exist (mainly fiestas and tequio) are ways of granting power, paths that lead to the creation of "great men" (Godelier, 1986) who can become oppressive and exploitative figures if they are not properly controlled or if their influence expands beyond certain limits. They also know that the possibility of transforming the relatively horizontal and multi-centred relationships created through tequio and fiestas into a vertical structure controlled from the top is an ever present possibility which constitutes a constant source of anxiety for most people but which is also an objective of those who hold great political ambitions.

Mixe society is one that can change from "rhizome to root" (to express it in Deleuezian terms) in a very rapid manner; in the following pages we will see how gifts that create reciprocal obligations are susceptible of being transformed into tribute (and from there into commodities) and the receiver of gifts can end up being subordinated to the authority of the donor. This is something that is not simply a potential alternative to their political practices, but a phenomenon that has actually taken place at different periods of history. A a Braudelian perspective on the history of the Sierra would show its geography is a space in which there is a constant alternation between movements of dispersion and aggregation, from this perspective we could observe how centres of political power are created and then decay or disappear due to the dispersion of its inhabitants. The moments of concentration would

correspond with those in which hierarchies become more vertical and authority control more intense while periods of dispersion would coincide when social structures become less rigid

The present chapter concentrates on one of those moments in which the Sierra Mixe was stunned by powerful centralizing forces. This was a process conceived, encouraged and put into practice by outsiders linked to the Mexican post-revolutionary state but also by members of Mixe communities, mainly the local bosses that ruled the region between the 1930's and the late 1970's but also by other actors. Nevertheless, and before entering in the histories of the caciques, I consider it important to make a rapid exploration of the colonial history of the Sierra Mixe as this constitutes the first extensively documented effort of a centralised bureaucracy to control the life of the Mixe.

First centralization: the colonial order

The difficulties of centralizing the religious, political and economic life in the Sierra Mixe during colonial times has been thoroughly explored by John K. Chance (1989) who studied the archives of the Alcaldía Mayor of Villa Alta, a predominantly Spanish (and nowadays Mestizo) city from which the colonial administration tried to control the Serrano Zapotecs, a portion of the Chinantec peoples, the western part of the Mixe region, which served as the focal point from which Dominican missionaries entered the region to convert the native population to Catholicism.

Chance´s reconstruction of the colonial period illustrates with absolute clarity the profound spatial and temporal discontinuities of the colonial state´s presence and the precarious attempts to reconfigure the region according to the political rationale introduced by the Spanish regime. The consolidation of the Spanish order in this region of Oaxaca faced great difficulties not only due to the harsh conditions imposed by the physical geography of the mountains but also because , in comparison to the Nahuas of central Mexico or the Zapotec and Mixtec from the central valleys of Oaxaca, the Mixe did not have a consistent tradition of state organization that could be employed as a basis for colonial rule. Mixe society was not organised following the model of the *altepetl* of central Mexico (Lockhart, 1992;

Fernández-Christlieb and García-Zambrano, 2006); here there were neither complex bureaucracies nor strong local elites that could be incorporated (or substituted with Spanish officials) to the colonial administration. The territorial limits between political entities were also diffuse or hardly recognizable for the Spanish geographic rationale. According to Chance, in the Zapotec and Mixe mountains, the Spaniards did not find the "customary settlement pattern of head town (*cabecera*) with subject hamlets (*sujetos*) [but one of] small, relatively independent villages [...] in which there was little social differentiation". With regard to the government structure Chance affirms that "early colonial caciques possessed relatively little land or other forms of wealth to set them off from commoners and with few exceptions, had little influence in their communities" (Chance, 1989, p. 13).

In the Sierra Mixe, the Spaniards tried to impose the customary method of relocating native populations in places that were easily accessible for *encomenderos*[47] needed of labour and tribute. Nevertheless, imposing the model of the *congregaciones*, reordering the urban space according to a grid pattern divided in neighbourhoods, called *barrios* or *calpules* supervised and administered by Catholic priests proved to be a difficult, almost impossible task. Not only was the physical terrain inadequate to reproduce a model imported from Spain that was successfully applied to the highland plateaus and lowland valleys of the New Spain, but that was clearly inadequate for the mountainous regions of Oaxaca. In the Sierra, the population simply could not be fixed to a single place of residence; the economy of the Mixe depended (and still does) on exploiting a wide range of ecological niches vertically distributed through the mountains (a form of agrarian economy that is similar to the "vertical archipelago" of the Andes although on a smaller-scale (Masuda, 1985) and consequently, the population of the Mixe *pueblos* periodically abandoned the lands allocated for the *congregaciones* making unfeasible even the most basic tasks of state regulation such as surveying, taxing and disciplining the population.

[47] *Encomendero* was the name of the Spanish conquistadors who were granted an *encomienda*, a certain number of native populations (usually whole communities or pueblos) from whom they were responsible to educate in the Catholic faith. In exchange, the *encomendero* was allowed to extract tribute either in specie or labour.

The mobility of the indigenous population combined with the inability of the Spaniards to contain the Mixe within the framework of colonial institutions allowed this indigenous people to maintain a considerable degree of autonomy, to develop social forms with little intervention from the colonial regime and to establish the rhythm of their contacts with the Catholic Church with relative independence. Thus, it is not surprising that the Mixe appeared in the eyes of colonisers and missionaries as an undisciplined population, often violent and prone to idolatry. Even today, most Catholic priests in charge of the churches of the Sierra (the majority of them Salesian fathers who practice moderate forms of liberation and indigenous theologies) speak with resignation of the difficulties of convincing couples to get married in the Church, of baptizing their children instead of taking them to the Zempoaltepetl mountain to receive their names and some of them are especially resentful of local rituals that compete with Catholic sacraments especially those involving animal sacrifices.

Chance's research offers a detailed chronology of several failed attempts to congregate the dispersed population and presents a comprehensive portrait of the frustrations experienced by missionaries and *encomenderos* with the lack of results in establishing an enduring political order. In his research, references to episodes of violence are not uncommon and there are numerous mentions to armed rebellions and military incursions aimed to pacify the region that, on most occasions, were ineffective or which only gave results during brief periods of time. Without entering into the minutiae of the variations in the colonial territorial patterns of the Sierra, it is important to mention that most communities of the Mixe Highlands were relocated in different periods of the colonial era and that all of them appear to have rejected the resettling and changed their place of residence as soon as the Spanish discipline loosened.

The town of Tlahuitoltepec, following Chance, was transferred from the upper parts of the mountains to a lower area at the beginning of the 16th century, a decision that "was not popular with the town's inhabitants because it meant giving up their *tierra fría* environment for a new, uncomfortable one in *tierra caliente"* (Chance, 1989, p. 84). It is likely that the *Tlahuis* returned to the original location of the town or occupied a different portion of the highlands as there is information about a new attempt

to resettle the town in 1598 and then again in1721. Both relocations were followed by a massive dispersion of Tlahuitoltepec's population that was probably linked to epidemics of smallpox that took place in different moments of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Although Chance never suggests that the Mixe lacked a state before or during the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors, the information provided in his research can be taken as indication that this may have been the case and it seems to reinforce my own proposition that in the Sierra Mixe there existed (and still exists) a type of social organization that differs radically from a centralised state order. To some degree, one can only speculate on the type of hierarchy that was present at the time of the conquest as written sources are strongly biased as they only reflect the colonial regime's perspective while the indigenous' viewpoint can only be inferred. Nevertheless, the data contained within the ethnographic literature on the Mixe and my own materials makes possible to elaborate some valid inferences on the subject and fill some of the gaps left by historical studies.

Referring to colonial history is important for the purpose of this research not only because it provides a broad perspective on the difficulties associated with the establishment of state rule in the Sierra Mixe but because it reveals the existence of a long-lasting pattern of dispersion and concentration among the Mixe which has strong similarities with the alternation between centrifugal and centripetal forces observed during the course of my ethnographic research.

To assume that the Sierra has been historically characterised by an alternation between centrifugal and centripetal forces which entails a rejection of the state becomes a less daring affirmation if we bear in mind that among many Amerindian peoples migration, dispersion and the abandonment of urban centres has been employed as a way of resisting domination and exploitative relationships throughout centuries.

Fleeing from the "pueblos de *encomienda*" to reside in peripheral *milpas* in the forest or to establish "*pueblos de huídos*" in isolated places was a strategy commonly employed by the Maya of Yucatan

from the 16th century to the early decades of the 20th century[48], when many groups were settling in the rain forests of the Petén in Guatemala escaping from the violence of the Caste War (Caso Barrera, 2002); similar strategies have been employed by numerous societies from the Amazon and the Andes (Morán, 1993; Santos, 1992, 2002; Wright and Hill, 1986) as a way of rejecting centralisation, coercion and power concentration.

Nevertheless, we must be careful not to reduce dispersal to a simple reaction against the expansion of the state or to think of it only in terms of a mechanical relationship between domination and resistance. Histories based on bureaucratic sources (either of colonial or national origin) tend to turn history into a matter of struggles in favour or against the state, however, the interaction of centrifugal and centripetal forces and the alternation of hierarchical forms are processes that occur even in the absence of state pressures. Undeniably, geographic dispersion is a useful resource to resist State imposition and exploitation by elites and bureaucracies but its rationale is not exclusively political but also ecological and even cosmological.

The interplay between centrifugal and centripetal forces is not only an instrument with which defy political hegemony but also a fundamental tool for socializing a geography characterised by its environmental and social diversity, a device that allows culture and society to be extremely flexible. In the same key, we should also think of geographic displacements not only as a physical relocation of social relationships but as an intellectual process that is constantly redefining the manner in which individual and groups perceive themselves and others.

By moving from the cold highlands of the Sierra to the tropical climate of *tierra caliente*, from hamlets to rural towns and cities, through interacting with peoples of different languages and religions, by experiencing multiple social, cultural and ethnic shifts and through maintaining contacts with a large range of non-human agents (divinities, animals, plants) the Mixe worldview has acquired a quality that could be labelled "Ovidian". Italo Calvino wrote that for Ovid, "everything can be

[48] Fleeing from urban centres as a way of avoiding state rule could have been a strategy employed since pre-Hispanic Maya populations; nevertheless, the later is not entirely clear and is a subject of debate inscribed in the great discussions on the archaeology and history of the collapse of the classic Maya.

transformed into something else, and knowledge of the world means dissolving the solidity of the world [...] for him there is an essential parity between everything that exists, as opposed to any sort of hierarchy of power and values" (Calvino, 1988, p. 9) and the same metamorphic principle could be applied for the Mixe with its plurality of ontological principles. Such cosmological (and political) imagination is stimulated by a spatial dynamism that cannot be separated from its geographic context.

To think of dispersion and aggregation as a process that takes place within multiple levels and not exclusively as the product of a political tension, allows us to surpass the state-centrism that characterise much of the historiographic and anthropological production on Mexico. The latter is a fundamental point to be considered in the following section since the expansion of the Mexican post-revolutionary state, the emergence of a centralised sovereignty and of a nationalist political tradition within the Sierra Mixe, did not mean the interruption of the interplay between centrifugal and centripetal forces. Even in moments in which certain mechanisms that regulate the spatial dynamic of the Mixe were intervened by the caciques (that is, taken by a centralizing power) and deprived of their levelling and redistributive qualities, people continue moving around the Sierra, shifting milpas, living in distant rancherias and travelling back and forth between villages, towns and head-towns to participate in fiestas, give tequio and serve in communitarian duties. The enormous scale of the Sierra, the existence of a religiosity in which pilgrimage plays a central role and even the migration associated with the violence of the cacicagzos, set considerable limits to the capacity of the centralizing efforts displayed during the 20th century. An additional element that is important to keep in mind is that the attempt to centralise the communities of the Sierra Mixe did not imply the complete disappearance of alternative ways of articulating the relationships between communities. Although these were damaged and persecuted (due to the fact that caciques tried to acquire the monopoly of the mediation between villages) there were efforts to maintain links among communities independently of the caciques and the state.

An ethnographic exploration of the post-revolutionary state in the Sierra Mixe

The point of departure for this section is what many people in the Sierra call the "Mixe War", the long process of cacique violence that dominated the life of the region between the mid thirties to the late fifties and persisted until the end of the seventies and early eighties of the last century. Focusing on the caciques is justified as their leading role, together with the appearance of the rural public school, was the most visible sign of the presence of the state after the Mexican revolution. Exploring the way in which the postrevolutionary regime approached the Sierra will serve to reveal in more detail certain processes that were insinuated in our brief review of colonial history but that cannot be thoroughly observed due to the limitation of the historical sources of that period. An ethnographic inquiry on the caciques will shed light on the various ways in which communities, region and state (in this case the National state) are articulated, the tensions between centripetal and centrifugal forces and the way in which a centralising and vertical form nationalism has historically relates to the decentralised and horizontal indigenous cosmology.

The latter will be achieved by focusing on people's memories of the caciques rather than in archival or written sources. My intention is not to elaborate a detailed reconstruction of the history of the caciques but to reflect on the problems derived from the state's presence in the Sierra Mixe and to offer an insight into that gray area in which the limits between society and state become unclear and political ambiguities arose. Additionally, I seek to understand the tenuous line that separates leaders from caciques, the moment in which consensual authority is transformed into coercive power. Throughout the following pages I will provide evidence of the way in which the different hierarchical models, mechanisms of association and power structures that exist within the Mixe communities are constantly reconfiguring and altering the way in which categories such as *inside* and *outside*, *us* and *them*, *self* and *other* are understood. The premise that orients this section is that the interaction of those categories is far from being a purely discursive or ideological matter but a process that acts on social and physical spaces, modifying geographies and transforming the social configuration of territories.

The Caciques of the Sierra

In the Sierra Mixe the Mexican post-revolutionary state faced challenges that were similar to those encountered by the Spanish colonial state. Although the region was not alien to the expansion of the coffee plantations that modified Oaxaca's social landscape at the dawn of the 19th century (Smith, 2009), by the time of Cardenas' arrival to power (1934) it was an unquestionably peripheral and fairly isolated area; the capitalist expansion of the *porfiriato* (Greenberg, 1989; Porter, 2002; Chassen, 2004) was visible only in a few municipalities of the Lowlands and Midlands; unlike other parts of Oaxaca there were no *mestizo* or immigrant elites, the majority of the population did not speak Spanish and the lack of roads and communications combined with an absence of strong links with an urban centre posed great difficulties to the expansion of state institutions. At the same time, the links between Sierra Mixe and the revolutionaries who had conquered power were tenuous if not inexistent. In comparison to other areas of Mexico that were fully engaged in the revolutionary struggle, the Sierra Mixe was only indirectly involved in the civil war mostly through Mixe combatants who were part of the *Sovereignty Movement*[49] (Garner, 1988). The political agenda of the Mixe (like other indigenous peoples in Oaxaca) was only marginally involved with demands for land redistribution[50]as most part of it was (and still is) communal land, and *haciendas* and plantations did not play a significant role in this area.

In the eyes of the state, the Mixe region was the archetype of a socially, geographically and culturally isolated area, severed from the rest of Nation, with no clear links to the state apparatus or to national elites which constituted a potential risk to national unity and a latent source of rebellion. For the state

[49] In a strict sense, the Sovereignty Movement was not part of the revolutionary struggle as it did not involve fighting the Porfirian regime or its class of land-owners. It was a relatively late armed movement whose purpose was to defend the sovereignty of the State of Oaxaca (therefore its name) established in the Constitution of 1857 against the incursion of the *constitucionalista* movement of Venustiano Carranza. For years the *Movimiento* was considered by most historians to be a reactionary movement, headed by the rest of a Porfirista class and backed by "conservative" or "non-revolutionary" peasants (Waterbury, 1975) but recent studies have been modifying this perception by seeing it as a way of defending local autonomies and communal lands (Chassen-Lopez, 2004)

[50] Only a few Mixe communities were affected by the process of land concentration that took place during the Liberal Republic and the Porfiriato. Among the villages who lost their land to the land surveying companies (Holden, 1990) was San Juan Guichicovi in the zone of Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Escalona, 2002?). Guichicovi, unlike the Mixe communities in the Midlands and Highlands was not able to maintain its lands in communal property and today most of it is in private hands or *ejido* property.

it was imperative to identify (or create) leaders who could be incorporated into the revolutionary project in order to guarantee a certain amount of loyalty to the new regime.

Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s the state's privileged interlocutor in the Sierra Mixe was Daniel Martínez, the cacique from the village of San Pedro y San Pablo Ayutla, the closest Mixe community to the city of Oaxaca. Martinez represents the typical *caudillo* of the early post-revolution; he acquired his political strength as a fighter in the *Soberanía* movement (where he reached the rank of Colonel) and controlled the region with the support of a military force of his own, that operated under the euphemistic name of *defensa social*[51]. Martinez established a style of politics that would be imitated by other caciques consisting in introducing schooling and building roads (mainly through a forced form of tequio) which allowed him to appear as a social reformer with government authorities. By the mid-thirties, Colonel Martinez's power was in open decay due to a combination of factors; he faced a growing opposition from many Mixe communities that were tired of his violence and constant requests of labour and tribute (corn, coffee, cattle, mescal and other goods), secondly, the attempts to demilitarise and civilise the post-revolutionary political elite were turning militaristic figures into unpopular characters and finally, Luis Rodríguez Jacob, the cacique of Santiago Zacatepec, was already challenging Martínez hegemony.

Luis Rodríguez Jacob one of the most emblematic figures of the Sierra Mixe, was a cacique who governed most of the Sierra with an iron fist for more than twenty years (from the mid-thirties to his death in 1959). Much of what is known of the Sierra Mixe outside is precisely a fragmentary history of Rodriguez's dominion elaborated by anthropologists, historians and journalists whose imagination was captured by the despotic, violent and almost Rulfian[52] quality of his power and by the long intestine struggles that plagued the Mixe lands during his time.

[51] The *defensas sociales* were the military forces employed by the Oaxacan forces during the days of the *Movimiento de la Soberanía*, although they had legal status under Oaxaca's law, most were in fact paramilitary forces at the service of local warlords.

[52] The term "Rulfian" refers to the literary production of Juan Rulfo, the author of *El llano en llamas* and *Pedro Páramo*, two seminal works of Mexican modern literature. Rulfo captured like no other author the authoritarian spirit of Mexican caciques. Páramo a phantasmal character, was laconic, prone to violence and marked by extreme *machismo.* Páramo ruled the town of Comala with a tyrannical style and an iron fist and represented the omnipotence power of those who can decide between life and death.

Understanding the precise place of Rodriguez in Mexican history constitutes a rather difficult task. Mexican *indigenista* ethnographer Salomón Nahmad, referred to Rodriguez as a "progressive leader", a "revolutionary" and as a "patriarch" (Nahmad, 1965; 2003). Etsuko Kuroda also used the term "leader" with a neutral and uncompromising tone (Kuroda, 1984). In contrast, journalist Iñigo Laviada had no hesitation in calling him a "cacique" and "murderer". More recently, Benjamin Smith (2009) argued that "the Janus-faced nature of caciquismo allowed Rodríguez to present himself as a radical Indianist and educator to the state and central government but as an armed and brutal *mandón* to those who would not bend to his imperious will." (Smith, 2009, p. 188) and in general he is inclined to see Zacatepec's cacique as a "murderer, rapist, exploiter and arsonist". At first glance it would not be difficult to understand the reasons behind such a disparity of opinions; Nahmad is a militant *indigenista*, educated in the most orthodox ideology of post-revolutionary regime while Kuroda wrote a rather de-politicised and aseptic ethnography of the Mixe that paid no attention to the role of caciquismo. By contrast, Laviada, a Catholic journalist, adopted the position of an activist denouncing the crimes of the Sierra's political bosses while Smith is a sophisticated revisionist historian, with a great distaste for caciquismo and a critic of Cardenista hegemony.

But more important than the academic characterizations of the period of the caciques are the opinions and memories of the Mixe about local bosses. During the course of my research I collected several accounts of the days of Luis Rodriguez, both from eye witnesses and from people who inherited an oral tradition on the subject. Collecting these stories was a task that demanded considerable amount of patience and discretion since participants were not always willing to discuss the subject and also, because the narratives were neither linear nor clearly organised but fragmentary, obscure and full of divergences.

The majority of my informants agreed that during the days of the great cacicazgos life was hard and death omnipresent; a considerable number of them belong to what many call the "orphan generation", due to the great of number of children who lost their parents or relatives in skirmishes or were ambushed on their way to the fields by rival factions during the years in which armed violence prevailed in the Sierra.

People had recollections of extreme poverty and in their narratives, hunger and lack of shoes (or *huaraches*) were the harsh and feared symbols of a past full of deprivation and destruction. In contrast, they are enormously proud (and relieved) that the worst days of conflicts between villages are now gone and disputes are usually bloodless; that moving throughout the paths and roads of the region is safe and relatively easy and especially, that villages and towns have regained their autonomy and power is no longer in the hands of the caciques but rests in communitarian assemblies and elected officers.

My conversations on the topic were usually full of tension as they brought back memories charged with pain and violence and on many occasions, it was obvious that deliberate attempts to forget conflicts of the past were disrupted by my attempts to reconstruct the history of the cacicazgos. Referring to Luis Rodriguez's actions was not as simple as invoking a figure dead long ago but to dig in a collective process in which many people participated, communities fought against each other and where the frontiers separating victims from victimisers were not always evident. Not surprisingly, many in the Sierra Mixe prefer to talk about the "Mixe War" instead of "the time of the caciques" (this a term mostly employed by *agäats* or outsiders); while the latter centres history on a few individuals, the former refers to a process in which most people in the Sierra was involved. As my conversations on the subject progressed, the act of remembering the caciques became more complex as people often found that their attitudes towards local bosses were deeply ambivalent; anger coexisted with admiration and individual grief shared a space with the recognition that Luis Rodríguez introduced a sense of ethnic unity and collective identity that was previously unknown and that many of my interlocutors and friends thought to be important. The recognition of this ambiguity was something which both my interlocutors and I found perplexing and often lead to dense and puzzled silences.

Old musicians (especially those who are now in their seventies or eighties) remembered the heyday of the caciques as "a time of slavery" in which they were forced to play at every single celebration without any payment and were subject to the capricious will of local bosses; nevertheless, they also demonstrated great admiration for the municipal band of Zacatepec, for decades the largest and best

of the brass bands of the Sierra, appreciated Rodriguez's efforts to establish a music band in every major Mixe community and of other initiatives related with music, including gifts of musical instruments, sending music teachers to the villages many of them were forced to reside as band directors in villages designated by the cacique.

This contradictory vision of the caciques is clearly summarised in the stories about Rito Marcelino Robirosa, which can be heard in many of the *pueblos* of the Highlands. Despite the fact that Rito was a historic character (he even appeared in a documentary shot by film and theatre director Ludwik Margules) his life story is now narrated in mythical terms or as tales that serve as metaphors of power, oppression and liberty and condense the way in which politics were perceived under the caciques' rule.

Rito Marcelino, a peasant and music composer from the village of Cacalotepec and author of songs that are essential in the repertoire of all Mixe bands (such as *Fandango mixe* and *Sones y jarabes mixes*,) was, at some point of his life, imprisoned for three years by the cacique Rodriguez in the municipal jail of Zacatepec. A number of versions state that Rito was sent to gaol for theft; others affirm that the reason of his imprisonment was murder while in some narratives he simply was kidnapped by Rodriguez to compose music for his own enjoyment and increase the prestige of Zacatepec's music band[53]. A number of versions, which have acquired an unmistakable mythic quality, state that Rito Marcelino was writing music and secretly taking it out from jail with the help of a boy or a bird; the pieces eventually were heard by the cacique who, marvelled by Rito's genius, put him out of prison and gave him land in Zacatepec and appointed him director of the local band.

In these narratives, Rodriguez is simultaneously presented as an arbitrary leader who imprisons Rito in order to use his musical talent but at the same time, as a generous, patriarchal figure that rewards the musician by giving him the precious gift of land. The appearance of the boy and the messenger bird in some accounts serves as a metaphor of the musicians' freedom and their struggle against authority, but this is a matter that will be analyzed in the chapter dedicated to the music bands. My interest here is exclusively to stress the way of portraying the character of the cacique as a

[53] This version is presented as a historical fact by Benjamin Smith in his otherwise excellent article on cacqiuismo in the Mixe region (Smith, 2008)

paternalistic figure that punishes and rewards in equal manner and always relates to people from a position of superiority.

Ambivalent opinions about the cacique did not come only from musicians. Almost every adult in the Sierra has a story describing the way in which Rodriguez's gunmen (*gatilleros*) arrived to the villages and forced their inhabitants to work outside their communities in the monumental works envisaged by the cacique (such massive works, at least for the standards of the Mixe region, included a system of landing strips distributed through the mountains that was used for the benefit of Rodriguez's light aircrafts and a telegraph network controlled from Zacatepec), of the punishments imposed to individuals and communities who challenged the authority of the local boss or about the fear of being ambushed on their way to the milpas by rival factions. However, these accounts coexisted with an obscure fascination for the cacique´s might; during my conversations it became clear that many felt attracted by the aura of Luis Rodriguez leadership regardless of its oppressive features.

The works built with forced tequio were admired for reasons that were not purely technical but involved a certain enchantment with the cacique's ability to mobilise people and force them to engage in hard tasks. Moreover, they referred to his capacity to impose his will with a hint of amazement; a few people (mainly elderly) avoided referring to Luis Rodriguez as a cacique and preferred to use the more neutral term "leader" while some simply said that Rodriguez was not a cacique but a bigshot (*mandamás*) and a *chingón*.

A most striking and strange expression of this ambivalent status became apparent when the legendary authoritarian masculinity of Luis Rodriguez was mentioned during the conversations. Versions on this topic vary significantly but they all coincide in mentioning Rodriguez's extreme machismo and his violent behaviour towards women. The cacique was not only notorious for having children in almost every Mixe village and for taking women whenever he wanted but he and his men were also known for using rape as a form of political punishment with striking frequency. Some versions (María Luisa Acevedo, personal communication) maintain that Rodriguez was obsessed with the idea of "improving the race" and for that purpose he forced women from his town to have sexual

relationships with non-indigenous, preferably white skinned outsiders in order to give birth to mestizo children. Such attitudes were seen as abhorrent, but especially among elderly men, they were regarded as a confirmation of the cacique's might and in some cases, there were hints that exercising power over women is an inherent trait (although not necessarily legitimate) of any great leader.

Regardless if the latter is historically accurate or part of the "black legend" that grows around every cacique in Mexico (Knight and Pansters, 2006), the fact is that Rodriguez conceived of himself as a moderniser in the Cardenista fashion and his political actions should be understood in the context of the campaigns of nationalization and acculturation that developed throughout Mexico in the first half of the 1930's.

These campaigns, whose purpose was to "redeem" and "integrate" peasants and indigenous peoples into the nation, focused on eliminating many of the features considered to be archetypal expressions of "indigenousness"; namely alcoholism, "superstitions" (including the practice of orthodox and more "popular" forms of Catholicism), native languages and traditional clothing. In Zacatepec, for example, many remember when Rodriguez prohibited the use of traditional clothes and replaced them with *mestizo* style garments (which he sold in a shop of his property) and then ordered to set a bonfire to burn the women's skirts, blouses and headdresses (*enredos)* in the town's square; I was told of this story by an old lady who, shivering with the recollection of the fires, said to me: "that day the women of Zacatepec were in tears".

The authoritarian measures took by Luis Rodriguez may appear the deeds of an irrational despot, but they were perfectly coherent with post-revolutionary forms of *vasconcelista* eugenics and *indigenista* mestizophilia (Urías-Horcasitas, 2007; Stern 2000, Stepan, 1991) which in many regions of Mexico (Friedrich, 1977; 1986) including the Sierra Mixe was appropriated and imposed through violent means by local caciques[54]. It is not surprising that women were a favoured target of the political bosses' symbolic and real violence. Burning traditional clothes was a violent and extreme way of

[54] A detailed account of the enforcement of the Cardenista campaigns in Chiapas (including the burn of traditional dresses and the imposition of Spanish language) can be found in R. Aida Hernández Castillo, *Histories and Stories from Chiapas. Border Identities in Southern Mexico*, Austin, 2001.

accelerating the "acculturation process" that was explicitly pursued by early *indigenismo* which regarded "traditional dresses" as an unequivocal index of the prevalence of a distinctive indigenous identity which (under extreme forms of mestizophilia) needed to be extirpated. At the same time, it is possible that women were subject to violence not only as a way to punish and humiliate individuals and communities that rejected the cacique's hegemony but also because of their crucial role in reproducing many of the mechanisms of the "traditional culture" (including horizontal and reciprocal ties) that the caciques sought to eliminate.

The question that derives from this information is why people could allow any type of ambiguous consideration or have any kind of respect for a violent regime which brought so much pain and destruction to the Mixe. In his study of Oaxaca's post-revolutionaries caciques, Benjamin Smith (2009) affirms that "memories of Rodríguez are universally negative, even in his hometown of Santiago Zacatepec", an assertion which clearly differs from the data that I collected. Such manifest difference may reflect a question of method; in my experience, gathering the narratives on the caciques (and collecting information on political issues in general) required numerous conversations; at first my informants were cautious and even suspicious of the questions formulated and I generally obtained only vague responses or answers accommodated to what my interlocutors thought were my expectations. The context in which conversation were held was also important; in public spaces and during daytime (towns' squares, schools, and municipal offices) I normally obtained information that at best, was scarce and schematic and which contrasted with the richness and complexity of what I was told during meetings held at night in households, rancherias or in conversations in which only a few people were present. It was only through a combination of patience, persistence, trust and familiarity that the ambiguities and contradictions surrounding the caciques came to surface.

On the other hand, differences between Smith's data and my own can be explained as the product of certain theoretical choices. Smith's main focus is put on the role of mediation between caciques and the central government (at federal and State level) to understand the degree of the state's influence in different regions of Oaxaca. For this author, caciques (and especially Luis Rodriguez) made an instrumental use of post-revolutionary ideologies, institutions and resources that allowed them to

appear as committed revolutionaries and social reformers blessed by the state and, at the same time, to maintain an autocratic and authoritarian control of their own regions. While Smith's characterization of caciquismo as a Janus-faced phenomenon is suggestive, he fails to see (as most scholars interested in aspects of mediation do) that, despite its strategic use, post-revolutionary ideologies were deeply internalised both by the caciques and the people subject to their power. Smith's excessive focus on individual caciques and their relationship with the state also makes him lose sight of the collective process behind the emergence of post-revolutionary cacicazgos.

The complexity of post-revolutionary caciques does not reside exclusively in the fact that the state (often through informal and even illegal means) made them depositaries of a great authoritarian power but that such power, despite its violent nature, enjoyed a considerable degree of support among local populations. The caciques managed to create a large social base whose size and importance exceeded by far the strength of the military and paramilitary forces (*pistoleros*, *guardias blancas*) at their disposal. Peasant and indigenous peoples were not simple victims of a violence which originated in the state and embodied in the caciques, but participants in profound social transformations in which violence was a fundamental component; authoritarian rule was not exclusively a top to bottom matter but a process that also developed from within the communities and whose explanation necessarily requires considering the role of local populations.

The role of caciques was not limited to mediation between an already structured State and a fully consolidated society; rather they were important agents in the creation of new social orders and novel ways of defining state and society. Their position was not restricted to translate to "local languages" the demands and needs of the State and their role was not a matter of creating the conditions to expand State's institutions to a milieu dominated by "tradition".

Through the exercise of a form of power backed, but not necessarily created by the state, post-revolutionary caciques were constructing a form of sovereignty (Agamben, 1998), i.e. "a tentative and always emergent form of authority grounded in violence that is performed and designed to generate loyalty, fear and legitimacy from the neighbourhood to the summit of the state" (Hansen and Steputtat,

2006). This form of centralised power entails a "de facto" sovereign power (i.e. "the ability to kill, punish and discipline with impunity" [Hansen and Steputtat, 2006]) directed to accomplish a complete reshaping of social relationships. Characters like Luis Rodriguez tried to impose a new way of conceiving "the political and natural body" (Kantorowicz, 1997) as well as a different manner to understand and experience the space in which those bodies exist. The creation of a form of political sovereignty entailed a redefinition of the geographical limits of the political order and of the way in which frontiers between spaces, individuals and groups are conceived. In this sense, the emergence and consolidation of the caciques can be seen as part of a spatial process that involved imagining a new geography, replacing previous territorial orders, erasing pre-existent boundaries and tracing a new territoriality. The spatial reconfiguration that ran parallel to the creation of the post-revolutionary State is an aspect frequently overlooked by scholars but it was fundamental not only for the agrarian reform (its most obvious manifestation) but for the overall creation of a (revolutionary) social subject. While different authors (Knight, 2006; Pansters, 1997) have recognized that the authority of rural and some urban caciques was mainly a territorial-based one, they tend to see such territories as an unproblematic dimension or as a pre-existent space whose features are unrelated to the type of political power exercised within it. As far as I am aware, Claudio Lomnitz (1991; 1992; 1996) is one of the few scholars that have dedicated considerable part of his work to reflect on the spatial features of the post-revolutionary state through what he called the "spatial dimension of cultural production and identity". Building on the work of "radical geographers" (Harvey, Urry, Gregory) Lomnitz developed an explanation of "the systemic regional cultural differentiation and homogenization that are involved in 'national culture'" (Lomnitz, 1991, p. 212)

The Sierra Mixe provides a particularly good example of how constructing a political sovereignty depended on reorganizing the (geographic and social) space as in this region caciques' authority was directly linked to the creation of a new political jurisdiction, the *Distrito Mixe*. Luis Rodriguez's ascent to power was the result of the creation of a Judicial and Administrative District[55] in the Sierra.

[55] The Districts (now known as ex-Districts) were an administrative unit that "lay between the state governor and the municipality" (Smith, 2009 p. 17). This type of jurisdiction followed a previous territorial unit, the *Distritos Políticos* of the *Porfiriato*, in which there was located a *Jefe Politico* which was the figure utilized by

Both Rodriguez and Martinez pursued the creation of a Mixe District encompassing those Mixe communities which were subject to different jurisdictions. The District would confer authority over all Mixe villages as well as official recognition by Oaxaca and Mexico City. Naturally, both caciques tried to place the District capital in their hometowns. Martinez argued that San Pedro y San Pablo Ayutla was the natural choice, as it was closer to the City of Oaxaca but Rodriguez connections with government officials were stronger, he had a larger coalition of villages behind him and so was able to to obtain a decree from Oaxaca's congress constituting the district of region Región Mixe with its cabecera in Zacatepec (Acevedo-Conde, 2002; Smith 2009).

The creation of the District was preceded and followed by great violence. Ayutla and Zacatepec formed two coalitions of villages that were constantly fighting. Furthermore, within communities ther were factions aligned with any of the caciques which led to brutal intra-communitarian struggles. Soon after the creation of the District, the Sierra Mixe turned into a dangerous place in which all the components of an exacerbated armed conflict were present. Peasants never left their villages without carrying a machete or a gun and burning crops and houses became a common sight. The fact that there were still weapons left from the Revolution, allowed the creation of irregular armies raiding enemy villages were a frequent affair (people from Zacatepec assured to me that men were still organised in the same battalions of the old *Defensas* of the *Movimiento de la Soberanía* and that guns were buried in the villages, but no one could confirm the authenticity of this information). The divide between partisans of Ayutla and Zacatepec was not always clear or rigidly maintained. Some villages did not want to be involved in the factional struggle and they tried to leave the Distrito Mixe and return to the old jurisdictions while some other pueblos changed bands many times throughout the years.

Despite its dramatic quality, the period of Luis Rodriguez cannot be understood by focusing exclusively in the armed aspects of the conflict, as force always came accompanied by elaborated

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Porfirio Diaz to centralize the exercise of political power by controlling state governors, restricting the authority of *Municipios* and disciplining regional caudillo, military chiefs and local elites. The Constitution of 1917 eliminated the Distritos and Jefes Politicos but in Oaxaca, Districts continue to exist after the revolution. In these jurisdictions were concentrated the tax collector (*inspector de Hacienda*), the public prosecutor (*Ministerio Público*), the school inspector and in some periods there was a local military force (*Defensa social*). The Districts had a capital, the *cabecera distrital*, usually the biggest town or city of the District.

ideological discourses that caused considerable impact among the people of the Sierra. Luis Rodriguez employed all the repertoire of post-revolutionary *indigenismo* to justify his actions with the government but also to mobilise communities within the Sierra in order to create a network of supporters at every village. For Smith, Rodriguez's use of *indigenista* resources was purely instrumental and a mere rhetoric device to please the government. He sees the cacique's control of coffee production and distribution and political repression as more significant elements to explain his power over the Mixe region and points that Rodriguez opportunistically modified his discourse as the political winds change in Mexico City.

While it is undeniable that Rodriguez was a repressive, exploitative and opportunistic character, it is impossible to dismiss the impact caused by *indigenismo* and nationalism among the Mixe people or to underestimate the importance of social and cultural changes brought with the creation of an ethno-political region (the District) that until then was unknown. Luis Rodriguez constantly employed a discourse which emphasizsed *racial purity* and *geographic unity* and proclaimed to defend *the great Mixe family*. At the same time, and with the help of rural teachers, he created a historical discourse (that transferred resources of the imagery and narrative of the nationalist historiography to the regional context), that conceived the indigenous past as a glorious time in which the Mixe were independent and prosperous and served to establish an uninterrupted continuity between the pre-Hispanic past and the present. This was the time in which an important idea start developing, one that represented the Mixe as an un conquered people that resisted by the Spaniards' domination but also stood firm against the military incursions of the Mexica, the Zapotec and even of the Mexican state.

The use of the ideological repertoire of the post-revolutionary state had a profound effect on the Mixe; it not only served to paved the way for building a modern "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991) in which linguistic, geographic and political differences among the Mixe communities were to be erased and substituted by the idea of a homogenous ethnic group, but it also set boundaries between peoples that from the perspective of the "traditional" mechanisms of regional articulation, were not significant or decisive. The caciques introduced the concept of a radical divide between the Mixe and the neighbouring Zapotec communities that remained outside the Mixe District, turning them into a

historical adversary whose presence threatened the cultural, linguistic and racial integrity of the Mixe. A similar process took place in relationship to the mestizo population (both of the Sierra and of the Nation); through the adoption and imposition of the *indigenista* worldview introduced by caciques, the mestizo/indigenous dichotomy acquired a resonance that under a different way of social organization is not meaningful.

The latter does not imply that before the arrival of the caciques the Mixe were unaware of incapable of perceiving differences between the different populations of the or that that conflicts between groups were absent; what I am interested in underlining here is that the model of ethnic relationships contained within the politics of caciquismo is radically different from that of the "traditional" Mixe way of understanding difference and alterity. The Mixe, obviously have conflicts with other groups[56] and within the *ayuuk* linguistic group, but similarly to Amazonian societies, the Mixe see others (including enemies) as fundamental elements for the reproduction of society (Gow, 2001; Killick, 2007). Approaching others through the exchange of gifts such as music, food and alcohol is, from the local perspective, an activity that is essential for the formation of the community and for the socialisation of the space of the Sierra. Differently from a nationalist conception that naturalises sameness by assuming that the community is formed by members united through their similarities, local views of socialisation conceive the community as an arrangement of ontological differences which are only momentarily transcended through rituals that assert reciprocity. By contrast, the *indigenista*/nationalist vision seeks to erase those differences as it considers that they jeopardise the continuity of society and regard them as essentially immoral. For Mexican nationalism, ethnic and

[56] Among anthropologists of Oaxaca, there is a tendency to define the relationships between Zapotec and Mixe as if this were essentially asymmetrical. Both in the literature (Nahmad, 1965; Kuroda; 1984, Torres Cisneros) and during my fieldwork, I constantly came across with comments on the "dominant instinct of the Zapotecs" and about the "Zapotec-ization" of the Lowland Mixe. Nevertheless the arguments on the subject are rather week. Most of them are based on the fact that many important middlemen who traded with coffee between the Sierra Mixe and markets in the Isthmus and the Central Valleys region (mainly but not exclusively with Mitla's market) were Zapotec and, apparently, particularly exploitative. However, more recent literature (including this chapter) shows (Porter, 2002; Smith, 2009), the abuse of coffee farmers was not something sustained on ethnic bases. The supposed cultural dominance of the Zapotec over the Mixe of the Lowlands has an even weaker basis. These conclusions were based on the fact that Mixe women from this area wear Zapotec style blouses and that many rich Zapotec men marry Mixe women. The first assertion reveals nothing but a crass culturalism and a complete unawareness of the possibility that "ethnic frontiers" are not defined in absolute terms and reproduces the archaic notion of clothing as the great index of acculturation. The second assertion is even more superficial, as it does not have any solid reference to Mixe or Zapotec kinship systems.

cultural differences were regarded as a colonial legacy that perpetuated inequality but, more important, were a threat to the unity of the Nation.

Through unifying Mixe communities under a single jurisdiction and a single authority, caciques reinforced the post-revolutionary notion of the Mexican nation as one divided between a *mestizo* majority and a constellation of indigenous minorities contained within rigid spatial and cultural frontiers that should be erased by means of political and cultural homogenisation. *Indigenismo* as implemented by the caciques, involved the creation of an indigenous political and individual body, constructed in terms of an essentialist form of ethnicity. Under this form of cultural hegemony, the individual body was no longer that of the *ayuuk* person, defined in terms of its relationship to others (humans and non-humans) and therefore, in permanent state of change, but one defined in racial and historical terms, whose defining features were inherited from a distant historical and biological past.

The fact that the individual body was founded and shaped according to the postulates of *indigenismo* made of this an extremely contradictory one. On the one hand, the indigenous (Mixe) body was celebrated as pure and glorious, valuable in terms of its links to the past and fundamental to the project of racial, ethnic and linguistic unity implied in the creation of the Distrito Mixe. However, that same ideology also predicted and encouraged the progressive disappearance of the indigenous body and its replacement by a *mestizo* one. In nationalist political imagination there will be a revolutionised and revolutionary body that will no longer heal by means of *curanderos* or magic but by scientific medicine and public health. Bodies will speak differently thanks to schooling and culture which will create the desire of speaking a proper language and not a "dialect" and its political life will no longer be organised through what was seen as a colonial religious-civic hierarchy that perpetuated exploitation but through the disciplined secular politics of the state and its official party. *Indigenismo* was for the indigenous (including the caciques) a double-edged sword as it is an ideology that exalts the indigenous as cultural foundation of the nation but that also leads to "disempowering, since the indigenous side [becomes] an incapacity to be transcended in the individual, and a continuing axis of discrimination" (Gledhill, 1997, p.3).

Thus, it is not surprising that Rodriguez was able to invoke an ethnicist and "Indianist" discourse to mobilise Mixe communities and that, at the same time, he could attack important elements of indigenous culture such as wearing traditional clothes and impose his view of *mestizaje* by forcing women to become pregnant by non-indigenous outsiders. More than a Janus-faced politician (Smith, 2009) that wisely used the rhetoric weapons of *mestizaje* when dealing with government authorities and then showed an indigenous face to his own people, Rodriguez appears as a slightly schizophrenic character, closer to the ontologically troubled Mexican of Octavio Paz's *Labyrinth of Solitude* (Paz, 2005)[57] than to a Machiavellian pragmatist.

The authoritarian application of *indigenismo* (a process in which the public school was fundamental) was experienced by the Mixe in a very dramatic way, not only as something imposed through force by a cacique allied to the government, but as an internal shock wave acting upon the most intimate spaces. It generated a divided consciousness and created a sort of uncertainty and anxiety about being indigenous or Mixe. Those who lived during the harshest times of the cacicazgos or were educated in the nationalist orthodoxy of the Mexican public school (basically everyone who went to school between the late 1930's to the mid 1970's) have vivid memories of being repressed for speaking Mixe in the classroom, of courses on hygiene which established an association between indigenous culture and dirtiness; at the same time, they spend their childhood listening to history lessons that praised the Indigenous, its glorious past and local political discourses that emphazised the need of political and ethnic unity of the Mixe. A fragment of a conversation on the caciques with a prestigious member

[57] In his celebrated *Labyrinth of Solitude* (, Paz elaborated at length on the "divided consciousness" of Mexican identity and on the anxiety derived from the inability of Mexican culture to reconcile its western, Hispanic legacy with its indigenous heritage. For Paz, the Mexican self was characterised by the violent and ultimately alienating clash between the desire for modernity and cosmopolitanism (an aspiration of "universality") and the search for some type of cultural autarchy and a need a strong believe in a type of Mexican Exceptionalism. Paz's book was basically a poetical elaboration of the work of Samuel Ramos a Mexican philosopher which was part of an intellectual current known as the "Filosofía de la Mexicanidad" (Philosophy of Mexicaness) that combined a nationalist interpretation of Heideggerian phenomenology with a culturalist psychology of American inspiration. Lomnitz (1992) explains that the main strategy of this intellectual tradition consisted in transforming history into psychodrama and as a consequence, it conceptualised every cultural and political phenomena of Mexican history in terms of "trauma". The "trauma of the conquest" was foundational of the Mexican self and equivalent to that of the birth of an individual. The Mexican" character" was for Paz and the philosophers of Mexicaness one characterised by solitude, inwardness and melancholy that could only relate with the exterior through the culture of *machismo* (which was explained as the result of the rape of the indigenous mother by the Spanish father that gave birth to the Mestizo), authoritarianism and occasional outbursts of a repressed consciousness whose main expression is the fiesta.

from Tlahuitoltepec, maestro Antonio, shows the type self-perception created through *indigenista* ideology. Antonio told me with certain amused resignation, how he grew up believing that the Mixe language was somehow inferior to Spanish. According to him "we were told [that Mixe language] was a dialect, like a second class thing, it was not until I was much older that I realise that [Mixe language] was a proper language and that Spanish was not better or worse language than ours".

The collective political body of the Mixe suffered great changes during this historical process; under the caciques' logic, the community was not a fluid and variable entity congregated through ritual, reciprocal exchange and collective labour but a permanent and solid unit maintained through force and built on a unified and stable territory in which its members relate to each other in terms of their immutable similarity and homogeneous nature. The idea of power as something impermanent, distributed in a multiplicity of spots throughout the geography of the Sierra was confronted by a different conception that sustains the existence of a pyramidal social order with a permanent political head and a geographic centre in which authority is concentrated in a centre from where irradiates its influence. The post-revolutionary caciques' aim was to legitimise an unequal distribution of power, a permanent and centralised hierarchy as well as the creation of a ruling elite. In many ways, what the caciques of the Sierra Mixe did was to replicate (although with local adaptations) the model of power that was being constructed in a national scale. If in Chiapas the caciques from the Highlands (*Los Altos*) were constructing the "*comunidad revolucionaria institucional*" through inserting the local cargo-systems into the apparatus of the corporate organizations of the State party (Rus, 1994), in the Sierra Mixe the bosses were building a small-scale reproduction of the Nation that mimicked the forms of power that the post-revolutionary order was consolidating.

The caciques introduced a new form of cartographic imagination (Craib; 2004) in which the "indigenous territory" was conceived as a large extension of land with clear geographic borders in which linguistic, ethnic, political and historical frontiers coincided in a perfect assemblage with no irregularities or disparities. In order to create this new space (and the political body that would inhabit it) it was necessary to weaken communitarian autonomies, to transfer power from its multiple centres to the District's head-town in Zacatepec and to make acceptable or unavoidable the existence of a

great leader. In many ways what caciques and indigenous nationalists did was to transform the Sierra Mixe into an indigenous region; the latter means that they did not simply made a pragmatic use of a political category that was central to the post-revolutionary imagination (the category of *indigena*), and neither they adapted a pre-existent indigenous identity to the terms of a modern political language but rather, they set in march a process aimed to achieve a profound reconfiguration of the social subjects. Here, I coincide with Benjamin Smith's view of the caciques of the Sierra Mixe as *indigenista* political bosses; however I differ with his view of *indigenismo* as a political and discursive tool that could be used to negotiate with the state and then discarded when it ceased being functional (Smith, 2009). For both followers and detractors of the cacique in the Sierra Mixe, the model of power and the type of social subject implied within *indigenismo* was far from being only an easily manipulable ideology but a powerful (and even dangerous) type of Foucauldian *dispositif* that reordered local subjects by re-organising their hierarchical relationship with the state.

To achieve these goals it was necessary to exercise a considerable amount of violence and to eliminate competing forms of hierarchy and authority. Nevertheless, the caciques could not destroy every mechanism of the "traditional" model of power; to achieve a certain amount of success they had to take advantage of some of the practices associated with traditional forms of authority. As a consequence of this, an important objective of the caciques consisted in taking control of the network of communitarian and regional fiestas, to use the system of reciprocity and mutual debts for their own benefit and to take advantage of the mechanisms that regulate tequio for their own benefit. Thus, it is not surprising that the caciques (and especially Luis Rodriguez) actively promoted the music bands and attempted to regulate and control musicians and band directors. As we will see in a latter chapter, music is a basic tool for community integration and for the articulation of inter-communitarian relationships. To some degree, to have control of the music band implies having great influence over society. Undeniably, music bands were useful to relate with government authorities concerned with educational progress and with the improvement of peasants' education (Smith, 2009); nevertheless, encouraging music performances was not a folklorist presentation card to the government but a clever way of penetrating into the core of the Mixe ritual (and into their economy and political hierarchy).

Supporting music bands was not the only way of co-opting rituality; the caciques also lend money and goods (cattle, mescal, and beer) to *mayordomos*, *padrinos* and *capitanes de fiesta* to organise their own celebrations and as a way to create political obligations towards the leaders.

Although the evidence on this topic is not conclusive, it can be suggested that money and goods were granted as reciprocal gifts (or that people understood in this way the offers made by the caciques) and then reclaimed as commercial loans with high interests (the majority of the caciques in the Sierra Mixe were authentic usurers). In any case, it is clear that monetary debts were accompanied with moral obligations that then translated into a form political allegiance to the lenders which in turn, had attached the obligation to give tequio for the benefit of the caciques. Mobilising a considerable work force was possible as a result of a combination of violence and of the intervention on rituals of reciprocity in order to convert them in acts of commercial borrowing whose consequence was to transform tequio into tribute.

What the caciques did was to "verticalise" mechanisms that serve for the (re)distribution of power and wealth and for the creation of horizontal ties between individuals and communities. Luis Rodriguez and other powerful figures benefited from existing chains of reciprocity and redistribution (Monaghan, 1990) and then put a halt to their circulation. Thus, caciques were able to escape the obligation to reciprocate by employing a form of a violence tolerated and often encouraged by the state.

Despite their adherence to post-revolutionary *indigenismo,* the caciques of the Sierra Mixe, as their counterparts in Chiapas and other regions (Falcón, 1984; Friedrich, 1986; Lomnitz, 1992; Knight and Pansters, 2006) were not interested in dismantling every "traditional" feature that they could find (they were neither utopians nor fundamentalists of modernization) but their aim was to reinforce and widen their power trough multiple strategies including the use of means and resources that were familiar to the people under their control. Like in other regions of Mexico where local bosses took control of the "cargo-system" to expand their influence, in the Sierra Mixe it was the co-optation of fiestas and tequio (and recurring to brutal force when necessary) the elements that allowed exercising control over the population. The Mexican state, the presidents of the Republic, the governors of

Oaxaca and the PRI accepted this state of things as it allowed the creation of a recognisable authority that could help to centralise the political life of the region. With certain naïveté, Benjamin Smith concludes his study on Luis Rodriguez declaring that his "*cacicazgo* was not 'modern', 'corporatist' or 'bureaucratic' and added little to state control" (Smith, 2009, p. 187) based on the fact that, unlike Chiapas' caciques, Rodriguez did not "draw ethnic groups into the corporatist party system" (p.187). However, for the post-revolutionary state, party membership was less important than loyalty, obedience and renunciation to political autonomy (at the end of the day, the post-revolutionary regime fostered membership to straw opposition parties –such as the PPS and PARM- as long as political militancy in the opposition was not taken too seriously and it not presented a real challenge to state party politics) and that was precisely what the caciques of the Sierra offered. Through centralizing the political life of the Sierra Mixe the political bosses effectively subordinated the region to the Nation-state. It is necessary to consider that the Mexican post-revolutionary state expanded like a Sierpinski triangle, internally replicating its shape to the infinite and to be successful, this iterative process needed agents who had internalised certain basic notions of the national political and cultural order.

The caciques were the most salient of those agents but certainly not the only ones. Many were seduced, not necessarily by the Mexican State but by the idea of the Nation. The caciques (who probably were sincere nationalists, despite their ambition and pragmatism) introduced in the Sierra the idea of the modern Mexican nation but at the same time, they toyed with the idea of the Mixe as a nation, as a people permanently unified despite their geographic, linguistic and historic differences.

Nationalist chronotope and the Myths of Kong'oy

As I have stated in previous pages, more than making an instrumental use of an ideology what the *indigenista* caciques fathered was a new and different type of cosmology; a nationalist one which included a new spatio-temporal matrix, a chronotope (Bakhtin,1981) which differed from that contained within "traditional" thought. In this new national time, history was (like Mexican national history) a succession of struggles against oppression aimed to restore a primordial order, a golden era

in which the Mixe were free and lived in a prosperous, uncorrupted world ruled by Kong'oy the wise, brave king.

Kong'oy, or King Kong'oy or the Burned King (*Rey Quemado*) is a character prototypical of the extensive mythical tradition of Mesoamerica. In most narratives he has similar characteristics to great "cultural heroes" of Classic and Post-Classic Mesoamerica such as the Maya Kukulkan or Huitzilopochtil of the Mexica[58], while in other myths he resembles the opossum or *tlacuache* (López-Austin, 1993), a trickster-like figure that has a central place in Mesoamerican tradition and which is closer to a popular peasant mythology than to the foundational myths of the Mesoamerican pre-Hispanic states. The distinction between "cultural hero" and "trickster" is important since during my fieldwork I found two different corpuses of myths of Kong'oy that followed this distinction.

Many of the stories of Kong'oy portrayed the latter as a majestic figure, guardian of his people and unparalleled king. This Kong'oy appears a belligerent and mighty character, usually described as a giant warrior capable of throwing stones to his enemies, either Spaniard conquistadors, Zapotec and Mexica warriors or Mexican soldiers. The majestic Kong'oy has a throne located in the chambers of an underground palace, *ranchos* inside the mountains where he raises magical cattle and imprisons those who have made pacts with him to obtain money or power. The Kong'oy of these myths is a powerful and slightly sinister figure. The Sierra is full of stories that affirm that Kong'oy can be occasionally found in the roads, usually dressed with fine clothes and an expensive hat or appear at night in the form of lightning or as a thunderbolt coming from the top of Mount Zempoaltepetl.

Interestingly, the majestic Kong'oy is always circumscribed to the territory of the Sierra Mixe which he never leaves and in radical contrast from the "trickster" Kong'oy who is wanderer by trade. As a territorial figure, the majestic Kong'oy is always fighting against foreign incursions and invasions. In her study on "messianic tradition" in Oaxaca the anthropologist Alicia Barabas included a version of the myth of Kong'hoy narrated by a "cultural promoter" (*promotor cultural)* which illustrates very

[58] There are versions that affirm that Kong'oy was born from a serpent's egg incubated in her mother's breast that has obvious similarities with the Mexica myth in which Huitzilopochtli is born from a ball of feathers that fall inside Coatlicue's blouse.

clearly this idea of Kong'oy as a defender of the Mixe territory. In this myth, Kong'oy after born from an egg and raised by his elderly adoptive parents, grows into a strong man and then leaves the house to measure all the mountain peaks of the Sierra Mixe and then communicate to his people the territorial limits of the Mixe Nation"[59]. The idea of Kong'oy measuring, surveying and defending the frontiers of the Mixe territory is a theme that is constantly repeated in different versions of the myths.

On many occasions I heard stories of Kong'oy punishing foreigners who went to the Sierra Mixe to steal or make of damage (including a couple of *gringo* archaeologist who were made sick as a punishment for taking offerings made to him inside a cave) mostly narrated by teachers and authorities. These stories were more common in contexts in which I was unknown, unwelcome or where people was suspicious of my condition as an *agäat* or stranger. The way in which these myths were narrated (to me) had an obvious admonitory tone that contrasted with the way that friends, musicians and people who were not political authorities referred to Kong'oy, preferring to tell stories of the trickster Kong'oy.

The trickster Kong'oy is dressed as a modest peasant; he has no colossal strength and relies in sagacity to defeat his enemies and in the ability to transform himself into different of animals (such as snakes or bulls) to escape from difficult situations or to pass unnoticed. The myths of the peasant Kong'oy are different from those of the"royal one" in the sense that they follow a different spatial rationale. In the peasant or trickster versions Kong'oy is constantly moving around Oaxaca; he visits the ancient Zapotec city of Monte Alban using a system of secret tunnels connected to the Mixe mountains; in his way to the market town of Mitla, Kong'oy falls asleep in the road and in the spot where he pins down his baton comes the *Árbol del Tule* (a gigantic *ahuehuete* or *Montezuma Cypress* located in Santa María del Tule between the Sierra and Oaxaca City that many in the Sierra Mixe believe is the tallest tree in the world). In Oaxaca he fools the secretary of the governor of Oaxaca to

[59] "El Rey Cong Hoy nace de un huevo encontrado en un arroyo por una pareja de viejos que no habían tenido descendencia, Cong Hoy crece y se desarrolla con sus padres adoptivos caracterizándose por su fortaleza y bondad, cuando madura como hombre se separa de sus padres para emprender el trabajo que debería cumplir: la fundación y defensa territorial del pueblo mixe. Procede a medir los cerros y, tomando el más alto que fue el Iipxukp (cerro de los veinte picos o Zempoaltépetl), comunica a su gente los límites territoriales de la nueva nación mixe" (Barabas, 1984)

sneak in the *Palacio de Gobierno* and then escapes with the governor's gold transformed in a bull or a donkey.

One cannot ignore that Kong'oy myths serve as metaphors of power, as ways of describing tensions, unequal relationships and assigning places to enemies, but they also reveal a different way of conceiving geography and the flow between strangers and locals. Kong'oy stories reveal two different types of territorial order; in the "peasant" or "trickster" accounts spaces are not rigidly divided in terms of ethnic belonging, although in his odyssey outside the mountains, he leaves his marks on the terrain, making strange places familiar through magical means (the *Árbol del Tule*, an imprint of his testicles on a stone in Totontepec, his sister *Eltehel* transformed into stone in the hamlet of Nejapa). Borders and frontiers are flexible like signs tenuously draw in space and characters are not defined in terms of ethnicity while the line that separating the Mixe from other peoples is not always clearly visible or a relevant element of the stories. The peasant Kong'oy moves from one place to the other, following a chaotic route while the menacing king is contained within a perfectly delimited territory.

The "majestic" myths of Kong'oy are characterised by a type of relationship between territory, ethnicity and political hierarchy that is eminently modern and nationalist. The chronotope of the stories (the space that allows the narration to take place) consists in an entirely distinguishable geographical entity, with clearly defined ethnic frontiers and that is exclusively inhabited by the Mixe. The space in which these myths take place, is conceived in a similar way to the territory of a modern state, provided a vertical hierarchy and a geographic and political centre. From the top of Mount Zempoaltepetl Kong'oy oversees his dominions as a king, but he also appears in some narratives as a cacique or as a President. This enclosed space contrasts with the space of the trickster myths in which not only there are not territorial boundaries are not fixed but a considerable part of the stories consist precisely in subverting limits and frontiers. Kong'oy (in this versions is not entirely clear if he is a king or a picaresque anti-hero) is always sneaking into places reserved to the authority (the governor's office), connecting places that under different ethnic and historic classifications should be separated (such as the city of Monte Alban, a Zapotec site and the Sierra Mixe) and socializing spaces beyond the margins of the Mixe region.

There are indications that the majestic versions the myths of Kong'oy were popularised during the time of the caciques and there is evidence indicating that Luis Rodriguez encouraged the symbolic use of this figure to reinforce the notion of the Mixe as "the unconquered people" in which Kong'oy plays an important role. Alicia Barabas (1984; 2002) has interpreted the myths of Kong'oy as part of a messianic/ millenarian tradition that announces the "the return of the King" and a new era of liberation. While some elements in Kong'oy's stories can be considered as prophetic, the importance of majestic myths is that they express a modern political imaginary[60] in which territorial centralisation and ethnic unity are fundamental elements. Stories of the fierce king reproduce the *indigenista* way of understanding the indigenous community while transfer to the regional level the categories of Mexican post-revolutionary nationalism.

The caciques' actions (and despite the violence that surrounded them) created the possibility of a pan-ethnic organization, of articulating the whole region by means different from those offered by the "traditional" culture. The idea of a Mixe nation now has experienced certain transformations and today is not expressed in the language shaped during the first half of the 20th century but it is still there, modified and reinterpreted but nonetheless present. Today it appears in other shapes, for example, in the concept of a great autonomous ethnic region configured following the logic of contemporary indigenous movements (a process in which the contact with the Zapatistas from Chiapas was of crucial importance).

The latter is one of the elements that explain the ambiguities around local explanations on the caciques and the resistance of many in the Sierra Mixe to refer to them in those terms. For the contemporary Mixe, the District created by Luis Rodriguez constitutes a referent to think of autonomy, sovereignty, autarchy and independence. At the same time, it serves as a source to reflect on violence and power, on the relationship of the Mixe with the Mexican state, on the role of women in society and on the place of tradition. By introducing a modern conception of indigenousness which was

[60] Here I employ "political imaginary" as employed by Susan Buck-Morss (2000). Based on the writings of the Russian philosopher Valerii Podoroga, Buck-Morss defines "political imaginary" as a "topographical concept in the strict sense; not a political logic but a political landscape, a concrete, visual field in which political actors are positioned" (Buck-Morss, 2000; 12).

internalised by large segments of the local population, it became possible to create a sense of identity with those peoples considered indigenous by the Mexican state and to create a common political ground despite regional and linguistic differences.

In that sense, we should be cautious with the scholarly fixation of reaching to the most precise definition of the role of caciques and characterise the exact function that they had during the process of formation of the Mexican post-revolutionary state. For the people of regions in which caciques were (or still are) politically dominant, this figures and the relationship with them are much more complicated, ambiguous and contradictory than any scientific approach can give account of. Trying to accommodate the caciques into socio-historical typologies is useful as a guide to move within the labyrinth of Mexican politics but it runs the risk of silencing the multiple visions of those who experienced the *cacicazgos*. Simultaneously, we should not renounce to adopt a critical position in relationship to those visions. Thus, it is important to recuperate the collective dimension of caciquismo, to incorporate the experience of those actors that made it possible as well as of those who rejected it.

Mural of Kong'oy in Tlahuitoltepec's Muncipal Offices.

The hero is inside an egg surrounded by his snake twin holding a ritual staff

Chapter IV. Teachers, schooling and the making of the communitarian geographic order

The following section proposes an ethnographic and interpretative exploration of the role of teachers and schools in the life of the communities of the Sierra Mixe. The presence of schoolteachers, I argue here, is essential for a more general ethnography of space in the Sierra Mixe, due to the important role played by schools and educators in shaping the way in which Mixe communities conceive their own space.

As privileged interlocutors between the Mexican state and the indigenous and peasant population, public school teachers have been an important vehicle to disseminate the geographic, historical and political imagination of the Nation. At least since the 1920's, when the first "missionary teachers" (Vaughan, 1997) appeared on the rural landscapes of Mexico to expand an consolidate the revolution, almost every peasant and indigenous community in the country was witness to an eruption of schools and school teachers whose arrival marked the beginning of a conflictive relationship between local and national *weltanschauungs*, which although intense and sometimes violent, cannot not be reduced to a mechanic form of domination of national culture over local cultures, but should be considered in terms of a multi-faceted political history in which the encounters between teachers and communities acquired many different forms and configured diverse patterns.

In the case of the Sierra Mixe, the relationship between post-revolutionary teachers and Mixe communities acquired the form of a cosmological and ritual dialogue. What teachers' transmitted to the Mixe was mainly a set of historic and spatial narratives on the historic origin and geographic nature of the Mexican nation, charged with all the mythical and ritual elements of the modern and predominantly secular narrative of the State. Teachers' narratives

often contradicted and in many ways were hostile to basic Mixe notions of space, time, nature and society, but despite the aggressive stance of the Mexican school towards local cultures, the Mixe did not radically opposed schooling and in most cases, they keenly sought to send their children to school. Moreover, becoming a rural teacher was quickly transformed into a source of prestige and thus, many Mixe households made of having a teacher within the family a central aspiration and an important collective endeavour to which many resources were dedicated to. Thus, in Tlahuitoltepec as in many other communities of the Sierra, it has been a widespread and relatively common attitude among households to support the youngest son (and more recently, the daughter) of the family and fund his studies and then be sent outside the village to city to study in a Normal School in Oaxaca or in another city.

The Mixe's acceptance of Mexican schools can be partially explained in instrumental terms; they lacked the political strength to reject schooling or to fully adapt it to local languages and interests and the perspective of acquiring a formal education in Spanish had obvious advantages. Nevertheless, the relative success of schools in the Sierra Mixe also obeys to the fact that the Mixe understood that state educational institutions were not too different from other important sites of power of their cosmo-geography. The population of Highland Mixe villages, as it will be illustrated by two ethnographic examples, rapidly equated schools with a sacred site, not too different the milpa, the house of the Kigaapj or the dwellings of the inëë and other divinities like those housed at the Catholic temples. Mixe communities managed to incorporate schools into their rituality in order to transform them them into autonomous "force fields", provided with their own political and cosmological order. In other words, they projected into schools a similar view to that which with sees sacred spaces as ambiguous sites of power capable of bringing gifts as well as misfortune.

The Mixe did not regard the school as a secular institution and neither adopted in their totality the narratives of the Mexican State on schooling and education, but projected their own vision on it and transformed the school in the process. The latter does not mean that schools were completely engulfed or dissolved by local culture; rather I suggest that both schooling and the political relationship between teachers and communities acquired particular features that can only be understood by looking at local concepts of space and political order as well at their views on knowledge, ritual and myth.

The Church´s background

To understand how this process of transformation occurred, and to make sense of the way in which schools were incorporated into the worldview of the communities of the Sierra, it is necessary to consider some aspects of the history of Mexican postrevolutionary education in the region. When the first teachers arrived to the Sierra at the end of the 1920's, they found a predominantly Ayuuk speaking region in which the use of Spanish was mainly restricted to the Catholic Church and to the Palacio Municipal, where a few bilingual men solved matters with outsiders including state and federal officials. Spanish was rarely used by locals and the majority of the Mixe population ignored the language. Nonetheless, the ayuuk speakers regarded Spanish as a language of power that, although foreign, it was crucial to accomplish many important tasks such as communicating with the divinities at the Catholic church, to engage in activities with the state and other outsiders including Mestizo and Zapotec middlemen, regular visitors to the Sierra´s village where they traded either with coffee or mescal.

Everyday contact with Spanish language was something that took place mainly in the villages´ churches and during ritual occasions, as it happened since colonial times, when the first Dominicans arrived to the mountains. Spanish became the language of mass and baptism, two rites in which the Mixe frequently participated (as colonial and ethnographic sources tell of the Mixe´s reluctance to accept other catholic sacraments, especially marriage) and also the language of the Bible and of almost everything written. Nevertheless, the use of Spanish was not extended; few were able to speak it and those able to read it were even rarer. The Mixe, for example, did not start reading the Bible in their own language until protestant missionaries linked to the Summer Institute of Linguistics translated the book during the late 1950's[61] and Catholic masses were not celebrated in Ayuuk until the 1960's, when a group of Liberation Theology-oriented Salesian priests settled in the Sierra. The fact that the majority of the Mixe were unable to understand the Church´s language but still eager to participate in many catholic rituals might seem strange to our eyes, but for the Mixe this was perfectly acceptable and coherent with their worldview. Being unable to understand the language of the Church was not an impediment to relate with its divinities and authorities as people employed the tools used to deal with the inëë, plants, animals and other beings with a language different from that of the Mixe.

On the other hand, the Catholic Church was not interested in converting the Mixe into Spanish speakers and its involvement in educational issues remained marginal. Historically, the Sierra Mixe has been a region where Catholicism's political influence was relatively weak, especially when compared to other parts of Oaxaca or to those rural regions in Central and Western Mexico where Catholicism was a significant political force.

[61] Unlike other regions of Mexico in which protestant missionaries arrived along with Cardenismo in the 1930's, through the Summer Institute of Linguistics, the Mixe only saw the first American priests until the 1950's and they did not made a considerable impact until the late 1960's.

Since Mexican liberal president Benito Juárez´s imposed the *Reforma* that secularised the State at the second half of the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church entered into a long period of decline; especially in the Highlands and Midlands, churches were semi-abandoned by the institution. With its severely damaged finances, it was no longer able to provide sustain for resident priests in the villages. Catholicism became an itinerant religion at least in its rituality, since the priests could no longer administrate the sacraments on an everyday basis or conduct the daily affairs of the temples. In the remotest pueblos of the Sierra, priests could only be seen once or twice a year, when secular clerics from Villa Alta and Oaxaca visited the rancherias and headtowns, riding on horseback and celebrating the scarce baptism or marriage. The priests of the Sierra, both during and after Juárez's *Reforma*, attempted to order and discipline what they saw as the problematic and frankly heretic religious customs of the Mixe. In those few cases in which the pueblos still had resident priests, these were poor and lived relatively isolated lives, ignored by locals, unable to impose their authority and besieged by the growing force of the secular Mexican state. Unlike the Central Valleys region in Lowland Oaxaca, where large portions of villages' lands were used to support churches and large convents(either through tequio or tribute), in the Sierra Mixe the Catholic temples had little or no land at all, and therefore, the clergymen had to rely on the contributions made by communities that were constantly dispersing, difficult to survey and nearly impossible to tax. Under the liberals´ secularization policy, when the Church lost most part of its economic, political and fiscal privileges, the hardened, militant Dominican friars who dominated the Sierra´s churches during colonial times had no option but to left the mountains and leave the temples. The latter then fall under the ritual and economic control of Mixe communities. who introduced their own rites, protocols, objects and images shaping Catholicism to make it fit within local cultural forms. Nevertheless, this takeover of the ritual sites of Catholicism was

never complete and relations with the clergy continued and catholic authorities maintained a certain ritual legitimacy among Mixe communities. Thus, the priests were allowed to enter the territories of each pueblo and travel through the Sierra for very specific celebrations. The periodic arrival of friars created tensions between communities and clergymen, but clergymen's visits were welcomed, as they served to activate the spatial dynamic of the, creating opportunities to congregate a dispersed population and stimulate the renewal and enlargement of all kind of social networks.

During catholic festivities, the priests insisted in regaining control of the churches and of the spiritual, political and economic affairs of the pueblos, but hopes of restoring the social arrangements of colonial times were constantly frustrated, since it was clear that the Church could not eradicate the religious hierarchies imposed on the temples by the communities. It is quite clear that by the end of the 19th century, clerics were incapable of banning, reconfiguring or imposing their views on the religious affairs of the Mixe. Itinerant priests systematically condemned rituals involving sacrifice (either of people, animals, plants or any other being), offerings or pilgrimages except those to Catholic sites (including churches, hermits and sanctioned sites where -sanctioned- miracles took place) but during visits to celebrate Easter, Christmas or the festivities dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe, they had no choice than to accept the strange and heterodox elements introduced by locals in the Catholic ritual.

In order to summarise, we could say the Mixe did not erase the Catholic Church's legitimacy, but they did contest ecclesial attempts to monopolise local ritual life and impose its particular form morality and politics on Mixe society. What Mixe communities did was to construct a specific domain for the Church which was basically circumscribed to the space of the temple.

The latter was a strategy to preserve vernacular rituality and avoid its destruction by an essentially hegemonic religion, but also a mechanism that transformed Catholicism from a system (once modelled as part of a larger State and aimed to imprint its logic on every aspect of social life) into a "force field", a specific site of power, recognised as legitimate and respected for its divine importance, but considered hierarchically equal to other local ritual and sacred spaces.

This brief look to the history of Catholicism in the Sierra Mixe is a crucial for the argument developed through these pages, since it serves to prevent thinking in the transformations experienced by the Church in terms of a linear history that sees its decline and loss of influence in terms of an unstoppable move towards secularisation and modernisation. The Mixe took advantage of the political victories of liberal and anti-clerical movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but they did not embraced secularism. The waves of secularisation experienced by the Mexican state did not transform the Mixe into liberal citizens detached from public religion, but served to reinforce a particular way of experiencing and shaping (the religious) space, whose cosmological accent is put on diversity and multiplicity. The Mixe operated a pluralising operation that transformed "The Church" in "the churches" and reshaped a single, unified space multiplied spaces modelled in terms of local cosmologies, each one with its particular rituality and order.

Thus, the Mixe saw the divinities of each Catholic temple in similar terms to those employed with the inëë, the ancestors and their keeper and with the multiple spirits that populate the geography of the Sierra. Saints, virgins or the figure of Christ, for example, were recognised as powerful inhabitants of specific sites that needed to be incorporated into social life and connected to other force fields by employing the tools of communitarian life: reciprocal

exchange, tequio (collective labour) and fiesta. In the villages of the Sierra Mixe, the rituals within or are associated to the Catholic temple are not the outcome of a syncretic process, a hybrid religious system or an archaic reminiscence as it is often claimed by certain style of Jacobin politics. The different Catholic temples of the region and their rituality have been laterally accommodated as part of network of sacred sites, connected among them by making use of a set of cosmological tools and place in such a manner that they cannot expand their scope become hegemonic or hierarchically superior to other sacred sites (or if they manage to surpass their limits this can only be done on certain ritual occasions).

The Cardenista School in the Sierra Mixe

Referring to the history of Catholicism in the Sierra Mixe is important to understand how the Mixe deal with the Mexican public school which, like the Church before, was conceived as a hegemonic and centralised institution whose explicit aim was to achieve a complete reconfiguration of local communities through the transformation of a whole range economic, environmental, cultural, linguistic and intellectual practices. Such changes were explicitly aimed to create a sense of belonging to the Mexican nation and to homogenise the population through the gradual replacement of local indigenous features for those of the (imagined) Mestizo. The vehicle to achieve these transformations, (which the state conceived as revolutionary and therefore, legitimate) was mainly a discursive one. Despite the fact that in the early years of the post-revolution the rural Mexican school had a strong technical side aimed to reconfigure the rural landscape by introducing modern technology and innovative techniques in order to create a new type of peasantry, the impact produced by this "technological revolution" was limited and often frustrated by the complexities of Mexican politics as well as by lack of resources. Thus, public education had to rely mostly on the

discursive apparatus provided by the Mexican revolution and its *indigenista* ideology and especially on its cosmological narratives of history and geography, which offered a holistic and unifying explanation on the origin and distribution of the different populations of Mexico. The predominantly discursive and ideological character of post-revolutionary education became even more notorious in relatively marginal regions like the Sierra Mixe, where technical projects were almost non-existent or scantily funded and schools were even poorer than in other Mexican states. Furthermore, the fact that in the Mixe region there were no large state owners, *haciendas* and because many of the elements that pushed peasant communities into the revolutionary struggle were absent, the public school did not become (as in other Mexican regions) a political centre to promote struggles against land owners or to implement the agrarian reform since most land was already in the hands of the communites.

The Mexican post-revolutionary school brought to the Sierra a corpus of myths and a rituality of its own, which although contradicted and in many ways was hostile to local cosmologies, it was expressed in a language that resulted attractive for the Mixe and which, to a certain point, allowed its incorporation within local communitarian practices. Nevertheless, such integration did not occur right away; on the contrary, it was a long process full of contradictions and tensions, marked by multiple quarrels and controversies involving local communities, national and state authorities and the teachers, who held ambivalent positions towards their role as political and cultural mediators.

The main focus of tension was, without a doubt, the attempts of the public school to impose Spanish as the sole language of the region. The hostile attitude of schools and teachers towards ayuuk language was unprecedented and even Catholicism, with all its disciplining and hegemonic attitudes, never took such a radical stance against local languages and cultures.

The hostility against local Mixe culture that came with the schools, was reinforced by the fact that the first teachers of the Sierra (who arrived in the late 1920's) were mostly Zapotec or Mestizo educators from Villa Alta (a small city located in the Zapotec portion of the Sierra from where the Spaniards dominated the region during colonial times) did not speak ayuuk or had little interest in understanding local cultures. Such teachers were probably more indifferent than antagonistic to Mixe cultures. They worked in penurious conditions, teaching in crumbling rooms that were reluctantly supplied by municipal authorities. Teachers from Villa Alta were absent during most part of the school year, cashing cheques or negotiating salaries with authorities in Villa Alta or Oaxaca. Early teachers relied mostly in donations made by local authorities, families and pupils that were given in the idiom of Christian charity more than in the language of taxes or contributions.

Local communities showed little enthusiasm in collaborating with Villalteño or Zapotec teachers. Monetary contributions to support maestros and school building were scarce or reluctantly given and the Sierra is plagued with stories of the communities' resistance to donate communal land plots to support both schools and teachers. These early "missionaries" of Mexican education, went through great troubles when trying to convince parents to send their children to school and persuade them that an education in Spanish was the best option for their families. Furthermore, Mixe students did not attend school on a regular basis, as they often left classrooms to work in family milpas, attend domestic and local ceremonies or regional fiestas. The dispersed pattern and the constant mobility of the Mixe population created obstacles to maintain a stable population of schoolchildren; when schools failed to maintain a minimum of children in the headtowns, schools became desolated places,

something that helped to reinforce the social, political and cultural isolation of teachers and the failure of the educational project.

This situation started to change in 1935, when Federal authorities created a boarding school in the village of San Pedro y San Pablo Ayutla in the Highlands known as the *Internado Indígena.* The purpose of this institution was to educate young people from Mixe communities, teaching them to speak, write and read in Spanish in order to become what was known as "agents of acculturation" in the indigenista jargon, whose task was to integrate and assimilate the Mixe population to the Mexican nation in a process prompted from the outside but executed from the communities' interior. Many of the youngsters who attended the *Internado Indigena* in Ayutla continued training to become formal Rural Teachers in the Normal School of Villa Alta that depended on the Federal government or in Mexican cities, while others (mostly but not exclusively those who remained within the region) became *promotores indígenas bilingües* (indigenous bilingual promoters). The *promotores* were bureaucratically inferior to *maestros rurales* trained in Escuelas Normales; the former received only a basic training of ten months and then were sent to their own communities to serve as primary teachers. *Promotores´* salaries were half of that of a regular teacher and they had no social security or legal rights as workers (they were outside the National Union, organically linked to the State), notwithstanding the poor labour condition, becoming a *promotor indígenas* was certainly something attractive for many villagers, as it secured a stable source of income and enabled them to enter into a network of contacts (within and outside their villages) that was valuable both in political and economic terms. The indigenista educational strategy based on *promotores indigenas* corrected some of the failures of the educational experiment developed during the 1920´s, as it meant that schooling was now an

activity rooted in the villages and developed by local agents knowledgeable on the inner functioning of the communities.

Quite rapidly, *promotores* and *maestros* were able to improve schools, obtaining better buildings from local authorities than those assigned to the teachers from Villa Alta and by persuading locals to collaborate with them, either by bringing building materials for the schools or to work in the edification of classrooms. They also obtained communal land plots that were used as "experimental milpas" to improve local varieties of plants, introduce new species and feed pupils and teachers. In other cases, teachers established ovens to make bricks, carpentries and sewing workshops with Singer machines.

At the same time, teachers transmitted the narratives of indigenista education by instructing their students on the virtues of the Mexican revolution and communicating State-sanctioned accounts on the glorious pre-Hispanic origin of the Mexico, the tragedy of the Spanish Conquest and a succession of revolutionary struggles that composed the narratives of the origin and history of the Nation. These very linear and standardized versions of what is often called Mexican "bronze history" (due to its monumental spirit and rhetorical vindication of Mestizo and Indigenous "races") were expressed exclusively in Spanish. Most *promotores* and *maestros* were ayuuk-speaking men, with full command of the native language, but they were very strict on the use of Spanish at school. Standard indigenista training taught teachers to regard Spanish as a proper language and to consider *ayuuk* as a "dialect", somehow inferior to the idiom spoken by the Mestizo. Those who attended school between the 1930's and the mid 1970, s recall the physical punishments imposed by educators to those children who spoke in ayuuk during lectures and even in the playfield and, in cases even more extreme, of the way pupils were urged to denounce fellow students and relatives who refused

to speak Spanish at home. The disciplining practices imposed by post-revolution teachers were not restricted to hispanisation but they extended to prohibitionist campaigns either to persecute *curanderos* and healers, ban witchcraft and punish witches, prohibit marriages among couples less than fourteen years old, forbid the use of *petates* (a mat made of weaved palm) for funerals and their replacement with coffins and proscribe domestic distilleries of mescal.

Promotores and teachers´ practice was shaped by the socialist spirit imprinted on education (Gillingham, 2006) during Lázaro Cárdenas´ government (1934-1940) and they spread its contents with militant conviction even if the images of "socialist education" were utterly contradictory. Indigenista education, as it has been largely reported, glorified the indigenous past and was full of eulogies of peasant cultures but at the same time, was emphatic on the need to homogenise, assimilate and integrate indigenous populations into the Mestizo sphere, imposing National culture, language and institutions. Teachers were also imbued with a radical and anti-clerical type of secularism that regarded itself as modern and scientific and defined in opposition to what it considered to be a world of "superstitions" that included Catholicism, local religious "customs" and, especially, the practice and knowledge all local specialists, especially the *xëmabie* and the *curanderos.*

The Cardenista and indigenista educational project also put strong emphasis on the practice and discourse of individual and collective hygiene; the latter, comprised an apparatus formed by teachings on healthy habits, awareness on infectious diseases (lice, malaria and gastrointestinal illnesses appear as preferred themes), in notions of biomedicine and a persistent struggle against alcoholism and local drinking culture. Indigenista concern with health, body and hygiene was expressed in the classrooms of the public school through a reformist language that regarded itself as an instrument of peasant and indigenous liberation,

but in contexts such as the Sierra Mixe the effect of such discourses was a blunt (and not always elegant) reproduction of many racist stereotypes of Mexican culture and of Western medical practice, whose effect was the reinforcement of many the asymmetries that characterise relationships between indigenous and Mexican modern culture. Even if it was tacitly expressed, early post-revolutionary education inevitably transmitted an image of indigenous peoples as backward, superstitious, poor and even dirty, which was perceived as traumatic and violent by indigenous pupils. My friend Antonio, who later in life become a teacher (although a critic and "ethnicist" one) constantly recalled the shocking effect that those narratives had on children as young as six:

"We (the Mixe students in Tlahuitoltepec's primary school) grew up convinced that we were somehow inferior to Mestizo and white people. I, for example, always felt that our language was not good to explain the world and that useful stuff needed to be expressed in Spanish. When we were in primary school, we often felt embarrassed of our parents and of their ignorance of Spanish; we saw the elders with distrust as if they were ignorant and everything they were trying to teach us was just something useless and something we were compelled to mock about. We thought that our culture was useless and ugly".

Teacher´s presence was often perceived as disruptive and aggressive, but we should be careful of not seeing educators as purely repressive figures. Teachers were regarded as odd and extravagant, for teachers adopted conducts and habits that were utterly strange to the rest of the inhabitants of the villages. They not only spoke Spanish in villages where nobody spoke that language except by foreigners or during ritual occasions. Furthermore, teachers refused to dress like the rest of the population, wearing shoes instead of huaraches and rejecting to be bare-foot while in class. Teachers introduced complex rules that established

proper times for children to wear traditional garments, usually during the civic rituals of the Mexican State; the rules implemented by socialist schools were not necessarily totalitarian but they resulted problematic for local communities as they re-located aspects of local cultures within categories new and different categories.

Teachers and caciques

In order to impose the discipline of the Mexican post-revolutionary school, teachers not only relied on their authority and knowledge but also depended on their political closeness to the caciques. Many initiatives on schooling enjoyed the blessing of local political bosses; the *Internado Indígena* in Ayutla, for example, was sponsored by Colonel Daniel Martínez, the regional political boss (involved in the bitter dispute for the control of the Sierra against Luis Rodríguez, the powerful and feared ruler of Zacatepec) and many other schools throughout the Sierra had the support of less powerful political bosses.

This proximity with the big men of the Sierra, transformed teachers into important actors in the factional struggles for the control of the villages; while many educators were unwillingly brought into the political disputes of the region, others took advantage of their closeness to the caciques to assert their authority within the villages and to profit from their position. In the village of Totontepec, for example, many teachers related by kin ties to the Alcántara family (the local caciques subordinated to Luis Rodríguez) became usurers and middlemen dealing with coffee, maize and mescal. In other places, teachers connected to the political bosses became shop owners, setting small businesses such as groceries or shops of music instruments or, obtained permanent stalls at market places, often financed with public funds usually set in strategic locations thanks to permits granted by municipal authorities.

Educators acted as brokers between State and Mixe communities and their influence was felt well beyond classrooms. Their ability to obtain resources for roads, wells or power lines and the capacity to influence government's budgets (even if it was only at local level) allowed them to create important political networks that included officials from different government agencies and to create contacts outside the Sierra Mixe which included non-Mixe people and migrants from the Sierra. In sum, they had the power to create connections between places and to attract people from peripheral rancherias and hamlets by persuading them to collaborate in village's fiestas or to collaborate with money and work for the centre's infrastructure. Acting as intermediaries between government officials and local communities gave teachers the the possibility to enter into the internal hierarchy of the villages and therefore, to participate in the organizations of bigger and more prestigious fiestas. There are endless cases of relatively young educators who, after establishing in the villages, rapidly became municipal presidents or *alcaldes* and a good number of those who after completing their constitutional terms, remained at municipalities holding petty bureaucratic positions.

Among the major disruptions caused by schooling on the "traditional" life of Mixe was undoubtedly, the attempt to Hispanicize the Mixe; efforts to impose Spanish led to a generational split between those without schooling and the children who acquired certain fluency in that language. Many elderly people experienced the spread of schooling as a time in which children lost respect for their parents and grandparents who could only speak ayuuk; old people also refer that the hispanisation process promoted by post-revolutionary teachers stimulated emigration, the rejection of traditional knowledge and disdain for communitarian participation.

Schooling and hispanisation also had economic effects; those able to speak Spanish increased their chances to access State funds and jobs and negotiate better deals with middlemen. From the 1930's onwards, the Sierra witnessed an increasing monetarisation of its economic life, encouraged by an alliance of caciques, middlemen (known as *acaparadores* or *coyotes*) and teachers (in some cases these three figures were embodied in the same person) who lend money with high interest and advanced loans for fiestas or to finance cash crops. This process led to increasing social differentiation, growing inequality and to an imbalance of the geopolitical relationships between villages, since the most affluent pueblos (generally those with well established schools[62]) sought to grab lands belonging to smaller communities, especially to plant coffee.

Another disturbance caused by the presence of schools was the erosion of the local structures of power and therefore, of the legitimacy of communitarian mechanisms of authority. Although teachers participated within the "cargo-system" and were eager to occupy the highest positions of the communitarian administration, they did not gain access to those offices by making use of to the "traditional" mechanisms employed by most men. Unlike previous authorities, teachers did not climb the ladder of ranked offices (Cancian, 1967; DeWalt, 1975; Chance, 1996) starting from the minor positions (such as *topil* or communitarian policeman) and then ascending to greater posts by sponsoring fiestas and giving tequio, but through using their knowledge of Spanish and taking advantage of their contacts with the caciques. P*romotores* and *maestros* refused to contribute with tequio, arguing that maintaining the schools should be considered as a form of servicing communities and therefore, that they should be excluded from making other contributions. In

[62] Schools were initially located in Tlahuitoltepec and Ayutla in the Highlands, Zacatepec, Totontepec and Atitlán in the Midlands and Guichicovi in the Lowlands.

other cases, teachers were directly appointed by the caciques (often against the will of villagers), becoming *de facto* tax collectors, recruiters for forced labour and judges.

The active role played by teachers in regional politics contributed to erode the autonomy of the villages and led to a modest but still significant form of centralization; like the priests before them (the comparison is valid since post-revolutionary teachers were considered to be "missionaries of the Revolution"), educators held a type of power that, unlike the rotational positions of the "traditional" hierarchy, was permanent and its source of legitimacy depended on powers located outside the Sierra. *Promotores* and *maestros* became an elite, that clashed with the relatively loose hierarchy of Mixe villages, altering the "traditional" distribution of power and other important aspects of social life such as native practices of reciprocity or land allocation which were disrupted through the introduction of cadastral, fiscal and population records, aimed to increase control over the movement of people and expand the presence of the state. The use of written documents for political and social control corroded networks built through the performance of multiple rituals and fiestas.

Documents and books were regarded with distrust by most Mixe people, who were reluctant to become involved in the bureaucratic apparatus of the State. The existence of cadastral records, in turn, created disadvantages for the illiterate and for small communities that lacked teachers or schools. Records, even when misguided or plainly false, could always be used with agrarian and judicial authorities outside the Sierra to claim a piece of land or to ask for a redrawing of limits between villages. Thus, the Mixe saw literacy, writing and written documents as powerful devices that were both empowering and damaging. Here is worth remembering James C. Scott's analysis on the relationship between literacy and non-centralised societies, according to this author:

> "For hill peoples and for stateless peoples generally, the world of writing and texts is also indelibly associated with states. Lowland (…) states were centers of literacy not merely because they were cult centers for world religions but also because writing is a crucial technology of administration and statecraft (…) For many stateless, preliterate or postliterate peoples, the world of literacy and writing is not simply a remainder of their lack of power and knowledge and the stigma attached to it. It is, at the same time, *a clear and present danger. The acquisition of writing, associated as it is with state power, could as easily be an avenue for disempowerment as for empowerment* [emphasis, EZM]" (Scott, 2010; pp. 228-229).

The Salesians and the transformation of schooling

The tight control exercised by teachers in alliance with the caciques remained relatively unchallenged until 1962, when a large group of Salesian priests arrived to the Sierra in order to "re-evangelise" the Mixe in an enterprise prompted by the Second Vatican Council. Although the Mixe did not remain passive to the transformations promoted by post-revolutionary educators, the evidence indicates that Mixe communities responded to the disruptions associated with penetration of the post-revolutionary State following a chaotic politics of alliance and counter-alliance between villages that were constantly switching allegiance between the two main political coalitions of the Sierra, but that they did not challenge the foundations of factional politics nor linked political instability with changes introduced by public schools.

Although it may seem paradoxical, awareness of the relationship between the presence of Mexican schools and the violence experienced by region was only achieved through the renewed action of the Catholic Church; it was only through the latter that the Mixe were able to advance a critique of nationalist schooling and to begin a long process that would reform schools, changing the political relationship between communities and educators.

The Salesians established four schools in the Mixe Highlands: two boarding schools in the hamlet of Matagallinas in Ayutla, a primary school in Tlahuitoltepec and a secondary school in Totontepec. They also set an education centre one in Santiago Jocotepec in the neighboring Chinantla region, which also boarded Mixe students. Catholic institutions started to compete with federal funded schools, managing to break down the state's monopoly on education, attracting large numbers of students by offering free shoes, books, food and scholarships for higher education either in Puebla, Tlaxcala or Mexico City.

Catholic education not only offered resources that public educational centers did not supply, but according to many people in the Highlands, it also offered a higher academic standard than government institutions. Nevertheless, the element that attracted the Mixe to Salesian schools was the fact that these institutions were bilingual and that the priests and nuns in charge of instructing children gave an important place to literacy in the ayuuk language. Furthermore, a good number of the priests were versed in the native language and interested in collecting myths, folktales and information on local religious life; priests also choose to use references that was resulted more familiar to local populations than those employed by public school teachers; the Catholic primary school in Tlahuitoltepec, was named "Xaam" (the ayuuk name for Tlahuitoltepec that means "cold land") while federal the grammar school was named (in a decision obviously taken in some office in Mexico City) after Pablo "Loco" Sidar, a pioneer of Mexican of aviation.

The presence of the Salesians did not bring to an end the factional politics associated with caciquismo and sometimes, it reinforced division within communitie. In Ayutla, the priests deliberately set the boarding schools in a distant rancheria (Matagallinas), partly because the

dominant faction of the village's centre was formed by the descendants of Colonel Daniel Martinez and a group of deeply anti-clerical public school teachers who opposed to the presence of the "fanatics" but also, because the missionaries understood that they could benefit from the geopolitical tensions between hamlets and head towns and assumed (correctly) that the population of the ranchos will be more approachable. The presence of Salesians also generated strains in the ritual sphere; despite the the "new evangelisation" sought to educate through a doctrine known as "inculturation" (that supposedly sought to adapt the practice of Catholicism to the local custom), the priests were firmly against the sacrifice of animals, to pilgrimages to mount Zempoaltepetl and they managed to convince several families of abandoning the most controversial aspects of "el costumbre". But even if the Salesians model created or added to existing conflicts, it also opened the way for a Mixe critique of the modernization policies implemented by the State, which was instrumental in adapting the Mexican school to the decentralized and relatively horizontal social order of Mixe communities.

Through Catholic education, the Mixe not only understood that schooling was not an exclusive task of the Mexican state, but that the content of schooling could be diverse and multiple, and probably most important, that local forms of knowledge (including those labeled as "religious" by the State) could be incorporated as part of formal education. Given the current influence of multiculturalist ideologies on educational issues, the latter might appear as a truism, but in the 1960's, amid the apex the post-revolutionary regimes, such discovery was absolutely revealing. The educational scheme designed by the Salesians did not marginalize the cultures and languages of the Sierra; on the contrary, it recognized the strategic importance of Ayuuk languages in education and of registering local mythologies and rituals.

Dissident teachers

The critique of education originated within the Salesian's project was recuperated and radicalised by a generation of Mixe teachers who attended the Salesian schools in Ayutla, Tlahuitoltepec and Totontepec and then continued their studies in the order's higher education institutions in Tlaxcala, Puebla and Mexico City. Most of these students received scholarships to finish high school while they were studying in the Sierra, and many others left the Sierra to pursuit an ecclesiastical career.

Nevertheless, the experience of Mixe students in Salesian schools outside the Sierra was less than harmonious and it did not necessarily reinforced adherence to Catholicism. Throughout the 1970's, a good number of Mixe students grew skeptical of the priests' view on their communities and began to question the legitimacy of the Catholic educational project. Such criticism was reinforced when Mixe students became in contact with indigenous students from other regions, involved in peasant organizations that were increasingly turning to identity politics and trying to build and independent indigenous movement.

A large number of Mixe students that left their communities to study in Salesian institutions, later became educators, while a small number pursuit a college degree. Those who became *maestros* played an active role in the creation of Section 22, a dissident leftist wing within the historically *Priista* national teacher's union (SNTE or *Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación*). The latter, one of the largest[63] and most efficient organizations of the state-

[63] It is likely that SNTE has between 1 and 1.5 millions of associates, although the exact figures are not known.

party[64] was the result of a split that took place the end of the 1970's, that divided the union between a large State-subordinated faction and a "rebel" one known as CNTE (*Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación*) that control of union's sections corresponding to Oaxaca[65] in the mid 1980's.

It is also necessary to note that some of those who became "dissident" teachers left their communities at a young age as result of conflicts between their families and the caciques or were expelled when their parents failed to repay loans contracted with the political bosses. When they returned to the Sierra, many of those educators played an instrumental role in organising an inter-village front against the caciques' rule and pushed to re-organise the traditional hierarchies and the communal assemblies suppressed by the political bosses. Through the links created while organising Section 22, teachers organised three grassroots organisations at the end of the 1970's, namely, CODREMI (Committee for the Defence of the Natural Resources of the Mixe Region), the Assembly of Mixe Authorities (ASAM) and later (in the second half of the 1980's) *Servicios del Pueblo Mixe* (SER). The purpose of these organisations was to contribute to reassemble communitarian power, by employing a four-legged strategy which included restoring (and in some cases, creating) communal assemblies, reinforcing local ritualities, spreading communal labour (tequio) making it in the main

[64] Under Elba Esther Gordillo's leadership, the union gained political and operative autonomy from the PRI and since then it has become an authentic vote-generating machine that negotiates with different parties and authorities (Ministers, state governors, municipal presidents) all sort of political benefits (including informal and illegal ones) in exchange for support during elections. The union has even created a political party of its own, that most of the time participates in coalition with other forces but sometimes presents its own candidates. This clientlist autonomous force has become a major political actor, considered to be an authentic "factual power" controlling vast resources and offices within the Ministry of Education (*Secretaría de Educación Pública*,) as well as other institutions such as the national lottery and the state workers' social security (*ISSSTE*).

[65] The *Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Eduación* (CNTE) is the name of the association that gathers those sections of dissident workers within the larger teachers' union (SNTE). CNTE was the product of a dispute against "Vanguardia Revolucionaria" a PRI-affiliated group that controlled the union, which took place in Chiapas 1980. CNTE has extended its influence throughout the country and now controls Sections in Michoacán, Distrito Federal, Chiapas and Oaxaca (González-Apodaca, 2006).

mechanism to access communitarian rights and, finally, a new educational model based on autonomous schools controlled by local populations.

Nonetheless, teachers who returned to the Sierra had an ambiguous reception; their role within communities was a rather complex one since their political and cultural identity remained unclear for the rest of inhabitants of the villages. The way in which villagers saw teachers was the result of the accumulation of different political processes in which the spheres of state, Church and community constantly overlapped. Young dissident educators, urged villagers to recuperate and value local languages but they still associated their own prestige with their ability to speak Spanish. In the same fashion, they sought to reinforce the legitimacy of communal assemblies but they also acted like a bureaucracy and as a political faction separated from the rest of the community. Furthermore, this leftwing and deeply ethnicist teachers campaigned for the recognition of local practices and forms of knowledge but their own pedagogic tradition contradicted many of principles of a predominantly oral culture. Thus, to be a teacher in the Sierra meant to occupy a space full of contradiction and ambiguity.

Mixe teachers were simultaneously rejected and respected, loved and feared, admired and mocked. Throughout the villages of the Sierra, teachers raised their voices in endless assemblies, ceremonies and rallies in which locals listened to educators with respect and interest, but also with suspicion and doubt. Mixe teachers were aware that their social status within their own villages was hopelessly "liminal", even if they were politically and culturally committed with their villages and indigenous rights. Thus, teachers are frequently regarded as ontologically and sociologically contradictory characters, always situated at the many crossroads that form the life of the communities. Such position gave them an important

type of power, namely, the ability to organize and congregate people, to attract *comuneros* from distant fields and rancherias to the headtowns either to take their children to school or to participate in local assemblies or in communal works. Such ability is considered by villagers a source of social prestige as well as a dangerous gift, as it entails the risk of creating a concentrated power and creating a permanent political class sociologically and political split from the rest of the community.

Schools as sacred places

Among the communities of the Highland Mixe, teachers (especially talented ones) are often regarded to be potential caciques and schools as powerful but also dangerous sites that contain the possibility of the state. The latter is no metaphor: the Mixe conceive power as a quality of individuals but also as a property localized in space, with a domain of its own.

Sites of power are not only the overtly religious but those that from our perspective are "secular" sites, including municipal buildings and schools. The latter are recipients of both creative and destructive forces that need to be tamed and brought into the sphere of the social through ritual means. Schools are simultaneously, a physical source of hegemony, a focal point of centripetal forces, capable of strengthening the community but also of subordinating it to an external power. The power contained within schools is not too different from that of Catholic temples; schools and churches are a source of Spanish (a powerful and menacing language) and both serve to congregate the dispersed population of the pueblos and connect these with the spaces of the non-Mixe. Nevertheless, the sacredness of schools differs from that associated to the dwellings of the *inëë*, the milpa or the house of the ancestors. In the Sierra, the sacralisation of these spaces becomes evident by looking to the rituals associated

with schools or performed in school buildings and to the categories in which schools have been accommodated.

The Mixe conceive schools as one of the multiple *Mä ja Wejkatäjk* or "places of learning" distributed throughout the geography of the Sierra. The *Mä ja Wejkatäjk* are sites whose spatiality is defined in terms of the knowledge that emerges from the interactions that take between geographic sites, objects, and living beings; the number of such "places of learning" is not defined *a priori* as every site (and every relationship) is susceptible of becoming a source of knowledge.

Although it is impossible to establish the exact number of "places of learning", people in the communities confer great importance to the *Jënjotp-tëkjotp*, the domestic space formed through the interactions between kin, elders and the household (including various objects such as the fireplace, the *comal* and the grinding stone); the *Në'äm-tu'äm* which are those spaces and trajectories linking hamlets, rancherias, distant communities and places outside the Sierra. The latter include the *Patuu'* or footpaths, *Mëj-tuu´* or "big road" and the *Pujx tuu'* or roads for cars. Other important *Mä ja Wejkatäjk* are the *Kämwemp kämjotp* or "workplace" which refers mainly to those spaces used for cultivation (*Ujts ejtääjk* or *Tunk-pëjkk*), gathering firewood (*Kipy jä'*), collecting water (*Nëë*) and for rituals of sacrifice (*Wëntse'ëjkii'ny*); the *Xëtuntääjkjotp*, or "space of joy" shaped by the interactions between the *Ja xëëtumpë* or fiesta host, the human and non-human guests, musicians and elders who conduct the ritual and advise people on the proper way of conducting celebrations; the *Këmuunytyuu'nën* or space of collective work (*trabajadero*, Sp.), created by those who are contributing with tequio; the *Käjpx-mujktäkjotp* or the space of reflection, where people gather to discuss communal problems and that is formed by authorities and those entitled to

participate in the communal assembly (*comuneros*) and finally, the *Wënpejtën-Tëk'äjtsën jotp,* the space of death, formed by relatives, friends, neighbours, *rezanderos* in charge of reciting the funeral prayers and the music band who gather to help the deceased to travel to another space in which they will reunite with their ancestors. The latter is the space to learn about the cycle of death and rebirth (*Wënpejtën-Tëk'äjtsën* means to die, but also to return or transform), where people can learn about the transitional and fluid character of life.

Finally, the Mixe categorise the school as a *Ëjxpëjktääjkjotp* (the root *ëjxpëjktä* is a corruption of the Spanish word, "escuela"), the place of Spanish and of the men and women who teach it by making use the myths and rituals narratives of the state; a field with its own authority and rules build through narratives that sometimes result familiar and sometimes not, through images and practices that are common to their own tradition, like for example, the myths of the Aztec pilgrimages that not only creates Mexico City but lays the stone for the creation of Mexico and the Mexicans. *Ëjxpëjktääjkjotp* is an important site for locals because they know that is probably one of the first places in which *ayuuk* children will have and insight of the *agaat* (those beyond reciprocity) and of their many worlds. Although potential agents of the State, the Mixe give legitimacy to teachers and to their schools, mostly because educators are also members of the community but because that power needs to be tamed and restricted. The Mixe recognise that the influence that irradiates from schools has to be politically contained within certain borders, and that the knowledge that comes from their interior should not be adopted as the general or dominant principle that organises local society. The school has to have it own piece of the communitarian territory and teachers can are recognised as legitimate members of the community, but they should not try replace or sites of the village to their authority.

As part of the *Mä ja Wejkatäjk*, schools must be treated as dangerous and benefitious, and therefore ritualised, as it happens with the the many ceremonial places that compose Mixe villages. Nevertheless, this rituality varies from that found in other spaces as it is composed with elements that come from the civic ceremonies of Mexican public education and by the local rituals introduced by communities in the sphere of schooling.

Public schools in the Sierra Mixe reproduce many of the ceremonies that compose the rituality of Mexican public education, but locals reproduce the civic rituals of the Mexican school in a way that is not entirely faithful to the State canon. Commemoration of Mexican Independence, the Revolution and a range of minor national festivities, always present some type of alteration, or habe elements that have been suppressed or minimised. The national pantheon, the Mexican flag or the patriotic of Mexican schooling generally appear with some type of distortion or adapted.

Inauguration ceremonies

This *sui generis* sacredness that the Mixe attribute to schools as well as the modifications of National rituals can become clearer, focusing on a very precise ethnographic example: the inauguration ceremonies performed at CECAM, the music conservatory and boarding school of Tlahuitoltepec. This important and prestigious school fosters and instructs middle and high students from all over the Sierra and, like most spaces of schooling in the Mixe region, it inaugurates its activities during January instead of starting in September as established in the Mexican school calendar. What explains this modification of the national calendar is that CECAM like many other schools in the region has attached a communitarian "committee" that is part of the local hierarchy and replaced like all local authorities at the beginning of

each year. The "committee" at CECAM is formed by a group of around ten to thirteen men and women (the number of member varies depending on the size of each school) who are individually known as *comité*[66]. Each *comité* is recognised as an authority and the post, although *relatively* minor, is considered as a legitimate point of departure to advance within the local hierarchy, to participate in the sponsorships of fiestas and to gain prestige.

Since the *comités* are communitarian authorities, they participate within the local rituality and therefore, they are obliged to perform a series of ceremonies which are similar to those performed by other "officials". The night previous to the inauguration of courses, each *comités* takes a ritual bath in one of the many of the springs of Tlahuitoltepec (all of them important dwellings of the inëë) in order to purify themselves and begin their *servicio* without impurities of any kind. After the bath, the comités generally walk either individually or in groups (there is no established norm in this matter) to the top of the Zempoalteptl or to other *cerros* in order to ask to have a good year for them, their families (who will take the burden of substituting the comité in her daily tasks), the school and the students. At the mountains, they leave an offering and then return to the village. The next morning, after the bath and the trek, the *comités* begin a ceremonial route in the centre of Tlahuitoltepec that is known as the the *Mej Tuu* or "big road". *Mej Tuu* comprises a course that goes from the of the Palacio Municipal, where they meet the rest of the members of the local hierarchy and receive a ceremonial baton with ribbons, a bottle of mescal and an a cross made of flowers, all objects that indicate their positions as authorities. They continue walking, pass the roofed square (that also serves as marketplace and basketball court) until they reach the entrance of the

[66] The term *comité* as employed by the Mixe can be slightly confusing; in Spanish the term denotes a collective body (equivalent of the English term, committee) but the Mixe use it in the singular form to refer to individuals. Unlike other terms of the hierarchy (topil, capitán de fiestas, regidor, alcalde) that were adopted during colonial times, *comité* has a modern origin and it was probably popularised during early post-revolutionary days. Nowadays, there are multiple *comités* in charge of supervising and managing water supply, rubbish collection, cemeteries, public lighting and other aspects of municipal administration.

Church where the meet the music band and the *regidores* of the Catholic Church who come from inside the temple. After listening to some pieces performed by the musicians and dancing to the rhythm of a slow and solemn *pasodoble*, the authorities, the musicians and a crowd of *comuneros*, students and teachers, guided by the comités walk to the outskirts of the village where CECAM is located. The *comités* march in two columns that separate men from women while the band plays music. When the arrives to the terrains of the school, a xemabie or the *alcalde* recites a speech in which he asks for the success of the comités but also warns them against failing their obligations toward the schools and the community. After the speech, the comités share a glass of mescal and then each *comité* pours three trickles of the beverage on the soil, drink a sip and then pass it to another person.

This operation can be regarded as a way of emphasising a language of reciprocity, but through the revering of earth and soil (expressed in the dropping of mescal), the ceremony also serves as a way marking a spot, of delineating a specificity of the territory and a way to incorporate the school to the geography of the village. In a similar manner to the pilgrimage made during the renewal of the ancestors' keeper or to ceremonies associated with the milpa (see Chap. I), the ritual performed by the *comités* serves to connect different domains of the pueblo. By linking places for ritual baths and mountainous sites for offerings with the human spheres of the *Municipio* and the Church, the Mixe are able to create and intertwine the different *Mä ja Wejkatäjk* or "places of learning" that form the community. The *comités´* rituals are political mechanisms to guarantee a form of communitarian "checks and balances" aimed to ameliorate contradictions between powers (in our case, between community and schools) but they are also important place-making activities. The *comites*' rituals are not merely protocolary acts (although their language is highly diplomatic) but cartographic actions that put into practice a geographic imagination whose effect is the creation of the

territorial order of the community. The preparatory rituals undertaken by the comités, the march of the band and people through the village, the presence of batons, of mescal and fireworks that resonate in the mountains at early morning, are all components of a practice aimed to establish a distinction on the village´s space, through the recognition of an specific "force field" that would be horizontally integrated as part of communitarian space, with recognition of its power but without hegemony.

Maestros: contradictions and ambiguities

The emphasis on the role of teachers as mediators between state and community that is common to a considerable part of the scholarship on the subject, tends to emphasise the rationality of brokerage (Vaughan, 1997) while often overlooks the ambiguities that surround educators and the problems associated to their conflictive position between contradictory spheres. At the level in which ethnography develops the effectiveness of such sociological characterisations of schooling processes become very problematic. To some extent, defining school as "an arena for articulating [and] contesting state domination" as stated Mary Vaughan (one of the great American scholars of Mexican post-revolutionary education) (Vaughan, 1997) or as a privileged place to display counter-hegemonic projects as one González-Apodaca (2006) the main scholar of Mixe education, necessary implies the elimination of the contradictory aspects that arise from the political and cultural process of schooling.

At the ethnographic level, those contradictions cannot and should not be evaded or overlooked even if they limit the possibility of producing neat models and coherent interpretations. During my fieldwork in the Sierra Mixe it became clear that there was little

uniformity between the State and local views on what the Mixe are and that the gulf between "National" and local ways of understanding ethnicity, community and hierarchy was so great that it was nearly impossible to find a "mediator" comfortably translating between two different political and cultural traditions. In the Sierra Mixe the figure of the broker embodied in rural teachers, appeared to be more an academic construct or the creation of a historiography indifferent to the problems that arise *in situ*.

Throughout my multiple encounters with educators in the Sierra Mixe I did not find teachers who could be accommodated into the model of the astute and Machiavellian figures that skilfully manipulate the links between society and the state and increase their power in the process. Even politically skilled educators are frequently confronted with complex political, intellectual (and probably existential) dilemmas that put them in an uncomfortable place in relation to their own communities. Such discomfort was not necessarily the result of being forced to choose between loyalty to state and nation or allegiance the community, but a product of the conviction that there was a fundamental incompatibility between the ideology and epistemology of Mexican public education and local interpretations of social life.

Many educators showed a profound scepticism and certain dislike with what they taught in classrooms. They often see schools´ curricula as having little or no relation at all with local needs and interests. This sense of alienation was expressed in a humorous and blunt way by Edgardo, a young teacher who often said things such as: "I´m always talking in class about how indigenous peoples were always building pyramids and so far, I have never seen a fucking pyramid in these mountains".

A considerable number of the teachers interviewed during the course of my fieldwork shared many of the identitarian anxieties of the "Mexicanidad" (Schmidt; 1978; Lomnitz, 1992) that

worried Mexican nationalist thinkers during most part of the 20th century; to some extent, teachers were authentic inhabitants of the "labyrinth of solitude" (Paz: 1985) obsessed with questions on nation, ethnicity, belonging, cultural and even racial purity that for most inhabitants of Mixe villages were scarcely meaningful.

Teachers´ discourses were often expressed in terms of a highly standardised form of Nationalist imagery. Narratives, conceptions and categories were framed in a relatively bureaucratised version of *indigenismo* that brought to life the imagery of the *libros de texto gratuito* (the text books supplied by the state and employed by the majority of Mexican schoolchildren), populated with depictions of pristine and magnificent indigenous civilizations that serve not only as aesthetic resources but as a mechanism to reinforce a political rooted in Mexican cultural nationalism.

The display of such discourses was a way of putting in practice a language of power whose very enunciation was an act of authority in itself. To engage in a conversations was often difficult, as teachers often used my interviews to display their intellectual and political authority. These were often situations with little dialogue as the maestros' interlocutors were usually reduced to listen and were not expected to talk back.

In my case, such tensions were amplified due to my condition as an anthropologist; unlike most people in the Sierra, teachers have a fairly well-established idea of what anthropologists do, that is (like their own role) surrounded by a profound ambivalence. In Mexico anthropologists have played an important position as ideologues and social engineers of the Mexican state, they are relatively familiar figures of the imaginary of indigenous teachers.

Maestros in the Sierra Mixe are aware that (like themselves) anthropologists in Mexico are usually linked to the state and that in some way they embody the ideology of *mestizaje* or represent a type of "mestizo epistemology" that periodically approaches the indigenous in a way that is suspicious and potentially dangerous. Thus, it is not rare for teachers to think of ethnographers as spies at the service of government agencies, as thieves looking to steal secrets and precious resources from the Mixe or as practitioners of a discipline that objectifies indigenous peoples by employing a racist and patronising scope. Anthropologists working in the Sierra Mixe are not a rarity and, sometimes relationships between them and the communities have been tense and conflictive. During my fieldwork I often heard stories about anthropologists being expelled from the villages and in Tlahuitoltepec, had a record of expelling researchers and students from the National School of Anthropology. Distrust was not only felt by Mexican anthropologists, the few gringo anthropologists were always suspected of being protestant missionaries in disguise

Nevertheless, this view coexists with a perspective that see anthropologists as individuals capable of producing an objective knowledge of their own society and of revealing truths about local practices whose authentic nature remains invisible for common people. In the teachers' imaginary, anthropologists represent the possibility of accessing to some type of valuable connection, to provide political influence or access to useful resources. In some cases, Mixe teachers have established strong links with anthropologists, including a few that occupied senior positions in government agencies (the political alliance between an influential group of Mixe teachers and the anthropologist Salomón Nahmdad, once director of the *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* and author of the first extensive ethnography of the region is a well known –and contentious- matter in the Sierra).

Some teachers consider that anthropologists may possibly hold some type of knowledge of the Sierra Mixe that locals have lost. Such a notion is reinforced by the conviction shared by many educators that, after centuries of Spanish and Mexican domination, local traditions are now fractured and missing some important components. Many teachers regard local customs as deteriorated, threatened by extinction or as pale reflections of what they were during pre-Columbian times. Mixe teachers tend to think that in a remote past, the Sierra was a harmonious and self-sufficient space, free from the damaging influence of Zapotecs, Aztecs, Spaniards and Mexicans. This idea of the Sierra as an incomplete or distorted space appeared constantly during my conversations with teachers; to some extent it helped them to justify a self-assumed role as wardens, preservers and restorers of the "Mixe self" (or "*el ser Mixe*", a term commonly used by educators) and they saw themselves as responsible of restoring the greatness of local indigenous cultures. Such notions, expressed in a language borrowed from Mexican anthropological culturalism, tended to reify and objectify "culture" to the point that they almost conceived it as if was a physical object, susceptible of being exchanged, bought, borrowed or stolen.

This array of notions makes of the relationship between teachers and anthropologists an ambivalent one; producing a form of dialogue is simultaneously repellent and attractive. It creates expectations about recovering some mysterious knowledge that might have fallen in the hands of outsiders, that could help to restore the damaged tradition but at the same time, entails the risk of revealing important aspects of local culture while opening the door to a potential threat to the community.

Although talking to an anthropologist constitutes a risk, teachers generally were willing to be interviewed and sometimes they sought to have a conversation with the ethnographer, as our

talks allowed them to articulate an interpretation of their own society, to communicate that discourse which is often received with indifference and distrust by the rest of the villagers. Both educators and anthropologists employ a collection of terms and representations that are, if not equivalentare mutually recognizable. Teachers' notions about culture, society and ethnicity are expressed in a language that in many ways resembles a popular version of concepts of classic Mesoamerican anthropology (educators commonly employed terms such as "cosmovision", "cargo-system", "region of refuge", "acculturation", or "Mesoamerica", which were never used by other people) through which they constructed a vision of Mixe society full of academic turns and superior to "lay" representations of local society. To some degree, anthropologists and teachers are mirrored in each other, both are intellectuals involved in a dialogue which rarely takes place *ex nihilo* but is rooted in a long and controversial history of encounters between indigenous peoples and social scientists.

Although I became friends with many teachers, my relationship with them did not have the candidness and innocence that characterised my relationship with other people. I found some teachers patronising and even menacing and I am sure that some of them never came to trust me or felt confident while in my presence. With educators with which I was closer, conversations were more relaxed and familiar; they usually invited me to their *fiestas* or to have a drink, but even these situations were not exempt from a certain strain as I was constantly teased in Mixe or found myself engaged in verbal battles of *albures*[67] that I usually lost. Asking direct questions to teachers was difficult, as they suspected that I had some undeclared interest on their answers or that they were being tested. Unlike other people in the Sierra Mixe, teachers seemed to be more aware of my urban and middle class background

[67] In Mexico *albur* is a pun or double entendre which frequently has a sexual connotation. *Alburear* (verb) is mostly but not exclusively, a male practice in which two individuals involve in dialogues full of double connotations whose purpose is to present the interlocutor as sexually weak or clumsy, as homosexual or even as raped. Albur is mainly considered a practice from urban popular classes but it is widely spread throughout the whole country.

and the question of social inequality in Mexico had a more central place in their views than for other people in the Sierra. Especially at the beginning of my fieldwork, teachers avoided my interviews or gave me answers that were plain fantasies either to please me or to have a laugh at my expense. Such situation continued until I attended to a fiesta in a house in Tlahuitoltepec, in which there was a group of prominent teachers and intellectuals from different towns. In that occasion I had a heated debate with my friend Pepe Diaz-Gomez and others on the subject of racism in Mexico. For the first time since I started my fieldwork, I was speaking my mind, allowing myself to criticise the Mixe and to be criticised by them, something that we all appreciated as it helped to have an open conversation which reduced the reciprocal asymmetries that characterise the dialogue between indigenous a non-indigenous. After this episode, my research improved considerably and I became a more or less trusted figure in Tlahuitoltepec and since news travels fast in the Sierra, soon I had an easier time in the other villages that I visited. Although stressful, the period in which my relationships with teachers was tense, helped me to understand the way in which educators construct their role as authorities and influential figures but also to see the contradictory role that they have within their own villages.

An intriguing aspect of the conversations that I held with teachers was the way in which they created a (hierarchical) distinction between themselves and the rest of the members of the community. Teachers established distinctions between themselves and the rest by invoking the knowledge they had acquired in books, by describing the contents of their writings and by pointing how local practices had meanings different from that given by locals and in certain occasions, by adopting a patronising attitude that consists in reducing communitarian practices as "beliefs" or mere superstitions. Although I suspect that in some cases teachers expressed derogatory opinions on Mixe culture in order to accommodate their words to what

they thought were my notions of Mixe society (especially in regard to ritual and religious practices) on other occasions, it was clear that they considered that true knowledge was the one they had acquired when they went to school and that their own education was superior to the rest of the Mixe people.

Nevertheless, teachers found it difficult to maintain those distinctions at all times. Many of them struggled to conciliate notions of the knowledge acquired during their stays at Normal schools with the teachings and knowledge acquired as members of the community.

For Mixe educators, the most problematic aspect of their practice were the contradictions between oral and written culture. While no teacher opposed the broadening of literacy among the population of the Sierra, they also shared a wide-spread among the Mixe, that considers that reading and writing entail the danger of undermining social relationships by breaking ties between elders and young people and weakening the mechanisms through which local knowledge is acquired and transmitted. Many educators expressed concerns about young people´s lack of interest in knowing the boundaries of the community, the history of the community or about acquiring information about plants and agricultural practices that are mainly transmitted through oral means.

Conversations with *Maestro* Adrián

Conflicts around what constitutes true knowledge can be better understood by referring to one of the conversations that I held maestro Adrián, a renowned teacher from Tlahuitoltepec

who I visited through most part of my fieldwork. Adrián was a slightly intimidating character; a tall and strong a man in his late sixties, he had the elegant solemnity that is commonly found among men who have held important responsibilities in the community. He was an important and respected voice in the local assembly and the kind of person used to perform in front of an audience. Similarly to other teachers, Adrián had an extensive knowledge of the region as he had been posted in different schools of the Sierra throughout the years. His was also an experienced political militant who had participated in many of the struggles of the Mixe. Maestro Adrián had been involved in indigenous politics at least since the late 1960's, during the harsh days in which the caciques were most powerful. In the mid-seventies he took part in the creation of the ASAM or Assembly of Mixe Authorities (*Asamblea de Autoridades Mixes*), a regional political front that played an important role in organizing the opposition against local bosses, that encouraged the creation of communal assemblies in every village and town and fought to against regional elites and FAPATUX, a state owned paper mill and logging company[68].

Maestro Adrián was a close friend and ally of Floriberto Díaz an important Mixe intellectual and political activist from Tlahuitoltepec, and together they encouraged the creation of an autonomous education system that made important changes to the syllabus of the Mixe

[68] FAPATUX, acronym for Fábricas de Papel de Tuxtepec was a paper company (originally foreign-owned but it was nationalised in 1965) that in 1958 obtained a 25 year logging concession to extract timber pulp from forests located in Zapotec, Chinantec and Mixe communities. FAPATUX was a monopoly and the communities that were within its concession were forced to sell all the timber to it and the payments were to be used only in development projects approved by the government. Relationships between communities and FAPATUX were surrounded by conflict, especially in the Sierra Mixe, where opposition to logging was fought with the help of local caciques. FAPATUX had a crucial role in the accelerated deforestation of the region, due to its intensive logging methods and failure in complying with reforestation obligations. The legal nature of the concession was also a matter of conflict as the Federal government gave rights over forests that were in ejido and communal lands. By making use of a juridical stratagem, the government maintained communities' land rights but took legal possession over the forests, turning peasants into employees of FAPATUX to exploit their own lands (Nemesio Rodriguez, personal communication and my own data). The struggle to regain the control of the forests, to fight the alliance between local caciques and FAPATUX and to eliminate the State's monopoly on logging was an important source for mobilisation during the 1970's. FAPATUX's concession was terminated in 1981 and the mobilisation of Zapotec, Chinantec and Mixe organisations prevented it from renewing rights to the forests. (Bray, 1991; Wright and Leighton, 2002; Mathews, 2002).

schools, defended the rights of communities to have teachers fluent in the local language (a way to counter a perverse strategy of the Ministry of Public Education and fostered by the teachers' union, which consists in sending indigenous teachers to work in pueblos where they do not speak the local language) and supported the creation of a standardised grammar to write the Ayuuk language.

Adrián was convinced of the necessity of writing and reading in Mixe as a way to preserve culture, reinforce a sense of ethnic belonging and widen the ability of the Mixe villages to resist the State."We, the weak peoples, the minorities" I was told once by Adrian "must learn to read and write to defend ourselves, there is no other option." Literacy, writing and books had a crucial place in Adrián's life; these were tools that he thought were fundamental to expand the relationships of the communities of the Sierra, to attenuate linguistic, historical and political differences between villages and to unify the Mixe people and not less important, much of his own prestige was linked to the fact that he had lots of books. Maestro Adrian's house was located in the centre of Tlahuitoltepec, just behind the municipal offices. It was a two story building, at the time I met him, he was just adding another level to accommodate one of his sons who had recently returned to town after serving in the Mexican army.

The house was not very different from others in Tlahui, except for an important detail: after crossing the front door, there was a large and pretty wood-panelled cupboard with glass doors containing a large number of books. This was an expensive piece of furniture, rarely seen in other houses full of perfectly ordered books. The cupboard was the first object encountered by any visitor to the house and it was also visible from the street (as most dwellings in the Sierra keep their doors open during the day). Since the house was located in a busy footpath, any passerby could see the books. The shelves contained mostly government editions of text

books ranging from those published during the 1960's to the most recent editions. There were also volumes on Mixe myths published by the Salesian fathers and a Bible in the "*edición latinoamericana*", the translation used by Catholic liberation theologians and a good collection of national political magazines. The books, occupied an important space within the household and it was obvious that they were precious and valuable objects.

Nevertheless, Adrian´s faith in writing and books was something that he did not always found it easy to maintain. His trust in literacy was confronted by the prestigious role played by orality and oral tradition and he constantly questioned the validity of the school as the main source for education. This became clear one evening, when, after spending a good long hour describing the merits of a grammar and a new phonetic system of the Mixe language that he was developing, he suddenly came to a halt and said: "In the end, this is all a waste" and pointing to the cupboard, added: "all these books, are useless. The government spends so much money in books that can't be used. This grammar, he said pointing to a book on Mixe language published by the Institute for Adult Literacy (INEA), does not work. We [the Mixe] don't speak like that. Every village has its own way of speaking the language. Mixe [language] cannot be taught in a classroom or in books, it is necessary to go to the fields, to the milpa [in order] to learn it. A child can't read a book [to learn Mixe], he has to go to the field with his father and learn the names of the corn-knobs, the names of the plants, of the animals. This is what the government can't understand or doesn't want to understand."

After leaving maestro Adrian's house, I started to think about disconcerting remarks. These were words that came from an experienced maestro who dedicated most of his life teaching to read and write but, nevertheless, they were coherent with a wide spread attitude of the inhabitants of Tlahuitoltepec. During the first months of my fieldwork, I was trying to find a

teacher to learn the local language or at least, to hire someone who could sit with me for a couple of hours and explain the rudiments of Mixe, a language that is grammatically and phonetically complex. Such requests, nonetheless, were ineffective; not only there were no teachers available, but it looked as if everyone in town was reluctant to instruct me. Instead, people insisted in that the only way to learn the language was to do the things that the Mixe did and especially, to go to the fields and learn the name of things. Following the locals' advice I dedicated considerable time at the milpas or inside Doña Cristina's smoky kitchen (the mother of my friend Eleazar and one of my main informants) learning Mixe through asking and doing.

Unsurprisingly, the method suggested by people in Tlahui proved to be effective; nonetheless, I remained curious about the local's resistance to teach me the language through a method which, from my point of view, was adequate. My suspicion was that behind this stance there was something more profound than a mere unfamiliarity with the idea of teaching a language through formal schooling. At the end of the day the Mixe's experience with the modern Mexican education has been mostly a matter connected with the acquisition of Spanish language. The recurrent insistence on learning the language through activities outside formal schooling and Adrian's sceptical view of books (and ultimately, with writing) can be better understood as attitudes that are similar to those that the Mixe have in relationship to maps (see chapter I); what these two episodes reveal is the profound reluctance of the Mixe to accept a separation between words and things, to detach language from the specific contexts in which it is produced. There is a strong political and epistemological opposition to the institutionalisation and centralisation of knowledge that is coherent with a political ideology and practice that is constantly pulling society towards its margins and trying to dissolve the foundations of authority.

In the same way to cartographic practices, acquiring and learning a language is seen as the result of a set of practices that are linked to specific sites and places. In vernacular tradition, language is contained *within* objects, inscribed in the landscape and it is an attribute of the multiple beings that populate the land rather than a general system or a set of universal rules with which humans describe a reality external to them. This vision of language implies that knowledge is not constructed by the subject upon objects through a method, but that is something that arises from the concrete relationships established between objects, places and subjects. Where western epistemology sees things as cognisable through individual thought, the Mixe see animated beings with a language which humans can learn and a social life in which they can participate creating a dialogue that makes knowledge possible; it is a relational epistemology that has an almost *maieutic* quality, except that in this case, the dialogue that leads to knowledge is not a activity that only involves humans but one that includes a wide range of different types of beings (including the animated geographical features and sites). Underlying this notion, there is an obvious animist conception that not only erodes categorical distinctions between nature and culture (Descola; 2005; Pedersen, 2001) but also between objects and subjects.

Although the status enjoyed by the school as a *Mä ja Wejkatäjk,* the hegemonic character derived from its place as an institution of the Mexican public creates constant clashes with the "traditional" epistemological and political views of the Mixe. Even if at the present time the Mexican post-revolutionary public school has lost much of the political and cultural belligerence that characterised its early history (Knight, 1994; Vaughan, 1997; Maldonado, 2002) it still is one of the main refuges of nationalist ideologies and its ethos is still guided by a hegemonic impulse.

The construction of post-revolutionary sovereignty can be seen as a great attempt to unify and centralise space. Such a process, implied not only taking control over the physical geography through military, political and legal means, to organise the national space according to the economic rationale of the state but also implied imposing its own (centralised) cartographic imagination at the expense of other spatial conceptions and territorial orders; thus, indigenous territorialities whose frontiers, centres and geopolitical logics did not coincide with that of the state have been constantly denied and even suppressed and in that process, the school has played a fundamental role.

Although indigenous professionals and teachers have made considerable efforts to modify the educational system of the Sierra, to put it under the control of the communities and to adapt its contents to the needs of the *comuneros*, the contradictions existing between a decentralised conception and practice of power and knowledge and the inherent centralising and homogenising character of the school remains unsolved. The hegemonic culture of the Mexican public school tends to clash with local conceptions of that see the social space as multiplicity of sites of power and knowledge horizontally integrated. Furthermore, as an institution whose authority is intimately associated with writing, the presence of written cultures has attached the idea of modern law from which the Mixe are. Thus, the school creates the conditions for the implementation of overarching "modernist and bureaucratic" procedures to order the physical and social territory of the community (Gledhill; 2008) and for a normalisation of social life which entails substituting the moral economy of reciprocity based on ritual that regulates the social life of the Mixe (see chapter 2) by the legal system of the state. Through schooling and literacy, the Mexican state not only seeks to create a common cultural framework to construct its authority but also to open the door to a set of

technologies in the guise of institutions, processes, policies, projects (Mueggler, 2001) whose purpose is to reconfigure rural space and to regulate people's territories according to a single juridical rationale. Thus, the public school has spear-headed the creation of a centralised bureaucratic apparatus for social regulation directed at replacing "traditional" patterns of spatial configuration with legal institutions, instruments, and authorities whose practice is based on the written word.

For the Mixe, literacy and access to written culture is not necessarily perceived as an automatic path leading to democratisation or to the construction of citizenship as it is has been regarded by the state and modern ideologies. On the contrary, among the communities of the Sierra there is certain scepticism in relation to written culture that is present even among those whose authority and prestige is associated with the ability to read and write. For the Mixe, literacy is an instrument required for dealing with the state and the mestizo, but it is also a dangerous practice that undermines equality by displacing oral culture (and with it, mechanisms of political relationship, local forms of knowledge, moral teachings, ritual processes) and creating the possibility for the surge of a potentially oppressive intellectual elite. In order to understand how people perceive literacy as a danger, we should focus on the omnipresent and never-ending debates and disputes on the creation of a written Mixe language.

Mixe grammars as territorial disputes

At least since the 1970's teachers and other literate individuals have been involved in creating a grammar and an alphabet that could be used by all Mixe communities. Those

preoccupations were shared by a few Mexican government agencies (the *Instituto Nacional Indigenista*, the *Dirección de Educación Indígena* of the Ministry of Public Education and the *Instituto Nacional para la Educación de los Adultos*) that in different moments provided some type of support to create standardised grammars of Ayuuk. Teachers involved in this process were convinced that a common written system was necessary to improve communication among communities and for strengthening the unity of the ethnic group.

Nevertheless, producing a standard written version of the Ayuuk language soon turned into a complex political problem; during the 1980's a group led by Floriberto Díaz created a grammar based on the dialect spoken in Tlahuitoltepec which was mainly used by activists linked to SER (*Servicios del Pueblo Mixe*). The use of this grammar was soon questioned by teachers and authorities from other villages that were unhappy about having to adopt Tlahuitoltepec's dialect as the standard form of Mixe. It did not take long before other organisations and villages started to work in their own grammars and by the mid eighties grammars based on the dialects of Totontepec, Alotepec and Quetzaltepec in the Highlands, from Cacalotepec in the Midlands and from San Juan Guichicovi in the Lowlands were circulating. Invariably, those involved in producing the grammars claimed that their own version was better than those of other communities and everyone saw each other's work as an attempt to impose their own dialect to other pueblos of the Sierra. In this context, accusations of trying to create political and cultural cacicazgos became common and everyone was prompt in pointing the pettiness of their competitors.

The 1980's did not see the end of these linguistic disputes; although only the versions of Totontepec and Tlahuitoltepec were published and distributed either to teachers or activists involved in the communitarian workshops organised by SER, every now and then teachers

and professional or amateur linguists decide that a new grammar is needed. During my fieldwork I had news of at least five ongoing projects for a new grammar or phonetic system and I met a similar number of people from different villages who were thinking of creating a new standardised version of Ayuuk. These "linguistics struggles" can be seen as an expression of factionalism and political tensions among leaderships, organisations and villages of the Sierra (this appears to be González-Apodaca's view (2006) who gave a detailed account of these episodes in her excellent study on bicultural education among the Mixe).

However and despite rivalries among groups and competing personalities are elements to be taken into consideration, they are insufficient to explain the conflicts surrounding the creation of standardised grammars and the inability to impose them in all the communities of the Sierra. In order to explain the disputes over the grammars it is necessary to consider the way in which the Mixe understand language and their ideas about the *Mä ja Wejkatäjk*. For the peoples of the Sierra, language is intimately connected to the specific territory inhabited by each community. The Mixe do not make a distinction between speech and language as established by modern linguistics but think of language is something rooted in specific relationships that take place in very localised spaces. Thus, speaking a particular variant of Mixe or any other language is explained as a product of the interactions that people have with and within a particular geography. The Mixe explain that villagers in the Lowlands speak differently from the people of the Highlands because they inhabit different territories, subjected to different and logics. For the Mixe language is eminently relational and collective.

Under this perspective, the idea of homogenising language cannot but be seen with great dislike. To standardise language by extirpating the small or large differences between dialects

of *ayuuk* implies to erase the specific modalities used by individuals and communities to relate with their surroundings. For the Mixe, multilingualism runs parallel to multiculturalism but also to multinaturalism and these three conditions that are fundamental to maintain a decentralised model of social relationships. It is under this context that linguistic struggles on grammars should be understood; although for many teachers eliminates differences between dialects and standardising the language increases the capacity of the Mixe to survive to the pressures of the state but for the rest of the Mixe, linguistic diversity is not threat for social continuity but a basic requirement for local specificity.

Exploring the attempts to create standardised versions of the Ayuuk language is useful as it helps to reveal the gaps between communities and teachers as well as the type of contradiction in which Mixe educators are immersed. The aspiration of many teachers to unify the Mixe people through language and to have tools to contain the influence of the state and set limits on the cultural influence of Spanish-speaking Mexico is often perceived as an attempt to create village-based forms of regional hegemony; accusations of caciquismo among creators of grammars are not just an easy way to discredit a political opponent but a cautionary warning about the rise of an embryonic centralised power. Behind the standardisation of the Mixe language there is the fear that an emerging elite might be trying to turn the Sierra into a politically and culturally centralised entity. Teachers are equated with caciques because they are perceived as reproducing a process similar to the one undertaken by the great caciques that dominated the Sierra during the 20th century, except that in this case, the strategy followed to achieve centralisation is not to create a centralised District but to impose a single interpretation of Mixe culture to all the communities of the Sierra.

Many teachers have internalised the post-revolutionary way of understanding sameness and difference and as a consequence, they understand their own political project as an attempt to reinstate the ethnic unity that existed during the past and disappeared under external intervention. Such a vision appears clearly portrayed in a conversation that I held with maestro Antonio a teacher from San Juan Cotzocon, a village from the Highlands located three or four hours from Tlahuitoltepec. According to Antonio, "In the time of the ancestors, before the Mexicans arrived and even before the Spaniards, the Mixe people were more prosperous and happy. The land was not as it is now, that is hard to cultivate and we can only harvest maize once a year. It was not like that. It is not like now, that the air [of the Sierra] is drier. Even when I was a child the air was more humid and the trees were taller. [Now is different] because of the logging and because of the oil industry in the Gulf [of Mexico]. I remember when there were no refineries on the coast, now you can see the flames coming out from the chimneys all the time. Now everything is polluted, even our language is contaminated. Before the Spaniards there were no Spanish words, with the Mixe was enough. But after the Spaniards and the Mexicans came things changed. You can hear the boys speaking, they mix everything. One word in Mixe and one in Spanish, it's really awful. They call themselves '*puto'* [Mexican slang for "faggot"] all the time and use all kind of insults. In the past the Mixe were united, this was during the days of Kong'hoy who led the Mixe to defend the land. Everyone feared the Mixe, the Spaniards feared for their horses and their Zapotec guides abandoned them in the Sierra. We were never conquered, but we have been manipulated. They create divisions among the pueblos, that is why we need to reunite."

Antonio's narrative summarises this view of a primordial past, of a "state of purity" in which the Sierra Mixe was an autarchic space free of outside intervention. This is a discourse that reproduces the logic of what Susan Buck-Morss has called the *principle of mass sovereignty*

(Buck-Morss, 2000). Through a historic-mythical narrative Antonio defines an enemy (Spaniards, Mexicans and Zapotecs) that threatens the Mixe either by military dominion or cultural conquest (that manifests in corruption of language) and by doing this, he identifies a political sovereignty formed by a collective subject (the Mixe) acting inside a defined territory (the Sierra) that needs to be defended from an "other" that menaces its integrity but , at the same time, helps to bring the subject into being. The latter illustrates the extent to which the political model of the nation-state has been internalised by Mixe teachers; Antonio's narrative represents a break with a political and ontological tradition in which to be Mixe (*ayuuk)* is to expand social relationships through the acts reciprocity that in turn, are mediated by ritual (*fiesta*), collective labour (*tequio*) and communal service (*servicio*). From the teachers' point of view to be Mixe is no longer a type of practice but to have a collection of attributes determined by history; to belong to a territory whose frontiers are historically demarcated, to be part of a certain linguistic community that is subject to a permanent political order.

In this *Weltanschauung* acquired during their contact with the institutions of the Mexican state, educators have learned to conceive power as a sovereignty that acts upon a territory centralising its administration and homogenising the individuals and social groups that live in it. This movement towards the elimination of differences within the territory generates and rests upon the creation of a series of antinomies based on a distinction between inside and outside, native and foreign which are formulated in a way that is completely alien to the local tradition. Such model of power unleashes a taxonomic impulse, a desire of creating frontiers, of classifying social groups and establishing social and political boundaries that are total and permanent. Teachers' representation of society reproduces the ethnic map of Mexico as conceived by state institutions in which groups are separated by clearly defined linguistic,

territorial and historical boundaries and which relate among each other in unambiguous terms. This cartographic imagination asserts that is possible for an authority to control the totality of space and to assign to every community a unique location (Craib, 2004), that the territory is fixed and social life is constructed upon it, with independence of space that has been turned into a silent background devoid of agency. Teachers have adapted to the context of the Sierra a view of ethnic, racial and cultural relations in which there are echoes of José Vasconcelos' (1997) idea of the *Cosmic Race* and of the less eugenicist versions of *mestizaje* of the *indigenista* anthropology (Aguilar; 2001); in the political community imagined by the teachers, the Mexican *mestizo* has been substituted by a culturally politically and ultimately racially homogeneous Mixe people. Mixe teachers follow a course of action inherited from the post-revolutionary "missionary teachers" whose duty was to create a sense of national identity among peasant groups (Palacios, 1999; Gillingham; 2006) except that in this context, the Mexican nation and the ideology of *mestizaje* have been modified and adapted to make the (Mixe) ethnic group and the strengthening a regional indigenous identity the core of political and cultural action.

In that sense Mixe teachers are not necessarily agents of the Mexican state but propagators of a state ideology, of a way of conceiving society, space, language and history that contrasts deeply with the variable and metamorphic qualities of the communities, the heterogeneous cultural and social composition of the region, the ecological diversity of the Sierra and the different strategies through which nature is socialised and society becomes naturalised. The model of social organisation proposed by the teacher is constantly being challenged by the fluid interactions that characterise the life of the peoples of the Sierra. Authorities, ritual specialists (*xemabie*) and musicians are all important social actors who question the role of schooling and that seek to put limits to the influence of teachers. Nonetheless, maestros are

also characters who are listened and respected and who make considerable efforts to adapt schooling in terms that are socially acceptable and or that do not put in risk the autonomy or the viability of the *pueblos*. In order to achieve this, the Mixe communities along with their teachers have tried to limit the influence of state agents in the planning of education and to develop an authentic, non-hegemonic system of bicultural education.

Thus, the inhabitants of the communities try to insert the school within the ritual relationships that mediate the social life of the Mixe. Whenever a school is built (especially if it the building has been erected using *tequio*), people will sacrifice a turkey or a chicken either in its foundations or in the courtyard when the work is finished. Authorities, accompanied by the music band, will drop tepache on the soil and pronounce prayers and advice teachers and students on how to behave and on their responsibilities and obligations as members of the community. Such rituals are aimed to establish a relationship with the building and the people that will use it. Most schools in the Sierra Mixe have a patch of land given by the community that is used to cultivate maize or fruits and the comités designated by the communal assembly who are responsible of watching for the proper functioning of the school, of cleaning and repairing the building and taking care of the students, especially if they come from distant rancherias or other villages. The comités are also responsible of organising an annual fiesta for the school or to make their students to participate in bigger celebrations of the community. The president of the committee and sometimes their deputies (called *fiscales* or *vocals*) are granted the right to use of a staff for a year that indicates that they are legitimate authorities. The committee not only supervises the school on behalf of the communal assembly, but it incorporates this space as part of the community; through organising a fiesta or participating in other celebrations the school becomes entwined within the relationships of reciprocity and mutual obligation. The products harvested in the land allocated for the school, allows having

an economic base to organise the celebrations and the committee (but rarely the teacher) is required to obtain help from their families, neighbours and friends to ensure that the fiesta will be carried well. The rituals socialise the school: they help to make it part of the community through means that are not different from those employed in other spaces of power.

The strategy adopted in relationship to the school follows the same rationale of the one employed with the Catholic Church; here, the communities have created a parallel structure of temporary *servicios* whose role is to insert the Catholic temple as part of the network of relationships of the *pueblo*. *Capillos* in charge of ringing the bells and putting flowers in the altars, *Cantores* responsible of singing in the Church during the fiestas and *Rezanderos* who say prayers and light candles are much more than honorary *cargueros* undertaking dignify but still relatively small jobs inside the temple, but they play a crucial role that consists in being the eyes and ears of the community's authorities (including the assembly) inside the Church. In nearly every village in the Mixe, the *servicios* working in the Church hold a considerable of power. The Catholic priests are forced to negotiate their way with a cohort of local authorities who regulate access to the temple and in many ways, are the ones who mediate the communities' relationship with saints and virgins.

Throughout the years, ethnographers and other observers have pointed out that many Church related positions are only given to elders or highly respected individuals, and most of the time, this has been interpreted as a symbol of deference and a recognition that after serving a life in the hierarchy, old people are granted the honour of being close to the most important deities of the village. While such observations are not entirely incorrect, they tend to be politically naive. Elders are given posts in the Church not as mere protocol, but mainly, because the

communities often send their more experienced and politically strong men and women to deal with a political and religious authority designated by an external power. Here it is possible to invert the widely accepted notion that Catholicism (especially in its baroque and counter-reformist form) engulfed the practices of indigenous peoples to incorporate them to its own hegemonic order and regard the involvement of indigenous communities in Catholic religious celebrations as a way to adapt this institutions to the mechanisms that regulate their life.

Chapter V. Musicians, bands and social process in the Sierra Mixe

Music bands, circulation and territoriality in the Sierra Mixe.

The purpose of the current chapter is to present an ethnographic portrait of the musicians and philharmonic bands (or *bandas de viento*) that exist in every village and town of the Sierra Mixe. As I will demonstrate in the following pages, musicians are crucial to understand the life of the communities of the Sierra since they are characters which are present in almost every major social, political and ritual event. However, and against a notion that has been widely accepted in most anthropological and historical literature on the Mixe, the argument developed in the following pages suggests that Mixe musicians are not mere companions to an intense ritual life whose purpose is to cement communitarian bonds but that musical performances are foundational acts through which society becomes constituted and renovated. Such is the importance given by the Mixe to their music bands that little of their ideas about social life, understanding of power and authority as well as notions of personhood and belonging can be grasped without looking at the manner in which music is socialised and to the sociality of musicians.

The centrality of music bands is a phenomenon that is present in all municipalities of the Sierra Mixe; even a superficial examination of the communities of the Sierra promptly reveals the existence of an intimate link between musicians, music and ritual as well as a connection between the music bands and the formation of social organisation. Strikingly, such an important role has only been marginally recognised in the ethnographic literature on the Mixe. Authors with a keen eye for ethnographic detail such as Kuroda (1987) or Lipp (1998) or whose focus was specifically on the fiesta, such as Torres Cisneros (2003) or Guido Munch (2003) have only made superficial comments on the social role of music bands and in

general, most anthropologist have reduced the position of brass bands to that of mere companions to rituals whose core is located anywhere but in the music.

The lack of awareness in relationship to the place reserved for music cannot but be striking, especially if we consider that in every single Mixe community, regardless of its size, wealth or political importance, music is an ever present feature. Although they are a relatively poor population, the Mixe spend considerable time and resources in music-related activities; nearly every household has a musician or a child playing in the municipal band or attending the local *escoleta* as people call local music schools. Having an *escoleta* or at least a music teacher or band conductor is as important as having a church, a school or a basket-ball court, the unequivocal material signs that a community exists in a determined place. The importance granted to music is such, that the well-being of a community is often measured against the state of its band. A big, talented and vigorous band is taken as an indicator of the existence of a burgeoning, well organised and prosperous community. By contrast, a band that struggles to subsist or that performs poorly is often viewed as a symptom of deep-rooted social conflict. Even further, the disappearance of the village's band (either because there are no musicians left in the community, or because quarrels among them make no longer possible to perform) is regarded as an ominous dramatic event that anticipates the extinction of the community or at least, of the absence of capable leadership, as one of the major tasks of local authorities is to ensure that a band should be present in town during fiestas.

The following pages also provide information on Mixe practices and conceptions of inter-communitarian relationship and regional integration as well as on the way in which people think and experience the space situated beyond the limits of the community. Until this point, most of the information presented in the thesis has focused on intra-communitarian issues while the ethnographic data on the nature of space and on socio-political mechanisms (such as *fiestas* and *tequio)* has been analysed from the perspective of community building. On the

other hand, materials on regional forms of integration in the Sierra Mixe (especially those concerning *caciques* and teachers) have been observed in relationship to actors and processes linked to the discontinuous presence of the Mexican state in the Sierra. In order to balance the approach on community and state that has prevailed in previous instalments (especially in chapters 3 an 4) I now intend to explore forms of inter-communitarian relations that are essential to revealing and understanding the existence of territorial orders that differ from those promoted by the state or by the (capitalist) market.

The territorial order described in the following pages, the one that emerges from the circulation of music bands across the Sierra Mixe, is different from other indigenous territorialities such as the one studied by John Gledhill in Michoacán's Pacific coast (Gledhill, 2004) where Nahua communities have maintained a solid geographic continuity, a delimited property regime based on communal holding of land that corresponds with clearly established ethnic boundaries. In contrast, the region and the territory configured by the circulation of Mixe music bands constitutes less a geopolitical unit and resembles more a "ceremonially reproduced cultural space" (Liffman and Coyle; 2000, p. 3) similar to the one that exists among the peoples of the Gran Nayar in North-Western Mexico (Liffman; 2000; Neurath; 2000)

Like the territoriality produced by the pilgrimages made by Huichol and Cora peoples from North-western Mexico, the regional order created by the circulation of bands has a basic and important ritual character. Nonetheless, we should be careful not to regard such rituality as something exclusively symbolic (in the sense of something merely representational). Nor should we understand it in terms of a "symbolic geography" that runs parallel to (but without touching) the political geography of the Sierra. The musical rituals performed by Mixe bands in ceremonies and fiestas need to be understood as important political acts that contribute to create alliances between peoples, to solve conflicts among *pueblos* and to the general shaping

of local and regional spaces of sociability and by doing that, they effectively create a territorial order and a collective sense of belonging to a particular geography.

Mixe musicians and their bands facilitate the constant reordering of the geopolitics of the Sierra; they are agents that add importance and significance to human (and non-human) places such as villages, *plazas* (squares), houses and temples (including mountains, stones, caves or churches) through linking different spheres of social life. They create continuities between different "force fields" and articulate diverse modalities and forms of power. In many ways, musicians act as a centralising and unifying force. Nonetheless, the territories articulated by Mixe bands are ephemeral, transitory and impermanent; they create power and concentrate it for a few days only to dissolve it again. The Mixe territoriality created by music bands needs to be understood in the context of a cartographic practice that unlike those of the state, do not fix and homogenise space but maintain it as a fluid and diverse dimension. More than a territorial unit or a normalised political entity, what the bands create is a geometry composed by the figures that result from the connecting of different societies distributed throughout the geography of the Sierra.

By moving from one village to the other, musicians make possible the expansion of relations of reciprocity, the emergence of links based on mutual obligations and debts based on the exchange of gifts including music, food and objects such as crosses, flowers and candles. Music bands make it possible to establish links between peoples who speak different languages, have different gods and different histories. The movement of music bands is also important for strengthening bonds of friendship and reciprocal understanding between the peoples of the Mixe Mountains; although my research did not find a strict co-relation or normative link between kinship and the flow of music bands, the social gatherings that take place under the umbrella of music represent opportunities for the creation of affective bonds and kinship ties among Mixe communities including those of *compadrazgo* and marriage.

The exploration of the role of Mixe music bands is important as it allows us to observe the way in which people move throughout a mountainous geography characterised by pronounced contrasts between ecologies, systems of thought and types of social organisation. By looking at music bands and their performers, it is possible to realise that the Mixe are everything but indifferent to the physical and social spaces located *outside* the frontiers of their *pueblos*. Thinking about things, people and places located outside the community is an activity which occupies a considerable part of their intellectual energies. Moreover, it would not be exaggerated to say that for the Mixe "otherness" constitutes a central category of their speculative thought. Nonetheless, reflecting about the "exterior" is not a purely intellectual matter but a necessity imposed by the geography of the Sierra; as people who live in a space characterised by pronounced ecological, social and cultural discontinuities, the Mixe know that establishing connections between natural and cultural communities (the construction of ecologies) is essential to make life possible and enjoyable.

The Mixe are aware that living in a rugged mountainous region without being able to move from one place to the other can become an extremely difficult matter. The economy of the Mixe household can only be reproduced by making use of various ecological niches distributed across the mountains and vital tasks such as collecting firewood, gathering plants to eat and cure and selecting plots to cultivate also require moving from one site to the other. Important activities such as trade, migrant labour or schooling also necessitate moving between settlements (from hamlets to head-towns and from villages to cities), fields and roads. Finally, the Mixe also need to travel freely across the Sierra in order to fulfil the obligations imposed by a ritual life that requires making pilgrimages throughout the year to a large number of sanctuaries and sacred places distributed in places within and outside the Sierra.

This constant mobility generates a continuous reordering of spatial categories, notions of distance and proximity both at the physical and the social level. The territorial order of the Mixe is subject to constant variations because its logic is not regulated by a rigid normative order like the one that governs the geographic rationale of the state. What defines how borders, limits between properties and rights over milpas and portions of the forest are structured are the organic links established within and between communities which, in turn, are mediated by music bands and not by a formal political authority. The Sierra Mixe is a place where inter-communitarian relationships are regulated in a most unusual way; among this indigenous people, inter-village "diplomacy" (to borrow a term from the state) has been left in the hands of the musicians, despite the fact that they are considered to be chaotic, lascivious, suspected of being in contact with spirits that can be dangerous and harmful and, paradoxically as it may seem, who are both central and marginal in social terms.

An immobilised community: the case of Malacatepec

Being able to circulate in the Sierra and have unrestricted access to roads and pathways is also basic for the dispersal and subsequent gathering of the communities. Freedom of movement is fundamental for the interplay of centrifugal and centripetal forces that shape the political life of the *ayuuk*. Without it, the alternation between the secluded and quiet life of the *rancheria* and the intense activity of the head-town would simply become impossible. Consequently, interruptions in the movement of people are always regarded as highly conflictive matters; an obstructed road or a blocked pathway is synonymous of hardship and conflict. Unsurprisingly, the most violent and cruellest moments of Mixe history have always been related with the impossibility to walk, ride or drive peacefully and freely throughout the mountains. Mobility and access to roads is important for all Mixe villages but it is

particularly needed for the communities situated in the Highlands since these are the ones that suffer the most when the movement of people and goods becomes obstructed to the point that life itself can be seriously threatened.

This dramatic aspect of the life in the Sierra was revealed in all its intensity during my visits to Santiago Malacatepec, a small *pueblo* situated in the highest part of the Highlands. Malacatepec or "Malacate" as many people refer to it, was a village comparatively poorer than most communities of the Sierra. In this place the signs of malnourishment among children were manifest, a large number of its inhabitants presented obvious symptoms of infectious diseases and even the stray dogs that wandered through the streets were in a lousy state, an unequivocal indication of poverty. Malacatepec did not look too different from other towns in the Highlands which, although humble, are rarely miserable. I did not have to push too hard to find out why the village was in such an bad state since from our first conversations locals made clear that their community was involved in a long and bitter conflict with the San Juan Mazatlan, a community located two or three hours by foot in the tropical Midlands which was also Malacatepec's head-town.

The quarrel between Malacatepec and its head-town (which was apparently related to the control of buses and lorries that circulated between the villages) escalated to the point that the head-town's communal assembly decided to cut the village's access to the main road. Prohibiting the village from using the road, was an act of aggression and collective punishment that Malacatepec was resolute to defy. Faced with the impossibility of using the main route, the villagers were forced to find a different way to descend to the plots of *tierra caliente* (the warm lands in which they cultivated maize, beans, squash and several types of tropical crops) using what was no more than a hardly distinguishable pathway opened through the interstices of the mountains; this new route demanded the villagers to spend almost one day to reach to the lower parts of the Sierra. Being deprived from using the old

road not only meant losing access to lands held in commonwealth with head-town but also, that the use of portions of land in to the new route had to be negotiated with other villages located in the same geographic range.

The situation in Malacatepec was so tense that at my arrival to the boundaries of the village, I was escorted by a *topil* (a young man who was serving his community as a "policeman") who in addition to the wooden baton indicating his role as sentinel of the pueblo, also carried an enormous shotgun and a radio with him. The *topil* who probably noticed my presence several miles before I met him, interrogated me at length on the purpose of my visit and only returned to his post when I was received by the local authorities.

The quarrel with the head-town and the impossibility of accessing the road brought some serious problems for the people of Malacatepec. The village was deprived of access to markets outside the community and the few goods and food transported by muleteers were sold at astronomic prices in the village's shops; abandoned coffee fields could be seen everywhere and the harvest was left to rot as there was no way of taking it out to be sold; obtaining medical attention was also problematic and people were deeply concerned about accidents and illnesses as they had no way of receiving adequate care and finally, the two lampposts erected in the middle of the village were a reminder of the hostile actions of their neighbours who had cut the supply of electricity and left the community in the dark and unable to use its water pumps.

In sum, Malacatepec was an immobilised and isolated village but this was hardly a voluntary choice but the outcome of a conflict over the control of the route that communicated between the quarrelling communities. Contrary to theories of acculturation and modernisation of indigenous communities stated, what threatened Malacatepec's existence was not the continued contact with other groups but precisely the lack of it. Forced isolation was tearing

the community apart and one of the most visible signs of the crisis was the lack of a music band. Within the village there were just a few musical instruments that needed serious maintenance, there was no money to acquire new ones and in addition, serious organisational impediments prevented forming a band as most young people were desperate to migrate to another place. At the time of my visit, the community was experiencing an accelerated process of dispersal as most people were trying to find new lands to cultivate, relocating the *rancherias* in sites near the new plots and in consequence, they did not have much time left to engage in communitarian or inter-communitarian rituals. Malacatepec, already isolated and impoverished, was virtually excluded from engaging in the ritual life of the region because it lacked a music band. Without one, the community had lost an important instrument to create links with other communities and was deprived of one of the main political tools used by the Mixe to negotiate their way through the Sierra. Malacatepec's case was an extreme and dramatic example of the difficulties of lacking access to lands, markets and services located outside the community. Looking at this small Highland village it was possible to imagine the harshness of life during the days of the great caciques when circulating through the Sierra was a dangerous activity and many villages and towns were isolated or directly under siege by enemy communities or more powerful towns.

The isolation experienced by Malacatepec was a reminder of the importance that bands have in the construction of political relationships among the communities of the Sierra Mixe and of the complexities that characterise inter-village relationship. Bands can also be considered as an index of the ritual, social, and economic wellbeing of any given community. The latter does not mean that music bands are simple extensions of the community or of its authorities nor that their only role is to mediate political contacts between pueblos. The relationship between bands, musicians and communitarian authorities are never straightforward; as was mentioned before, musicians are considered to be ambiguous characters and they are often

regarded as morally dubious when not overtly deviant. On the other hand, musicians tend to reject the power of authorities and frequently maintain complex relationships with their own communities.

The following sections provide ethnographic elements with which to understand the mechanisms of solidarity as well as the contradictions existing between musicians, the communities of the Sierra Mixe and their authorities. The subsequent pages also describe the ongoing tension between those forces that order and structure the communities and the chaotic, anarchic power summoned by the bands. My interest is to highlight how an ideology of collective belonging and an elaborated moral philosophy of "communal being" is combined with a carnivalesque practice in which drunkenness, sexual desire and apparent social disorder conflate to produce the social body.

The devil at the crossroad: the ambiguous social status of musicians

The point of departure for this section is the image of a musician waiting for the devil at a crossroad at night in order to exchange his soul for great musical talent. Images stressing the link between demonic or spiritually powerful figures, geographic intersections and musicians can be repeatedly found in many different musical and cultural traditions throughout the world[69] including the Sierra Mixe where musicians are said to be in contact with the lord of the mountain or with a devilish figure known as "el Chato", who can be found wandering the

[69] Myths linking musicians and the devil or supernatural forces seems to be wide-spread both in contexts in Africa and the Americas; folklorist Alan Lomax found references to the encounters between supernatural beings, devils and musicians both among Blues artists from the Mississippi Delta and as well as with Irish fiddlers (Lomax and Cohen, 2003); Michelle Bigenho investigates how *lucanino* dancers and musicians from Lima in Peru made pacts with the devil (Bigenho, 1991); in Cuba, Lydia Cabrera and Samuel Feijóo collected narrative of the *Regla de Ocha* and *Santeria* tradition which refer how Kainde, a mythical hero, played his guitar to make the devil dance in exchange for opening the roads to allow Kainde's brothers to return from the underworld (Perez, 2004).

roads at night usually dressed as a rich mestizo who is willing to trade money or talent in exchange for their souls.

In anthropology, the best documented of representations associating musicians and the devil belongs to the tradition of jazz and blues musicians from the United States. Versions collected in the field by folklorists and musicologists at the beginning of the 20th century state how black musicians from the Mississippi Delta participated in a ceremonial consisting in attending a lonely crossroad at midnight in order to meet with a limping, shabby old black man who then took the guitar or trumpet carried by the musician, tuned it and played some blues or jazz with it and then returned it to its owner imbued with supernatural power. The latter is a myth familiar to anthropologists and ethnomusicologists (Szwed, 1969; Peretti, 1994; Pavlic, 2002) and is also well-known in popular culture since many blues songs have been written on the topic and some performers have claimed that their own abilities were the result of a pact made with the devil (the most prominent of these Faustian artists was Robert Johnson, the blues singer from the 1930's).

According to Thomas Marvin (1996) Afro-American narratives of musicians looking for the devil at the crossroads are a re-elaboration of a West African mythical cycle associated with Legba or Papa Legba, a protective deity whose origins are in Benin and Nigeria but it is also present in musical and religious traditions of African origin in Brazil, Cuba, Haiti and the United States. Legba is a god who has one foot set in the world of humans and another in the world of spirits which would explain the limp of the old man at the crossroad in the American myth. Legba, both in Africa and in the Americas, is an ambiguous and idiosyncratic figure who can be equally beneficial or harmful and understood to be a trickster with the ability to speak any language, endowed with great sexual potency and metamorphic skills (Pelton, 1989). Once again, Marvin explains that "jazz and blues musicians may be considered 'children' or followers of Legba because they are liminal figures who stand at crossroads

where cultures meet, connecting their listeners with the spirits of ancestors and the lessons of history" (Marvin, 1996; p. 587).

Despite the internal complexities of the myth and the intricacies associated with the context in which it was produced, the image of the devil at the crossroad can be legitimately employed to understand the social, political and ritual life of Mixe musicians as it contains many aspects that are associated with musicians in the Sierra. The myth clearly alludes to the musicians' morally ambiguous status, to the uncertainties derived from carrying on an existence that revolves in the junctures of different social orders, to the coexistence with dangerous physical and metaphysical forces and to the intimate connections between ritual exchange and music. Like their peers in the Mississippi Delta, Mixe musicians are figures who although prestigious and important for the reproduction of society, always maintain a liminal social status that puts them in a strange social position both at the centre and at the margins of social life[70]. Musical performers are seen as individuals who, because of being constantly on the road, develop connections to places considered to be spiritually, politically and socially perilous. Their trade implies passing through crossroads where people can lose their souls, be victims of witchcraft or encounter potentially harmful spirits. Since they are itinerant figures, they constantly trespass and ignore political boundaries which for others are difficult if not impossible to traverse and this is achieved thanks to the power of music.

The image of the crossroad is as fundamental in the context of the musicians of Sierra Mixe as it is for artists from the American South. The crossroad is a figure that alludes both to the moral ambiguity and to the wandering life carried by most Mixe musical performers. Methodologically, the figure of the crossroad allows us to situate the Mixe musicians and bands in terms of a longstanding field of anthropological inquiry on ritual transitions and rites

[70] Here I employ the terms "liminal" and "liminality" as utilised by Victor Turner, who defined "liminality" as "a temporal interface whose properties partially invert those of the already consolidated order which constitutes any specific cultural 'cosmos' (Turner, 1979, p. 37)

of passage that dates to Van Gennep and his ideas on the *territorial passage* and the "magico-religious aspects of crossing frontiers" (Van Gennep, 1977), and that since then was successively re-elaborated by Turner (1978, 1979;) who focused on the role of the liminal phases of the ritual process and by Bloch (1992) who emphasised the internal dynamism and trajectories of rituality .

Mixe musicians are involved in a quotidian crossing of physical, political and even metaphysical borders that is particularly intense given that music bands perform in spaces characterised by great environmental, political and cultural contrasts. Musicians play in cold villages surrounded by cloud-forests in the Highlands as well as in the semi-tropical and tropical *pueblos* of the Mixe Lowlands; they perform in a vast range of urban and rural spaces, from tiny hamlets to head-towns and provincial cities and in great and chaotic megalopolis such as Mexico City or Los Angeles. The spaces in which Mixe music bands are present differ greatly in political terms; Mixe musicians attend to celebrations organised by traditional political authorities (such as the *cambio de autoridades* or renewal of authorities that takes place in January in every Mixe village) but can also be found in civil ceremonies organised, controlled and supervised by the state. Consequently, it is not rare to see a Mixe band playing during Priista rallies in Oaxaca warming-up audiences of peasants and urban *colonos* before the candidates' speeches or to hear them play during the annual *Guelaguetza*, the large folkloric festival organised by the government of the state of Oaxaca.

Mixe musicians are characters familiar with the humble and the exuberant venue; they play in small, domestic *campesino* rituals such as the celebration in which a newborn receives her name and also in communitarian ceremonies such funerals where they play mortuary songs in the processions leading to the cemetery; musicians also take part in massive rituals that gather millions of people such as the annual celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the *Basilica* of Mexico City where Mixe bands play the *mañanitas* for the Virgin and mix up with people

from all kind of Mesoamerican ethnicities. Mixe musicians are frequent attendants at sacred places that belong to the myriad of Mesoamerican, European, American and Mexican traditions that shape the religiosity of peoples in Mexico.

Every year Mixe bands follow an itinerary that takes them from the villages in the Highlands and Midlands to accompany pilgrimages in Mexico City, Veracruz (where they attend to the sanctuary of the *Señor de Otatitlán*, a mainly indigenous gathering) and Guatemala (where they visit the *Señor de Esquipulas*, in the hub that connects Northern and Southern Mesoamerica). Mixe musicians and their bands are assiduous visitors to revered mountains like the Zempoaltepetl where the *ayuuk* communities have some of their most important rituals and they can also be seen performing in sacred places of other peoples such as the Serrano Zapotecs from Albarradas or Cajonos or among the Chinantec and Popolocas from Lowland Oaxaca and Veracruz. Mixe musicians travel with great ease in a ritual and religious geography that is constantly in motion due to the circulation of pilgrims and that far from being static is continuously changing as a result of the incessant appearance of new shrines in sites where miracles have taken place or that house holy objects and effigies (Turner, 1978).

Like other Oaxaqueños who have migrated to northern Mexico (Kearney, 1996; 2004), Mixe musicians have started to move towards the border with the United States. In this route towards the national frontier Mixe itinerant musicians and migrants with musical skills have come in contact with several cultural forms and genres both from Northern Mexico and the American Southwest, such as the brass bands from Sinaloa (strikingly similar in their structure to the bands of the Sierra Mixe), various types of Tex-Mex music and with the omnipresent culture of the *corrido*[71], including the wide-spread *narco-corrido* a popular

[71] The *corrido* is a wide-spread Mexican musical form that, according to two of the most salient scholars on the subject (Héau and Giménez, 2004), is based on the Spanish *Romance*, an octosyllabic verse that usually narrates histories of popular heroes and serves as a form of social critique. The *corrido* is mainly a peasant form of music although exists a robust tradition of urban *corridos*. During the Mexican Revolution the *corrido*

musical form which sings about the deeds, triumphs and misfortunes of drug-smugglers and criminal lords. The recurrent transit to the North has also meant that some Mixe musicians have been incorporated to the industry of *música grupera* (a profitable business which attracts investments from big media companies, independent promoters as well as from illegal organisations linked to drug trafficking) and a few bands from the Sierra have acquired considerable commercial success playing in the endless routes of villages *bailes* and barrio *fiestas* that run across the whole Mexican geography.

The presence of Mixe musicians and bands is not restricted to the popular music scene; Mixe intellectuals, formally educated musicians (the Mixe make a distinction between musicians from "school", *de escuela* and self-taught ones, called *líricos*), teachers from Tlahuitoltepec's conservatory (known as CECCAM) and government officials (usually but not exclusively linked to *indigenista* institutions such as INI or CDI) have made significant efforts to obtain recognition for Mixe music in cultural circles that are more approachable for the urban middle classes. Thus, Mixe bands are regularly invited to music and cultural events organised by federal and state agencies or to assist as emissaries of Oaxaqueño culture to perform in festivals in Mexico and abroad. Philharmonic bands from Tlahuitoltepec, Totontepec and Zacatepec have played in important theatres in different parts of the country, including the *Palacio de Bellas Artes* in Mexico City and they have recorded their music for the musicological collections of INI and INAH (the National Institute of Anthropology and History).

The way in which Mixe bands have entered in academic-anthropological spaces and in cultural circles of educated middle classes and urban elites has an undeniable political component; *indigenista* officials and institutions have made efforts to give visibility to Mixe

was the preferred vehicle used by the mobilised peasantry to narrate the stories of the revolutionary struggle, to the point that became a "metonymic symbol" of peasant struggles (Héau and Giménez, 2004).

music as part of a cultural policy based on the recognition of *culturas populares* or popular cultures (a project envisioned by Mexican nationalist anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil-Batalla) while *Oaxaqueño* elites in need of cultural legitimisation and avid to distinguish themselves from the leadership of Mexico City have found that Mixe bands offer a space for representation imbued with an air of authenticity and tradition[72]. From the Mixe perspective, music bands have been instrumental in giving this indigenous people a space in discourses of local, regional and national identity that is distinct from representations that mechanically associate indigenousness with poverty and backwardness. Nevertheless, we should not think that the success of Mixe bands relies exclusively in terms of politics, Mixe bands are attractive because of their musical quality and many jazz and classical musicians from Mexico and other countries (including Hector Infanzón, a renowned jazz composer, the classic flautist Horacio Franco, the Mexican-American singer Lila Downs as well as by Serbian artist Goran Bregović) have showed great interest in them and have made recording with Mixe bands.

Although musicians are not the only characters of the Sierra Mixe who constantly move and travel from one place to the other (as we have seen throughout this thesis, mobility is an ever-present characteristic of the Mixe people) their journeys are qualitatively different in form from those of peasants, merchants, teachers and other people who for some reason need to move within and outside the Sierra. Unlike migrants whose identities need to be adapted to the rules and rationale that a new place enforces on them, musicians can traverse different social and spatial orders without having to alter, deny or suppress their identity. While the prestigious *ciudadano caracterizado* or the local authority who migrates to the city is prone to end up swallowed by the "mestizo majority" and his identity re-classified as "indigenous"

[72] An example of the interest of regional elites in the bands of the Sierra Mixe is reflected in the involvement of the *Fundación Alfredo Harp Elú* a private foundation headed by Alfredo Harp a banker and businessman from Oaxaca city, who funds different music projects in communities of the Sierra and especially in Tlahuitoltepec.

and then forced to modify if not the totality, at least a considerable part of its own identity, musicians are able gain access to new places precisely because they are (culturally, ethnically, artistically) different from their audiences who expect to witness an exacerbated form of otherness during the musical performances. They are characters who embody a form of otherness that at the same time, is important for establishing cultural continuities between different places, for the distribution of cultural and ideological forms and for the shaping of regional identities. Mixe musicians are not only performers who act as a vehicle for the transmission of particular cultural forms that travel in songs and music pieces, but they are also territorial specialists who have acquired a detailed knowledge of the communities of their own region and of sites beyond it.

Like the "children of Legba", Mixe musicians, have their feet set in different worlds which confers them a privileged standpoint from which to connect multiple spaces, temporalities and forms of existence. They are figures which are constantly traversing boundaries and crossing frontiers that simultaneously divide and connect different social realms. Musicians are familiar both with the solemn and the profane and the same they perform for saints at churches that in carnivalesque celebrations in which the social orders is subverted.

The status of musicians as wanderers and the ambiguity associated with the equally disruptive and ordering forces untied by music implies that they can simultaneously occupy the role of figures of excess and at the same time, be considered solemn religious characters. In the Mixe villages, people regard musicians with deep ambivalence: on the one hand they have a reputation for being drunks and lascivious, negligent as family men and unreliable in the fulfilment of communitarian obligations and on the other, they are considered nearly sacred characters, who are in close contact with saints, gods and spirits. The latter can be better appreciated by looking at the *capillos* who accompany the music bands of each pueblo. *Capillo* is a position within the communitarian hierarchy (usually but not necessarily

occupied by a musician) that lasts for a year and whose function is to assist the band by taking care of the instruments, escorting the musicians during the fiestas and feeding them at certain ceremonies. Although the *capillo* is a relatively minor "office" of the communitarian hierarchy (Valdivia-Dounce, 2010), the fact that it is linked to the music band and to the religious sphere make it a position of considerable reputation and permeated by an aura of sacredness that is reflected in the fact that *capillos* are obliged to abstain from having sexual relationships during the first two weeks of their *servicio.*

Musicians and political authorities

The sacredness surrounding the *bandas filarmónicas* does not exempt musicians from having constant friction with local authorities and with the inhabitants of the communities. During the long and frequent conversations that I had with musicians throughout my research, they regularly talked about the difficulties derived from their condition as wanderer that translated in lacking what many people in the villages consider to be proper jobs (such as carpenter, builder or teacher), of the problems of finding a wife and forming and family and they also made constant references to the great number of musicians who did not have a house of their own and were forced to rely in relatives and friends to have a roof. A large number of musicians were in fact landless peasants who had lost rights over family plots due to their prolonged absences from the *pueblos* and who outside the performances, occupied a relatively marginal place in the local society. Many musicians were alcoholics and teachers in Tlahuitoltepec's conservatory always insisted that the students that played in its band did not drink during the celebrations, something that was difficult to achieve. A good number of my friends, in different periods of their life had made promises to the Virgin to stop drinking and

although they were fond the fiestas many were concerned about the long-term effects of their life style.

Musicians also complained about the demanding ritual life and on the obligations imposed by local authorities and mentions of conflicts between performers and communities came constantly to the surface during our talks. My friend Eleazar, a young musician in his twenties who was also the director of the municipal girl's band of Tlahuitoltepec (a recent innovation since playing music was traditionally an activity reserved to men) made constant references to what he called the "the time of slavery", a period when musicians and especially band directors were forced to remain for years serving in the municipal bands without payment. Images of enslaved musicians were also present in the narratives of many old performers such as Don Abel Vazquez, an elderly music teacher who served as a band conductor in a large number of villages of the Sierra and in other places. According to Don Abel, at least until the late 1980's, musicians were obliged to serve in the municipal bands in every *fiesta* and attend to other towns in order play at their celebrations. While most musicians had to serve in the municipal bands for a year as part of their communitarian service, the majority of directors and music teachers had to remain for an undetermined number years at the service of the *banda filarmónica* and they were provided only with food and a place to live. Old musicians also remembered the difficulties of having to spend days walking to reach other villages carrying their instruments across the mountains at a time in which roads and cars were almost non-inexistent in the Sierra.

Musicians' mentions of "slavery" were particularly strong whenever they evoked memories from the time of the caciques; as mentioned before, the two great political bosses of the Sierra, Daniel Martínez from Ayutla and Luis Rodríguez from Zacatepec realised that controlling the music bands could increase their chance of dominating the Mixe communities. Both Martínez and Rodríguez encouraged the creation of bands in every Mixe village either

by providing instruments or assigning directors and teachers for every musical group. While some band directors volunteered to work in the villages others were forced to relocate or held at gun-point in the pueblos to which they were assigned. The caciques' support for the bands adopted the form of violent and authoritarian patronage aimed to monopolise the organisation of the fiestas and to exercise influence over the ritual life of the villages and their mechanisms of reciprocity.

Music bands can therefore be seen as an indicator of the geopolitical order of the Sierra at the time of the caciques' reign. After Zacatepec defeated Ayutla in the "Mixe War" and became the capital of the Mixe District and the hegemonic town of the Sierra, its band was transformed in the biggest and best of the entire region. In its heyday Zacatepec's philharmonic had more than sixty members and Rodriguez recruited a major Mixe composer Rito Marcelino Rovirosa, to be its conductor and write music for it (before becoming Zacatepec's band conductor Rito was imprisoned by Rodriguez some say for a crime while other think it was to appropriate of Rito's music). The size and quality of the band certainly reflected Rodriguez's ambitious and authoritarian style of exercising power (according to Tlahuitoltepec's musician Mauro Delgado no village was allowed to have a band of the size of Zacatepec's) and the centralising order that he was trying to enforce. In that sense, the formation of Zacatepec's band followed the political rationale that led to the creation of the great cultural symbols of the post-revolutionary state such as the *Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia* in Mexico City, which centralised both in a physical place and in discursive terms, the history of pre-Hispanic and contemporary indigenous peoples.

Although is undeniable that supporting the bands allowed Rodriguez to develop a political instrument that could be easily accommodated to nationalist and *indigenista* discourses (Smith, 2009), the role of encouraging the production of music in the Sierra was more important in terms of reorganising the internal politics of the Mixe region. Rodríguez

certainly was a despotic character who constantly had recourse to violence, but that did not prevent him from understanding the influence of music among the Mixe and realising that constructing a new geopolitical order in the Sierra could not exclusively rely on force, but that it was a task that also required changing the rationale of how people circulated across the Sierra.

Rodriguez' project contemplated transforming his hometown into a centre of pilgrimage for all Mixe communities by making use of the traditional religious fiestas as well as of a new civic calendar of civic ceremonies of nationalist inspiration. The cacique had the greatest band in the region to attract people to Zacatepec and enough henchmen (*pistoleros*) to persuade other villages that his hometown should be the political and cultural centre of the region. The *fiestas* devoted to Zacatepec's patron saint as well as a large number of festivities dedicated to commemorating Mixe "race" and "culture" became occasions in which the towns and villages subject to Luis Rodríguez's rule sent their music bands to affirm their ties with the cacique. Rodriguez' aim was to build a hierarchical relationship between his town and the rest of the Mixe communities and the gathering of music bands became an occasion for the symbolic display of hierarchical relationships established between Zacatepec and the Mixe villages subject to its influence. During the age of caciques, musical performances ceased to be part of a mechanism of reciprocal exchange in which villages visited each other during their major *fiestas* and were transformed into events in which subordinated communities offered a tribute (which included not only music but also offerings of *tepache*, mezcal and coffee) to their ruling lord.

For the caciques, constructing a permanently centralised regime in the Sierra Mixe required controlling the bands and this could only be done by disciplining the musicians. As demonstrated in the second chapter of this thesis, the exercise of authority in the Sierra Mixe consists not as much in having control over a territory but in the ability to attract people to a

centre and to achieve this, music bands are fundamental since they act like magnets pulling people toward important villages and head-towns. We have to bear in mind that for the Mixe power materialises in *fiesta*s capable of gathering people from distant settlements and *rancherias* and that in order to achieve this, is fundamental to guarantee abundant food and good music to listen and dance. Thus, it is not surprising that political bosses were interested in controlling musicians either by peaceful or violent means which included holding them prisoners or forcing them to reside in a certain village to work at the service of the municipal band.

Since the objective of the local bosses was to create a permanent regional elite and restructure the mechanisms of reciprocity in order to reinforce a vertical relationship between rulers and subjects, they could not rely on the patient exercise of persuasion and negotiation that characterises the construction of authority in the Sierra Mixe but it required a considerable degree of force and coercion. Musicians suffered the violence of the caciques as much as much as other people, but the violence directed has to be seen as part of an effort to institutionalise the practice of music and transform the bands into an instrument organically subordinated to the person embodying the authority of the state.

This idea of music bands as a component organically linked to the political power of the caciques is an idea that resulted strange for most people in the Sierra and that musicians considered to be abhorrent. Although musicians are aware of the importance that bands have in the life of their pueblos they do not think of them as a "social institutions" and not even as a constitutive element of Mixe cultural identity. People in the Sierra Mixe (including musicians) generally think of the bands as a social entity provided with an agency of its own, that is important for the social life of the communities and it is imbued with a particular form of power, which nevertheless, is different from the power as exercised by the caciques and of the way in which is conceived under the logic of the state. The latter does not imply that

musicians are indifferent to the social impact of their trade; on the contrary, they (like the rest of the peoples of the Sierra) are aware of the crucial role that music plays in the making of ritual life, of the influence that it exercises on individual and collective bodies and of the importance of the social spaces occupied, created by musical performances. Among the Mixe there is unanimity on the social relevance of music bands and on the power that music has over people. However, the Mixe disagree among themselves in the way in which a powerful force embodied by music should be managed or regulated and here is when tensions between musicians, communities and political authorities arise.

Although tensions between musicians and political authorities are no longer expressed with the violence that characterised the period in which the caciques governed the Sierra, they are still present in everyday life. Despite its potential for social solidarity, music bands are considered to be risky and to some degree, authorities constantly try to extend their control and regulate them. The reasons explaining this need for control is that authorities consider that music bands could be a potential threat both to the community and its individual members.

The following can be better understood by referring to some events that I witnessed during the fiesta in honour of the *Ascención del Señor*, that takes place during the month of May in Tlahuitoltepec. This fiesta is one of the major celebrations of the town and it attracts a large number of people from other communities as well as most of the inhabitants of Tlahui's rancherias who gather at the head-town´s centre. The year I was present, the fiesta looked promising; in the town's plaza there were numerous stalls of itinerant merchants offering all kind of products, a stage was erected in front of the Presidencia Municipal's building to present traditional dances performed by local schoolchildren and which also served as a ring for *lucha libre* (Mexican free wrestling). The municipality also invested a considerable sum of money in fireworks and they even set up a tightrope for the *maromeros*, a type of acrobats

who are extremely popular in the Sierra. However, the main attraction was the four music bands (two from the *municipio*, one from the music conservatory as well as the municipal band from Ayutla) that would perform during the three days of the fiesta. Each band had a *padrino* or *mayordomo*, who sponsored the performances and whose tasks consisted in feeding the musicians for the duration of the fiesta and providing food for the guests. The *padrinos* were all young married men looking to enter in local politics and become *ciudadanos caracterizados*. Some of them had saved money for long periods of time or contracted debts with a large number of friends and relatives who either gave them money, goods (especially cases of soft drinks and beer or firewood) or agreed to work in the preparations of the celebrations.

Although it is expensive and demanding, sponsoring a band in an important fiesta is politically and socially attractive and a significant number of families and individuals have an interest in doing it, to the extent that every year there is a waiting list of men looking to become *padrinos*. Somehow predictably, the men and the families involved in sponsoring the bands all had good political connections and enough resources to carry out the patronage. In some way, the expected political outcome of the fiesta was to reinforce the position of a few influential families and individuals who were already skilful in the matters concerning "el costumbre" (custom) and who had a consolidated network of relationships. Nevertheless, just before the opening of the celebrations news spread around the town there was a fifth band whose *padrinos* were not in the "official" list. The four music groups that were already part of the programme for the fiesta were playing in the basketball court located in the centre of the pueblo while the "new" band was playing outside the *mayordomo's* house in the upper parts of Tlahuitoltepec. The *padrinos* of the four bands at the plaza were unhappy about this as it meant that there was another site attracting visitors and they certainly did not received this unexpected competitor in the race for prestige and connections well. Some of the

padrinos expressed their discontent by saying that it was not safe to have a band playing elsewhere and there would be too many *borrachos* (drunks) wandering the town and outside the vigilant eye of the *topiles*. To make things worse, the band sponsored by the unexpected *padrinos* was the *Banda Región Mixe* or *BRM*, formed by musicians who played traditional Mixe songs combined with ska and punk music and so a considerable number of the youngsters went to listen to this band. Despite their discontent, they could not forbid the band from playing and during the last day of the fiesta they had to let the *BRM* play in the centre of the town accompanied by their *padrinos* who from that moment onwards, were recognised as full members of the community and allowed to compete for positions in the local hierarchy. By drawing on the band, the family had entered into the arena of politics; they have created their own space for extending relationships and were competing for power with the rest of the *padrinos.*

The sudden appearance of a fifth band during the fiesta illustrates the diffuse and dispersed way in which power is distributed, demonstrates the decentralised nature of Mixe ritual, its flexibility as well as the (failed) attempts of powerful individuals to control and monopolise the social force of the bands. Nevertheless, music bands have demonstrated that they have a considerable degree of resistance to the controlling efforts of authorities and they have always tried to maintain a certain degree of autonomy from political powers. Such autonomy has widened thanks to the surge of a vigorous industry of rural Mexican music, access to computers, cheap and efficient technologies to produce recordings and to the expansion of routes of migration. The bands are linked to the political and ritual life of the community but they constitute a relative autonomous space. Musicians who play in the municipal bands are not obliged to contribute with tequio as their performances are regarded as a valuable contribution to communitarian life and they also have their own authorities (the *capillos*) and

conscientiously defend their own space. Thus, the relationship between local authorities and musicians is always subject to an imbalance.

The power of the band: musicians and music in the formation of Mixe communities

Whenever I asked people in the communities about the reasons that explained the importance of bands, the response I obtained was always the same: "without music there is no fiesta". The latter is not a self-evident observation on the fact that in order to be successful, a fiesta requires of having (good) music but rather, it is a statement that reveals a profound notion on how society is organised and on the social role of musicians. For the Mixe, music is the vehicle that allows the community to emerge and renovate itself and one of the mechanisms that permits to those who are dispersed in the mountains to approach the village centre and re-establish their links to others.

Mixe bands create a *soundscape*[73] capable of fostering "a sense of community and belonging and shape the worldviews of their hearers" (Boivin, 2007). At the same time bands allow the emergence of pre-established cultural patterns and to consolidate the rhythm of communitarian life; they create a space for conviviality that permits the extension of social relationships, to bring people back from the relative isolation of the *rancheria* and construct links of solidarity that go beyond the sphere of nuclear and extended families. Here I think it is necessary to insist that musical performances are not considered celebratory moments of an already constituted society but the very moment in which society comes to be. As it was

[73] I use the term "soundscape" following Jo Tacchi's definition, which states "soundscape is fairly commonly used in discussion of music and more general sounds. Its definition (although not its invention) as the sonic environment consisting of both natural and human-made sounds is generally attributed to Murray Schafer " (Tacchi in Askew and Wilk, 2002, p. 256)

mentioned in chapter two, musicians use a phrase in Mixe language, *agüük jotjuk*, to describe the open, joyful and harmonious space that the fiesta is supposed to create but it also indicates a transitional moment, when people come out from relative seclusion and become members of a wider community, marking the moment when they effectively become *ayuukhai* or persons linked by ties forged through reciprocal exchange.

Musicians are charged with power precisely because they make possible the temporary cessation of dispersal; music acts like a gravitational force, attracting people from distant rancherias to head-town centres. This transit from relative isolation to communitarian life constitutes one of the most important moments in the life of the Mixe. Although the alternation between separation and gathering is subject to constant repetition, such moments generate great expectations as they are full of risks and need to be properly conducted in order to be successful. The moment of the fiesta, when the community effectively comes into being is a sacred time when an an authentic rite of passage takes place. Musical performances mark the very instant in which communities are born; it is a movement towards the transcendental (Bloch, 1992) that follows the same sequence of separation, liminality and aggregation of other rituals (Van Gennep, 2004; Turner, 1969). In the case of the Mixe, the ritual trajectory leading to the constitution of the community is the same as the physical route followed by the people who either ascend from *tierra caliente* or come down from the highest parts of the mountains to attend to the plaza of the town where the bands gather. Attending to the fiesta from a distant hamlet implies making a pilgrimage, and following a course that becomes increasingly sacred and charged with power. During fiesta days, in any Mixe town, one can sit at a high point and observe how roads and pathways became filled with tiny groups of people walking to the centre, dressed in galant clothes and often carrying flowers and other objects that will be left as offerings in different sacred spots. These treks typically entail visiting sanctuaries, chapels and sacred sites distributed along the road, where people

ask for protection, make promises to deities in exchange for gifts. On their arrival at the villages, visitors generally attend to the Catholic Church, where they thank the saints for arriving safely and then go to the plaza (or the basket-ball court which in many Mixe villages act as the main meeting point) and listen to the music played by bands.

The order of the fiesta is marked by the itineraries of the music bands. Celebrations typically begin with the first daylight, when the municipal band of the host village gathers a the church´s front to play the first pieces of the day while accompanied by some of the local authorities including the *capillos* and elders, who pray and drop mezcal at the temple´s entrance. Following this inaugural operation, the band then makes a "ceremonial circuit" (Torres-Cisneros, 2000) which in some cases includes visiting sanctuaries distributed in different parts of the head-town[74] and only then they head to the main square or basketball court. The first day of the fiesta (also known as *víspera*) is when the host musical group receives the bands from other villages marking the actual opening of the celebrations. From that point onwards, the fiesta will increase in intensity along with the music. During the day the bands play long, calm pieces which are heard by the people who gather slowly in the main square listening quietly to the music. These performances can extend for five or six hours and sometimes are used to release pieces composed by musicians from different villages. As the night falls, music goes *in crescendo* and the bands start playing *sones*, *jarabes* and *pasodoble* (the traditional musical forms of the Sierra) and the audience already fuelled with beer and mezcal starts to dance.

[74] In his ethnography of the fiesta of the Señor de Alotepec in the town of the same name, Torres-Cisneros (2000) suggests that the route followed by the band reproduces a typically Mesoamerican representation of the cosmos, formed by a square route symbolising four cosmic corners. (Lopez Austin, 1984; 1993). My own information does not confirm such assertion and neither the testimony of informants in Tlahuitoltepec, Tamazulapam, Totontepec and Cotzocon. Although I did not attend Alotepec's celebration, I think a cautious note should be taken in regard to Torres-Cisneros´ ethnographic data, as it is heavily influenced by an attempt to demonstrate that Mixe cosmology is structurally similar to an ideal Mesoamerican cosmological model.

At the beginning, the dance develops timidly and is carefully choreographed; the first pieces are reserved for elderly men who follow some pre-established routines and then dance in couples holding hands, afterwards comes the turn of women who also perform in an ordered way and dance only among themselves. This separation between genders lasts for a couple of hours and then the musicians start playing to a faster rhythm and men and women begin to intermingle. The way in which the fiesta develops, its choreography and the "rhythm of ritualisation" depend almost entirely on the band. Musicians set the pace of the celebration and the intensity of physical and emotional contact between people. As the night progresses, musicians will play in a more daring, humoresque and aggressive way. Combined with alcoholic drinks, music creates a frenetic environment which makes people open and uninhibited and enables them to occupy the centre of the celebration while the authorities are relegated to a silent position as spectators or they become incorporated as any other member of the audience.

The latter is an important point to bear in mind as most people in the Sierra Mixe consider that the fiesta (and especially dancing) together with tequio are fundamental for creating equal relationships among people. Dancing and music erase (even if only momentarily) the everyday patterns through which hierarchical distinctions of gender, age and political difference are established; children dance with their elders, young men and women who in daily life are reserved and wary of being observed mingle and allow themselves to seduce and be seduced. The bands make it possible for people who are at odds with each other to reconcile and allows strangers to meet. Music generates the fundamental space for extending social relationships, by "opening" the bodies of people and interweaving them (almost in a literal sense) through dance.

Music and dancing are seen as vehicles for the creation of a type of identity that runs independently of language, history or geographic origin. This is significant for a place like

the Sierra Mixe, where enormous differences in language and dialects exist and where the geography challenges the possibilities of communication between villages. The music played by the Mixe allows a non-linguistic type of contact that permits the creation of social bonds without the need of homogenising culture or eliminating all differences. It is a type of ritual that does not impose anything on people except for the music itself.

Like many other pueblos, those of the Sierra Mixe are centred on ritual, but it is a peculiar type of rite since it is mostly accompanied by music and the latter is a practice incapable of creating hegemony or any kind of permanent order; music is a temporal form of power in which no domination exists, its only social strength lies in enchantment and magnetism. Because of its dependency on music, Mixe ritual contrasts vividly with rites based on oral and written language. The latter are much more rigidly structured than musical rituals and therefore, they are prone to produce more rigid and hegemonic social messages and more strict modalities of hierarchy, while music can create spaces with looser or "softer" messages and a more tenuous presence of authority.

The core of Mixe ritual is a loud one and at times it can be cacophonous. The music of Mixe bands can be beautiful, calm and moving (especially when played in funerals) but during the fiesta it acquires a certain roughness, a type of intensity that can only be produced by dozens of indigenous peasants playing tubas, trumpets and banging to cymbals and drums. It creates a space and a moment where there is no room for priests and their sermons, for *Priista* politicians and their speeches on revolution and democracy, for moral discourses of elders and *ciudadanos caracterizados* an not even for the secretive whispers of the *curanderos.* There is not even place for a language and consequently, it allows people of different idioms and cultural traditions to coexist and establish affective bounds. Musicians were generally aware of this non-linguistic aspect of their practice. One of my main informants Don Abel Vázquez, was always eager to assert how easy it was for him to establish and teach music in

Chinantec, Zapotec and Spanish speaking *pueblos*. Don Abel, like other musicians, was deeply sceptic of communicating language through written means. According to Abel´s own words "it is only necessary to learn to sing the notes in order to learn a language. That is why we the Mixe can speak other languages easily. In all my years teaching music I never had to write anything, plus it is has been scientifically proved that the Mixe [language] does not fit in writing [*está comprobado científicamente que el Mixe no cabe en la letra*].

By themselves, musical performances do not assert any type of authority and this aspect should be unashamedly remarked, as in the Mesoamerican context there has been a tendency to consider that most rituals ultimately serve to reinforce vertical forms of authority and power or that they acts as representations of the"cargo-system", imagined as an integrated and total normative structure (Reifler-Bricker, 1981). This status of music as a non-hegemonic social force has not remained unnoticed to the holders of political power in the Sierra. In various moments of history and through different strategies, the Catholic Church, the Mexican state (via the caciques) as well as local and traditional authorities (*servicios, ciudadanos caracterizados* and communal assemblies*)* had showed considerable interest in regulating the role of bands. They all had sought to exercise control over the magnetic force of music and for that purpose, they have recurred to patronage and persuasion as well as to violence and coercion. That different types of authorities and institutions have been keen on regulating musical performances should not come as a surprise, since the Sierra is a region where power basically consists in the capacity to mobilise and draw people from the periphery to the centre.

Music bands are instrumental in creating the community, but their capacity to achieve this does not reside in having a normalising or structuring power but in their capacity to generate the *communitas* (Turner, 1978); bands create a space of non-hierarchical conviviality and identification that embodies the "liminal phase" of the ritual and displays a twofold operation

which both erodes and reasserts social order and political hierarchy. The latter explains why musicians although socially important, never lose their ambiguous moral status. Music and the fiesta in general are considered to be forces that when properly conducted, serve to expand relationships within and between villages, reinforcing the power of and prestige of authorities; but, at the same, the force of celebrations (conducted through music) also entails a clear and present danger as they can also diffuse and undermine such power. Local authorities often see the emergence of bands in rancherias as an indication of a possible secession or as a sign that a rancheria is trying to develop their own rituality while abandoning those celebrations held at the head-towns, but at the same time, those authorities are also aware that the gathering of bands (usually called "guelaguetza" a Zapotec term) from different villages and rancherias allows expanding relationships beyond a single community and that they are a vehicle to create reciprocal links with other pueblos.

Relationships between communities, authorities and musicians is therefore, occur within an environment marked by a continuous interplay between negotiation and coercion; in every Mixe village it is possible to hear stories on the voracity of musicians, of how the will eat everything in the house of the unfortunate *padrinos* who will end up bankrupted after sponsoring a band[75], of their insatiable drinking habits, of the manner in which they chase women when they visit other villages and even of their laziness and inability to do proper male tasks such as building houses or cultivating land. But, at the same time, no Mixe will dare to disrespect a musician and they certainly enjoy a type of immunity during the fiestas since, no matter how drunk they or the audience can be, they are rarely are assaulted.

When I was collecting narratives on the caciques, locals referred to the fact that even during the bloodiest conflicts between Mixe villages, music bands were spared from ambushes and

[75] In some villages Mixtecos of Oaxaca and Puebla (where music bands are also important) there is a large plate served with chicken, beans, salad, totopos (fried tortillas) and cheese is called "plato de musico" or "musicians plate" (Juan Mario Perez, personal communication).

musicians were the only people that could go to enemy villages or move safely across the mountains. People certainly complain about musicians' morality, but almost in every family there is someone that plays music and parents make considerable efforts to buy instruments for their children and encourage them to attend to the local *escoletas* or to Tlahuitoltepec's conservatory.

Music is an omnipresent locus of the Mixe society and its presence is vital in the constant reshaping of the political order of the Sierra. The way in which bands move across the region and the rationale of their itineraries allows to create centres of power that are impermanent, subject to regular change and that do not last for long periods of time. Music bands are instrumental in forging and reinforcing a territorial rationale that is radically different from that of the national geography (i.e. the geography of the state) in which relationships between centre and periphery are fixed and cannot be changed without modifying the normative order that constitutes them.

Thus, many fiestas in the Mixe region have acquired considerable prestige only because of the quality of their bands; small villages with no roads, poor infrastructure and with no apparent economic or political importance, are visited in large numbers by people from other communities due to the prestige of local band or because having good relationships with their neighbours, certainly villages are able to gather bands from different pueblos during their communitarian celebrations. A fiesta with a single band might be a good one, but those communities who manage to attract many different bands can claim to have the greatest celebrations of the region. In a similar note, villages whose importance have diminished or are in crisis usually reflect the decay in their bands. In the Sierra Mixe, there is identity between social process and music bands, they are related in such a way that one cannot be understood without other. Social process on the other hand always corresponds with a territorial process entailing both a tension and an alternation between centrifugal and

centripetal forces in which the participation of music bands is fundamental. Without musicians and their great brass bands moving throughout the roads and paths of the Sierra, the social and political geography will probably become more static and the Mixe mountains would probably lose its metamorphic and shifting qualities. Musicians and *bandas filarmónicas*, act as a force to congregate people and serve as a catalyst that allows putting other practices in motion. Nevertheless, bands' ability to attract and gather people cannot be endlessly maintained. At some point the music needs to cease and the fiesta has to come to an end; to perpetuate any of them would be inconceivable and its effects destructive. The end of the fiesta puts a stop to the *communitas*, concluding the liminal condition in which the fiestas' participants has been submerged during three or four days.

Thus, the conclusion of the celebrations marks the beginning of a new cycle of dispersal. After the last notes are heard, people will start the journey back home, heading to another village or traversing tenuous paths leading to lonely hamlet in the midst of the forest, but the departure does not imply a rupture as people has already created or renovated ties. They have established bonds of obligations with relatives and friends, made compromises for the future and have attended to church or to a sanctuary to make promises to a saint or another divinity. People have eaten the food offered by their hosts during the fiesta and they have given and received gifts. In sum, they have become *ayuuk*, individuals who have transcended themselves and are now connected to others regardless if those others speak the same language or dialect, if they live in *tierra fría* or *tierra caliente*, if they are similar or not. At this point it is worth citing Maurice Bloch at length, who has given thought to the an important phase of ritual, which he identifies as the "return". According to this author:

> "In the return, the transcendental is not left behind but continues to be attached to those who made the initial move in its direction; its value is not negated. Secondly, the return to the here and now is really a conquest of the here and now by the transcendental […] The return is therefore a conquest of the kind of thing

> which had been abandoned, but as if to mark the difference between the going and the coming back, the actual identity of the vital here and now is altered. Vitality is regained but it is not the home-grown which was discarded in the first part of the ritual that is regained, but, instead, a conquered vitality obtained from *outside* beings, usually animals, but sometimes plants, other peoples or women" (Bloch 1992; p. 5).

Among Mixe villagers, the return from the fiesta is formally marked by the bands as in other faces of the ritual. Celebrations normally conclude with the *Despedida de las bandas* or "Farewell of the Bands", the moment when the visiting musical groups return to their pueblos. During this ceremony, the authorities of the community hosting the fiesta address the musicians and express their gratitude for attending the village celebrations, they are blessed together with the *padrinos* who made possible the visiting. The *padrinos* are given a cross made of weaved palm, flowers, candles and sometimes are offered cases of beer as compensation for their expenses. Those objects generally are used to embellish the small shrines that most villagers keep at home. The beer is usually distributed among those who helped the *padrinos* preparing the celebration or are kept until the next fiesta. Meanwhile, bands gather to play for a last time at the plaza; afterwards each of the visiting bands march towards the boundaries of the community, sometimes accompanied by fellow villagers who also return to their places of origin and disperse until any sight of them is lost and the music fades in the immensity of the mountains.

Musicians and dancing women during the fiesta dedicated to the Señor de la Ascención in Tlahuitoltepec

Conclusion

The main purpose of this thesis was to describe and understand the spatiality of the Mixe and, at the same, to maintain an eye on the tensions produced by the long-standing relationship between the hierarchical forms of the Mexican state and the horizontal and decentralised political forms of the Mixe. Throughout this thesis, I been trying to conciliate and propitiate an anthropological dialogue between politics, space and the histories of Mixe communities. The work presented here does not pretend to solve major theoretical problems or to write and exhaustive monograph on the Mixe of Oaxaca, although there is a serious effort to contribute both to anthropological theory and to the ethnography of Mesoamerican indigenous peoples.

The Sierra Mixe of Oaxaca constitutes an exciting field for ethnographic work and theoretical reflection, full of possibilities and still awaiting for a larger body of anthropological literature capable of giving account of the complexities of the region. To advance in this task, it is necessary to build a more solid corpus of ethnographic documentation on Mixe communities, a type of work that necessarily requires making an effort to develop new theoretical strategies. In that sense, this thesis does not escapes to theoretical and ethnographic limitations, however, I consider that the work presented in these pages, provides some robust ethnographic materials as well as a serious theoretical reflexion.

Materials on the milpa, rituals to the ancestors, mythical narratives on Kong'oy and a considerable part of the material on caciques, maestros and musicians are elements relatively unknown to previous ethnographers of the Sierra. Although agricultural rituals, myths and data on fiestas and hierarchy are mentioned and registered in the majority of the ethnographies of the Mixe, the traditional treatment of these is sometimes superficial. In most cases, ethnographers regarded Mixe life as a typical expression of Mesoamerican features, a

confirmation that the Mixe were simply another part of the larger cultural and religious tradition of Mesoamerica which had the effect of hiding significant aspects of Mixe life.

While my own ethnographic data and analysis does not exhausts any of the subjects and themes explored (on the contrary, there is plenty of room for a large ethnographic literature on the Sierra Mixe), I consider that that the research makes an contribution to understand the particularities of the region, but also provides a route to understand Mesoamerican traditions from a perspective different from that of classic historical and ethnographic models. Throughout the thesis, I have attempted to depict the life of the Mixe in terms that are different from those employed by traditional or dominant views. This search for originality is not gratuitous and there is no intention to be revisionist for the sake of it, but a legitimate intention to highlight that, in order to understand Mixe communities, it is necessary a critique of previous anthropological paradigms.

Risking being over-repetitive, I think important to insist in that the Mixe have a history and a present that cannot be fully understood from the viewpoint of the epistemological, cultural and political traditions of the State. I hope that the preceding chapters will persuade the reader of the solidity of my claim on the non-hierarchical and horizontal character of Mixe. I hope to demonstrate as well, that the Sierra Mixe can be an important field of research not because of its exceptional character, but because its study reveals crucial aspects of Mesoamerican indigenous peoples that remain unseen.

This thesis also seeks to establish some degree of dialogue between the field of Mesoamerican and Mexican studies with anthropologies from other latitudes. Due to a combination of multiple factors, Mesoamerican anthropology has developed in relative isolation, concerned mainly with internal cross-comparison and relying mostly in its own theoretical literature. Thus, I consider that there is merit in the attempt developed through

these pages to rethink classic Mesoamerican problems under the light of theoretical perspectives developed in and for other societies. The literature cited throughout the chapters and especially the works of Edmund Leach and Pierre Clastres offer sophisticated theoretical insights and valuable ethnographic points of reference for the Mesoamericanist. Leach's ideas on oscillation and hierarchical transformation guide much of my own work on fiestas, places and rituals; while Clastre's concept of *societies against the state* has oriented my approach to hierarchy, political contradiction an on the nature of the Mixe political space. The thesis also owes a great debt to the work of ethnographers and anthropologists of space and landscape (and in the case of Tilley, to the archaeology of landscape). However, this dissertation is not a piece on landscape anthropology and while I am aware that many descriptions do not make entire justice to the Sierra's impressive scenery, I have chosen to privilege the sociological and political aspects of the relationship of the Mixe with their space.

Another important aspect that should be remarked is the attempt to overcome the false alternative that leads Mesoamerican researchers to portray indigenous practices in essentialist terms, as closed systems that reproduce themselves with complete autonomy or by contrast, to depict local histories and stories as reactions or by-products of processes located outside the reach of local actors. This thesis runs against the reification of community and ethnicity that characterises much of Mesoamerican anthropology. In that sense, it is important to insist on the processual and open-ended nature of Mixe socialities. I think the information provided on ritual, politics and the processual character of power and politics, will contribute to a less rigid and essentialist understanding of identities in the Sierra Mixe. The exploration of the way in which villagers in the Sierra Mixe understand the categories *ayuuk* and *agäät* reveals a relational understanding of person and community that has little resemblance with visions that depict Mesoamerican identities as firmly rooted in history, language and ethnicity.

Such dichotomy has prevailed for a long time both in the anthropology of Mesoamerica and Mexico. The study of Mexican indigenous peoples has been characterised by a proclivity to produce dense and static images with little room for contradiction, asymmetry or uncertainty. There has been a predisposition to portray the worldviews and the social forms of Mesoamerican peoples as ordered and coherent structures that only become modified when an external actor disrupts them. The fact that, for example, Malinowski and De la Fuente's early study on the dynamics of the markets of Oaxaca was rapidly condemned to oblivion by anthropologists of Mesoamerica should not come as a surprise. The latter alluded to fluidity of exchange and it emphasised the contact between indigenous and mestizo societies, contradicting the still and closed images of the models of Redfield, Aguirre Beltran and Wolf that dominated the discipline.

The influence of linguistic and Levy-Straussian structuralism in the anthropology of Mesoamerica did not help to modify this tendency to stillness. Alfredo Lopez-Austin's view of Mesoamerican cosmology (Lopez-Austin, 1980) as an ordered totality characterised by symmetric dualism and the harmonious correspondence between oppositional categories (such as cold/hot, day/night, feminine/masculine) became orthodoxy. As a result of this, a considerable part of the research on indigenous peoples has been directed to confirm the presence of a great cosmological and political Mesoamerican system among every indigenous group.

In contrast, this study calls into question the validity and convenience of relying on general models that obscure the specificities of the space in which people live as well as the particularities of their histories. In my opinion what this research exhibits is the urgent need of a revision of Mesoamerican studies similar to that undertaken by Amazonists where scholars have "moved away from efforts to classify the entirety of Amazonia towards efforts to understand distinct Amazonian groups on their own individual terms" (Rueda, 2004, p. 56).

Although this may appear as a call to renounce to produce theories of general application and to the further atomisation of a discipline already fragmented, I think it is a necessary to take critical stance on grand theories in order to re-think how exchange, continuity and communication is possible in a milieu whose main characteristic is its cultural, social political and environmental diversity.

What is contained in the previous chapters needs to be understood as an attempt not only to see how different political histories intervene in the production of a society but to see how a society incorporates difference, variation and uncertainty to its everyday life. The oscillation between hierarchical models and the interplay between centrifugal and centripetal forces that distinguish the life of the Mixe proves that their social organisation is marked by tension and contradiction (just like any other society) but instability and contradiction, far from being something that the Mixe reject, is seen as a basic component of their intellectual and social life. Among the Mixe, homeostasis is not necessarily considered to have an intrinsic value while the urge to maintain order and a form of stable authority capable of guaranteeing the continued stability of the social body has been mainly an objective of the state and of local elites fostered by post-revolutionary regimes.

By taking a processual look to the spatial politics of the Sierra Mixe is possible to see the relevance that oscillation, flow and transformation have in shaping social life and, at the same time, to reconsider the nature of hierarchy.

While the inhabitants of Mixe communities are concerned with keeping the internal order of their villages and maintain harmonious relationships with neighbours (both Mixe and non-Mixe) it is clear that in cosmology and political system there is space for ambiguity, uncertainty and for the continuous transformation of individuals and communities. Mixe spaces, as I think the previous chapters illustrate, have plastic almost, liquid quality that allow

a great flexibility in their social, cultural and even ontological order. The way in which different communities of creatures and beings (people, plants and animals, spirits and ancestors) relate to each other, is not simply animism While it is true that the uncertainty and instability that characterise the region are a source of social anxiety, they are also the elements that allow to the Mixe to create relationships of great flexibility and incorporate elements that are strange to their culture with relative easiness. The Mixe view of the world as multi-centred and their rejection of centralisation and homogenisation (either of culture, politics or knowledge) is a fundamental instrument for constructing social relationships in a place where diversity is an ever-present feature. It is also a key to understand the recent political history not only of the Mixe, but of many other indigenous groups both in Oaxaca and Mexico who have centred their struggles in gaining autonomy and guaranteeing their right to difference.

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