

# EQUAL IN DIGNITY AND RIGHTS: THE STRUGGLE OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF THE AMERICAS IN AN AGE OF MIGRATION

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Rector Magnifice, Members of the Curatorium of the *Prince Claus Chair in Development and Equity*, Your Royal Highnesses, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

### INTRODUCTION

“An awareness of one’s own cultural identity and past is a fundamental condition for sustainable autonomous development.” With this observation Prince Claus of The Netherlands made a crucial link between cultural identity and development as an autonomous process. In this hour I shall attempt to explore certain implications of that link, while focusing on the dialectics of home and migration. Cultural identity, as we know, is individual –for indigenous Americans determined by our “ombligo” (umbilical cord)- as well as collective. It is, particularly, in the latter respect that the “Confession” of article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights –All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights- appears to touch upon serious constraints in implementation.

Indeed, the “Decade of the World’s Indigenous Peoples” came to an end without much fanfare in December 2004.<sup>1</sup> The more than 370 millions indigenous peoples throughout the world have expressed their concern about how little progress has been made with respect to the adoption of the draft declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples. Only two articles out of forty-five had been adopted so far at first reading, even though the U.N. General Assembly had called for its adoption before the end of the decade of indigenous peoples. The two

articles that have been adopted referred to individual rights — to the right of indigenous peoples to be recognized as citizens of their country, and to the equality between men and women, but the other 43 articles, that referred to indigenous peoples as collective actors have met with tremendous resistance on the part of nation-states. The most controversial articles are the ones that referred to self-determination and the right of indigenous peoples to control the natural resources within their territories.

Indigenous communities in the Americas and in other parts of the world are still wondering what happened with the generous intentions of the declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples. What happened with the promise that “indigenous peoples are equal in dignity and rights to all other peoples, while recognizing the rights of all peoples to be different, to consider themselves different, and to be respected as such.”<sup>2</sup> Why the lack of will on the part of the nation-states members of the U.N. General Assembly to adopt the declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples. Indeed, if agreed upon it would stand beside the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, marking a turning point for indigenous peoples. In order to answer this question we may need to start by asking another even more basic set of questions — What are indigenous rights anyway? Are these rights, as they are articulated by indigenous peoples’ claims, contained in the same conceptual framework as the representatives of Western democracies in the U.N. understand them? If contemporary liberal legal and political thought presents itself as a universal idiom by providing the conceptual foundations of international and comparative law for understanding and reflecting upon social, legal and political relations at the global level, where does this leave indigenous political thought and indigenous understanding of their rights to land, culture and self-rule?<sup>3</sup> It is true that the intentions of proposals such as the draft declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples are to contribute to a future in which indigenous communities no longer suffer the consequences of colonization, dispossession and forced assimilation. But the questions still remain; can liberal democracy become genuinely intercultural and incorporate the thoughts and visions of indigenous peoples?

These questions do not arise in a vacuum since they describe the current context of the uneven power relationship between western colonial nation-states and the continuation and resistance of pre-existing indigenous societies on the same territory. Hence, these are not

issues of mere academic interest, since they touch upon historically entrenched injustice and social disadvantage. Ultimately, they concern the very survival of indigenous peoples on this planet. Such issues should concern any reflective citizen of a contemporary nation state.

It is true that indigenous peoples in the Americas face tremendous challenges for their own survival. However, in spite of centuries of poverty, discrimination and genocide indigenous communities are no longer the passive victims of exploitative conditions, and have now become actors of social change. No longer able or willing to wait for the nation-states to deliver on the long awaited promised of universal human rights, equality before the law, and individual and collective freedom (since these nations states are the ones which have denied such entitlements to indigenous peoples), indigenous communities are experimenting with new ways of being autonomous in practice since the legal framework has yet to be worked out in the international institutions in the next coming years if not decades.

Assessing the practical meaning of Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - "equal in dignity and rights"- for the indigenous peoples of the Americas one might, with a slight alteration, refer to the irony of Prince Claus: when reality fails us, we always have recourse to words. Yet, even the debate about the international legal framework regarding the rights of indigenous peoples has lagged behind among both nations-states and indigenous communities in the continent. In practice, however, indigenous communities have adapted traditional practices to the process of globalization to fight for their rights and their own survival. This is especially the case of indigenous communities who have experienced the process of dispersal due to international migration. The presence of large numbers of indigenous peoples outside their traditional homelands posed some serious questions about indigenous identity, issues of citizenship and territoriality of indigenous communities. As I will try to explain in detail, indigenous communities in the Americas have transformed something that appeared to be threatening their own existence (the process of depopulation due to international migration), into a source of strength and renewal. I will now explore in detail this issue using the case of indigenous peoples of Mexico who have migrated in great numbers to the major urban centers within the country in the last fifty years and to the United States in substantial numbers at least since the mid-1980s.

## **INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN THE AMERICAS**

The past and the future of many Latin American nations can be seen in the faces of the tens of thousands of indigenous people who each year set out on their journey to the capital cities of their countries, as well as the many others who decide to settle in countless communities within the United States and Canada. To study the struggles of indigenous peoples living outside their homelands today requires a transnational lens, taking into account basic changes in the way Latin American societies are understood as the twenty-first century begins. On the one hand, many countries in Latin American such as Mexico, El Salvador, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, to name just a few, are increasingly recognized to be nations of migrants, a societies whose fates are intimately linked with the economies and cultures where their diasporas currently resides. On the other hand, the experiences specific to indigenous migrants require an understanding of Latin American as formed by multi-ethnic societies in which basic questions of indigenous rights are finally on their national agenda but remain fundamentally unresolved.

However, the future projected by Latin America's dominant economic model has little place for indigenous peoples other than their joining the urban and agro-export workforce. Because the majority of Latin America's indigenous population depends on agriculture, their livelihood prospects are highly sensitive to governmental policies toward that sector. Two decades ago, the governments of Latin America's abandoned their previously on-again/off-again commitment to make family farming economically viable.<sup>4</sup> Since the 1980s, peasant agriculture became a target of welfare policy rather than production support, a shift that weakened the economic base of indigenous communities. As a consequence of these policies, according to official figures, poverty worsened in 30 percent of the predominantly indigenous communities throughout the continent between 1990 and 2002. The long-term crisis of the peasant economy has been exacerbated in recent years by the persistent collapse of the international price of coffee, which is the principal cash crop for many of Latin America's indigenous farmers.

Since implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the government's rural development strategy has been based on the assumption that a large proportion of the rural poor would move either to Latin America's larger cities or to the United States. Indeed, Mexico City's population of urban Indians in the hemisphere is officially estimated by the city government at half a million in the Federal District and one million in the greater metropolitan area.<sup>5</sup>

Indigenous migrants find themselves excluded — economically, socially, and politically—as migrants and as indigenous people in their countries of origin and the places of destiny. Economically, they work in ethnically segmented labor markets that relegate them to the bottom rungs. In the social sphere, in addition to the well-known set of obstacles that confront cross-border migrants, especially those without documentation, they also face entrenched racist attitudes and discrimination from other mestizo populations as well as from the dominant white society in North America.

In the civic-political arena, most cross-border indigenous migrants are excluded from full citizenship rights in the places where they reside. For example, on the one hand, the U.S. government resists proposals to regularize the status of millions of workers. On the other hand, by 2003 the Mexican government had yet to comply either with the 1996 constitutional reform that recognized migrants' right to vote or with the 1996 San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture, which had promised a modest form of indigenous autonomy. In addition, lack of effective absentee ballot provisions also prevents many migrants within Mexico from voting. In the less tangible arena of the dominant national political culture, both indigenous peoples and migrants have long been seen, especially by Latin America's political elites, as less than full citizens—a powerful historical inheritance that only began to change substantially by the mid-1990s as a consequence of the increasing massive mobilizations by indigenous peoples in the region. Indigenous peoples of the Americas bring with them a wide range of experiences with collective action for community development, social justice, and political democratization, and these repertoires influence their decisions about who to work with and how to build their own organizations whatever they happened to be.

## REFRAMING MEXICAN MIGRATION AS A MULTI-ETHNIC PROCESS

The case of Mexico's indigenous peoples, the largest in the hemisphere with approximately one-quarter of the Indians in the Americas as a whole, is of primary importance to understand larger trends in the continent's indigenous population. In terms of the relative sizes of national indigenous populations in Latin America, Mexico is followed by Peru, Guatemala, Bolivia, and Ecuador. Mexico's national indigenous population at 12 million, who speak 85 different languages, represent in relative terms, at least 13 percent of the Mexican population, according to the government's relatively strict criterion of indigenous language use (though the most recent national census allows for ethnic self-identification for the first time). In other words, despite five centuries of pressure to assimilate, at least one in ten Mexicans reports to their national census that an indigenous language is spoken in their household.<sup>6</sup> This trend in the growth of indigenous population is occurring in Peru, Guatemala, Bolivia, and Ecuador as well.

Indigenous Mexican migration does not correlate with the size of the indigenous populations. Until recently, Mexico's two largest indigenous ethno linguistic groups, the Nahuatl and the Maya, did not tend to cross the border in large numbers.<sup>7</sup> Even within the state of Oaxaca, there is no direct correlation between the lowest-income municipalities and those with the most out-migration. In contrast to the predominance of Oaxacans among migrants to Baja California and the United States, the groups with the largest presence in Mexico City are of Nahuatl and Hñahñu (Otomí) origin, representing approximately 27 percent and 17 percent, respectively. However, as the economic and social dynamics that encourage migration spread more deeply throughout the Mexican countryside, indigenous peoples who did not have a history of migration outside of their regions are coming to the United States. For example, Mayans from Yucatán and Chiapas are now working in California and Texas, both Hñahñus and Nahuas from central Mexico are coming to the Midwest and Texas, and Mixtecs from Puebla are settling in the New York area, followed more recently by Hñahñus from neighboring Veracruz. Mixtecs and Nahuas are also coming to the United States from Guerrero, a Mexican state whose migration patterns have received little research attention so far. As newer arrivals coming with different traditions of community organization back home,

these indigenous migrants have experiences that differ from those of the Oaxacans. To improve our understanding of these new groups and their regions of origin and settlement, researchers will need to broaden the exchange between those who study indigenous communities and those who study migration, as well as between those who focus on domestic versus international Mexican migration.

Historically, most Mexican migrants did share many common characteristics, coming primarily from rural communities in the central-western part of the country. Over the last two decades, however, the Mexican migrant population has diversified dramatically, both socially and geographically. Their regions of origin now include a more diverse range of states as well as large cities. For example, the Los Angeles area now has federations of hometown associations from at least thirteen different Mexican states, and eleven statewide federations are active in Chicago. Regions of migrant settlement in the United States are becoming similarly diverse—researchers recently found license plates from thirty-seven different U.S. states just along the main road of San Juan Mixtepec, a community in the Mixteca region in Oaxaca.<sup>8</sup>

The Mexican migrant population is also becoming increasingly multi-ethnic. Some Mexican indigenous peoples have many decades of experience with migration to the United States, dating back to the Bracero Program (1942–1964), such as the P'urépechas of Michoacán and Oaxaca's Mixtecs and Zapotecs. This binational government program also recruited Nahuas, as revealed in the recent account of a rare (successful) strike by braceros in the late 1950s. As one participant reported, "We spoke in *mexicano* [Náhuatl] and they didn't understand us, that's how we were able to organize even though it was prohibited and we fought for fair pay. We did the strike in *mexicano*."<sup>9</sup>

Historically, however, most indigenous migrants went to large cities or agribusiness jobs within Mexico. Until the 1980s, their relative share of the overall cross-border migrant population was relatively low. More recently, the indigenous proportion of the Mexican migrant population has grown significantly, most notably in both urban and rural California and increasingly in Texas, Florida, New York, and Oregon. As the public debate within

Mexico continues over the nation's multi-ethnic character and indigenous rights, the growing presence of indigenous migrants has also raised this issue within Mexican migrant communities in the United States.

It is important to recognize that not all migrants have formed satellite communities in the United States, which is a key precondition for organizing along hometown lines, and even fewer have formed ethnic, regional, or pan-ethnic organizations. Some indigenous Mexican migrants organize as members of ethnically mixed groups, whether along religious lines, as in the case of New York's Tepeyac Association, or along class lines, as in the case of Oregon's Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United (PCUN) or Florida's Coalition of Immokolee Workers (CIW). Indigenous migrant organizations also vary in terms of their degree of interest in collaboration with other kinds of groups, whether they are organizations of other kinds of migrants or U.S.-focused civic and social organizations. In Los Angeles, for example, the Oaxacan Federation works closely both with other Mexican organizations and with trade unions and civil rights organizations on issues such as access to driver licenses for undocumented workers.

Because of cultural, political, and language differences between groups of Mexicans, any efforts to communicate or build coalitions among these groups must take these differences into account. Advocacy efforts by U.S. groups on behalf of indigenous migrants face major challenges in terms of building trust and cross-cultural communication. Various incipient cross-sectoral coalition-building efforts have not coalesced, leading to some skepticism as well as suggesting the need for greater mutual understanding to facilitate the process of finding the common ground needed to sustain balanced multicultural coalitions.

## **THE EXPERIENCE OF OAXACAN INDIGENOUS MIGRATION**

Historically, most indigenous migrants to the United States were temporary, but the increased risk and cost of crossing the border without documents has led more of these immigrants to settle in the United States for the long term. This is possible in part because their networks have matured over the past two decades. In addition to the cross-border



workers in the Bracero Program, the first travels of Oaxacan villagers in search of employment began back in the 1930s, taking them to Oaxaca City, the sugarcane fields of Veracruz, and later to the growing neighborhoods in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl on the periphery of Mexico City. Then labor contractors supplying the agribusinesses of the northwestern state of Sinaloa began recruiting, especially in the Mixteca region. These south-to-north flows later extended to the Valley of San Quintín in northern Baja California. By the early 1980s, indigenous migrants reached further north, to California, Oregon, and Washington.

Early migrants were able to regularize their status and settle down in the United States following the 1986 immigration policy reform (the Immigration Reform and Control Act, or IRCA). Within California, Oaxacans have long-established communities in the San Joaquin Valley, the Los Angeles metropolitan area, and northern San Diego County. Within a relatively short time, these indigenous migrants went from invisibility to outsiders to attracting media attention and becoming a subject of both academic research and progressive activism.<sup>10</sup>

Oaxacan migration took off by the end of the 1980s, with the extensive incorporation of Zapotecs in urban services and Mixtecs in farm labor—often in the most difficult and lowest-paid jobs. The IRCA reforms permitted millions of earlier migrants to regularize their status, allowing them to move up in the labor force, leaving open bottom rungs in the social ladder for newer indigenous migrants. Employers of low-wage workers have been more than willing to continue their long tradition of encouraging ethnic segmentation in labor markets. As a conservative scholar and farmer summed up the employers' view, "they will tell you, 'don't bring anybody onto the cement crew who speaks English' because the second generation will not work like the people from Oaxaca."<sup>11</sup> Indigenous workers also draw on ethnic difference to position themselves in the labor market. As one informant reported to Guidi: "Of course we speak Mixteco! [in the United States]. Sometimes we speak to each other in *dialecto* in front of the [Chicano] contractor so that we can come to an agreement about our wages. And they get mad because they don't understand us."<sup>12</sup>

By the early 1990s, an estimated 45,000 to 55,000 Mixtecs worked in agriculture in California's Central Valley, and 50,000 to 60,000 Zapotecs had settled in Los Angeles, mainly in the central neighborhoods of Koreatown, Pico Union, and South Central. The proportion of predominantly indigenous migrants from southern Mexico in California farm labor almost doubled during the 1990s, from 6.1 percent (1993–1996) to 10.9 percent (1997–2000), spurring researcher Edward Kissam to project that indigenous migrants will represent more than 20 percent of California's farmworkers by 2010.

The parallel process of long-term settlement and geographic concentration has led to the creation of a "critical mass" of indigenous Oaxacans, especially in California. This has permitted the emergence of distinctive forms of social organization and cultural expression, especially among Mixtecs and Zapotecs. Their collective initiatives draw on ancestral cultural legacies to build new branches of their home communities. Their public expressions range from building civic-political organizations to the public celebration of religious holidays, basketball tournaments involving dozens of teams, the regular mass celebration of traditional Oaxacan music and dance festivals such as the Guelaguetza, and the formation of village-based bands, some of which return to play in their hometown fiestas, as in the case of the Zapotec community of Zoogocho. Their cultural and political projects also include the revival of traditional weaving workshops, the publication of binational newspapers, indigenous- and Spanish-language radio programs, and efforts to provide translation services and preserve indigenous languages, as well as the emergence of writers and visual artists with cross-border sensibilities.

These migration processes have had social, cultural, and civic impacts in the United States and in Mexico. Sustained migration and the emergence of organizations of indigenous migrants influence social and community identity, both in the United States and in Mexico. The creation and re-creation of collective ethnic identities among indigenous migrants influences their economic, social, and political relationships in the United States.

## **TRANSNATIONAL POLITICAL ACTION**

On February 10, 2003, the local media in Fresno, California reported on a rally that a group of migrant workers had organized in front of the Mexican Consulate offices in that city. What caught the attention of the media was that the farm workers' group, composed of indigenous Mixtec farm workers, had simultaneously organized a press conference in the Northern-border city of Tijuana and a caravan traveling from the Mixtec town of Juxtlahuaca to the City of Oaxaca. Along the way the protesters had managed to symbolically take over the ancient city of Monte Alban. The main demand of this binational political mobilization, which had been coordinated across the 2,000-mile distance between Oaxaca and California, was to ask the Mexican federal government to recognize the agreement on culture and indigenous autonomy, which they had signed with the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in February 1996. The organizers of this mobilization also demanded that the governor of Oaxaca address the specific demands of the twenty-two communities belonging to the Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional (Binational Indigenous Oaxacan Front).

This binational mobilization carried out by Mixtec migrants raises a number of critical questions such as: Where does Oaxaca begin or end for Mixtec migrants? Does it begin or end on the streets of Los Angeles, California, where for the last seven years Zapotecs and Mixtecs have organized an annual cultural performance of traditional Oaxacan dance and music called the "Guelaguetza" for a massive audience, which last included almost five thousand people? Does it begin or end in the agricultural fields of the San Joaquin Valley in central California, where more than 60,000 Mixtecs work, and where they can go cheer for their favorite team of pre-Hispanic handball game known as "pelota mixteca" every Sunday in the city of Madera, more than 2,500 miles away from Oaxaca? In the everyday practice of these indigenous Mexican migrants, their "community" of reference transcends the limits of the U.S. and Mexican borders and has become a "deterritorialized" space (sometimes called Oaxacalifornia), giving rise to novel forms of organization and political expression.<sup>13</sup>

The incorporation of large numbers of indigenous peoples in the US-bound Mexican migratory flow illustrates just how dramatically migration patterns are changing. Not only are

an increased number of Mexican migrants attempting to cross the border, but also new groups have joined the migratory stream. Mixtecs, Zapotecs and Triques from Oaxaca, Nahuas from Guerrero, and Purepechas from Michoacan form the largest share of this new indigenous immigration wave. Recent research has documented that Mixtec farm workers now make-up seven percent of California's agricultural labor force. Many of these new indigenous migrants came to the U.S. for the first time during the mid 1980s, and they tend to concentrate at the bottom of the agricultural labor market in California, performing the most physically demanding and the worst paid jobs. However, far from being passive victims of exploitative conditions, indigenous migrants have responded creatively to the multiple challenges they face in both countries. They have formed binational political organizations that allow them to undertake collective action both in their communities of origin and in the multiple satellite communities they have established along their migratory circuit. These indigenous organizations form part of a "new" wave of Mexican immigrants organized around a wide variety of cross-border civic organizations.<sup>14</sup>

Why have indigenous Mexican migrants been so effective in developing binational grassroots organizations to defend their political and economic rights, and mobilizing politically on both sides of the border? And how does the political activism of indigenous Mexican transnational communities affect politics on both sides of the border, at local, regional, and state levels? The analysis in this lecture makes clear that the political involvement of indigenous peoples in Mexico—the desire for autonomy, long-term independence in local governance, and particular political structures—have had a crucial impact on indigenous Mexican migrant communities and transnational political activism. Just as indigenous people in Mexico distance themselves from the Mexican state and Mexican identity, so, too, Mixtec migrants in California create new forms of transnational organization that both reflect, and strengthen, their ethnic identity.

## **TRANSNATIONAL APPROACHES TO MIGRATION**

Recent literature on international migration has focused on the emergence of transnational communities. These studies have furthered our understanding of transnational action,

community building, and the formation of transnational political communities, in the United States, Mexico and the Caribbean. In this literature, transnationalism is defined as *the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement*. At the heart of the transnational approach to international migration is the argument that current restructuring of global capital produces a new set of political, economic, and social relations between sending communities and governments and citizens abroad. In this view migration represents a *multi-level process (demographic, political, economic, cultural, familial) that involves various links between two or more settings rather than a discrete event constituted by a permanent move from one nation to another*.

In a transnational perspective, migration is conceptualized as *an on-going process through which ideas resources and people change locations and develop meaning in multiple locations, suggesting that by retaining social, cultural and economic links with various locations and contexts, people can surmount the impediments traditionally associated with long-distance and international borders*. The emphasis is on the fact that migrants remain heavily involved in the life of their country of origin even though they no longer permanently live there. Transnational social relations thus allow migrants to develop and maintain multiple relations in more than one nation state.

The case of indigenous Mexican migrants points to the need to view the way transmigrant identity reflects shifting power relations in both communities of origin and destination. In the literature on transnationalism, ethnic identity is frequently ignored or treated as a consequence of migration flows—a problem “here” but not “there.” Kearney and Nagengast argue that indigenous migrants, such as the Mixtecs, struggle to define cultural and ethnic identities in the United States and resist incorporation into the racial hegemony of a bipolar (black-white) system.

Indigenous migrants participate in a rich cultural exchange between the United States and Mexico by bringing back to their communities of origin commodities, styles, and attitudes acquired in the North. Paradoxically, migrants’ insertion into the U.S. labor market also

reinforces what appears to be quite “traditional” at home. For example, traditional fiestas, which are central to indigenous communities, have not only been perpetuated but also made more elaborate with funds from migrant earnings. It is not uncommon for migrant workers who have done relatively well in el Norte, to volunteer to serve as *mayordomos* (sponsors) of festivities celebrating their community’s patron saint. The expense for these festivities can run into thousands of dollars, all paid by relatives and extended families of the main *mayordomo*. Many migrants living permanently or working temporarily in the United States return to Oaxaca during these celebrations, adding even more excitement to these events.

Among Mexican indigenous migrants it is necessary to appreciate the historical context and the specific politics and economics of their migratory experience to understand the ways they construct meaningful lives in situations not of their own choosing. Indigenous migrants become agents of social change by organizing and implementing creative strategies for collective action to fight for their survival—and this involvement in political organization builds on and reinforces ethnic identities that they bring from home.

### **TRANSBORDER INDIGENOUS POLITICAL ACTIVISM**

A striking feature of Mixtec migrant workers’ transnational activism is their active participation in the local political life of their communities even when they are not physically present. This political participation by migrants both strengthens and transforms their community’s cultural and social resources (such as traditional forms of self-government, including the *cargo* system, leadership accountability to popular assemblies, and strong corporate community political identity). The ideas and practices Mixtec migrants bring back are in fact remolded in the context of the home community and ‘traditional’ community practices have been adapted to the transnational context. During my fieldwork in California I met many Mixtec migrants who have been summoned back to their communities to perform tasks they had been elected to carry out by the local community assembly. Often, these migrants have been absent from their communities for many years, working and living as far away as Oregon, California or New Jersey.

These Mixteco indigenous communities have taken a dramatic step in terms of asserting its regulating mechanisms for membership in the community. Migrants have to fulfill some very strict requirements, which include the physical return of the migrant to perform a *cargo* to maintain a good-standing status within the community. Failure to do so may carry severe penalties, such as the confiscation of land and property.

Many Zapotec indigenous communities have a very different notion of citizenship—a more flexible one—than Mixtecs, in the sense of its membership and requirements. Migrants from many Zapotec communities do not have to return physically to serve their *cargo*, since they can pay someone in their village to carry out their responsibilities for them. Another major difference is that sanctions are more symbolic than in the case of Mixtecos—after all, being frowned upon by neighbors for not performing a *cargo* is a less drastic punishment than the confiscation of the family's farm by local authorities. Additionally, being a *ciudadano al corriente* (literally up-to-date citizen) in Zapotec indigenous communities does not carry big rewards to migrants. On the contrary it involves investing a substantial amount of money in the form of unpaid labor (*tequio*) or hard currency in the forms of dues (*cooperaciones*).

Many Mexican indigenous communities with heavy out-migration flows, like Mixteco and Zapotec communities in Oaxaca, have decided to incorporate *paisanos* that have migrated into the local political process by redefining, through their community assemblies, their conceptualization of citizenship and community. According to their own redefinition of “citizenship,” migrants who relocate abroad do not sever their ties with the community and can continue to enjoy the same rights and obligations as members of the community who stay, as long as these migrants continue to serve the *cargos* (elected positions) the community assembly decides to confer on them. In this way, the definition of community has been expanded to incorporate the many members who reside abroad. People in indigenous villages in Oaxaca refer to their community as including the local population as well as the population dispersed along the migratory network that extends to northern Mexico and into the United States. Thus, through the constant movement of migrants back and forth and the concurrent flow of information, money, goods and services, the communities of origin and their various “satellite communities” in northern Mexico and the United States have become

so closely linked that in a sense they form a single community, a transnational community. The transnational concept, the way I would like to use it here, has two relevant dimensions. The first is its geographic sense, referring to such phenomena as migration, commerce and communication that cross national borders. The second refers to the notion of transforming and transcending the nation-state as a modern social and cultural form.

The political activism of migrant populations such as the Mixtecs and Zapotecs in California and their ability to participate in the political processes of their communities of origin directly challenges the hegemony of the Mexican state to define the boundaries of the “national political community” and the rights that its members can enjoy. One can hardly imagine an effective way that the state and federal governments in Mexico could regulate the process by which 570 municipalities and hundreds of small villages elect their representatives every four years. The Mixtec municipality of Juxtlahuaca, where I was born, is composed of 62 *agencias municipales* or villages, which are the smallest political organizational units in Mexico. Each of these *Agencias* elects its own council of representatives according to its own customs and traditions. In other words, it is not the Mexican state which determines where the boundaries of a Mixtec migrant “political” community<sup>15</sup> begins or ends through judicial mechanisms (laws and regulations), but the indigenous community itself which has redefined and expanded the contours of their community through its political practice of incorporating the thousands of migrants who work and live two thousand miles away in a different country.

The ability of Mixtec indigenous communities to adapt their political and cultural capital to the transnational process of migration is closely related to the high degree of autonomy they have traditionally exercised in regulating their internal affairs. In this sense, autonomy understood as “the right to exercise collectively the free determination”<sup>16</sup> of indigenous peoples is a well-established community practice. We could list many examples of how in everyday practice these indigenous communities have governed their communities and exercised authority through their own traditional mechanisms for a long time. This ability of the indigenous communities to regulate their community affairs turns out to be of great importance, especially for those communities with a high rate of out-migration.



In other words, Mixtec indigenous communities have completely reversed something that had been seen as a catastrophe for their long-term survival—extremely high rates of out-migration—and have transformed it into a source of synergy that assures their cultural, social and economic reproduction. Indigenous autonomy, understood as the mechanism to govern and exercise their authority, has been fundamental to their response to the migratory experience. Within this context, Mixtec indigenous communities have reconceptualized and expanded the concept of “political community,” redefining this notion in a way that allows for the incorporation of the immense indigenous population dispersed across many geographical borders.

The active participation of Mixtec migrants in the affairs of their communities of origin has strengthened their ethnic identity, which has allowed them, at the same time, to build binational political organizations that further strengthen close ties with communities in Oaxaca. Many Mixtec migrants not only continue to be consulted about political decisions in their communities while they live in the United States, but they also still maintain rights and obligations as members of their specific “political community.” In practice, Mixtec migrants have the right to participate in the internal governing process of their home community. Indeed, as I have indicated, they are eligible to be considered for elected positions within the local governing structures.

In this context, the transnational organizations of Mixtec migrants perform two basic tasks: first, these organizations institutionalize political practices that allow for collective action in the different places where the Mixtec migratory network is located (that is the transnationalized space sometimes denominated Oaxacalifornia); second, they institutionalize cultural exchange practices and the circulation of information that give meaning to a political community that transcends many geographical borders, at the community, state, and international levels.

In the case of Mixtec migrants organizations and other Zapotec village-based migrant associations in Los Angeles, it is apparent that the cultural base of these organizations is a recently emerged sense of pan-ethnic identity—namely Mixtec and Zapotec ethnicity—that

was formerly nonexistent in Oaxaca. There is a strong relationship between the emergent ethnicities and the formation of migrant political organizations among indigenous migrant communities whose political participation and activism in California have been reinforcing their ethnic identity, holding the community together as it becomes evermore extended throughout both Mexico and the United States.

Indigenous migrants have been and are able to mobilize and to transform cultural and social resources within their “traditional” society and culture to resist full incorporation into highly exploitive wage labor and to resist the forces of acculturation. Thus, whereas most conventional migration theory predicts that long term extensive migration reduces ethnicity and promotes assimilation, this research points to an apparent contrary case.

As observed before, a key assumption of transnationalism is the notion that racial, ethnic, and national identities are constructed categories that are reconfigured and strategically deployed by immigrants. Indigenous migrant organizations are not only engaged in nation-building projects, but also in the construction of transnational identities. Consequently, migrants fashion multiple identities within a complex geographical landscape that includes their communities of origin and multiple sites along their migratory network. As a result of migration, ethnic and regional identities are problematized and become particularly salient as in the case of indigenous migrants. Such identities are reconfigured and deployed both to accommodate and resist subordination within a transnational capitalist system.

The political practices of the transnational indigenous migrant organizations go far beyond the recent attempts by the Mexican State to recognize the particular situation of millions of Mexicans who have been incorporated in the US-bound migratory process. It is not surprising that organizations such as the Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional consider the recent changes in the Mexican constitution, which will allow Mexican immigrants who acquire US citizenship to still maintain their Mexican nationality, as too little too late. The main problem with this constitutional amendment, according to the Frente, is that it will not recognize the political rights of dual nationals, since they will be unable to vote or be eligible for public office in Mexico. In other words, this recent change in the Mexican constitution will

allow migrants to maintain their Mexican nationality, and enjoy the protection of their civil rights by the Mexican state (rights such as buying property along the coasts and border lines), but they will have to renounce such political rights as voting during presidential and local elections, and will not be allowed to hold elected office in Mexico. For indigenous migrants who are active participants in the affairs of their communities of origin, this represents a step back, rather than an improvement for their political rights.

Another recent development has been the approval in the lower chamber of parliament of a law granting Mexican citizens the right to vote in Mexican presidential elections while living abroad (approval in the Senate is still pending and it looks unlikely that they will approve it). Some indigenous migrant leaders saw this as a step forward in the recognition of the political rights of Mexican migrants in general. However, they claim that while electing the next Mexican president in the year 2006 is very important, it is more pressing to be able to shape policy at the state and local level since the political institutions there affect indigenous communities the most. Indigenous migrant leaders want to be able to participate fully in political decisions at the local and community level in both the United States and Mexico—something that requires the recognition of “double citizenship:” being full members of two nations, including all the rights and obligations they enjoy in their communities of origin back in the Mixteca region in Oaxaca.

## **ETHNIC IDENTITY AND COLLECTIVE ACTION**

My understanding of the relationship between Mexican migration, collective action, and the formation of ethnic identities has been greatly influenced by the research of Michael Kearney, who pioneered the study of Mixtec migration to the United States. His work provides detailed descriptions of the transformative impact of migration on the ethnic identities of indigenous Oaxacan workers. The process of racist discrimination and exclusion, both in northern Mexico and in the United States—though not completely new for Oaxacan indigenous people—was sharpened in the agricultural fields of Sinaloa, Baja California, and California’s San Joaquin Valley. Vividly represented by the widespread use of derogatory terms such as “*oaxaquitas*” (little Oaxacans) and “*indios sucios*” (dirty Indians), this process

of racialization led to a new ethnic identity for many migrants. Not only does this experience intensify their sense of ethnic difference, Kearney goes further to suggest that the process of migration to a new social context generates a new, broader ethnic identity that brings together migrants from communities that would not necessarily have shared identities back in Oaxaca. “This experience of discrimination outside of Oaxaca was a major stimulus for indigenous migrants to appropriate the labels—*mixteco*, *zapoteco*, and *indígena*—that formerly had only been used by linguists, anthropologists, and government officials, and to put them to work in organizing along ethnic lines.”<sup>17</sup>

The newly appropriated ethnic identities that emerge in the process of migration created new opportunities for collective action that were expressed through the emergence of a diverse array of civic and political organizations in the United States and northern Mexico. These organizations differed from those in the communities of origin, where cross-community solidarity was often blocked by persistent legacies of inter-village conflict.<sup>18</sup> Kearney argues that workers from communities that might have been rivals in Oaxaca came to develop a sense of solidarity through their shared experiences of class and racial oppression as migrants. The resulting pan-Mixteco, pan-Zapoteco, and, later, pan-indigenous Oaxacan identities made possible broader pan-ethnic organizing among migrants for the first time.<sup>19</sup> This interpretation has been confirmed by recent developments within the Oaxacan Indigenous Binational Front (FIOB), which include a collaborative agreement with a newly organized P’urépecha community in Madera, California. Of the six elected leaders of the FIOB’s Baja California branch, one is Mixtec from Guerrero and the vice-coordinator is P’urépecha from Michoacán. This partial shift from a pan-Oaxacan frame to a broader pan-indigenous base has initiated an internal discussion over whether to drop “Oaxacan” from the organization’s name, possibly to become the “Indigenous Binational Front.”

These insights about how migration and racialization influence collective identities provide the context in which indigenous migrants are to be understood. Here, indigenous migrants are framed as social actors rather than as either passive victims or faceless flows of amorphous masses. In contrast to idealized views of indigenous migrants, whether as “heroes” or “*pochos*,” my intention is to focus on their efforts to create new lives, to build their

own organizations, and above all to represent themselves in a process of building an indigenous migrant civil society that can help face the challenges of the future.

Despite the adverse conditions that indigenous migrants encounter, they have nevertheless managed to create a wide range of civic, social, and political organizations that are notable for the diversity of their strategies and goals. Within this indigenous migrant civil society, two main kinds of organizations stand out. The first includes the large number of hometown associations, known in Spanish as "*organizaciones de pueblo*," "*clubes de oriundos*," or "*clubes sociales comunitarios*." They are composed of migrants from specific communities who come together mainly to support their community of origin, most notably by raising funds for local public works such as road or bridge building, water systems, electrification, or public spaces such as town squares, sports fields, schools, churches, or community halls.

The second main kind of indigenous migrant associations includes coalition-building projects that draw on hometown, "translocal" ties but bring people together from a broader, regional ethnogeographic sphere. The most consolidated coalitions include the Oaxacan Indigenous Binational Front (FIOB), the Oaxacan Regional Organization (ORO), the Union of Highland Communities of Oaxaca (UCSO), the Coalition of Indigenous Communities of Oaxaca (COCIO), the International Indigenous Network of Oaxaca (RIIO), and the recently formed Oaxacan Federation of Indigenous Communities and Organizations in California (FOCOICA), whose affiliates include most Oaxacan organizations in that state.

Both kinds of organizations have created spaces within which indigenous migrants can engage in collective action and cultural sustenance. These organizations open up spaces within which social identities are created and re-created through the institutionalization of collective practices in which migrants are recognized as Oaxacans and as indigenous people. That is, these diverse collective practices generate discourses that recognize their specific cultural, social, and political identities. The real and imagined space in which they develop these practices is called "Oaxacalifornia," a transnationalized space in which migrants bring together their lives in California with their communities of origin more than 2,500 miles away.<sup>20</sup>

Note, for example, the wide range of names chosen for the organizations that bring together indigenous migrants from different regions and political backgrounds. These names reflect the previous political experiences of some of the leaders, who were able to channel the members' collective efforts to recognize themselves as social actors with specific political roots. The use of *frente* in FIOB reflects the previous activism of some of the founding leaders in leftist causes and organizations in Mexico. Some of the FIOB's founding members were active, for example, in the class-based Independent Central of Agricultural Workers and Peasants (CIOAC), the leading independent farmworker union in Mexico during the 1970s and 1980s (and especially active in Sinaloa). Several key leaders were teachers and veterans of Oaxaca's movement to democratize the official union. Since the 1930s, this tendency within the teachers' union encouraged members to commit themselves to "serving the people."

In this context, the concept of *frente* referred to a coalition that could coordinate the actions of independent groups desiring to join their efforts in a common cause, all the while maintaining their own autonomy. When FIOB was founded as the Mixteco-Zapoteco Binational Front (FM-ZB) in late 1991, its main goal was to coordinate the indigenous campaigns of the nine original founding organizations that were opposing celebration of the quincentenary of the "Discovery of the Americas." These organizations did not want to dissolve their organizations and create a new one for this purpose; rather, they wanted to coordinate their efforts temporarily in a "front" that would serve as an umbrella organization for this very specific goal. After this first joint campaign, some of the founding organizations merged in what became the FIOB in 1994; others withdrew from the process and remained independent. Notably, the shift in the organization's name reflected a more inclusive, pan-Oaxacan identity (the state has sixteen distinct ethnic groups).

The names of the Oaxacan migrant organizations also offer clues about their members' political orientation. The name of the Organization of Exploited and Oppressed People (OPEO) clearly emphasizes its members' shared sense of both class identity ("exploited") and racial identity ("oppressed"), though the members also share a strong territorial identity since they come from the same community of origin. Other groups chose to highlight different dimensions of their identity. "Civic," for example, in the Mexican context of the 1960s through

the 1980s (before electoral democracy was on the agenda) was a relatively nonconfrontational way of referring to the struggle for respect for citizens' rights and for clean government (especially at the local level), and it sometimes provided cover for a radical democratic agenda. "Civic" also had the advantage of suggesting a nonpartisan approach in a context in which explicitly "political" opposition was severely sanctioned by the state. The term "popular" in the Mixteco Popular Civic Committee (CCPM) suggested a broad class identity, bridging workers, peasants, and small entrepreneurs with both a civic and an ethnic (Mixtec) identity. Inherent in the name of the CCPM is the ideological dilemma facing members as to whether to organize along class lines, or as Mixtecs, or both. Yet either approach implicitly required a fight for democracy; hence the term "civic." In practice, however, the organization's membership was primarily hometown-based.

The name of the Benito Juárez Civic Association (ACBJ) also identifies it with the cause of democracy and good government implied by "civic." The reference to Benito Juárez combines an implicit call for the rule of law with the ethnic/national pride symbolized by Mexico's "indigenous Abraham Lincoln." This name choice also sent an implicitly pan-ethnic signal; because the ACBJ's base was primarily Mixtec while Juárez was Zapotec, the name underscored shared Oaxacan identity. The names of the primarily Zapotec Oaxaca Regional Organization and the Tlacolula Community in Los Angeles (COTLA) illustrate the use of more politically neutral descriptive terms, reflecting their primarily cultural goals as well as their members' shared territorial identities.

Despite the wide variety of political backgrounds of indigenous migrants that are reflected in the nature of the different organizations, all emphasize public activities and mobilizations that reaffirm their collective identities as indigenous peoples. As a consequence, the migrant organizations' wide range of public cultural events nourishes the multicultural experience of its citizens. The Guelaguetza festivals of music and dance are among the most important Oaxacan cultural events, and at least four Guelaguetzas are now celebrated annually in California within the context of a broader pan-ethnic Oaxacan indigenous identity.<sup>21</sup>

The Oaxacan Regional Organization pioneered the celebration of these festivals in the United States in 1987 and has been holding them in a park in the Pico Union neighborhood of Los Angeles. The festivals bring together two thousand people each year. In 2003 the XVI Guelaguetza featured two of the oldest musical bands of migrants in Los Angeles—Yatzachi El Bajo and Zochina—as well as six community-based dance troupes (Huaxyacac, Yalálag, OPAM, Nueva Antequera, Centeotl, and COTLA).

The Coalition of Indigenous Communities of Oaxaca, based in northern San Diego County, also holds an annual Guelaguetza festival, this one on the campus of California State University, San Marcos, in association with the leading Chicano student organization (MEChA) and other university- and community-based organizations. COCIO's Guelaguetza is unique in that it draws on organized support from the region's broader Latino and university community, in addition to the Oaxacan immigrant community. COCIO's festival, begun in 1994, is the second oldest in the state. Its organizers report that more than four thousand people have participated. Since 2001, northern San Diego County's Oaxacan organizations have also participated in a broad, multisectoral, officially sponsored public celebration of the Day of the Dead in downtown Oceanside, which draws thousands of people to a community otherwise known for its social polarization.

In the city of Fresno, in California's Central Valley, the Oaxacan Indigenous Binational Front has held a Guelaguetza annually since 2000, drawing on newly formed local dance troupes and also on larger, more consolidated Los Angeles-based dance and music groups. In 2002 this Guelaguetza opened with music from a local Native American group, and in 2003 with traditional Mixtec dances (*chilenas y diablitos*) performed by the Madera-based Grupo Folklórico Cultural Se'e Savi. Public interest groups and civic groups in the region are invited, with outreach activities that range from disseminating information about political causes to culturally appropriate public health education.

More recently, FOCOICA has since 2002 celebrated a Guelaguetza in the Los Angeles Sports Arena (former home of the Lakers basketball team), cosponsored by the Oaxaca state government, local trade unions, and the Spanish-language media. FOCOICA's



Guelaguetza draws between six and ten thousand people, mainly Oaxacan immigrants in Southern California, as well as a large number of Mexicans from other states. This event also promotes Oaxacan imports (ranging from traditional arts and crafts to mescal, chocolate, and so on) brought by entrepreneurs trying to gain a foothold in the large immigrant market.

Sports competitions are also important public events for Oaxacans, with basketball more popular than soccer.<sup>22</sup> One of the most important tournaments is the Los Angeles “Juárez Cup,” organized by the Union of Highland Communities of Oaxaca each March for the past six years. Some sixty-five teams participate, representing more than forty Oaxacan communities.

Some Mixtecs and Zapotecs in California also play a pre-Columbian ball game. “Mixtec ball” is played in some very unlikely places—a parking lot in Los Angeles’s Griffith Park, a lot adjacent to a farm in Selma, a high school sports field in the agroindustrial city of Watsonville. The resurgence of this game among immigrants is culturally important because, according to a recent report in *El Oaxaqueño*, the number of players of the game has decreased in Oaxaca as appropriate open spaces have disappeared.<sup>23</sup> As many as twelve different teams meet in an annual statewide tournament in Los Angeles. According to one player, many “play this game from childhood for fun. This is a tradition, a custom that we carry in the blood, and we do it for the sheer pleasure of the game.” As in the case of many other Oaxacan migrant cultural activities—dances, music, food—Mixtec ball has generated a demand for traditional equipment, creating jobs for the artisans back home who make the gloves and balls.

Public religious celebrations among indigenous migrants in California have emerged much more recently. The “community calendar” section of *El Oaxaqueño* newspaper is very revealing. For example, the July 28, 2001, issue listed a number of fund-raising events organized by various Los Angeles-based Oaxacan hometown associations, including a dance organized by the Commission for the Restoration of the Santiago Mayor Apostol Church in Villa Hidalgo, Yalálag, to raise money for major repairs to the community’s church. The Club Pro-Santos Fiscales from San Francisco Cajonos was organizing a dance to

support their efforts to get two local “martyrs” declared “saints.” After some twenty years, the Oaxacan Archdiocese had sent the case for canonization to the Vatican for consideration. The association from the town of Santa María Xochixtepec was announcing a “traditional fiesta” honoring the Virgen del Rosario. And finally, the association from San Miguel Cajonos was organizing a dance honoring their community’s patron saint, San Miguel Arcángel. In addition to these fund-raising events, announcements reminded readers about the monthly “*oaxaqueño*” mass every third Sunday in a Catholic church in South Central Los Angeles. This “*oaxaqueño*” mass, accompanied by a Oaxacan dance troupe and a 25-piece Zapotec brass band, reflects a high degree of community participation. This crowded calendar of religious happenings is typical among indigenous Oaxacan immigrants in Los Angeles, with events spread evenly throughout the year. In fact, Oaxacan hometown associations in Los Angeles often compete for available venues in which to hold their dances.

A more public example of faith-based collective action was the procession of the Virgen de la Soledad, organized by a group of immigrants who call themselves the Oaxacan Catholic Community of Los Angeles (Comunidad Católica Oaxaqueña). The procession drew more than a thousand participants on December 16, 2002. On this Sunday the Oaxacan community celebrated finding a permanent home for the Virgin, the patron Saint of Oaxaca City and a special religious symbol for *oaxaqueños* in general. The statue of the Virgin that led the procession had been brought from Oaxaca City by the Oaxacan Catholic Community, who had lobbied the Oaxacan Archdiocese for a statue of the Virgin and then traveled to Oaxaca to bring it back to Los Angeles. The procession began at the intersection of Normandy and San Marino in Koreatown. The mood was very festive, with Oaxacan dancers leading the procession and a brass band playing traditional *jarabes serranos*. Auxiliary Bishop of Los Angeles Edward Clark declared, “the Virgen de la Soledad is your patron saint; she is your mother. She has come here, to be beside you, so that you do not feel alone far away from home.”<sup>24</sup>

This procession, organized by Oaxacan immigrants, culminated a series of actions begun about four years earlier when Oaxacans from different communities had decided to set aside their differences and organize as Catholics and as *oaxaqueños*. Both the religious

procession itself and the formation of the Oaxacan Catholic Community can be explained in part by Hirabayashi's concept of *paisanazgo* (see Hirabayashi 1993). It is true that Oaxacan immigrants draw on the social solidarity prescribed by *paisano* relations to form village-based migrant associations. However, the formation of the Oaxacan Catholic Community as a Oaxaca-wide religious organization had to transcend village-based social relations through the development of a strategy that would provide the basis for a Oaxacan identity, bringing immigrants from dozens of villages in the Mixe, Mixtec, and Zapotec regions of Oaxaca together in a single collective organization. This is a good illustration of the interconnectedness between religious practices and ethnic identity.

The dense web of social, civic, and political organizations—as well as their performances and “public rituals”—creates an environment in which preexisting collective identities come through in a new context, in the process transforming the actors themselves. These organizations create a dual identity. First, they are vehicles for reinforcing collective practices that affirm broader ethnic identities emerging from the migrant experience. Second, these organizations—above all the hometown associations—encourage community building, cultural exchange, and the flow of information. Both processes are crucial for sustaining the links that connect communities of origin with their satellite communities spread beyond their traditional homeland.

The use of alternative media also plays a central role in building migrant civil society. Notably, the biweekly newspaper *El Oaxaqueño*, “the voice of Oaxacans in the United States,” is one of the few professional Mexican newspapers with a binational circulation. The paper was launched by Fernando López Mateos, a successful Zapotec migrant entrepreneur and native of Matatlán. It has published more than 117 issues since its founding in 1999. Its content is developed binationally; graphic design work is done in Oaxaca and then the job is sent to Los Angeles for printing. The paper's coverage includes civic, political, social, sports, and cultural issues that affect Oaxacan communities in both Mexico and the United States. Reports range from local village conflicts and the campaign to block construction of a McDonald's on the main square in Oaxaca City, to the binational activities of hometown associations and California-focused coalition building for immigrants' right to obtain driver

licenses and against cutbacks in health services. The press run of 35,000 copies is distributed free of charge throughout California and in other migrant communities in the United States, as well as in Oaxaca. *El Oaxaqueño* is made available at public events and through community institutions and local businesses (as well as given to arrivals at the Oaxaca City airport). This groundbreaking effort in community media remains largely invisible outside of the Oaxacan community.

Oaxaca's indigenous migrants are also using radio and electronic media in the United States. Filemón López, a native of the Mixtec community of San Juan Mixtepec, has for the last six years anchored *La Hora Mixteca*, a bilingual (Mixtec-Spanish) weekly program broadcast on the Radio Bilingüe network founded by Hugo Morales, another Oaxacan migrant from the Mixteca. Radio Bilingüe recently obtained a Rockefeller Foundation grant for a satellite link that will enable it to transmit its programming to listeners in Oaxaca and Baja California.<sup>25</sup> As another example, in 2001 the FIOB and New California Media jointly produced a one-hour news show, *Nuestro Foro*, on local community radio in Fresno (KFCF-88.1 FM). In addition, FIOB has published a monthly newsletter, *El Tequio*, since 1991 and introduced an on-line version two years ago, allowing its binational membership to share news on local activities and maintain a sense of unity across the U.S.-Mexico border.<sup>26</sup> Since these migrant-run mass media also report systematically on other community initiatives, they promote "virtuous circles" of institution building within indigenous migrant civil society, each reinforcing the other.

The effort to sustain the use of indigenous languages has become a collective activity, both as part of the political struggle for rights and as an endeavor in cultural survival. Indigenous migrants who do not speak Spanish well experience intense language discrimination on a daily basis at the workplace and also in their interactions with legal, educational, and health institutions. Long-standing Mexican cultural prejudices, symbolized by the use of the term "dialect" to describe indigenous languages, are widespread in immigrant communities in the United States. Ayala and Mines (2002) documented a classic example involving mestizo discrimination against P'urépechas in California's Coachella Valley:

The son of a *mayordomo* [crew manager] coined the term *chaca* to describe the P'urépecha. One man described the origin of this derogatory phrase in this way: "The *mayordomo* asked me, 'Hey, you guys sure talk a lot. All of this *chaca, chaca, chaca* and I don't understand anything! What are you saying?'" That's how it started—at that moment. They say, "You're a *chaca* because you guys say *chaca, chaca, chaca, chaca* like a washing machine" [authors' translation].

In at least two well-known cases in the 1980s, indigenous-language speakers were incarcerated in Oregon, unable to offer any defense because they did not speak either Spanish or English. The first victim was Adolfo Ruiz Álvarez, a Triqui, who was confined to a mental hospital and kept sedated for two years before being released (see Davis 2002). The second, Mixtec Santiago Ventura Morales, was jailed for more than four years for murder before his conviction was overturned.<sup>27</sup>

This situation began to change when California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA), in a precedent-setting move, hired the first Mixteco-speaking outreach worker in 1993 (see Olivera 2003). Migrant organizations have also responded to the need by creating their own translation services in Mixteco, Zapoteco, and Triqui to help people responding to criminal charges or trying to access health care and other public services. Interpreters for the Binational Center for Indigenous Oaxacan Development (CBDIO) work throughout California as well in other states. The Madera School District has hired a Mixtec community outreach worker to communicate with the hundreds of Mixtec parents who send their children to the public schools of this farming community in the heart of California's Central Valley. The Oaxaca-based Academy of the Mixtec Language recently began conducting workshops in the Central Valley to teach the writing of the Mixtec language.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, the Mexican government's Adult Education Agency, which is already active in eighteen U.S. states, recently launched an outreach project specifically for indigenous migrants. These various initiatives have been reinforced by the use of CD-ROM teaching materials in English and Spanish that provide accessible introductions to many dimensions of Mixtec history and culture, from analysis of little-known codices to contemporary issues of land and identity.

Indigenous immigrant organizations face a huge challenge with the coming of age of the second generation. As thousands of indigenous immigrant families settle for the long term, the rising number of their children born and raised in the United States poses the risk of losing the indigenous languages. In some cases, migrant youth become trilingual, and hence are a crucial resource for the migrant community. For example, the Oaxacan Indigenous Binational Front (FIOB) has employed several trilingual organizers in strategic positions, encouraging leadership development. Nevertheless, these cases are the exception. More often, second-generation indigenous youths are not unlike other migrant groups, and they often show low levels of retention of fluency in their parents' first language.<sup>29</sup>

Gender roles are also changing the terms of community membership.<sup>30</sup> Some migrant women experience changes in the division of labor when they begin to earn wages. In the less isolated new areas of settlement, the women are exposed to different customs and institutions, and they sometimes enter into contact with U.S.-based social actors promoting gender equality. Note, for example, the active role of *Líderes Campesinas* in making domestic violence a public issue for the first time in many small towns of rural California, challenging the widely held view that such violence is strictly a private matter and cannot be changed.<sup>31</sup> Women are also taking on public leadership roles in mixed-gender migrant organizations in the United States. At the same time, migration from many indigenous communities remains primarily male, affecting the women who remain in at least two ways; on the one hand, their workload is increased, but on the other they often gain greater access to the local public sphere. In some communities of origin, women are participating more in assemblies, creating their own organizations, and fulfilling their husbands' community obligations (in a context in which local citizenship often remains explicitly reserved for men). Women tend to undertake their increased public role in the name of their absent spouse, making this a form of "indirect citizenship." Much more research is needed to enhance our understanding of the diverse patterns of change in gender relations, both in communities of origin and in settlement areas.

This nascent process in which migrants are creating their own public spaces and membership organizations is built on the foundation of what are increasingly termed as

“transnational communities,” a concept that refers to groups of migrants whose daily lives, work, and social relationships extend across national borders. The existence of transnational communities is a precondition for, but is not the same as, an emerging migrant civil society, which also must involve the construction of public spaces and representative social and civic organizations.

Some analysts use the concept of “cultural citizenship” to describe cases where migrant collective action has transformed the public sphere in the United States. This term “names a range of social practices which, taken together, claim and establish a distinct social space for Latinos in this country [the United States]” and serves as “a vehicle to better understand community formation.... It involves the right to retain difference, while also attaining membership in society.”<sup>32</sup> This process may or may not be linked to membership in a territorially based community, either in the home country or in the United States. Instead, it may be driven by other kinds of shared collective identities, such as racialized and gendered class identities as Latina or Latino workers. The idea of cultural citizenship is complementary to but quite distinct from the notion of transnational community, which both focuses on a specific kind of collective identity and emphasizes sustained *binational* community membership.

The research presented in this collection also speaks to a third way of conceptualizing migrants as social actors, which is the process of constructing a *de facto* form of “*translocal community citizenship*.” This term refers to the process through which indigenous migrants are becoming active members of both their communities of settlement and their communities of origin. Like the idea of transnational community, translocal community citizenship refers to the cross-border extension of the boundaries of an existing social sphere, but the term “citizenship” differs from “community” in at least two ways. First, it involves much more precise criteria for determining membership rights and obligations. Second, it refers explicitly to membership in a public sphere. The idea of “translocal community citizenship” therefore involves much more explicit boundaries of membership in the public affairs of a community that is geographically dispersed or, in Kearney’s terms, “deterritorialized.”

Like cultural citizenship, the term “community citizenship” refers to a socially constructed sense of membership, often built through collective action, but it differs in at least three ways. First, community “citizenship” incorporates the term *that is actually used by the social actors themselves* to name their experience of membership. In indigenous communities throughout rural Mexico, a member in good standing—one who fulfills specific obligations and therefore can exercise specific rights—is called a “citizen” of that community. In contrast, it is not clear whether the idea of cultural citizenship has been appropriated by those to whom it refers. Second, the idea of translocal community specifies the public space within which membership is exercised, whereas “cultural citizenship” is deliberately open-ended as to the *arena* of inclusion (local, regional, or national? territorial or sectoral?). Third, the concept of cultural citizenship focuses, quite appropriately given its goals, on the contested process of negotiating new terms of incorporation *into U.S. society*, in contrast to the emphasis embedded in the idea of translocal community citizenship on the challenge of sustaining binational membership in a cross-border community.

The concept of translocal community citizenship has its own limits as well. It does not capture the broader, rights-based perspective that transcends membership in specific territorially based (or deterritorialized) communities, such as the broad-based migrant movement for Mexican voting rights abroad, or the FIOB’s emphasis on pan-ethnic collective identities and indigenous and human rights. These collective identities are shared beyond specific communities. The idea of translocal is also limited insofar as it does not capture the frequently *multilevel* process of engagement between migrant membership organizations and the Mexican state at national and state as well as local levels.

These different concepts for describing migrants as social actors are all complementary, and each reflects important dimensions of the process. Each one refers to social processes of migrant identity and organization that may overlap but are distinct, both in theory and in practice. At the same time, they do not capture the full range of migrant collective identities. The broader idea of “*migrant civil society*” provides an umbrella concept for describing diverse patterns of collective action.



The collective and individual practices that are beginning to constitute a specifically indigenous migrant civil society show us a positive side of what would otherwise be an unrelentingly devastating process for Mexico's indigenous communities—their abrupt insertion into globalized capitalism through international migration in search of wage labor. In spite of their dispersion throughout different points along the migrant path, at least some indigenous communities manage to sustain the social and cultural networks that give them cohesion and continuity. In some cases, the migratory experience has both broadened and transformed collective ethnic identities.

This open-ended process serves as a reference point for rethinking what it means to be indigenous in the twenty-first century. Notably, “long-distance membership” in home communities, as well as the construction of new kinds of organizations not based on ties to the land, raises questions about the classic close association between land, territory, and indigenous identity. Within Mexico, the national debate over how institutions and social actors could or should build indigenous autonomy has yet to fully grapple with this dilemma.

In this context, one analytical puzzle that emerges from the studies that follow is why, in spite of the challenges posed by migration, some communities, within some ethnic groups, manage better than others to sustain themselves as a group and create their own public spaces as organized migrants. Note, for example, the case of Nahua migrants to the United States. Though they represent the largest indigenous group in Mexico and some have been coming for many years, their migrants have not sustained visible membership organizations in the United States. Yet this does not mean that they are not organized or capable of cross-border collective action. On the contrary, it turns out that Nahua transnational communities from the state of Guerrero supported a pioneering and highly successful public interest advocacy campaign in defense of their villages against a planned hydroelectric dam in 1991. The project threatened to displace an estimated forty thousand people in the Alto Balsas Valley, damage a critical ecosystem, and flood a newly discovered major archaeological site. Local communities drew on existing cross-village social ties and local marketing networks to quickly build a cohesive regional movement, gaining national and international leverage in the context of the pending quincentenary of the Conquest. Migrants not only contributed

funds, drawing on their traditional quota system for village fiestas, but they were also involved in campaign strategy and tactics. Migrants bought video cameras to tape the movement's mass direct actions in a state known for intense repression. This tactic not only served to inform *paisanos* in the United States; it also inaugurated what became the Mexican indigenous movement's now widespread use of video to deter police violence. Migrant protests in California also drew the attention of Spanish-language television, which led to the first TV coverage of the Alto Balsas movement within Mexico itself. With their combination of regionwide, national-level, and transnational organizing crosscut by multisectoral alliances with environmentalists, anthropologists, and human rights activists, these migrants pioneered what could be called a "vertically integrated" approach to public interest campaigns.<sup>33</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

In his so-called "forbidden speech" of 1999 discussing fifty years of Dutch development cooperation, Prince Claus called for reflection and redefinition "founded on principles that go beyond the narrow ones that have characterized much of our past thinking and action to include those of equity and justice." If there is one area in which such an appeal acquires a great sense of urgency, it is the collective identity of indigenous peoples. This address attempted to incorporate the experience of indigenous migrants in the larger debate about indigenous peoples' rights. Evidently, my perspective has been upstream,<sup>34</sup> hopefully encouraging further collaborative initiatives among researchers to help fill the many gaps that remain, as well as among other social and civic actors concerned with building sustainable bridges across multiple cultural divides to defend indigenous peoples rights. This will require rethinking the current nature of indigenous communities from the perspective of migration in terms of the diversity of different ethnic, gender, and regional experiences. This recognition has very practical implications. First, it can help to inform potential strategies through which indigenous migrants can bolster their own capacity for self-representation. Second, this recognition of diversity is crucial for broadening and deepening coalitions with other social actors.

To sum up, indigenous migrants' organizational initiatives and rich collective cultural practices open a window on their efforts to build new lives in distant places from their homelands while remaining who they are and remembering where they come from. This is the challenge they face at the dawn of the XXI century. This may give them the opportunity to achieve the long cherished goal of being "equal in dignity and rights to all other peoples, while recognizing the rights of all peoples to be different, to consider themselves different, and to be respected as such."

## **WORDS OF GRATITUDE**

*Rector Magnifice,*

At the end of this academic session I should like to thank Utrecht University in general and its board in particular for the honor bestowed on me in this appointment. My special thanks are due to the Curatorium of the Prince Claus Chair for their nomination. I still cherish the recollections of my first meeting with its Chair, Princess Máxima of the Netherlands, almost exactly a year ago. The intellectual passion that she demonstrated in explaining to me the contributions of Prince Claus of The Netherlands was truly inspirational.

I should also like to pay special tribute to the Netherlands Institute of Human Rights in general and to its Director, Professor Cees Flinterman, in particular. Indeed, I am looking forward a great deal to my three months based at this wonderful institution.

I am also indebted to my dear friends Maarten Jansen and Aurora Perez for introducing me to The Netherlands for the first time, and to demonstrate with their life's example that Dutch people and *Mixtecos* working together with love can accomplish some great things. I would like to thank also *mi amigo* Professor Bas de Gaay Fortman for his intellectual inspiration and support.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife Shannon and my daughter Noemi for their love and their steady commitment to make this a better world one small step at a time. I wish to dedicate this address to both of them.

Thank you!

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**END NOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> Commission on Human Rights. Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights Fifty-sixth session Agenda item 5 (b). Prevention of discrimination and protection of Indigenous Peoples, Report of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations on its twenty-second session. Chairperson-Rapporteur: Mr. Miguel Alfonso Martínez. 3 August 2004.
- <sup>2</sup> Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, as agreed upon by the members of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations at its eleventh session, Commission on Human Rights, Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, 44<sup>th</sup> Sess. (1993).
- <sup>3</sup> See *Political Theory and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Edited by D. Ivison, P. Patton and W. Sanders. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- <sup>4</sup> On the history of government policies toward peasant grain production, see Fox 1992.
- <sup>5</sup> This is the official estimate of the Government of the Federal District (personal communication, Pablo Yanes, Dirección de Atención a los Pueblos Indígenas, June 2003). For details on ethnicity and the most recent census in the Mexico City context, see Yanes Rizo 2002, as well as Anzaldo Meneses 1999; Dirección de Atención a los Pueblos Indígenas 2001; Gobierno del Distrito Federal 2000. For background on the Assembly of Indian Migrants of Mexico City, see [www.indigenasdf.org.mx/](http://www.indigenasdf.org.mx/).
- <sup>6</sup> The National Indigenous Institute's (INI) most recent estimates of the national indigenous population range between 10.3 and 12.7 million people, depending on the criteria. See Serrano Carreto, Embriz Osorio, and Fernández Ham 2002 for details on the 2000 census. For background on the census and indigenous peoples in Mexico, see Valdés 1995; Lartigue and Quensel 2003. For analyses of indigenous migration by the INI, see Rubio et al. 2000 for an overview, as well as Atilano Flores 2000 and Valencia Rojas 2000. For background, see Molinari Soriano 1979.
- <sup>7</sup> In terms of the relative sizes of these populations in Mexico, according to the INI's analysis of the 2000 population census, the fifteen largest indigenous language groups include: Náhuatl (1,771,000), Maya (1,149,000), Zapoteco (546,000), Mixteco (534,000), Tzotzil (445,000), Otomí (427,000), Tzeltal (349,000), Totonaco (289,000), Mazahua (256,000), Mazateco (224,000), Huasteco (186,000), Chol (174,000), Chinanteco (157,000), Purépecha (141,000), and Tlapaneco (98,000) (Serrano Carreto, Embriz Osorio, and Fernández Ham 2003: 73–74).
- <sup>8</sup> Besserer documented that this municipality received remittances from 171 locations scattered across seven states in Mexico and fifteen states in the United States (2003: 67–69).
- <sup>9</sup> Testimony of Florencio Martínez Hernández, from Tlaxcala, cited in Ramírez Cuevas 2003.
- <sup>10</sup> For example, the first *New York Times* coverage of Mixtec migrants to California appeared in Mydans 1989.

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- <sup>11</sup> Victor Davis Hanson, California State University, Fresno, cited in “Mexifornia: A State of Becoming,” Panel Discussion Transcript, August 19, 2003, National Press Club, Washington, D.C., at [www.cis.org/articles/200e/mexiforniapanel.html](http://www.cis.org/articles/200e/mexiforniapanel.html).
- <sup>12</sup> Cited in Guidi 1992: 162. Note that the use of the term “dialect” instead of words for “language” indicates the still widespread self-denigration of indigenous culture.
- <sup>13</sup> For a more general discussion about the concept of “deterritorialized spaces” see Linda Basch et al. *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects and the Deterritorialized Nation-State*, 1993.
- <sup>14</sup> These binational civic organizations take many forms, ranging from immigrant hometown associations and related community development initiatives to cross-border indigenous rights movements and new advocacy networks for Mexican absentee voting rights.
- <sup>15</sup> Political community is defined here in its broadest sense as the individuals who claim membership in an indigenous community and enjoy rights and responsibilities by participating actively in the internal decision making process and the election of local authorities.
- <sup>16</sup> “La Autonomía una Forma Concreta del Derecho a la Libre Determinación y sus Alcances”. Paper presented by Adelfo Regino from Servicios del Pueblo Mixe A.C. during the first Foro Indígena Nacional celebrated during January 3-8, 1996 in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico. (See page, 2).
- <sup>17</sup> Personal communication, Michael Kearney, July 2003. Ethnic slurs used against indigenous migrants from Guerrero include: “nacos, güancos, huarachudos, montañeros, piojosos, indios pata rajada, calzonudos, comaleros, sombreroños, sin razón, paisanitos, indio bajado a tamborazos de la Montaña, Metlatontos (de Metlatónoc), Tlapanacos (Tlapanecos), son de Tlapa de me conformo (Tlapa de Comonfort), tu no savi, tu sí savi (tu no sabes, tu sí sabes), mixtequillo, indiorante (ignorante), paisa, mixterco (mixteco terco)” (cited in García Leyva 2003).
- <sup>18</sup> For a full discussion on intercommunity land conflict in Oaxaca, see Dennis 1987. Dennis finds that government agencies deliberately allowed such disputes to fester for decades, thereby focusing political conflict inward and preventing the emergence of broader, cross-community coalitions. For an analysis of one of the first political openings—subtle but systematic—that permitted widespread regional, cross-community coalition building in Oaxaca, see Fox 1992. See also Fox 1996 on the dynamics of scaling up indigenous organizations from local to regional levels.
- <sup>19</sup> It would be useful to compare this process with others in which localized collective identities become transformed, through bottom-up antiracist struggle and contact with outside allies, into ethnic and pan-ethnic collective identities. Note Pallares’s study of the Ecuadorian experience with this process (2002).
- <sup>20</sup> The term “Oaxacalifornia” was coined by Michael Kearney and Carole Nagengast, to refer to the deterritorialized community from which new forms of organization and political expression emerged. See their seminal articles: Kearney and Nagengast 1989; Nagengast and Kearney 1990.
- <sup>21</sup> Guelaguetza is a Zapotec word that refers to reciprocity or mutual aid, but its meaning now refers to dance and musical exchanges. The festival centers on a series of dances associated with Oaxaca’s ethnically distinct regions, each with its own music and costumes. In Oaxaca City, the state-sponsored Guelaguetza is the most

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important annual tourist event, but grassroots organizations also organize their own Guelaguetza festivals on special occasions. For historical context that underscores the role of the state government in structuring officially acceptable regional identities, beginning in the 1930s, see Poole 2002, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> For detailed accounts of the role of basketball in Oaxacan migrant communities, see Quiñones and Mittelstaedt 2000; Quiñones 2001. See also the new film *Oaxacan Hoops*, by Olga Rodríguez ([www.oaxacahoops.com](http://www.oaxacahoops.com)). The game's popularity in the northern Sierra region is due in part to the very limited availability of flat space, which makes basketball courts easier to build than the larger soccer fields.

<sup>23</sup> See García 2003b. This report mentions that at present there is only one ball court in the entire city of Oaxaca, compared to ten courts that existed just a few years ago.

<sup>24</sup> His words were published in Spanish in the January 19, 2002, issue of *El Oaxaqueño*.

<sup>25</sup> For more on Radio Bilingüe's programming, see [www.radiobilingue.org](http://www.radiobilingue.org).

<sup>26</sup> To access *El Tequio* newsletter, see [www.laneta.apc.org/fiob](http://www.laneta.apc.org/fiob).

<sup>27</sup> Ventura Morales is now a trilingual community organizer. See his own account (2000), as well as De León's analysis of the role of linguistic disconnects in the trial (1999).

<sup>28</sup> "A written script for Mixtec will help inhabitants from different villages communicate with one another, since the creation of a standardized vocabulary will smooth over linguistic variants [from] the rugged countryside where the language originated," according to the Academy of the Mixtec Language (Stanley 2003a).

<sup>29</sup> For example, Cruz Manjarrez's ethnographic study of the reproduction of highland Zapotec culture in Los Angeles reports, "although most immigrants continue to speak Zapotec for everyday use, most Yalaltecos born in the U.S. just understand it. I have observed that American Yalaltecos generally speak Spanish with their parents and relatives, and usually switch from English to Spanish when they are with friends of their own age. Immigrant Yalaltecos consider it more important for their descendents to learn Spanish than Zapotec" (2001: 49).

<sup>30</sup> For gendered analyses of women's participation in Mexican migrant organizations, see Goldring 2001, 2003a, 2003b. For one of the few analyses of indigenous migrants that bring together ethnicity and gender, see Sánchez G. n.d.2.

<sup>31</sup> Líderes Campesinas is a California-based women's membership organization that is mestiza-led but includes indigenous migrant women as well. It is the first organization in this country founded by and for farmworker women. It is assisting nascent organizations in other states, including Arizona, Iowa, Oregon, Texas, and Washington.

<sup>32</sup> See Flores and Benmayor 1997: 1; Flores 1997: 255, 262. See also Stephen 2003. Johnston 2001 applies the concept of "transnational citizenship" to refer to similar struggles for inclusion with empowerment.

<sup>33</sup> On the vertical integration of civil society policy advocacy, see Fox 2001b.

<sup>34</sup> See Bas De Gaay Fortman's Inaugural Address for the Monsignor Willy Onclin Chair in Comparative Canon Law "Quod Omnes Tangit. . ." (February 27, 2004). Catholic University of Louvain.