

# The Migration Experience as It Relates to Cargo Participation in San Miguel Cuevas, Oaxaca

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## ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of the ongoing effects of migration on municipal governance and community organization in the Mixtec town of San Miguel Cuevas in Oaxaca, Mexico. Legally constituted as a self-governing indigenous municipality, Cuevas has recently been reconstituted as a transnational community whose citizens now reside mainly in Cuevas and Fresno, California. Increased circular and permanent migration to the United States since the late 1980s and the customary law (*usos y costumbres*) enforced in the community, situates its migrants in a complex array of familial and community obligations that require fulfilling civic and ceremonial obligations (*cargos*) in order - to maintain one's citizenship and residence in Cuevas and to have access to its communally owned lands and other resources.

*Keywords:* 1. migration, 2. Mixtec, 3. customary law, 4. *cargo* system, 5. San Miguel Cuevas, Oaxaca.

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## RESUMEN

Este artículo ofrece un recuento de los continuos efectos de la migración sobre el gobierno municipal y la organización de una comunidad mixteca: San Miguel Cuevas, Oaxaca, México. Legalmente constituida como un autogobierno municipal indígena, en décadas recientes, Cuevas ha sido reconstituida como una comunidad transnacional, cuyos ciudadanos radican principalmente en ella y en Fresno, California. La creciente circularidad y permanente migración de Cuevas a Estados Unidos desde finales de los ochenta, así como los usos y costumbres impuestos por la vida comunitaria en Cuevas, pone a sus varones migrantes en una situación complicada para cumplir sus obligaciones familiares y comunitarias —cívicas y ceremoniales (*cargos*)—, que se requieren para mantener su ciudadanía y residencia en Cuevas y tener acceso a tierras comunales y otros recursos.

*Palabras clave:* 1. migración, 2. mixtecos, 3. usos y costumbres, 4. sistema de cargos, 5. San Miguel Cuevas, Oaxaca.

## *Introduction*

The interrelated foci of this article are migration, municipal governance, and identity within San Miguel Cuevas. This article reflects on the migratory experience of three individuals, all with contrasting life experiences, as it relates to the local government of Cuevas. Based on ongoing research, which includes three in-depth interviews with young males, I demonstrate how males increasingly have difficulties in acquiring, maintaining, and ensuring their status as transnational migrant citizens.<sup>1</sup> The life experiences of Flavio Bautista, Rufino Domínguez, and Jesús Gutiérrez allow me to form a hypothesis of the viability of the cargo system. Additionally, in a town meeting in Cuevas, I observed firsthand the ongoing changes of the cargo system.

### *A Transnational Community*

Previous researchers have identified transnational communities as those extended across national borders (Kearney and Nagengast, 1989; Levitt, 2001; Miles, 2004; Smith, 2006). Transnational migrants maintain close relations with their community of origin as a way to resist racism; ties are facilitated by the global market (Szanton Blanc, Basch and Glick Schiller, 1995). A reoccurring question among researchers is why transmigrants need to maintain ties with the community of origin. According to Luin Goldring, new localities “improve their social position and perhaps their power, make claims about their changing status, and have it appropriately valorized, and also participate in changing their place of origin so that it becomes more consistent with their changing expectations and statuses” (Goldring, 1999).

The Mixtecs of Oaxaca, an indigenous group of southern Mexico, cross national, ethnic, class, linguistic, and “racial” bor-

<sup>1</sup>In the political sphere women are not visibly present; hence, they are not mentioned in this piece. Yet, this does not mean that they do not influence local politics or are not affected by the changes in the cargo system.

ders (Kearney, 1986; Stephen, 2007).<sup>2</sup> Previously, foundational works on migrant communities focused on documenting the nuances of family life and community relations, but vaguely discussed the experiences and stressors encountered by Mixtec migrants (Ravicz, 1965; Romney and Romney, 1966). Scholars and researchers have recently focused on migration and its effects on socio-political changes within Mixtec communities (Besserer, 1999; Kearney, 1996; Velasco Ortiz, 2002, 2005). Historically, Mixtecs have migrated within Mesoamerica from pre-Columbian times (Kearney and Besserer, 2004). However, permanent and circular migration became significant only in the later part of the 20th century.

Ongoing changes within the community and external forces such as migration have reconfigured the closed corporate community. Yet migrant communities function as daughter communities to the home community (Kearney, 2003). Cuevas is a complex transnational community because of how it is legally and informally constituted. Specifically, as defined by customary law (*ley consuetudinaria*), married men from the community are obliged to fulfill civic and religious *cargos* to maintain their citizenship and residences in their community of origin (Kearney and Besserer, 2004).<sup>3</sup> Customary law is enacted by the cargo system, which varies across Mixtec towns. The fulfillment of municipal cargos is unpaid and imposes financial hardship upon those appointed due to partial or complete loss of normal income during the period of service.<sup>4</sup>

Recent transnational research indicates that the longer Mixtec communities engage in migration, the more governance is rede-

<sup>2</sup>Mixtecs also live in the Mexican states of Guerrero and Puebla.

<sup>3</sup>Cargos are defined locally by customary law, which is recognized by the *Constitution* of the state of Oaxaca. Of the 570 municipalities in Oaxaca, 418 have opted to so govern themselves, rather than participate in the political party system of governance that prevails in the remainder of Mexico (Kearney and Besserer, 2004). Cargos range from administrative positions to organizing and financing ceremonial events, and often both types are interrelated (Anaya Muñoz, 2006).

<sup>4</sup>Financial hardship may lessen when close kin assist the cargo holder throughout the cargo process (López Bárcenas, 2004a, 2004b).

financed and transformed (Gil Martínez, 2006). As more families from Cuevas become evermore extended from Oaxaca across the U.S.-Mexican border and established in the North, it becomes more financially and socially onerous for those named to municipal offices to return to Cuevas for the extended periods necessary to fulfill their legal and ceremonial obligations (Wence Partida, 2006). Harsh sanctions such as fines, confiscation of property, and expulsion from the community are increasingly being imposed to encourage compliance (Kearney and Besserer, 2004). My ongoing research reaffirms how, as a result of their transnational situation, some citizens of Cuevas are forced to decline civic service; by doing so, they are threatened with the loss of their homes and of municipal citizenship.

Cuevas' system of governance within its present transnational context is thus becoming stressed and transformed accordingly. For example, in Fresno, California, in March 2007, adult migrant male citizens of Cuevas voted to eliminate three of the seven sodalities.<sup>5</sup> However, some youth and elders had opposite reactions. While a young permanent migrant male held that this system was in the best interest of the community, an elderly non-migrant woman argued that it was detrimental to community well-being. Currently, with newly elected town authorities, such decisions are subject to change.<sup>6</sup>

### *Background: Mixtecs*

There are seventeen indigenous groups in Oaxaca; among these, Mixtecs comprise the second largest group (Ravicz, 1965). In Oaxaca, economic, ecological, political, social, and economic conditions cause extensive circular and permanent migration to northern Mexico and California (Garduño, García and Morán, 1989; Stuart and Kearney, 1981). In Oaxaca, widespread soil ero-

<sup>5</sup>This continues to leave 110 cargos. The four remaining sodalities have the following cargos: San Miguel Arcángel-45; Virgen del Rosario-32; Virgen de Guadalupe-25, and Virgen de Dolores-8.

<sup>6</sup>An example of such changes will be presented later in this article.

sion due to deforestation and agricultural practices has caused low agricultural yields, resulting in extensive outmigration. Also, political situations such as land disputes and violent social movements have forced people to leave their community of origin (Cohen, 2007). Land encroachments by *mestizos* have also dislocated some people.

Circular Mixtec migration to nearby Mexican states increased considerably in the 1960s, and subsequently turned to the northwestern states in the early 1970s, and then to the U.S. in the late 1970s. Mixtecs generally emigrated to seek seasonal employment in agricultural labor markets (López and Rusten, 2004). Presently, permanent immigration is increasing because of established networks and because the U.S.-Mexican border is becoming less permeable for people without proper documentation. Income earned in *el norte* compensates for the lack of economic resources in the community of origin.

As “indigenous peoples,” Mixtecs are commonly targets of socioeconomic discrimination by Mexican nationals and other groups, and consequently encounter bleak situations in California with respect to housing, employment, health, and educational opportunities. Recent research findings, particularly those deriving from the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM, metropolitan university of Mexico), have enhanced the ethnography of migration by focusing on the dispersion among localities and the relationships among these (Kearney and Besserer, 2004). They demonstrate that although permanent migration is increasing, Mixtecs continue to replicate traditional cultural practices because of their transnational ties with their original communities.

The community in Oaxaca is defined territorially; therefore, citizens are obliged to participate in religious ceremonies established by the community. Communities such as these have been defined as “closed corporate communities” (Wolf, 1955, 1957), with citizenship typically restricted to persons who are born in, or who marry into, the community. Community membership benefits include access to natural resources and to communally owned land, owning a house in the town, and the right to be

buried in the community of origin.<sup>7</sup> Such socio-cultural practices are recognized by the state government of Oaxaca (Anaya Muñoz, 2006).

### *Municipal Governance*

*Usos y costumbres* is one of the many ways through which indigenous groups from Oaxaca express their indigenous autonomy (Anaya Muñoz, 2006; Cordero Avendaño, 2001; Hernández-Díaz, 2007; López Bárcenas, 2004a). This system of communal governance is rooted in pre-contact local governance and was recently formally recognized by the Oaxacan state government as a legal way for indigenous communities to exercise local autonomy. The current structure of the local government, the *ayuntamiento*, resembles the political organization of the Mexica and Mixtec civilizations during colonial times. For example, the council of elders, *consejo de ancianos*, exerts a strong influence on the assignment of cargos and other decisions vital to the life of the community. Yet this does not signify the absence or influence of local political parties in various community government structures (Velasco Ortiz, 2005). Within the local government, the system of *Bienes Comunales* administers communal land, patrols borders, and is responsible for the distribution or removal of communal land.

The cargo system integrates both religious and civic aspects of governance. This system is traditionally hierarchal. Young males begin serving basic cargos and, as they age and gain experience, move up to important cargos such as the municipal presidency and attain membership as *principales*.<sup>8</sup> *Principales* are elder males who have completed their obligation as community members by

<sup>7</sup>“Legally, most of the communities in Oaxaca are communes in which land and other major resources are owned by the community at large [...]” (Kearney and Besserer, 2004:455).

<sup>8</sup>San Miguel Cuevas is defined as a municipal agency; therefore, the highest appointed authority is the *agente municipal*, whereas in a *cabecera*-district such as Juxtahuaca, the highest elected authority is the municipal president.

giving their service in cargos until they retire (López Bárcenas, 2004a). Cargos are assigned in *asambleas*, assemblies, to which only males are elected and in which they are allowed to vote. Traditionally, status, prestige, and respect are achieved in the community by serving the assigned cargos (López Bárcenas, 2004a; Wolf, 1957). The prestige economy contributes to the socioeconomic, political, and cultural reproduction of the community. Community citizens are required to expend surpluses in the operation of a prestige economy. The community maintains a strong attitude against accumulated wealth (Foster, 1979). The prestige economy operates in support of the community's religious *cofradías* or sodalities, which proffer prestige to citizens, but tend to level them economically.

Yet the former structure is being reshaped at present within the contemporary transnational context. Francisco López Bárcenas (2004b) notes that in Santa Rosa Caxtlahuaca, there are changes in the cargos because of ongoing migration by young people to the U.S. Cargo holders depend on the economic aid of migrants for cargo expenses, which range that from several hundred to thousands of U.S. dollars when there include living and traveling expenses (Estrada Villanueva, 2003; Kearney and Besserer, 2004; Wence Partida, 2006). The economic hardship that each cargo entails encourages males from San Miguel Cuevas to seek income by either borrowing money or migrating. Matus Ruiz (2004) explains that economic strategies are developed to aid with cargo expenses. According to Francisco López Bárcenas (2004b), due to migration the cargo system is drastically changing, but I would also add that in the case of San Miguel Cuevas, the cargo system also impacts migration. In order to subsist, cargo expense migration has become a natural way out.

Paradoxically, cargos in Cuevas also pull people to migrate back to the town. In the case of adult migrants from Cuevas, to fulfill the cargo means to return to the community; more importantly, it signifies having something to which to return by fulfilling the civic obligation. By giving service, they are able to build their houses, contribute to ongoing infrastructural development, and

continue to ascend in the cargo system. However, this decision does not rest upon the individual, because the majority of adult migrants have families and dependents. Their partner must be willing to assist them in the process and to make drastic changes with the living situation. During my fieldwork in Cuevas, I talked to Julita, who was obliged to return to Cuevas. Julita explained to me that her husband was called upon to fulfill his *cargo* obligation. She was living in California. During his service, he asked her and her son to also return to Cuevas; she has now been living in Cuevas for two years. While in California, she supported her husband through remittances; however, the family now struggles to subsist because labor in Cuevas is scarce.

Ariana Estrada Villanueva (2003) notes that when a cargo is assigned, preference is given to migrants residing in the U.S. because they are assumed to be better able financially to cover necessary expenses. For the Christmas *cofradía* in Ixpantepec Nieves, the *mayordomo* expended 58 000 Mexican pesos, and the remaining six *diputados* expended a similar amount (Estrada Villanueva, 2003).<sup>9</sup> The sodalities range from a few persons to as many as 46 couples, depending upon the importance of the venerated saint. In the majority of cases, this implies considerable economic loss. There is resistance to such economic hardship. In recent study, San Miguel Tlacotepec demonstrates how this community's cargo system has opted to offer economic incentives for those holding cargos (Perry *et al.*, 2009). In an *asamblea*, where males are selected for cargos, the majority of those who are eligible do not assist, because this would mean a higher probability of being selected (Estrada Villanueva, 2003).

Some financially buoyant individuals are able to "buy" their way out of the cargos, and cargos can be fulfilled by another person by hiring someone else to serve (López Bárcenas, 2004b).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup>The *mayordomo* is the main person who organizes the fiesta with the help of the *diputados*. In San Miguel Cuevas, the *mayordomo* is an older and married, whereas *diputados* are younger and may or may not be married.

<sup>10</sup>Higher ranked cargos do not allow substitutes. Women and young males are limited to the cargos for which they can substitute.



These practices affect the manner in which a cargo is delivered. The person initially assigned for the cargo not only does not gain experience, but does not voice his vote. Innovative methods are developed to insure that migrants fulfill their duties and that those selected retain their citizenship. For example, Julita explained that during the period her husband was giving his three-year service, her married son was a *diputado* for the Virgen del Rosario. Her son did not return to Cuevas; thus, she and her husband acted as their son's substitute by rendering their service. Julita's son, however, provided the money to sponsor the *fiesta*. Nonetheless, this raises the issue of who actually is able to carry out the cargo, and also, who does the decision-making.

### *Identity*

Multiple dimensions in an individual's identity are shaped by gender, community membership, nationality, class, and education. According to Kearney (n. d.), a person has identities that "are multiple, intricately interrelated, and often contradictory", and he defines such a person as a *polybian*. He further contends that identity is socially constructed and that identity "is in a process of ongoing formation, definition, and application" (Kearney, n. d.). Identity needs to be contextualized because it has many layers (Hall, 1996). Scholars have closely examined how ethnicity is used to create solidarity in a heterogeneous community (Kearney, 2001; Stephen, 1996). Government agencies and political organizations employ ethnic identity to exploit and/or to improve current social conditions (Martínez Novo, 2004; Velasco Ortiz, 2002, 2005). However, both ethnicity and identity draw from their historicity because they are unable to exist without roots.

I argue that a person could be born into an identity, or could acquire it throughout her or his life. The individuals interviewed show examples of both. Being born into the community, the individual has shared characteristics, such as a similar background within a given group, such as an ethnic group. A member of a group that shares common traits feel affiliated with each other;

hence, they may be likely to work together toward a common goal. This is more evident in the case of cargo system. Males born in Cuevas are granted citizenship as long as they give service to Cuevas through the cargo system. Moreover, they are required to continuously reaffirm their membership in the community by giving service to Cuevas. As they escalate through the cargo system, their identity within the community is altered because they garner prestige through the cargos that they hold.

Identity shapes the notions of membership, citizenship, and belonging in a community. This is challenged when a citizen is found in more than one territory, culture, language, and community (Ramírez, 2002). Some youth are born within the territorial borders of the community, but larger numbers are born beyond these. Increasingly, youth are being born in Mexican states other than Oaxaca and in the U.S. According to censuses conducted in Ixpantepec Nieves, San Jerónimo Progreso, Santa María Tindú, and San Miguel Cuevas, the majority of youth reside outside of their geographical borders. Ariana Estrada Villanueva shows that in 1995, there were 520 youths aged 15-29 years, while in 2001 there were 200 youths in the same age range in Ixpantepec Nieves (Estrada Villanueva, 2003).

The notion of the community is being transformed because it is currently conceived as not only existing in multiple places, but also making it possible for others to belong without being physically present within its territorial limits. This imagined community thus allows its citizens to function as citizens although they do not reside within the former (Anderson, 2006). According to Rocío Gil Martínez (2006), community need not be territorially defined, but the sense of belonging defines borders. Gil Martínez notes that belonging is what creates community borders. The sense of belonging informally defines who belongs to the community and defers from the formal definition of citizenship.

Legal citizenship means full membership in the community in which one lives (Hall and Held, 1989; Marshall, 1950). Turner (1993:3) defines citizenship as “a set of practices (judicial, political, economic, and cultural) that define a person as a ‘competent’

member of society.” However, migrants who are away from their community of origin are prevented from fully engaging in these practices. Nevertheless, the citizenship of transnational persons citizenship has become increasingly flexible in response to migration (Ong, 1999). According to Evelyn Glenn, citizenship is a fluid and decentered complex that is continually transformed through political struggle. She states there are three elements that construct citizenship: membership; rights and duties, and the conditions necessary for practice.

### *The Case of San Miguel Cuevas*

Las preocupaciones de los hombres jóvenes son tales que en la comunidad de San Miguel Cuevas es difícil ganar y ahorrar dinero porque no hay mucho trabajo donde pueda uno ganar lo suficiente para mantenerse; el salario que pagan es poco y los gastos son muchos. Por eso, muchos jóvenes preferimos salir de nuestro pueblo y emigrar a Estados Unidos o a otro lugar donde podamos conseguir trabajo y podamos ahorrar un poco de dinero, ya que aquí en nuestro pueblo hay muchos servicios, cooperación y cargos que tenemos que cumplir<sup>11</sup> (José, Summer of 2006).<sup>12</sup>

Jose speaks as young male eligible to comply with all the responsibilities that entail being a community member of San Miguel Cuevas. José’s concerns are deeply interrelated with his subsistence, with being a male, with his responsibilities toward his town, and with migration.

<sup>11</sup>“The young males’ worries are that in the community of San Miguel Cuevas it is difficult to earn and save money because there is not much work to earn sufficient money to subsist; the salary that they [employers] pay is little and the expenses are considerably large. That is why many youth [like myself] prefer to leave our town and emigrate to the United States or to another place where we can get jobs and can save a little of money, since here in our town there are a lot of services, cooperation [monetary], and *cargos* that we must comply with” (authors translation).

<sup>12</sup>Jose’s age is unknown, and we do not know if this is his actual name. The only information I have available is that he was among the 12 youths whose age ranges from 11 to 23 years old and participated in project titled “San Miguel Cuevas: Miradas jóvenes de una comunidad” (2006). This was the first phase of Georgia Melville and Emilia Ramírez project.

Presently, Cuevas has approximately two thousand persons dispersed in California and among other states in the U.S. and Mexico (Matus Ruiz, 2004).<sup>13</sup> Lone males were the original migrants to California, but at present entire families reside in Fresno, California, the majority farm workers (Rusten and Kearney, 1994). Cuevas, a predominantly Mixtec-speaking community, has a high ratio of non-migrating elderly and child residents. Recently, single and married women have migrated in greater numbers (Cota-Cabrera *et al.*, 2009).

From January to mid-February 2007, I observed and participated with a youth group in Casa San Miguel in Fresno as they worked on the San Miguel Cuevas “Young Visions of a Community Project”. This project, coordinated by two student researchers, Georgia Melville and Emilia Ramírez Valenzuela from the UAM Anthropology Department, created an exhibit with pictures and text describing the perspectives of youth in their communities: Cuevas and Fresno. I have been conducting ongoing preliminary research since July 2006. I draw largely from three in-depth interviews conducted on the last weekend of January 2007 with three individuals: Flavio Bautista, Jesús Gutiérrez, and Rufino Domínguez, and a month later, I conducted a post-interview with Jesús.<sup>14</sup> I utilized my observation notes from an *asamblea*, which I attended while conducting my 2009 fieldwork, to demonstrate the process involved in the decision-making of Cuevas.

The interviewees’ reflection is based on their experience in the U.S. and their interest in Cuevas. In addition, the backgrounds of these individuals do not necessarily exemplify a general prototype of migrants from Cuevas. Rather, they demonstrate an array of experiences and voice the concerns of those who are willing to

<sup>13</sup>Exact numbers are not available since the Mexican national census only counts persons who are present at the time of the census and Cuevas’ officials only document male citizens, of which they presently list 645. A reasonable assumption is that both censuses undercount the actual municipal population by about 75 percent.

<sup>14</sup>The interviews addressed topic related to migration, labor, education, and political experience as well as identity. The interviews were conducted in Fresno, California.

share them. *Don* Rufino is the General Coordinator of the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB) in Fresno, California. This organization, through binational efforts, has strived to promote and protect indigenous rights through political, social, and cultural events, forums, actions, and dialogue. Flavio, a community worker who conducts outreach, advocacy, and who is a paralegal works with the California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA), also a non-profit organization, which through legal means promotes and protects the rights of California's rural poor, such as Mixtec farm workers.<sup>15</sup> *Don* Rufino and Flavio work in organizations that have allowed them to be aware of the often bleak conditions the *Mixtecos* encounter in California. Jesús, who works putting up fences in the Fresno area, participated in the Melville and Ramírez Valenzuela project because he has an interest in the community where he lived for a couple of years. It is their interest in Cuevas and their desire to communicate their ideas that sets them apart from other *Mixtecos* from Cuevas who, as Jesús says, "*ni les va ni les viene*" (Gutiérrez, 2007, interview).<sup>16</sup> Both Jesús and Flavio are in their early twenties, whereas *don* Rufino is in his late forties. Of the three, only Flavio is a *comunero*, defined as one who provides a service in the cargo system.

Based on the interviews I conducted, it is difficult to generalize about all the people from Cuevas because I interviewed only males who are interested in community-related activities and are willing to talk about their life with me. Jesús was born in Oregon and raised in Mexico, and recently arrived in Fresno to work since he left with his mother as an eight-month-old infant. He is eager to make money, and returned to Morelos, Mexico, to start his own business. On the other hand, Flavio was born in Cuevas and raised in California, and although he returned for nine months to Cuevas as a teenager, plans to remain in the U.S. *Don* Rufino, found at the other end of spectrum, left Cuevas as

<sup>15</sup>Flavio's job title is community worker. This entails performing outreach and being an advocate and paralegal. Approximately a year after the interview, he resigned his position to become a full-time college student.

<sup>16</sup>It comes and goes, and they could care less about it.

a youth and was a migrant for more than 20 years in California and in northern Mexico.

Each individual's education, work, social network, and migration history are directly linked with the way they self-identify. All three individuals had a formal education; *don* Rufino and Jesús attended a *secundaria*.<sup>17</sup> Both Flavio and Jesús are seeking higher education and aspire to either practice law or to start a business. Flavio states that the "way to go is education" (Bautista, 2007, interview). Education is perceived as a venue to terminate the cycle, the interminable assignment of cargos on a bi-annual basis that the cargo system has established. The cargo system does not allow people to discontinue their participation without being reprimanded, fined, or ostracized from Cuevas by fellow citizens. The interviewees' educational experience demonstrates the blatant discrimination and ubiquitous incidents of racism that they confronted when they were labeled as indigenous or *mixteco* by fellow Mexicans. For example, while in school both Flavio and Jesús were called pejorative names and were bullied by peers.<sup>18</sup> They were ostracized because they are indigenous. In other situations, there was a sense of self-rejection, as in the case of *don* Rufino, who regrets that as a youth he felt embarrassed to say that he was a *mixteco*. *Don* Rufino was harshly criticized and ridiculed by fellow classmates because he was labeled as being indigenous when attending a school in Juxtlahuaca, Oaxaca. He was exposed to other youth who were phenotypically differently, *güeros*, light-skinned peers, and who spoke another language, Spanish (Domínguez Santos, 2007, interview).<sup>19</sup> Both skin tone and language serve as criteria to differentiate *mixtecos* from others.

The contact that the three interviewees had with people from outside of their immediate community during their time at school

<sup>17</sup>Junior high school.

<sup>18</sup>Interviewees did not specify. Jesús states that it was his classmates, who in his case were Mexicans, because he attended a school in Mexico.

<sup>19</sup>Domínguez states that Juxtlahuaca predominantly has *ladinos*, i.e., *güeros*, who speak only Spanish. *Ladinos*, *güeros*, are people with Spanish and Indigenous ancestry who have fair skin.

was expanded upon coming into contact with non-*mixtecos* or *mexicanos* through their employment. According to Flavio, working at the CRLA has enabled him to meet people who he otherwise would not have. Similarly, through *don* Rufino's work in indigenous rights, he has met people such as Rigoberta Menchú Tum. He became conscious of his indigenous identity when he was 17. Since that time, he has become politically active and concerned with Indigenous rights. Jesús identifies as Mexican because he was raised in Morelos, although he was born in the U.S. The employment and the social work that each interviewee has are deeply intertwined because they depend upon each another.

The interviewees identify differently depending on the situation. When I asked Flavio, "If a random person asks what you are, how would you respond?," he answered, "well... it depend on who [asks]." He is, after all, a *mexicano* because he is from Mexico, but he is also a *mixteco* because he is from Cuevas. Note that he did not say this because he spoke the language or because he looked Indigenous. If someone is a *paisano*, someone from the Mixteca of Oaxaca, he tells them that he is from Cuevas. If someone "White" asks him, then he tells them that he is Mexican but also Indigenous, a *mixteco*. He tells Mexicans that he is from Mexico and adds "*Mixteco, soy indígena, soy de Oaxaca.*"<sup>20</sup> He definitely does not identify as Hispanic because he associates this term with the Spanish who invaded Mexico. Flavio's identity is multiple and his response in relation to self-identification varies upon who inquires Jesús is *mexicano* even though he is a U.S. citizen by birth. Whether in the U.S. or Mexico, he remains a *mexicano*. He says that he cannot identify as an American because he was raised in Mexico. Their identity is relative to the context in which they are found.

Being concerned with the cargo system, my interviewees claimed the need to change the system to suit "modern times". The cargo system, Rufino states, is archaic, not pragmatic in *los tiempos de hoy en día*.<sup>21</sup> According to my interviewees, this system

<sup>20</sup>"Mixtec, I am Indigenous, I am from Oaxaca."

<sup>21</sup>The phrase translates to "our modern times".

does not facilitate the life of migrant *mixtecos* from Cuevas and is perceived and experienced as an obstacle to securing employment and economic improvement in both Cuevas and in Fresno. When I asked Flavio if he thinks that his having migrated to the U.S. changed the way he perceives the cargo system, he explains:

It's not a bad cycle, but it's a cycle that just makes you, a *vuelta* you know *no te puedes salir* [...] and I mean a lot is cause I was lucky my dad was smart enough to submit documents for us in order to become residents [...] and I guess that is what has opened my eyes [...] and then the education I got and people I've been around and exposed to and talk to [...] If I hadn't come here, *no pensaría así, igualito*.<sup>22</sup> (Bautista, 2007, interview).

Similarly, when I presented this preliminary data at the V International Colloquium at the UAM, it was brought to my attention that in fact the cargo system is undergoing drastic changes.<sup>23</sup> Velasco Ortiz (2005:47) demonstrates how various communities in the Municipality of Juxtlahuaca, to which Cuevas belongs, are coping with the constant out-migration of their community members in relation to the cargo system. Flavio's case exemplifies these changes, because he has prioritized his goals as first, education, second, employment, third, purchase of a home, and last, being a *comunero*. These are drastic changes that may become a current trend for youth residing for long periods of time in California. Flavio notes that other males from Cuevas his age who recently migrated are forming families and are sending remittances to Cuevas. In the 21st century, there are two generations of in Fresno: one that does not perceive Cuevas as part of their future, and the other, who may not.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup>"To go around in circles"; "cannot get out"; "I would not think the same."

<sup>23</sup>I participated as a panelist in the V Coloquio Internacional, Balance de los Estudios Transnacionales: Una Visión desde la Docencia.

<sup>24</sup>I was able to interview such people since the persons who attended the meeting were all younger members of the community and were at least bilingual in both Spanish and English. There was a single mother who participated occasionally.



These changes have affected various aspects of these individuals' lives. The place where each person has spent the majority of their lifetime, their family support, and how they perceive their future is related to migration. Migration has shaped their life experiences in Fresno, California, and their relationship with Cuevas, Oaxaca, Flavio states that had he not migrated sixteen years ago and if he did not possess legal status in the U.S., he would be like *them*, meaning that he be married and be sending money to Cuevas, as other young males from Cuevas who have recently migrated. Similarly, Jesús states that he would have a life similar to that of his cousins, who are married, have children, and work. Migration has been a turning point for these individuals; both Flavio and Jesús are U.S. citizens and freely criticize the cargo system. In the case of *don* Rufino, migration became the only option when he was forced to leave Cuevas after he challenged an authoritarian individual in there. Oddly, because he is a migrant and cannot sacrifice work, family, and/or health, he has stopped participating in the cargo system in Cuevas and has consequently lost his status as a *comunero*. Migration plays a critical role at present because there are higher stakes at risk, such as losing town membership by not participating in the cargo system.

As Flavio explains, the migrations of his grandfather and father were different from his migration experience, as they were temporary and people returned to Cuevas. Unlike Jesús, Flavio views his stay in Fresno as permanent because he has nothing in Cuevas. Similarly, *don* Rufino states that he cannot take his children back to Cuevas because they consider the U.S. their home. The idea of where their home is located is a direct consequence of migration. *Don* Rufino explains that children who have parents who are from Cuevas but who have been raised in the U.S. for greater part of their lives perceive the U.S. as their home. He predicts that they will experience an identity crisis. However, this is opposite to what Flavio experiences. If people like Flavio, consider the U.S. as home, why would they want to continue to participate actively in the cargo system, because they are unable to benefit from it? In a way, the cargo system is good because, as Flavio states "things

[religious cargos] are done collaboratively". However, he also explains that people who continue with the cargo system, as does his father, do so because they have their homes in Cuevas and plan to retire there. Jesús says that one can obtain land in Cuevas, but in order to not lose it, this requires many investments. Jesús considered joining the cargo system in Cuevas, but Cuevas requires him to pay nearly 1 000 dollars and to donate money for the upcoming cargos. His bi-weekly salary in Mexico, 150 dollars, is not sufficient to be able to donate such an amount. He believes that this makes it difficult for people from Cuevas, particularly if they are undocumented, to comply with these expenditures.

All three criticize the cargo system in Cuevas as inflexible in the face of change and an impediment to economic mobility. For example, *don* Rufino states that three important fiestas must be retained, and adds that certain civil cargos are simply pointless, such as the water and electricity cargos, because there are paid governmental agencies that provide such services.<sup>25</sup> Flavio states that there are too many fiestas and contends that these must be eliminated because they are not part of the community's indigenous culture. Important municipal cargos can only be maintained if they are paid positions. Their critiques are based on their experiences with the cargo system. Flavio has recently joined the cargo system, and had been hesitant to accept his previous religious cargo due to the workload and money invested with nothing given in exchange. *Don* Rufino stopped participating in the cargo system a couple of years ago because it prevented him from continuing his work and because he thought it was unfair to relocate his family to Cuevas. Jesús knows that the amount of money required to join and participate is not plausible. I gather that based on their migration experience, participating annually in the cargo system is observed as economically onerous.

Their experience in California has impacted how they perceive the cargo system in Cuevas. The notion of individuality promo-

<sup>25</sup>The three fiestas are Día de los Muertos, San Miguel Arcángel, and Virgen de Guadalupe. The water and electricity issue is handled by a committee of three to five males and requires a one-year cargo service.

ted in California clashes with the idea behind a community in Cuevas. The shift in the order of priorities, which is not necessarily negative, pushes the person away from a system of economic leveling. While education is a priority, it is uncertain how this will help Cuevas. Will Flavio use his education to lessen the burden he perceives from the cargos? The function behind the cargo system, which is to level everyone and to pull individuals into the community, does not work for Jesús and Flavio. This is also visible when adults from Cuevas struggle to accept their cargos.

While conducting my field work, I attended *asambleas*, specifically, the *cambio de poderes*, transfer of governance, in early January 2009, for the *Bienes Comunes* and *Consejo de Vigilancia* in Cuevas. At this meeting, the decision-making process became more evident and the impact that migration has exerted this process is observable. Over the loudspeaker, the municipal secretary announces in Spanish: “*Se le invita a todo el pueblo en general para que asista a la asamblea general...*”;<sup>26</sup> he then repeats the invitation in Mixtec. From what I observed, those who attend are males, both elders and young teens. Those who actively engage in the meetings are few: only adults who had occupied highly ranked cargos participated. When I asked women why they did not attend, they responded that only males attended the meetings and that it is not socially acceptable for women to attend.

The *agente municipal* presents the topic, which he has previously discussed with his *cabildo*, the men in attendance, and asks them for their opinion. The men, about one hundred in attendance this time and all seated in the *agencia municipal*, conduct discussions in small groups for twenty minutes. This meeting was different from one that I attended in November 2008, when more migrants attended the meeting, which was held in the *agencia municipal*'s courtyard.<sup>27</sup> The agenda begins to be addressed when someone stands and voices the concerns; this is usually an older, respected male who in the Mixtec language eloquently voices what he has previously discussed with the men seated around him. Another

<sup>26</sup>The community in general is being invited to attend the meeting.

<sup>27</sup>The town hall's courtyard is an open space available for big events.

adult male seconds this and then unanimously everyone agrees with the decision. The *agente* thanks the men and moves on to the second topic.

The topic of discussion for the January 2009 assembly was Antonio. Antonio resides outside of Cuevas. He had been elected in November 2008 as the secretary of *Bienes Comunales* for three years, 2009-2012, but has not come forward to explain his absence or to provide an excuse for not assuming his assigned cargo. The decision was to “*levantar un acta.*” This meant his removal as a *comunero* in Cuevas. The *principales* and others from the meeting mentioned that he was following in the footsteps of his father. Those present at the meeting have held cargos during service years of 2008-2009 and 2009-2010, and remain in Cuevas on a semi-permanent basis. Among these are males who decide to stay after the festivities in Cuevas for personal reasons. Thus, those making the decision are those who have ongoing contact with Cuevas. No one sided with Antonio, not even his brother, who resides permanently in Cuevas.

Two men were required to switch their cargos due to the fact that Antonio’s cargo could not remain vacant, which required documentation by the agrarian reform board. This process took longer because the *asamblea* had to plea with Bernardo to accept Antonio’s cargo. Previously, Bernardo had held a cargo of lesser rank, hence obligation. He reluctantly accepted, although he argued that he was not elected by *na ñuu*, the people, and thought that he was not qualified to replace Antonio. Bernardo explained that he did not speak or write Spanish well, thus limited in the manner in which he could carry out the cargo. Therefore, he issued a reminder that he not be criticized on how he delivers the cargo.

In another case, Juan, a California migrant, appealed to the *asamblea* for a change in his cargo because he was unable to fulfill the assignment for personal reasons; he explained that he has to travel frequently to California. Juan also proposed that his cargo term and that of his fellow cargo holder be shortened from three years to a year and half. Thus, the burden would be lessened and

more men would readily accept their cargos. He had consulted with the representative of the agrarian office and was told that any changes could be made as long as the *asamblea* agreed to it. After many pleas from the men present at the meeting, the *asamblea* convinced Juan to accept his cargo. The men did acknowledge that by shortening the term, men will happily accept cargos lasting a year and a half.

Oddly, others who have experienced similar situations did not sympathize with Juan and Antonio. No one suggested any solutions; rather, they were asked to assume the cargo first, because they were elected by *na ñuu*. The men at the meeting comforted Bernardo by telling him that one never really knows what to do initially, but that they will learn through experience. Juan was reminded that as someone born in Cuevas, he must fulfill his responsibility. This responsibility, they informed him, derived from generations and must continue. Secondly, there was no else to replace him. Although they agreed that everyone has difficulties in fulfilling the cargos, there are no alternatives and that he, then, ought to assume it.

During the *cambio de poderes*, I observed the interaction among the decision-makers, the *na ñuu*, and the cargo holder. Moreover, I heard the justifications, although simplistic, but important in carrying out cargos. The cargos have been in existence because they have been passed on from generation to generation. The cases of Antonio and Juan demonstrate how their status as migrants influences the cargo system and how the cargo influences their lives. Thus, the *Bienes Comunales* was short-handed by one person, because no alternatives to replace the men who had to switch his cargo.

### *Conclusion*

In sum, from the perspective of males from Cuevas concerning Cuevas's governance based on their migration experience, Cuevas's cargo system is inflexible; the system, at different times, pushes and pulls people out of and into the community. All three

interviewees agree that the cargo system needs to be changed to alleviate the amount of money and time invested, because it is not working under the current conditions faced by migrants from Cuevas. The problems that the 2009-2012 cargo system in Cuevas has encountered will become more prevalent for subsequent cargos, and the perceptions that youth have of the cargo may also become widespread in Cuevas. The cargo system's intransigence and the number of cargos to be fulfilled in a person's lifetime are not realistic, considering the current scenario of the Mixtecs.

In Cuevas, there is a strong sense of community responsibility that is reinforced by community participation, yet this is continually challenged when Cuevas' migrants become permanent migrants in California. Cuevas depends on its migrants to continue with its governance for securing natural resource and infrastructure development. In order to fulfill a cargo, due to the economic demands, males are required to migrate to hold a cargo; notwithstanding this, in other obligations, such as giving service in the *Bienes Comunales*, they are required to be present in Cuevas. This becomes further complicated when current and new migration restraints come into play. There are cases in which people are forced to return to Cuevas because of deportation, or because they are transmitting their legal documents and must choose to either remain in California or in Mexico.

To some extent, the cargo system has been a characteristic that uniquely identifies and distinguishes people from Cuevas from other migrants in California because the system ties them to their community, and whether the system acts for their benefit or detriment, encourages them to return and to maintain their status as members of the community. Striving to be part of a community and achieving economic success in California do not go hand in hand. As noted, the person's notion of individuality conflicts with the idea of collectiveness. Youth struggle with the idea of sacrificing their own priorities, such as education and economic mobility, to benefit their community. This could very well be the root of the problem for *comuneros*; in the final analysis, a cargo impedes them from being economically mobile. Although

fulfilling cargos increases their prestige, this does not necessarily have great significance for youth who have grown up outside of Cuevas.

The descending number of youth in Cuevas due to migration is common to other Mixtec communities. The ramification of migration on communities such as Cuevas causes not only demographic change, but also dictates the manner in which the youth practice their customary law. The latter is characterized by its notion of reciprocity and community service. However, these notions are gradually being lost as social and religious cargos are eliminated. Cargos encourage reciprocity and community service. Social and religious cargos also generate a flow of goods, people, and ideas. Entire communities are known for their weeks of celebration, and migrants have something to which to look forward. Through cargos, individuals garner status and prestige. Fiestas and cargos signify the return of a long-absent *comunero*.

This leads us to the reality that Mixtec communities face. What will bring Mixtec migrants back to their home town at times when they are crucial to the economic, social, political life of the community? Mixtec communities such as that of Cuevas, Oaxaca, depend on their migrants to contribute economically, but what are the consequences when a generation of youth is questioning this idea? Will the lack of the participation of young males allow for a more active role of females in municipal cargos? How are the notions of belonging, membership, citizenship, and identity redefined when a person loses his status as a *comunero* in the community? A person from Cuevas has claims to this when he is recognized as a *comunero*. What, then, is a person who claims he is no longer recognized by the community?

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### *Interviews*<sup>28</sup>

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Date of receipt: August 18, 2008.

Date of acceptance: February 3, 2009.

<sup>28</sup>All interviews were conducted by the author in Fresno, California, in 2007.