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Religious Negotiation and Identity Formation: Reading Material Religion in Oaxaca's

“Guelaguetza Oficial”

An Honors Paper for the Department of Religion

By Rene Sebastian Cisneros

Bowdoin College, 2023

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## Introduction

Scholars of Mexican religion after the Spanish Conquest emphasize the role of public festivity in popular Catholic practice. Their historical analyses often center the visible and material expressions of religion throughout the country's history, emphasizing the causes and consequences of changing trends in public Catholic veneration. Catholic practice in southern Mexican communities has always incorporated Indigenous identity and culture. These result in negotiated religious practice most evident in regional popular forms of Catholic veneration, celebration, and festivities. Thus, scholars of religion in Mexico continually underscore the combinations of Indigenous belief and Catholic practice that lived religious practice there has developed. Southern Mexico is home proportionately high number of Indigenous municipalities and Indigenous identifying populations in its urban population and commercial centers, such as that of Oaxaca City—the capital of Oaxaca which is a state in the southwest of Mexico and home to the second highest proportion of Indigenous identifying residents.<sup>1</sup> This thesis will demonstrate how religion remains integral to public festivity and civic ceremony of present-day Oaxaca, subverting recent scholarship that explains away the state government and economy's modern appropriation of Indigenous culture as expressions of hegemonic political and economic aims. I will argue that Oaxaca's history of Indigenous-Catholic practice paints modern ceremonial life, such as during Oaxaca City's folk-dance festival *Guelaguetza*, as sites of continued negotiation between authorized identity and popular religion in Oaxaca.

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a turning point for Catholic practice in Mexico as the 1910 Mexican Revolution resulted in liberal republican forces establishing a new secular republic

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<sup>1</sup> INEGI 2015 (National Institute of Statistics and Geography). *Encuesta Intercensal 2015*, 2015. (accessed April 7, 2023).

after centuries of rule under either the Spanish empire or autocratic monarchies. The republican powers proceeding the *Porfiriato* era of Mexican national politics harnessed changing national attitudes into lasting political reform which sought to modernize religious practice in the country. The liberal federal and state governments who inherited a nation born out of enlightenment ideals of federalism and modern state-making passed laws discontinuing the political dominance of the Catholic Church in political affairs in Mexico. In terms of individual religious practice in Mexico, the republican government promoted an image of enlightened private and individual practice where educated Mexican nationals pledged allegiance to the new Mexican republic rather than the Catholic Church or any local, state, and regional identities.

Any remaining signs of Catholic practice after this period of secular reform needed to be deemed by both state and national governments as acceptable for secular public space. This meant that public festivity and religious practice had to fall in line with the emerging national ethos of secular public politics and racial projects of *Mestizaje*, or the Mexican racial project of mixing Indigenous and Spanish identities and racial categories into an emergent Mexican and mestizo race. Despite the best efforts of Catholic clergy, secular priests, religious orders, and everyday Indigenous and Mestizo folk who forged alliances to maintain social institutions of religious practice, such as Catholic schools or ecclesiastic ownership of land, the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a drastic transformation of lived and public religious practice throughout Mexico.

This thesis seeks to outline this resulting modern religiosity of Mexican life, using the case of one specific modern-day Oaxacan public festivity to demonstrate the transformation of religious life in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Oaxaca. The Catholic tradition of venerating the *Virgen del Carmen* in Oaxaca City began at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was soon after co-opted by local city officials into becoming an outwardly secular urban dance performance. The first ‘homages’ between both

the festivities of the Virgen de Carmen and what Oaxaqueños know today as Guelaguetza clearly performed and commemorated the diversity of the state's racial and ethnic groups and their ultimate incorporation into a Oaxacan identity, which was an ideal in line with wider Mestizaje and nationalist ideologies.<sup>2</sup> This celebration of the Virgen del Carmen incorporated the most popular forms of public festivity in the region to these early nationalist and civic ends.

While the present-day Guelaguetza retains a similar colloquial name as to that of its Catholic predecessor, “Lunes del Cerro” or Mondays of the Hill, named after its traditional/historical site of celebration of one of Oaxaca City's surrounding hills named the *Cerro Del Fortin*, and it embodies the history of public Catholic and folk Indigenous religion in the Mixtec and Zapotec region of Oaxaca in the Northwest region of the state. This thesis will explain the origins of what Oaxaqueños now formally call the *Guelaguetza Oficial* by tracing Oaxaca's history of popular religious practice. This analysis of the cultural history of Guelaguetza situates this public celebration firmly within the history of popular religiosity in the state, explaining how its dances, aesthetics, and history exists as an ongoing site of religious innovation.<sup>3</sup> The case of the Guelaguetza Oficial suggests that public religiosity in the state was not extinguished as liberal reformers of the post-Revolutionary era desired. Instead, public religion and religious festivity transformed into a new form of public celebration. The Guelaguetza Oficial which we see today is a product of new sacred values which blend both Indigenous Zapotec, Mixtec, and Catholic religion within a contemporary post-agricultural national economy and globalized public space.

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<sup>2</sup> Deborah Poole, “Mestizaje, Distinction, and Cultural Presence: The View Form Oaxaca,” in *Histories of Race and Racism: The Andes and Mesoamerica from Colonial Times to the Present*, ed. Laura Gotkowitz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 179-220.

<sup>3</sup> Henceforth I will refer to the *Guelaguetza Oficial of Oaxaca City* as *Guelaguetza Oficial* or simply *Guelaguetza*.

## What is Guelaguetza?

The state of Oaxaca is in the southern Pacific coast of Mexico, while its capital city and population center is in the *Valley of Oaxaca* where its diverse landscape reflects the great number of different Indigenous peoples who reside in the state. The state officially recognizes eight distinct ethnic regions, the two most populous of which being the *Central Valleys* region where Oaxaca City is located, and the *Mixtec* region named after the Mixtec civilization. Oaxaca has a significantly high percentage of residents who identify as Indigenous, with 65.7% self-responding as “fully Indigenous” compared to only 21.5% of all Mexicans respondents who identify as Indigenous in 2015.<sup>4</sup> Over half of the population of Oaxaca lives in rural communities while the capital city of Oaxaca City had a population of around 265,000 in 2015.<sup>5</sup> Mixtec and Zapotec are the two Indigenous-Oaxacan ethnicities most represented of all indigenous groups in the state, with over 55% of Indigenous language speakers speaking one of the two languages.

The *Guelaguetza* Official of Oaxaca City’s name derives from the Zapotec term of *guendalezaa* that in Zapotec-speaking communities refers to a pre-Hispanic enduring form of gift ritual and mutual aid. In Oaxaca City, however, Guelaguetza refers to an annual folk-dance festival which began in 1934.<sup>6</sup> Guelaguetza is an annual folk-dance festival split into two performances, one on each Monday of the last two weeks of July. The dance consists of different choreographed dances which blend regional musical anthems, their respective genres of traditional dance which include ballads and *Jarabes* which normally mix Spanish colonial styles and Indigenous ceremonial traditions, and intricate costumes (*trajes*) which all together celebrate the eight officially recognized ethnic regions of the state. During the Guelaguetza Official each of Oaxaca’s

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<sup>4</sup> INEGI 2015. *Encuesta Intercensal 2015*.

<sup>5</sup> The state’s surveying agency classifies rural villages as municipalities with under 2,500 residents.

<sup>6</sup> Jancsó, Katalin. 2003. “La Guelaguetza: Una Fiesta Moderna De México”. *Acta Hispanica* 8 (January):101-7. <https://doi.org/10.14232/actahisp.2003.8.101-107>, 103-4.



eight state-recognized regions sends a representative dance delegation to perform their respective regional dance. The Oaxacan State *Committee of Authenticity* invites these regional dance groups to perform in what the state labels as “the most popular celebrations of Oaxacan culture.”<sup>7</sup>

Guelaguetza’s attendees, performers, and organizers see Guelaguetza as both a unified representation of Oaxacan culture and a gala for the *stylized* diverse plethora of different traditions and identities in the state. I place emphasis here on stylized as many anthropologists and sociologists have explored the way in which the event as a performance of diversity never comes close to conveying the breadth of different local Indigenous culture found in Oaxaca.<sup>8</sup> Instead, Guelaguetza’s performance represents an ideal of Oaxacan Indigeneity that, as this thesis will argue, takes inspiration from both Zapotec and Mixtec Indigenous religious life and Catholic evangelization and the syncretic religious practices of Oaxaca’s many different communities. This is the result of historical and enduring religious tensions between existing modes of Indigenous religious belief and institutionalized Oaxacan Catholic practice, and eventually secular civic values. Present-day Guelaguetza continues to rely on the subsequent Catholic and Indigenous imagery and histories of religious practice to evoke feelings of being-in-community.

The Oaxacan Guelaguetza Oficial happens on the *Cerro del Fortin* on which, according to both tradition and sparse anthropological records, Aztec and Zapotec peoples would celebrate the God/Goddess of maize, Centeotl, through dance and music and ritual sacrifice. Today on top of this hill lies an architecturally modern, sleek white roofed auditorium, straightforwardly named the *Auditorio Guelaguetza*. Here performers from the eight recognized regions of the state perform one dance each from their respective region. These dances go on for around 10 minutes of smaller

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<sup>7</sup> Gobierno del Estado de Oaxaca, “La Guelaguetza - Archivo General del Estado de Oaxaca.” Accessed September 9, 2022. <https://www.oaxaca.gob.mx/ageo/la-guelaguetza/>.

<sup>8</sup> Erika J. Pettersen, “The Image of La India in Oaxaca, Mexico: Forging Afro-Descendant Visibility and Trans-Modern Indigeneity at the 2019 Guelaguetza” (master’s thesis, Tulane University, 2020).

pieces, *sones*, that each represent a story in the form of dance. The Orchestral State band of Oaxaca provides the music using both modern brass and wooden wind instruments, some of the later are reminiscent of both colonial traditional instruments and some percussions that archon back to pre-Hispanic music. Recent renditions of the Guelaguetza Oficial demonstrate the multifaceted role of the celebration in the complicated history and demographics of Oaxaca in present-day social implications of globalization and neoliberal tourist economies. When looking at the history of Guelaguetza, especially in its beginnings as a civic cultural festival in the 1930s and how it has progressed to its modern form, contemporary performances show a complicated development of the role of public festivity in modern Oaxaca and lived religious practice's role in shaping this new role.

### Theoretical Roadmap

Often noting the shift in both legally acceptable and socially popular public religion in modern Oaxaca, recent scholars have often single out the political and social role of Guelaguetza in generating feelings of local identity.<sup>9</sup> This thesis will demonstrate how Guelaguetza retains and navigates through the history of everyday religiosity in Oaxacan life. While Guelaguetza is a festival that only came to its shape in a “racial homage” festival in 1932, and that not until 1969 became something that resembles how Oaxaqueños celebrate it today, its different cultural aspects are products of other developments in material culture in the last 200-300 years. This thesis explores how the arbiters of modern liberal secularism in Mexico, nationalization efforts by

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<sup>9</sup> Jesús Lizama Quijano. “La Guelaguetza en Oaxaca: fiesta, relaciones interétnicas y procesos de construcción simbólica en el contexto urbano.” Mexico, D.F.: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS), 2006.

different sectors of Oaxacan society, and the enduring power of Catholic clergy and Catholic communities throughout the history of Oaxaca determined how Guelaguetza is celebrated today.

By adjusting the type of stories that illustrate the way the Guelaguetza is celebrated in present-day Oaxaca City, this thesis will expand the archive upon which we understand what agents and processes take part in shaping popular values, forms of civic public life, and the individual feelings of identity in modern Mexico. The Cartesian divide between mind and body shaped prominent epistemologies of religion in post-enlightenment scholarship. This split between the internal world of thought (belief) and the outer world of experience (practice) promotes the idea that religion resides primarily in the psychological processes of meaning-making. We find this epistemological jump in many post-Enlightenment definitions of religion, ranging from Durkheim's formulation of the sacred and profane divide or Rudolph Otto's usage of the term numinous to emphasize the cognitive reception of a supernatural and overpowering force just outside of full perception. Here the material world, sensuous and multifaceted, needs some kind of symbolic order imposed upon it to make any sense or hold any meaning. This thesis is informed by a recent turn in the study of religion away from this Cartesian divide and towards the material signs of religion, grounded in the assertion that "artifacts or environments produce and maintain a web of relations that brings human beings to what really matters to them—their people, their land, their gods or ancestor."<sup>10</sup> This newfound interest in the material culture of religion uncovers a new plane on which religious life interacts with seemingly secular aspects of social life.

In response to preconceptions about how religious life is experienced, scholars like Manuel A. Vasquez reassert the role of material experience in how religious practitioners live out their

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<sup>10</sup> David Morgan, *The Thing about Religion: An Introduction to the Material Study of Religions* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

religious life.<sup>11</sup> Rather than approaching religion through a textual lens, reading religious life as networks of meaning-making and discursive communication, scholars of material religion look at the material culture which envelops and shapes religious practice. A material analysis of *Indigenous-Catholicism* in Oaxaca looks at the music, dances, and costumes that generate for Oaxaqueños both religious meaning and geographic identity that we can trace back to both Indigenous pre-Hispanic religious ritual and culture and to Catholicism as it was both imposed on Mesoamericans through conquest and missionary work but, most importantly for the argument of this these, negotiated through maintained contact between religious authority of the Catholic Church and Indigenous-identifying communities. Secondary research on lived Catholic practice in Oaxaca, or the body of common practices, rituals, rites, and meanings that Catholics in Oaxaca, offers crucial context about the sustained role that public religious practice, ritual, festivity, and religion's material culture has had on wider social processes which resulted in present-day conceptions of Oaxacan identity.

Before diving directly into the contemporary material religion of Oaxaca's Guelaguetza, I will establish the material religion context of the festival. Chapter One will provide crucial history about how religion has been practiced in Oaxaca through the colonial era and into the present-day. A key turning point for this chapter is the emergence of powerful discourses of nationalism and liberal secularism immediately following the 1910 Mexican Revolution. Turning to the history of religious practice in republican era Oaxaca, this chapter will look at how the Catholic Church and their Catholic communities of Zapotec, Mixtec, and Mestizo lay Catholics respond to increasing liberal secular reform in the state began to shape the way that local celebrations in Oaxaca City were organized. Chapter Two will continue by looking at the history of ceremonial dance, public

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<sup>11</sup> Manuel A. Vásquez, *More than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2011).

veneration of Catholic Saints, and the civic celebrations of Oaxaca that influenced heavily the first Guelaguetza. It will look at the first cultural interactions between the Zapotec and Mixtec peoples of central Oaxaca and Spanish colonizers and Catholic missionaries in the early years of Spanish rule. It will highlight the cultural politics of Catholic evangelizing efforts, adding a necessary cultural dimension to the development of a syncretic Indigenous-Catholicism in the late colonial and independence periods in Oaxaca. It will end with talking about modern developments in public ceremonial life effected by neoliberal economic policy in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that opened Oaxaca up to a global tourist economy it became increasingly dependent on for economic growth.

Chapter Three, a material religious analysis of Guelaguetza, blends the previous two focuses into a reading of the festival's present-day manifestation. Looking at recent performances and at the dances, music, and aesthetics of the event, this chapter will unpack the material culture that gives the festival its identity-constituting power. This analysis will demonstrate the religious pasts of the celebration, uncovering a dimension of the festivity that connects with the history of religious practice of Oaxaca. By doing so, this thesis hopes to locate Guelaguetza, in all its cultural and social significance, alongside the cathedrals of the city, its many archeological sites on the surrounding hills of the city, and the remote sanctuaries of Oaxaca, within a landscape of religious culture that remains constitutive of the Oaxacan experience and social identity.

## Chapter One

### The History of Material Religion in Oaxaca

Religious culture, or the popular forms which people have come to practice religion through, offers us a promising angle in approaching Oaxaca's history. Studying where certain cultural traditions in the Oaxacan Guelaguetza originate from provides scholars important insights about religion's place in the everyday lives of Oaxaqueños. While the Oaxacan Guelaguetza's beginnings are found in both pre-Hispanic Zapotec dance ceremonies and the post-Conquest *Lunes de Cerro* festivities of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century which honored the *Virgen Del Carmen Alto*, a central convent of Oaxaca City, the present-day Guelaguetza also incorporates different modes of popular music, dance, and cultural meanings derived from religious celebrations in the state's history. Situating contemporary Oaxaca public ceremony within a genealogy of popular religious practice in the region signals complex and open-ended claims to authority from different actors during Guelaguetza, including state committees, Oaxacan audiences, and Indigenous Oaxaqueños.

Historians of religion in colonial to post-revolutionary era Mexico describe the history of Oaxaca in part through emergent competing definitions of local and national identities. Thus, religious authorities like the Catholic Church, both in terms of its regional ecclesiastic institutions and among intra-parish politics, had to navigate new currents in national and local politics. Societal and ecclesiastic decisions on how religious ritual and personal piety should look like in Oaxaca—both in its many rural villages and its capital city—depended upon both the needs of individual practitioners and the public sphere of debate and political mobilization. This cultivated a regional politics where isolated villages were in communication with many different sources of power

which included the religious authority of archbishops, local aims of parish priests, or the economic and political power of state governments and turbulent centralized power in Mexico City.

It is from these negotiations of power in Oaxaca where we witness the development of popular modes of Indigenous-Catholicism in Oaxaca. A major reoccurring conflict important to underscore here is the desire of Indigenous identifying, in this case Zapotec and Mixtec communities, to preserve tradition and religious belief threatened at first by early Spanish colonization and Catholic missionary efforts and eventually by liberal secularizing reforms post-revolution. Rather than through direct subversion, many Indigenous Catholics, and their rural communities (*pueblos*), as evidenced by the available historical archive, negotiated between hegemonic Catholic orthodox practice and popular folk tradition of entire regions and individual villages, which is a practice this paper, as many scholars of religion in Oaxaca do, refer to as *Indigenous-Catholicism*.<sup>12</sup>

#### Popular Catholicism in Colonial Era Oaxaca

Nowhere is the turbulent character of the relationship between Indigenous Oaxacan rural village communities and the Catholic Clergy more evident than in the politics of Catholic conversion efforts after first contact between the Spanish empire and Mesoamerican Indigenous peoples in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Conflicts between politics and religious practice are documented in the efforts of Spanish Catholics, Mestizo Bishops, and pious Indigenous lay folk to cast their influence on how the wider Oaxacan society should practice religion, and in focus the rules for Catholic practice in the public sphere. Among the different fronts that the Spanish Colonization of Mesoamerica, now New Spain, occurred, scholars of religion emphasize the

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<sup>12</sup> Kristin Norget, "Popular-Indigenous Catholicism in Southern Mexico," *Religions* 12, no. 7 (2021): p. 531, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070531>.

spiritual colonization of pre-Hispanic religious life that began shortly after the fall of the capital of the Aztec Empire, *Tenochtitlan*.<sup>13</sup> Certain authors emphasize the lack of arbitration in these early decades, highlighting the judicial efforts of Spanish forces and Catholic missionaries in New Spain's version of the Inquisition. Spanish forces and Indigenous rural leaders, called Caciques by the Spanish, would collaborate to facilitate Spanish efforts to demolish any sacred sites of organized Mixtec or Zapotec ritual and the images and priestly classes central to pre-Hispanic religion in Oaxaca.

Oaxaca provides a notable exception to the efficacy of 'hard power' which the Spanish Empire and Catholic Church were able to exert upon the mainly rural and sparsely populated state. Spanish rule in urban Mixtec villages often meant little in terms of communal power structures, economic distribution, or place of residence in these first decades after first contact and as the Spanish turned first to conquering the *souls* of new Catholic subjects needing "salvation."<sup>14</sup> These early years, notably in the decades immediately following the arrival of the first patches of Franciscan and Dominican friars to the continent, marked the beginning of large-scale purges of much of the archival record of the intricate Mixtec and Zapotec rituals, cosmologies, and regional festivals dedicated to their respective pantheons of deities. Friars and the violent enforcers of the Catholic evangelization effort in New Spain sought out the physical representations of Zapotec and Mixtec deities which villages relied upon for venerating rituals of deities they deemed most important to communicate with. This destructive process often first entailed missionaries recording first-hand accounts of Zapotec and Mixtec religious practice through different codex guides and *relaciones*—or Catholic Inquisitional accounts of so-called pagan crimes. These texts reported the

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<sup>13</sup> Roberto Cintli Rodríguez, "Spiritual Colonization: A Totalizing Reframing Project," in *Our Sacred Naíz Is Our Mother: Indigeneity and Belonging in the Americas* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2014), 55–81.

<sup>14</sup> Kevin Terraciano, *The Mixtecs of Colonial Oaxaca: Ñudzahui History, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004). 117-9.



*idols and false gods* of different Indigenous pueblos, in doing so generalizing different pueblos' religious myths of creation and explanations of different deities to aid in the evangelization of native populations in New Spain and the extinguishing of plethora of Indigenous belief and ritual life.

Whereas many scholars of the conquest of Mesoamerica, rightfully, place emphasis on tactics by Spanish soldiers in suppressing Mixtec and Zapotec belief and practice through force, some authors allow a level of agency in part of indigenous communities even in these early years of Spanish colonization. This early prosecution by part of the Spanish on 'heretic' pagan Zapotec and Mixtec religious practice, or in public and communal pre-Hispanic religious practice, led to a wide array of reactions by villages, ranging from outward collaboration initiated by Indigenous communities to private subordination through hidden continued practice or even active rebellion.

Judith Zeitlin notes in her historical analysis of Zapotec politics in central Oaxaca, was not uncommon in southern Oaxaca in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, leading to armed rebellion by village communities and the execution of regal authorities.<sup>15</sup> However, in the Mixtec region of Oaxaca, Terracino emphasizes instead the continued celebration of pre-Hispanic ceremony and public religious practice even among the sporadic but daunting presence of the Catholic Church and Spanish military and colonial government as these centuries continued. As Spanish inquisitions and their networks of regal power where both Indigenous royalty and Spanish governors came into Indigenous villages reported what they perceived as acts of pagan ritual, sacrifice, and idolatry, Indigenous communities and specifically their clerical classes of priests took special care to hide

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<sup>15</sup> Judith Francis Zeitlin, *Cultural Politics in Colonial Tehuantepec: Community and State among the Isthmus Zapotec, 1500-1750* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

the higher echelon of deities, protecting the sacred relationship between pueblos and the world of Zapotec and Mixtec deities.<sup>16</sup>

Different records of Mesoamerican religious codices which Spanish missionaries and Indigenous translators and religious authorities wrote down described the general deities of Zapotec, Mixtec, and Mexica and their myths. The original codices of Zapotec and Mixtec religion depicted generations of ancestors and past local leaders among pantheons of deities and the religious ceremonies which united human settlements with their cosmos of both ancestor worship and ritual offerings to anthropomorphic deities of different natural forces, most notably in Mixtec religion post-15<sup>th</sup> century the deity of rain and thunder *Dzahui*.<sup>17</sup> Anthropologists of religion in Oaxaca home in on the less than a dozen of these translations which inaccurately convey the diversity of different regional religious practice, including how festivals and sacrifice rituals to these deities looked like dependent on setting and time. Most important, the genealogy of different ancestors which Mixtec and Zapotec communities worshiped remained both untranslated into Spanish and vulnerable as ritual festivals and celebrations became more costly for certain villages to perform. This not only explains how current recreations of Zapotec or Mixtec ritual dance and gift-giving ritual rely on already overly general estimations and translations of pre-Hispanic belief and ritual, but it also helps contextualize the precarious setting of rural Indigenous religion in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Where one might see this as a limit to the plethora of religious practice that rural Oaxacan villages would engage with, there remained intricate formulations of popular religion and ceremonial life in 17<sup>th</sup> century Oaxaca found within the violence of early inquisition efforts as spiritual self-defense and the preservation of traditional modes of ceremony and Mixtec and

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<sup>16</sup> Terraciano, *The Mixtecs of Colonial Oaxaca*, 271.

<sup>17</sup> Terraciano, *The Mixtecs of Colonial Oaxaca*, 265.

Zapotec religious belief in their pantheon of deities.<sup>18</sup> Thus, despite the continued observance of Catholic secular priests, parish priests, and Spanish viceroys and military in and around the Mixtec region of Oaxaca, communities continued to depend on traditional modes of pre-Hispanic religious life. In times of drought or bad harvest, Mixtec communities in northern and central Oaxaca continued to perform sacrifice rituals to the deity of rain, thunder, and lightning Dzahui, which would involve, according to numerous at times contending sources, the sacrifice of “slaves, feathers, jade, cloth” by an enduring, if slightly disempowered and secret, class of priests.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries represent the heyday of the popular Catholic practice in Oaxaca of saint veneration. This form of popular Catholic practice centered around regional celebrations and veneration rituals of the divine patrons of different villages and regions in Oaxaca as across colonial Mexico. Rural and Indigenous religious practice in Oaxaca during this period reflected many historical, theological, and intellectual currents that shifted in this period, in particular for the case of New Spain that of the Spanish Counterreformation which Irving H. Leonard labels as the coupler between a Catholic “dark age” orthodoxy in both Europe and America and the post-Enlightenment West.<sup>20</sup> What did this mean for the rural and relatively isolated network of Indigenous and Mestizo villages of Oaxaca? How did religious practice change after the initial wave of Catholic prosecution and attempts of extinguishing Indigenous religious practice and belief?

Veneration of regional saints, which Mixtec and Zapotec-Catholics practiced through a blend of both dance festivals, public celebration of major Church holidays, and pilgrimage to

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<sup>18</sup> Terraciano, *The Mixtecs of Colonial Oaxaca*.

<sup>19</sup> Terraciano, *The Mixtecs of Colonial Oaxaca*. 265.

<sup>20</sup> Kirstin Norget, “Hard Habits to Baroque: Catholic Church and Popular-Indigenous Religious Dialogue in Oaxaca, Mexico.” *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 33, no. 1 (2008): 131–58.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27764247>.

important regional sanctuaries. Saint representations constructed by both Indigenous craftsmen and Catholic missionaries depended upon collaborations between Indigenous communities and members of the Catholic Church. Thus, changes from within the Church, in terms of techniques of evangelizing efforts and in institutional theological emphases, effected the way Indigenous Catholics came to practice Catholicism. Key to this came through a transition and translation of religious ceremony which paralleled or reproduced a structure of communal cohesion similar to how villages came together to prepare and celebrate the world of the sacred. Where once Mixtec and Zapotec community leaders, their class of priests and collectors of tributes for rituals and ceremonies, all ensured the communal health and the strong relationship between villages and their pantheons of Gods and Goddesses, local Catholic orders, secular priests, and community leaders took on this responsibility. In terms of Indigenous Catholicism, ceremonial life maintained similar systems of communal interdependence which often centered mutual aid and collective spiritual care during special events, namely parish veneration of local saints. Celebrating, for example, the commemoration of a village church or a nearby Catholic sanctuary involved donations by community leaders and the labor of all sectors of a community, often reflecting religious ceremonial life pre-Conquest.<sup>21</sup>

Collaboration in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Oaxaca involved structured modes to pay for the maintenance of churches or church festivities and collaborative efforts in translating Catholic Catechisms into native languages. This birthed new communities of interdependence in later generations of Indigenous Oaxaqueños which itself relied on a series of translations both literal in terms of language but also in theological doctrine and lived religious experience. Terracino notes how the Catholic “cult of saints” resembled the pre-Hispanic system of feasts for deities and sacred

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<sup>21</sup> Judith Zeitlin, *Cultural Politics in Colonial Tehuantepec*.

ancestors. This became most evident in Indigenous-Catholic celebrations of both All Saints' and All Souls' days, which combined represented a single festive feast in many Mixtec and Zapotec villages where certain villages and Indigenous families would take advantage of Catholic veneration of the dead to celebrate ancient and sacred ancestors, a carry-over from pre-Conquest religious practice. Such individual veneration and familial celebration involved ceremonial dances which by the late 17<sup>th</sup> century was at least partly sanctioned by the Catholic Church, demonstrated by receipts for payments of dance instructors for festive days such as Easter. Dance and Catholic practice represented a site of precarious religiosity for Spanish authority, where its openness to interpretation made such dances, while vital for popular celebration of Catholic feast days, vulnerable to unorthodox and even heretical belief and regression to "pagan" ritual. Thus, while reproducing familiar modes of communal religious life, Indigenous Catholicism remained reliant upon the power of Catholic religious authority to determine the wider absolute limits to, as Benjamin T. Smith writes about, chaos that could be brought on by religious festival in rural colonial Oaxaca.

Changing attitudes after the Protestant reformation back in Europe signaled new valences in how the Church would come to see Oaxacan Indigenous elaborations upon Catholic veneration. Hidden beneath the threat of regression was the promise of religious zeal, for local priests and regional bishops who sought to harness what they saw as a unique potential for Catholic rejuvenation. Kirstin Norget, whose work helped popularize the term Indigenous-Catholicism, approaches this process in her "Hard Habits to *Baroque*" article by outlining the changes in Indigenous-Catholic practice of Oaxaqueños in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>22</sup> I highlight this work in particular as it touches upon the syncretic practices and beliefs that Norget notes as flourishing

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<sup>22</sup> Kirstin Norget, "Hard Habits to Baroque," 131–58.

the later decades of Colonial rule in Oaxaca, compared the popular Catholicism during the genocidal efforts of the Spanish empire and its presence in New Spain in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. That is, while early after the counter-reformation, Spanish military forces, provincial governments, and clergy members accelerated/exacerbated efforts to suppress and eliminate Zapotec and Mixtec religious practice, idolatry, and pre-Hispanic religious festival and public ritual, slowly but surely Baroque sensibilities, or an emphasis on bodily experience and aesthetic beauty in art arose. And, Norget argues, Counterreformation Catholic practice and dogma opened space for remaining practices and fragments of Indigenous religion in Oaxaca to reemerge.

Reeling in from the violent prosecution of pre-Hispanic religion during the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, we see early capitulations and cultural blending that anthropologist and historian of religion Edward Wright-Rios, going against the grain of many scholars of Mesoamerican religion post-Conquest, describes:

Although we commonly begin discussions about Catholicism in Mexico with the trauma of conquest and early evangelization, the more useful starting point is actually a later, very gradual, multigenerational time span during which Mesoamerican every-day experience became infused with Catholic meaning. It was in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that a culture of Christian devotion formation and reproduction evolved into a central dynamic of social life. It was then that the relationships between priests, sodalities, *beatas*, and common parishioners took on their cultural salience.<sup>23</sup>

In terms of the material culture of Catholicism and its social significations in mid to late-colonial Oaxaca, we find the immense importance of the “cult of saints” and its public veneration in the state, documented extensively most notably by William B. Taylor. Both local parish churches which often sheltered regional images of Saints and *Virgenes* of a pueblo, and isolated sanctuary pilgrimage sites both became central to Indigenous Catholicism in the late colonial period, and

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<sup>23</sup> Edward Wright-Rios, “Conclusion: Picturing Mexican Catholicism,” in *Revolutions in Mexican Catholicism: Reform and Revelation in Oaxaca, 1887-1934* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2009), 277.

distinctly Catholic alters, saint figures, churches, and on the decorations of Church services and festivities developed.<sup>24</sup>

While before I touched upon how societal formations leant themselves to a smooth(er) transition between Indigenous religion and Catholic practice, here we see an explosion in Catholic material religion, noted by the rise of regional saints and sanctuary sites. Most notably to scholars of religion in west Oaxaca are sanctuaries in rural mountainous regions such as the one of the Virgen de Juquila which made for important pilgrimage sites. The Virgen of Juquila is found in the costal Mixtec region of the state, among the Pacific coast's dense forest, jungle, and dense mountainsides. Another notable example of this rising importance of material culture in Indigenous Catholicism includes the Virgen del Carmen whose veneration ceremonies mark the beginnings of the official Guelagueta Official of Oaxaca City, which this thesis will look further into in Chapter Two. For now, it is important to note that even before the popularization of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century ideals of secular nationalism in Mexico, Indigenous religion found refuge within the hegemonic religion of post-Conquest Catholicism.

### The Republic Era and Modern Religion in Oaxaca

After Mexico won its independence and transformed rapidly due to the liberal federal and state reforms of the post-Porfiriano era, Mexican society began to redefine the requisites and ideals of Mexican identity. Gradually, certain definitions began merging into stable and long-enduring identities through prevailing intellectual movements. The religious and socio-cultural landscape that emerged from this time included individual agents and their social (including religious)

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<sup>24</sup> William B. Taylor, *Shrines and Miraculous Images: Religious Life in Mexico Before the Reforma*. (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2011); *Theater of a Thousand Wonders: A History of Miraculous Images and Shrines in New Spain*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

institutions, including groups of public-school teachers, Catholic clergy, and members of Catholic orders/fraternities. Individual religious parish developed and promoted competing flavors, or dynamic yet distinctive strands of social identity. Communities like the Catholic Church, rural and urban Catholic communities, and liberal state politicians formulated practical visions of the place of religion in modern Mexico, which ultimately guided how present-day Oaxaqueños define their religiosity in relation to state and regional identity.

Secondary literature on Oaxacan popular religion during the revolutionary period of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Mexico delineates and analyzes the different sites of contact between different members of the Catholic Church in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, and emerging forms of republican governance. For example, anthropologist and historian of religion Edward Wright-Rios writes about Oaxacan Archbishop of Eulogio Gillow, who symbolizes a top-down restructuring of the Church's presence in the everyday lives of Oaxaqueños in which the solidification of the inner stability of Church Bureaucracy, akin to the creation of a modern state formation project, depended upon the cooperation of disparate ideals and beliefs of smaller parish priests, pious church order members, politically ambitious nuns, and the women of secluded villages in Oaxaca's highlands who experienced divine revelation from the Virgin Mary. The story of Archbishop Gillow and his contemporaries highlight the modernization of the Catholic Church in Oaxaca as a negotiation between competing and collaborating classes of Catholics in Oaxaca instead of a conflict between a still powerful Catholic institution and an emerging secular Mexican state. Religion in Oaxaca throughout the late 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries centered the efforts of Catholics, both Mestizos and Indigenous Catholic, to again blend Indigenous practice and Christian belief in different projects in collectively constructing new meanings of modernity and state identity.



In 1909, Archbishop Gillow was the chief proponent of commemorating the construction of the sanctuary of the Virgen del Soledad, which continues to carry its immense cultural power in modern Oaxaca City. Incorporating the time period's infatuation with Social Catholicism and modern conceptions of state-making and nationalism, the celebration of this urban Cathedral and Catholic image harnessed post-enlightenment ideals in the run-up to the 1910 revolution.<sup>25</sup> Compared to other regions, especially those from the northern half of Mexico, the state of Oaxaca has better maintained its diverse wealth of distinct Indigenous communities. This has been true since first contact between the different Indigenous peoples and Spanish missionaries all the way to the present day. One explanation for why Oaxaca is home to a third of all Indigenous speaking municipalities in Mexico concerns its geographic isolation from Mexico City. Despite today only being a four/five-hour drive between Oaxaca City and Mexico City, the land barriers of mountains, steep valleys, and thick forests made this journey a difficult and at times unviable or unwanted excursion. This, coupled with existing prejudice against the large Indigenous populations of the region, the self-sufficiency of communal villages, and its neutrality during national crises/conflicts allowed the region of Oaxaca to fly under the radar, maintaining a significant level of local identity and solidarity coming into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>26</sup>

The state of Oaxaca borders other southern states in Mexico also with high numbers of Indigenous people, most notably Chiapas, Veracruz, and Guerrero. Thus, many sociological and ethnographic reports of Indigenous people across these southern Mexican states detail similar stories of resistance to assimilation and colonization before the 1910 Mexican Revolutionary War. Today, much of the national and local attitudes towards Oaxaca revolve around its visible remarkable "indigeneity." This is in no small part due to the many different cultural landmarks

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<sup>25</sup> Edward Wright-Rios, *Revolutions in Mexican Catholicism*, 46.

<sup>26</sup> Wright-Rios, *Revolutions*.

that include archeological sites and artisan shops, and to the many festivals that allegedly highlight the Indigenous past of the state. There are many ways to read this enduring presence of Indigenous culture in the mainstream in Oaxaca, one of them being an emphasis on visibility that tourism brings to the region and to communities that, to this day, continue to face repressions from political organizations and economic developments of neoliberal democracy in the state and national scene.

The Central Valleys of Oaxaca are enveloped by two large mountain chains that curve around what has been historically the region's population and commercial center. It is the heart of the state and home to its capital of Oaxaca City and to its sprawling suburbs and other local villages and famous tourist sites. These sites that surround the city are also economically important, more so in the decades following the shift in state and national economic policies away from traditional production and trade-based economies and towards an international neoliberal capitalist one. Starting in the 1980s, the Oaxacan economy depended less on agriculture (trading of corn, beans, and other food crops) or commerce (production and selling of fabrics) and more on tourism.<sup>27</sup> A good example of this would be how the textiles of the *Ruta Magica* in the northwest of the city today represent more of a tourist attraction rather than a sustainable economic front. Recognized by the state and promoted through state propaganda, such as street signs and advertisements in the center of the city and by local tour guides and bus tours, the *Ruta Magica* promises tourists of the city a trip into a timeless profession that defines the city itself and its cherished history. Archeological data does prove how the Mixtec and Zapotec civilizations of the Classical period were renowned for and reliant on their production of one-of-a-kind fabrics.<sup>28</sup> These textiles that

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<sup>27</sup> Further reading on the topic of recent changes in the economy of Oaxaca and its impact on the social ties and culture of the region, in particular concerning economic migration of the state, see Rodolfo Stavenhagen's "Ruta Mixteca: Indigenous Rights and Mexico's Plunge into Globalization."

<sup>28</sup> Joyce Marcus and Kent V. Flannery, "Cultural Evolution in Oaxaca: The Origins of The Zapotec and Mixtec Civilization," in *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas*, edited by Richard E. W. Adams and Murdo J. MacLeod, 2:358–406, 2000.

created everyday clothes, blankets, ceremonial garments for pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, however, are not directly connected to these newer artisan businesses. Rather, their owners, workers, and customers belong to this new generation of tourist economic production where these fabrics serve as decorations, single-use dresses to use when strolling the Central Park of the City (El Zócalo), or as identifying signs that connect immigrant Oaxacan-Americans to their home state.

The culture of this region has become a site for economic modernization in a new global economy and evidence for this shift is evident in the statistics provided by the state government and its yearly economic reports.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, scholars of religion and anthropologists of culture in Oaxaca expanded on these official reports of this new boom in the tourist industry in Oaxaca. Scholars like Deborah Poole and Quijano incorporate a critical material analysis of the tourist economy in Oaxaca as part of their research into the culture of the region. To contemporary researchers, this economic shift in recent years has affected the culture of the Oaxaca region, where new traditions, based on tourist tastes and economic profitability, emerge. They also make this connection in expense of a thorough deep analysis of the intimate experiences of audiences to Oaxacan culture that makes tourism such a viable and unique market in Oaxaca.

Alongside economics, developments in politics affected what identity should look like in Oaxaca, or the order in which Oaxaqueños should rank their different identities. Beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, alongside early experimentations in nation-building, politicians, scholars, and religious leaders in Oaxaca competed for their own plans on how to build a state of loyal and productive Oaxaqueños. Central to these modernizing ideas was the role of identity and of cultural and religious institutions in regulating individual loyalty and general feelings of identification with

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<sup>29</sup> James P. Robson and Raymond Wiest, "Transnational Migration, Customary Governance, and the Future of Community," *Latin American Perspectives* 41, no. 3 (December 2013): pp. 103-117, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582x13506689>.

the state government and the New Mexican Republic. Here emerges a powerful and lasting image of *Lo Mexicano*, or of a Mexican subject who is patriotic, modern, Mestizo, and no longer chained by tyrannical tradition and irrational belief peddled by the Catholic Church.

Liberal secular thinkers of the early Republican period of Mexico's history faced an incomplete and uneven spiritual conversion project left by the Catholic Church. Seen in Oaxaca is a cacophony of religious practices and different combinations of Indigenous and Catholic rituals and belief scattered across the land. At the same time, we see emerging new alliances that were the result of different political factions vying for the support of the pious. The process of nation-building led clergy members like Bishop Amorado to tune into the everyday religious life of Oaxaqueños who were merely a couple of generations separated from the very first Mixtecos and Zapotecos who were violently converted under the early stages of Spanish colonization. This time-period has been the disproportionate interest of many scholars of the anthropology and history of religion in Northern Oaxaca. This is with due reason as many of the unresolved questions about Catholic practice in Oaxaca that emerged out of the colonial period re-emerged out of the struggles between the new secular liberal federal and state governments after the revolution and the lasting power of the Catholic Church.

Turning towards the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the underlying question of politics remains concerned about how that political landscape of this new Mexican nation should look. The implications of this new national, state, and local political landscape on religious expression and authority spiraled out into its own history that historians of religion documented extensively. This period in religious history of Oaxaca produced new visions of how religion in Oaxaca should be practiced. Secular thinkers inspired by emerging nation-states as the new archetype of state power began chipping away at religion's sole authority on the reproduction and discipline of pious

subjects. The new 1917 Mexican constitution, a major victory for the liberal factions that included Indigenous Oaxacan lawyer Benito Juarez, concretized a political separation of church and state. In place of the old system of politics, which these liberal thinkers saw as relic of the colonial system, came a new civic religion that led the zealous and pious masses to identify with this new secular Mexican republic. Scholars today have shown interest in modern rural forms of popular Catholicism, but much less on religion out in the open, in Oaxaca City, which seems to, sometimes justifiably, have been seeded to modern notions of civic secularism.

How is this look reflected in religious practice today in Oaxaca? Much of the secondary analyses of ethnographies of religion in Oaxaca at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century focuses on the lived Catholic devotion of individuals and their families. Central to such research is the question of what it means to practice religion in the face of different obstacles brought on by late modernity. Yet, as mentioned earlier, certain factors help shelter religious practice and tradition in Oaxaca, including the seclusion of its villages, enduring modes of communal governance, the honored role of tradition, as well as the reflective effective of a recent turn towards the tourist economy in the state. Soon we will see how civic festivity and the tourist economy in Oaxaca both profits from these continued religious traditions and material culture of Indigenous-Catholicism, mirroring the mutual dependence between Catholic clergy and Indigenous communities, but here harbored by Zapotec and Mixtec religion in the face of alternative social ideals of Mestizaje and Mexican secular nationalism.

## **Chapter Two: Contested Histories of the Oaxacan Guelaguetza**

In the words of the State of Oaxaca and countless journalists who cover the festivities, Guelaguetza is the ultimate expression of Oaxacan identity and its history. Looking at the role of social histories, or rather the indirect ways that Oaxaqueños and tourists alike interact, digest, and reproduce narratives about the history of Oaxaca, I will focus on what exactly fiesta looked like in the capital city of Oaxaca de Juarez through the colonial era and the early republican period. We begin with the role of dance and performance in the early colonial ambitions of the Catholic Church and Spanish empire which both subjugated and incorporated the Mesoamerican populations, and then I will consider the growth of the Guelaguetza Oficial of the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. In both cases, public performances of traditional folk music and dance were the conduits for implicit and explicit values about the official narrative of Oaxacan history and identity. Public festivities offer different social actors a chance to promote their own idealized image of Oaxaca in the present, something in which religious actors have participated since the beginning of Spanish Conquest, as believers of either Catholic Orthodoxy or pre-Hispanic religion vied for primacy among public space. This thesis argues that public festivity maintains this religious role during present-day Guelaguetza.

Guelaguetza's beginnings makes this abundantly clear, particularly in the festival's role of facilitating social cohesion in 20<sup>th</sup> century Oaxaca City and in its negotiation of racial, gendered, and ethnic identities beneath a modern *Oaxacan* identity. While certain authors like Deborah Poole, rightfully write about the state appropriation of Indigenous material culture for secular political aims, the religious history of public festival and material culture in Oaxaca point us towards more pluralistic understandings of Guelaguetza's history. This chapter will map out the

murky origins of the celebration, looking at its official beginnings as a “racial homage” (in Spanish *Homenaje Racial* which meant a public festivity celebrating the racial ethnicities of the different regions of Oaxaca through floats and costumes by both Indigenous and Mestizo Oaxaqueños) in 1934 and further back at its colonial Spanish cultural influences and Zapotec and Mixtec antecedents. The dance and musical genre of the Mexican “Jarabe” and the larger centrality of dance performance observed by Spanish conquistadores after first contact both represent the historical and archival beginnings of Guelagueta. Thus, this chapter looks at secondary and primary sources that describe the role of dance in the public space throughout Oaxaca’s history, culminating in the official organization of the festival today. By looking at the history of dance and festival in colonial and republican Oaxaca, this chapter will demonstrate the interpenetrating flux between popular religiosity and social politics that continue into the present-day Guelagueta. Turning the Oaxacan state’s own implicit aims on its head, the Mexican phenomenon of “fiesta” retains social histories of negotiation between Indigenous religion and Catholic spiritual conquest, even despite the efforts of 20<sup>th</sup> century nation-building efforts to obscure the role of religion in modern public life.

Much of what we know about pre-Hispanic religious life in the Oaxacan Central Valleys is a product of what archeologists have been able to piece together from sites such as Monte Alban or Mitla—two of the most important archeological sites in Oaxaca and the urban capitals of both Zapotec and Mixtec civilizations, respectively. Many secondary analyses of these archeological sites show fragmented understandings of presumably altars and religious houses of worship in the period before Aztec/Mexica domination in the land now known as Mexico, or either of the late-classical 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century Oaxacan religion. As we saw in Chapter One, the oral and written accounts of Zapotec and Mixtec practice offers scholars a look into immediately pre-Conquest

Oaxacan religious life, but the sites of Monte Alban and Mitla offer the most widely known encounters of pre-Hispanic religious life near present-day Oaxaca City. What today archeologists and everyday visitors alike can hope to find in the ruins of ancient urban centers are stone plazas which retain the signs of Mixtec and Zapotec rituals and their centrality within their urban population centers.

### Monte Alban and Indigenous Precursors to Guelaguetza

The city center, *Centro Historico*, of Oaxaca City is characterized by its colonial style colorful villas, cobblestone streets, and magnificent cathedrals built in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. On the hills surrounding this epicenter, including on the Cerro del Fortin upon which the Auditorio Guelaguetza sits, lay pre-Columbian cultural centers where tourists seek more authentic experiences of Oaxacan culture and its Indigenous past. This often equates to Indigenous culture associated with archeological attention and prominent published scholarship. On the outskirts of the city such culture tourists can find archeological sites like Monte Alban, which is the most famous archeological site of them all in Oaxaca. Translating directly to White or Albino Mountain because of its limestone and slate cobbled foundations that once supported the center of the Zapotec civilization, Monte Alban was founded in 500 B.C.<sup>30</sup> Archeologists understand that the site was the center of Zapotec administrative power and of the society's bureaucratic and mercantile elite. Beyond the signs of economic might and pre-Colonial methods of societal structure, present-day tours emphasize the few intact signs of Zapotec cultural life of this period in Oaxaca's history. These guided tours take you through the many different sites, offering little

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<sup>30</sup> Adams Richard et al., "Cultural Evolution in Oaxaca: The Origins of the Zapotec and Mixtec Civilizations," in *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas: Mesoamerica* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 358-406, 373.



time for you to marvel at fragmented marble foundations that once supported homes of wealthy merchants and important administrators during the height of the Zapotec civilization, named its “high classical period” of 300-100 B.C.<sup>31</sup> Spaces like Monte Alban showcase the remnants of pre-Hispanic Oaxacan urban spaces that retain cultural significance in the present day. It is important to note here that Monte Alban today gets a lot more foot traffic and governmental funding than other important archeological sites such as Mitla which is its Mixtec equivalent. Similarly, in colloquial language, Zapotec tends to be more in use in Oaxaca than any other Indigenous ethnicity, reflected both in how most of the state’s population self-identifies as Indigenous Zapotec but also in the prominence of Monte Alban as a contemporary tourist site.

Cultural anthropologists have uncovered evidence of early Zapotec ritual, cults, and cooperative modes of governance and economic stability through similar archeological sites which offer more plentiful albeit fragmented and indefinite data as opposed to religious Zapotec and Mixtec codices.<sup>32</sup> Monte Alban’s foundation in 500-300 B.C. occurred in the middle of the height of the Olmec civilization and the founding of urban Mixtec centers later around 800-500 B.C. Yet, Winter emphasizes the culturally symbolic role of the city as a social repertoire for ideals of urbanization, arguing that “the carved figures on the *Danzantes Wall* represent a different kind of social memory, not an abstract template but a material manifestation, like a photographic documentation, of a performance involving many participants in a ceremony commemorating the founding of the city.”<sup>33</sup> What Winters references here is the epicenter of the site which is surrounded by the foundations of what used to be palaces meant for the city’s political leaders and

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<sup>31</sup> Adams Richard, “Cultural Evolution in Oaxaca,” 360.

<sup>32</sup> Richard E. Blanton, Gary M. Feinman, Stephen A. Kowalewski and Linda M. Nicholas. “The Great Transformation in Ancient Oaxaca: The Monte Albán State,” in *Case Studies in Early Societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, 103–45.

<sup>33</sup> Marcus Winter, “Social Memory and the Origins of Monte Alban,” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 22, no. 2 (2011): pp. 393-409, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0956536111000332>.

ritual sites where residents would come to venerate Zapotec deities. The Main Plaza in the middle of these buildings includes an open space for public interactions where individuals practiced a public remembrance, in Winter's theory of the meaning of the wall of *Danzantes*, of the founding of the city decades after it was established, and where ceremonies of ritual sacrifice remained socially central to the economic and political life of the city.

Winter's theory of the meaning of the Swimmers and Dancers of Monte Alban, that today collectively visitors call the wall of *Danzantes*, resonates with the floating meaning that everyday residents of Oaxaca perceive when looking at these stone engravings. The narrative of conquered soldiers being ridiculed and tortured in public ecstasy is the predominantly popular one that tour guides discuss, at least in 2022 when I went on one such tour. Yet, the guide for this trip allotted us a few hours in the open public plaza where we could discover for ourselves the immense size of the site and stare at the *Danzantes*. As Winter puts it, "the memory of specific individuals and dates was lost, but the place and general idea of origins were not forgotten." The exact details of the *Danzantes* may be vague but the site symbolically points the lost archive of Zapotec ritual that, among signaling the decimation brought on by both Aztec rule and Spanish colonization, represents a space for creative cultural production that we see in Guelaguetza. Similarly, for those familiar with Mesoamerican iconography, be it because of formal education about their meanings or through creative designs reproduced on tourist material, including state promotional material for Guelaguetza, the stone gratings on the side of buildings and tombs of Monte Alban ring recognizable to many visitors. The engraved stone icons of the Early formative period of both civilizations, which started off as more simple carvings of different forces of nature such as lightening or earthquakes, and which later emerged to the recognizable animated and mythic Mesoamerica iconography of the classic era, are essential to the aesthetic and visual landscape of

the city.<sup>34</sup> The simplistic human figures wearing cloth tunics, with expressive faces and posed in active movement are ones that resemble both modern day iconographic styles of Guelaguetza posters but also the snapshots of Guelaguetza performances used on online brochures of its dances.

Today, if you google “Danzantes Oaxaca” you are more likely to receive results about a fine dining and mezcal bar in the city historical center. Besides the palm lined walls and open patio seating area, there is not much inside this restaurant that screams authentic. Rather, one can make a different connection, looking at the stone engravings of Monte Alban that represent a social memory that, in the city center, remains contested. As an example, many culture tourists in the city do not stop at overtly commercial expressions of Zapotec culture in Oaxaca City’s cultural center, and instead move into the hillside suburbs to look at both these archeological and contemporary sites of culture. Even then, the modern *traces* of Indigenous Zapotec and Mixtec religious culture most accessible to tourists are ultimately mediated through local religious entrepreneurs, some of which call themselves ‘shamans’ as a local Temezcal ritual bathhouse owner calls himself. What concerns this thesis’ focus on material religion, in contrast to the belief systems of Zapotec and Mixtec peoples that includes their creation myths, are the artifacts, environments, and aesthetic motifs that we can discern today in the streets of Oaxaca City, especially during Guelaguetza.<sup>35</sup>

Archeological projects detailing the histories of the development of Zapotec and Mixtec civilizations illuminate an opaque yet legible past that is incorporated, to certain extents, into the current popular culture of Oaxaca. The artwork, architecture, and other material markers of pre-Hispanic culture of the central valleys of Oaxaca remain visible on the graffiti and commercial art of the city. Street activists, Marxist-Leninists, Social Democrats, Anarchists, the odd Ecofeminist

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<sup>34</sup> Richard, “Cultural Evolution in Oaxaca,” 373.

<sup>35</sup> Maarten Jansen and Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez, “Introduction to Mixtec Pictography,” in *The Mixtec Pictorial Manuscripts: Time, Agency and Memory in Ancient Mexico* (Leiden: BRILL, 2011), pp. 3-41.

or two, make elaborate wood-printed posters of black ink to plaster all over the historical center. In fact, for the last three years I have visited the city, each time on every city block of the center remain pasted adverts on woodcarving lessons. Showing images that represent facets of traditional Oaxacan life, including costumes for Guelaguetza dances, or mothers wearing long multi-textured dresses like Huipils while carrying babies, or men in sombreros working on corn fields, all resemble Winter's Wall of Danzantes, as social memories of the foundation of the Oaxaca City.<sup>36</sup> Present-day Monte Alban depictions of Danzantes, while far from a concrete depiction of these religious practices, demonstrate that ritual dance and religion was central to life in the capital of the Zapotec empire throughout its classical period. Much of the information available on the religious life and ceremonial practices of Zapotec and Mixtec peoples before the influence of Aztec/Mexica culture is often mediated through syncretic practice of Aztec and Zapotec/Mixtec cultures. By the time that Spanish colonizers and Catholic missionaries arrived at the central valley of Oaxaca, to the urban centers of Monte Alban and Mitla, the ceremonies and dance performances the Spanish were greeted to a blend of these two eras of Mesoamerican culture.<sup>37</sup>

As researchers delve into the Spanish records of Zapotec and Mixtec culture early after first contact and before the mass mobilization of Catholic missionaries in the early days of the Spanish conquest in the 16 and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, dance and festival remains an important method of translation between Indigenous peoples and Spanish Conquistadores. Paul A. Scolieri in *Dancing the New World* describes these early interactions and how Mexica cities in particular celebrated (in the literal sense of putting on a celebration or festival) the arrival of Spanish Conquistadores.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Peter Kuper, "Fraught History - Subterráneos," *The Nation*, February 10, 2022, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/fraught-history/>.

<sup>37</sup> Paul A. Scolieri, "The Mystery of Movement," in *Dancing the New World: Aztecs, Spaniards, and the Choreography of Conquest* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2013), pp. 127-149.

<sup>38</sup> Scolieri, "The Mystery of Movement."

This is a story often retold by a public performance called the Bani Stai Gulal, where the “ancient” Mixtecs and Zapotecs performed a yearly ceremonial dance that eventually transforms into the veneration of the Virgen del Carmen in the early Colonial Era, in a meta-performance of the history of the Guelaguetza. Despite the inaccuracies of the Bani Stai Gulal, the dance provides an accurate traditional understanding of role of festival and dance in translating social structures between the pre-Hispanic Zapotec powers-in-be, colonial social stratification, and present-day secular nationalism and local identity. The Bani Stai Gulal historically occurred every year in the week before Guelaguetza, starting in 1969. Through a similar combination of the Oaxacan state band and local performers, the dance begins with a recreation of an Aztec dance festival named *hueytecuilhuitl* that translates, according to this origin story, to “Grand Festival of the *Señores* or chiefs/lords.”<sup>39</sup> These performances are distinct in their stage preparation and design, where this event is meant to take the viewer to a replicated period of time, where the Cerro del Fortin takes the form of previous forms of dance festivities of the city.

Male performers wear brightly colored feathered caps, capes with Aztec iconography, mainly of eagles, and brandish *Macuahuitls* arranged in dance circles. From this moment, comparisons can be made between the Guelaguetza itself and the Bani Stai Gulal, where organizers have an active role in deciding what colors to use and highlights vibrant and clashing primary colors, as greens, purples, reds, and oranges fill in the Mesoamerican iconographic designs on performers’ costumes. *Huipiles* and other traditional dresses are worn by women performers who stand around the warrior men, holding torches and metal vessels emitting light plumes of smoke.

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<sup>39</sup> Due to legal disputes on who has ownership over the event and who is responsible for funding and organizing it, there has been no public performance of the event since 2009. However, an online reproduction of the 2009 performance is available on YouTube and was shared by CORTV during the 2020 online Guelaguetza. There will be a 2023 performance, as announced by local newspapers.

This performance transitions after the first act into what these Aztec dance performances looked like after the commencement of the Spanish Conquest of Mesoamerica.

The public festivity of Guelaguetza Oficial, as it is organized by the state of Oaxaca, its officials, the Committee of Authenticity, and by the sprawling tourist industry that provides all the goods and services for the event derives from this second phase of ceremonial dance. The interaction between Indigenous festivity and Catholic religious practice and “earthly guidance” is signaled by the continuation of similar garments, colorful dresses for women that resemble closely the ones female performers wore in the first half of the production, while behind them are make-shift church facades depicting the church of the Virgen del Carmen Alto, thus positioning dance performances as part of its veneration.<sup>40</sup>

Here the lines between Zapotec ritual and Catholic festival become blurry as demographics changed and communities in rural Oaxaca began incorporating Catholic identity and practice. One truth remained consistent in Oaxaca as it entered the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, which was that public dance and ceremony remained central to the celebration of communal ideals and religious values. While Spanish evangelizing efforts began to show successes both in the suburban communities around Oaxaca City and in certain rural communities further inland, Indigenous communities exerted their own influence on how popular Catholic practice would look like in Oaxaca, as we explored in Chapter One. What this meant to colonial dance is that Oaxaca saw a negotiated development of public religious practice and festival, resulting in a lot of what we know today as traditional modes of Oaxacan dance and *fiesta*.

A central theme of these early days is a Spanish urgency for establishing a mode of communication, not just to facilitate orders in a translation of power, but also for a transmission

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<sup>40</sup> María Del Rocío Durán De Alba (CIESAS (Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social), 2011).

of (or to impose upon these new Indian subjects) a new set of values and beliefs. Franciscan missionaries of the 16<sup>th</sup> century saw early successes in establishing intricate modes of teaching Indigenous communities' Catholic catechism through a combination of words and images, of Spanish, Zapotec, and iconography.<sup>41</sup> When it came to contact between the Spanish military and Indigenous people, this seemed to take a more embodied performance emphasis early on.

### Guelaguetza as a Modern Return to Indigenous Dance

Indigenous-Catholicism involved a blend of Catholic and Indigenous culture and religious practice that leant itself to public celebration. Public festivity was central to both practices, evidenced by the history of rural religion in Oaxaca. The turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought attention to a new realm of religious history, the setting of the urban metropolis of Oaxaca City which seated the state power which would only become more relevant after the 1910 Mexican revolution and establishment of the new Mexican republic. An overlooked space where we can understand these changing popular norms, values, and urban practices is in the religious and civil ceremonial activity in the city after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century leading into the modern day.

Here is where secondary literature on religious life runs a bit scarce, with the most prominent English-speaking anthropologist and historian of religion in Oaxaca being Kirstin Norget. The author's career revolved around analyzing state government archives and lived ethnographic data which reveals the effects of the 1910 revolution on popular religious practice and belief. Such ethnographic data suggests the adoption by different Catholic institutions of Indigenous social organization in celebrating Catholic faith during Church holidays and in everyday religiosity. The conclusion that Norget often arrives at is that the interplay, negotiation, or

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<sup>41</sup> Nancy M. Farriss, "Signs and Gestures," essay, in *Tongues of Fire: Language and Evangelization in Colonial Mexico (Oaxaca, 16-18th Centuries)* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 11–26.

conflict between Indigenous belief and practice and more Orthodox Catholic structure leads to innovation in the way Oaxaqueño/as live out religion, or their relationships with worlds that are out of direct sight, touch, or hearing. It is in the Novenarios of the “defuntos” of these suburbs of Oaxaca de Juarez that religion continues to provide Catholics of the region to engage in traditional forms of respecting and communicating with loved ones long after their deaths.

Returning to the process of an academic defining of indigeneity in the Oaxacan context, Norget looks at the political popular mobilization in the state capital in the early 2000s. Norget asks why city teachers, their unions, their allies, and transplant activists looking for a new progressive issue to protest and lend a helping hand for, all developed a discourse of Indigenous authenticity and identity through these protests. What acts as the backdrop for this grassroots and organic emergence of a Oaxacan and Indigenous identity is the Guelaguetza. Norget argues that the fact that teachers yearly go on strike right at the same time as the festival is not just because of the publicity that it brings, while that certainly helps and is a crucial part of this next point. Instead, these protests have come to engage and embed their own arguments for material gains and social agency alongside and in communication with what the festival claims to do, which is to represent and celebrate the lives and cultures of Indigenous Oaxacan peoples. Distinct from a typical representation of identity politics in the cultural sphere, Norget looks at how the teachers’ union and their allies during these protests and their organization came to fortify a working definition of what it means to be Indigenous. In this way, many different signifiers, qualifications such as working class, brown, first-generation scholar, poor, all came to be implicated with Indigeneity and a true Oaxaqueño.

The strong Indigenous presence in Oaxaca, and the paradoxical way it is used for the presentation of state identity, especially in tourism, has contributed to the state’s distinct cultural



profile as well as its political and economic marginalization relative to other Mexican states.<sup>42</sup> Thus, official actors have customarily assigned Indio or Indígena status to certain Oaxacans on the basis of their skin color, place of residence, and other cultural indices and practices (e.g., language, dress, diet, ritual celebrations). These criteria, however, are simply a way of *fixing* an identity that is ambiguous, slippery, and nuanced, for Indigenous identity in practice is also “multiple, fluid, and abundantly positional.”<sup>43</sup> From the perspective of a scholar of religion, this sounds like a promising site to witness the fractured whole of a definition of indigeneity that I seek to read out of the Guelaguëtza performance. Most importantly, the idea of Indigenous ritual and of Indigenous religion remains, in Norget’s article, elusive, something that not even Oaxaqueño/as can fully describe, outside of fixed categorization. Where does that leave scholars of Oaxacan religion? I argue that an investigation in lived popular Catholicism in the region contains certain overlaps with popular civic celebration, but also that this interplay connected to the emergence of a Mestizo identity, one which crucially depends on some internalization and outer performance of indigeneity.

The Oaxacan state economy shifted from being based on agrarian and merchant income to instead tourist markets by the end of the 20th century. Following neoliberal policies implemented on the state and national levels and responding to the voyeuristic tourist interest in Indigenous customs and aesthetics, Oaxacan state politicians and business leaders saw opportunity for economic expansion. Whereas for rural campesinos in the towns that coat the central valleys of the state, transnational agreements like NAFTA spelt destabilization and exponentially plummeting agricultural markets, artisans and business owners in Oaxaca City saw promising

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<sup>42</sup> Norget, *Days of Death, Days of Life*, 123.

<sup>43</sup> Norget, 124.

markets and the need for a continued partnership between the state government and local business interests.

Early modern histories of religion are inscribed in the first Guelaguetza performances. But the successes of the liberal Oaxacan state government were incomplete. Religion might have been resigned to a background role in the politics of Oaxaca, but its role as arbiter of the form that popular culture in Oaxaca remains undeniable and invaluable for scholars of contemporary cultural identity of the region. At the same time, a dangerous mistake that researchers make when writing about contemporary Oaxacan culture is in conflating religion with Catholicism. This is an easy generalization that leads to thinking that religion in Oaxaca is not as prominent as it was 100 years ago. While the majority of Oaxaqueño/as self-identify as Catholic they do so in individualized modern religious senses, not through church attendance or membership in *cofraidas* but instead through personal belief.<sup>44</sup> Yet, such statistics only show one side of religious life in Oaxaca, another belongs to its streets.

I assert that we need to reconsider the idea of Indigeneity to understand Oaxaca's religious life more fully. This remains a difficult task as the archeological and historical archive which could have shed light on the religious practices and beliefs of Mixtec and Zapotec peoples before first contact has been lost since. The Catholic Church's spiritual and military conquest of Mesoamerica succeeded in eliminating Indigenous structures of religion in New Spain. This caused religion in this region to be inseparably bound to Catholic practice from then on. Traces, however, of such belief endured through synthesis of Indigenous practice and theology with Catholic dogma and

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<sup>44</sup> Church attendance in Oaxaca, like most places in the “western” world have gone down, and membership in *cofradías* or Catholic orders has historically gone down in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leading to a shift in funding for local parishes, coming today more from individual donations than frequent payments.

ritual. A practice of Indigenous Catholicism was born from the rubble of toppled temples and altars that themselves can still be found in sites like *Monte Alban* and *Yagul*.

Indigenous Catholicism, this thesis argues, is a tradition with histories defined through the many contacts and translations of religious thought and practice between Catholics and Indigenous peoples. A central site of Indigenous presence and religious practice remains the material religion of festivals in Oaxaca and throughout Mexico. What the history of religious dance and festivals in Oaxaca has revealed is a prevailing discourse of a “Oaxacan festival” akin to Octavio Paz’s own well-known quote that “The art of the *Fiesta* remains intact within us [Mexicans].”<sup>45</sup> Like fireworks in the eyes of spectators, my family and the strangers who have shared their stories to me in random taxi rides to and from city centers of Oaxaca retell the importance of festivities to their sense of belonging. Catholic practice in Oaxaca as developed in coordination between Indigenous flocks and Catholic clergy popularized the different material religious aspects of the archetypical Oaxaca fiesta: Its music, garments, processions, decorations, and how it sprawls out into the capital city’s streets as in Guelaguetza.

The most celebrated festivals of the Oaxacan calendar remains determined by the Catholic calendar of saint days, anniversaries of the convocation of local churches, the liturgical veneration of the weeks leading up to Easter (*Semana Santa*) and, this paper argues, even in Guelaguetza. Guelaguetza was once entirely referred to as Los Lunes de Cerro or as the festivities of La Virgen del Carmen Alto. The early Catholic Church presence in Oaxaca sought the eradication of “heretical and pagan” dance and excess festivities of gluttony and deviance of the Indigenous peoples. Yet, facing the attacks by the newly in power liberal government, alliances between Indigenous Catholics and the Catholic Clergy defended the idiosyncratic practices of Indigenous

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<sup>45</sup> Edits my own, quote is from *Labyrinth of Solitude* but in Spanish and taken from Katalin Jancsó’s “La Guelaguetza – Una fiesta Moderna de Mexico,” 2003.

communities, to the point where certain traces endured until today.<sup>46</sup> Guelaguetza is embedded with these traces in its explicit representation of Indigenous aesthetics but also in how it embraces a Oaxacan tradition of the “Fiesta” in its use of music, dance, and color.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Norget, “Popular-Indigenous Catholicism.”

<sup>47</sup> Goertzen, Chris, “Tradition and Tourism in Festival Life: Shaping and Marketing Oaxaca’s Guelaguetza,” in *Made in Mexico: Tradition, Tourism, and Political Ferment in Oaxaca*. University Press of Mississippi, 2010.

## Chapter Three:

### A Material Religion Analysis of Guelaguetza

The history of popular religion in Oaxaca signals a recent significant decline in institutional religious practice in recent years. For rural communities in the Mixtec and Central Valley regions of Oaxaca, this decline in Indigenous-Catholic is reflected by the decreased membership in local Catholic orders, including cofraternities upon which Catholic parish growth historically depended on for funding the construction of new churches or the funding of Catholic schools.<sup>48</sup> This overlooks more unorthodox, outwardly civic, and discursively secular public ceremonial life. An ethnography of contemporary Oaxacan religiosity would look at spaces right in the middle of both national civic religion and the domestic sphere of individual religious practice, where we would find ceremonies like the Guelaguetza Oficial as a pivotal case study into public religion and its present-day manifestations.

Previously, material analysis of public religiosity in Oaxaca would look at festivals like during the anniversaries of the commemoration of Oaxacan Cathedrals or at annual Posadas in the state's small villages. In present-day Oaxaca, we can incorporate the work of literary and cultural critic Octavio Paz, and his infatuation with the Mexican 'fiesta.' Paz, writing in the 1970s and 80s, saw the Mexican party life, with its music, dancing, and excess emotionality, as a quintessential part of a national Mexican identity. For Paz, in his monumental collection of essays *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, the festivities of the Day of the Dead or *Todos los Santos*, or more colloquially known as Dia de los Muertos, represents a disorganized, unsponsored inheritor of pre-Columbian

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<sup>48</sup> James P. Robson and Raymond Wiest, "Transnational Migration, Customary Governance, and the Future of Community," *Latin American Perspectives* 41, no. 3 (December 2013): pp. 103-117, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582x13506689>.

religion.<sup>49</sup> Mexicans' flaunting of skulls which are a popular representation in Mesoamerican pre-Hispanic iconography, paired with Catholic authority and the chaos of drunken civic gatherings, represented a 20<sup>th</sup> century intersection of religion and ceremonial festive life in urban Mexico. This chapter and thesis in general explore how smaller formally organized regional events like Guelaguetza embody regional and localized identities in contrast to larger national Mexican ones, embodying regional histories of religious ceremony and negotiated practice in Oaxaca.

Public festivals are an often-overlooked space of religious life when compared to the institutionally sanctioned and theologically structured religious ceremonies. Religion in the streets, including traditional Oaxacan processions of local rural parish' commendation anniversaries in Latin America, have only recently begun to receive the scholarly attention and space in secondary literature on religion in Latin America. Even then, in many anthropological monographs, discussions of such events remain periphery to overarching analyses of modern religion in the region.<sup>50</sup> *Guelaguetza, a discursively secular event*, challenges the concrete lines scholars construct between the religious and secular world. It invites us to ask: What is the difference between public celebrations of religious veneration and civic festivities of supposedly ancient tradition and history? Complicating this already difficult question is the fact that the history of Oaxacan public space fundamentally intersects in countless crucial points with conflicts over religious visibility.

This chapter hopes to explain how Guelaguetza embodies popular Oaxacan religion in its presentation through its use of fabrics, colors, textures, and in the movements of its performers.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Cite the chapter!

<sup>50</sup> Martin Austin Nesvig and Martin Austin Nesvig, "Introduction," in *Religious Culture in Modern Mexico* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), pp. 1-12.

<sup>51</sup> Juan Manuel Yáñez García, "El Misterio De Las Identidades: Oaxaca Como Alegoría De Unidad Religiosa," Fundación Alfredo Harp Helú Oaxaca (FAHHO, May 10, 2021), <https://fahho.mx/el-misterio-de-las-identidades-oaxaca-como-alegoria-de-unidad-religiosa/>.

The festival includes a web of discourses deployed by its organizers and all the promotional material that the state circulated in the lead-up to the Guelaguetza added on to the huge uptick in artisan sales of dresses and craft. How organizers and audiences come together to perform Guelaguetza reveals a matrix of different social agents who depend on the Guelaguetza reproducing an image of Oaxacan culture as uniquely connected to the styles of its Indigenous past. The existing presence of Indigenous artisans and activists complicates the reduction of state and economic definitions of Oaxacan culture by reminding the public that the material culture on display in Guelaguetza reflects living cultures, traditions, and religious practices in the state. In doing so, Indigenous people and their allies participate in the ongoing negotiation of meaning in continuous creative conversations that Oaxaqueños have that constitute what culture in Oaxaca should mean, which itself belongs to a tradition of negotiation about how religion should be practiced in public space and whose religion claims the right to such civic space and social resources.

### La Diosa Centeotl

The dresses that performers wear, the music that accompanies their traditional choreography, the many peripheral events that shape the week of Guelaguetza, and the core dances that tie them all up all find root in a Mexican tradition of *fiesta*. Guelaguetza's state organizers planned expansions of the festival, turning the event into the cultural spectacular it is today. In a partnership between tourist market actors and state funds and policy, new traditions rapidly added to the dance festival. The result for the material cultural characteristics of the festivity was that Guelaguetza, and its dances, turned focus towards captivating audiences that now included foreign tourists, new city demographics, and rural folk. As an example, the local dances and presentations

of the now eight regions of Oaxaca emphasized the sensuous connections that modern Oaxaqueños feel and construct between themselves and an imagined Indigenous past. Guelaguetza does this through regional music, regional garments, and popular aspects of party life that include the use of parades (‘calendas’) and dance performances that combine all these elements into a cohesive symbolically legible event.

What did this shift mean in terms of Indigeneity? Part of the process of Spanish conquest, what scholars of Spanish colonization call the spiritual conquest of the Americas, erased much of any archeological material Oaxaqueños and scholars of pre-Colombian material culture could have used to decipher the religious practices of pre-Hispanic Mixtec and Zapotec peoples. Yet, for scholars of contemporary lived religion in Oaxaca, this offers only a slight setback in unlocking contemporary practices influenced by Indigenous religion, or popular conceptions of Indigenous belief. Without an authoritative discourse that says exactly what “Indigenous religion” means, Oaxaqueños’ definitions of Indigenous religion revolve around what anthropologists call ‘memorates’ or oral narratives too loose to resemble traditional unified oral myths.<sup>52</sup>

Of course, this lack of detail signals both a misunderstanding/political appropriation of Indigenous “motifs” and a cultural phenomenon that takes on a life of its own. Loose definitions of Indigenous Zapotec and Mixtec religious culture might help us recenter the creative negotiations and ongoing construction of Guelaguetza that scholars of culture in Oaxaca have already highlighted in the region. The surviving traces of pre-Hispanic Oaxacan religion, while transformed and not the same as direct oral histories of a true Indigenous Zapotec or Mixtec past, still represent *modern* traces of “Indigenous” religion.

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<sup>52</sup> Goertzen Chris, “Tradition and Tourism in Festival Life: Shaping and Marketing Oaxaca’s Guelaguetza,” in *Made in Mexico: Tradition, Tourism, and Political Ferment in Oaxaca* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), pp. 74-103, 76.



Many auxiliary events that surround the Guelagueta Official itself, most of them official and choreographed dance performances in the two weeks leading up to the main event. Many of these events include performances that began in the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and whose origins date back to similar murky and contested traditions of performance, dance, and festival in Oaxaca. Among these dances are ones depicting the “true” origins of the Guelagueta, that we can read as a balance between an “official” history of the festival and a creative production that transcends any attempt by the state and its Committee of Authenticity to relay any concrete narrative of the true origins of the celebration.

There is one such event that stands out from the rest in its discrete yet efficacious display of modern Indigeneity in a touristic and popular fashion. On the Saturday before the first Monday Guelagueta performance, a similar committee as the one that curates the official dance bestows the honor of the Zapotec God/Goddess of Maize the *Diosa Centeotl* to one lucky female Guelagueta performer. Wearing the same dress that she would wear to perform in a week’s time, the victorious *Diosa* walks up to the judges’ table, bestowed a celebratory wooden staff crafted by Oaxaca City artisans, by the Governor of Oaxaca. This ritual marks the final formal and public settling of roles for the Guelagueta dance.

Katalin Jancso lays out the qualifications for winning the contests, writing that the *Diosa Centeotl* is the representative of her respective region who “más conserva las tradiciones y costumbres de su pueblo (best preserves the traditions and customs of her village).”<sup>53</sup> Before the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in the earlier incarnations of this contest, one representative per dance assemblage would be nominated by their group to vie for the coveted title. Jancso’s usage of the term “tradition y costumbres” is vital, as the phrase does not translate to just any tradition or

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<sup>53</sup> Jancsó, Katalin. 2003. “La Guelagueta: Una Fiesta Moderna De México”. *Acta Hispanica* 8 (January):101-7. <https://doi.org/10.14232/actahisp.2003.8.101-107>, 102-3.

customs.<sup>54</sup> The traditional customs whose representation is up for judgement surrounds unspoken vocabularies which village communities talk about their memorates. One village speaks its agrarian identity, so to speak, by inscribing a regional and at times ethnic or racial identity with values like *hardworking, dedicated, trustworthy*. Likewise, when a Diosa Centeotl says that her dress, her braids, her very voice and demeanor reflect a cultural tradition, she does so by defining her village's and region's people as particularly in-tune to a distinct and non-modern culture, in direct contrast to the culture of the city, of the nation as a whole, and of a modern and disenchanted globalized world.

After a slow and dramatic march onto the stage, accompanied by the same music as the orchestra plays for each village's dance, each contestant performs a short speech filled with rhetoric nods to their plucky Indigenous otherness. In front of the historic *Catedral de Santo Domingo*, a 5–10-minute walk from the steep steps that lead up to the Auditorio Guelaguetza, where in a few days' time these same contestants will perform in-front of thousands of spectators, a more unofficial public audience convenes in the wide-open off-white stone paved yard to watch each contestant give her speech. After a quick introduction by a curator of the event, always by someone both knowledgeable and outwardly passionate about the entire Guelaguetza month of festivities, each performer, dressed in their traditional outfit that they would wear for their respective dance, gives a speech that captivates this mostly urbanite and public audience. A combination of the folk traditional dresses, the tenor of each woman's voice, the facial and bodily movements, or the setting in the heart of the cultural center of the Oaxaca City, that leads Oaxaqueño/a audiences to nod, cheer, and cry in joy and pride.

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<sup>54</sup> Jancsó, 2003, 103.

Sitting at the very front, next to a table designated for them, is a panel of judges, that much like the Committee of Authenticity, is made up of local anthropologists, leaders of state Indigenous cultural organizations, and of prior performers who take notes and watch stoically, in contrast to the heterogeneous assortment of audiences behind them. The late 20<sup>th</sup> century contests were more about what the *Diosa* said about her respective village and how she verbally represents the distinction between the traditional and pre-modern Indigenous agrarian life and the urban and secular life of the city. Speaking on the 2007 Diosa Centeotl context, Chris Goertzen observes,

Speeches in which the contestant efficiently and humorously present “authentic” knowledge of their home’s traditions (especially of the elaborate local folk clothing they wear) and glorious history, usually narrated first in an indigenous tongue, then in Spanish. Many contestants incorporate gender-based humor into their shouted speeches, and the one with the best combination of spunk and knowledge of tradition wins.<sup>55</sup>

Contestants add descriptors like *passionate* and *expressive* to their groups’ performances to signal authenticity. These early performances, however, also emphasized the individual rhetorical prowess of dancers. At display in these earlier contests were the performances of dancers, where the whole contest resembled a play of intense emotion and of winners and losers. As much as these renditions of the Diosa Centeotl were a product of the debates about modernity and traditional social structures in the post-Revolutionary period of industrialization in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, contemporary contests reflect the new forms that public life in Oaxaca co-opts, redefines indigeneity.

Particularly, newer renditions focus on the material culture that defines, in the eyes of the judges and audiences, the autochthonous authority of Guelaguetza deriving from visual and auditory markers of Indigeneity. Looking at how mass publications speak of Oaxacan culture, this connection between folk Oaxacan culture and an Indigenous past appears both tangible yet open-

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<sup>55</sup> Goertzen, 16.

ended. This is to say, because most audiences arrive to the month of Guelaguetza and its surrounding festivities without a complex index of Zapotec history, the roars of cheers at events like the selection of the Diosa Centeotl depends on each contestant's performance of an "Indigenous" script.

*Vive Oaxaca* is a private corporation that seeks to "diffuse and preserve the culture of the state of Oaxaca through digital journalism and audiovisual productions."<sup>56</sup> In the lead up to the 2018 Guelaguetza, the group's YouTube channel posted a cinematic video titled "Who is la Diosa Centéotl?"<sup>57</sup> The video begins by showing the many faces of contestants wearing their unique outfits, but the close angles that cut off most of their bodies focus the details of their costumes, including flowers, different styles of braids, different earrings and jewelry. Peering through the gaze of this promotional material, suited one can guess for outside cultural tourists, seeing that most Oaxaqueño/as who would care about Guelaguetza know about it, certain features stand out. Distinctions in the styles of braids in the same full back length jet black hair, the different interwoven ribbons, fabrics, and textured patterns, and the subtle changes in their skin on their Brown faces, all matter more than the scripts that these, or at the very least they initiate the viewer, peeking interest in Guelaguetza, much like the Diosa Centeotl event itself. Behind their smiles a low pitch booming voice summarizes the role of these women, with typical neutral modern music plays in the background (weirdly the type that you would find in those pre-flight programs detailing safety guidelines): "Prideful are her traditions, culture, and love for her land, women of the eight regions [of Oaxaca] hope to represent the Goddess Centeotl and to introduce the festivities of *Los Lunes de Cerro*."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> "About Us - ViveOaxaca," accessed 2023, *ViveOaxaca*.

<sup>57</sup> "¿Qué Es La Diosa Centéotl? - Guelaguetza 2018," *YouTube* (Vive Oaxaca, 2018), <https://youtu.be/ykXx0v3vdzc>.

<sup>58</sup> "¿Qué Es La Diosa Centéotl? - Guelaguetza 2018," 2018; translation my own.

How does a Diosa Centeotl articulate meaning in their native traditional customs during their speeches? Looking at the cosmological significance of the Diosa Centeotl, one could make an educated guess that something needs to be said about corn, about maize and its irreducible role as a foundational pillar of Mesoamerican civilizations both before the conquest and in the agricultural economies and ways of life up to the mid to late-20<sup>th</sup> century. The Diosa Centeotl, the Goddess of Corn in Zapotec religion and whose veneration Guelagueta is said to derive from, evokes the religious orders of meaning central to Zapotec religion and culture and that bled through into the Indigenous Catholicism and popular religious beliefs and culture of Oaxaqueños.

In an article for the Mexican Daily Post, the grassroots organization The State Space for Native Corn of Oaxaca reiterated and centralized the place of corn in Guelagueta.<sup>59</sup> Their statement challenged notions that Guelagueta is only a reproduction of a Oaxacan folkic past or some heritage lost to the past, only to be recreated in the Auditorio Guelagueta. Instead, the group presents Guelagueta as expressing the ideals of communality and a closeness to the Earth that provides us nourishment, transmitting surviving traces of a living and still influential presence in Oaxaca. These are ideals not only held by Indigenous communities but also embodied by what we see in Guelagueta.

Still, the Diosa Centeotl is selected much in the style of a beauty pageant. The ceremony represents a superficial and explicit judgement of the authenticity of different performers of the Guelagueta. The Goddess is voted based on the speeches that a designated woman performer from each dance group gives in a separate ceremony from the Guelagueta Oficial. This Goddess is selected by a special committee, not unlike the Committee of Authenticity, based on ideals of

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<sup>59</sup> Juan Carlos Zavala, 'The Guelagueta Is Not Folklore': They Seek to Return Deep and Living Meaning to This Oaxaca Festival,' La Universal: Oaxaca, July 19, 2022, <https://mexicodailypost.com/2022/07/19/the-guelagueta-is-not-folklore-they-seek-to-return-deep-and-living-meaning-to-this-oaxaca-festival/#>.

regional authenticity in both the speech performed by the dancer and her own “representacion” or the way she embodies her region through her posture, demeanor, and dress.<sup>60</sup>

The continued use of different patterns in syncretic music, garments, dance, and festival all signal a continued and unrelenting influence of both Catholic power and Indigenous ingenuity. Central to the way that Mestizo Oaxaqueño/as talk about their Mestizo Oaxacan identity is, in Poole’s words, through a language of distinction. This thesis posits that such a language does not only involve a literal vernacular of difference between an Indigenous past and a Mestizo present, as Poole emphasizes, but also the presence of Indigeneity in the contours of everyday life in Oaxaca. Rather than appearing exceptional to Oaxacan residents, the days of Guelagueta festival reflect the embodiment of these floating, competing, and disparate images of Indigeneity and its place in modern Oaxaca.

Jacsenic Maybeth Rodas González is the reigning 2022 Diosa Centeotl, representing her hometown of Santo Domingo Tehuantepec. This is a municipality in the southern Isthmus of the state and is famously the region from which Frida Kahlo was “inspired” from in her own personal aesthetic, seen most clearly in her auto-portraits.<sup>61</sup> In her speech that would eventually win her the coveted title of Diosa Centeotl, González proclaims, “it is with pride that I wear this outfit of the Tehuana woman. It consists of a petticoat and a black velvet Huipil (traditional Oaxacan and Indigenous dress) with flowers embroidered in multicolor silk treads, complimented with.”<sup>62</sup>

In Jacsenic’s own words, “*cada region da un color especial a nuestra estado* (every region gives a special color to our state).” These colors are embodied by the tapestry of fabrics and colors

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<sup>60</sup> Goertzen, 2010.

<sup>61</sup> Hettie Judah, “The Real Story Behind Frida Kahlo’s Style,” The New York Time, June 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/15/fashion/frida-kahlo-museum-london.html>.

<sup>62</sup> “Ella Es Jacsenic Maybeth Rodas, La Diosa Centéotl 2022 Para Las Fiestas De La Guelagueta,” Herald De Mexico, July 19, 2022, <https://oaxaca.heraldodemexico.com.mx/guelagueta/2022/7/19/ella-es-jacsenic-maybeth-rodas-la-diosa-centeotl-2022-para-las-fiestas-de-la-guelagueta-34.html>. Translation my own.

of these Huipils and Guelaguetza outfits, and in the discourses of diversity employed by both the state and dance performers.<sup>63</sup> Guelaguetza presents folk textures, the combination of women wearing bright pinks, sky blues, wine reds, embroidered bouquets of flowers that line the shoulder-blades of the Huipils of candidates, and Maybeth presents herself as particularly in tune to the material culture of Guelaguetza. Centering the sensory world of the festival and her place within it all, she describes feeling “so many things [like] the immense emotion that makes you cry in joy at what you represent.”<sup>64</sup> This convenes with the narrator of Oaxaca Vive’s presentation of the Diosa Centeotl, who in a booming tenor ends the video with the phrase “*te presentamos a lo que es Oaxaca* (we present to you what is Oaxaca).”<sup>65</sup>

### Dance, Music, and Garments

Packed tightly against each other and peering onto the large stage below, a cacophony of different audiences sits awaiting the arrival of the Guelaguetza performers. A multitude of voices block the usual sounds of morning in the central valleys, its bird calls and whispering breezes on a typically mild July morning of the first Guelaguetza performance. The best seats in the auditorium, unobstructed to both the performance and the breathtaking panorama of the city bellow, are sold at prices up to thousands of dollars. While American and European tourists can often afford this “once in a lifetime” experience, Oaxaqueño/as sit in the nosebleeds, wearing their usual jeans and light shirts, in contrast to the tourists’ usual getup of the nicest “Indigenous” garments probably bought a few days ago either in the pop-up Zocolo stands or in close by suburban manufacturers.

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<sup>63</sup> “Ella Es Jacsenic,” 2022; Translation my own.

<sup>64</sup> “Ella Es Jacsenic,” 2022; Translation my own.

<sup>65</sup> “¿Qué Es La Diosa Centéotl?,” 2018; translation my own.

Yet, all in attendance have at least one thing in common: they all understand the weight of what they are about to witness. They all know that the space they have just entered, its open-air seating and its white steel frame, brass band tuning up their instruments, and palm sombreros covering the endless faces of other onlookers constitute something special, something that only happens once a year and that beckons one's full attention. "Welcome to the greatest spectacle of Oaxaca! (Bienvenidos al espectáculo mas grande de Oaxaca!)" yells the first announcer to the performance, whose short stage time is all the same met with loud jeers from White and Mestizo audiences alike.<sup>66</sup> The band on their elevated platform above the dance floor tune their instruments, again contrasting the usual musical accompaniments in the city below who often perform out of tune, causing a cacophony that itself symbolizes the typical un-choreographed dances of Oaxacan night-life. No matter how long someone has stayed in the city center, be it a few days, a couple of hours, or their entire lives, the mixture between the unofficial fiestas of the chaotic city below and of the state-sponsored performance above blend seamlessly into this "spectacular showcase of Oaxacan culture."<sup>67</sup>

Some things carry on directly from the traditional fiestas of Oaxaca. This includes the songs the state band performs and the routines that Guelaguetza dancers have practiced for months leading up to this event, which are the same found in any regional festival, in the smaller Zocolos of local Indigenous municipalities. And even as the band and the dancers perform the Jarabes and Sones through technically spectacular moves, audiences familiar with its material smile and sing along mainly to the rhythms they remember from childhood. The Cancion Mixteca is a song that anyone from the region knows in heart, including descendants of Mixteco immigrants in the US who know the song as one they play during wedding processions or funeral rites. Its melancholic

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<sup>66</sup> 2021 performance; "espectáculo" can translate to either spectacular (noun) or spectacle/performance.

<sup>67</sup> See above.



ambiance and earth-weary lyrics clash against the major notes and Alegre tone of a chorus of hundreds of voices singing “O’ Land of the sun, I breathe to see you, because now that I am so far away, I live without light, without love. And, to see me so alone, as sad as a leaf in the wind, I want to cry, I want to die of emotion.” Again, before the introduction of the regional dance groups, the second song that always plays is the state anthem that the Oaxacan state motto is named after, plays: “Dios Nunca Muere” or “God Never Dies.”

As anyone who attended funerals and wedding possessions in Oaxaca knows, both songs’ lyrics speak less to the ontological and theological implications of local pride or the immortality of the Christian God and more to the earthly sorrows and rugged individual suffering of the one singing its words, “the sun dies behind the mountains, and within its dying light... It doesn’t matter that I have the same fate, because I am consoled knowing that God never dies.” Norget uses *Cancion Mixteca* as a metaphor of popular Oaxacan Catholic conceptions of death and the immanence of passed loved ones. The author arrives to the conclusion, after an ethnography of lived Catholic death rituals, celebrations, prayer services, and communal care of those left behind that:

The independent quality of local popular Catholicism derives from an embeddedness of religiosity in quotidian existence: popular religious practices are woven into *the most important communal gatherings and celebrations; they are present in everyday settings such as domestic altars and public streets, and in special festivals* that punctuate the cycle of seasons or, as with the Day of the Dead...<sup>68</sup>

The lyrics of “Dios Nunca Muere” are paramount to this religiosity of everyday celebrations that extends beyond the role of God to the song’s protagonist. But here these songs contain a different context, not within family or loved ones, instead in the open, in a commercialized event meant to galvanize state identity and national pride.

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<sup>68</sup> Norget, “Popular-Indigenous Catholicism in Southern Mexico,” 15-6.

For the tourists who often come to Guelaguetza with limited knowledge of these traditional fiestas, these songs can remind them of the ones that mariachis play in front of open balcony cafes in the city center. They are the same that different caravans play in the many marches through the streets by independent bands tailed by other dancers offering tastes of what's to see in the official Guelaguetza performance. The month of Guelaguetza, at least outwardly, pays homage to the multifaceted culture of the state, proving that its music and dances and visual patterns cannot be contained within singular performances on two nights in July. This is, of course, despite its own generalizations and overlooking of real Zapotec and Mixtec communities, their traditions, and their forms of communal governance and precarious histories of colonization. We arrive at a sticky spot where the emotional reactions of audiences to the Diosa Centeotl and the songs in the prelude to Guelaguetza, emphasize distinction, transforming traditional songs, dances, and fabrics into a cohesive and legible whole for tourists and Oaxaqueño/as alike to read as Oaxacan.

The performers gather just behind view of the orchestra, emotionally preparing themselves for the dances that lay ahead. *Jarabes*, while being dances that originate in Spanish dance traditions, became its own genre of Mexican dance through the incorporation of Indigenous meanings and aesthetics. Translating directly to syrup, Gabriela Mendoza-Garcia notes that it was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the word began to refer to “different melodies of sones [highly rhythmic musical melodies] from a particular state in Mexico or a variety of regions.”<sup>69</sup> This imminent definition of Jarabe corresponded directly by efforts by the fledgling Mexican republic to solidifying social ties between Mexican subjects and the nation-building process, through the expression of a new national culture that Mexicans can look at for inspiration and feelings of

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<sup>69</sup> Gabriela Mendoza-Garcia, “Bodily Renderings of the Jarabe Tapatio in Early Twentieth-Century Mexico and the Millennial United States: Race, Nation, Class, and Gender.” *UC Riverside*. ProQuest ID: MendozaGarcia\_ucr\_0032D\_11336. Merritt ID: ark:/13030/m51v5js4. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8c47k3gm>, 3.

identification. The way that performers and observants describe how the Jarabe expresses a Oaxacan identity is in a language that itself is not too helpful in delineating an Indigenous origin or any Mixtec influence out right. This is in line with the role of Jarabes set out by early Republican intellectuals and their Mestizaje ambitions. The Jarabe Mixteco represents a disembodied Indigenous culture read in the works such as how Wright-Rios describes Indigenous-Catholicism as being about dance, motion, partying, and out of place color. Looking back at the explicitly religious origins of the Lunes de Cerro festivities, rather than being a cultural anomaly, the music, dances, and aesthetics of the Guelaguetza both evoke a Oaxacan identity but also link up to the history of material cultural negotiation of the state that itself is leant public space through ritual performance and religious celebration.

Like the Mesoamerican iconography that one finds both in tourist momentous and in archeological sites of the Oaxacan Central Valley, the symbols of flowers and the multicolored laces in reds, yellows, blues, and other contrasting colors all mark a Oaxacan tradition that itself is in part dependent on a history of Indigenous ancestry and the remnants of autochthonous forms of communal life. Best seen in the outfit of the male partner, whose *huaraches* (traditional leather sandals), *sombreros*, and white shirt and pants archon to an agrarian past that itself cannot be separated from the racial systems of economic hierarchy sustained throughout Oaxaca's history. Embedded in both the men's *campesino* outfits, the women's gestural *huipils*, and the wool scarves and *revosos* that both sexes share, is a constructed image of Oaxacan culture. This culture is both altered in its presentation yet symbolic of the actual ways of life shared by modern Oaxaqueño/as and resemblant of what a tourist sees in the capital city.

Guelaguetza in its state sponsored popularity and instruction showcases culture as it is produced, both in practical ends of state cohesion and economic necessity but most importantly

for this these, as an end in of itself. One can take either a microscopic or macroscopic analysis of how Guelaguetza works. The difference here is between watching Guelaguetza as a representation of local identity or as the product of national processes of Mestizaje and nation-building. In the eyes of audience members, and most accurately through the eyes of Oaxaqueño/a audiences, there is also a similar binary or even gradient between focusing on the larger significances of the feelings that Guelaguetza evokes, namely a transhistorical and all reaching cultural identity, and the more localized lived feelings of being home. What this project has thus far tried to posit is that the Guelaguetza official works by blending both sides of that binary, enmeshing them into an embodied performance of the heterogeneous religious culture of the region that cannot be simply reduced to a history of either Aztec/Zapotec history or Catholic practice, or even a secular Oaxacan *presence* (see Poole).

My first example was that of the Jarabe Mixteco and its the use of Indigenous imagery, aesthetics, and narrative material to call upon a “shared” and authentically unique Indigenous heritage. Watching for example the Bani Stui Gulal performance, a more elaborate stage production of the pre-Hispanic roots of the Guelaguetza dances, might leave audiences believing that all Mixtecos and Mestizo-Mexicans in general are entitled to identifying with a common lineage of Zapotec or Mixtec histories. However, rather than an “in-your-face” non-subtle representation of the history of the state of Oaxaca and its Indigenous past, Guelaguetza works on a different frequency (or to evoke Taussig, a different spectrum of color.)

None of the elaborate stage directions, songs, choreography, or even speeches by the leaders of each group during the Guelaguetza would come to move individuals if it weren’t for prior experience and already ingested knowledge about what it means to be from Oaxaca. This is meant to add nuance to the argument that Guelaguetza simply calls upon feelings of communal

identity to need to evoke emotions of social cohesion that seemingly come out of nowhere. The Guelaguetza Oficial depends on the life experiences of its audience to leave its mark and to blend together into a cohesive whole a Oaxacan identity that is at once local and universal. That is not to say that this image of a baroque and sensuous cultural sensibility of Indigenous culture is not something that Zapotecs and Mixtecs themselves incorporate into the ways they self-identity. Here, we can look at how both performers from Indigenous roots and those who make their garments describe their relation to material culture, looking for themes of embodiment of values and of emotions in expressive and vibrant resulting aesthetics.

We see a self-evident vocabulary of Indigeneity where Oaxaqueño/as speak of Indigenous material culture is a way to tap into and experience a common past. This collapses the differences between different Indigenous communities, their ways of lives, the nuances of their cosmologies, and the different political struggles they fight. Rather than seeing coexisting battles for water rights, forest conservation, the end to political violence, and a call for a bolstered welfare safety net, the Guelaguetza, seen in many of the Diosas Centeotl's speeches, focuses the limelight of recognition only to the very abstract goal of "cultural representation." Severed in both a material cultural sense and in a political maneuver is the relationship between cultural expression and the tactile practical meanings of political, economic, and social recognition.

This is of course a very clear-cut explanation of how the state government of Oaxaca uses Guelaguetza to promote social cohesion by veiling distinction and political debate. Since the Guelaguetza, in its clothes, dances, music, and imagery is so open to interpretation, and relies on the experiences of viewers in making up their own meaning behind Guelaguetza, then the festival offers a radical space to make that final cognitive leap to recognizing and acting upon the needs of Indigenous communities. To use the terms of the late cultural critic bell hooks, an educated

audience can learn to navigate the discourses of white supremacy, of patriarchy and empire to produce new interpretations that have ramifications not only on how we consume culture but how we see and engage with the material world. To go further, in Guelaguetza, in its tourist economy, and in how Oaxaqueños engage in its weeks of celebration, audiences are offered an unprecedented opportunity to experience the effect of material culture on constituting feelings of community and alternative ideals of modernity (as these next pages will show.)

### *La Jarabe Mixteco*

(Re)presenting Oaxaca to the world, Mixteco/as to Oaxaqueño/as, and their respective Pueblos to all at attendance, (all at the same time, mind you) the performers of the Mixteco delegation come waltzing on stage. They enter in pairs with the women on the left side and the men on the right.<sup>70</sup> At the front of the stage they separate into two gendered lines. Behind them plays the Oaxacan state band, in booming and slow melodic beats the *Canción Mixteca*. Between dancers and the band stands one woman who sings the song's lyrics, alternating between Spanish and Mixteco languages. The audience, who were gifted palm sombreros by organizers and some of the dancers themselves before the start of the dance, wave them in rhythm. They sing along mainly to the Spanish version, creating an auditory harmony with exigency cacophony. Goertzen, who is a scholar on Mexican popular culture, comments on the social heterogeneity, notes that the city's elite, poorer city habitants, newly middle-class migrants, and tourists across the economic spectrum all rub shoulders in the Guelaguetza's stands.<sup>71</sup> Yet, despite the visual markers of

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<sup>70</sup> Fiesta Oaxaqueña YT, "Jarabe Mixteco, Huajuapam de León Guelaguetza Vespertina 2022," Youtube, July 2022, <https://youtu.be/jw1JxHreeaA>.

<sup>71</sup> Goertzen, Chris, "3. Tradition and Tourism in Festival Life: Shaping and Marketing Oaxaca's Guelaguetza," in *Made in Mexico: Tradition, Tourism, and Political Ferment in Oaxaca* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 74–103, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt12f4mw.6>.

material wealth and racial capital, from afar such signs melt into a canvas of bodies focused on the performers from Huajuapán de León.

The performance of a Mixtec *orgullo*, or expression of pride, commences. Dancers flow effortfully through half a dozen different *sones* for the next nine minutes. The couples first scatter across the nine different points on stage. The men stand still, smiling with subdued grins, holding in their right hands the left ones of their partners, while the men's left hands cling on to black fabric scarfs. These scarves appear, again, uniform with the same tricolor red, white, and green pattern and more subtle white designs parting the cloth into three parts. The men are uniformed in such a way that only their different skin tones, facial features, and heights stand out, but only for the brief minute they stand patiently, singing along to both sets of lyrics of the song.

This contrasts with the women, who from the waist up also wear uniform white blouses and black *revisosos* around their head. Yet, each one waves their signature dress, long and fluorescent, again also to the melody of the brass instruments and sing-along. Some of their dresses are cyan blue, like the noon sky that is the background that envelops the auditorium. Others are forest greens that reflect the mountain façades you can see from the seats. There are also purples and pinks that stand out against the concrete and ivory of the buildings of Oaxaca City and its sprawling suburbia that Norget writes in *Days of Death*.<sup>72</sup>

Four women performers stand still between the singer and the couples, wearing unique dresses. One wears a dress made from palm that dangles close to the ground. Yet, all performers sing both versions of the song. This is a song about missing the Mixtec region. Longing, according to its lyrics, is a lifelong endeavor that exists even when physically present in one's home. Guelaguetza, as a celebration of corn, agriculture, and labor, signals for many an idyllic image of

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<sup>72</sup> Kristin Norget, *Days of Death, Days of Life: Ritual in the Popular Culture of Oaxaca*, Illustrated edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

life pre-contact. At the same time, the fabrics are produced by *Talleres* or artisan workshops catered to tourists and celebrations like this one. Tailors outside of the city reserve these dresses for only this festival and the countless rehearsals leading up to it. All in all, regardless of what happens on stage, the event brings into being an actuality of cultural relations. Embodiment, in this instance, means bringing back into view (and to give a voice, to incarnate) what might otherwise live only in the back of the minds of Oaxacan residents, foreign tourists, and other non-Indigenous or even diasporic Mixtecos.

Nostalgia, in this sense, does not capture all that this performance does. As Chris Goertzen points out, Guelaguetza is a modern production and social phenomenon. Contrary to how many in attendance may feel “transported out of time” and into the past, Guelaguetza embodies/summarizes an Indigenous and Catholic presence in a secular “present.” Rather than a diversion, the Jarabe Mixtec speaks the reality of religion and identity in Oaxaca today. The textures that dancers wear are similar to the ones you can buy in the outdoor markets that line the outside of the Central Park of the city—The Zocolo. *Canción Mixteca* is a classic for the dozens of mariachi bands that perform in front of the same Zocolo’s endless patio restaurants and cafes. In the month of Guelaguetza, the songs of the dance are performed by individual dancers and couplets for tourists in the walkways between restaurants and street vendors. The material themes of Guelaguetza that makes the event a celebration of Oaxacan identity incorporate Indigenous culture and Catholic tradition, both as a tool posits authors like Poole and Quijano, but also reterritorizes aspects of religious life that might, on the surface ideologically seem contradictory to modern Oaxacan life, especially in the capital city.

What makes Guelaguetza special is the literal and political platform it provides for performers and their work. A far shot away from an official recognition of indigeneity, the space



of the Guelaguetza Oficial is murky and open to endless play. Its colors, fabrics, movements, sounds all resonate and vibrate in heterogeneous harmony with how lived popular religion in Oaxaca has gotten its modern forms. The Catholicism of Oaxaca has always been in the streets, even as the visual markers of overt devotion have phased out. The celebrations of the Virgen del Carmen Alto that represented at least one of the stories of the origin of Guelaguetza do not strike the same cultural significance in the city. Yet, the possessions (*calendas*) of Guelaguetza, its band heavy music, its ability to melt together audiences into a mesmerized and galvanized collective even for just a few minutes, all remain as central effects and aspects of the festival. For a state that remains predominantly Catholic identifying (despite the growing number of Oaxaqueño/as that say they only “culturally” identify with the religion), religion cannot be severed from this analysis of Guelaguetza, despite the best wishes of Liberal, Neoliberal, and Late modern ideals of its place in civilized modern civic society.

### Towards Religion

Laden in how the state organizes and dancers perform the Oaxacan Guelaguetza are compromises between contending ideas of what modernity should mean for religious practice in the state. Without the sensibilities remnant from Catholicism and Zapotec religion in present day Oaxacan popular religion, Guelaguetza would be unable to leave audiences with a powerful response and lasting image of the city and the state. It is still true that such images are produced by social processes of colonization, *Mestizaje*, and neoliberal capitalist tourist economies of the state. How the *Jarabe Mixteca* mimics, personifies, and animates the humanity and sentience of non-human actors remains tethered to imprecise understandings of Zapotec and Mixtec values of sacred land and Maize. Guelaguetza alludes to an agrarian past without reproducing/promoting the

true social conditions of such life even though Indigenous communities continue to rebuild upon values of communal interdependence and ecological responsibility.

The critical work of scholars often stops at this point—seeing the ideology of Guelaguetza as shallow economic cash-grabs. Oaxacan artisans’ production of the garments not only clothe the dancers but also the stage and the city through advertisements and replica dresses and fabrics sold in the Zocolo. In the month of July, the Oaxaca City undergoes a cultural process reliant on Indigenous artisans and a long tradition of Indigenous focus on vibrant and abundant color. In the 2022 Guelaguetza, all state advertisements of the event featured the traditional and elaborate costume of the *Tiliches* of Putla, another state in the Mixteca Alta region of Oaxaca. A tall and short brimmed palm sombrero and a cloth mask that is simply a piece of fabric with two eyeholes cut out top off the many overlaid cutout rectangles of differently colored and textured fabrics.<sup>73</sup> Carrying clay bottles, the type that actors would sip from in movies from the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema to mimic the village drunk, the Tiliche suit steps directly into the civic and playful role of Guelaguetza as being about excess emotion and overabundant meaning that slides across the many different experiences that onlookers have with festival life in Oaxaca. In doing so, audiences to Guelaguetza construct connections between some of the unsavory and messy characteristics of the “Mexican Fiesta” which complicated its role in religious life.

The connection between vibrant, eye-catching, and sensuous religious altars, temples, and celebrations and a pre-modern sensibility to the baroque is seen abundantly in Guelaguetza. The connotations of the sensual in Guelaguetza resonate with the earlier chapters in Michael Taussig’s *What Color is the Sacred* which looks at the place of color in the material world of Western

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<sup>73</sup> Marisol González, “¿Qué Son Los Tiliches yCuál Es Su Significado? Historia De La Imagen Oficial De La Guelaguetza 2022,” *Heraldo De Oaxaca*, July 18, 2022, <https://oaxaca.heraldodemexico.com.mx/guelaguetza/2022/7/18/que-son-los-tiliches-cual-es-su-significado-historia-de-la-imagen-oficial-de-la-guelaguetza-2022-29.html>.

modernity.<sup>74</sup> What Taussig does best in his first chapter is dispel the myth that modernity has itself reversed the power of sensuality and brash emotions; replacing primitive emotional temperament with a new stoic rationality in the ideal of how people should behave and think. It is true that there exists a shift in post-enlightenment Europe and North America, specifically in the explicit normative social values of human behavior and, above all, in thinking that privileges rationality and emotionlessness. At the same time, however, the power of color and of cacophonies in style and intensities of cultural aesthetics has not been lost or even reduced, only reshaped, and particularly conquered. And like any hegemonic system of values, the colors of Guelaguetza highlight areas of compromise for visibility.

Rather than being out of place in a static, monochromic late modernity, the colors, textures, designs, sounds, movements of the Guelaguetza are both set apart from conventional desires for homogeneous color and presented as cohabiting a modern Oaxaca. Colors clash and blend on saints alters, in the paper decorations that line the streets of both the city and all the pueblos that make up the Mixtec region of Oaxaca during the highest of Catholic holidays. This is an observation that many scholars and Catholics of Oaxaca hold close to their own definitions of religious life in the state. Similarly, Guelaguetza reproduces a performance of these colors and aesthetic themes.

This production promotes, while sub-textually, the notion that religion has always already existed in the fabric of Oaxacan society. This thesis does not go as far as to argue that Guelaguetza itself is a religious ritual, much in line with how Quijano says “you cannot ask Guelaguetza to be something it has never meant to be.”<sup>75</sup> What we can conclude from a material cultural analysis of the event is that the depth of Guelaguetza opens up questions that historians of religion, such as Wright-Rios, have been exploring and asking about the history of Catholicism and Indigenous

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<sup>74</sup> Taussig, Michael, *What Color Is the Sacred?* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>75</sup> Durán, “La Guelaguetza no es una fiesta indígena.”

religion in the state of Oaxaca. Such questions continue to be relevant even in our current, so-called, secular age.<sup>76</sup> Despite the lowering rates of Catholic mass attendance and growing conversion rates of Oaxaqueño/as into Evangelical and Protestant Christian faiths, we see material religious themes that work in how scholars understand aspects of religious such as ritual, icons, holy celebration, and enactment of sacred stories.

The development of a recognizably popular and traditionally folk Catholic tradition in urban centers of Mexico throughout the colonial period, of an Indigenous Catholicism of an independence and post-revolutionary Oaxaca, and of a Vatican II and liberation theology Catholic practice whose presence remains with Oaxacan Catholics to this day, adapts to shifting demographic and social realities in Oaxaca, especially in the capital city of the state. Ever present, however, is a need to combine Indigenous and Catholic inspirations in everyday religiosity and religious life. The afterlives of popular Catholicism reflect longstanding contests for the popular acceptance of different social values and identities. Seen in Guelaguetza are the emerging afterlives of the different material characteristics of folk traditional culture in Oaxaca, including the contested origins and meanings or “authenticity” of such traditions. Whether it be for cultural representation, tourist interests, state interests in representing an unquestionable “Oaxacan” identity and heritage, or a combination of all the above, Guelaguetza represents a play with tried and tested (and undeniably effective) forms of public devotion and collective effervescence. This view into a supposedly (as represented by the state committees of authenticity or as written about in the work of local scholars of anthropology and sociology in Mexico) secular and civic event

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<sup>76</sup> For a good and concise discussion on the current state of secularism and non-religion in Western society, and on understandings of “secularism” as a social phenomenon that centers the process of “finding the place for religion” rather than a process of “expunging” religion from civic and public society, please read this wonderful introduction to a collection of essays on secularism, religion, and modern politics: Leerom Medovoi and Elizabeth Bentley, eds., *Religion, Secularism, and Political Belonging* (Duke University Press Books, 2021), 1–31.

instead shows how the history of popular religious, and mainly Catholic, practice in the region continues to effect what forms popular festivity takes there.

What countless scholars who have studied popular religiosity, mainly the lived Catholicism practiced by Oaxaqueño/as of a wide range of social, racial, gendered, or material strata, have posited is that religion was not extinguished by liberal reform. Thus, the Mexican revolution of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century did not represent the clean break away from previous forms of traditional Catholic lived practice and orthodoxy hoped by from the authors of the 1917 Mexican constitution—the Liberal reformers who now underwent a series of nation-building processes. Instead, the post-Independence history of Mexico, and of Oaxaca in particular, reflected a sprawling array of different negotiations, or contact points of contention, between continually pious Catholics, the Catholic Clergy, and secularizing and modernizing forces in the nation. This chapter has consulted the material culture brought on by Guelaguetza to explain the religious dimensions of Oaxacan identity.

## **Conclusion**

The study of religion, of its practice and its material culture, remains crucial to our growing understanding of contemporary Latin America culture. In Oaxaca, this entails analyzing religion's many intersections with other facets of social life, including the realms of politics, economics, and social values. While scholars of cultural anthropology and urban sociology have poignantly articulated Guelaguetza's political and social effects that constitute many Oaxaqueño/as' feelings of local identity, scholars' incorporation of Oaxaca's many traditions of lived religion promise to fill in many gaps left open for further interpretation.

In demonstrating how underrepresented groups such as Zapotec and Mixtec identifying Oaxaqueño/as have historically continued to negotiate religious traditions in Oaxaca despite the pressures from state and ecclesiastic actors, we better understand the centrality of previously overlooked multitudes of everyday Indigenous and lay-Catholic communities in the shaping of Oaxaca's present-day culture. The study of religion and its remanent effects on contemporary civic culture reflect a historiography from the bottom-up where previously overlooked Indigenous voices and actions reemerge as important sites of religious innovation and identity-building in present day Oaxaca. Considering this, Oaxaca's Guelaguetza offers a contemporary lens into the ongoing Indigenous Latin American struggle for recognition and agency which echoes both within the pages of the historical archive of academic research of culture and religious life and across the stage of Oaxaca's most important cultural event.

### Further Research

Local and Indigenous Zapotec, Mixtec, and Mestizo/a archeologists and Indigenous voices have done a commendable job raising awareness about the social and political role of Guelaguetza.

When it comes to cultural literacy, talking to performers of Guelaguetza uncovers a hidden knowledge that systems of power hold a heavy hand in what makes it onto the stage of such official events. Turning inwards to more on the ground grass-rooted cultural events, that is by reading such local cultural practice as products of dynamic and ever-changing negotiations for religious visibility, scholars of religion can offer invaluable context on how Indigenous autonomy has been a local and state aim for rural communities. Further research, in this sense, should seek to center contemporary signs of Oaxacan religious life and its roots in present forms of Indigenous Zapotec and Mixtec religion.

When assessing how state organizations like the Oaxaca Committee of Authenticity determines the validity and profitability of local culture at the state scale of Guelaguetza, scholars may reframe the question as: How do Indigenous voices, both present and past, speak through the dense array of political and social powers which historically have sought to silence Indigenous agency or co-opt Indigenous culture and thought for state ends? By diving deeper into the current state of Indigenous-Catholicism, scholars of religion may elaborate upon the more dynamic and responsive models of modern religious life that coexist, interact, affect, and change the shape of seemingly secular and civic life, both in Oaxaca and across the so-called modern globalized world.

Here we find fertile ground to ask whether secularism is a historical qualifier suitable for its cultural life. I hope that my work offers future scholars of religion and sociology of Latin America a guideline to move beyond an image of secular modernity to describe civic public ceremony. This is to ask enlightening question of: What is the continued role religious life in public life in Oaxaca, Mexico, and the rest of Latin America? If we cannot come up with a definition of religion, then why bother with studying the remnants of religious life in secular public space? How are people in urban settings of Latin America responding today to secularization and globalizing

markets of goods and ideas? As scholars from across disperse corners of the world, in conversation with different disciplines and scholarly focuses, collectively move to expand the repertoire of case studies on the continued importance of religious life in public spaces, Guelaguetza sets an example of how culture continues to mobilize individuals and underrepresented communities into positions of creativity, and publics towards generative alternatives of identity.



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