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Guelaguetza as a Religious Site of Identity: Construction and Defense of the Oaxacan Immigrant Community

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GUELAGUETZA AS A RELIGIOUS SITE OF IDENTITY: CONSTRUCTION AND DEFENSE OF THE OAXACAN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY

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Abstract: This article attempts to explore new techniques in how religious studies scholars study religious communities. Leveraging theoretical engagement with the religious practices and celebrations of Oaxacan Mexicans, as well as my own experiences in this community, this article will explore how Oaxacan Mexicans in Mexico and diasporic Oaxacans experience faith. This article will conclude by proposing that auto-ethnographic engagement with religious studies is a fruitful scholarly method that can help scholars make sense of lived religious practices.

Published over a decade ago, Kimerer L. LaMothe's groundbreaking article in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, "What Our Bodies Know About Religion and the Study of It," unveils a tension in religious studies scholarship.[2] LaMothe attempts to navigate the differences between purely empirical methods of religious studies, and an alternate model that emphasizes religious experience *sui generis*—that is, as an irreducible phenomenon instead of a product of other social processes. For LaMothe, this is a dynamic of pushing and pulling, movements and reactions that lead to a fuller understanding of religion and its practice. On top of this, the article emphasizes how scholarship on religious practice and belief still has not fully articulated how scholars should place their own body and experience into the work that they do. This theoretical space offers an opportunity for historically underrepresented researchers, a community I feel firmly part of, to situate their undervalued and silenced experiences into the common scholarly pursuit for a fuller understanding of what religion is and how people participate in it. As such, to create an intellectually robust understanding of Oaxacan Mexican religiosity, I suggest that we first explore the essential role of religious practice to the communal cohesion of the Oaxacan

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[2] Kimerer L. LaMothe, "What Bodies Know about Religion and the Study of It," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 3 (2008): 573–601.

diaspora. Afterward, we can turn to the role that religiosity has as a site of communal defense and self-reliance for Oaxacans.

Guelaguetza is an annual religious celebration that takes place in Oaxaca City, Mexico, one that offers a shared link between Oaxaqueños and reminder of the community's boundaries and histories. The Oaxacan dance festival, called colloquially 'Lunes del Cerro,' is a term that captures a wide array of different events occurring in the middle of July in Oaxaca City, including dances that Mexican government and the Oaxaqueños alike call Guelaguetzas. A Guelaguetza is a ceremonial dance performance hosted both in the Auditorio Guelaguetza, a designated arena on top of one of the surrounding hills of the city, but also in various public venues scattered throughout the city. This leads to abrupt morning dance performances in front of cafes or in the narrow colonial-era streets late into the night.

Both the official performance of the Guelaguetza and the various dances in the Oaxacan City streets combine cultural elements of indigenous religion, such as the appropriation of the Aztec God Centeotl, and the lived Catholic practice of Mexico. It is in this intersection where the Oaxaqueños who participate in the dance, and those in attendance, label the different events as a distinctly Oaxacan practice. Much of the scholarship heretofore published on Catholic Christian practice in Mexico centers on the different saint venerations that researchers often see as the crux of Catholic lived practice there.[3] While this has certainly been true in my personal experiences, there are other influential and visible currents of religion in Oaxaca that merit study. Cultural ceremonies such as Guelaguetza become centers of identity formation and sites of intimate engagement with religion and Catholic and pre-Colombian beliefs and practices. Through the study of lived religion, scholars can uncover how people construct, understand, and defend the imagined communities that everyday practice and cultural performance bring to life.

Discussions of religious syncretism fail to fully capture the religiosity of transnational communities like the Oaxacan diaspora. Research on the creation of a national Mexican identity is always one step behind the colloquial practices of people like my parents who might label themselves as "not the best Catholics," but who are nevertheless informed

[3] Here I am referencing academic work done particularly on the various interactions between Spanish Catholicism and Indigenous Mexican religion. Some notable work in this space includes Jennifer Scheper Hughes' *Biography of a Mexican Crucifix*; John A. Ingram's *Mary, Michael and Lucifer*; Cristián Parker's *Popular Religion and Modernization in Latin America* and Matthew D. O'Hara's *A Flock Divided*.

by religious discourses that make celebrations like Guelaguetza 'legible.' My family comes from the village of Tezoatlan de Segura y Luna, a small merchant center in the northwest valleys of the Alta Mixteca region. My experience with the Oaxacan culture of Mexico is different from the readily available academic work done on the Oaxacan immigrant experiences, most of which focus on diasporic Oaxacan communities in California and other parts of the West coast. Contrary to the scholarly consensus, I feel a sense of personal connection to the state of Oaxaca and my parents' home village through my own memories of visitation and the stories my parents have often shared. Most immigrants from my home village moved to the metropolises of New York City and Chicago; however, it is in New Jersey where my family ultimately settled. It is a combination of these different contexts that also include the immigrant experience that inform how I see a Oaxacan identity, as held together by bonds we may label as religious.

Religion, if we take note of Jonathan Z. Smith's work in *Map is Not Territory*, is similar to how a farmer orders his farm by constructing boundaries between home and his fields. Ritual initiation is the act of dirtying one's hand in dirt to mark the moment the farmer becomes part of this second world.[4] The farmer understands his field as a cosmology of zones with meanings that supersede any visual or scientific reason. Words like immanence and transcendence have little meaning for this farmer, who still understands that moving from one world to another requires a new set of rules that abide by logics out of reach from a sociological or anthropological lens. Similarly, initiation into the Oaxacan community encompasses meanings that researchers cannot understand through social theory or empirical data alone. Religion looks different depending on where you are and carries power that merits a study of its own. The question for my research, therefore, becomes: What does religion, seen in the mix of Catholic saint veneration and "Oaxacan" indigenous culture, do for those who talk about this mixture, such as when my mom talks about her upbringing, or when a Guelaguetza dancer re-enacts Aztec religious stories?

I have never attended a Guelaguetza performance in its official venue, though I do have many family members who have contributed to it. Consequently, I come at both the topic of a Oaxacan identity and of the festival of Guelaguetza through my experiences as a

[4] Discussed in in Donovan O. Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 4–5.

son of immigrants, having witnessed the every-day performances of the dance festival, my family members' retelling of its performance, and its intimate effect on my family here in the United States. A distance appears between the cultural practices and values that my parents talk about and my own experiences, a space that is open for academic and self-reflexive research into what still makes me Oaxaqueño.

Through my own experiences of Guelaguetza, I perceive a site of performance of a Oaxacan identity that incorporates, whether consciously or through subtext, the Oaxacan migrant experience. This is tangible in the way that immigrants travel back from the United States to Oaxaca, creating both a touristic market for the exchange of cultural artifacts (often with a unique aesthetic which immigrants and foreign tourists alike label as "Oaxacan"), but more importantly in the every-day interactions that occur in festivals of mass influx into the state, one such festival being Guelaguetza. Here, we again arrive at the idea of boundaries, suggesting that "religion" includes the concept of experiencing (or as LaMothe might phrase it, 'feeling'), these boundaries that make up a shared communal identity.

Researchers, especially sociologists and political scientists located in the critical theory tradition, may seek to understand the relationship between nation-states and religion through ideas of civic religion. One of the intoxicating strengths of such an approach is its ability to unearth hidden assumptions that we might have in what a nation-state is and what a nation's borders represents. Returning to LaMothe's article, we can try focusing her lens on how immigrants feel towards borders and the different "maps" that Oaxacan migrants may deploy to understand their circumstances.

As well-articulated in Silas W. Allard's chapter, "Borders: Sites of Exclusion; Sites of Engagement," borders constitute more than just the ways that states use power to exclude humans from their protection.[5] We can deploy Giorgio Agaben's concept of *Homo Sacer* to see that a sovereign's power manifests, in our contemporary age, to separate migrants from their political being. This allows the United States to deny groups of people the rights protected by citizenship.[6] The numerous social interactions that Oaxacan work-migrants experience on the path to the United States represent immigrants' experiences with the many

[5] Silas W. Allard, "Borders: Sites of Exclusion; Sites of Engagement," in *Christianity and the Law of Migration*, eds., Silas W. Allard, Kristin Heyer, and Raj Nadella (New York: Routledge, 2021), 87–104.
[6] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

borders that make up this unique and often dangerous experience of immigration. In such confrontations with the many borders of their every-day lives, I see echoes of Allard's usage of Balibar's idea of the heterogeneity of the border. Indeed, Allard's focus turns to how different boundaries are experienced and felt throughout different socio-political landscapes.[7] The ubiquity of the border follows the feeling that, from the perspective of an undocumented immigrant (as was the case for my parents until 2006), the border manifests itself not just in the physical "line in the sand," but in the many institutional lines that immigrants feel when navigating the unemployment process or even just dropping off one's child at school in fear of being stopped by ICE agents.

In another sense, we may look at the Guelaguetza festival as one that often attracts immigrants who live in the United States and have documentation to see the cultural and religious landscapes that also present unique experiences with state borders. The cultural construction of a Oaxacan identity stretches across national borders; yet, the immigrant experience is one that is ingrained in the way that immigrants talk to locals. In the case of my mother, this manifests in how she greets members of our home village, with warm embraces and the transaction of often sad or cheerful conversations. Migrants like my mother undergo a process of self-reflection after these conversations that involves an internal struggle between what it means to have left family members in Mexico for so long and being in the process of constructing new homes in the United States. This is where a Oaxacan identity is both challenged and persistently re-articulated.

The social significance of ceremonies like Guelaguetza highlight the importance of a geographic center for a Oaxacan diaspora. In my own experience of walking the streets of Oaxaca City, I have seen how intertwined culture, religion, and this Oaxacan identity are in cultivating an imagined community. Whenever I go back to visit the capital city, I make sure to visit at least two cathedrals, the first being El Templo de Santo Domingo. At this cathedral, I have had the honor to witness my cousin's wedding in the same week as the Guelaguetza, seeing professional dancers perform on the steps of the cathedral, blending both traditional Catholic customs and indigenous aesthetics of colors, form, and dance, to create a Oaxacan atmosphere that fills the streets. La Iglesia de la Soledad, on the other hand, makes up one of the sides of the Central Park of the city (*el Zocalo*) that is home to endless stands where

[7] Allard, "Borders: Sites of Exclusion; Sites of Engagement," 94-95.

artisans from largely indigenous communities sell ceramic cookware, mugs, *revosos*, and dresses that are colored in the mystic dyes that forcefully capture the eye.

For my immigrant family, this is yet another border we contemplate as we decide what to bring back home to the United States. A border uniquely attentive to the history and social realities of Mexico today appears between my family and these markets. The way that my parents understand the Oaxacan imagined community is imperfect and often glosses over or diminishes the real material suffering of indigenous communities. How much are these mystic dyes and 'othered' aesthetics that tourists and Oaxacan migrants alike label 'Oaxacqueño' also products of a capitalistic enterprise that often veils the hands that produce them? Instead of addressing how religious studies scholarship might uncover these hidden undercurrents of exploitation, I would like to focus on identifying a possible solution for the way that scholars can approach this unique case of lived religion.

Religious studies, through theories of social cohesion, offers us a way to see lived religion, or the way that people and communities live out religious practice in every-day life, as fluid and reactive to the pressures and coordinated efforts of those who can read cultures' oblique (and yet far-spanning) languages. The imagined Oaxacan community becomes a site where those who can read its significations can also affect and be affected by different cultures. The study of culture becomes a space for tangible social, political, and economic change on both sides of the Mexican-American border, and in the many frontiers whose ubiquity immigrants are experts in.

The questions I hope to pose here are: What steps should researchers take to incorporate more marginalized voices into the on-going pursuit of a more complete understanding of religious life? How should we apply the scholarly achievements of Robert Orsi and other theoreticians to other settings?[8] How might we further develop appreciative and transformative theories of what religion is and what it does? How are such questions inseparably bound to the communities of immigrants that live with religion and express their deepest sentiments through it?

Heeding LaMothe's call for a fuller understanding of a researcher's place in their research, I hope to describe what is at stake for me and how my body and mind feel the

[8] See, for example, Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

different textured landscapes of the Oaxacan community. As I write and read about the community of Oaxacan immigrants in the United States, as well as those I have left back home, I must remember to read my unique coordinates in the social institution of higher education in the United States, seeing myself as an outsider within the walls of a historically privileged social institution. I am then led, by these acknowledgments, to question what my place is here.

My goal in describing the Mexican city which my family still calls home is not aimed at legitimizing a strictly Oaxacan aesthetic that includes "indigenous" colors or designs or sounds or people. There is yet to be an all-inclusive Oaxacan community because of the historical, social, and economic consequences of events such as the Spanish conquest of Meso-America. What makes Guelaguetza a perfect example for identity-making, however, is in how it captures continual re-articulations of what being Oaxacan means, akin to how a dancer learns to perform their dance in different rhythms, compiling different techniques into fluid performances and embodiments of history and experience into one cohesive display. A Oaxacan community undergoes, in different historical moments, different movements of inclusion and exclusion, similar and often intersecting with the history of the construction of a Mexican national identity. If we consider Claudio Lomnitz's *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico*, we see a similarly ongoing apparition and disappearance of a Mexican identity whose constituents and characteristics depend on the conjurer who invokes a Mexican history out of a wide breadth of narratives at one's disposal.[9]

It is in the same process depicted by God's creation of existence in the first lines of the Book of Genesis, and God's verbal act of "speaking into existence" the universe, that Oaxacan Mexicans use to construct and defend their imagined community. (Gen 1:1-26 RSV). The Oaxacan imagined community celebrated in the festival of the Guelaguetza, through the traditional clothing worn by its dancers, the music played on so-called "traditional" instruments, and the colors of the skins of both performers and attendants, rely on a shared and agreed upon notion of Oaxacan identity. One way to translate such an utterance as "soy Oaxacaqueño" is to say, "this is my lot, this is my field." Smith's analogy becomes even more suitable when we consider the centrality of agricultural life in Oaxaca

[9] Claudio Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico*, First edition (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

and the idea of the *campesino* (the laborer) that forces one to return to an image of a brown farmer whose clothes are often worn by Guelaguetza dancers. What matters in the dancers' attire is not the historical accuracy of what indigenous farmers wore but the dancers' understanding of the centrality of maize and agriculture to a Oaxacan identity. Further, the focus of this identity-making process is in the depth of cultural signs that represent a reservoir of social histories waiting to be evoked through identification as Oaxaqueño.

I am told by my parents that I am Oaxaqueño because of my heritage. My mom once told me that she is proud to be from Oaxaca, no matter what other Mexicans think of her, because she sees her skin and sees beauty. I hope to untangle what this means and to see the continual processes of racial formation that occurs in the construction of a Oaxacan identity. I hope to ask how such racialized ideals are transmitted through generations of immigrants and their families here in the States. The focus of this inquiry is to reveal how the transformative nature of lived religion may enable the reversal of racialized ideals from Mexico, and a newly found appreciation of beauty in Brownness. Indeed, here, at the intersection of sacred ideals and material realities, scholars may ask: How can celebrations that are not overtly or theologically *religious* still be examples of engagements with religious vernaculars? How can religious languages of meaning, or the way that people come to live out religion, create connections that supersede material borders?

By looking at how people on the ground talk about religion and identity, or in this example, how Oaxaqueños define the practices and beliefs that tie them to their villages and to a Oaxacan identity, we can read the vital principles of religious practice in the age of modernity. Studying religion, as well-articulated in *Christianity and the Law of Migration*, is made more fluid and dynamic in the time we might label the 'modern age of immigration.' In the context of transnational cultural exchanges, I raise the question of: How is religious life fundamentally changed, and how does it adapt to, technological, political, economic, and social movements brought on by the modern form of capitalism and liberal democracy?

The lived religious practices of migrant communities can be seen in events such as Guelaguetza that incorporate the religious themes of Catholic saint-veneration and Catholic Cathedrals that stand alongside the indigenous pantheon of deities and ways of approaching the environment of Oaxaca. This offers scholars a view into the dynamic and creative practices of communities in need. Contrary to commonly accepted notions of religion being

traditional, steadfast, stubborn, and ancient, it is instead a practice of ongoing construction and redefinition. To be Oaxacan means to partake in this process of religious redefinition that mirrors the ubiquity that Allard attributes to national borders.

The religious rituals that belong within the festival of Guelaguetza do not fully make-up the whole of the celebration. There remains space for political, ethnic, racial, gendered and other powerful discourses that attach individuals to a community. Religious ritual, in this light, is what I ascribe to the process of social cohesion that leads people who live thousands of miles away from the state of Oaxaca to identify with and feel in coordination with the Oaxacan community. The movements of meaning and of different cultural signs that migrants carry across the United States-Mexico border have constituted a tangible community of Oaxaqueños. The movement of embodied stories and religious meaning that constitute the migrant experience has opened space for me to write: Soy Oaxacaqueño.

Beneath the level of discourse, or the way that Oaxaqueños talk about their upbringing or their ties to the state, lie powerful presuppositions about what makes a person, an event, an aesthetic, or an experience sufficiently Oaxacqueño. The fabrics that Guelaguetza dancers wear, the religious myths they deploy, the color of their skin, the layout of the city grid, all weave into a religious landscape of performances that construct a total and unified experience of the city. The city of Oaxaca can perhaps only be fully appreciated when Guelaguetza dancers animate the Catholic cathedral plazas and blur lines between secular sidewalks and sacred spaces. The city takes on a religious immanence, where divine presence takes over public space for a few days in mid-July.

We must also be careful not to concretize what a united and timeless image of Oaxacan identity is. Walking through the city of Oaxaca in the time of Guelaguetza offers fleeting and turbulent glimpses of social histories. Much in the same way that Claudio Lomnitz describes the continual construction and conjuring up of a national Mexican identity throughout the country's history, when Oaxaqueños articulate a Oaxacan identity, they tap into a depth of different narratives that include religious discourses and practice to momentarily construct meaning. The emphasis throughout Lomnitz's monograph is the cacophony of different voices that can be called upon depending on the setting and one's intentions. A more cynical view might see national identity as always determined by the power of the hegemonic order of one's time and place.

Instead, I invite a more open-ended reading of identity construction, where subaltern communities may find space to practice solidarity and democratic communal identity construction. Having explored the de-humanizing events that make up the many borders of the migrant experience, we might also see a fountain of hope revealing itself, sprouting opportunities for radical empathy with other communities in need. Redefining what makes the Oaxacan community succinct involves articulating ethical values that can be changed and summoned from the past. Oaxaqueños might even recover lessons from generations of migrants past to form communal myths that transcend generations.

As demographics reflect a decrease in the rate of migration from Mexico to the United States, and as generations of migrant workers slowly undergo the sociological processes of cultural and socio-economic assimilation, it becomes a strenuous effort to maintain a sense of Oaxacan identity. I experienced how it may also become harder to orient this identity towards lived experiences of precarity. At the same time, the depth of the immigrant experience, with the stories of crossing the Sierra desert or crawling through drainage beneath an Arizonan highway, can always be invoked.

I find myself in a privileged position to apply new hermeneutics of religious experience to better understand critical dimensions of the immigrant experience. Familial stories convey more than just a linguistic transmission of communal values and narratives. These stories share the way that bodies feel when they cross the border, not just in the literal words that come out of migrants' mouths. These stories may be written down in ethnographic manuscripts, but it is through the calculated retellings of border-crossing experiences, or the imagery and emotional significance of postcard-sized images of the Virgen de Guadalupe, for example, that they become meaningful. There remains ample unexplored territory for scholars to show us how such images can help make sense of the heterogeneous experiences that are then recalled through religious performance.