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The Enchanted Cinema. Cine Too, Comunalidad and Media Project in Guelatao
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Glossary

<i>Alcalde</i>	Judge. A local official with judicial authority, often resolving disputes or ensuring justice within a community.
<i>Bienes comunales</i>	Communal assets. Resources such as land, water, or forests collectively owned and managed by a community, traditionally for the benefit of all its members.
<i>Caquiques and principales</i>	Indigenous elites or community leaders who occupied hierarchical positions of power, often starting their roles at intermediate levels of governance.
<i>Cofradías</i>	Religious brotherhoods or lay associations within a community that organize and manage the celebration of specific saints' festivals, typically involving shared responsibilities and resources.
<i>Gobaz</i>	General servant. A person who performs a variety of tasks within the community or for local authorities, often in a subordinate or assistant role.
<i>Gobernador</i>	Governor. A leader or authority figure in a local political or communal structure, responsible for overseeing the implementation of customary laws and regulations.
<i>Macehuales</i>	Commoners or rural farmers who typically began at the lowest level of communal governance, gradually ascending through service and participation.
<i>Mayor</i>	Police chief. A high-ranking officer in charge of community security and law enforcement.
<i>Mayordomías</i>	Communal systems in which individuals or families take turns sponsoring religious or social festivities, a practice that blends community obligations with expressions of social status and faith.
<i>Mayordomos</i>	Individuals who oversee the organization and funding of religious or social events, often seen as an honor but also a significant financial burden within communal structures.
<i>Padrino</i>	Godparent. An individual, often selected for their social standing, kinship ties, or economic capacity, who assumes a sponsorship role in religious or social events, particularly baptisms, weddings, or community celebrations. The

<i>Regidor</i>	padrino plays a dual role, combining material obligations (e.g., financing the event) with symbolic responsibilities, such as offering guidance or fostering reciprocal bonds of obligation and respect within the community. Councilman. A member of a municipal council tasked with advising or making decisions about communal governance and local policy.
<i>Tequio</i>	A form of unpaid community labor or service mandated by custom or tradition, often used for the maintenance of communal infrastructure or religious festivities. <i>This concept will be discussed in detail and with nuance in the main text to highlight its cultural, social, and historical significance.</i>
<i>Todos jalan agua para su molino</i>	Every man for himself. A Spanish proverb meaning individuals tend to act in their own self-interest, often used in a critical sense to describe self-serving behavior in communal or cooperative contexts.
<i>Topil de comun</i>	Policeman and messenger. A community member responsible for maintaining order and communicating directives or announcements within the community.
<i>Topil de iglesia</i>	Church-keeper. A community member who manages the upkeep and daily operations of the local church, often serving as a caretaker and assistant in religious ceremonies.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the intersections of *comunalidad*, indigenous media practices, and community-based cultural production through an ethnographic study of Cine Too, a communal cinema project in Guelatao, Oaxaca, Mexico. The study explores how *comunalidad*—an indigenous concept rooted in communal assembly, unpaid labor (*tequio*), the cargo system, and fiestas—functions as both a political ideology and a practical framework for organizing media initiatives. Drawing on long-term fieldwork, participant observation, and historical analysis, the research situates Cine Too within broader processes of indigenous cultural resistance, media activism, and local political economy. The findings demonstrate that Cine Too is not merely a site of film exhibition but a locus of negotiation over value, identity, and autonomy, where notions of communal obligation and cultural production converge. By framing *comunalidad* as a tactic rather than a static identity, the dissertation highlights how indigenous actors navigate between state institutions, global media discourses, and local practices to assert agency and redefine modernity on their own terms. Ultimately, this study contributes to debates in media anthropology, political anthropology, and indigenous studies by showing that *comunalidad* operates as both an analytical category and a lived practice of resistance. It underscores the importance of grounding anthropological theory in emic concepts, while also exposing the challenges faced by Global South scholars in predominantly Eurocentric academic institutions.

Keywords: *comunalidad*, indigenous media, cinema, Oaxaca, anthropology of media, *tequio*, cultural resistance, community projects, theory of value

Zusammenfassung

Diese Dissertation untersucht die Verflechtungen von Comunalidad, indigenen Medienpraktiken und gemeinschaftsbasierter kultureller Produktion anhand einer ethnografischen Studie über Cine Too, ein kommunales Kino-Projekt in Guelatao, Oaxaca, Mexiko. Im Mittelpunkt steht die Frage, wie Comunalidad – ein indigener Begriff, der auf gemeinschaftlicher Versammlung, unbezahlter Arbeit (Tequio), dem Cargo-System und Fiestas beruht – sowohl als politische Ideologie als auch als praktisches Organisationsprinzip für Medieninitiativen fungiert.

Auf Grundlage langfristiger Feldforschung, teilnehmender Beobachtung und historischer Analyse verortet die Studie Cine Too in größeren Prozessen indigenen kulturellen Widerstands, Medienaktivismus und lokaler politischer Ökonomie. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Cine Too nicht nur ein Ort der Filmvorführung ist, sondern ein Raum der Aushandlung über Wert, Identität und Autonomie – ein Ort, an dem sich gemeinschaftliche Verpflichtung und kulturelle Produktion überschneiden.

Indem Comunalidad als dynamische Taktik statt als feste Identität verstanden wird, verdeutlicht die Dissertation, wie indigene Akteur:innen zwischen staatlichen Institutionen, globalen Mediendiskursen und lokalen Praktiken navigieren, um Handlungsmacht zu behaupten und Modernität nach ihren eigenen Maßstäben neu zu definieren.

Diese Arbeit leistet einen Beitrag zu den Debatten in der Medienanthropologie, der politischen Anthropologie und den Indigenous Studies, indem sie zeigt, dass Comunalidad sowohl ein analytisches Konzept als auch eine gelebte Praxis des Widerstands ist. Zugleich unterstreicht sie die Notwendigkeit, anthropologische Theoriebildung in emischen Konzepten zu verankern, und weist auf die Herausforderungen hin, denen Wissenschaftler:innen des Globalen Südens in überwiegend eurozentrischen akademischen Strukturen begegnen.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Comunalidad, indigene Medien, Kino, Oaxaca, Medienanthropologie, Tequio, kultureller Widerstand, Gemeinschaftsprojekte, Werttheorie

Introduction

Writing a book (essay or thesis) is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand.¹

George Orwell

Why am I doing this?

What is *comunalidad*? And what is its role in (media) community projects?

When I applied for funding at the Austrian Academy of Science, one of my anonymous reviewers wrote that my project was truly interesting, but fifteen years too late. Not relevant in nowadays scholarly standards or interest, not enough for research funds anyway. The bitter tone of the review put me on alert. Anthropology of media is moving in a different direction now, the reviewer claimed. Our discipline is moving rapidly, trying to catch the new “trends” of socio/cultural dynamics of people’s lives, or whatever the supervisors and mentors intend to research. National funding generates struggles for new anthropologists by subjecting them to their interest, or whatever “hot” topic is on the funding table.

As media anthropology now, moves towards the digital realm, modern technologies of communication, or human relations with technologies, one may think that this project – as the reviewer stated – is worthless and perhaps is right in assuming that a topic about a cinema was good if conceived a decade ago. In the beginning, my project had nothing to do with indigeneity or Mexico. I decided to appeal to my *exoticness* as a Mexican of Indigenous heritage, to elevate the chances of gaining sympathies. At least that was the advice from many of my peers and

¹ And this (Orwell 2004, 15) is the reason why this is my last academic piece realising that my motives to become an academic are completely wrong. There are different ways to being active politically and understand social reality beyond the chains and dungeons of academic circles.

colleagues here, there, in Europe and Mexico. Anthropologists here, still have certain empire nostalgia, and they are still keen on researching exotic lands², countries, and areas denominated as the Global South, more than a few Austrian schoolmates confessed a few years ago that in our faculty there is still a rancid smell of academic colonialism. The place I was born, did not have a direct link to Austria concerning colonialism – besides of course the Hapsburg Empire which in anthropology, at least here, is a dead end.

So, the question is, why do a project about a cinema theatre in a small village in Mexico? Why keep doing it if it is not relevant? Or for the lack of any of the reasons above mentioned. The other answer would be that because of my many failed attempts to gain funding, because my intentions did not fit any fashionable topic, I started to turn my eye to what, presumably, anthropology is supposed to be, a discipline with its keen awareness of the very range of human possibilities (Graeber 2004, 13). That is my simple plain human curiosity to find out how things work and to get to know what is going on in the Mexican town Guelatao. I remember when I confessed this intellectual curiosity to a professor at my faculty during a farewell retirement dinner of my supervisor; the professor in question ended up accusing me of organic intellectualism³ in Gramsci's terms, assuming of course that she believed that I come from the middle class or dominant class. Nothing of the sort. To be fair, I did not understand what she meant by it.

A more honest answer lies between the two above. This course led me to think that, as a manner of contestation to my reviewer, a topic, a field, or a subject is always contested, as my late doctoral advisor Elke Mader used to say; there is always a myriad of scopes, new findings, and intellectual lagoons to fill. New and old topics and new and old methodologies collide. Any topic is there, waiting to be readdressed with a different theory and method. Claiming that a topic is "outdated" is a spurious commitment to our discipline and is subjected to the dynamics of the academic "market." Therefore, this project is more a personal project than an attempt to find recognition from academia or a career icebreaker.

² Here is not the place, but there is an already excellent literature about the relation of media, the exotic and colonialism. For starters, see Shohat & Stam 1994.

³ Here is an interesting and short definition of the organic intellectual developed by Gramsci:

"Organic intellectuals are more directly related to the economic structure of their society simply because of the fact that every social group that originates in the fulfilment of an essential task of economic production creates its own organic intellectual. Thus, the organic intellectual gives his class homogeneity and awareness of its own function, in the economic field and on the social and political levels. In addition, their interests are more nearly identical with those of the dominant classes (they identify with) . . . than the traditional intellectuals" (Ramos 1982, para. 23).

As I agree above with Graber (2004), I am interested in anthropology because it is the *only* discipline that truly tries to understand the full human range of what has been – and is – possible politically, socially, economically, and so forth. Media anthropology became the sort of field that meets my interest to engage in a certain scholarship that allows me to talk or write about human possibilities of action outside of what we know of the mainstream cinematic industry, for-profit films, or the authoritarian Hollywood realm as Powdermaker (1950) would call it. Again, because of my interest in how cinema is produced, its infrastructures, technicalities, and organization, my interest in Cine Too grew on parallel lines with what I have read from Graeber's (2004) views on what anthropology is about, and his way of doing anthropology. My interest also grew because, Cine Too actors informed me many times that, a project is an act of resistance, and in that, "another (way of doing) cinema is possible." As any self-declared leftist person, we love to get to know how people are achieving things that tend to be more democratic, establishing more horizontal social relations, and so on. Another reason is to bring different notions and understandings of social arrangements, and emic perspectives if you like to get away from forcing theory on the field rather than the other way around. While once anthropologists' "key theoretical terms were words like mana, totem, or taboo, the new buzzwords⁴ are invariably derived from Latin or Greek, usually via French, occasionally German" (Graeber 2004, 98). Our task or my task for *my* anthropology is to refer theoretical terms emanated from the field, it is one of the ways I could correspond, to reciprocate to those who already are producing knowledge, hence to my "informants" to my interlocutors. That is why the title of this work has *comunalidad* as a node, and an enchanted cinema as an entryway to understanding *comunalidad* and its whereabouts anthropology is emic all the way down (Sahlins 2017).

After a disappointing and failed attempt at my PhD public presentation at the University of Vienna in Austria – which was related to another topic than this project – I took a break to wonder if doing doctoral studies in anthropology was a thing for me. After the overwhelming precariat living conditions that any global-south immigrant carries on, I then decided to head back to Oaxaca, Mexico the city where I spent a few years of my life and where my family resides. There, my father told me that a cinema theatre opened in the Northern Oaxacan Sierra region. In this region, there

⁴ Examples are vast e.g. resilience, *verstehen*, among others; but perhaps what Graeber (2004, 98) had in mind was the flip upside down in anthropology, that is, size-fit-all theory and concepts coming from other disciplines and using them before, during and after fieldwork, rather than theory and notions that emerge from the field, in short, emic perspectives in a serious theoretical manner.

is a high density of indigenous ethnolinguistic groups: Zapotec, Mixe, and Chinantec. A region better known as Sierra Norte and locally known as Sierra Juárez.

I have been interested in cinema since my bachelor's studies, when, along with some classmates we put together a cine-club. When you study in a public institution in Mexico at the university level, you have to do a sort of civil service for a year. This service is meant to be a kind of payback to taxpayers for free education. In my master's degree, I reflected on the reception of Mexican cinema in the former Yugoslavia in a short period right after the Second World War. I have always been involved in various capacities within the realm of cinema. So, the news of a cinema opening in the Sierras, especially in a small village, made me very curious.

The project was led by Luna, daughter of local intellectual Jaime Luna (Fundación *Comunalidad A.C.*), she was also a friend of Juan José García, filmmaker and at the time INPI⁵ state delegate.⁶ Juan José facilitated Luna's number. I called and we met up to talk about the *Cine Too* project. At the end of 2016, after couple of weeks after *Cine Too*'s inauguration, I met with Luna at the café below Macedonio Alcalá Theatre in the capital city.

Luna shared her film experiences from her early years as a student at the faculty of Visual Arts at the University of Guadalajara, as co-founder of the Audio-visual Training Camp, *Campamento Audiovisual Itinerante CAI*, and being part of the long-standing Guelatao media process and projects. She believes that *Cine Too* came into being as almost natural given the preceding media projects and engagement by some Guelatao community members and she considered having such infrastructure in the town practically a necessity. This infrastructure enables, she continues, indigenous populations to have a cultural space to learn to watch and produce cinema, distinct from the mainstream narratives, “*Cine Too* is resistance, but above all, a project that emerged from the communal assembly by general consensus” (personal communication, November 2016), she concluded. Luna invited me to visit the town and the cinema, with hesitation, and due to my situation back in Europe, I was reluctant to go. I did not lose her contact and once back in Europe the project seemed to pique my curiosity to find out how things work. Something she mentioned kept pounding in my head, – the assembly and *tequio* (faena) communal labor, familiar to me coming from indigenous communities (in the Chihuahua

⁵ Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas. National Institute of Indigenous Peoples. In subsequent remarks, I noted that INPI was formerly known as INI (Instituto Nacional Indigenista) National Indigeneity Institute and CDI (Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas) National Commission for Indigenous Peoples Development.

⁶ Juan José García is founder of Ojo de Agua Comunicaciones and state delegate of INP since 2018.

mountainous area, on the Mixtec, Afro-Mexican Oaxaca coast, at the Otomi part of south Queretaro, among others), but a concept that was new for me, that of *comunalidad*. This notion seems so powerful that people engage with it to do things, projects, conferences, and others. It refers to how life is organized socially by Indigenous people in the region and proposes a viable way to do things beyond hierarchies, oppression, capitalism, and the state. The social forms are based on four principles: The decision-making of the communitarian assembly by consensus; unpaid community labor, as direct action, known as *tequio*; the *Cargo* system, meaning administrative obligatory labor and the absence of political parties; and the fiestas. I come back to this in the following part.

This is a doctoral dissertation about a cinema project based on *comunalidad*; a local theatre cinema located in a rural town in the *Oaxacan* Sierra Norte, just an hour away from the capital city. The small town of no more than six hundred inhabitants lies on a mountainous terrain. The town of Guelatao is known as the birthplace of the only indigenous president that Mexico ever had, Benito Juarez, and for hosting an annual regional basketball tournament where hundreds of people from different corners of the Juarez Sierra and even from the U.S. meet to compete for prestige. Guelatao is very well known among activists, indigenous organizations, and media for its short history but rich engagement with radio, television, and film production. This is also a dissertation about a concept which, according to many of my peers back in Oaxaca and Mexico, functions as an engine for cultural resistance, projects of almost any kind, anti-colonial discourse, and, above all, indigenous identity and practice, that is *comunalidad*.

My interest in Guelatao developed not only by its media engagement and hub for indigenous activism but also because it offers anthropological intertwine possibilities, a sort of kaleidoscope of intersectional social fields, media, politics, economy, colonial history, autonomy, etc. For once, I was interested in cinema, how movies and documentaries are made, its technicalities, infrastructures, and organization. Cine Too, I thought, could provide an interesting setting that would meet that anthropological kaleidoscope. As I stated briefly before, cinema has always been of interest to me, first as a *cinophile*, second as an anthropologist. When I was studying *my bachelor's* back in Mexico some colleagues and I decided that it was important to create a cine club, not only for the faculty but also for the whole neighborhood. A working-class neighborhood with proletarian resistance and a tradition of social unrest. We understood that cinema is a *valuable* art form where we could reflect on human existence. Supported by our then advisor, the late

Zapotec Rene Cabrera Palomec, we set up our cine-club with whatever infrastructure the faculty would provide. We set a theme and a film per week: cinema and modernity, silent cinema, early Mexican cinema, and so on. Each of us had to prepare a review of each film and present it, then after we screened the film, the floor opened up for discussions. The project was born out of the curiosity of what film could bring to our anthropological insights and epistemological tools beyond as object of research, and as discourses about the human condition. In the end, we were a handful of people trying to do stuff.

In contrast, Cine Too members, position their project as one emanating from the community. It is said that through community consensus the Cine Too, project, infrastructure, and budget were chosen, hence, as the project itself claims, it is a communal project by and for the community. As Luna pointed out. “It was almost natural, organic since we have been doing media for almost three decades. We are the second-generation doing media” (Fieldnotes December 2017). However, Cine Too did not appear without contestation. Luna told me that in 2014, they presented an audio-visual project to the local assembly. Sadly, the assembly rejected the project at the time, but it was only when Juan José held *Cargo* as *presidente municipal*, that the project saw the light. This project, known as *Agenda Guelatao*, served as an umbrella micro-business which includes cultural events and promotion, film workshops, and screenings. The project's conception was to offer new job opportunities for young professionals who, because of lack of chances left for the city. It is said that the project aims to be a viable way to return people to the community. The question was of course if Guelatao truly needed a movie theatre project at all or any other business venture to bring people back, or if because the political juncture allowed media actors to have a project of their own.

Perhaps the reason why the project was rejected by the local population was because of reasons of “value” since many people there would speak about *valor*, *valores*, attached to things they do as a community or as individual members of their community; but some other would refer explicitly to value in financial terms, so in the widest sense of the term, I was asking: what value could the cinema bring to Guelatao? I found many people among my interlocutors, especially those working at the cinema and youngsters alike, stating that “it is hard to bring such (cultural) projects for approval to the assembly, they are worried about the money.” Bringing projects was a matter of money and employment/labor, I realized. At some point, people would talk about *tequio*, a fundamental part of being a community member. *Tequio* is a requisite and a moral and ethical

obligation for community members, it is unpaid labor, mostly for community projects and management of the community infrastructure. I suspected that *tequio* was an important matter in Cine Too construction and management. Matters about *tequio* and value were not present as research questions at the beginning. I abandoned the early research questions. I then opted to focus solely on the question on *comunalidad* and formulate the following research question: What is *comunalidad*? And what is its role in (media) community projects? The question had the task of relating *comunalidad* and community projects, particularly media.

The vicissitudes of a non-white, third-world anthropologist in a very white and “first world” university.

As we normally do, anthropologists tend to start any dissertation with the reasons and motives of what we study what we are about to explain, discern, reflect, or expose. And so, we proceed with the process of other people's business, life, motives and what have you, to understand why they do what they do. Very few times, we have put forward our very process of research and the vicissitudes of our own process of research in written form, or as an integral part of our dissertation. Indeed, we talk about it in the hallways of the faculty, out in a bar, or at the end of any conference when we mingle. We all agree that it is a hard process, a precarious one, at times as mental and soul-consuming, a spurious way of making a living with the hope of getting some crumbs for our next research, often under the foot of some supervisor eager for power and exercising their power over students loading them with teaching assessments, bureaucratic work and the like. There are always rumors and gossip; racism, nepotism, professional jealousy, corruption, and the like; some of those are very true.

Now you know, there is no surprise why Orwell's quote comes first in this introduction. The act of writing is one of the most beautiful things we do as humans. The demons, as Orwell has it, come with the surrounding reasons for writing. Academia. Moreover, if the writer is situated in a particular position determined by “race”, gender, language, geopolitics, the topic of research and recently came to mind, the historical relation of its place of origin, with the place of the institution the writer intent to do the writing. Ultimately, this means a colonial historical relation. At the end of the last section, I give a hint on the matter. My intention is not to dwell on the bitterness of this process, but rather to highlight the power dynamics that young scholars from the Global South,

particularly non-white scholars, often face. I became increasingly suspicious when, throughout my time as a PhD student, I would not recognize non-white/global south students at the Department of Anthropology of the University of Vienna.⁷ In a previous work (Ruiz 2020), I highlighted the undemocratic nature of knowledge production in academia, despite anthropologists often aligning with anti-hierarchical and democratic discourses. In reality, academia downplays the significance of race and class, while hierarchies are justified in the name of 'excellence.' Ironically, the very structures that anthropology seeks to challenge are the foundations of its own institution. Knowledge production in the social sciences remains deeply rooted in geopolitics, with the old imperialist and colonial formulas still in effect (see Ribeiro & Escobar 2006; Ribeiro 2006). English continues to dominate as the 'linguistic empire,' disregarding or ignoring knowledge produced in so-called subordinate scientific languages (Hamel 2006). Some colleagues and I suspect that, as scholars from the Third World, we are often perceived merely as exchange students expected to return home, rather than as true peers with potential for career development, making it difficult to be taken seriously in academic circles.

Today, in some academic contexts, though not in Austria, there is a growing recognition of the role of non-hegemonic anthropologists in the production and reproduction of knowledge, engaging in anthropology as *cosmopolitics* (see Ribeiro 2006). Interestingly, a Brazilian colleague who works closely with Ribeiro (personal communication, August 2022) remarked on how un-cosmopolitan Austrian academia is. He noted that hierarchies are so entrenched that there is little space for scholars from the Global South, reflecting his own struggles to navigate Austrian academic circles. Sadly, after years of battling cancer, my supervisor Elke passed away. This event was a profound emotional and mental blow, it left a mark on me. Working with her had been incredibly fruitful – our political views were closely aligned, though we rarely discussed academic work in detail. Over time, I felt us drifting apart intellectually. She was focused on ontology and Amerindian perspectivism, while I was still trying to find out how to approach media without falling into identity politics. Despite this, she truly understood my position. I recall her telling me early on, 'I cannot help you. I don't play politics anymore, and you are on your own now (personal communication December 2018). I soon realized what she truly meant by being alone. While she granted me the intellectual freedom to explore my research as I saw fit, testing theories and adapting my approach, I lacked the critical guidance that a supervisor typically provides. Supervisors play a

⁷ This was not only the case at the Department of Anthropology. Colleagues from Political Science, Science and Technology departments share very similar views.

fundamental role in advising, helping to avoid pitfalls and poor research practices, and offering crucial discussions and feedback. Unfortunately, I didn't have that support. However, I did encounter individuals with similar political alignments and experiences, including a new supervisor knowledgeable about Mexico and indigenous issues, as well as others who helped make this journey a bit lighter and brighter. Unfortunately, almost none of them came from my academic field.

My demons, as noted by Orwell (2004, 8), surface most intensely within academia. Yet, paradoxically, writing, reading, and engaging with anthropology, this intricate web of human actions and possibilities—remains one of the most rewarding and adventurous pursuits I've experienced. Without a doubt, this will be my last piece of 'academic' writing.

[The art of being in the field.](#)

As Cohen puts it, there was a time when, as social scientists, conducted fieldwork in an unproblematic way, we wrote findings thinking with little doubt, that we were accurately documenting the world. This procedure, a positivist one, thought on a world dominated by laws and rules, once found, the world appears coherently to be explained (Cohen 2015, see chapter 1). This is, by no means, a spurious way to fall false to the richness contradictions, and ambiguities of modern life. As contradictory as it may sound, we shall give an account of how people go about contradictions and navigate to make sense of the world.

If something gives me anxiety and fear, it is to give account to such contradictions, inaccuracies, and ambiguities of people's life, practices, narratives, and discourses. Probably because many of my interlocutors may find inaccuracies in my findings or misinterpreted or against their beliefs and what they stand for. This was a commentary made by two of my interlocutors, a matter of representation at the end, a topic with which anthropology dealt too much in the eighties in the phase of so-called postmodern anthropology.

During Covid, Cohen (2020) wrote a small online article describing the practice of solidarity of Zapotec people in times of crisis, particularly in Santa Ana del Valle, a village where he did his research. When I shared Cohen's reflection with Abril, a citizen of Guelatao, Abril said that Cohen misunderstands indigenous cultural practices, and researchers more oftentimes than not,

publish whatever they think they are. “In some way, they have always homogenized us by calling us, indigenous as a size fit all term” (field notes February 2019), she concluded. In informal conversations Tavo and I talked about some historical and anthropological studies of the Sierra Norte region. He referred to it as truly valuable, the work of Chance and Taylor, and without explanation, he went on to say that common people and sometimes scholars, do not and cannot understand their way of life, it is just hard, next to impossible to grasp. Indigenous media, in this regard, not only takes the form of self-representation or technological appropriation for indigenous media projects but as a means of a larger cultural production of contestation.

This reminds me of discussions with my classmates at Xalapa, where I studied historical anthropology. They often questioned why we should apply theories rooted in European thought when we could use emic concepts from the indigenous communities we studied. This raises a dual perspective: on the one hand, as anthropologists, we must grapple with the challenges of representing agents in our texts. Despite extensive scholarship on this issue (Clifford 1988; Spivak 1988; Crapanzano 1992), we continue to produce monographs and papers as authors in our own right. As I write these pages, a good quantity of the papers⁸ and articles related to *comunalidad* have been written by indigenous people, and a good more from sympathizers. Many of them are scientific articles, bachelors, and master theses in different universities across Latin America refereeing and working on *comunalidad* and because of this, many of them *describe* similarly what *comunalidad* is. That it is the way of life of indigenous people, mainly supported by ancestral and immemorial communal practices surviving until today. How does one engage in writing the other side of that coin? The risk of writing something they might not like is significant, creating a daunting ethical dilemma. Critique should be at the core of our text, as Feimann⁹ once said, we are not here to sell candy, nor buy it, and even if the landscape looks obscure, we should carry on. Many senior scholars in Mexico have warned me against critiquing social movements or 'native' concepts. However, just as many of my indigenous peers lament the homogenization of their struggles and identities, I feel compelled to reciprocate that sentiment. This means I must critically engage with the heterogeneity of their practices, intentions, and politics. It's vital to heed Ortner's warnings about resisting simplified ethnographic accounts.

⁸ It is futile for the space, to number and make examples of this here, but I invite the reader to type in the academia.com and redalyc portal, “*comunalidad*” to realise the time invested in research on the matter.

⁹ Juan Pablo Feinmann was a prolific argentine philosopher, a TV host and a declare *cinophile*. He tried to divulge in a simple way the most complicated philosophical topics through TV shows. The most memorable is the show which I extracted the quote of this footnote, *Filosofía, aquí y ahora*, Philosophy, here and now.

My position was both strange and ambivalent. At times, I was viewed as a middle-class researcher from a Western European university, while at other times, as a person from the capital. Occasionally, common ground was found through shared networks – activists, state agents, indigenous intellectuals. My identity was never fixed. In broader terms, I was simply a person from Santa Cruz Amilpas, Oaxaca, pursuing a PhD in Austria.

Method (s)

I rely mostly upon participant observation derivative in ethnography. That is arguable since us, or some anthropologists, know that ethnography is not a method and is not anthropology (Ingold 2017; Miller 2017; Ahmad 2021). However, ethnography is an end in itself that allows us to have an anthropological understanding. The anthropological method instead, participant observation, comes to the fore assuming that “we” anthropologists collect data by observing and listening to people and at times participating in what they are doing and in conversations.

Thus, I experienced fieldwork relying mostly upon participant observation and took a historical approach. A combination of history and ethnography ends up with anthropological outcomes known as historical anthropology (see Burguiere 2009; Yannakakis 2008). And wrote experience rather than conducted, since “to conduct” implies fieldwork is managed and pre-directed (Okely 2012, 5)

In this, I recognized, however, that both ethnography, and participant observation are part of the same bowl, with four core aspects:

“(a) long duration (long-term engagement), (b) revealing social relations of a group of people (understanding a group of people and their social processes), (c) holism (studying all aspects of social life, marking its fundamental democracy), and the (d) dialectical relationship between intimacy and estrangement (befriending strangers)” (Shah 2017, 51).

At least that is what I thought. No shit, fieldwork, ethnography and above all, participant observation is always a messy business. I remember when I did my first fieldwork back in Mexico, in fact it was more extensive than this one, or than my MA. As Mexican bachelor student you are really obligate to do one, if not more, year of fieldwork. I was between participant observation,

history and paleoanthropology, I simply did not know how to go about it. Nobody really, not even our dear wise late supervisor Rene, told us how to do it beside simple acts of bodily exploration: read, watch, see, listen, speak and act and above all, be reflective, think. I still did not know how to go about it. Interestingly, for instance, he would have emphasized fitness preparation. I guess, somehow I feel more comfortable talking to archives, books or else than people. This is an uncomfortable confession, a sin for an anthropologist doing participant observation. However, along the way, you meet remarkable people, people as open books, with stories as endless archives, you listen and is like reading, oral history and the like. I always believed that, interlocutors, knowledge sources, informants or co-researches, whatever you want to call it, always choose you, rather than the other way around. Sometimes, no matter how hard you try to reach people to talk to you, it turns out an impossible endeavor. To make things short, I think my interlocutors chose me. They talk to me as they saw fit. For instance, I was so interested in a feminist workshop they had. When I tried to reach out, I was left in oblivion. Some people who kindly talk to me in my first fieldwork, refuse in the second and vice-versa. Nobody was really constant. I rather say, I had moments with people, so rich moments, condense with data and insights. I never really had an interview, I never had group discussions, and I rather had talk-partnerships. In simplicity, I had a small note book where I write what I saw, what I observed, relying in my short memory and imagining what the outcome could be. There are a number of names which I consider central to the development of this work. Carmen who work at that time as the Cine Too manager, whom by the way I spent most of the time; Luna Maran who is; probably the main public figure of the Cine Too project and also other media projects; Kiado who is a media and ICTs scholar and indigenous activist; Jaime Martínez Luna, indigenous intellectual and activist, indigenous media pioneer and social activist and Tavo, a young local activist who sympathizes with the *comunalidad* principles.

It was not only a few weeks more finishing up this dissertation that a text would come up. In this text a PhD from Columbia University researching Iraqis in the UK, remind us that writing anthropology becomes “the issue of penning an ethnography out of the fieldwork material became an endeavor in its own right (rather than a means)” (Saleh 2011, 23). Saleh, same as almost any colleague from, say, countries like Mexico, Spain and other “baroque” historical literature traditions, would appear to prefer a sort of storytelling, in speaking Spanish countries we would call it *licencia poetica*, or poetic license. Taussig’s (2010)¹⁰ annotations on the matter become

¹⁰ Webster (1983) has a similar approach to anthropological writing, as he notes in similar fashion as Taussig (2010) that communicability of experience is decreasing.

important for Saleh, by stating that, “the art of storytelling has been stifled by the dominant approach to academic writing and its emphasis on explanation, and by the anthropologist’s perception of the people s/he works with as informants, rather than storytellers” (Saleh 2011, 24). Saleh then, takes Iraqis stories as storytelling rather than data to be analyze not only for the sake of anthropological writing exploration but as a way to allowing to elaborate on her position in the field and interaction with Iraqis.

I would like to believe that in this dissertation I tried to do what Saleh (2011) and Taussig (2010) are suggesting, not without grip on the sort of steps or “typology” of Shah (2017) suggests above. And even, if I failed to do so, at least I am aware what “my” anthropological writing may look like in the future. Likewise, anthropology relies on different theories. I did not come up with any of them prior to the fieldwork. The fieldwork illuminated them as it were. I do not particularly enunciate any of them but my writing was guided by some theoretical concerns insofar as they were mediated by my experiences in the field but mostly by the stories and theoretical concerns of my interlocutors. Class, identity, indigeneity, value and its forms, commons informed this dissertation’s intellectual curiosity. Media, became the entry point to all this plethora of inquiry. My interlocutor’s histories in particular, Oaxaca and Guelatao in general informed all this “mess” simply and bluntly by simply engaging in deep conversations and remember part of my childhood in the region. This messy anthropological work relies in an *inductive* process data analysis. Once you got the sense of abstracting the meanings from your little notebook of sketches, observations and quotes then local notions and whole narratives start to emerge. Order follows which enables to answer your research question (s).

In his well- known compilation, *Changing Fields of Anthropology: From Local to Global*, Michael Kearney (2004, see introduction) notes that, unlike most empirical disciplines that rely on calibrated instruments to mediate between observer and observable, anthropology’s primary instrument is the ethnographer. However, these instruments are rarely systematically considered when evaluating written results, meaning that ethnographers are seldom "calibrated". What does this imply? Our outcomes of our working often fail to reflect the production process and the writing finished product – explanations rather than storytelling as mentioned above – making it essential for me to address this gap. Reflexivity is crucial in this endeavor as I mentioned above. As Kearney points out, intellectual products of anthropology should be viewed as sociocultural artifacts situated

within specific sociocultural and political contexts. Yet, he observes, anthropology rarely operates under this working assumption.

This perspective reveals that my work is not only situated within sociocultural and political contexts; it is also shaped by power relations, working conditions, available resources, university policies, and external factors like COVID-19. Additionally, aspects such as class position and race further complicate these dynamics. Ultimately, Kearney asserts, the output of the anthropology community is conditioned by the broader political, social, and cultural contexts in which they operate (Kearney 2004, 3). Above all, and as my late supervisor Rene Palomec would remind us, our Body and Minds are our primary instrument for any fieldwork endeavor.

Leaving the attenuators of production behind, I experienced fieldwork in two short stages, both determined by (lack of) resources. First from February to May 2019 and the second from February to end middle of April 2020. This last one was shortened due to Covid-19. At that time, my former advisor suggested I go back to Austria since she foresaw things only to get worse due to the pandemic. I tried somehow to do online and offline research, something that Daniel Miller encourages on his YouTube channel claiming that, to some extent, technologies may lead people to take it as a sort of “confessionary” and open up, while pointing out that, online fieldwork may be different in different social groups and cultures, and online and offline could be certainly experienced in terms of engagement with interlocutors. Also, in doing so, there are certain dilemmas in doing remote ethnography and the reason anthropologists still find it difficult to give up the idea of “being there” while actually proving ways of being there in other ways (Podjed & Muršič 2021).¹¹ My fieldwork during COVID-19 did not turn out this way, and my failure to engage in online or “not being there” fieldwork limited me to reviewing online stories and magazine interviews publicizing anniversaries and following developments from local news outlets. Is it fair to admit that I do not use social media? And the people I worked with, although very keen and open to technology, found it impersonal to the point of insisting that I be *present* rather than *online* socially.

In the following pages, I review what media anthropology is about and its valuable contributions to our discipline to explain why I moved, although not entirely, to a different

¹¹ As the authors point out in their article, actually since the whole history of anthropology, regardless the main practice of “being there” as fundamentally paramount for anthropologist, there has been several attempts to write ethnographies from afar, digital, online and the like.

direction. I also decided to only review media anthropology, otherwise, my literature review would include political and economic anthropology, too much to bear. Instead, I explain at the end why necessary to include other fields of inquiry in media anthropology, emphasizing the inclusion of media anthropology framed to indigenous peoples' media production.

This is not Anthropology of Media, or is it?

This section addresses some confusion. I am not doing media anthropology, or am I? Powell's (2016) compelling article about media and mediation argues that, when we commonly think of media, we jump quickly to think of it as technology: television, newspapers, cinema, and so on. But social media, or the act of mediation, goes far beyond the technological realm and is much older. In addition, Boyer (2006) sees that Marx was preoccupied with what we might call social mediation, meaning human relations of production, exchange, and needs-satisfaction. Engaging with history is to hear Turner's advice in focusing "fundamentally and principally on the historically and socially specific human energies, capacities and relations from which both mediation and knowledge of mediation are composed" (Boyer 2006, 58). These are perhaps one of the main arguments about this work, or how to approach the subject. I take media not only in the technological sense but in its broader sense as a social act. In this way, this dissertation is twofold. On the one hand, it looks historically the emergence of *comunalidad* where I look at the work and function of indigenous mediators and cultural brokers historically in the region of Sierra Norte Oaxaca, and second, the emergence of grassroots media projects in the same region focusing primarily on the small village Guelatao. Yet, the entry point of this dissertation remains in the field of anthropology of media since I consider the main part of this work deals with questions related to technological media as well as social mediation by agents.

When I started to figure out how to approach a small cinema project in Guelatao, other elements emerged. The role of mediators and intellectuals in their community, *comunalidad* as a local concept to mobilize people politically and culturally, indigeneity, local cultural practices, gossip, value and values, the relation between indigenous communities and state institutions. It became simply too much to handle. In some way I had to put it all together without losing the grip, narrowing it all down. Also, the research design that I envisioned at first lost its shape precisely because my PhD process was interrupted by the loss of my first supervisor, dear Elke. In addition,

thanks to the readings of Graeber (2004), I decided to let theory and notions emerge from the field rather than the other way around, by taking people very seriously in their elaboration about the world and the meanings of their endeavors.

What started as media anthropology, politics of identity, and self-representation by decolonial theoretical orientations, turned out to be something completely else. Thus, in the further pages, the literature review is an entry point from the general anthropology of media to indigenous media. This dissertation, in short, pertains to what I consider the lagoons existing in indigenous media, or what I would like to read and see in more prolific scholars dealing with it.

In the historical first section, I argue that local mediators, cultural brokers, and intellectuals, have played a fundamental role in mediating, negotiating, contesting, constructing, and discussing *meanings* in the cultural, political, and economic fields and with local, national, and international institutions throughout political and economic processes historically. *Comunalidad* and Cine Too became paramount to unfold the historical development of a community such as Guelatao which adapts and contests at times, indigenous struggles, social and territorial claims, and process of development, while at the same time mirroring what is going on in a larger scale.

Indigeneity is an unavoidable central theme in this dissertation. Juan José remarked that being labeled as "Juan José the indigenous director" comes with a branding that defines his films within the genres of video indígena or indigenous cinema. Ideally, he wishes to be recognized simply as Juan José, the filmmaker. In contrast, the newer generation strongly emphasizes their identity in public forum films, conferences, chatrooms, and Zoom meetings. They position themselves in a political landscape that extends beyond mere representation, a space I aim to explore within the margins of political economy rather than at the center of identity politics. This focus arises from a notable gap in media anthropology regarding the integration of political and economic dimensions, especially in indigenous media. Thus, while acknowledging the importance of politics of representation as a starting point for this study, I seek to broaden the discussion by engaging in these often-overlooked areas.

In many ways, I am exploring ideas about the historical evolution of indigenous agency, particularly the role of brokers and their social class in colonial times. Similarly, I examine the brokers and their class who have made Cine Too possible. I argue that Cine Too represents the pinnacle of media production and engagement in Guelatao, gaining recognition among intellectual,

activist, and indigenous media circles. It has even attracted the attention of national cinema and cultural institutions, positioning Cine Too as a potential model for national cultural policy. Cine Too, along with other media projects, emerged as a result of the political work surrounding *comunalidad*. Media and *comunalidad* are deeply intertwined.

Comunalidad exists only in the minds and work of these brokers as a political idea. *Comunalidad* came about in the early eighties as a political ideology to fight back against the government concessions of private companies that, at that point exploited Sierra Norte woodlands handsomely, from then on, it gained momentum working as a political ideology aiming at indigenous people to gain representativeness in different socio-political and cultural channels. *Comunalidad* is a descriptive political combative discourse that translates into organization of life of indigenous peoples in Oaxaca.

Let us turn again to indigenous agency. Indigenous agency can mean just about anything. By anything I mean, agency as “the human capacity to take intentional action in the world, both within and against (but never outside of) the constraints of society, culture, and history” (Ortner 2023, 114). One can frame it as programmatic of de-coloniality or epistemic “de-linking” (Amin 1985; Dussel 2002; Mignolo & Walsh 2018), as south epistemology (De Sousa 2014), as indigenous theory (Maldonado 2002) or as I argue, as a *tactic* (de Certeau 1988). The latter, I consider a proper notion to see an indigenous *comunalidad*. Taking *comunalidad* as a tactic, allows us to see through history the constant indigenous practices of political mediation on different fronts or rather fields and in different times. Simply put it, it is sort of *know-how* to navigate the system(s), yet being somehow part of it, i.e. capitalism, the state, patriarchy, mainstream media, etc.

“Tactics does not assign a defined area of action. Tactical acts happen in time rather than space, passing through another’s “own” on its way to a yet another, spending just a brief moment in either. A tactical identity is not set, and its value is not retained for long. It is the “art of the weak”, who is not “of control”. The strength of the tactical activity is that of the outsider to the “own”, which it infiltrates temporarily, robs the necessary resources, and moves to the next target. The tactical individuals act in a variety of systems, within which they are trapped, and which they manipulate by acting in the manner of tactics, not by occupation and ruling. This gives the tactical action the solid framework of strategy, but allows for a lighter touch and quick relationships, making it ideal for acting within the everyday” (Dorfman 2014, paragraph. 7).¹²

¹² A note: I found this interesting but doubtful commentary in some blog while looking on different perspectives on tactics by way of de Certeau (1984). However, I must admit that the source is a translation of a French written article by A. Dorfman. I, however, feel obligated to quote the original article and leave the translation as I found it in the blog here: <https://intersectinginterests.wordpress.com/2013/10/30/reading-lefebvre-de-certeau-the-everyday/> (retrieved, May 2020)

I relate to tactis as both, as space and time, rather than only a space as Dorfman does referring to de Certeau. Tactics exist in space as well as in time, say a conference, a stage, and a film, or the like, social and institutional rituals. The tactical identity is indeed not set and its *value* falls into space and time. As we will see indigenous identity, takes its shape in political moments, and as many of my interlocutors affirm, not in everyday life, but rather when it is put forward as a political weapon, as a tactical *spear*.

The practices of everyday life, claims de Certeau (1984), create an advantage in ordinary man's acts, as in modern society we are aware that strategic systems are limited and dependent on a set of defined identities. Individuals who evade these identities by migrating between strategic systems are still "residents" of the system, but their movement within it introduces the notion of motion into a solid, immovable social concept (de Certeau 1984, p. xx).

Individuals who learn to navigate systems through tactical moves are inherently part of those systems, shaping and operating within their margins. Drawing on de Certeau (1984), I find tactics to be a fitting lens for examining various indigenous social and cultural movements historically. This perspective allows us to recognize the grey areas beyond a simplistic binary of oppressor and oppressed. De Certeau emphasizes that everyday practices are crucial for understanding social systems. However, my approach diverges from this focus on everyday life. I consider the situational and specific contexts—cultural products, events, and spaces—where tactics become particularly vibrant and impactful.

As we will see, *comunalidad* transcends the territorial defense movements of the 1980s, evolving in meaning through various contexts since colonial times, shaped by indigenous individuals.

So, why is this not solely a media anthropology dissertation? Simply put, while I began my research within media anthropology, I found it lacked a solid framework to address my field findings. I believe media anthropology requires greater engagement with political processes and economic contexts. My goal has been to merge political anthropology and media anthropology. Consequently, the structure of this dissertation is somewhat unconventional; it can effectively be understood as comprising only two main parts.

In the first part, I examined the historical emergence of *comunalidad*. It's important to note that while *comunalidad* is a contemporary concept, it was previously referred to by various terms such as the *Cargo* System, República de Indios (Carbó 2006), Internal Normative System, and *usos y costumbres* (Recondo 2007; Eisenstadt 2007). These terms were often foreign to the communities themselves, and *comunalidad* represents the first instance of an indigenous self-definition, as I explain in the concluding section of this part.

I then explore *comunalidad* as a tactic, highlighting the diverse ways it has functioned as an engine for political initiatives and cultural projects. This section provides a preliminary overview of these functions, leading into a discussion of the enchanted cinema (Cine Too).

The second part focuses on the description and analysis of the enchanted cinema. Although my time in Guelatao was brief, the data collected provided valuable insights into the interplay of *comunalidad* and media concerning class, indigeneity, and value. I explore how interlocutors perceive values in their cultural practices and projects, contrasting these with perspectives from both Guelatao residents and outsiders. The Cine Too project prompted an examination of Guelatao's political and social organization, highlighting that no project or community matter escapes the community's decision-making process, which unfolds through assembly meetings. I will elaborate on these aspects in greater detail at the end of this introduction.

Anthropology of Media and Indigenous Media

Perhaps, the work of Powdermaker (1950) is the earliest serious attempt at work that an anthropologist has dedicated to mass media. Her work on the Hollywood movie industry delivered interesting insights on the role of social relations in movie production suggesting their significant influence on the meaning and content of movies. Her work demonstrates the intrinsic tensions between film as art and the business side of them. Powdermaker (1950) not only describes the internal relations at the core of the movie industry, but she suggests that the movie industry, as a maker of human relations and values, influences American society, just as the invention of the wheel of other technologies. This early study shows that anthropological preoccupation has a long history in media. This case was unusual at the times when anthropology was busy in "exotic" places. However, it was only until the 80's that anthropology fully engaged in the study of media

and the subfield of media anthropology started to emerge. Media in general comprises wider forms of technological mediation i.e. books, radio, billboards, e-mails, internet, movies, phones, newspapers, and so on. Some scholars may argue that the question for anthropology is to find out how these technologies operate and how such mediation is embedded in broader social and historical processes (Peterson 2003, 4).

The late rediscovery of media by Anthropology has resulted in hesitancy to engage with it, due to focusing on other theoretical problems, this was for two historical reasons. The first is that sociocultural anthropologists have focused on village-level communities rather than cities (though since the 1960s this has changed). Second, Anthropologists have also concentrated on societies and cultures from what would be classified as the “Third World” – often former colonies – (Gray 2010, 123). In so, this rediscovery came when theory and method were very well established in other areas of social science and humanities, especially in media studies: philosophy, and semiotics, among others. Peterson (2003) argues that anthropology brought at least three contributions to the study of media; ethnography, cross-cultural comparison, and alternative theoretical paradigms meaning anthropological theory to visual studies and other disciplines dealing with electronic media. In the eyes of Peterson, these contributions are a sort of pinnacle for understanding media in diverse cultures. For Peterson, context is crucial in assessing how TV shows are received, particularly when applying anthropological theories that challenge universalism and essentialism. He emphasizes that not all media are perceived the same way across different societies, and that the West and other cultures may interpret the same media differently.

Postill (2009) critiques Peterson's contributions by noting the absence of historical analysis. He observes that contemporary works referencing "history" often fail to truly engage with it and advocates for the use of "chronological tools" to understand historical discontinuities and the uneven spread and adoption of media innovations such as writing, radio, or mobile telephony (Postill 2009, 335). However, there are significant media studies by historians that anthropologists can benefit from (see Ruiz 2016). For example, Marc Ferro (1988) views cinema as both an agent and a source of history, providing a lens through which to explore socio-cultural and political continuities and discontinuities. Similarly, Burke's work (2000, 2012) on the historical organization of knowledge, from the invention of printing to the rise of Wikipedia and the internet, offers valuable insights. Burke (2005) also highlights the potential of media and images as historical evidence, which can be particularly useful for anthropological research. Anthropologists have

begun to recognize cinema as a secular ritual (Armbrust 1998), a means of constructing moral and ethical codes in various cultural contexts, and as a material and social experience (Larkin 1998; Ruiz 2016). While anthropology may have been slower to fully engage with media compared to other disciplines, this dissertation seeks to incorporate history into the study of media projects –not by focusing on the technological aspects, but by examining the social and cultural conditions that shape their historical development.

While media anthropology can be seen as a subfield, it complements other social science disciplines, particularly by contributing methods, though it rarely introduces its own theories. Instead, anthropology often borrows and adapts theoretical approaches from neighboring disciplines (see Ardévol 2018). However, in terms of methods, media anthropology distinguishes itself through its emphasis on qualitative research, particularly the traditional anthropological approach of participant observation and ethnography (Ginsburg et al. 2002). Other disciplines only recently began focusing on qualitative research and audience studies (Morley 1980; Katz & Liebes 1984).

Media anthropology has evolved by intersecting with cultural, literary, and film studies (Burnett 1995; Hall 1997), emphasizing transnational networks (Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1996; 2003) and media circuits through multi-sited ethnography (Mankekar & Schein 2013; Kummels 2011, 2017). From this point, I will refer to media "flow," acknowledging Graeber's (2002) critique that flow is often metaphorically treated as a natural phenomenon and, simultaneously, a symbol of neoliberal ideology. Graeber, building on Tsing (2000) and Kearney (1995), suggests using "movements" instead of "flows", shifting focus from the consumption of globality to its production.

Despite the increasing globalization of media, the nation-state remains a crucial frame of reference, especially in countries where the state has played a central role in the creation and regulation of media (Ginsburg et al. 2002). The field has advanced by incorporating participant observation and mixed theoretical approaches, drawing from visual and cultural studies. These developments have been significant in visual and media studies across the social sciences. Anthropology's unique contributions provide in-depth insights into how people engage with, manage, and understand media culturally, socially, and politically.

Already in the early nineties, Spitulnik (1993), laments the relatively small place that media has in the anthropological literature, and, at that time, anthropology of media did not exist as such.

She, however, notes that this has changed when anthropologists started to see that media are at once artifacts, experiences, practices, and processes, adding that “(media) is economically and politically driven, linked to *developments* in science and technology” (Spitulnik 1993: 293). The angles of study are simply too wide to let media wither from our scope: “as institutions, as workplaces, as communicative practices, as cultural products, as social activities, as aesthetic forms, and as historical developments” (Spitulnik 1993: 293). The early attempts of media and anthropology did not call serious attention until Spitulnik's article came about, noting that media had an early discreet boom in certain circles, studies on media started to emerge more frequently.

Although few works were produced initially, as noted by Spitulnik, anthropologists have continued to engage with media, following in the footsteps of Powdermaker (1950). Notable contributions include the pioneering study by Worth and Adair (1972), which explored the collaboration between indigenous peoples and anthropologists in media creation. Their efforts aimed to overcome the power disparity between anthropologists and their informants by jointly creating films, thus giving ethnographic film a new language. This approach has been a significant area where anthropology and media have intersected "successfully," particularly in the context of indigenous media.

The combination of media, anthropology, and indigenous perspectives has created a rich niche where these fields converge. Scholars quickly began producing a robust body of work on indigenous media (Wehrheim 2012). Numerous studies describe how indigenous peoples use media for cultural activism, self-representation, and empowerment (Ginsburg 1991, 1994, 2002; Prins 1989; Reza 2013). Ginsburg and colleagues note that "minority peoples have begun to take up a range of media in order to 'talk back' to structures of power that have erased or distorted their interests and realities" (Ginsburg et al. 2002, 7). Ginsburg further emphasizes the political agency and cultural intervention involved in these efforts, highlighting practices of self-conscious mediation and cultural mobilization that emerged in the late twentieth century.

In Latin America, a significant movement emerged around *cine comunitario* (communitarian cinema), aimed at supporting political processes and struggles (Gumucio Dagron 2014). This movement gave rise to a new wave of Latin American cinema, particularly in South America, closely linked to the region's social struggles. The New Latin American Cinema emerged alongside the social movements of the 1950s. In Brazil, Glauber Rocha's *Aesthetics of Hunger* and *Cinema Novo* reflected on social misery, while Argentina's manifesto, *Toward a Third Cinema*,

advocated for a politically militant cinema that challenged cinematic underdevelopment and the neo-colonial practices of Hollywood. This manifesto promoted cultural decolonization and a trend toward globalization, emphasizing the shared characteristics of new Latin American cinema across national boundaries (Teshome 1982).

During the 1970s, amidst the dictatorships in South America, Marxist-Leninist social activists produced documentaries and films with a guerrilla-style approach. These films critiqued colonial and authoritarian regimes, exposing issues like colonialism, capitalism, and racism. This "clandestine" cinema became known as Third Cinema. Notably, the Ukamau Film Collective, a key player in Third Cinema, collaborated closely with indigenous peoples, who not only featured in the films but also participated as actors, bringing their issues to the forefront (Wayne 2001).

Media scholars frequently reference the term "activist imaginary," coined by George Marcus (1996), to describe how subaltern groups use film, video, and other media not only to pursue traditional goals of social change through identity politics and representation but also out of an utopian desire for "emancipatory projects" that raise new issues about citizenship and the public sphere within traditional discourses of polity and civil society (Marcus 1996, quoted in Ginsburg et al. 2002, 8).

Notable contributions to media and indigenous rights have been made by Terry Turner (1991, 1992, 1995, 1997), one of the most prolific scholars in Amazonian studies. Turner, who worked extensively with the Kayapo people since the 1970s, combined his anthropological research with activism for social justice. In *Defiant Images* (1992), Turner explores how the Kayapo adapted video to their moral and aesthetic principles, treating video-making as a cultural performance that produces social reality (Boyer 2006). The Kayapo's engagement with video was not merely about adopting new technology but about ritualizing it, with full awareness of its implications. Turner (1992) emphasizes that the Kayapo assumed complete agency in their video practices.

For some scholars, Indigenous cinema and video must be understood within the context of indigenous social movements (Wortham 2013). Ginsburg (Ginsburg et al. 2002, 8) positions anthropology and media as social practices that challenge structural power and enable activism, allowing marginalized groups to "talk back" to mainstream media. While the relationship between power, media, and activism is often apparent, as Budka (2022, 35) notes, it is not always the case.

The motives behind indigenous media, much like the notion of "indigenous" itself, are nuanced and vary widely. These motives can shift from activism to other objectives and back again. Although activism is a key focus, it is important to recognize the broader spectrum of social phenomena involved.

Cultural activism is a recurring theme, but as Kummels (2017) demonstrates in her study of media in Tamazulapan, Oaxaca, indigenous media is not always tied to social movements or cultural activism. The intentions behind media use are diverse. Historically, in Mexico, indigenous media began as a form of institutional activism. The Indigenous National Institute (INI) played a significant role in developing indigenous media and film production, starting in the 1970s and mid-1980s (Kummels 2011). By the late 1980s, Mexican independent filmmakers, anthropologists, and collectives were bringing film equipment and training to indigenous communities through the state program *Trasferencia de Medios Audiovisuales* (Audio-visual Media Transference). This initiative allowed marginalized populations to create their own media on their own terms, using video as a tool to contest the distorted images of indigenous people propagated by mass media (Reza 2013).

However, the concept of indigenous media is complex, as the term "indigenous" often carries political and colonial connotations (Batalla 1972; Stavenhagen 1975). While there have been attempts to define this field globally (Wilson & Stewart 2008, 14; Bräuchler & Budka 2020), there is no one-size-fits-all definition, nor is there a need for one. Indigenous media is best understood in its specific contexts. For instance, some participants in the Cine Too project referred to indigeneity only in interactions with non-indigenous people or in institutional political situations, while in everyday life, the project was simply a cinema. It is more accurate to describe Cine Too as a grassroots media project rather than strictly as indigenous media.

Anglo universities and scholarship centers in the Global North have been at the forefront of studying media and its appropriation by indigenous people. Much of the scholarship up to the 2000s originated from these regions. The edited volume by Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin (Ginsburg et al. 2002) is a notable effort to place media and anthropology on the map by addressing the role of media in the world, as anthropologists increasingly encounter media in their fieldwork. This body of work pushes media studies into new environments, recognizing that media transcends traditional boundaries of place and culture. Media reception occurs *beyond the living room*, and *production happens beyond the studio*, as part of *daily practices and discourses* that constitute the complex act of media *engagement* (Silverstone 1993, 133, quoted in Ginsburg et al. 2002, 1).

Ginsburg and colleagues highlight how *technologies of power* are created and contested within intimate institutional cultures, shaped by ideologies ranging from public service to audience appeal, aesthetics, and political empowerment (Ginsburg, et al. 2002, 23).

In recent years, media anthropology has expanded significantly, diversifying its approaches and topics. The eleven-volume series published by Berghahn Books on the anthropology of media exemplifies this growth, covering a wide range of studies that explore new and old technologies as engaged by indigenous peoples. This series addresses media in various forms, times, and spaces, including topics such as online activism in Kuala Lumpur (Postill 2011), indigenous media and global communication (Alia 2010), journalistic practices (Rao 2010), cryptopolitics (Bernal et al. 2023), and media practices in conflict zones (Bräuchler & Budka 2020).

Among these works, Kummels (2017) study stands out for its insights into media practices in the indigenous community of Tamazulapam, Oaxaca. Kummels argues that indigenous engagement with media is not always driven by activism but often involves more diversified practices, such as photography, radio, film, television, and the Internet, which have expanded transnationally to the United States (Kummels 2017, 9). She also briefly discusses the concept of *comunalidad*, making her one of the few international scholars to incorporate local Mexican indigenous scholarship. Through video documentation of local fiestas and rituals, a transnational flow of images fosters a sense of belonging and communitarian responsibility based on *comunalidad* principles, while also opening new markets and business opportunities.

One common thread throughout this body of work is that media is a practice interconnected with other practices, offering ethnographies of non-Western media practices. This theoretical and methodological diversity prompts reflection on the purpose of media anthropology, as argued by Postill (2009). The value of media anthropology, particularly within the realm of indigenous media, lies not just in addressing media as practice and agency or in framing indigenous media as cultural activism. Rather, as Budka (2022) suggests, it involves relating broader notions such as conflict, solidarity, competition, cooperation, resistance, mobility, or ritual to local understandings – such as the notion of *comunalidad* in my case. Additionally, mediated activism often seeks to spark, create, and support social and political change.

Media anthropology's scope is not limited to non-Western or Western practices but encompasses a broader engagement of humans with media. For instance, anthropology can be a

tool to analyze film content for pedagogical purposes, helping us understand how films mirror social views and cultures. Sutton and Wogan (2009) examine American films anthropologically, using seminal anthropological theories to analyze themes like gift economy or social hierarchy in films such as *The Godfather*, or cooperation and social control in *The Village*. Their work offers insights into why some films resonate deeply with American popular culture, while others are quickly dismissed, highlighting the cultural dimensions of American society.

Drummond (1996) provides a more theory-driven cultural analysis of Hollywood films, exploring the conflicting American self-image: one that aspires to build a technoscientific society and another that indulges in consumerist banalities like cinema, TV, and fashion. Drummond argues that a group's cultural productions – spanning from art and literature to television and movies – form a system of meanings that individuals use to navigate their lives. By analyzing American culture through the lens of anthropology, Drummond seeks to uncover its fundamental nature, breaking away from the dichotomy between "positivist" and "materialist" approaches and "postmodernist" or "interpretivist" perspectives. Instead, he proposes a third way, incorporating insights from quantum mechanics, cosmology, and chaos-complexity theory into his cultural analysis.

Morin's (1956) work, contemporary with Powdermaker's (1950), is another early attempt to understand the dialectic relationship between cinema and audiences, where the objective truth of the image and the subjective participation of the spectator converge (Blassnigg 2006, 163). This underscores the long-standing anthropological interest in media, particularly cinema, as a site for exploring cultural dynamics.

While the works I've mentioned are remarkable, my focus lies in a different direction, one that aligns more closely with studies on indigenous peoples – though this is only partly true. The town where I experienced my research happens to be indigenous, but this was incidental. The project could just as easily have been a community effort involving people from various backgrounds, such as refugees and migrants from the Global South, as in a film project I was briefly involved with in Vienna. In short, people doing stuff which they think open up political possibilities leaning to the left side of political spectrum. My true interest lies in the principles that bring a project to life. However, as I mentioned at the beginning, research often follows a path shaped by intuition and the pursuit of resources, and the "right" project is frequently influenced by trends and

fashions within anthropological circles. One reviewer even noted that my project seemed to arrive at least 20 years too late.

The intersection of media and the indigenous world has emerged as a significant and well-researched field, particularly within Anglo academia, which often combines new technologies with studies of "old," exotic, and distant lands. Although peripheral anthropology has not been absent from this field, it was slow to engage. It wasn't until the 1980s that anthropologists began experimenting with new forms and methods of representing indigenous peoples. During this time, *indigenista* policies showed some progress, as some anthropologists established workshops to train indigenous people to create their own films. Initially, these efforts resulted in scattered texts, monographs, and booklets, but it was only a few decades later that full-fledged scholarship began to seriously engage with this subject.

Two edited volumes on media and indigenous peoples stand out. The first one *Miradas propias: pueblos indígenas, comunicación y medios en la sociedad global* (Magallanes & Ramos 2016) might translate to: Own Perspectives, and this is a rather bad literal translation, it refers to *looking by ourselves* or *our own looking* or even, *the loci of seeing* – *Indigenous peoples, media and communication in the global society*. The main core running through the book is the myriads of ways in which indigenous groups' communicatory praxis dispute self-representation and visibility of their cultural identities using community radios and indigenous videos as means to articulate resistance and claim their identity. These uses of media are techno-platforms that enable tactics to revive and keep the native language alive, care for nature and the environment, and represent their communities with their own *values*, their own forms of self-narrative for and by themselves and *for* and *to* "others" (Smith 2016) as an autonomous discourse of resistance against cultural hegemony. The volume discusses the relationship between indigenous peoples and the state, highlighting issues like the lack of public policy in Colombia (Herrera & Sierra 2016) and Chile (Salazar 2016). One notable contribution in the book explores the concept of *indio permitido*, a term further developed by Hale (2004). The piece in question tries to solve the old "homogeneous" issue (see Castells i Talens 2016), that of the construction of the state's Indio, in his case Maya, *permitido*. In his view, the Mexican nationalist project, or the *indigenista* project, modeled indigenous subjects from the mestizo conception, which is manufactured to insert itself into modernity. As close it gets to being modern, it has become familiar with the dominant medium, it has modulated the language, and it has become something else, an *indígena ladino*. In contrast,

there is *el indio no permitido*, the not-allowed indigenous who rises from the margins and gives an account, through the uses of media, its cultural resistance and self-representation distance itself from the identity construction of many nation-states which historically have erased local identities and local practices. These pieces fall into a predisposition to believe that such things pre-exist as a precondition to established national identity and endow indigenous people engaging in media to fight back.

There are cases where indigenous towns and communities do not see any contradiction in being indigenous and identifying with being Mexican at the same time. Indigenous identity emerged in the political as many of my interlocutors mentioned, they tend to do the same institutional rituals as any other city, town, or community, feel close to national music, and so on. Yet, historically, indigenous people mobilize against the state and external capitalist interest when necessary, resisting and fighting by any means necessary, always putting their identity at the front. Furthermore, indigenous people have shown us once and again that cultural diversity existed, exists, and will exist. As Sahlins (1999) and Turner (2003) note, indigenous people have historically adapted Western technologies and ideas to create their own forms of modernity and capitalism while resisting them (Echeverria 1998). This situation recalls debates within anthropology regarding the role of media. Critics of indigenous media projects, like those involving the Kayapo and Turner, argue that such projects merely incorporate indigenous people into a Western visual economy, portraying them as passive consumers rather than active creators (Boyer 2006). They suggest that Western technology corrupts indigenous cultures and replaces a supposed “purity” with modern influences (Carpenter 1972; Weiner 1997). Turner and other scholars argue that this is more a historical issue than an ontological one (Boyer 2006).

Furthermore, indigenous media makers, overly reject such assumptions just as Ginsburg and Turner. Indigenous and media anthropologists understand and are very aware of the potential of media for political participation, social justice, and documenting struggles related to land and other issues (Budka 2022). It is important to understand, as Turner (2003) does above, that part of the indigenous appropriation of media, under indigenous means and interests, a double mediation occur. The indigenous community and filmmakers alike, mediate *meaning*. Not only in terms of meaningful communication but also through technologies, platforms and spaces. Media functions to represent communities under their symbolic values, pursuing autonomous discourse of resistance against cultural hegemony. A text in the compilation book *Miradas Propias* should

interest us. Nava (2016) extracts an article from her monograph study of Radio Totopo. Probably Nava is the only scholar in the compilation who addresses media as it is built upon native notions. In addition, she is one of the few scholars in Mexico who addresses *comunalidad* with outstanding rigor. Media and *comunalidad*, she has it, are intertwined in her study, as the latter serves as a proposition for media, or any kind of project invested within indigenous epistemology. In addition, it seems that *comunalidad* is intertwined with ethnic identity and identity is an essential part of resistance movements as well as media production,

The identity approach is noted as straightforward in the literature review made by Kummels (2017, 8-12); scholars working mostly on indigenous media, especially in Mexico and other parts of Latin America, since the opening of radio stations in the late seventies, to the appropriation of cameras and making their videos in the early eighties) tend to focus in state initiatives, external agencies and state institutions patronage, international cooperation or the influence of nonindigenous filmmakers and anthropologist working in those programs. Often, these scholars, she argues, “delve into *emancipation processes* that indigenous actors initiated by teaming up with nonindigenous advocates to *appropriate media* [emphasis added] for their political purposes. These researchers emphasize this movement’s political success at the national and international levels. Like other ethnic minorities across the Americas” (Kummels 2017, 10-12). This trend was or still is not restrictive to Latin America but since the eighties, the frame of reference has been state-subsidized indigenous TV broadcasting via communications satellite as the principal medium (Wortham 2013). At least in the Mexican scholarship, the argument, or the chain of developments of indigenous media, goes something like this. State institutions – those dealing with indigenous matters such as INI, then CDI, and now INPI – and some anthropologists and filmmakers working in them, elaborate radio and video programs with the commitment that it was time that indigenous people build and produce their media production. Then, indigenous people develop projects without the aid of state institutions looking for emancipation and independence. Henceforth, indigenous media production learned to use video to visualize and highlight political issues, claiming social justice, identity recognition, and exposing the lack of positionality in the process of decision-making about their land and political issues before the state, and exploring ways to achieve self-determination (see Castells i Talens 2010). The way of seeing the development of media falls into a train chain of events obscuring some nuances. I rather think that the Mexican case unfolded heterogeneously, despite those topics in scholarship on media falling fairly similar at least until the late nineties; cultural recognition, territorial defense, and politics of identity seem

to be the recurrently used notions. But things changed during the 2000s when indigenous filmmakers and other media actors started to experiment with different genres taking a look at topics of ecology, and sexuality among others (Salazar & Cordova 2019). However, cultural identity seems always at the core of indigenous media in different shapes and forms. Simply put, indigenous media, suggests Salazar is better understood “as a socio-technical system of relations where technology becomes a cultural construction appropriated according to relevant cultural codes and social relations” (Salazar 2007, 16). Our case, albeit something similar, simultaneously points to different directions. Although the media project of Guelatao tended to be sort of independent, it was only possible with state aid from the local intellectuals and cultural brokers. Differences exist, however, when we see a whole integral infrastructure dedicated to media production and exhibition linked to an ecotourism venture. The idea of the cinema and workshops it holds provides a niche for non-scholarly learning. Luna, one of the main members of Cine Too and a prolific filmmaker and producer, stands out for her long commitment to building channels where youngsters connect and get knowledge with film production and *comunalidad*. She understands cinema as communitarian cinema (Cine Too) as different from the way she learned it at the University in Guadalajara where she studied, that of the hierarchical studio system, where power relations and labor exploitation hide the art-form outcomes and serve the capitalist interest. She understands communitarian cinema as a critical tool and a way of production where labor, economic and gender violence does not exist. In this way, communitarian cinema tries to break with the hierarchy of the film director (*film auteur*) and the star system film industry. Communitarian cinema provides visibility to community problems, it is built from grassroots initiatives and intent to seek a viable way for social justice.

As I mentioned before, most of the media anthropology devoted to indigenous people goes around similar lines of research, however, some recent, and not-so-recent works tend to show a more nuanced panorama. A case in point is Ferron's (2019) understanding of Zapatista media networks at the international level. The author takes us to the historical struggle of the 1994 Zapatista movement and their fight for a more fair and independent media. This is not to say that the movement was solely based on media but for our purpose here we will focus only on that. One of the points of San Andre's accord calls for Indigenous peoples be provided with their own communication media, which are also key instruments for the development of their cultures and while the negotiations fail, the EZLN calls to create the Intercontinental Network of Alternative Communication (Red Intercontinental de Comunicación Alternativa, RICA). After that, new

alternative media grew exponentially, and solidarity networks emerged in the international arena. The Zapatista media network and movement is one of the greatest contemporary examples of a vast number of activists, media professionals, and organizations coming together globally to spread and report news and media productions. Ferron (2019, 151) notes that not everything went as planned and as much as horizontal social forms were the goal in the organizational bases, something underneath was happening. Ferron recurs to studies of critical sociology of international relations and globalization to tell us that

“(a)n “international culture” is not a spontaneous creation. It is both a set of symbolic goods unequally distributed according to the social and national properties of the members of a group and a set of rules, practices, and collective beliefs variably interiorized, according to the specific logics of a field of activities (and the relationships of power between the organizations, which are structured by this field and structure it in return” (Ferron 2019, 155).

His main argument is that, when these symbolic goods, – I suspect any form of media product surrounding the Zapatista movement – do not circulate in the loci, in the locality, or even within national frameworks and instead circulate in other countries – again, I suspect in western countries – “agents are mutually predisposed to know and recognize its exchange value on an international market of signs of prestige, excellence, and distinction” (Ferron 2019, 156). Thus, for Ferron, agents navigating the international arenas of media are more likely to monetize those symbolic goods rather than those in national ones. This creates unequal power relations and capital, including Bourdieusian, accumulation. He distinguished these two agent groups; one being related to *fields of relationships* (emphasis in original) where agents are positioned; the other being related to the *spaces of localization*. This last group is rooted in local rural areas or urban struggles remaining invisible in their society and on a global scale. Now, Ferron (2019, 155) endows the Zapatista a group of the former, because they engage vividly within international media flows, benefiting from the “spotlight” making a name and career for themselves; especially those who speak several languages or have a set of skills, those who can navigate the codified language in international settings and those who accumulate social capital that is transnational through experiences in other countries. Ferron (2019, 156) concludes by describing some alternative media as sites of heretical accumulation of “international capital.” He emphasizes that activist media networks cannot be reduced to mere technological means for political goals or cultural intermediaries—what he refers to as mediators—between different fields of symbolic production.

Activists, benefiting from their privileged position, often serve as informal spokespeople for people whose life conditions they do not necessarily share.

Ferron's (2019) piece works on several levels, it gives us insights into how agents, and media activist's media exchange value of symbolic goods when in the international fields. Albeit he puts the case of EZLN alternative media developments, he misses some in-depth ethnographic examples and leaves us wondering how this structure and agents truly mediate and "monetize" those symbolic goods, and what those goods are after all. The value of Ferron's insights, I think, comes from truly emphasizing alternative media as spaces of accumulation of noncertified cultural capital. Thereafter, it is important to pay attention to how capital is created, accumulated, and invested in these spaces. What stresses Ferron (2019) as symbolic good, well could it be the symbolic form of *identity* when put in the context of political economy? I intend to see identity in the second part of the dissertation, but even more interesting is to see who makes and by which means identity becomes a particular form of value. On this, it is worth noting that, Smith (2010) positions indigenous media makers as more than cultural brokers and positioned them as authoritative producers of knowledge about indigeneity. Smith (2010) does not engage the issue of authoritative producers as Ferron (2019) does, nor uses class as a social category to understand such "authoritative" qualities of indigenous cultural brokers, as to understand their position within their community or any other social contesting setting. While she highlights the understanding of mediations of semiotic technologies of representation – media technologies –, Smith (2010) warns us that, such engagement may enable essentialist renderings to indigeneity. This "slippage" as Smith (2010, 270) calls it, is hard to avoid even "when colonialist categories get appropriated as the means to make claims as diverse cultural dignity, citizenship rights and community development." (Smith 2010, 271) I concur with Smith in such notation, however, as in my cases, my dissertation including, it is not rather a "slippage" it is a conscience attempt to play tactically politics. Even when such a form of indigeneity seems at times essentialist, it plays an important role for indigenous people as a way of mediating before state institutions and international agencies, or even general societies, to negotiate whatever they may feel suit. There is indeed an interplay between media and identity. This is a "must" notion to address in almost any serious scholarly attempt on indigenous media, how indigeneity is mediated, by whom, and context is a key point.

I believe my work aligns with aspects discussed by Ferron (2019), Ortner (1995), Turner (2008), and Nava (2018). Additionally, Graeber's contributions (2002, 2004) have been significant in shaping and refining ideas and approaches in this field. Although I reviewed key works in indigenous media, particularly those relating to media as cultural activism, the sheer volume of scholarship made it challenging to address everything comprehensively.

Initially, I did not plan to delve deeply into indigenous media within the anthropology of media; however, it became unavoidable given its relevance. At the outset of writing this thesis, I was uncertain how to approach the concept of value, which emerged as crucial for understanding the perspectives of Guelatao inhabitants, Cine Too members, and outsiders regarding media projects. While I did not include a detailed review of value in the initial sections, I plan to address it in the second part of the dissertation.

In examining the concept of value in relation to media projects in Guelatao, I find Kearney's (2004) forms of value particularly useful while taking Turner's (2008) categorization of actions and value to deepen understanding. In addition, Lambek's (2013) views go deep and add understanding on the actions verted onto media projects within the community of Guelatao. Here, the term "value" is understood more in terms of importance and significance (Graeber 2002).s

[What's this dissertation about? And what is its value?](#)

As one of my early professors noted, there are no strict guidelines for experienced research in media anthropology. Even if such guidelines exist, they often prove inadequate once you delve into the field. Halfway through, you may find that preconceived theories do not always hold true. The literature review reveals a vast array of studies on media, demonstrating the field's immense scope and diverse approaches. These studies provide various understandings of the role of media, particularly electronic and technological, in contemporary global society, with a significant focus on indigenous peoples.

Ultimately, our focus should be on the relationship between media and humans, which lies at the very heart of anthropology. Thus, media anthropology, in essence, encompasses any aspect of anthropological inquiry.

The following is not strictly a study of media anthropology, though it does engage with a project that could be situated within that field. As PhD students, we are often tasked with producing work that contributes to our field, addresses existing gaps, or develops new and relevant theories. This is arguably the value of a PhD dissertation. So, what is the value of this dissertation?

One possible answer is that it will be evaluated by reviewers and supervisors who may view it as a “Frankenstein” of disparate elements, patched together in ways that some might consider unrelated. Another perspective might be that this dissertation addresses indigenous media through the lenses of political and economic anthropology, a relatively rare approach. However, I am cautious not to overstate this claim. My primary motivation was to test some established ideas, such as how Wolf’s concept of the Closed Corporate Peasant Community (CCPC) (Wolf 1957) might somehow be utile today, how value forms interact with media projects, and how indigenous practices like *tequio* (unpaid community labor) might generate value.

Time and resources were limited, but I aimed to make this dissertation as engaging as possible. This interest in political and economic anthropology and the question of value stemmed from my own experiences. Identity, especially in indigenous settings, emerged unexpectedly. Having grown up in villages among indigenous people, I never questioned my own identity or that of the children around me. We were simply a group of kids playing together, indistinguishable in our shared experiences. Only during fieldwork did some Guelateños highlight the differences between us, particularly through interactions with individuals like Luna, who saw me as a somewhat ambiguous figure due to my mixed linguistic background.

Conversely, others like Carmen or Tavo saw me as an ally and equal. Thus, identity became an unavoidable subject of study. My interlocutors played a crucial role in mediating meanings – such as identity, indigeneity, and value – to outsiders. This mediation was integral to their interactions with me, tourists, and others. Therefore, my argument emphasizes the historical nature of indigenous mediation and media creation in contemporary contexts, using native customs and identity as strategies for negotiation and representation.

In this first part, I will explore the art of mediation, which Yannakakis (2008) describes as the art of being between. This practice has been fundamentally significant for indigenous communities, particularly during colonial times. Indigenous intellectuals learned to navigate legal systems, allowing them to reconstruct their cultural particularities by blending the old with the new.

This reconstruction was made possible through systematic mediation between law and values, enabling the establishment of semi-autonomous regions where local rule could be negotiated with crown officials.

In Oaxaca, this mediation has persisted through various historical changes, resisting drastic social and political transformations, including the wars of independence and the rise of Mexican republicanism. During the Mexican Republic, local natives often functioned as state agents, such as rural teachers, particularly during the long period of indigenista policies (Caplan 2003, 255-93; Chassen-Lopez 2004, 280-310). At times, anthropologists working for the state allied with local intellectuals to advocate for social justice, resulting in the emergence of indigenous anthropologists.

A notable example is the collaboration of two activists and anthropologists from the Sierra Norte, Jaime Martínez Luna (2010) and Floriberto Diaz (2007), who introduced the term *comunalidad*. Many local leaders and intellectuals pursued studies in anthropology, contributing to this body of knowledge. The political and social developments of the late 20th century created viable pathways for indigenous people to negotiate and mediate terms with state officials. The concept of *usos y costumbres* defined the Internal Normative System, further empowering these negotiations.

Through the diligent efforts of indigenous intellectuals, concepts framing the social structures of Oaxaca's indigenous peoples were articulated as *comunalidad*. This historical mediation has enabled indigenous communities to resist external pressures, negotiate governance, and secure state aid while simultaneously mediating the meanings and definitions of what it means to be indigenous.

In this first part, I review Eric Wolf's (1957) CCPC concept to assess its current relevance. I argue that the *restrictive* nature of the CCPC effectively prevents external agents from extracting and accumulating value. However, the "P" in CCPC is misleading, as we are not dealing with peasants anymore. The concept remains valid, albeit in a different form, as it continues to serve as a powerful structure against external value extraction while failing to prevent internal accumulation by local actors.

These actors, whom Kearney (2004) refers to as polybians or mediators (Yannakakis 2008), shape their value through diverse social relations. During my fieldwork, I observed that media

actors serve as value mediators both within and outside their communities, extracting value from their work. They create not only media but also value itself. In Marxist terms, value arises from the labor invested in an activity, distinct from value measured as wages or price (Lambek 2013).

Turner (2008) viewed value as the proportion of labor power invested in a system, focusing more on action and practice than on structure. In his work with the Kayapo in Brazil, he emphasized the production of social persons. For Turner, capitalism equals money, while for the Kayapo, value is expressed through rituals, chants, and orality – actions that embody value. In our understanding of *comunalidad*, actions shape the creation of value.

Another key action is *tequio*, which embodies the community as a whole. This unpaid labor practice enables projects like Cine Too or the Glass Viewpoint, fostering a community fabric that creates value reflective of communal “values.” However, value is not merely represented; it illuminates people’s aspirations to become what they truly represent (Turner 2008; Graeber 2013). This is why projects sometimes clash, as personal desires may conflict with collective ones. I will delve deeper into the concept of value in the second part.

Since its inception in the late seventies, *comunalidad* aimed to establish a look to one’s own, *una mirada a lo propio* (Martínez Luna 2010, *c.f.* Batalla 1981); a revaluation of their culture highlighting their social and political organization in their own terms by way to focus in strengthening ethnic identity. The *comunalidad* movement, widespread in Oaxacan Northern Sierras, pushed back government permission to private paper and wood companies to exploit the local forest. Their success, it is claimed, was due to the local organization and mobilization, the commonality they have in the region. Thereafter, *comunalidad* gained social and political momentum. The notion is widely known and put into practice as an engine and front discourse for making projects and mobilizing local people. Likewise, it works as a window of mediated meanings, value forms, and subjectivities to and for non-indigenous, state, and international institutions as well as NGOs. The *comunalidad* has materialized its endeavors in conferences, social movements, media, and educational projects among others.

In the last section of the first part, I will address the emergence of those projects. One of those projects is Cine Too.

In the second and last part of this dissertation, I will address ethnographically the emergence of Cine Too as well as their *comunalidad* principles. *Comunalidad* became the cornerstone for

media projects and of media actors in Guelatao as well as sympathizers and collaborators. I investigate the process of Cine Too's local emergence and how internal (Guelatao inhabitants) and external agents collaborating with the project related to it and in general terms, to *comunalidad*. Under the principles of *comunalidad*, a small media agency has emerged along with a communitarian ecotourism business and Cine Too. The latter has developed non-formal educational film workshops, summer camps film exhibitions, periodical screenings for local schools, and daily programs for the general public. In their formative filmmaking workshops, many nationally and internationally known filmmakers, including Jaime Luna Martínez, have come to Guelatao to teach and instruct people attending workshops. The process of Cine Too and actors has not come easy internally, serious and rough scrutiny by the general assembly has at times come to the fore. This contrasts sharply with its relationship with external agents, the general public, media outlets, and other media makers. Several understandings of value and actions onto projects, I will argue, surround these relationships, and intend to serve what is best for the community. But it also deals with gossip and suspicion of value extraction and accumulation of capital in its different forms.

Albeit all these projects take place in Guelatao in communal infrastructure and are carried out on *comunalidad* principles they truly obey the *Cargo* system or indigenous internal normative system. Therefore, these projects are only possible by internal scrutiny and community assembly decisions. I look into the process of the acceptance of the project by reconstructing the opinions of inhabitants and following their engagement with the media and ecotourism projects while comparing them. This comparison was only possible by establishing the value relations mentioned above. Derived from the fieldwork, I came to notice the importance of the projects as the people talk to them in terms of value. The notion of value emerged repeatedly. Thus, value is an important notion that I take into consideration when looking at internal mobilization to do projects as well as external views into those projects to analyze what they mean by value. Value became very much spoken when inhabitants of Guelatao discussed the projects that emerged from the community as well as the *comunalidad* notion.

In the end of the second part and general conclusion, I will give an account of the process of one of the workshops to understand how identity, indigeneity, and the value of the project was shaped by *comunalidad*. How gossip, and value extraction fit within this interplay to understand not only how cultural resistance exists in this context, but how contradictions with what actors

claim to resist – the state, capitalism, etc., fade momentarily or completely. By unveiling this “fading”, we can reach what are the limits of identity politics, and media resistance and point out the necessity for more class relation analysis. It is then within this framework that we could be more equipped to understand and fight the most obscure and subtle forms of exploitation and oppression.

Part I: Of what they call *comunalidad*

Introduction

All we get is postcolonial subjects who resist (but in what determinate way?);
colonial subjects who are disciplined or repressed (again, in what way?);
bourgeois subjects who are alienated or wounded (like you and me?)
or else who commodify (what?) or consume (what?);
national subjects who identify (with what?),
or other such tautological people.
If a cultural or historical analysis were wanted,
one would have to return to the structural conditions
that had been lost in the translation to subjective terms.
Sahlins (2002, 69-70)

Back in 2016, I met Luna for the first time. Through some mutual contacts, we talked over the phone. I showed my interest in the project they were working on. A cinema up in the mountains. An enchanted cinema or *Cine Too* in its Zapotec name. As already said in the previous part of this dissertation, Luna and I met at a café in the heart of Oaxaca's capital where I used to work when I was younger. The coffee shop, as I recall, no longer exists. After Luna explained to me what *Cine Too* is and what they do she handed me a few booklets of CAI. I started to go through them quickly when I noticed a picture of her father, Jaime Luna. It was noted that he gave a workshop on *comunalidad*. When I asked her about it, she responded that *comunalidad* was the philosophical cornerstone of what *Cine Too* and CAI were based on, it is the guidelines of our endeavors and our life attitude as indigenous peoples. Shortly thereafter, I found out the importance of *comunalidad* in indigenous people's discourses of cultural resistance, in social movements, projects, and politics across and beyond the state of Oaxaca. Moreover, there is an extensive transnational network of social activists, cultural brokers, state agents, and academics of and about *comunalidad*.

The network paved the way to two international congresses on *comunalidad*. The first took place in Puebla, Mexico in 2015 and the second in different towns of Oaxaca in 2018 – Guelatao, Tlahuitoltepec, and Comitancillo. Local and international intellectuals, activists, journalists, and state indigenous agents (e.g., Silvia Federici, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Gustavo Esteva, Jaime Luna Martínez, Salomon Nahmad, and Adelfo Regino, among others) gathered to reflect the historical development of *comunalidad* and the process of indigenous struggle for self-determination and autonomy, and its importance as a particular form of historical resistance to the malice of colonialism and state intervention as well as current neoliberal capitalism. Several, if not hundreds of projects based on *comunalidad* principles, in different domains (e.g., media, education, technologies, arts, NGO, etc.), have seen the light. Hundreds of pieces of literature – scientific articles, bachelor, master, and doctoral thesis, and academic and non-academic essays¹³ have been produced about the topic and based on its principles. It is notorious how *comunalidad* has gained a preponderant place in knowledge production, educational state policy, and the emergence of diverse grassroots projects.

My interest focuses only and foremost on the emergence of a cinema theatre in Guelatao, however, the overwhelming emphasis of indigenous media production on *comunalidad* and the vast literature produced, obligate me to take a closer look at it as an engine and cornerstone of several cultural projects.

Among the vast literature on *comunalidad*, the notion turns difficult to grasp due to the vast interpretations, adjectives, and positionalities depending on academic and (none) institutional projects and social arrangements. For instance, for Nava (2016,) *comunalidad* seems to be a seemingly universal indigenous theory that gives the commonness of the Mesoamerican¹⁴ historical matrix, all indigenous people shared. For Maldonado (2016) it is the *traditional* way of life of indigenous people who shared a Mesoamerican civilizing root constituted by three elements: a structure, a form of social organization, and a *mentality*, that of *collectivist*; for Aquino Moreschi

¹³ This is not the place to name them all, but any academic engine would throw an important number of papers on the matter, *redalyc* a creative commons engine, register at least above 1000 articles mentioned *comunalidad*. For instance, *comunalidad* has been test out as proposal equally important as *El buen vivir* from South America, especially for Political Ecology, see Mina Lorena Navarro Trujillo and Daniele Fini (2016).

¹⁴ Mesoamerica is understood as a pre-Hispanic cultural area from the central Mexico valley to more or less Panama. The notion was coined by Paul Kirchhoff (1943). Then it was intended not as a finished term, as many people think Kirchhoff claimed. Quite the opposite, he always thought of such concept as emergent and work in progress, approximation.

(2013, 7) it is a form of south epistemology which has epistemological and emancipatory potential in its praxis. All of them posit *comunalidad* as an indigenous historical form of resistance.

Comunalidad was coined mainly by Jaime Luna, a Zapotec from Guelatao, and Floriberto Diaz a Mixe from Tlahuitoltepec. Both are from the Sierra Norte region and are trained in anthropology. For the former, *comunalidad* is a descriptive notion of how indigenous people live and are structured socially (Martínez Luna 2015, 99), it is a *lived* concept¹⁵ that allows comprehension of how indigenous reproduce life *naturally*. For the latter, *comunalidad* explains the indigenous community's essence and describes indigenous reality emphasizing their territorial relationship (Diaz 2007). However different their perspectives are, and the varied ways in their scholarship, they inform a long historical political form seeking self-determination as well as an abstraction of what is commonly known as *usos y costumbres*¹⁶ practices or constitutionally framed as the *internal normative system* in Oaxaca. In addition, this historical political form also explicitly sets a sense of community membership supported by an internal social organization – known as a *Cargo* system – and community identity. Likewise, both, Martínez Luna (2015), and Diaz (2007), understand *comunalidad* as describing four interrelated socio-cultural structures: Hierarchical administrative positions known as *Cargo system*, unpaid communitarian labor known as *tequio*, communitarian assembly, and civic and religious (catholic) *fiesta*. Rendón (2003) points out similar four fundamental elements: Communal power, communal labor, communal territory, and communal *fiestas* while Mendoza Zuany (2014), recognized *comunalidad* as a practice where community-based identities are constantly been negotiated and performed, and ethnicity is rather absent. In this regard, in Guelatao for instance, a sense of belonging to the community is stronger than that of belonging to an indigenous group or ethnicity. These social processes, according to Zuany (2014, 67), rely heavily on notions of what indigeneity, autonomy, and politics of representation and recognition is. The four structures mentioned above form the fabric which constitutes the indigenous social organization realm.

In contrast, some scholars see the *comunalidad* proposal as an essentialist and romantic attempt to frame the indigenous way of life as a pre-Hispanic continuity, anchored in ancient times (de la Cruz 2011). Dangerously, as critics claim, *comunalidad* overlooks the colonial enterprise,

¹⁵ In the original, Luna refers the notion to make sense only when it is lived and as experienced. “Un concepto vivencial” (2015, 100).

¹⁶ In this regard, we have to remember the works of Yannakakis who finds in colonial Oaxaca, specifically in Villa Alta region, legal documents where *costumbre* is used as a rhetorical strategy in legal courts. *Costumbre*, had a legal framework rooted in medieval times (Yannakakis 2010, 116 and following pages).

since it tends to portray indigenous communities as self-contained entities, mirroring early 20-century anthropology studies on communities, where a homogenized and idealized communitarian life reminds us of the Rousseau noble savage. (Lisbona 2005; see also Graeber and Wengrow 2021.) The *Comunalidad* framework, ignores internal struggles, inter-ethnic conflicts, and its relationship with the state (Zárate 2005).

This part consists of three forms of understanding the development of *comunalidad* historically. My interest is to shed light on the core of indigenous social structure – that of the *Cargo* system – since *comunalidad* pays great attention to it, insofar constitutes the particularities of “any” indigenous community. Firstly, I attempt to revise through a *longue durée*¹⁷ the formation of *comunalidad*, that of the *Cargo* system, contrasting two scholarly proposals dealing with the indigenous social structure historical constitution. The first one, favors the pre-Hispanic root continuity, while the second is partisan of deep influences of colonial rule and century state formation. In addition, I focus on different anthropological studies on *Cargo* systems in indigenous communities. Since the beginning of the 20th century, examination of the *Cargo* system grew parallel with that of peasant communities in Mexico. Secondly, I will address in depth what is *comunalidad* by its proponents while at the same time, I attempt to reflect on contemporary indigenous political endeavors based on *comunalidad*. As I mentioned above, countless projects have seen the light based on *comunalidad* principles, shaping and signifying indigeneity for specific political goals. Thirdly, by bringing ethnographic accounts and critical approaches to *comunalidad*, community, and studies of resistance, I attempt to reflect on what Ortner calls ethnographical refusal (Ortner 1995).

Through these three subparts, I argue that *comunalidad* represents tactical responses (de Certeau 1988), employed by communities, individuals, indigenous intellectuals, and cultural brokers to navigate, resist, and negotiate state authority in the context of expanding capitalism. These tactics empower indigenous populations to actively participate in decision-making regarding their affairs in relation to the state (c.f. Yannakakis 2008). At the conclusion of this first part of the dissertation, I will present empirical notes illustrating the historical capacity of indigenous peoples to manage relationships with hegemonic powers, particularly colonial rule and the Mexican state.

¹⁷ Although would be next to impossible to render a proper study of *cargo* system by way of Braudel’s *longue durée* (1980), it is fundamentally important to address indigenous social structure continuity and discontinuity as well as cycles through history.

Furthermore, contemporary management of indigeneity is crucial as it aims to achieve specific objectives. Insights from historical anthropology on resistance and the anthropology of community can deepen our understanding of the concept of *comunalidad*. I propose that the significance of *comunalidad* lies not in its academic analysis or the development of indigenous anthropological theory, but rather in its political potential to negotiate with the state and regulate capitalist initiatives, thereby enabling indigenous peoples to pursue autonomy through various projects.

*The *longue durée* of what they called *comunalidad**

Two subjects have gained traction in contemporary social science scholarship focused on indigenous peoples in the Americas. The first is political ecology, which examines the processes of dispossession and degradation of indigenous territories through economic and (neo)extractive practices in neoliberal contexts, along with tactics of resistance (see Wolf 1972; West 2006; Gersdorf 2016). The second, particularly takes upon ontologies and perspectivism – especially in the Amazon – through scholars such as Descola (1994), De Castro (2015), and my former supervisor, Elke Mader (1999). These discussions often situate resistance movements within frameworks of (new) commons, decolonial theories, and indigenous epistemologies, positioning actors within the notion of radical alterity (see de Castro 2015; Graeber 2015).

As trends come and go, it seems almost impossible to avoid these two subjects as the main framework. What I am trying to understand, however, is about a media project's creation from individuals of a community and the media project's reception in that community, again in a neoliberal capitalist context. To begin, my interest is primarily limited to the two subjects mentioned above. It lies in the diachronically and synchronically examination of what they call *comunalidad* using social change through creating media projects, particularly a cinema theatre. As I mentioned above, according to its proponents, *comunalidad* constitutes four pillars, that is, the community assembly, authority positions rotation, civic and religious fiestas, and *tequio* or unpaid community labor. These four pillars, as they call them, framed the social life and structure of the indigenous communities in Mexico, specifically in Oaxaca. In my view, the *Cargo* system stands out not only as the backbone of what it means to be and what it makes the *community* in several parts of Oaxaca for the indigenous population and, is widely spread in discourses stressing out the uniqueness of indigenous practice. Moreover, it was always pointed out proudly by interlocutors in Guelatao as a distinctive way of serving the community and the only way of doing politics contrasting and downplaying the liberal state and political party politics.

My aim, therefore, is to shed light on understanding the emerged *comunalidad* historically, that is, by following its structural foundations: the *Cargo* system and its historical unfolding.

For that, I will analyze two main arguments. The first attributes the continuity of Mesoamerican-Precolonial social structures as the main axis for indigenous contemporary social structure; while the other postulates the colonial rule and Mexico state formation as the main historical *events* of indigenous social structure transformation (Pellón 2016). *Comunalidad* proponents fall into the first, insofar as they place the indigenous source of social organization in the *ancestral* (Martínez Luna 2010; 2015), traditional and Mesoamerican continuity (Maldonado 2010, 57-74) by way of historical resistance. *Comunalidad*, Maldonado subscribes, is the key to resistance and incubator for liberation (Maldonado 2002, 76).

The point here is to break with the vulgarization of *comunalidad* and to avoid – not without critique – giving simplistic explanation commonly framing indigenous social structures as a spontaneous reaction to exploitation, a tradition anchored in pre-Hispanic times, an *uniqueness* cultural form of indigenous people, as an alternative way of life and feverish opposition to state control or any forms of capital (*c.f.* de la Cruz 2011). I suggest that paying attention to empirically anthropological studies and historical lenses could provide more nuanced outcomes and a better understanding of the subject, thus keeping simplistic and romantic understandings of *comunalidad* at bay.

In understanding the present indigenous *comunalidad* proposition we need to tend a historical *bridge* recurring to the *longue durée*; where the colonial framework largely defines the political culture of the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca as Yannakakis (2008, see introduction) puts it. It is in the end, the territory that interests us. Equally important is to pay attention to external forces that shaped the entire region; transnational and national policies, for instance, would come to play a fundamental part since colonial Mexico – e.g., Bourbonic reform and Mexico state formation (see Wolf 1986; Joseph & Nugent 1994; Chassen-López 2004). More often than not, the intention of the state to *homogenize* indigenous communities turned out to be a futile enterprise, since we know now that adaptation to new forms is a historical fact (see Sahlins 1999), the early composition and social dynamics in Sierra Norte played an important role on what we know now as the *comunalidad* and its development as semi-autonomous region.

It is worth then, to make note of what I am referring to when using the *longue durée* and to which extent it is important to employ it in trying to understand the *Cargo* system in Oaxaca's indigenous *pueblos*. Perhaps, it would seem self-explanatory – long duration, i.e. something that

lasts very long in time and space. But it is necessary to bring up again why Braudel (1980) was truly interested in historical endeavors of such caliber.

Firstly, I must say that my interest in the *longue durée* started in my early days of studying anthropology. As we engaged in historical anthropology, French anthropology and history traditions were the cornerstone of my degree studies. It was an interesting way of understanding social and cultural phenomena as a totality which, back then, was only possible by framing our studies using historical methods in anthropological inquiry. In the end, we thought that the task of the historian lies for the most part in questioning the past if we understand that the gesture of turning toward the past explains our present (Burguière 2009, 7). However, it is not about summing endeavors between two different disciplines, but rather bearing in mind that comprehending a society is only possible historically, since

“(...) any relationship between disciplines is not determined by the intrinsic nature of those disciplines but by the prior theoretical considerations (...) In my view, there ought to be no relationship between history and anthropology, since there should be no division to begin with” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992, 13).

Back then, we thought, and I still think today, the latter is still a valid point. The relationship between anthropology and history is a fruitful one and could shed light on how social groups unfold and reproduce themselves through time, building, fighting, or adapting to, say, historical events of social unrest, political changes, power structures, and the like, while at the same time seem to generate social change of some sort. Thus, adopting a long-time span approach could give us the insights to understand how certain structures did manage to prevail, paradoxically changing and adapting, through the myriads of economic, historical, and cultural predispositions which preceded such changes and continuities.

In this light, my interest in this study on *comunalidad* and the *longue durée* came when reading the work of Kummels (2017) on *Transborder Media Spaces*. In her work, Kummels takes the reworking of *lienzos* to demonstrate the long timespan of a form of mediatizing politics and the usages of media for political ends, as well as the upholding forms of self-government (*cargo* systems) to, on the one hand, integrate indigenous people as one of Mexico’s *clientelist* populations and in the other, functioning as an important cultural and political asset (Kummels 2017, 36). These two folds suggest the very historical tensions between indigenous communities and power structures – royal officials, the crown and state institutions, and the political leverage of the

community to keep the community somehow linked. She also points the how fundamental is *Cargo* system for indigenous communities.

Kummels' (2017) work notes the precisely *longue durée* of the *Cargo* system and media (in the form of *lienzos*) for political tools and ends. Although briefly and limited on the historical field – and of course is not her intention to make a historical study – Kummels' work gives clues that media, whatever this may be, production and usage for political goals in indigenous communities, is as old as colonial times.

I concur with Kummels (2017) when she states that fiestas and the *Cargo* system are the backbones of semi-autonomous democratic communities in present-day Mesoamerica. As such, it must be framed under the *longue durée* to understand the slow changes and their adaptability to the manifold historical changes at national and global stages and, how and in which ways operates today.

However, in my view, Kummels (2017) falls short in historically applying the *longue durée* by looking only at the reworking of *lienzos* as a form of political mediatization for territorial ends. If one goes on to say that societies historically mediatized their politics without explaining the relation between structures, in some way, everything would be *longue durée* in about the ways people mediated and mediatized their politics. In contrast, as Braudel would suggest, mine is that of structure, and the importance of mediators (indigenous intellectuals, indigenous state agents, and so on) of structures. I am interested in the ways mediators, cultural brokers, intellectuals, and so on, mediate rule, authority, *values*, or *value* between structures in the historical landscape for political ends and how their class position plays an important role within and beyond their community.

Now, let's get to it. Braudel (1980) coined the term and developed the methodology by reflecting on what he thought was a crisis in historiography particularly and social sciences generally. He favored the almost immobile long-term history to understand structures through time. This crisis in the social sciences, Braudel would have it, was due to a crisis in human sciences, to what he saw as “overwhelmed with their progress (and consequently), “remain in the grip of an insidious and retrograde humanism no longer capable of providing them with a valid framework for their studies” (Braudel 1980, 25).

What perhaps Braudel (1980, see part 2) noted, was the propensity of how the works of other social scientists and scientists neglected that of historians and the limits of how historians understood history. He reminds us that other human disciplines fall short of what historians need;

consequently, historians approach at that time was “incomplete” and unable to give the full range of human activity through time. The time of political scientists let us say, is not the time of historians. He claims that “without explicitly wishing it, the social sciences force themselves on each other, each trying to capture society as a whole, in its totality. “Each science encroaches on its neighbors, all the while believing it is staying in its domain” (Braudel 1980, 26). Braudel offers a gift to all human disciplines, from anthropology to economics, that is, to look at the multiplicity of time and to engage directly with time in history. His interest in considering history in depth led him to engage in the process of timespans that of *long-term*, *medium-term*, or *short-term*; and subsequently arranging them internally as *structures*, *conjunctures*, and *events*, that are geographic, social, and individual time. The main idea was that historical changes have different *speeds* and *rhythms* and the way of arranging them was paramount to understanding processes. The arrangement consisted of undertaking the relationship between humans and their environment, time which he considered imperceptible, repetitive, and cyclic, a structural history. A history of conjuncture is a history of economic systems and state and civilizations' slow but perceptible rhythms (Burke 1992). Lastly, the history of events, the fast-moving time of individuals, is superficial and “only interesting for what it reveals about the forces underlying it” (Burke 1992, 152).

Of course, Braudel (e.g. 1980; 1992; et al.) was interested in the development of geographical regions, their economy, and *civilization materielle* or material culture. His work, however, has been widely criticized on a myriad of grounds, that of gigantism, economic and geographic determinism (see Gurvitch, 1964; Burke 1992, 153-165), and yet, his work remains remarkably important that until today, the *longue durée* is still called for different proposals, as Kummels (2017) does it very briefly. Despite of critiques accusing him of geographical determinism and ‘gigantism’, if one puts attention, as Burguière (2009, 153,ff.) notes, Braudel followed the circulation of networks of material and immaterial goods to their natural limits, only then to frame it to truly gigantic geographic spaces, and its mass populations (demographics). What he was interested in was the relationships among structures and times, rather than the totalities. Moreover, he was interested in “the clashes, the relations of dependency or exchanges that human groups knit together through the circulation of their products, their customs and their ideas” (Burguière 2009, 154).

If the circulation of networks and relations between structures were at the core of Braudel’s (1992) interest I consider it truly important to look through the time spans to grasp the structures

of indigenous communities in-depth as I look into how *Cargo* system structures still prevail today, not forgetting the changes derived from historical junctures and larger political changes. My intention then is not to make a large and deep study of the *Cargo* system as Braudel would have it – a vast, more like encyclopedia type of study; but to point out that the *Cargo* system is better understood in terms of the long-time span.

It is not surprising then that the work in Yannakakis (2008; 2010; 2014) I mentioned earlier as well as that of Chance – to which I will devote further pages; made me look back at how social structures, conjunctures, and events came to shape what we now know as the Sierra Norte, how they go about their affairs and what do they do in terms of the organization of projects facing the challenges of the contemporary. In doing so, I look not only at the structures but the figure of the mediator, agents who, through history, managed to shape politics in the region of the Sierra Norte, and more concretely Guelatao.

Cargo System in Sierra Norte: A Historical Account

It seems always the case that "practically all anthropologists who have worked in the different regions of Mesoamerica have described and analyzed the *Cargo* system" (Cancian 1967, 283). This is not my intention here, at least to the extent of what Cancian had in mind by only focusing on the *Cargo* system leaving out the "outside world." As I noted above, *comunalidad* seemingly points out the way in which indigenous people structured and reproduced "community life" in *Cargos*. Likewise, *Cargo* positions are proposed and approved only in assembly meetings, and only by community members. Projects, as in our case, the enchanted cinema, are proposed and approved in assembly meetings only by community members too; and as any approved project by the assembly, projects as well as individual elected community members, are accountable to both assembly and local authorities.

With this in mind, we must direct our attention to the indigenous community and to the institutions that govern their social and cultural life. As concurred with Kummels above, if the *Cargo* system and assembly meetings are the backbone of indigenous communities in today's *Mesoamerica*, as it seems to be the case in Guelatao, we must look at the *Cargo* system historically to point out its importance and presence until today in Oaxaca's indigenous communities. Thus, it is important to situate the *Cargo* system in its inception, that of colonial times.

As it is not my intention here, I will not engage in the totality of what *Cargo* system is in the national landscape, but rather regionally, especially because Mexico is a vast and diverse cultural zone, and it's impossible to look at it as a no more than a regional level (Taylor 1974, 400). Taylor sees this diverse sharply differentiated location in Oaxaca's Sierra Norte and although he was more preoccupied with land tenure history in the Sierras, equally important is the diversity of ethnolinguistic composition, forms of modes of production, and colonial history in the area.

Chance (1989) demonstrates that regional colonial histories are essential for understanding how social structures are constructed and reproduced differently from central powers. In this context, Topete (2010) emphasizes the need to view *Cargo* systems as plural, as variations can arise from different colonial histories and prior social stratifications. Similarly, González de la Fuente (2011) argues for the inherent heterogeneity of the *Cargo* system.

Sierra Norte Oaxaca stands apart from other regions due to its unique colonial inception. Colonization here differed from that in the Oaxaca Valley and the rest of central Mexico, characterized by dispersed Indigenous settlements and a lack of complex social hierarchies. This contrasts sharply with the established stratifications of the valley and Mixteca Alta. Class stratification among Indigenous societies in the Sierra is either absent or only incipiently developed (Chance 1989, 126-127).

For instance, identity in Sierra Norte was based on community rather than ethnicity. While Chance (1989, 10; *c.f.* Mendoza Zuany 2014 and Wolf 1959) notes that ethnicity may have been more prominent in pre-Hispanic times, the conquest transformed this dynamic, consolidating regional ethnic ties into one's community of origin or adoption. Taylor (1974, 407) notes that local communities adopted an exclusive and suspicious stance towards outsiders, fostering internal cohesion. This dual outcome prevented a unified front against colonial powers, allowing Spaniards to "divide and rule," while also enabling communities to resist external encroachment and maintain control over their lands. Thus, the social structure in the Sierra emerged as less organized than in the Valley of Oaxaca or Mixteca, suggesting that negotiations of rule and administrative units developed only during colonial times.

Before addressing that point, I will summarize key anthropological "generations" and interpretations of the *Cargo* system, originally conceived as a civic-religious hierarchy.

Chance and Taylor (1985)¹⁸ identified four distinct generations of scholarship on Mesoamerican civic-religious hierarchy, particularly in Mexico and Guatemala. Each generation analyzed the topic through the theoretical lens of its time. The first generation of anthropologists focused on *Cargo* systems as the primary framework for understanding peasant communities, viewing them as the central structure through which social, economic, and religious life was reproduced.

For example, Redfield (1930) depicted Mesoamerican peasant communities as isolated, small, and impoverished, with members living in subsistence conditions within homogeneous, bounded communities. These communities were seen as culturally differentiated and internally cohesive, partially segregated from national society due to a lack of economic integration. This disconnection stemmed from the perception that Indigenous populations primarily operated within a primitive, pre-capitalist economy characterized by communal cooperative labor, obligatory mutual aid, and church labor (*tequio*) (Nolasco, 1972).

This economic model emphasized spending over investment, with social prestige and status being the primary gains, rather than the creation of surplus for reinvestment and capital accumulation (Tax 1937; 1964). This theory has proven so influential that it continues to shape attempts to study Indigenous communities, even today.

The second generation of scholars not only described the *Cargo* system but also conceptualized it as an institution in its own right. This institution functioned as a defense mechanism against external exploitation, termed a closed corporate peasant community (CCPC) by Wolf (1957). The CCPC fostered a democracy of the poor where no individual or group could monopolize power, leading to a leveling economic effect (Nash 1967; Wolf 1955). As Wolf noted, “the corporate structure acts to impede the mobilization of capital and wealth within the community in terms of the outside world which employs wealth capitalistically” (1955, 458). However, this leveling mechanism did not eliminate internal class distinctions.

Harris (1964) contested the “defense” idea, arguing that the *Cargo* system historically failed to provide protection against external factors. He framed it as a repressive institution imposed by

¹⁸ I will not provide a thoughtful overview about the phases on which *Cargo* System has been studied over the last 100 years. This is not simply the place. But my point is to show variation through time of hierarchical positions and heterogeneity. In order to understand *comunalidad*, I think it is useful to gain historical knowledge since, colonial history provides *cargo* system or civic-religious hierarchies grounds to think about *comunalidad* not in terms of pre-Hispanic heritage but rather as colonial mixtures inventions.

Catholic priests that siphoned wealth from the community to the clergy, *hacendados*, and merchants.

The third generation, led by Cancian (1967; 1972) through studies in Zinacantán, Chiapas, empirically demonstrated that the *Cargo* system does not level wealth differences; rather, wealthier individuals tend to hold more costly *Cargos*, while poorer individuals hold fewer. Although the *Cargo* system may appear to level wealth, it stratifies and legitimizes existing economic disparities. Cancian described it as a homeostatic mechanism sensitive to local internal pressures, aligning his views with a functionalist perspective like his predecessors. Following Cancian, a consensus emerged among scholars (Dewalt 1975; Dow 1977; Greenberg 1981; Slade 1973) that the leveling hypothesis is flawed, and that stratification is compatible with the *Cargo* system (Chance & Taylor 1985, 3).

The fourth generation of scholars focused on both external and internal factors shaping the *Cargo* system. While there were differences among this group, they generally agreed on the importance of regional economic history and political economy (Diener 1978; Friedlander 1981; Rus & Wasserstrom 1980; Smith 1977). Some emphasized the central role of internal mechanisms (Beltrán 1967; Dow 1977).

In contrast, Carrasco (1961) aimed to reconstruct contemporary social stratification¹⁹ through the lens of pre-Hispanic continuity, relying on the chronicles of Durán, Motolinía, and Sahagún. He proposed a general hypothesis based on Aztec social stratification, identifying three forms of social mobility he termed the “ladder system.” Commoners could ascend hierarchically through positions in warfare, priesthood, and trade. Carrasco acknowledged that, while the *Cargo* system likely originated in the colonial period, it retained certain pre-Hispanic features that influenced its development (Carrasco 1961, 485).

However, by using the highly stratified Aztec society as a model for all of Mesoamerica, Carrasco overlooked significant regional differences. Chance noted that even the peak of social stratification in Oaxaca cannot be compared to the complex stratification in Central Mexico, particularly in Villa Alta (Chance & Taylor 1985; Chance 1989). This point remains crucial today, as variations in rituals, *Cargo* position diversification, and their functions challenge any generalizations. For example, Greenberg (1981, 159) identified at least two adjustments in the

¹⁹ In Spanish, the ladder system could be translated as *sistema de escalafon*, as such is well known today in Oaxaca too.

number of *Cargos*: shifts in modes of production and changes in the relationship between the metropolis and its satellites. These dynamics created new opportunities for inhabitants and facilitated mobility to “greener grasses”, as community members moved in and out.

It is crucial to consider the historical diversification of *Cargo* positions. Many villages and towns in Sierra Norte now engage in ecotourism and other economic enterprises, creating commissions embedded in *Cargo* practices. Additionally, post-revolutionary Mexico introduced civic rituals, such as Mexican Independence Day and Brass Band committees, which are also recognized as *Cargo* positions in places like Guelatao.

Following Carrasco's perspective, Vogt (1966) analyzes the rotation of *Cargo* positions in the lowland Classic Maya to exemplify *Cargos* in Zinacantán, Chiapas. He suggests that the *Cargo* system may have promoted territorial integration during Classic times by rotating men from specific lineages into priestly offices at ceremonial centers (see Chance & Taylor 1985). However, Haviland (1966) argues that the rigidity of Classic Maya stratification would not have allowed for the type of rotation Vogt proposes.

As was chiefly pointed out by Friedlander (1981, 133), it seems that two lines of argumentation have been carried out in the interpretation of *Cargo* origins. The first before the sixties sought *Cargo* as static and pre-Hispanic continuity and early colonial times as we see above. And the other takes history to take factors such as Indian demographics growth (Cancian 1965) or the “increasing of lowland sharing cropping, and infrastructure construction that created new social divisions and political conflicts that traditional rituals and practices cannot resolve” (Wasserstrom 1978, 209). His position is rather modern, in the sense that she sees the emergence of a new *Cargo* system in post-revolutionary Mexico by comparing past *Cargo* with the process of secularization, where saints were replaced by national heroes and *mayordomos* were promoted by state agents for the same purpose. For our case, it is interesting to note that Guelatao's patron saint fiesta (San Pablo) has fewer attendance since of course it is a celebration for the village and a fist of tourists. Notwithstanding, another celebration makes the mark by calling all towns of the region to compete in a Basketball tournament honoring 19th-century liberal Mexican president Benito Juárez, born in Guelatao. This regional celebration, I noted, has a twofold generational opinion. One favored the liberal father-figure statist of Juárez, and the younger favored the “traditional” pre-Hispanic Guelaguetza.

In some way, Friedlander's point seems to concur with what Pellón (2016) sees about the twofold *Cargo* system debate in current times. One privileging pre-Hispanic origin, mentioned above, and the other was shaped by the colonial and 19th century Mexican independence (Pellón 2016). For Pellón, the *Cargo* system and *Cofradías*²⁰ (Catholic religious brotherhood), would somehow merge into what we had known as a civic-religious system. Pellón would look at historical studies on *cofradías* in Spain in medieval times and argue that the Spanish experience in the multi-ethnic society of the *Reconquista* (Moreno 1981, 257), predisposed the transfer to American lands the same system to diverse heterogeneous groups, taking advantage of the plural Indian society existence. This religious institution was not drastically incompatible with indigenous and peasant society, with little or no internal stratification, compatible with the equal distribution of *Cargo*. Moreover, *cofradías* would spring out of colonial strategy for evangelization to the multi-ethnic indigenous Mexico's population. During the 16th century, it is worth noting that monetization of indigenous *Cargo* was established in two ways. One was the tribute for the Crown and *encomenderos*, and the other was the foundation of *caja de comunidad*, designated to cover the expenses of religious rituals (Lira 1982) and often proving resources for lengthy litigations for plaintiffs in courts (Yannakakis 2010, 121).

Thanks to its ability to adapt, this institution would integrate the segregated native population into religious units. The integration into these units would allow the indigenous population to reconstruct their identity in such a way that the *cofradia* would function as an instrument of resistance (*c.f.* Carmagnani 1988). On the one hand, *cofradías*, made possible colonial control, both by the Crown and the Church. The ethnic *cofradías* must have been a fundamental institution of the *República de Indios*, and on the one hand, they became a powerful instrument of colonization, and on the other, they became an authentic expression of indigenous identity (Pellón 2016, 61). Chance and Taylor suggest that looking at *cofradías* (catholic religious brotherhoods) and colonial civic *Cargos* are richer to give us more fruitful insights. An early attempt to look at *Cargo* systems and *cofradías* was carried out by Chance and Taylor (1985). Their insights were in a similar fashion as Pellón, although earlier than him. They argued that *cofradías* were established at different times across Mexico. In Jalisco and central Mexico for instance, records would have them about the 17th century. In Oaxaca, they came about the next century

²⁰ I would not go in detail to explain and analyse what *cofradías* is and its role in colonial Mexico. But they were a voluntary association of lay people which carry on religious festivities and rituals, charity, or piety. Carmagnani (1989) gives a compelling account of this voluntary associations in Oaxaca and its role for reconstruction of ethnic identity.

parallel to the growing indigenous population. The same authors point out that *cofradías* in Oaxaca were generally founded by a small legacy of one or two individuals, unlike Jalisco which was founded by donations from many families. In Oaxaca contrasting with Jalisco, annually fiestas remain in the hands of the *mayordomo* rather than the whole members of the *cofradía*. Interestingly enough, *cofradías* in Oaxaca were relatively poor, and worked less as village institutions, *cajas de comunidad*, were robust of community farmlands worked collectively by all families, and community coffers with hundreds, sometimes 1000 pesos in cash gathered from rental of buildings and lands and annual contributions by tributaries (Chance & Taylor 1985, 12). It seems that *cofradías* and *cajas de comunidad* had an intertwined character where the former served as an integrational organization while the latter served the ways to ensure collective property and communal goods.

Pellón (2016), Chance, and Taylor (1985) may concur with what we know now, as the *Cargo* system changed through time and evidence clarifies that the *Cargo* system is hardly antecedent of pre-Hispanic origin, nor that it remained unchanged, and it rather proved adaptability. One of those changes had to do with the fuse of civic and *cofradía* offices into the ladder of *Cargo*. This fusion, at least according to Chance and Taylor, stems from a lack of *cofradía* property and the prohibition of communal support for religious fiestas imposed by some Spanish political officials (Chance & Taylor 1985, 20). These restrictions were enforced first through Bourbon policies, including the secularization and confiscation of property (*laicización y desamortización*), and later during Mexico's early liberal post-independence period, championed by Benito Juárez, a Guelatao native, and his liberal reforms. In this period

“(f)ewer priests were trained and fewer spent their energies in rural parishes as the issues of the Reform heated up. In absentia, the parish priests lost their key role as the indispensable *brokers* between the villagers and the larger society. It became clearer to villagers that the Church was not the priest, it was the faithful, the people. (...), villages may have had greater leeway to reconstitute their ceremonial organizations and express religion in their terms” (Chance & Taylor 1985, 20).

This point is truly important and must be highlighted since, priests were not the only *brokers* and mediators between villagers, the native population, and the larger society; Ladino indigenous intellectuals played a significant part in shaping colonial rule, as brokers and mediators between legal colonial institutions, and the native population, between state institutions and indigenous communities until the present time as the work of Yannakakis (2008; 2010; 2014) will show further

down. It is worth noticing that for Wolf (1982, 148), the civil-religious hierarchies, not only installed a system of elite domination within the communities but also allowed them to represent the community before external power holders and authorities. It is worth noting that, in Wolf's latter view, he would abandon the idea of levelling wealth and social balance.

The myriads of ways in which the *Cargo* System has been interpreted, as any other interpretation has had its shortcomings. In this light, Chance and Taylor (1985) advice that the general theory of the *Cargo* System would be carried on, based on comparative research, whether pre-Hispanic, colonial, or contemporary. Cross-cultural comparison and theory building could be more productive than say, looking at antecedents (as Carrasco does) and archaeological sites. In this light, when looking at studies of *Cargo* systems, Cohen (2000, 122-123) observes the lack of sense that the native population and peasants truly understand their position before the state. They are not blind to the works of the state, cooperation has its coercive functions at the local and state levels but is a system that "works." Class-based differences exist in these communities, however not as in urban economies, but in the same civil and religious *Cargo* system. Following Wolf again, he reminds us that the structuralist approach (was) a tendency to look at these things in terms of themselves, as pristine models, however, they do not have to be looked at only in those terms. They can be seen as both internally and externally involved in a whole web of relationships, so that is a real plus (Ghani 1987). The shortcomings Wolf argued were because,

"(a)nthropologists of the time tended to short-circuit four centuries of history, to draw a direct line from the pre-Columbian past to the Indian present. At best, they acknowledged the successive modifications of Indian culture as the outcomes of successive phases of acculturation, without linking these to a processual understanding of economic and political history" (Wolf 1986, 326).

I will come back to Wolf's point later.

But how *were the Cargo* system and society were structured in the Sierra Norte during the colonial period? I believe the work of Chance (1989) and Yannakakis (2010), for instance, serves very well to approach a general historical understanding of the regional particularities of the development of the *Cargo* system in Sierra Norte, where an important history of the manifestations in time of economic and political forces shaped human action (Wolf 1986). As I mentioned before, the district of Villa Alta, where Guelatao is located, stands out by its history, since colonial enterprise took a different form from, say, the Valley of Oaxaca or central Mexico. Villa Alta

district was rather poor and social stratification was low or absent in most cases contrasting Oaxaca Valley or Mixteca region. In addition, inter-ethnic conflicts were constant when *conquistadores* arrived and later, the predominant form of estate economics in colonial Mexico known as *hacienda* unit, was largely absent in Sierra Norte (Chance 1989, 176).

In the area of Villa Alta, disputes over nobility status and *Cargo* holdings emerged as early as 1717. Zapotecs in the area distinguish between honorific and higher positions while referring to the lower ones with disdain as *servicios bajos*, which had a more indigenous character as we can see below by its Nahuatl name. In reality, indigenous nobles tried to avoid the lower *Cargo* at all costs. Although *Cargo* varied from village to village, Chance (1989, 139) provided a scheme as follows:

Gobernador – governor

alcalde – judge

regidor (2) – councilman

mayor – police chief

topil de comun – policeman and messenger

topil de iglesia – church-keeper

gobaz – general servant

Chance notes that access to *Cargo* positions in the 18th-century Villa Alta region was contingent on holding a specific social status. *Caquiques* and *principales* could access hierarchical positions starting from the middle, while *macehuales* (communers and rural farmers) had to begin at the bottom. These *Cargo* positions served to differentiate social statuses within the indigenous population, clarifying who held what status.

The variations in access to the *Cargo* system were significantly influenced by the existing social stratification and the ability of the nobility (*principales*) to prove their heritage in legal courts. In this context, social status was conferred by Spanish officials to legal plaintiffs. *Macehuales* could also attain higher *Cargo* positions, but it required a longer time to "climb the ladder." This delay was largely due to demographic factors, as in small villages, a one-year term rotation ultimately allowed them to become *gobernador* at some point.

Despite the early lack of social stratification, the figure of the nobility stands out as an intermediary who mastered the “Spanish political ways” while at the same time carrying the native ways of doing politics. In this way, the native intermediaries managed to navigate the four colonial institutions – the *cabildo*, native municipal government; the *repartimiento*, forced labor and production; the Catholic Church and, the colonial legal system. They were not only knowledgeable in politics or the legal system, but they knew very well how to perform in courts, in plaintiffs, and in most cases mastered Spanish and Nahuatl the two main official languages, apart from their own, Zapotec, mixe, or Chinantec.²¹ According to Yannakakis (2008, 3), these indigenous intermediaries made the colonial system work while simultaneously creating a hybrid colonial culture and politics. In addition, indigenous were not only nobility receptacles of knowledge working as middlemen, but also “legal, administrative, and church functionaries who through their intellectual activities and social networks created a communicative bridge between indigenous society and the law” (Yannakakis 2014, 78).

Several factors facilitated the emergence of native intellectuals in the region. The small number of Spaniards living in the area necessitated reliance on local elites to maintain control and uphold colonial order. A notable example is Joseph Ramos, a general interpreter in Villa Alta from 1685 to 1709. Born in Analco, a village established by central Mexican Indian *conquistadores* allied with the Spanish conquerors, Ramos’s role as a translator coincided with significant historical events, including the demographic recovery of the region and the secularization of the Dominican parish.

During his tenure, Ramos navigated land disputes and power struggles among local pueblos. He also witnessed a flourishing of native language notarial writing (Yannakakis 2014, 81). While translating civil and criminal litigations, Ramos served as a translator for confessions of cabildo officials following the 1700 Cajonos rebellion. His position as *alcalde* of Analco afforded him strong political and cultural ties, while his role as a general interpreter allowed him to engage with the Spanish world, acquiring land and property like other colonial officials.

Ramos’s case highlights the complex social networks that enabled natives to traverse intercultural spaces and power dynamics. His experience was not unique; similar cases exist in

²¹ There was a hierarchy of language instruction in legal system instructions and translations. While Spanish and Nahuatl position as the main language in the region, Zapotec language managed some hierarchy since most of the population in Villa Alta were Zapotec speaking. Mixe and Chinantec however were not use as legal language in courts and in fact were mediated by Nahuatl (see Ramos & Yannakakis 2014).

colonial contexts (see Yannakakis & Ramos 2014; Schwaller 2014). Ramos is central to Yannakakis's work (2008; 2014), illustrating how natives, rather than solely colonial powers, contributed to the creation of a hybrid system or “shadow system” (Yannakakis 2008, 221). This dual navigation of systems enabled native intermediaries to gain political and economic capital. Ramos's work exemplifies how native populations engaged with the colonial legal system while leveraging their local authority positions to enhance their material and political standing, thereby creating diverse forms of inequality within the region and among ethnic groups.

However, local intermediaries went beyond helping to maintain colonial control and secure political and economic positions. They used tactics as a form of resistance. By borrowing de Certeau's tactics, Yannakakis (2008) makes sense of the ways indigenous intellectuals engage with colonial powers. Strategy is referred to by de Certeau as formulated from space outside of and before direct engagement with the enemy. A strategy is a calculated manipulation of power relations that works only when a subject with will and power can be isolated (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution). Then it postulates a *place* as proper, from where relations to and for targeted individuals (competitors, adversaries, “clienteles,” “targets,” or “objects” of research) are managed (de Certeau 1984, xix). Tactics, on the other hand, operate from within, the glitches in the matrix one may say, where subjects subvert the relations established by the strategy. Subtle, everyday actions undertaken by individuals to navigate, resist, and subvert authority (Yannakakis 2014, 10).

These tactics, Yannakakis subscribed to, were carried on in courtrooms as *performances* where native intermediaries negotiated their personal identity and colonial subjects. These negotiations in courtrooms were due to legal and power struggles where oral testimonies of managing “local customs” by local officials contested hierarchical positions of their towns in relation to others, that of being *cabecera del pueblo* or municipal center. Indigenous intellectuals, holding political and civic-*cargo* positions made legal cases, informing colonial the positionality of their community about others to gain political autonomy and resources.

Not only can we see these examples in Yannakakis's (2014) work, but the same de Certeau also provides similar views when conceptualizing tactics. For him, despite the success of the Spanish *Conquista*, indigenous “*made* of the rituals, representations, and laws imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind; they subverted them not by

rejecting or altering them, but by using them concerning ends and references foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept” (de Certeau 1984, xiii).

The work of cultural brokers, indigenous intellectuals, or those who mastered the art of being in between, as briefly drawn above in the work of Yannakakis (2014), carries on as a historical constant. Their work, which was notorious in colonial times, however, did not vanish in Mexico’s independent period, they were in fact, nurtured during the Cardenista period (1936-1942). During those years cultural and educational state policies applied to indigenous people were at the forefront of the agenda. One of the many ways to educate teachers and subsequently put them into towns and regions in key positions. The state was expecting them to contribute to indigenous integration to the idea of Mexican identity. By teaching Spanish in their community, little by little they became the vehicle of health, sanitation, and civic instruction state policies (Recondo 2007, 33). Soon enough their quality as cultural brokers helped them to become almost a natural political intermediary. As in Chiapas, described by Jan Rus (1995), rural bilingual teachers, functioned as a kind of local elite, in San Juan Chamula. These agents of modernization driven in Cárdenas’ policy times, would become the main defenders of the community traditions and by defending them, they defend their power. They control the local economy (sale of alcohol, usury, transportation) and access to municipal *Cargo*. They especially profit from the ritual consumption of alcohol and the whole expenses that *mayordomías* entail. Post-revolution Mexican rural schools became also new spaces where relations with the state were negotiated and where the fabric of local civil society was reinforced (Rockwell 1994, 171). Furthermore, even the “(state) agents and instruments of a repressive state bureaucracy not only serve(d) as points of resistance to state projects but also (did) provide opportunities for the shoring up and reconstitution of popular traditions” (Joseph & Nugent 1994, 17).

Through these pages, different approaches to the *Cargo* system were reviewed, questions about it however remain puzzling us today. It seems to me that the *Cargo* system today differs greatly from colonial times, notwithstanding it is still greatly possible to grasp its historical continuity by way of its hierarchical structure through adaptability to new realities of cultural and socio-economic order. This adaptability turned out to be crucial in “preserving” communities in their political and cultural “ways”. The adaptability and continuity of the *Cargo* system, however, should not be seen simply as a matter of successful and everlasting indigenous communities’ resistance. It obeys different forms of negotiation of rules, concomitant to larger socio-political and

economic developments. The indigenous intellectual, cultural broker, or intermediary, played a truly fundamental role in shaping local politics, mediated in the larger state structures. Their role as brokers is crucial in the relationship of internal and external politics and economy as the work of Yannakakis (2014) pointed out above, where those “in-between” moved along the shadow and state systems.

A detailed historical analysis of each one of the generations studying the *Cargo*/civic religious system scape my intentions here. Furthermore, any attempt to empirically describe the *Cargo* system in Guelatao would be limited since it is not my primary intention nor my main objective. However, it is important to point out the myriads of interpretations and analyses on the *Cargo* system whether it functions as a mechanism of defense from external exploitation, or leveling wealth by stratifying, expropriating, or redistributing production. Scholarship on the origins of the *Cargo* system tends to look at either pre-Hispanic continuity or colonial enterprise. Even today, these two possible origins seem to be at the core of current debates and discourses, formal and informally. The pre-Hispanic continuity still stands strong in contested political arenas, especially in current times where identity politics form the basis of resistance movements and the creation of media projects. However, while reviewing historical material simultaneously mirroring my ethnographic work, it led me to shed light on the work of indigenous intellectuals to suggest that the *Cargo* system also functions as a network of relations that enables *mediation* between the local population, communitarian projects, and external forces and powers, either capital, the state, NGO's or international aid and development agencies. Historically they linked processes of external economic, political, and social changes with internal local dynamics.

Whether colonial administrative functionaries and translators or state agents (rural teachers), indigenous intellectuals learned quickly how to perform in different scenarios to achieve political goals; even more so when independent Mexico set the basis of policies of education and assimilation through the school system. As state agents, indigenous intellectuals not only negotiate power but assume the role of gatekeepers of “traditions”. Their position allows us to see that not only those who hold higher positions in the civic-religious shape local politics while simultaneously mediating with the crown authorities or state institutions and higher agents.

The figure of indigenous intermediaries is crucially important even today, not only in terms of negotiation with state agencies but as producers of knowledge, mediating and re-signifying what indigeneity means at the front of wide and social movements at large on the world stage. However,

I am interested in how these intellectuals emerged in contemporary, and how communities endorse or not those intellectuals. What is more, to do so, we have to tackle the process of how a community is built to shed light on the process by which intellectuals reflect on that very issue of community. As we will see below, my interest lies in class rather than identity or ethnic identity for that matter. It seems that when it comes to indigenous community studies in Mexico, class relations are often – if not always – omitted or not addressed at all.

Community in the *Cargo* System Context

Put aside all definitions of community, I will not try to come out with my own, due to the dangerous propensity to draw a taxonomy (see Cohen, 1985), or a “typical” *Cargo* system as Korsbaek (1996) would have it without any substantial variations. The notion of community, or indigenous community, goes hand in hand with that of *Cargo* system, at least in the field of indigenous scholarship dealing with the area of Kirchhoff’s Mesoamerica (1943). Making it even harder for a possible definition. As harder and more ambiguous to define something, a definition, according to Korsbaek (2009, 32) would be as follows: A group of people in close contiguity generally in a place with geographic or politically recognized borders. Korsbaek goes on to describe at least six characteristics: a 1: process by a 2: collective, often but not always within a 3: territorial framework, with 4: horizontal coherence, and 5: vertical coherence and 6: history (Korsbaek, 2005, 134). In another definition, González de la Fuente (2011, 93) refers to it as a social group, generally territorialized, with the main characteristic that all its relations are canalized by institutions, which generate, maintain, and enhance scenarios of interaction for the majority of the individuals forming that social group.

Therefore, I would consider a more useful, and against all attempts at homogenization as it normally goes in the indigenous arena, to refer to *Cargo* as rather than systems in the plural (Topete 2010). There is simply too much variation across communities and cultural practices derived from *Cargo* systems even in cities and urban neighborhoods. By the same token, it is even of more use to “deal with the community as it is symbolically constructed, as a *system of values, norms, and moral codes* [emphasis added] which provides a sense of identity within a bounded whole to its members” (Cohen 1985, 9.). However, I am not dwelling on the idea of categorizing community nor that I try to come up with new typologies of anthropological classification. I rather seek an understanding of what community means for the inhabitants of Guelatao and, according to them

and the internal bureaucratic system, how one does become a community member. In other words, I aim to concur with Cohen (1985) on following Wittgenstein's advice not to look for lexical meaning but *use*.

Wolf (1957) has stressed that in the case of Mesoamerica (present-day) communities are territorial and not kinship-based and that community membership is performed by participation in common civic rituals as well as religious. But how does one become a member of the community and get to participate in it? And what constitutes a community such as Guelatao?

The close corporate community that Wolf (1957) saw as a restricted community membership, maintaining a specific religious-civic system and a reinforcement mechanism to ensure the redistribution or destruction of surplus wealth is, in my view, somehow maintained until today. Of course, in many ways, we no longer consider close communities in the way Wolf (1957) puts it, nor does destruction or distribution of surplus wealth prevail, but as intermeshing of networks internally restricted which informed the realm of the community.

For Kearny (2002, 14), the CCPC has been largely misunderstood as it is often taken as a model of the presumed *isolated local village* of the earlier mainstream anthropology of Mesoamerica or a bold claim that the CCPC is a model against global capitalism. Simply put, Wolf never claims that his model would refer to communities closing off themselves to the world, nor that they engage in non-capitalist relations, nor lack of process and dynamism (See Chassen-López 2004, 290). Wolf refers to the efforts, customs, and beliefs of the members of peasant communities to protect themselves from the penetration of outside interests that extract economic value from the community (Wolf 1957). Furthermore, CCPC informs the historical process of indigenous community formation by which a labor force was required and provided resources of wealth serving Spanish colonization enterprises. As Wolf would have it,

“The integration of this peasantry into the colonial structure was achieved typically through the formation of communities which inhibited direct contact between the individual and the outside world but interposed between them an organized communal structure. This structure we shall call here the “corporate” community” (Wolf, 1955, 456).

It is, therefore, the process in which these efforts, customs, and beliefs are informed by the structure of the *Cargo* system, or as corporate in the case of Wolf (1955), and historical processes through which community members formed, that is by colonial structure. Moreover, if Wolf's CCPC provides the grounds to defensively counteract value extraction by external actors, then what

is the process by which communities allow external actors to become community members? I discovered early in my stay in Guelatao a process by which its members are classified socially accordingly to access resources, gain social recognition, and hold *Cargo* positions, as we will see below, thus becoming community members. I encountered several reasons as to why outsiders wanted to become part of the community. Either because they married someone from Guelatao, because of a state administrative job, teaching at schools, media and development projects, to explore housing possibilities, or, to pursue the *community project*. The latter, by Topete (2005) would be described as a pursuit in which members of a community engage to guarantee them diverse community projects such as health and care, labor, *life gifts*²², good harvesting, enough rain, etc. We have to bear in mind, that Guelatao²³ is by no means a peasant community²⁴ as considered by Wolf, that of an “agricultural producer in effective control of land who carries agriculture as a means of livelihood, not as a business for profit” (Wolf 1955, 14). Its land extension does not go beyond 22.96 km², peasantry as a form of livelihood is rather inexistent. Inhabitants are employed in government offices, some of them go to work in the city of Oaxaca, only less than one hour away, they are schoolteachers, they have small stores and small food businesses, and others work in the neighboring town of Ixtlan as construction workers, teachers and state agents and very few in local community tourism ventures.

Yet, Wolf's insights could give us interesting points to shed light on what he considers a general framework for the communities, how the mechanism works against external exploitation, and how class division exists. In doing so, two issues remain important to me. One is the process of becoming a community member, a process following Wolf's (1955; et al.) insights, which I consider a sort of defense mechanism against value exploitation from outsiders. The other is the process of how value(s) is extracted, not from the outside but from the inside out, meaning how class division exists internally. The latter is fundamentally important to understand social dynamics which become more visible with the emergence of any number of projects, these two issues pave the way for value extraction. This, however, will be addressed in the second part.

²² Here, the author presumably refers to reciprocities among community members through *cargo* positions.

²³ Moreover, it is important to point out that Guelatao plays a role for governments for power legitimisation since it was the birthplace of Benito Juarez. Concretely, it worked for the current administration of Lopez Obrador. Each year on 21st of March, he visits the village to link symbolically liberal republican principles with principles and goals of his government. His visit has promised a new federal fund budget exclusively for Guelatao.

²⁴ For and extensive discussion on issues of peasantry definitions in 20th century, see Kearny 1996).

Community Membership

In Guelatao not only live people raised and born in the village. An important number of people come from outside. School teachers, people married with locals, students, and people from around the region, who at some point got involved in some project and decided to stay. As Carmen, the cinema manager, mentioned to me many times, a great number of people came from outside, including half of her family. Today, some indigenous communities are heterogeneous contrary to early and even today studies. But there are memberships. Not everybody who gets to live there is considered a community member. So, a simple question came to my mind on the very first day of arrival in Guelatao, how one does become a member of a community?

While experiencing fieldwork, I first encountered a sort of personhood classification among Guelatao inhabitants. That is, commoners, those who oversee the land tenure as well as certain social spaces of the town. They are eligible and must occupy *Cargo* positions as well as fulfill obligations e.g. *tequio*, assembly meeting assistance. *Ciudadanos*, citizens, those who by birth, or those outsiders who acquired to be *ciudadanos* by application must fulfil the same obligations as the commoners, however, they do not take care of the land tenure nor administrate social spaces, only by request. Lastly, *avecindados*, (neighbors) are those who just live in the town but have no rights or obligations to occupy *Cargo* positions nor are they integrated into the assembly decision-making of internal affairs of the town. What truly interests me is the kind of effort people make to become citizens of the community and the level of local scrutiny they go through.

Once I arrived in Guelatao, I got to know people who lived in, but they were not considered part of the community, insofar as they were not entitled to hold any *Cargo* position or community rights. They were known as *avecindados*, meaning a person who just inhabits within, what is considered legally municipality land. I became aware on my very first day in Guelatao of the several categories and hierarchies of people regarding community recognition. Mendoza Zuany (2008; 2014) had a similar observation in Guelatao and Ixtlan. By mirroring Edwards's (1998) study in Allentown England, where local identities are defined by belonging to the community and belonging is primarily determined by being native and those who are not; those who are born and bred and the incomers, Mendoza Zuany pointed out that similar definitions exist in the aforementioned towns in the Oaxaca Sierras, where in practice categorization of people comes not in terms of ethnicity but birthplace and by time living in the community. As mentioned before, in

Guelatao inhabitants are distinguished by being *ciudadano*, *comunero* or *avecindado*. Each one of these categories holds status and a certain level of responsibility and obligations before the community. The *ciudadano* and *comunero* categories are acquired by birth or family membership born in Guelatao. In addition, one can become *ciudadano* depending on the time the person has lived in the community, to my knowledge, in Guelatao it is around five consecutive years. To hold *Cargos* in a position, it is necessary, to express the will to perform them, to be ready, either when someone turns 18 years old or finishes studying. These categorizations are mainly based on birthplace, and outcomes are related to access to resources, and obligations to the communities' political and economic structures (Mendoza Zuany 2014, 60). What I became interested in was on incomers and how and when they are considered part of the community. A normal procedure as it was mentioned by my interlocutors, is as follows.

Any person who comes to live in Guelatao for whatever reason needs to present him- or herself before the authorities and hand in legal documents i.e., birth certificate, motivation letter, no criminal record, and letter of recommendation from previous domicile municipality. Documents may vary at times, but legal documents are required by the authorities. Involvement with the community, for instance performing *tequio*, is an asset if someone wants to become a community member, as well as amicable social interactions. After that, the petition for becoming *ciudadano* is brought to the assembly, and through it *avecindados* community membership is approved. It is worth mentioning that while Mendoza Zuany does not mention any sort of legal requirements, as to documents, the level of “integration” as they call it, is through dialogue between *avecindados* and the assembly. The latter expects full commitment and acceptance of how things are done in the community. As one *avecindada* from Venezuela explains:

“They are going to *impose* things on you (...) you are not allowed to do things by halves, you have to assume that (...) you have to perform *Cargos* from the bottom or to *pay* someone to do it in your place” (Magdalena quoted in Mendoza Zuany 2014, 63).

The process of becoming is through involvement in the community tasks, *tequio*, and low *Cargo* positions, from *topil* to the 25th of January committee. In short, to be present and be seen as an active person. Rights are earned not granted. Vásquez notes that

“The *Cargo* is a service to the community and, in exchange for it, the community offers benefits to *ciudadanos*, (...) thus, the inhabitants of Guelatao are compensated with services like water or public lighting, which do not pay. For this reason, it is frowned upon that someone does not comply

with the *Cargo* and resorts to the authority to request favors. Otherwise, if you do not feel the desire to perform the service – the *Cargo* – for free, it is preferable that the person leaves the town or will cease to enjoy the benefits” (Vásquez 2008, 412).

This commentary sharply contrasts with legal documents archives of the municipality²⁵, where municipal taxation or “collecting” funds is paid by community members for water, renting chairs, and fees on small businesses, while public lighting is free nationwide as the state provides. Paying someone else to do the *tequio* or in minor *Cargo* positions is not rare. Kearney (1986, 17-18) noted, while doing his fieldwork in Ixtepeji, Oaxaca, a village near Guelatao, that on occasions, individuals pay up to 2000 pesos of that time to get a substitute, however, that practice is strongly disapproved and not acceptable in the most important *Cargo* positions.

In this regard, during my own fieldwork, in conversations with Andrés Martínez, historian and philosopher from the University of Veracruz, *ciudadano* of Guelatao and son of Jaime Luna, went on to explain the processes of becoming a *ciudadano* of Guelatao.

“The community is not restrictive, you can come to live here, no problem. But to have the rights as *ciudadano*, you have to be recognized by the citizens. You cannot just come and live here. You have to show that you are worth it; you have to live here, for at least a few years, so we can see that you are a good fella who works and is responsible. You must prove to have the psychological and emotional capabilities to live in communitarian life. By regulation, after living here for three years, you can file your application to the assembly to become one of us. Then the assembly has the last word on the matter. Anybody can live here for 5 or 10 years, but if we see that you are a violent, alcoholic, or lazy person, selfish or bad neighbor who makes problems to a *ciudadano*, then we wonder why we want you as part of our community. You can keep living here or there, but you will not have rights. It is about earning your rights by being consequent to the community. For instance, my father Jaime talks about how, in liberalism, the rights are above the obligation, meaning you were born with rights and later you acquire obligations. I like our local approach better; you have obligations then you earn your rights. First, do your duties, then we respect you” (Fieldnotes March 2019)

For Andrés, it is clear that the procedure to become *ciudadano* is necessary to maintain certain order and follow the moral and ethical principles in the community. Coercion therefore is

²⁵ Plan de desarrollo municipal, 2010-2013. Consulted 25/03/2021

https://www.finanzasoxaca.gob.mx/pdf/inversion_publica/pmds/11_13/035.pdf Retrieved March 2021

In an additional note, municipality income comes from mainly two federal state funds named, *Ramo 28* and *Ramo 33*. The former is not labelled, meaning it could be used as the municipality disposes, and any municipality is entitled to it. Its nature is compensatory and proportional for participating in taxation and in the economy of the state. While the latter, is a federal fund labelled and designated to social, education, health infrastructure, education, and technology, among others.

necessary or, as Magdalena mentioned above, *imposition* on how things are done in the community is necessary and a full commitment is expected to reproduce the internal social structure.

The division of natives and non-natives becomes greater when higher positions are occupied by *avecindados* who became *ciudadanos* as proven in the case of Ixtlan exposed by Mendoza Zuany (2014). On the contrary, in the case of Guelatao, where the number of inhabitants is low, no more than 600, *avecindados* can occupy higher positions without harsh disputes. At times, these native non-native divisions create essentialist discourses and negative attitudes towards non-natives. An example of this comes from a commentary from Don Gonzalo, a well-known person in Guelatao. He complains that the municipal president is from Matatlan, a town from the valley. He also complained that he did not even know how to speak proper Spanish and had a strong Zapotec accent when he talked. “You have to speak Spanish to be authority”, Don Gonzalo claimed. Paradoxically, no one speaks the language of their “ancestors” in Guelatao. Another case in point comes from an *avecindado* who claims that a *cold war* was taking place between natives and *avecindados* where natives claimed that everything belongs to them, and a “secret” meeting happened where a discussion about kicking out of town all the non-natives (Mendoza Zuany 2014, 64).

The bureaucratic process of becoming part of the community is not the only step, there are several variables, the period of living in the town, the level of engagement, and above all what people say and think. A preceding bad reputation could have consequences for those wanting to become community members.

Rumors and gossip shaped how natives consider *avecindados* as well. In this way, gossip connects with the maintenance of the unity of groups (Gluckman 1963). Wolf also reminds us that:

“paralleling the mechanisms of control which are primarily economic in origin are psychological mechanisms like institutionalized envy, which may find expression in various manifestations such as gossip, attacks of the evil eye, or in the fear and practice of witchcraft” (Wolf 1955, 460).

When looking at types of the peasantry, Wolf (1955, 460) tells us that communal organizations, such as *comunalidad* depictions, have often been romanticized and it is assumed that a communal structure makes for the absence of divisive tensions. Quite the contrary we find in these communities where envy, witchcraft, or gossip are some forms of institutionalized regulation mechanism (*c.f.* Lewis 1951, 428-29).

A case in point comes on the very same day I arrived in Guelatao when I met an *avecindada* working as a moderator in the Ixtlan taxi base. She is divorced from a *ciudadano* of Guelatao and the mother of two teens. Although she has been living for more than 15 years in Guelatao and has presented her case to become *ciudadana*, her case has not been heard. She complains that there are rumors spread by her former husband and the community has turned against her. She told me that, in consequence,

“(...) people are nasty, they are saying to cut my electricity and water because I have not done any *Cargo*. But I have applied to become a *ciudadana*, and my case has not been heard” (Fieldnotes April 2019).

Later, Carmen, the Cine Too manager, would confirm such rumors to be true. She stated that there were general complaints about her because she would spread gossip about community matters.

It became clear that the community of Guelatao, and I do not doubt some others too, have somewhat a procedure of sustaining a defense mechanism against external actors by internal means, that is, a long-term process of showing tasks and responsibilities for those to outsiders who want to become a full community *ciudadano*. On the other hand, my interlocutors never spoke about “features” of community identity e.g. speaking an indigenous language ethnic identity; rather they spoke on local identity bounded by territory and assembly assistance and *Cargo* holdings. Identity is rather connected with internal bureaucratic procedures, that is, becoming community members which in turn translates into rights and obligations, performing *Cargos* and the like, being employed in communitarian ventures, and access to positions of administrative hierarchy. The liminal position of *avecindados* exemplifies the *othering* existing internally and the process of becoming a community. Othering and liminal positions come to reinforce the bond of local identities while at the same time, external exploitation is put at bay.

For the most part, self-identification as indigenous is seldom among Guelatao and Ixtlan inhabitants, and territorial-community identity, as proven by Mendoza Zuany (2008; 2014) and Wolf (1955; 1957) above, is stronger. Local identities inform differences and boundaries without claiming ethnicity. However, categories of natives and non-natives, or *avecindados* and *ciudadanos* fulfill functions for defying access to political power and economic resources. This definition and practices of distinction light the different power relations at play and class distinctions – as I will address later – open the question of whether ethnicity or indigeneity is still a valid category of

interpretation, and class should be addressed more seriously, meaning that notions such as ethnicity, indigeneity would only make sense by establishing class relations. Class distinctions and reproduction within communities should be addressed more seriously. Above all, because such notions are often framed as politics of representation, or solely as identity. This, for instance, is crucial when looking at the emergence of projects and their position to external powers, institutions, and society at large.

As for the case of Wolf (1957), CCPC's membership duties and *Cargo* performed positions are only the social reproductive aspect of the community, the process of gaining access to perform them, as the cases mentioned above, present the other side of the coin. Since membership is not kinship-based nor ascendancy or ethnicity pointed out by Wolf (1955) and Mendoza Zuany (2008; 2014) above, in the case of Guelatao, the community feeds itself from outsiders to being able to fulfill *Cargo* positions to make ends meet, either because the professionalization of youngsters allows them to immigrate to the cities looking for better jobs, or they are losing the interest of performing *Cargos* because performing them could bring them debt. A clear statement came once from an interlocutor. She stated that creating projects and communitarian ventures could potentially prevent migration to allow youngsters to employ their skills in those projects. But the creation of projects aims to ensure the continuity of *Cargo*. The professionalization of a new generation of community members allows them to access state and private resources to create ventures and projects within the community which reflect the diversification of the *Cargo* hierarchical positions.

It is important to reintroduce the remark above mentioned by Greenberg (1981) that two shifts diversify *Cargo* positions – the relationship between the metropolis and the satellite and shifts of mode of production –. New *Cargo* positions emerged from new demands of various kinds, different forms of projects and new offices, new opportunities for business for the community, and so on. While Chance (1989) mentions the variations of different *Cargo* positions across villages, and this is the case presumably until today, Velásquez (2001) identifies seven diversified *Cargo* positions: 1.-Justice administration (*alcalde*, secretaries, and deputies); 2.-Council members (Municipal president, secretary, council, police mayor, *topiles*) 3.-Agrarian members (*ejido*, or communal infrastructure commissar, security council); 4.-Religious (*mayordomos*, *fiscales*, Church mayor, church *topiles*, *madrinas*); 5.-Development managers (health and education committees, running water council); 6.-Intermediation (*tequio*, ambassadors) and 7.-Civic

festivities (various festivities committees) and at times, elderly council. For instance, in Yalalag (Chassen-López, 2004) around 1896 the *Cargo* was constituted as follows:

I	<i>Topil del cura</i>	Church-keeper
II	<i>Topil o policías del Ayuntamiento</i>	Messenger or policeman for Town Council
III	<i>Jefe de los Topiles</i>	Chief of aides/messengers
IV	<i>Suplentes de Regidores</i>	Substitute Councilman
V	<i>Regidores propietarios</i>	Councilman
VI	<i>Mayordomo de la iglesia</i>	Steward of the Church
VII	<i>Presidente o agente municipales</i>	Municipal President or Municipal Agent
VIII	<i>Alcalde</i>	Judge
IX	<i>Consejero</i>	Adviser on Consejo de Ancianos

Figure 1 Screenshot taken from Chassen -López 2004, 287

Naturally, there is a great historical gap between the two, but attention should be paid to the diversification over time and the opening of positions according to determined historical times. For instance, new *Cargo* positions regarding “development” and civic festivities would be unthinkable in colonial times for simple historical obvious reasons. As for the difference between towns and villages, municipalities, and *cabezeras municipales*, in diversifying *Cargo* positions Guelatao presents the following scheme for *Cargo* positions, as Vásquez (2008, 410) would conceive it in 2008. She presents the *Cargo* scheme as follows:

Gobierno local de Guelatao

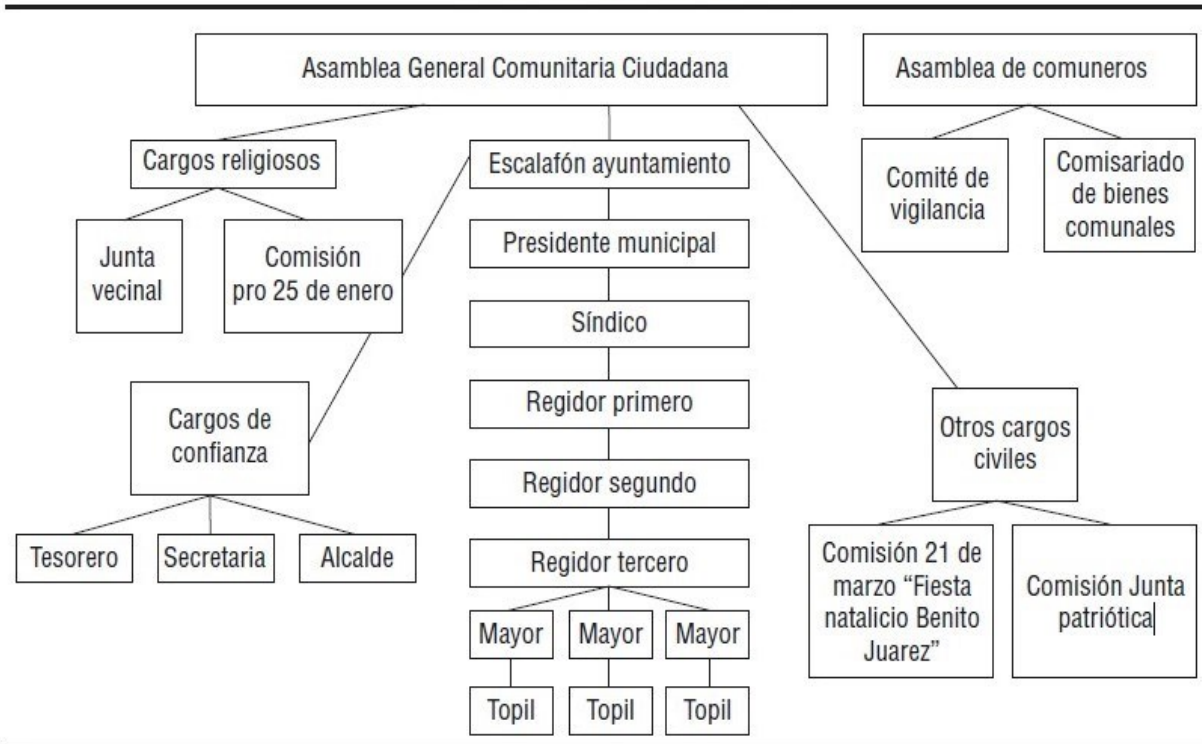


Figure 2 Screenshot taken from Vásquez, (2008, 410)

It is worth noting that during my fieldwork in 2019, the brass band committee and the ecotourism office were created, both functioning as *Cargo* positions in different capacities. While there is a significant historical leap within the *Cargo* system, these examples illuminate how external political and economic demands shape *Cargo* roles, such as those in ecotourism and the brass band.

Interestingly, in Guelatao, community membership occasionally bends to fulfill *Cargo* positions. This challenge prompts the community to seek new job creation strategies within the *Cargo* system. Some new positions require manpower to address ongoing inter-city and inter-municipality labor migration. Local young professionals often leave Guelatao in search of better opportunities, but projects like Cine Too and the ecotourism office aim to attract them back to meet *Cargo* demands and generate job opportunities.

The CCPC concept helps us understand both the "closed" community membership access and the mechanisms that resist external value exploitation. It also highlights the historical dynamics of "local and parochial relationships" within broader economic and political processes, emphasizing how members of closed corporate communities respond through culturally informed actions (Wolf 1986, 328). This approach requires attention to internal relations concerning external factors, particularly regarding access to local hierarchies and power.

The diversification of *Cargo* structures reflects historical political and economic shifts, driving the community council's economic priorities and political compromises. Projects like Cine Too and other cultural initiatives emerged during a political and economic juncture where local authorities prioritized culture and media. Thus, the process of community formation and the performance of *Cargo* positions create a framework through which the community delineates and purifies external social, economic, and political influences while negotiating local differences.

The Cine Too project has been the object of mild discussion about its position within the community at least on two fronts. Questions of whether the Cine Too could be a *Cargo* position or keep it as a communitarian business were expressed by many inhabitants I talked to. I became aware of these issues when looking at the process of accessing *Cargo* positions and resources by specialized and professional community members. These professional members worried about the continuity of the project if left in the hands of members with no interest in cultural projects or cinema. The other was the lack of interest of the community as a whole in Cine Too. People were not interested in the project, mainly because they questioned if such a project could create profit for all or just for some.

Guelatao presents, as noted above, the scheme for *Cargo* positions, as Vásquez (2008, 410) would conceive in 2008, noting that the ecotourism office and brass band committee are absent, not because she overlooked them, but because they did not exist at the time.

Kearney (2002, 14) noticed the lack of scope on how migration affects value extraction and exploitation as well as class and cultural differentiation in Wolf's corporate community model. The same goes for agrarian and indigenous scholarship in general. While I am a little interested in the way of transnational migration, as Kearney's work is concerned, by looking at community projects of various kinds, I become more interested in how different forms of value emerged from those projects and consequently how cultural projects unveil class differences. As for class, and as we

will see later, I concur with what Kearny sees as the confusion of referring to class as class culture or class identity rather than its deep structural sense. Class as Kearney proposes, is fundamentally structural of a relationship of uneven value exchange between identities, as “cultural construction of contrasting identities is a potential basis for inequalities in the game of value – class relationships” (2002, 9-11).

Active participants of cultural projects, especially Cine Too, link and mediate certain forms of value (s) from what constitutes the community; that is, it is the social fabric and symbolic realm which is informed by a larger cultural and political movement known as *comunalidad*. The proposition of class differentiation within the community, as proposed by Kearney (2002) above, directs us to look at forms of representation from and beyond the community as a practice of value transformation. Representation, class, and commodification of identities cannot be detached from each other (see Part II). To gain insight into the latter is paramount to address the question of becoming communitarian, that of how to become a member of the community. In this way, Wolf’s (1957) CCPC would serve as the grounds to see how, in which way, and by whom value extraction is mediated and how this mediation occurs internally and externally. The *Cargo* system is the skeleton where members position themselves as agents who negotiate and mediate value internally and create forms of exchange externally. Moreover, intellectuals in colonial times, as we saw above, were and, I would argue, are still very important agents to fulfil this task. As I mentioned at the beginning of this part, *comunalidad* is becoming an important guideline for cultural projects; in so, it recurs to ancient and traditional schemes of the indigenous way of life, social formations, and cultural differences in doing things. Whether *usos y costumbres*, *Republica de Indios*, internal normative system, or *comunalidad*, each one of them grew from national and global historical conditions, each one of them, not only endows a framework of legal, cultural, and political actions to indigenous communities in southern Mexico, but also, they emerged through historical tensions, social struggles and political consciousness of indigenous communities. Each one of them obeys emergencies to different historical epochs where internal histories are linked to a larger political and economic trajectory.

What follows, is an account of how *comunalidad* became so important and how, despite its political potency, it awakes criticism, romantic views, and hopes for a present and future of the commons.

And... what is what they called *Comunalidad*?

During my fieldwork, I encountered a fistful of ways and meanings in which local people of Guelatao, Oaxaca city, and elsewhere expressed what *comunalidad* is about. The enthusiasm in the way people talked about it and how it occupied a central role in several projects, debates, and political positions was simply impossible to avoid. At times, it is not clear what they mean by *comunalidad*, at times it refers to an attitude, a feeling, or as Esteva (2015) has it, a *senti-pensar*. A word term that recovers the communal art of living. For some scholars, it is a notion that agglutinates social reproduction structures of Oaxaca's indigenous people (Dietz & Mateos Cortes, 2013, 124), for others it is a theory or native epistemology (Nava 2013). Whatever the case, there is a constant and continuous reference to *features*, claiming particular to indigenous populations: communal festivities, territory, communal assembly and *tequio*, communitarian unpaid labor. More notions are added in the making, *compartencia* (sharedness and exchange), solidarity, collectiveness, reciprocity, and the like. All these notions appear to be constituted, almost inherited part of indigenous life; natural to ethical and moral values of indigenous people (Martínez Luna 2010; Diaz 2007; Maldonado 2002; Barabas 2003; 2006; 2008), values which, according to these authors, are in a constant threat by the state, protestant religious groups, capitalism, and the like. Let us first see when and how it came about.

The idea of *comunalidad* was conceived around the 1970s by two indigenous anthropologists leading two indistinctively social movements: Floriberto Diaz from Tlahuitolpetec, and Jaime Martínez Luna, from Guelatao, both from the region of Sierra Norte. Historically, there have been two types of indigenous social movement organizations throughout Oaxaca. The first is a community-based company seeking to find solutions and alternatives to internal crises. The second seeks to group intercommunity authorities that usually are formed in negotiation processes with the state or governmental authorities (Maldonado 1998). Wortham (2013, 95) notes that the second type appears historically, more concretely in regions such as Sierra Norte, defending local autonomy and self-determination, “a region active in Oaxaca's earlier declarations of sovereignty from Mexico (1914-1920)” (Stephen 2002, 230, quoted in Wortham 2013, 96). This type of organization was paramount for Diaz and Martínez Luna in their intellectual formation and process of solidifying *comunalidad* ideology as a political force.

At the end of the 70's and beginning of the 80's, Jaime Martínez Luna was a member of the Defense of Natural Resources and Social Development of the Sierra Juárez (ODRENASIJ) in the Zapotec region of the Sierra Norte, and Floriberto Diaz was part of Committee for the Defense of Natural, Human and Cultural Resources of the Mixe Region (CODREMI). By establishing a direct dialogue with the state without any intermediary, both organizations were seeking to develop programs to ease the lack of regional social necessities: land possession, education, infrastructure (roads and highways), credits and loans, provisions, commercialization, etc. Likewise, both organizations linked Diaz and Martínez Luna to nurture ideas for self-determination and knowledge production on their own terms. Luna's work as much as Diaz's was important as they formed different fronts of social and political struggles – *luchas políticas*²⁶. One former delegate of the INI and CDI in Oaxaca told me that Luna's work and Diaz's had links with INI after they started their indigenous organization work, and they managed to secure aid for their organizations. Their work focused differently back then, Luna worked in trying to communicate ecological awareness and conservation and the like, while Diaz was focused on indigenous rights and law (Personal communication, March 2020). Luna tells us that he was more interested in communication and ecological preservation rather than territory, a subject which occupied a preponderant place in Diaz' thought and struggle (Recondo 2007, 58-60). Both coined the term from political action and defense of their territory, as they saw what is common to Sierra Norte communities, that is, civic-religious hierarchies, *Cargo* system, or as they called *comunalidad*.

The context in which these organizations were born and successfully defended their territory, gave place to reflections anchored in the core of what is the backbone of indigenous capacity to resist, that is their internal social organization and their decision-making process. Thus, when addressing *comunalidad*, one needs to consider the situation in the 1970s when a classe-based social movement in Oaxaca felt disenchanted with the homogenizing classist trend which did not consider cultural specificities and by the beginning of the eighties, indigenous movements took ethnicity as their form of organization (Wortham 2000). This turn from class to ethnic and cultural identity is well explained, although briefly, by Kearney (2002, 8)²⁷. In the debate by *proletariados* and *campesinistas*, surrounded by the agrarian question, the class was the main issue

²⁶ I will not give a whole account of the organisations that emerged from the 70's on. It does not serve our purpose here. I am only limited to give some context where Diaz and Luna were formed as intellectuals and social activists. For an extensive account of these organisations see Pye and Jolley 2011; Diaz Hernandez 2001.

²⁷ For debates on postmodernism and class in the Latin American context see, Harvey (1990) and Varese (1979).

in the agrarian question. Rural peasant Mexican population and their destiny was anchored in either becoming workers for agricultural firms or remaining peasants, thus their class interest was best served by political projects, while the main issue in the debates about indigenous peoples was center on their cultural identity. In this regard, it is worth noting that in the Barbados Declaration II of 1971, there was already the question of class and ethnic identity. Bonfil Batalla (1972), notes that the declaration tackled already a clear distinction between class and ethnic struggles. Moreover, he reflects that the latter should not be called for because they tend to depict utopias and romanticism, as populist and lead to class divisions, and in some way, the “ethnic” is a mere state only to be overcome by class. However, ethnicity and class, the declaration claims, are phenomena of the same order. Bonfil Batalla goes against it by stating that ethnic groups are rather different social categories than class because ethnic groups are not defined by the place of their members in modes of production. Moreover, the demand of indigenous people in the declaration has the recognition of ethnic politics, politics of recognition, which involved their different forms and levels of autonomy (Bonfil Batalla 1972, 98).

In contrast, Pye and Jolley argue, there is a continuity of class-based indigenous politics seeking control of resources, far from the claim that ethno-politics in Mexico has become a post-modern identity politics (Pye & Jolley 2011). For, Pye and Jolley, it seems that indigenous social mobilization covers two fronts at the same time. The first, with examples of social mobilization organizations, CODREMI (mentioned above), COCEI, and MULT²⁸ in the early 80s go on to argue that class-based motivation is concomitant with the actual control and defense of natural resources, while at the same time, increasing social mobilization in Oaxaca is due to lack of cultural recognition and respect, as members of the nation-state. They see it as a form of *indianismo*, by arguing that young educated indigenous leaders, often under the tutelage of the state; have worked against the possibility of cultural breakdown by maintaining their own culture and languages (Pye & Jolley 2011, 189). Demands for benefits of modernization, services, and state aid programs, desired by many indigenous people, could result in state penetration and assimilation into *mestizaje*, while at the same time, the authors argue, the penetration of the state institutions creates educated intellectuals who defend their communities against assimilation. However, they still point out that we must consider the specificity of Indian mobilization because there are many differences

²⁸ COCEI: The Coalition of Workers, Peasants, and Students of the Isthmus, funded at the beginning of the 1970's in Juchitan, southwest Oaxaca, was formed by Zapotec indigenous farmers, while the MULT: The Movement of Triqui Unification and Struggle, sprung in the 80's in the Triqui region of Oaxaca.

between regions, states, and local dynamics. In this light, they still argue necessary, comparative research among regions, where different methods of capital accumulation, class structures, and relations emerge, rather than research based only on identity politics in the postmodern sense. Let us not forget that, in the case of Oaxaca, discourses of indigeneity have been shaped by politics of recognition of cultural diversity since the early 90s at the federal level (Muñoz Anaya 2004).

In addition, for Korsbaek (2009) the new *communalism*, as he calls it, attaching it, particularly to Floriberto Diaz, precedes three factors: the discredit of the scientific method in the voice of postmodern anthropologists doubtful of an objective truth²⁹. The crisis of Mexican anthropology, since the early seventies and the anthropology with its link to state policies and political agendas in the period of neoliberalism makes anthropology, as Korsbaek sees it, in permanent crisis and lastly, the failure of *indigenismo* in Mexico. Korsbaek argues that these three factors open up spaces for social leaders and indigenous intellectuals' intervention *viz a viz* the state and academic circles, such as Diaz. In his eyes, the new communalism is a possibility to discuss to put in actual practice the promises of the Mexican constitution while at the same time, is a possibility to produce knowledge and channel it into projects by the indigenous themselves. By seeing in this way, communalism is a notable advance in paving social, political, and cultural conditions that enable a truly indigenous autonomy (Korsbaek 2009, 120).

In the same light as Korsbaek, Aquino Moreschi (2010, 9) links Oaxaca communalism of the 1970's social movements, with what she calls the "generation of the Indian emergency". This generation of indigenous political activists and intellectuals was shaped by their experiences of migrating to urban centers to pursue a university education or attend teacher training colleges. This led to experiencing racism in public institutions, resulting in developing links to indigenous migrant organizations in urban centers which strengthen their identities and the potentialities of communitarian organizational practices in the urban context. The 1968 Mexico student movement, enabled this generation to actively participate in political organizations and actions influenced by a strong Marxist approach which back then, paradoxically considered indigenous communities and peasantry as conservative and parochial with limited potential for social change. In this regard, Martínez Luna tells us that, after studying anthropology with a strong Marxist influence, around 1977, he decided to return to Guelatao where he thought about what to do to improve the labor

²⁹ This is, of course a larger discussion and I am not trying to resolve here. However, it is interesting how, in the text quoted above, Korsbaek see this as anti-scientific in the hands of cultural relativism neo-Kantian's Boasian anthropologists. Postmodern social scientist claims that it is in the subjective position in which "several truths" coexist.

conditions of workers. But what he found were peasants who work on the land, a land which belongs to the community, nor proletarians in factories. It is there, where he saw the shortcomings of class struggle to understand communitarian dynamics (Aquino Moreschi 2010, 10). Luna's views on class and the reality of their communities led him to reorganize their struggle into local problems, e.g., local *caciques* linked to the PRI (National Revolutionary Party) party and improvement of the precarious life of their communities as well as strengthen ethnic identity through cultural production.

Whether *comunalidad*, *indianismo*, or new communalism, a “new” knowledge production sanctioned by indigenous intellectuals themselves, served as an ideological base for political projects and self-identification, a way to describe indigenous life in their own terms. It is worth noting, for instance, the role of the native intellectual in establishing links in different fields – social, academic, state negotiation, or as cultural brokers such as in the case of Luna and Diaz. Another aspect of the arguments mentioned above is that class and ethnic identities seem to be at the core of the debate on the emergence of indigenous social mobilization and knowledge production. This is not uniquely of Oaxaca nor Mexico but at a larger spectrum in Latin America where intensive intellectual debate has shown the relationship between class and ethnicity, the relationship between ethnic identity and grassroots political movements, and the validity of ethnicity as a category in postmodern discourse (Stephen 1996; *c.f* Recondo 2007). Reconciliation between class and ethnicity or ethnic identity seems impossible and even antagonistic in the views of Luna for instance; however, the analysis of “ethnic culture as a form of symbolic capital which is linked to take political spaces through symbolic means, its deployment as a strategic weapon are tied to concrete situations of economic and political conflict, experience for by people in material and physical ways” (Stephen 1996, 34). Moreover, Kearney notes in his study of Mixtec migrants that Indigenous leaders

“(...) regard ethnicity as a major resource to be managed in promoting and organizing pan-Mixtec identity. They advance their long-range projects by converting this symbolic capital, acquired from the dialectic of human rights and ethnicity played out largely outside the indigenous communities, into social capital consumed internally in the form of political consciousness, organization, and agency within the greater indigenous community” (Kearney 2000, 189).

Jaime Martínez Luna is an anthropologist who graduated from Universidad Veracruzana and is also a well-known musician and local intellectual from Guelatao. His political leadership

and social activism played a crucial role in establishing the Defense of Natural Resources and Social Development of the Sierra Juárez (ODRENASIJ) in the early 1980s. This movement successfully prevented government concessions to companies that sought to exploit their communal woods for paper production. Since then, Luna has focused on communal life, territory, and media – a topic I will address in the final section of this part of the dissertation. Along with Floriberto Diaz and other scholars, he has contributed extensively to the literature on *comunalidad*.

Diaz's academic trajectory differed from Luna's. He graduated in anthropology from ENAH (National School of Anthropology and History) in Mexico City around 1970. After completing his studies, he returned to his town to do further fieldwork while simultaneously serving as president of the Defense of Natural Resources Committee. An episode involving a confrontation with two elderly community members, who questioned whether academics knew more than they did, led him to reconsider his academic priorities. According to the elderly, Diaz did not need to pass formal exams. Instead, his "exam (was) here, daily with the people of the community. The exam started when the community named you representative of the *Cargo*. That is the most important exam of all, not something you take elsewhere" (Diaz 2007, 351).

After that confrontation, Diaz realized that the elders were essentially telling him that, as a Mixe himself, he could not treat his fellow citizens and communities as mere objects of study. He understood that, if he was to do research, he needed to be an active participant in his own community rather than a detached researcher. He questioned whom he was truly writing for. Whether it was only for academics or for his fellow *paisanos*, many of whom were illiterate in Spanish. He recognized that his work would primarily be read by academics in urban centers, who were often only interested in what was said about indigenous people to rephrase it in their own words. Diaz ultimately understood that the *Cargo* assigned to him could serve as a gateway to open communication with the broader community (Diaz 2007).

His anthropological training and political activism at that time enabled him to perceive the "repression" of indigenous peoples in a new light and to seek ways to overcome it. As Nava (2018) describes, Diaz, balancing his role as an anthropologist and his responsibilities to his pueblo, functioned as an intercultural translator, though he admitted at times to being an imperfect one. I see both Diaz's and Luna's trajectories as responses to the realities of their home regions, their anthropological training, and the need to mediate between different worlds. Both recognize that political action is central to bridging their discipline, the changes they aim to effect, and the needs

of their community – politically, economically, and culturally. Political action has been crucial in their lives and has shaped their academic contributions to the concept of *comunalidad* as it is understood today. In this regard, Diaz identifies four key elements present in any indigenous community: a territorial space, which is always demarcated and defined by possession; a shared history, passed down orally from one generation to the next; a linguistic variant or dialect that differentiates each town from a common language; and an organizational structure that encompasses political, cultural, social, civic, economic, and religious aspects (Diaz 2007, 38). Diaz emphasizes that the essence of being indigenous is deeply tied to territory. For him, there is an ontology of self that is intertwined with the community's relationship to its land. Territory is integral to indigenous identity; it is what constitutes being Ayuuk³⁰, in relation to nature, rather than separate from it. Diaz also argues that *comunalidad* expresses universal principles and truths about indigenous societies. It should be understood not as opposed to Western society but as different. To fully grasp its elements, one must consider notions such as commonness, collectiveness, complementarity, and *integralidad* (comprehensiveness). This category, Diaz suggests, reflects a theory of Ayuuk's worldview and his ethnic identity (Nava 2018). In contrast, Martínez Luna changed strategically his position in different texts. At times, for him, *comunalidad* is only a descriptive notion (Martínez Luna 2010) sometimes a contradiction resulted from Spanish colonization, and a way of existing resisting as he poetically puts it:

“We are *comunalidad*, opposite to individuality, we are communal territory, not private property; we are *compartencia* (sharedness); we are polytheism, not monotheism. We are exchange, not business, diversity not equality, even though in the name of equality we have been oppressed; we are interdependent, not free. We have authorities, not monarchs” (Martínez Luna 2010, 17. Translation by me).

Furthermore, Luna endows moral and ethical values and advantages in relation to being born in a small community, that is to be linked closely to the soil (territory), is to make cooperation, reciprocity, and solidarity happen as a natural element of human relationships, and with this, “the *we*” flourished in the mind, because you depended on others, you only could live thanks to others (Martínez Luna 2010, 33).

³⁰ Mixe, exogen name in Nahuatl and endogen name Ayuuk, is one of the ethnolinguistic groups in Oaxaca.

For Jaime Martínez Luna, resolving "the Indian question" means addressing it on indigenous peoples' own terms and perspectives. He critiques the imposed colonial category of "Indian," referring of that drawn by Bonfil Batalla (1972)³¹, and instead favors the term *pueblos originarios* (original peoples). Martínez Luna emphasizes that beyond just labels, the issue stems from deeply rooted colonial values. To him, resolving the question involves dismantling these colonial mindsets and empowering *pueblos originarios* to define their own identity and history. Martínez Luna links colonial notions with the imposition of hierarchical values that emphasize submission through social ranks and power over others. These hierarchies, according to Martínez Luna, assign surplus value to titles such as kings, priests, or teachers. However, he differentiates power from authority, viewing authority in indigenous communities as service to the people without coercion. He attributes the verticality of these structures to religious-monocratic systems, which foster competition, individualism, and the pursuit of profit and private property (Martínez Luna 2010, 30). Martínez Luna's reflections, more personal than scholarly, trace the historical relationship between indigenous peoples and both colonial and independent Mexican states. He arrives at the current indigenous struggle for self-determination and autonomy, noting that these goals are more achievable today due to the resilience of the four communal pillars: the assembly, *Cargo*, the *fiesta*, and *tequio*. Despite ongoing tensions with the state, these traditions continue to uphold communal resistance.

The communal assembly stands out as a key pillar of *comunalidad*, as it is where community members gather to make decisions on internal matters. Those holding *Cargo* positions face the community to vote, discuss, and reach agreements. For Jaime Martínez Luna, the assembly is crucial to the social reproduction of *comunalidad*, providing equal opportunities for all, regardless of gender, literacy, or marital status. He emphasizes that "talking too much in the assembly is seen as arrogant; each word must be backed by collective work" (Martínez Luna 2010, 83). Martínez Luna argues that the assembly has historically endured due to the relatively small size of the communities. Participation is a civic duty, as all decisions are made collectively.

As Martínez Luna once told me:

³¹ Bonfil Batalla uses the terms *Indio* and *indigenous* interchangeably, as both originated from colonization. He views this category as an analytical tool to understand the position that a specific sector of the population, labeled as such, occupies within the larger social system to which it belongs. This category defines a group subjected to colonial domination. Consequently, it serves not only to describe a static condition but also to account for an ongoing process—the colonial process (Bonfil Batalla 1977, 122).

“(...) we can see that 417 municipalities in Oaxaca decided their issues in assembly meetings and that do not respond to any individual wish or interest but respond to the wishes of the people who have held *Cargo*. In that sense, it edifies the commonality, and communal authority. It does not settle power; it edifies authority” (Fieldnotes March 2019).

Comunalidad also relies on communal labor, known as *tequio*, which involves residents maintaining infrastructure and undertaking construction projects. This work is performed two or three times a month, depending on the community's needs, and is organized by formal authorities. According to Luna, *tequio* is an obligation – those who don't participate must either pay a fine or reschedule the work, and failure to comply results in punishment (Martínez Luna 2010, 89). Interestingly, Martínez Luna notes that de-communalized individuals view this practice as authoritarian and anti-democratic. He links this perspective to contrasting value systems: the nation-state model, which promotes individualism, enterprise, efficiency, and market orientation, versus traditional societies, which emphasize collective values, respect for diversity, and simplicity in economic and technological matters (Martínez Luna 2010, 89). Martínez Luna sees *tequio* as an extension of communal cultural practices, pointing out that both, Indigenous and *mestizo* people, worked this way during the 1985 Mexico City earthquake.

Tequio remains an interesting topic, and in the second part, I will offer an ethnographic perspective. It is a widespread practice, even in Oaxaca City and surrounding municipalities, where it is carried out in public schools and working-class neighborhoods like INFONATIV.³² Unlike in the Sierra communities, *tequio* in urban areas is optional but socially expected. Failing to participate is seen as irresponsible and disconnected, which can erode solidarity among neighbors and reduce social prestige. In some cases, *tequio* in Oaxaca's public schools is used to offset infrastructure costs, despite the expectation that schools should have budgets for such expenses. Parents often complain about this practice.

In Guelatao and the Sierras, *tequio* can sometimes be paid work, with those unable to participate hiring non-citizens or those in need of money. As one interlocutor explained, this allows people to build social capital and prestige, easing their path of becoming respected members of the community, and possibly making them eligible for *Cargo* positions.

³² The Institute of the National Housing Fund for Workers, a federal state organism dealing with credit housing and other kinds of financial loans for workers

Although Martínez Díaz and Luna have similar trajectories, as they both are anthropologists and both are social leaders and activists, their *comunalidad* principles are not as different as the four social pillars are ever-present. Their work derived from their understanding of what constitutes the particularities of the indigenous way of life. Whether a word that defines or describes Oaxaca's indigenous communities, the four structures remain constant in their thought. *Comunalidad*, in some way, is an indigenous understanding of themselves, however, this understanding is not radically different from what it has been called *Cargo* system or *Republica de Indios*, or indigenous normative system or *usos y costumbres* as it is what constitutes them in symbolic forms of community reproduction concretized in civic religious *Cargo* systems.

Indigenous social structures and institutions have long been recognized and included in Oaxaca's constitution, with *comunalidad* receiving notable acceptance, particularly in educational institutions. This recognition is not merely a response to social unrest or pressure from activists, nor is it a simple codification of an existing reality. No social reality, however "objective," directly determines institutional changes. Legal reforms are deliberate decision-thoughtful choices made by individuals at specific moments, selected from various options.

I agree with Recondo (2007, 99) in rejecting the "systemic"³³ view that sees institutional change as a necessary response (output) to the pressures or demands (input) of social actors. Broader forces are at play in constitutional reforms. In the cases of Oaxaca and other regions in Mexico, state intervention and government initiatives shape the direction of social mobilizations and activist demands. Indigenous organizations' claims cannot be fully understood by focusing solely on government policies. Constitutional reforms on indigenous rights are often seen as government responses to indigenous mobilizations across national and continental scales. However, Recondo (2007, 100-102) argues that this view doesn't hold up when examining reforms undertaken from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s. At that time, indigenous organizations lacked the political weight to impose decisions. While they exerted some influence and intermediaries played a role, they didn't have the political power to place their demands at the forefront of the public agenda.

³³ Recondo (2007) throughout his piece, makes a very compelling argument. The basis of social change does not come from the social unrest or pressure of social activist, it obeys to a rather larger context. He made a meticulous and grounded study about the recognition of *usos y costumbres*, or nowadays known as internal normative system. In his study, he preponderates nuance and historical junctures suggesting that a larger context is necessary in order to understand social movements, its reach and limits.

In line with indigenous resurgence, Turner advises us to examine the ideological principle of the "right of difference" not in isolation, but as a reflection of the effects of global capitalism on the internal social dynamics and class structures of nation-states (Turner 2007, 121). He argues that indigenous movements are part of a global phenomenon shaped by historical conditions, not merely isolated instances of social mobilization. Turner's key insight is to consider the shifts in capitalism after World War II and how nation-states have ideologically engaged with their citizens.

He highlights that early 20th-century assimilationist policies, aimed at creating homogeneous citizens and promoting class equality, gave way to a shift in the 1970s with the retreat of welfare-state policies and the rise of financial deregulation. This shift led to a move away from assimilation towards "synchronic pluralism," in which nation-states no longer push for internal homogeneity but instead focus on maintaining the external uniformity of their members as participants in the global economy (Turner 2007, 120). In this context, postmodern multiculturalism emerged, allowing for the coexistence of culturally differentiated groups while maintaining economic unity.

Turner (2007) argues that while the politics of recognition and identity are crucial in indigenous media, they should be viewed as starting points for analysis.³⁴ Overemphasis on these aspects, without considering the broader social relations and class dynamics, risks overlooking how inequality is produced and reproduced.

Hale (2004, 17) shares a perspective similar to Turner's, identifying two visible reasons for the rise of indigenous politics. The first is the creative and audacious agency of indigenous peoples, while the second involves structural or institutional dimensions. On one hand, the wave of democratization has opened new spaces for participation. On the other, neoliberal reforms have imposed corporatist constraints on indigenous autonomy. Although both points are valid, Hale argues that they overlook the fact that neoliberalism is a cultural project that both amplifies

³⁴ A rather long footnote here. Indeed, focusing solely on identity politics is "risky" and can become disconnected from the economic realm. Graeber echoes this concern at length:

"The risk, if they are not careful, is becoming yet another cog in a global "identity machine"—a planet-wide apparatus of institutions and assumptions that, over the last decade, has effectively led most of the world's population (excluding the elite) to believe that all debates about political or economic possibilities are over. Consequently, the only way to make a political claim is by asserting some group identity. This assertion is accompanied by preconceived notions of identity, such as the belief that group identities should not be used to compare different groups but are instead defined by how a group relates to its own history. There is an assumption that no essential difference exists between individuals and groups in this regard. The situation has reached a point where, in countries like Nepal, even Theravada Buddhists are compelled to engage in identity politics — a particularly bizarre scenario since their identity claims are based on a universalistic philosophy that asserts identity is an illusion" (2004, 101-102).

indigenous voices and imposes frustrating limits on their aspirations. He asserts that the core of this cultural project is not radical individualism but the creation of subjects who govern themselves according to the logic of globalized capitalism (Hale 2004, 18).

In this context, *comunalidad* and indigenous media cannot escape the realm of political economy. This point is crucial for understanding the political and economic conditions that paradoxically enable indigenous peoples to successfully mobilize in defense of their cultural and land rights. The period marked by the local centralization of capital has also witnessed the resurgence of indigenous movements. As Martínez Luna (2010) notes, *comunalidad* emerged as a response to colonialism and, by extension, as a reaction to neoliberalism.

It is not surprising that many reflections on *comunalidad* focus on the cultural features of indigenous peoples or on the binary distinction between colonizers and the colonized, rather than exploring the full range of historical developments or the dynamics of class relations within their communities. Nonetheless, these notions have enabled indigenous intellectuals to create categories that they consider their own (*propias*).

In my view, indigenous scholars refer to *comunalidad* as the foundation of a "good" communal way of life, rooted in *lo propio* – what is their own – often invoking a connection to ancient times and ancestors, or the *abuelos* (ancestors), dating back over 500 years. A strong sense of *pre-hispanicness* emerged in conversations during my fieldwork with interlocutors in Guelatao, particularly among those with higher education or those who hold significant positions within the town council, including members of Cine Too and individuals known for their contributions to culture and education. I will further develop this point.

The work of Diaz (2007) and Martínez Luna (2010) has echoed beyond their communities and indigenous fields into urban spheres of social activism and scholars alike. Most of the collaborators are non-indigenous academics and intellectuals who have elaborated on the principles of *comunalidad*. Guerrero Osorio, for example, sees it as

“(...) expression of the stubborn resistance to all forms of development which has had to accept diverse accommodations as well as the contemporary type of life that incorporates what arrives from afar without allowing it to destroy what is its own – *lo propio* (...) Community, is the verbal predicate of the We. It names its action and not its ontology” (Guerrero Osorio 2019, 130).

Another definition is proposed by Alejandra Aquino Moreschi, who sees it as rather communalism, for her it is a

“(…) stream of action, and Indian (indigenous) critical thinking. As *action*, communalism expresses everyday forms of organization and resistance and struggles – *luchas* – [emphasis added] of *Serrano pueblos*, as well as their institutions. In contrast, critical thinking is the result of the endeavor of activists and intellectuals to conceptualize and visualize their organizational experience and their community knowledge, as well as elaborating from their own perspective on what defines them as indigenous peoples” (Aquino Moreschi 2010, 8).

Maldonado (2002) defines *comunalidad* as the traditional way of life of the indigenous peoples of Oaxaca, shared among those within the Mesoamerican civilization matrix. He interestingly describes Mesoamerican communities as a house, with solid foundations built on a tight social fabric shaped by genealogical relations and intra-family reciprocities. Thus, a community comprises families living a communal life characterized by these intensive social connections and reciprocal relationships. In this context, *comunalidad* is understood as a way of life that develops within a specific social organizational framework, which is the communitarian social fabric. Outside of this close-knit community, the possibilities for the reproduction of *comunalidad* are limited.

These definitions sharply contrast with those of Guerrero Osorio (2019, 131), who argues that while *comunalidad* exhibits a “stubborn expression of resistance” that has adapted to external influences, including technology and non-indigenous elements, indigenous peoples have managed to incorporate these changes while maintaining structural continuity in their lifeways. Guerrero Osorio posits that *comunalidad* calls for action rather than ontology, in stark contrast to Maldonado's view of a static Mesoamerican civilization matrix.

According to Maldonado (2002), *comunalidad* can only exist within indigenous communities, where kinship relations – referring specifically to bloodline connections – are essential for maintaining the “intensive social fabric” that sustains the communal “house.” If a significant portion of the population were to leave, these reciprocities would likely diminish, leading to the collapse of the community. Although Maldonado does not address transnational migration, a substantial body of scholarship highlights its role in reproducing community ties.

Aquino Moreschi (2010) aligns more closely with Guerrero Osorio (2019) in emphasizing resistance and action as central to her definition of *comunalidad*, highlighting the importance of communal social organizational point they share with Diaz (2007) and Martínez Luna (2010). It is crucial to note the variations in these definitions and to consider how they can be empirically investigated to understand how projects emerge and are sustained under such conditions. Additionally, what are the constitutive components of projects that embrace *comunalidad*?

While it is not my intention to present an exhaustive overview of all scholarly definitions on this topic, it is worth mentioning that these definitions have remained largely consistent over time, with only minor variations and contradictions among the three scholars discussed. The concepts surrounding the *Cargo* system, communal fiesta, communal labor, *tequio*, and communal territory are constant in the discourse on *comunalidad*, demonstrating a shared understanding of these foundational structures.

Comunalidad and indigenous mobilization did not arise solely from indigenous intellectuals' reflections on identity or their internal struggles with anthropology. Broader political and social dynamics influenced them during the economic crises of the 1970s and 80s. Disillusioned anthropologists critiqued state policies (*indigenismo*), while indigenous organizations appropriated academic discourse to support their demands for cultural and territorial autonomy.

Globally, national liberation movements, particularly in Africa, prompted a reevaluation of state policies favoring marginalized sectors. With the rise of neoliberalism in Mexico, there was a shift from class-based politics to identity-focused agendas, altering state policies. Echeverría's "ethnopolitism" and López Portillo's "indigenismo of participation" sought to suppress agrarian movements but inadvertently empowered peasant and indigenous organizations (Recondo 2007, 50).

Organizations like COCEI, CODREMI, and ODRENASIJ emerged in this context, reclaiming identity and ethnicity to demand visibility. New intellectuals acted as political intermediaries, connecting ethnic claims and territorial control with state institutions, thereby shaping policy.

Mediators have been crucial in fostering cross-cultural understanding between Spaniards and natives, using legal means to negotiate and reinforce indirect rules. Indigenous intellectuals

like Martínez Luna and Díaz excel at navigating these spaces. They serve not only as intellectuals and social leaders but also as cultural brokers, shaping perceptions of indigenous identity within communal life. This role is historically rooted in the social dynamics of the Sierra Norte, influencing interactions that extend beyond the region.

Debates on *Comunalidad*

It's overly ambitious to claim there is a comprehensive debate on *comunalidad*; at best, there has been a brief regional discussions with some international resonance. This concept is deeply intertwined with longstanding discussions about community and indigeneity in Mexico. The legitimacy of *comunalidad* has faced few challenges, making it difficult to craft a nuanced literature review that showcases significant academic contrasts.

Nonetheless, there are valuable works that provide a critical lens for engaging with the notion of *comunalidad*. During my fieldwork, interlocutors, activists, and scholars often criticized the idea for portraying homogeneity and presenting a bounded community rooted in a pre-Hispanic continuity, adopting an essentialist stance. An article by Victor de la Cruz (2011), a Zapotec anthropologist researcher at CIESAS Oaxaca, offers a poignant critique. He argues that the concept of *comunalidad* cannot be attributed solely to Díaz or Martínez Luna, as its development involved many contributors, including non-indigenous individuals who already had established academic and media platforms.

For De la Cruz (2011), *comunalidad* has two primary meanings widely used by social scientists: a) as a cultural construct, and b) as a social structure or organization, often anchored in a form of indigenous governance such as the *Cargo* system or communal assemblies. He notes the significant, yet debatable, connection made by scholars between *comunalidad* and pre-Hispanic cultures, as emphasized by Maldonado (2002; 2010; 2011; et al.). The latter argues that “one of the basic characteristics of traditional Mesoamerican societies is their collectivist organization” (Maldonado 2011, 69). In his doctoral thesis, Maldonado admits his work idealizes *comunalidad*, treating it as a model rather than a precise description of any specific place (Maldonado 2010, 27). By relying on this idealized framework, he overlooks historical sources, reducing the vastly work of scholars like Chance and Taylor to footnotes.

De la Cruz (2011) also critiques Martínez Luna, who acknowledges that *comunalidad* is rooted in coloniality and dispossession, yet paradoxically insists it is not tied to colonial, pre-colonial, or post-colonial contexts but rather to the present (Martínez Luna 2010, 80; 2015, 111). This raises the question: if *comunalidad* is produced by coloniality, how is it not reproduced through its economic, class, contradictory and even religious dimensions?

Varese (1983, 48) identifies tensions between custom law and state law, particularly as the secular state guarantees religious freedom, often clashing with Catholic civic-religious hierarchies in indigenous communities. De la Cruz highlights that such contradictions lead to violent confrontations, especially among different religious factions. Maldonado (2010, 48; and see 2011) and Rendón (2004) argue that attacks on *comunalidad* often arise from individualism and fractures within the community, typically exacerbated by religious sects like Protestantism. In the Sierra Norte, expulsions of Protestants are increasing. Varese (1983), however, sees Protestantism as offering an ethical alternative to indigenous practices tied to debt, such as unpaid *Cargo* positions and *mayordomías*.

De la Cruz (2011) highlights the contradictions between state law and indigenous normative systems, which can lead to state intervention and human rights violations.³⁵ I suspect that inter-religious violence is less about faith and more about control over resources and labor. Protestant practitioners, while distancing themselves from *comunalidad*, do not necessarily represent individualism, as some scholars claim, nor do they pose a threat to communities. Lisbona Guillén (2005) provides ethnographic accounts from Las Margaritas, Chiapas, documenting religious violence against Catholics and Protestants who reject Zapatista principles. It is often the imposition of communalist homogeneity, which denies cultural or religious diversity that leads to conflict.

Contrasting Lisbona Guillén, Mendoza Zuany (2008) describes Protestant integration into the *Cargo* system in Ixtlan and Guelatao, where dialogue facilitates agreement between religious groups and preserves community cohesion. Similarly, in my fieldwork, I observed individuals of various religious affiliations actively participating in *Cargo* positions and civic activities. Religion did not serve as a coercive barrier to participation. Although Protestant inhabitants of Guelatao may occasionally refuse unpaid labor, Varese's (1983) observation remains relevant: debt,

³⁵ There have been several cases of people accused of being *caciques*, for practicing other religion, or denied taking *cargo* positions because of their religion, even lynching or exiles. In this light De la Cruz point to the case of Santiago Atitlan in the Mixe region, where protestant religious members were forbidden to harvest coffee to then incarcerated (De la Cruz 2011, 50).

regardless of religious affiliation, is deeply embedded in the system, essential for sustaining certain *Cargo* roles. In this sense, debt is crucial for community reproduction, as Martínez Luna (2010) suggests, since paid positions could lead to corruption and the co-opting of communities by liberal democratic systems.

These contrary positions lead us to think once more that central to this debate has been the conceptualization of what a community is, especially in Mexican scholarship since, the vast majority of papers, theses, and academic work in general, deal with indigenous and peasantry populations in Mexico in one way or another. Here, it makes sense to point out what I mentioned in previous pages, about the still powerful studies on communities by structural functionalism, as Zárate points out:

“Communalism, as well as nationalism was at the time, hides and denies the complex dynamics in indigenous communities and simplifies them into an ideal model which, to a large extent, is the result of visions from specific theoretical frameworks built by the same anthropologists and other social scientists” (Zárate 2005, 63).

Lisbona Guillén (2005) critiques the trend in scholarly work on indigenous peoples, accusing Lenkersdorf (1996) of portraying Tojolabal culture as pristine and isolated, only threatened by external forces. Lisbona Guillén’s empirical and historical research directly contradicts this view, arguing that Lenkersdorf overlooks the historical context of these communities, artificially isolating them from the broader world. This mirrors the longstanding debate between Robert Redfield (1930) and Oscar Lewis (1951), with the latter viewing Tepoztlán as a dynamic and open community.

It's no surprise that both, Díaz (2007) and Martínez Luna (2010; et al.), trained as anthropologists in the 1960s, shifted their focus to political action, where ethno-political discourse often mirrors structural functionalism. They generally view the state, capitalism, and colonialism as external forces, while cultural resistance is seen in the enduring social mechanisms of the *Cargo* system and assembly consensus. Rendón (2003; 2004) further argues that indigenous belief systems explain everything within indigenous communities, leaving little room for external influences or historical complexity. *Comunalidad* is thus framed as a self-reproducing structure in opposition to external "enemies." These external forces play a key rhetorical role in reinforcing communal moral and ethical values, portraying communities as outside the reach of capitalism and

colonialism. The state is seen as negotiable as long as the terms are manageable, a point that De la Cruz (2011) critiques, highlighting the limitations of this perspective on *comunalidad*.

In addition, Bartra (2002) shows to what extent the constitutive elements of the hierarchy systems of municipal offices are of colonial origin and not pre-Columbian, as some indigenous or *Indianista* intellectuals claim. For Bartra (2002, 7) for decades, the political actions of the National Indigenous Institute (INI) have been an example of the strange combination of an official policy of exalting “deep Mexico” with a governmental practice of burying even deeper the indigenous people’s history progressively in the mud of modern society. Indigenous people are the reference of the past but are often rejected as an active presence. For indigenous people, it is the will to survive *in* and through *form*. This, Bartra notes, is the transposition of reasons of state into Mesoamerican past, a

“(…) delicate and complex process. We are facing a delicate and complex process that manages to establish in collective consciousness a structural relationship between two unrelated cultural dimensions. This structural link operates on two planes simultaneously: as mimesis on one, and as catharsis on the other” (Bartra 2002, 7).

Although Bartra doesn't fully explain his ideas, he mentions that mimesis involves identifying similarities between ancient cultures – such as the Mesoamerican collectivist matrix (Maldonado 2013, 22) discusses – and colonial or modern history, like the continuity of *Cargo* civic-religious hierarchies. Catharsis, in contrast, is a vague psychological release that links an imagined cultural continuity with the current socio-political reality of indigenous populations. Bartra suggests this connection strengthens ethnic nationalism by aligning politics with culture (2002, 8). Bartra seems to blend INI state policies with intellectuals who channel their cultural and resistance narratives within state institutions. As argued earlier, indigenous intellectuals have shaped both domination and resistance. "The state has created the conditions for indigenous life, (...) if the nation-state requires assimilation, then debates will emerge from within the apparatus of assimilation. The form of indigeneity in a particular place cannot be divorced from these histories of national classification and management" (Tsing 2007, 37).

For instance, Mendoza Zuany (2014, 53) finds in her ethnographic study in the Sierra Norte (Ixtilan and Guelatao municipalities) that, empirically, she did not find essentialisation of culture or construction of boundaries as structural ethnic differences as a strategy. She sees, however

essentialisation in state institutions' discourses of static and permanent culture as well as in some indigenous organizations and leaders demanding autonomy and cultural rights. In contrast, Mendoza Zuany sees *comunalidad* as a new word for naming indigenosity without ethnic claims and being indigenous is becoming a matter of self-identification rooted in the daily practices of the core elements of *comunalidad* (Mendoza Zuany 2014, 66).

De la Cruz's (2011) article discussed above, sparked strong reactions. Nava (2013) described it as imprecise and full of misunderstandings about *comunalidad*. Esteva (2015, 178) went further, criticizing De la Cruz's (2011) stance as reflecting prejudice and ignorance. He labeled the article "pretentious and foolish," arguing that it demonstrated how out of touch academia can be with the realities it claims to study. Esteva, a well-known leftist intellectual and co-founder of UNITIERRA Oaxaca, had worked as a mediator between the state and figures like Floriberto Díaz in the 1970s and 80s. Both Nava and Esteva, however, do not engage deeply with De la Cruz's critique, opting instead to dismiss it and continue developing their own ideas. Moreover, a 2013 special issue of *Cuadernos del Sur*, published by CIESAS, responded to De la Cruz (2011) by focusing on *comunalidad* from various expert perspectives, including anthropology, audio-visual projects, photography, and education. Rather than fostering debate, the issue largely reaffirmed existing positions. I will limit myself to highlighting some relevant points from this discussion.

Aquino Moreschi (2013, 8) argues that by producing their own concepts, like *comunalidad*, indigenous peoples have revealed the limits of hegemonic categories used to understand them. She views *comunalidad* as a form of "southern epistemology" (de Sousa 2014, agreeing with Díaz (2007) that, *comunalidad* is the element that defines the *immanence* of the community or, in other words, the principle that explains an indigenous society. This southern epistemology provides analytical and conceptual tools to comprehend indigenous oppression and challenge dominant discourses on indigenous cultures, development, citizenship, and the state, offering insights into creating non-colonial relations and alternatives to neoliberal capitalism. However, Aquino Moreschi's (2013) analysis remains theoretical, focusing on the concept's epistemological and emancipatory potential without attempting to empirically assess how the model operates. She acknowledges that doing so risks falling into generalizations and criticisms based on stereotypes and personal biases (Aquino Moreschi 2013, 8).

Maldonado (2010, 60-65) explains that *comunalidad* has evolved into an ideology that generates identity, rooted in indigenous communities. As both ideology and identity, it reflects a communal self with historical roots, indigenous knowledge, and cultural specificity, aiming to guide the lives of *pueblos* as *pueblos*. This ideology forms the core of cultural projects and serves as a source of resistance against extreme impoverishment, land dispossession, environmental destruction, and shifts in modes of production. Maldonado (2010) emphasizes that *comunalidad* strengthens collective socioeconomic self-management, mobilizing community members around responsible governance, economic practices, environmental care, health, social reproduction, and conflict resolution.

He further warns (Maldonado 2013, 25-30) that if *comunalidad* were sporadic, isolated, or optional among indigenous groups, it could not be proposed as a unifying axis. In reality, *comunalidad* is omnipresent, respected, and viewed as "own" (*propio*), making it valid even outside of indigenous communities and adaptable to the trans-territorial lives of indigenous people in a globalized world.

The *Cuadernos del Sur* issue hardly responds to the De la Cruz (2011) critique; but the authors center their efforts in writing extensively, how *comunalidad* articulates in different fields of action e.g., education, photography, or media. This last relationship is brought up by Luna Maran (2013) reflecting in the notion of *compartencia*, which has no literary meaning in the Spanish language because it simply does not exist, however, its meaning is *shareness* or act of sharing since is composed by the word *compartir*. She goes on to explain two parallel projects that originated in 2012 inspired by *comunalidad* principles: The Audio-visual Cooperative, and *Aqui Cine, Cines Comunitarios*. The former, promotes training, promotion, development, and production inspired by *comunalidad*, while the latter aims to exhibit cinema across indigenous communities. *Aqui Cine* became in 2013 a platform for supporting the creation and consolidation of exhibition spaces in communities. The platform gained the support of institutions for the distribution and exhibition of films such as Ambulante A.C., Oaxaca Cine A.C., and the support of the National Fund for Culture and the Arts (FONCA)

Questions of Representation

The local debate around *comunalidad* raises issues of self-representation and how indigenous communities understand and express their realities on their terms. While the politics of

identity and representation are not my main focus, I noticed throughout my fieldwork how prominent these themes are in media and indigenous activist discourses. Notably, *comunalidad* literature rarely offers opposing viewpoints or contrasting scholarships. During fieldwork, I could not ignore the emphasis on representation, as it lies at the heart of indigenous media and the Cine Too project. However, my interest was more in understanding how social relations, labor, and value function within the project, rather than focusing solely on media. As Geertz noted, "we study in villages, not villages themselves" (1973, 22). Media representation is certainly significant, as scholars have pointed out since the 1980s, but my focus lies elsewhere.

I do believe that, in that respect, we share the same concerns. Furthermore, as debates on *comunalidad* go, different epistemological fields collide, insofar as they respond to different ends. While De la Cruz (2011) understands *comunalidad* as very limited by pointing to its scholarly shortcomings, *comunalidad* proponents seek to posit their proposal as a political weapon to gain recognition, highlighting the indigenous culture as a form of direct action. The latter, I claim, is where my interest lies. Thus, the fine line of representation is there only to define how indigenous communities decide tactically what to use to legitimize their political action, while others, such as the case of De la Cruz above point out to depict and review the contradictions of the former. In such a view, it is difficult to understand *comunalidad* as an academic reflection since it carries great shortcomings. Hence, there is a consensus of deep misunderstanding and omissions about scholarship on *Cargo* systems in the historical and anthropological sense. For instance, the points mentioned above are hardly a critique of De la Cruz's (2011) critique.

Claims of self-representation are increasingly vital for Indigenous rights activists, particularly in the context of *comunalidad*. While these representations can serve as essentialist tools for showcasing Indigenous institutions and lifeways, they can also become traps. Activists sometimes exploit positive representations of indigeneity, a tactic that Conklin (2013) describes as both innovative and avoidable. At the core of *comunalidad*'s political ideology is the need to defend this representation.

Maldonado (2010) briefly addresses De la Cruz's academic affiliations in footnotes, but these comments do not illuminate substantive issues, merely reflecting personal disputes. Similarly, while Aquino Moreschi (2013) attempts a theoretical approach, she acknowledges a lack of empirical analysis, which can lead to easy criticisms and false assumptions. Historical work is often dismissed or relegated to footnotes, and proponents of *comunalidad* view anthropological

works as hegemonic, often misinterpreting the indigenous *Cargo* system and peasant ideology unless they align with certain ideological forces.

In essence, if everyone in a discussion agrees, it becomes an echo chamber where only selected voices are heard. Bartra (2002) cautions that critics are frequently dismissed due to their outsider status or lack of lived experience, leading to a hostile response: “the critique of customs – of morals – is a dangerous intellectual exercise” (Bartra 2002, 34).

During my time as a visiting doctoral student at CIESAS Oaxaca, many peers expressed concern about the political climate surrounding the notion of *comunalidad*. This climate reflects a division between those who prioritize *comunalidad* in their work and those who view its theoretical application as misleading. Some scholars engage only superficially with the concept. For instance, my advisor, Susana Vargas, remarked, “I see *comunalidad* as a source of inspiration” (personal communication, April 2019). Even my father, acquaintance of Martínez Luna, cautioned me against critique, saying, “Leave them alone!” He implied that critiquing *comunalidad* could lead to immediate backlash, as Bartra (2002) noted.

What then? Should we continue to focus solely on empirical description? Should we perpetuate an endless narrative of indigeneity rooted in pre-Hispanic history while obscuring issues like class exploitation, capitalist engagement, gender dynamics, or interethnic violence within and between communities? Should we support social movements without critically examining their contexts?

These questions extend beyond Mexican anthropology and reflect broader issues in social science. Colleagues from the so-called global north have frequently expressed anxiety about writing their observations and reflections from fieldwork. They often feel too politically engaged and sympathetic toward indigenous causes, even while recognizing the fundamental contradictions in these politics that are difficult to address. Many hesitate, needing to negotiate the content of their theses or articles with their interlocutors for approval. I’m unsure if mainstream scholars have explored these processes, but during times of hegemony contestation, even our research can fall prey to self-censorship, as our interlocutors may not endorse what we write about them.

My focus is not on political compromise but rather on ethical and moral principles. I am interested in how people create projects and cope with oppression or how values manifest in various cultural, economic, and social settings within capitalism. The distinction between discourse and

practice is crucial. It fascinates me that, despite historical and anthropological evidence, proponents of *comunalidad* often remain unresponsive to it. It seems unlikely that they are unaware, but perhaps they prefer to omit it.

During my fieldwork, many interlocutors in Guelatao found my reflections inaccurate or misinterpreted, evident in their gestures or direct statements that I lacked the authority to discuss regional history due to my outsider status. My academic credentials held little validity in their eyes. For instance, at the start of the Covid pandemic, Cohen (2020) published a brief article on the solidarity practices of Zapotec people during this crisis, particularly in Santa Ana del Valle, where he had done research for several years. When I shared Cohen's insights with Abril, a resident of Guelatao, she responded that Cohen

“misunderstands indigenous cultural practices, and all researchers more oftentimes than not. They publish whatever they think we are. In some way, they have always homogenized us by calling us indigenous as somewhat size fit all terms” (Fieldnotes February, 2019).

She concluded without adding as to why Cohen truly misunderstands or is unable to grasp the indigenous ways. In some informal conversations *Tavo* and I talked about some historical and anthropological studies about the Sierra Norte region to concur with referring to the work of John Chance and William Taylor as truly valuable. However, and without explanation, he went on to say that common people and sometimes scholars, do not and cannot understand their (indigenous) way of life, it is just hard, next to impossible to grasp he told me. Indigenous intellectual knowledge production, not only takes a form of self-representation, a form of production in their own terms which functioned as contestation to a broader field, a field which some indigenous and non-indigenous intellectuals would call academic hegemonic discourses.

Abril and Tavo's comments remind me of discussions I had with classmates in Xalapa, where I studied historical anthropology. They questioned why we should apply European theories when we could rely on emic concepts since they belonged to the indigenous communities we aimed to understand. With their “native” credentials, they felt there was no need to delve into capitalism or hegemony; they could simply describe their communities.

Indigenous knowledge production is part of a political climate that has opened spaces for papers, conferences, theses, and media, which in turn influence state politics and recognition, enabling community projects. Collaborators in Cine Too similarly emphasize cinematographic

self-representation and skill sharing (*compartencia*) as essential to their film production process. They focus on creating films that resonate with their community, highlighting the significance of self-representation and crafting moving images on their own terms. In Luna's words:

“The cinema, television, and advertising have distorted the image we have of ourselves. The historical debt is greater with the indigenous peoples who for hundreds of years have been conquered and colonized ideologically and culturally, denying us, or hindering our processes of representation” (Maran 2020).

This is a valid point where Luna sees media as a way of controlling the outcome, not only in terms of production, but the target audience, and the ways we want to reach it. However, there are some instances where, regardless of our intentions, a reproduction of the same models of mainstream media is inevitable or it takes different forms in different situations as representations vary in genres for different ends, either political, entertainment, social awareness, and the like.

I would like to conclude this section with two remarks. First, although my thesis focuses on media, it is inevitably intertwined with *comunalidad* and the *Cargo* system in the region I'm studying. This connection arises from two key factors. First, all projects emerging from indigenous communities, which often adhere to *Cargo* system schemes, must be approved by the local assembly and its citizens. Second, initiatives like Cine Too are guided by *comunalidad*, whether as prescriptions to follow or as forms of external representation in various socio-political contexts. Diaz and Martínez Luna represent the first generation in Sierra Norte to engage with media and indigenous self-representation. However, the indigenous population's interaction with media predates them, as demonstrated in Gruzinski's work (1991, 1994, 2003), which shows that indigenous people have influenced art media production since colonial times. Juan Jose Garcia and Martínez Luna pave the way for a generation concerned with media fields, leveraging their class position to create consensus and secure necessary community projects. Their networking has connected them with larger audiences and resources nationally and internationally. These media brokers have developed skills to navigate international cultural platforms and secure funding from state agencies and media organizations. They have also contested “hegemonic discourses” on indigeneity, building a strong international network for projects, aligning with what Yannakakis (2008) refers to, as the art of being in between. This is where *comunalidad* finds its strength.

On the other hand, I have recognized the shortcomings of *comunalidad*. I initially noted that studies on indigenous populations often carry elements of structural functionalism. While I am unsure if this is entirely accurate, the conceptualization of *comunalidad* tends to embody romanticism and idealization, sometimes presenting binary distinctions and rarely acknowledging nuances. Despite the existing literature, many scholars, particularly local ones, remain reluctant to incorporate *comunalidad* into their analyses. It becomes sterile when trying to understand the socio-cultural realities of these communities, including their relationships with state agencies and the global economy. As Zárate states, “we cannot idealize indigenous communities, strip them of their internal problems, and reposition them as an alternative to the rest of society” (2005: 67). Therefore, it is essential to provide “thick” ethnographic descriptions to grasp the contradictions and gaps within these communities and the developments of the communalist realm. This aligns with what Ortner (1995) has termed ethnographic refusal.

Overlooking nuances. Or the pathology of ethnographical refusal.

As I write these pages, hundreds of papers and articles on *comunalidad* have emerged from both indigenous authors and non-indigenous collaborators, encompassing scientific articles and theses at the bachelor's, master's, and PhD levels across various Latin American universities. While most describe *comunalidad* similarly, Nava laments that it is not recognized as part of the hardest academic center and struggles to enter hegemonic academic discourse in Mexico (Nava 2018, 45).

Nava (2018) draws parallels with the Peruvian context, where, following the publication of José María Arguedas's novel *Todas las Sangres*, social scientists convened to discuss the novel's unviable political project and the potential instability it could bring to the country. This situation underscores the importance of knowledge production, legitimation, and the geopolitics of knowledge in shaping how ideas are disseminated.

The question of whether *comunalidad* holds a place in hegemonic discourse should hinge on the maturity of the assessment of this theory or ideology. In comparison, the term *el buen vivir* from South America has seen a markedly different trajectory in terms of acceptance and dissemination. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that these notions often become subjects of romanticization and homogenization (Alltman 2019).

Indigenous political notions, as Alltman (2019) would have it, focusing on *el buen vivir*, at times serve the ground for discussing, say, alternatives to capitalism. In this process, the integration of *el buen vivir* in intellectuals, and mainly academic circles, implies, a new process of colonialization and the possibility of the invisibility of social movements, organizations, and people as political agents. The question is not whether *hau*, *potlatch* or *mana* or *el buen vivir* are “legitimated” by anthropological theory or the academic field, they are simply not academic, they are *emic* notions. But by discussing and bringing them to light, “native” notions would provide an intellectual forum for all sorts of planetary conversations, political and otherwise (Graeber 2004, 98). This, I consider one of the true values of anthropology. However, I lamented that until recently,

“anthropologists no longer produce many broad theoretical generalizations at all – instead, turning over the work to European philosophers who usually have no problem discussing desire, or the imagination, or the self, or sovereignty” (Graeber 2004, 97).

To understand *comunalidad* and its political implications, we must approach it *emically*, even if it entails a degree of disenchantment – stripping away romantic sentiments and notions. I remain skeptical that any theory can be accepted uncritically. *Comunalidad* has not resisted this scrutiny effectively, and when it has, it often resorts to self-indulgence and fervent defense. This is particularly evident when formalism is presented as an ethnographic model, presuming a social structure founded on perpetual consensus, historical continuity without change, and sharp ethnic differentiation based solely on cultural traits. Such perspectives often overlook critical analyses of capitalism and social categories like class, gender, and citizenship within indigenous communities. It is erroneous to assume that all societies in southwestern Mexico operate solely on a gift-giving economy, or “gifts” (*dones*), as the basis for social life. In reality, indigenous social structures have emerged from a colonial context and a specific form of capitalism, notably a baroque ethos (see Echeverría 1998; 2001).

For example, Kiado, a ciudadano from Yagavila and a prominent activist who has worked with community media technologies, shared that while the concept of *comunalidad* holds significance, it is shaped by the experiences of each indigenous activist or scholar involved. He first encountered the notion about fifteen years ago and recalls:

“.... It was very attractive to me because it explains to you, what you have not been able to explain (indigenous lifeways), especially when you just came out from the university where they teach you something else. But after a few years, I realized that it has its limits” (Fieldnotes April 2020).

For Kiado, *comunalidad* represents a bounded territory where people live and engage in certain structures, such as *Cargo* systems. However, he notes that this concept falters when applied to de-territorialized communities. He views *comunalidad* as a tactic, avoiding the trap set by Martínez Luna, who emphasizes its structural permanence.

Kiado has encountered many anthropology students and young activists, mostly from urban middle and upper-class backgrounds, who find *comunalidad* appealing. He points out that, while it's easy to cite and reproduce this concept, simply doing so fails to generate new knowledge. This is because the community is multifaceted, with various layers and types of social relations that must be considered.

To fully grasp *comunalidad*, one must examine the mechanisms – such as *Cargo* and *tequio* – that enable it to exist. Kiado uses his hometown of Yagavila as an example, stressing that understanding *comunalidad* requires looking at its connections with surrounding villages and the migrant communities in Oaxaca City, Mexico City, and the U.S. He argues that *comunalidad* has often created binary oppositions, where external influences are seen as threats rather than opportunities for enrichment. By framing *comunalidad* as an essentialist notion, it risks overlooking external factors, leading community members to perceive any critique as an attack.

This last point was reinforced when we discussed Victor de la Cruz's (2011) paper. “It is there when we could test out to which extent a notion, could be *potentially liberating* or not,” Kiado mentions, “as we used to say: *Indians they conquered us, Indians we will liberate us*, but in this climate, that simply does not work any longer. Since the *comunalidad* only is understood in terms of *indigenusness*, and the *indigenusness* is a *creation of the state, of the church*, [emphasis added] of the PRI” (Fieldnotes April 2020) he concluded.

Notwithstanding, taking seriously *comunalidad*, as Graeber suggests, we should, “look at those who are creating viable alternatives, try to figure out what might be the larger implications of what they are (already) doing” (Graeber 2004, 11-12). Considering political alternatives would open new ways and spaces where political action and social organization could be potentially liberating. However, what Kiado pointed out above, critique is necessary, to take seriously what people have to say about themselves and their world. Therefore, stressing its strengths and limitations is a necessary task. What I see in *comunalidad* – meaning what constitutes it – is its

function as historical *action* by way of strategy and tactic. *Comunalidad*'s success, locally and regionally in southwest Mexico and some Pan-American (non) indigenous circles, has enabled a myriad of projects, either in academic circles, political militancy, pedagogical projects, or in media (see Nava 2018, 45). However, its relationship with state agents, and the market is closer than we may think. As Kiado told me, at the end,

“(c)omunalidad is functional to state structure within this neoliberal context. Jaime has understood very well and has taken advantage of it. By assembly *comunalidad*, to indigeneity, defense of the territory, education, media, all this have opened up the path for the process of institutionalization of *comunalidad*... The problem is that, when this happened, it becomes and is becoming public policies, it becomes a term that the audience just repeats” (Fieldnotes, March 2020).

Furthermore, Kiado suggests that if we aim to understand *comunalidad*, we have to link it within a larger framework, that of multicultural neoliberalism, transnational migration or capitalism. Kiado's words are consistent with some of my observations and notes during fieldwork. His insight made me turn the page and lead me to some directions which, at that time, I did not consider. One of them was to grasp the networks that which mediators, and cultural brokers move and how at times, their position is in constant tension with their communities. In this vein, he suggests that it is imperative to *test out*, the *comunalidad* liberating capacity.

So far, only a few ethnographies have focused on *comunalidad* directly, and in many cases, it is not the central theme, particularly in the anthropology of media (Wortham Kummels 2017; 2013). In contrast, there are thousands of ethnographic studies addressing the *Cargo* system and the broader context of indigenous peoples in Mexico. To categorize these works on *Cargo* systems, assemblies, and indigenous communities as ethnographies of *comunalidad* is a bold and complex endeavor.

This raises the question of how *comunalidad* intellectuals view these studies. For instance, Jaime Martínez Luna (2010) has criticized academic works for their limited utility in understanding indigenous lifeways. In contrast, Maldonado (2002, 96) describes *comunalidad* as a form of *political ethnography*. Aquino Moreschi (2013, 7-8) acknowledges a lack of empirical analysis in his work, while others, including Diaz (2007), Martínez Luna (2013, 83-84), and Rendón (2003), highlight the presence of structures without substantive content, presenting a *formalist* perspective.

How to proceed with a more coherent *comunalidad* ethnography avoiding the temptation of attributing undue qualities? A notable example is Nava's (2018) study on the establishment of Radio Totopo in a working-class fishing neighborhood in Juchitán, Oaxaca. Founded on *comunalidad* principles, Radio Totopo serves as a lens through which Nava explores the concept of hegemony. She draws on Gramsci's notion of hegemony to position the radio project as non-hegemonic and references hegemony as a complex of experiences, relations, and activities encompassing culture and ideology. This framework acknowledges that where there is power, there is also resistance to power, introducing the concepts of counter-hegemony and alternative ideologies. At the same time its counterpart, counter hegemony, counterculture, and alternative ideology are ever present. Nava (2018) takes Radio Totopo as a counter-hegemonic stance against mainstream mass media, which she deems hegemonic. She illustrates how the radio acts as a platform for political and cultural resistance. However, she cautions against the ethnographic shortcomings in resistance studies, citing Ortner (1995).

Many such studies fail to depict the politics of marginalized groups, their cultural richness, or their subjectivity. Without an ethnographic perspective, Nava argues, the meanings attributed to social agents and their practices are lost, reducing the actions of colonial subjects to mere acts of resistance (Nava 2018, 112). In Nava's (2018) work, some inconsistencies are to be noted referring to Ortner's (1995) views on the shortcomings of non-ethnographic engagement. Her account lacks the nuances that Ortner advocates. I will elaborate on this point in the final section, but for now, I aim to further develop Ortner's argument.

Sherry Ortner (1995) warns that many studies on resistance in the social sciences suffer from a lack of ethnography. The ethnographic stance is both an intellectual and moral position and a physical process that immerses the researcher in the world they seek to understand. Ortner argues that the absence of an ethnographic perspective on internal struggles – what she calls "sanitizing politics" – along with a lack of analysis of internal conflicts, lends these studies an air of romanticism and exoticism. Resisters are not merely oppositional; they possess their political dynamics. By overlooking them, we obscure the contingencies and contradictions inherent in resistance movements. These contradictions exist not only in the actions of those resisting, but also within the power structures they oppose,

“(...) between chiefs and commoners or landlords and peasants but within all the local categories of friction and tension: men and women, parents and children, seniors, and juniors; inheritance

conflicts among brothers; struggles of succession and wars of conquest between chiefs; struggle for primacy between religious sects; and so on” (Ortner 1995, 176-177).

Ortner advises us that we should introduce, as a partial antidote against this trend, structural Marxist analysis since some of the work studying so-called egalitarian societies was able to tease out, how the apparent benevolent authority of elders or the apparent altruism and solidarity of kin are grounded in systematic patterns of exploitation. Worth noticing, in Ortner's observations, is the impossibility of understanding these societies “in relation with, but not limited to, their histories under colonization and penetrating capitalism without understanding the interactions of those external forces with internal community politics” (Ortner 1995, 179).

Ortner's analysis emphasizes the importance of nuance over sharp binary oppositions. To achieve this, she draws on Geertz's concept of "thick description" in ethnography. For Ortner, thickness involves "producing understanding through richness, texture, and detail, rather than parsimony, refinement, and (in the sense used by mathematicians) elegance" (Ortner 1995, 174). Descriptions should delve into the internal politics and tensions of subaltern communities, highlighting their cultural richness. The heterogeneity of perspectives, along with the asymmetries and hierarchies within social groupings, is crucial (Urla & Helepololei 2014). In this context, a thick description can illuminate how class inequalities operate and the various forms of value at play in emerging projects, which aligns with my research intentions.

An example comes to the point when Nava (2018, 153-154) while looking at Radio Totopo actors and networks, situates the coordinator of Radio Totopo, Carlos Beedxe, as *broker* and mediator. In doing so, our author qualifies Beedxe as a leader with “charisma”, but without the Weberian trace of dominating his fellows. Furthermore, in about the same pages above, Nava recurs to Wolf (1957) to tell us that the individuals, capable of acting in terms of state/nation and community expectations, tend to be selected for mobility – I suppose social and geographical mobility –. They become the economic and political intermediaries of state-community relations, a function that brings benefits of different sorts. However, Nava (2018) disagrees with Wolf, because for her, Beedxe is not moving between hegemonic spaces, rather he is linked with civil society, nationally and internationally, building bridges between organizations, collectives, and institutions, subscribed to the non-hegemony, rather than the Mexican state. I am far from giving an account of how Radio Totopo is linked to non-hegemonic organizations, or if Beedxe is always

moving outside the realm of power, hegemony, and the like. However, it is worth noticing the remarkable dismissal of Wolf's (2001) study on colonial *Cargo* system leaders. How Nava (2018) conceptualized brokers and mediators as sharply non-hegemonic is suspicious in some sanitizing way. Likewise, it is notable that the lack of nuance and ambiguity on *comunalidad* proponents, suggests that sanitizing politics is at play, since internal politics are seldom or not explored at all. One just wonders, if power relations or the penetration, at any level, of capitalist relations are absent in indigenous populations, or class and gender exploitation by local authorities or intellectuals are waved automatically by the institutions they have.

Theodossopoulos (2014, 418-417) elaborates on Ortner to tell us that the exoticization or resistance has two-fold, one which denigrates resistance, say, resisting subjects as primitive, violent, and uncivilized, and other which sanitizes and idealizes resistance, say patronizing as noble but savage, bigger than life, idealistic, but naïve, daring but temporary; and others which simultaneously do both, more than one permutation of the above. Many of these predispositions are often deeply entrenched in the imagination of resistance as stemming from a world exterior to power. As such, often binary oppositions results in an exaggeration of difference between elites and disenfranchised group and encourage a homogenous treatment of the categories. The author points out that subalterns may resist some things while accepting others or even dominate other subalterns. Consequently, such views detract from the analysis of ambivalent experiences by resisting subjects and grey areas of interest that divide or unite them.

Urla and Helepololei (2014), through their experiences as activists, argue that research can critically and methodologically engage with resistance. Both, Urla and Helepololei note that thick description, as emphasized by Ortner, is essential for addressing resistance. Their work is informed by debates on hegemony and Foucault's views on power, which present challenges. One such challenge arises when interlocutors resist thick descriptions, reflecting their own political stances. For instance, in the case of the *okupas* (squatters) in Barcelona, individuals were hesitant to speak because they feared their words would be manipulated or that the researcher would profit from their narratives. The diversity of their experiences further complicates the idea of a unified "*okupa*" voice (2014, 442). These analytical issues encourage a deeper understanding of resistance while highlighting the contingencies and challenges involved in pursuing thick descriptions, particularly concerning the political dimensions of how ethnographers write about their subjects and activism.

My case diverges significantly from how activist anthropologists typically position themselves within collaborative anthropology, often seeking mutually beneficial outcomes. In my research, the experience was more labor-intensive. While my interlocutors did not resist thick description in the initial phase, the main actors in the latter phase did, although I was still able to engage with others. If my role as a free laborer in their project qualifies as collaborative or activist anthropology, then I am on the right path; if not, we have still managed to reciprocate in some way.

I discussed this with Lalito, one of the Cine Too Lab students, and formed friendships with the key actors in the project. We agreed that sometimes people don't need anthropologists to organize events or teach seminars; they need individuals who can make coffee, pop popcorn, clean, and project films. We both performed similar tasks at different times and for different reasons – Lalito as part of his social service requirement to complete his degree in anthropology and I, as part of my fieldwork.

Thick description ambitioned by Ortner (1995), as I noticed during my fieldwork, is only achieved as much as interlocutors allow you to and, among other things, time. Interestingly, I came to think about the inherent level of politics that interlocutors might share and the researcher's investment in the interlocutor's political cause. These two undoubtedly play a role. As one can be sympathetic to political actions we encounter in the field, sometimes criticism can be censored by our interlocutors and could potentially close doors, rather than open them.

Comunalidad endeavors somewhat move pendulously between sanitizing and cultural thinning. There are, of course, some other works that explore *comunalidad* but only occupy a rather marginal role or as a lateral topic that do not. However, is noteworthy the way Nava (2018) engages deeply in it. Different from the works of Martínez Luna (2010; et al.), Maldonado (2002; et al.), or Aquino Moreschi (2010; 2013). Nava (2018) shows us important aspects of how *comunalidad* may work outside the indigenous context and in urban settings. I would argue that *comunalidad* should be central to any reflection of ethnopoltics in Oaxaca or projects aligned with it. I agree with Nava (2018, 323) at the end of her Radio Totopo exposition. She does not want to take *comunalidad* as a theory that explains indigenous people's totality, in Mexico or the whole Americas. This could turn spurious and wishful thinking out of proportion. Moreover, in the political dimension, where everything turns darker, *comunalidad* could fall into the other hands, for example in the hands of political parties. Nava's last point, I am afraid is too late, as it is suggested by Kiado above. Or it is, as Urla reminds us, by recurring to Foucault, a diagnosis of power.

Comunalidad and Cultural Projects. Tactical moves.

The historical constitution of what appears to be at one time, *Republica de Indios*, civic-religious hierarchy to then, *usos y costumbres* and normative internal system, their names are not arbitrary, each one of them, obeys to a different degree of historical, cultural, and legal understandings of what is an indigenous community internally and externally. Likewise, the middleman, or cultural brokers have historically shaped these understandings too. Those who mastered the art of being in between, as Yannakakis (2008) wisely put it, have worked in political scenarios historically shaping relations between indigenous communities and central powers or civil society at large. Either in colonial courts of law, as cultural missionaries, and rural teachers in post-revolution Mexico, or as state agents and academic fields, filmmakers, and so on, these cultural brokers have managed to create important projects of various kinds and build international networks and infrastructures. Cultural creation is considered crucially important for reproducing, their cultural and social life, where cultural resistance is at the core of their discourse. In this light, a notion that always popped up in my fieldwork is indigenousness or *indigeneity*, *indigenismo*, *indigenista*, *indigena*, and so on. The term alludes to many things and at the same time none; as Juan José García, founder of *Ojo de Agua* Comunicaciones and state delegate of INP since 2018, puts it:

“Indigena does not make sense to us. Is only a political category that makes no sense in everyday life; we do not go around presenting us as such. It is rather a political category we use for outsiders” (Fieldnotes, February 2019).

Likewise, when referring to the TMA project, and Video Indigena he told me that “...video indigena, is ambiguous and difficult since, it is only a category that, once you are in it, you cannot escape. It labels you” (Personal communication, March 2019). I remember he argued elsewhere (Brigido-Corachán 2004) that he wanted to be known as Juan José the producer, the director, and not as the *video indigena* producer, director.

We know through the works of historians that local rule in colonial Mexico was mediated by well-established indigenous intermediaries through tactics. *Comunalidad* proponents are carrying on a similar yet different path. They not only engage with state institutions, legal courts, or Crown officials as in Yannakakis's study (2008), nor only as state agents or social leaders as in

Rus (1995) and Recondo's (2007) historical account, but with international organizations, international and national activists, international development agencies and society at large. These new possibilities of association open up links, resources, and networks. In this context, *comunalidad* has managed to be instrumental as means to bring to life several interesting and important projects for communities, especially in the fields of education and media, in particular the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca area where historically different projects have emerged. As 2021, the current *Obradorista* Mexico administration has handed in high positions to indigenous people at the INPI before CDI before INI. Adelfo Regino, a *comunalidad* proponent and intellectual from the Mixe area is the national delegate, and Juan José García is Oaxaca's state delegate.

Indigenous people's position in key governmental institutions has helped to leverage on *comunalidad* positionality in the creation of projects. In Oaxaca, *comunalidad* strives to keep on providing guidelines and inspiring cultural and educational projects, either through state educational policies, communitarian projects, or projects in an urban context. For instance, the decentralized state institution CSEIIO ³⁶, created in 2003, introduced the Intercultural Communitarian High School (BIC), aiming to condense ideas of *comunalidad* into high school curricula to provide students critical thinking and awareness of what is to be indigenous and learn the ways of communitarian life, emphasizing the linguistic diversity and competence. Today there are around 45 BIC schools across the state of Oaxaca. Interestingly enough, the first school was set in Guelatao. Another example is the Ayuuk Intercultural Higher Institute (ISIA) located in the community of Jaltepec de Candayoc, in the Mixe region. This higher education institution aims to provide intercultural education that, situated in a communitarian context, promotes integral-sustainable development, and strengthens the self-determination of indigenous peoples. The ISIA have as collaborators the private and Jesuit university Iberoamericana as well as researchers from the Jesuit university system providing professionalization of the population to promote local development and opportunities aiming to decrease migration of youngsters.

In the Mixe region, more precisely in Tlahuitoltepec, in 2012 was inaugurated the Intercultural Communal University of Cempoaltépetl (UNICEM). With a strong emphasis on media (see Kummels 2017, 305), the UNICEM aims to link interculturality and *saberes propios*, *own knowledge*, and human development, reciprocity, and communal way of life based on the *Wejën Kajën* philosophy (Land-Life, Labour- *Tequio*, Human-Pueblo). While there are several

³⁶ Colegio Superior para la Educación Integral Intercultural de Oaxaca (Oaxaca Integral Intercultural Education High Institute).

educational projects and institutions, some of them are somehow related to state institutions while others are more independent.

A master's degree in communal education was already established a few years ago at the UABJO (University Benito Juárez of Oaxaca), the largest public university in the state of Oaxaca, and recently, the institution handed over the master's degree rights to the recently created UACO, Autonomous Communal University of Oaxaca.

I had little knowledge about the process of the UACO creation and its process of consolidation rather happened when I was doing my fieldwork back in 2019. I came to the cinema to work as a volunteer one day in March and I witnessed a meeting of professors who rented the space. They were discussing the National Communal Autonomous University (UACO). A few hours later, Africa, one of my interlocutors, invited me for dinner at Luna Maran's place. Jaime Martínez Luna was present, whom I saw forming the presidium earlier at the cinema. Over dinner, Jaime came along and after discussing the matter with his daughter, either they would wait for the government to approve the project or not. Luna said that there was no need to wait for the aid of the government or ask them for anything – Jaime told us that they achieved an agreement: that they should carry on the project without the government's aid. Henceforth, the Communal Autonomous National University was on the move.

I did not know until now that following the creation of the master's degree on communal education, there was already a process to make a bachelor's degree adhering the same *comunalidad* guidelines at the UBAJO. By then, there was already interest in the local congress to support the creation of UACO. Its creation was approved by the Oaxaca Congress in the middle of 2020 and entered the normativity of high educational state law with the government's aid. Jaime Martínez Luna was named dean of the new UACO. I am far from discussing the whole range of projects and the new creation of the UACO and its implications; but most importantly to note the legitimacy of *comunalidad* regionally and nationally, to create educational and cultural projects. But let us focus on what I am interested in, that is, media projects.

Perhaps, the most obvious and sort of self-explanatory example – by its name – of *comunalidad* ideology translated in media projects, is the legally constituted Fundación *Comunalidad* A.C. In effect, the work of Martínez Luna is not only limited to social organizations, intellectual production, and activism. He is a well-known musician with this group *Trova Serrana*,

a pioneer in local media, radio, television, etc., and one of the founders of Fundación *Comunalidad* A.C. The interest in media has been always in Jaime Martínez Luna's mind. In a small conversation with him, he told me that it is fundamentally necessary to see alternative ways of media community far from mainstream media, "...we are on the road of how to build media alternatively from mainstream media," he said; and he follows:

"We do not have the clarity or a clear pathway to that, but we have experience with Stereo Communal and a TV project. They have been experiences that did not structurally emanate from the community but from entities integrated into the community, meaning individual endeavors" (Fieldnotes March, 2019).

Moreover, commercial media that foment the opening of consumer markets with the introduction of foreign elements into the community has been both (his) starting and end point. *Comunalidad* (as a legally recognized organization) is a story of regional consolidation solidarity through communication media (Wortham 2013). Jaime Martínez Luna's works as an activist and his history as a musician embodied lyrics of *comunalidad* themes, opening up media curiosity and critical awareness through means of communicating what it means to be indigenous and to "inform people about the richness of their lands, their territory, and the wide range of alternatives that could be designed to protect them" (Martínez Luna quoted in Wortham 2013, 98). Combining political action and *comunalidad* understandings, they looked to establish a radio in Guelatao. After years of applying for a radio state permit, it was not possible, then only through a friend in the Salinas administration that the concession through the INI was granted and in 1990, Radio XEGLO, *la voz de la Sierra* started to operate, with a frequency of about 80 kilometers, enough to reach the three linguistic groups in the region, Chinantec, Zapotec and Mixe communities. A member of Fundación *Comunalidad* explains that from 1990 until 1994, they worked really well, each one of them had a program up to the point that slowly they were displacing commercial media.

The early established radio station programming was a way to promote *comunalidad* ideology throughout the communities it reached and even a sense of harmony among the communities. Wortham gives an interesting account of the tactics they used.

"The station implemented many outreach strategies (outlined in *comunalidad*'s original proposal) that the INI later institutionalized (or, according to Martínez Luna, "stole") for its radio program, such as the use of community advisory councils made up of community authorities, community correspondents whose job was to assure community representation within the radio station, and community-based Radio Production Centres (CPR) that produced multilingual, diversified programming from throughout the region. The station selected the content delivered from the field

with an interest in maintaining “harmony” among its constituent communities, careful to *censure* programs or news that might pit one community against another (for example, in agrarian disputes). An important indicator of the success of the station – and radio’s location as a community project – is that in many cases community radio correspondents were folded into the system of community *Cargos* (community obligations), making radio-producing a part of rotating those *Cargos*” (Wortham 2013, 100. Italics are mine).

The relatively independence and *comunalidad* platform of the new radio station in Guelatao took a turning point in 1994. The Zapatista uprising led the government to tighten its control over state media and INI was no exception. On and off, the station kept running and some of their members went on to cover the Zapatista movement. One of them, Aldo Gonzales, director of the radio at the time and akin to the *comunalidad* idea and Zapatista sympathizer was forced to resign. According to a former INI state delegate, Aldo, as the state delegate at the time told me, was not forced to resign, he was fired by leaving his post without notice.

While the INI tried to control the radio stations as much as possible, *comunalidad* petitioned to hand over the control of the radio to indigenous control, in response, the Oaxaca INI delegation office, hand it over to a non-indigenous agent as director. Jaime left the station, but Juan José García stayed put. This process was revived in the video making of *comunalidad Breaking the Silence* where the new radio station director defined the station in an interview as an entertainment medium (Wortham 2013, 101). The *Comunalidad A.C.* had another experience in media. They founded a TV. Station, the little channel sprung after the state-owned Canal 9 invited *cComunalidad* to fill a slot in their programming. They managed to work for about six months only, due to hard schedules of media production and limitations of the signal strength, at that time Canal 9 had a very limited coverage – a weekly program called *Revista de la sierra* (Magazine of the Sierras). With the experience gained, Martínez Luna and company had the idea of a local TV station after a satellite engineer from Jaltianguis, the neighbor village, set up a transmitter to receive a satellite signal thanks to a disuse antenna owned by TV Azteca – one of the major media conglomerate – which was in a legal dispute with Televisa at the time – the major media conglomerate. With the aid of Canal 9, *Comunalidad*, piled up a bunch of programs from commercial TV, movies and TV shows from other channels, and cartoons from a cartoon channel, including their videos to create the whole program. After the resolution between the two big conglomerates over the antenna, the *Comunalidad* TV Canal 12 “Nuestra Vision” *our vision*, ceased to transmit. They operated between 1994 and 1997.

This bump did not stop *Comunalidad*. The radio station *Estéreo Comunal 94.1* saw the light in 2001 after they got a hold of a new transmitter to send a broadcasting signal to more communities. The basic idea was to broadcast radio programs in the morning and TV shows in the afternoon. Martínez Luna's idea was to contest the homogenizing power of mainstream and commercial media by any means possible by creating programming based on *comunalidad* ideology by assembly consensus, while at the same time, creating links in the region enhancing revalorization of community values and intercommunity participation.

I heard many people in Guelatao enjoyed *Estéreo Comunal*, however, I got to know that the transmitter burned out and *Estéreo Comunal* ceased broadcasting. The internal process of radio and television was rather not easy. In some instances, Jaime Martínez Luna told me that they were objects to internal criticism and gossip about profiting from such projects. Since, those projects did not emanate from the community but from members integrated into the community (see above), there were internal disputes, bitter comments, and gossiping. Looking back at the process of media projects, Jaime Martínez Luna went on to tell me that,

“(i)t is simply not the same if an initiative comes from the assembly or a group of individuals interested in media or something else. It would take years for the consensus to make it and, it would be the community who decides to relocate resources for the project. In our case, it was not like that, because the assembly process itself does not allow the flowering of the energy and the rhythm of young people could bring into the community. In assemblies, young people are not heard because of a lack of experience. The amount of time that a project needs is too much. However, that does not mean that our project is not communal. Because it comes from the people here, regardless of if it is not regulated or authorized by the assembly, everybody knows about its existence.

At some point, the assembly could say, *but we do not know what they are doing there*. My response would be “You idiot you never go there to see what is going on”. Simple as that. Let us say that, in the assembly, a *ciudadano* can say, I do not know what they are doing, they may be doing business. But then you can say... do not be a jerk, go to see, inform yourself, and check it out. They have the faculty to inquire, and oftentimes cursing at us, but whoever wants to see what we are doing, they can come around and all” (Fieldnotes March 2019).

Such disagreements did not reverberate *Comunalidad A.C.* projects, nor did they lead to a major obstacle to its development. These disagreements and gossip explain the tensions and priorities of members of the community and the forms of value that community members endow to engage in some projects or misestimate others. Gossiping and disagreement play a certain part in the regulation of social relations, especially when suspicion of profiting or value-extraction from community members rises. It is not only in Guelatao that this happens, nor only happened with *Comunalidad* projects, as I will provide some examples in the following part.

Fundación *Comunalidad* A.C. was and is still to this day a sort of hub where people learn media ways to enhance their potential and develop skills in media production, either radio, TV, or audio-visuals. For instance, one of the members of the radio XEGLO was Juan José García, who was the percussionist of the *Trova Serrana*. Juan José was one of the founding members of *Ojo de Agua Comunicaciones*, perhaps, the most renowned media production organization, nationally and internationally in the field of indigenous media. Juan José is one of the most prominent filmmakers in the indigenous media field.

The story of Juan José as a filmmaker is concomitant with the late 80's INI's created project of Audio-Visual Media Transference to communities and media organizations, TMA (Transmisión de Medios Audiovisuales). The TMA idea, it is said, was brought by Arturo Warman who was interested in visual anthropology, along with members of INI's *Archivo Audiovisual Etnográfico*. Warman INI's directives emphasized decentralization through transferring functions and control over resources and programs to indigenous peoples (Wortham 2002, 137). In this way, Warman set the path for a most autonomous approach to endow indigenous communities the video-making on their own terms. The TMA was seeking

“the transfer of necessary devices for the realization of programs and register, as well as of (...) teaching of knowledge that surrounds this medium. The intention is to provide the tools that allow (indigenous organizations) to produce works that respond to their own needs and interests. It is a priority to direct this transfer in a way that leads to the autonomy of the participant organizations and communities regarding contents, themes, and uses of their works” (Piño Ana 1995, 57, quoted in Cardús i., Font, 2014, 11).³⁷

A brochure written in the offices of the INI's *Archivo Etnográfico Audiovisual*, in Mexico City, states that “the objective of the program was to transferring audio-visual media to indigenous peoples to represent their reality through their own eyes ... (a)s the first step toward the development of their visual language on video” (INI 1994, 2, quoted in Wortham 2013, 58). Another trend surrounding politics of identity and self-representation is provided by one of the key figures of the TMA creation and director of the CVI, Guillermo Monteforte:

³⁷ I am afraid that this quote appears on the author's article without referring to the original text. Although, it is not fundamentally important for my reflections, it is important to point out the level of agency for indigenous people that this policy tried to be achieved at the time. It is important that themes of agency, self-representation through media was at the core of these policies and political atmosphere at the time. However, the responsibility of not providing full reference relies on the author who I referred at the beginning of this footnote. I suspect that the author is referring to the following text: Piño, Ana. 1995. *En busca del México real. En Pueblos indígenas de América latina y el Caribe*. Edición de la Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Caracas. Since I did a cross reference comparison I could only speculate.

“Indigenous video implies a commitment to make faithful and worthy portraits of how they (indigenous) conceive themselves, that the image is the result of the way they want to present themselves, and that they are the ones who control how wisdom, spirituality, and knowledge these images entail can be made known through means of communication” (Monteforte 2002, 24).

The TMA program provided indigenous communities across Mexico with the infrastructure and technical training necessary to produce documentaries, supplying camcorders, microphones, and film sets. However, the TMA largely disappeared after 1994 due to political shifts and changes in state administration. In its place, Warman and Monteforte established the CVI (Centro de Video Indígena), which became a hub for collective activities, enhancing indigenous training and fostering networks with international institutions. Notable collaborations include exchanges with the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian and media fellowships co-financed by the MacArthur and Rockefeller Foundations for indigenous video makers from Oaxaca. Members of the center attend inter-American indigenous film and video festivals, serving as instructors on several occasions (Smith 2006).

The 1994 EZLN uprising catalyzed indigenous communities to pursue a more independent and autonomous approach to media production. As Recondo (2007) noted, this uprising also prompted the Oaxaca government to shift its policies regarding the legal recognition of *usos y costumbres* to mitigate social unrest.

In discussing long-term strategies, we can view these projects and mobilizations as tactics, with indigeneity serving as a cultural and political resource or form of capital. Cultural brokers and native intellectuals have illustrated how indigeneity is sometimes leveraged to achieve political goals and pursue projects. Media initiatives and community ventures, particularly eco-tourism projects, exemplify this trend. While I am particularly interested in how indigeneity is represented in these projects, it's crucial to examine its role in social mobilization and how it operates in various contexts

While referring to *longue durée* strategies, we could now frame to projects and mobilization as tactics and the way indigeneity is employed and used as a cultural and political resource or as a form of capital. Cultural brokers and native intellectuals have shown how at times indigeneity is used to mobilize political goals and the pursuit of projects. Media projects exemplify this trend as well as community ventures, in more concretely eco-tourism projects. In this regard I am more interested in seeing how indigeneity is displayed in projects; however, it is important to note how

it has formed an important part of social mobilization to then question how it operates in different contexts.

Kristin Norget (2010) provides an example of how indigeneity functioned as a tactical resource during the teachers' social unrest in Oaxaca in 2006. Initially focused on demands for salary increases, educational development, and union autonomy, the movement evolved into the heterogeneous social movement known as the APPO (Popular Peoples Oaxaca Assembly). This unrest brought together a diverse array of activists, including indigenous organizations, academics, journalists, housewives, and street kids.

Despite its varied base, Norget (2010) notes that indigeneity became a central identifying factor for both insiders and outsiders of the movement. It served as a "cohering principle and ethos" that significantly shaped the APPO's identity. However, this concept of a fixed indigenous identity is challenged by the ambiguous and nuanced realities of individual self-identification. For example, a dark-skinned Mixtec from a rural area might identify as mestizo when moving to an urban setting, while someone from Juchitán who speaks Zapotec might not consider themselves indigenous in relation to neighboring groups.

Norget (2010) argues that the indigenizing of the APPO was a tactical move to root the movement in Oaxacan identity. By drawing on experiences of oppression, exclusion, and communal norms like indigenous practices and assemblies, the APPO sought to unify its fragmented and geographically dispersed members. This strategy also aimed to garner attention and support from the transnational activist community. The result was a portrayal of the APPO as radical and authentically indigenous, which crystallized complex perceptions of indigeneity and reinforced enduring binaries of ethnicity.

In this context, indigeneity emerged as a language of protest, facilitating collaboration among grassroots movements, activists, intellectuals, and international supporters to achieve political objectives.

At some point in her study Norget (2010) appears to be thin in taking Yudice's views on indigeneity, as a "resource as groups invest in it, challenge it, and use it for a range of socioeconomic and political ends" (Yudice 2003). Norget states that Yudice's take is overly narrow, an overall utilitarian understanding of culture's *ontology*, since he emphasizes on performative of culture (Norget 2010, 122). Interestingly enough, Norget (2010, 123) uses *currency* as a metaphor

for indigeneity, as it offers political engagement for a wider public, and imbues resonances of morality and legitimation. The usage of *currency* as a metaphor implies a certain mediated *value* in the case of Norget, language, and imagination. She does not develop this little but interesting detail, and in any case, I shall develop it in the following part. Although I partially agreed with Norget (2010); it is only fruitful to think of indigeneity *with*, rather than solely identity within the realm of politics of recognition. My take on indigeneity is rather closer to Yudice (2003) than Norget (2010), insofar as the understanding of the performativity of culture and the utilitarian understanding of culture's ontology, as she calls it, especially in the era of globalization and neoliberalism must be analyzed in the terrain of *value*. Indigeneity and *comunalidad* tend to differ in meaning according to either my interlocutors and their position, or the literature on the topic, thus making them polysemy. As Elena Nava, once told me, "I came to understand *comunalidad* not as a theory but as a polysemy notion" (Personal communication April 2021). This polysemy, I understand it as dependable on the context and the intention of using it. Such notion usage form tactics as well as the social position of actors who nourish them and use them for a particular end.

If we attempt to understand indigeneity and *comunalidad* as a resource, we must separate them from the politics of identity to introduce a more class-oriented and economic anthropology analysis. As in the case of currency pointed out before, I consider it truly important to include forms of value as mediators of social relations that consolidate into projects. What is more, in some way, I would argue that indigeneity and *comunalidad* operate as mediators and construct value in media production emanating from communities. This point, however, will be developed in the second part of this dissertation

It is rather difficult to come to any conclusions just yet. It seems to add and off to go back historically to the colonial period and link it to a cinema theatre in a small town in the Sierras. Maybe I stretched my arguments far more than I could defend them and perhaps I am eating more than I can chew. My point was and is that resistance does not only obey to establish simplistic binary oppositions of oppressed and oppressor, and there are grey zones of negotiations and mediations. As I tried to look at the colonial period, indigenous social structures did not solely obey a continuity of older forms of social reproduction, it was a reconstruction taking new forms, Bolivar Echeverria (1998, 51) would call it *codigofagia*. In them, cultural brokers emerge and shape local politics, mediate local rule, and through legal means, shape relations with colonial powers. Likewise, the newly independent Mexico needed those brokers to intermediate in communities

bringing ideas of *Mexicanness* and policies of post-revolutionary progress/development. As state agents (rural teachers, for instance) oftentimes, hold power by relying upon notions of tradition and custom shaping local relationships with the state while keeping at bay, as much as they could, external exploitation.

It is not strange for instance, that the *Cargo* system survives in states where an important number of inhabitants are considered indigenous. Oaxaca is a clear example of that. The *Cargo* system is, for the most part, an important structure within these communities, and it prevails as such for a myriad of reasons. Either by noble and brave historical indigenous resistance processes, by the benevolence of state powers trying to control them, or both. In any case, I intend to look at these processes as intransigence intertwined and intimate related. These relations were not developed solely from mediations between indigenous communities and state institutions, rather economic and larger political forces unfolding in different periods allowed and enabled new relationships. Let us not forget that new forms of self-representation and state relations take place in state institutions such as the new INPI where well-known indigenous intellectuals and activists occupy important positions.

In some way, what I am trying to do is to highlight the historical relation between the state, indigenous resistance, and academic thought, insofar as this relation has outcomes, and those outcomes are what I am interested in. The challenge was to understand and shed light on such relations because it appears that indigenous and autonomy resistance discourses obscure those relations; relations which are closer than we think, and at times blurred and tense. If we aim to create a feasible world out of capital and state coercive relations, we rather recognize how these two operate somehow and find solutions to abandon them. There are, however, social political, and cultural projects based on social arrangements of some sort that direct efforts in thinking more democratically, more horizontally, aiming to fight for social justice, at least that is how Cine Too members have seen their process.

My curiosity about Cine Too prompted a retrospective reflection on the historical relations between the state and indigenous communities, leading me back to the media projects emerging from Guelatao and their ties to the *Cargo* system. Throughout the historical context of these relationships, I recognize there are areas I have not explored in depth, particularly the *indigenista* policies that are typically covered in the first year of anthropology programs in Mexico. This period is personally conflicted for me, as I spent my early years in indigenous communities and many of

my father's colleagues, including Jaime Martínez Luna, were active participants in these policies. While this is not a reason to avoid the topic, I believe it is not central to this study, though it is worth noting the crucial role played by indigenous intellectuals during this time.

I also feel compelled to mention the 1994 EZLN uprising and the 2006 APPO social unrest, as they were significant for the development of grassroots media. However, they warrant their own comprehensive studies, and this section cannot accommodate that level of exploration. It's essential to adopt a focused strategy rather than attempting to cover everything, as the Mexican context is vast and complex. Writing this, I realize how easy it is to become sidetracked and lose sight of my intentions, particularly given the limitations of my fieldwork in terms of time and resources. Thus, this section serves to fill in some gaps in my analysis.

The Sierra Norte and specifically Guelatao have been an area of steady engagement and media creation which presently culminates with the first cinema theatre managed by an indigenous community. While the story of Cine Too will be described in the following part, its trajectory precedes the aid of Fundación *Comunalidad*, at some point TMA and CVI, and *Ojo de Agua Comunicacion* indirectly but closely.

While TMA and later CVI operated within state institutions, *Ojo de Agua Comunicaciones* emerged as an independent entity. Both served as hubs where videoastas and their activist formation played crucial roles in fostering alternative and indigenous media. Similarly, the experience of Fundación *Comunalidad* A.C. was vital for the local development of youth, providing media instruction and training. Professionalization took root among the second generation, who grew up in Guelatao during the early stages of community media engagement. Many of my interlocutors pursued degrees in visual arts, communications, and political science.

A notable example is Luna Maran, who developed an interest in media early on, particularly after attending a photographic workshop led by Mariana Rosenberg at Fundación *Comunalidad* A.C. In 2001, Luna's photographs were showcased in the side hall of Cine Too, marking a significant moment in Mexican photography: the first time indigenous photographers represented Mexico at Photo Spain 2001. This work was later published in a catalog exhibited at the Centro de la Imagen in Mexico City.

Luna holds a degree in visual arts from the University of Guadalajara and is a co-founder of the Itinerant Audiovisual Camp (CAI). She is a film director, producer, cultural broker, and co-

creator of various projects under Cine Too. Recognized as the public face of Cine Too, her name frequently appears in reviews and discussions about indigenous media and community projects. Luna is well-known in the field of communitarian cinema and actively participates in talks and forums across Mexico and abroad.

I was particularly interested in her perspective on the Cine Too project and cinema in general, as her insights resonate widely across online platforms and community discussions. She embodies the role of a gatekeeper and authoritative voice on contemporary indigenous communitarian cinema. Luna believes that communitarian cinema differs significantly from the traditional, hierarchical, capitalist approaches to filmmaking. She views it as a critical tool for combating labor, economic, and gender violence within production and distribution contexts.

Interestingly, Cine Too's idea did not emerge from any of my interlocutors, it was actually Juan José's idea when he held *Cargo* as Guelatao municipal president in the period 2015-2016. And it did not come about solely as a cinema theatre alone. It is part of a media and cultural promotion agency in Guelatao called Agenda Guelatao. Luna and Juan José have expressed that the project was the *organic* consequence of decades of media engagement and attempts to make possible media community projects to bring back to town the new (but dispersed) generation of media and arts professionals, especially those youngsters informed and inspired by *comunalidad* and its projects. With this in mind, Cine Too was inaugurated in December 2016, a few weeks before my first encounter with Luna at a café in central Oaxaca City. The work of *mediation* that Juan José put on *bajar el recurso*, getting federal funds, and lobbying at the assembly to accomplish the making of Agenda and Cine Too was crucial.

When I visited the cinema for the first time back in February 2019, actually the beginning of my fieldwork in Guelatao, I asked Luna about who had the idea of such an impressive cinema: "It was all Juan José's work; did he not tell you?" She responded. While taking a walk into the cinema, the projection room, and the café shop, I was immensely impressed by the architectural design, then she went on to say that, "...actually, Juan José was responsible for all this architectural design." Then, she told me a lot of details about the cinema. Here I quote at length:

"We started screening films in communities in an itinerant way, that was seven years ago, and it all started to kick in 2012. In Guelatao, we screened in the main square and then in this space which already existed as an audio-visual room. They just did not use it for screening, and around 2014, we presented a project before the tourism committee that is in charge of this space. However, they didn't care. Then in 2016, Juan José was Guelatao's president, and we asked we present the project

again which was only asked for the keys to the space. However the audio and projection system were of a lower quality, it had problems with humidity and water drooping. So, what Juan, said was that, if we are going to do it let's do it right. And 3 months later he called me and said, come, Luna, I want you to check the *renders*. And I was not expecting to render it all or any architectural design, only just use the space which was already here. As Juan was the municipal president, he managed the resources, and he was the one who thought about the design of a cinema theatre. He achieved it and four months later, we were already opening" (Fieldnotes February 2019).

The story of Cine Too is fascinating. Juan José not only masterminded Cine Too but also led Agenda Guelatao, a long-term media engagement initiative among the citizens of Guelatao. This effort has contributed to the formation of a new generation of media and communication professionals, shaped by parallel histories within communities across Oaxaca and political mobilizations. The internal dynamics of Guelatao, along with the relationships these new media professionals have built with international agencies, renowned filmmakers, and universities, have also played a significant role. Their concepts of indigeneity, *comunalidad*, and values regarding project emergence are explored in the following section, demonstrating how Cine Too navigates different contexts and influences perceptions. As I argue at the beginning of this section, middlemen – cultural brokers – have historically shaped the meaning of indigeneity. They negotiate and contest state and colonial institutions, as well as academic and NGO entities.

Context is crucial. Echoing Recondo (2007), Hale (2004), and Turner (2008) above, Indigenous mobilization and knowledge production cannot be fully understood without considering the economic and political shifts at specific historical moments. Brokerage is driven not only by the desire for a fairer world and equal rights but also by broader economic, political, social, and cultural relations. In the next section, I will ethnographically examine these fields. The example of Cine Too is not merely cinematic resistance; it represents an effort at "alternative" market integration and gaining a foothold within the cinematographic field. Here, various forms of value converge, and Cine Too's role in the Guelatao community differs from its position externally, shaped by the group's interests and the perspectives of observers.

Part II: The Enchanted Cinema

Cine Too is the first communitarian movie theatre. Every week, the schools of the community have a free movie entrance, serving as a pedagogical complement and as a space for cultural recreation for the 200 indigenous children and young people who live in the community.

*Cine Too web page*³⁸

Going to the Sierra

Guelatao is a town well known in the Mexican imaginary; it is proudly singled out as the birthplace of Benito Juárez, the one and only indigenous Mexican president, executioner of Maximilian I von Habsburg, emperor of Mexico, and “father” of Mexican liberalism. The town is located in Sierra Norte, a mountainous region roughly fifty minutes ride by taxi *colectivo* from Oaxaca, the capital city.

Luna, a regional filmmaker and cultural broker, led the Cine Too project. I connected with her through Juan José García, a friend of my father and the state delegate of INPI (formerly CDI and INI). After visiting García at his office, he provided Luna's contact number. We met at a café beneath the Macedonio Alcalá Theatre, where I had worked as a waiter and barista.

Luna described Cine Too as an umbrella initiative encompassing several projects: Cine Too Lab offers workshops for aspiring filmmakers, providing skill-sharing opportunities and hosting renowned documentary filmmakers for training; JEQO (meaning “starting to understand each other” in Maya K'iche' language) serves as a self-managed space for communitarian feminist cinema; and Cine Too itself acts as a cultural venue for academic events, concerts, and community screenings. Visitors can choose from nearly 1,000 films, “donating” a small amount (less than one euro, or 15-20 pesos) for a bag of popcorn.

³⁸ Unfortunately, the quote presented is no longer available online. Cine Too Lab webpage has been changed. Therefore, any link that I could provide would be misleading. However, the quote itself is by its nature, consistent with the goals and proposition of the project.

As noted on the Cine Too website, the cinema prioritizes children and adolescents. It has established agreements with two local schools: BIC (Intercultural Communitarian High School) and CIS No. 3 (Integration Social Centre), commonly known as El Internado. At BIC, film screenings serve as a mandatory extracurricular activity, while at El Internado, they are a reward for good behavior.

Cine Too also hosts a holiday program called BECHI LOI, or “Cinematic Vacations,” during the Easter period. This week-long event features film screenings and discussions led by guest film experts, along with small workshops on film critique and related themes. Additionally, Cine Too participates in a broader network of film exhibitions, collaborating with major Mexican film festivals such as Ambulante and Ultracinema, and is a member of the Alternative Exhibition Community (CEDECINE).

Luna believes that Cine Too came almost organically, given the preceding history of media engagement in Guelatao. She considers it a *necessity* to have such infrastructure in the town. “This infrastructure enables, indigenous populations to have a cultural space to learn, watch, and produce cinema – by our own stories – distinct from the mainstream narrative. Cine Too is resistance, but above all, is a community project emanated from consensus from our communal assembly” (Fieldnotes March, 2019), she concluded.

Luna shared her early film experiences as a student at the University of Guadalajara's Faculty of Visual Arts. I recognized then that she was a key figure in Guelatao's community media engagement. Luna invited me to visit the town and the cinema, but I hesitated due to my situation in Europe. I was uncertain about pursuing doctoral studies, and the stress of making ends meet dampened my curiosity. Preparing for odd jobs to survive – something I still do – I kept her contact information and began to outline a potential project once back in Europe. During the outline process, I researched Cine Too while reflecting on the ideas Luna shared: assembly consensus, resistance, cinema, labor, reciprocity, and leisure time as a Western invention. These notions stirred my anthropological curiosity and love for cinema, prompting me to explore what was happening in the Sierra.

Over coffee with Luna, I first learned about *comunalidad* and how it influences the audiovisual production process. To me, *comunalidad* seemed akin to *usos y costumbres* (traditional

practices) (see the first part). After that conversation, it took two and a half years before I finally returned to Oaxaca to visit the cinema in February 2019.

The trip to Guelatao involved a winding road, taking about an hour from the capital, depending on the reckless driving of the taxi colectivo, which is typically quite daring. Cine Too becomes visible just before reaching the enormous metal archway that serves as the town's entrance, a structure resembling three intertwined forms. Most villages in Oaxaca feature a large welcoming gate, often made of concrete or metal.

Walking up the main street just a hundred meters from the road, there is an old wooden board with the words TOO written in blue ink leaning at the bottom of a tree, right there in the movie theatre entrance.

On the big glass door, there are small eye stickers everywhere, that is, the Cine Too logo. Once I entered, a woman was behind the counter. Her name is Carmen. I introduced myself and



Figure 3. Cine Too old Billboard. Photo: Rodrigo Ruiz. 2019

explained the situation. I was there to meet and have a chat with Luna. Two kids were there too, Carmen's kids. She turned out to be the main cinema manager and caretaker of the cafeteria. “I do film screenings, cleaning, and most of the time taking care of everything” Carmen said. She has been working there even before Cine Too opened. She began to work at Agenda Guelatao where she started as a cleaning employee and moved to managing the

whole cinema. Agenda Guelatao, I learned, is a Guelatao media agency managing cultural tourism in the town. I will address this important agency later.

While waiting for Luna, Carmen was grateful that such a project took place, “...job opportunities are scarce around here, and this was good for me”, she said. Most of our visitors who come to watch films, she told me, are from the nearby towns, especially from the bigger neighboring town of Ixtlan, some tourists from Oaxaca, and sometimes foreigners too.

Although they have mainly a program for children and youngsters, adults come to watch the cinema during the weekends. But mainly, kids are the audience. They ask for anime or Disney films. Youngsters ask for action and drama films. She recalls youngsters asking for the new Dragon Ball film. She responded to them rather angrily that that was not the purpose of the cinema: “We cannot just bring new films screening at the mainstream cinema; Dragon Ball is not even there yet. We provide education, not entertainment” (Fieldnotes March, 2019).

As mentioned at the end of the previous section, Cine Too emerged from nearly three decades of media engagement by some *ciudadanos* of Guelatao. Juan José recalls that, “the first engagement in cinema was monetary, we just needed cash. The town’s authority bought a projector and to get funds they used to go to itinerant cinemas throughout the region. Popular films like Capulina, Pedro Infante, El Santo, were projected. We came back with a little money from the contributions to help the city hall. It was only for entertainment to get funds” (Fieldnotes February 2019).

Juan José's commentary and Carmen's concern that Cine Too leans more toward education than entertainment highlight a contrast with alternative indigenous media in Oaxaca. In Guelatao, these two streams run parallel, serving both as entertainment and *comunicación de lucha*.

As Kummels (2017) notes in her study on media in Tamazulapan, Oaxaca, we must avoid equating media in indigenous communities solely with the Video Indígena movement, a category established by the INI. Kummels emphasizes that media production here serves not only as a political tool but also as a local industry, where photography, video, television, and the internet intersect with diverse outcomes.

Cine Too members engage with politicized media, and cultural projects in Guelatao prioritize political action and *comunalidad* principles. However, both Cine Too and Agenda Guelatao seek to create job opportunities and provide entertainment, positioning themselves as local enterprises that balance politicized media with social responsibility.

Cine Too members frame the emerging *cinema in Guelatao as natural and organic*. Too many years of media production and projects pushed for a larger and “fixed” infrastructure in the community seemed logical. However, the process has not been easy; internal community relations and its *Cargo* structure have challenged the project. *Cargo* systems set goals, aspirations, and rules for new projects and attribute certain values to them. Different postures about the project by



Figure 4. Cine Too entrance. Photo: Rodrigo Ruiz. 2019

the *ciudadanos*, inform the place of the *enchanted cinema* in the community and its position in the Guelatao *Cargo* system. Several projects precede Cine Too. The cultural project Agenda Guelatao and the communitarian ecotourism company named Yela Too. The former is not part of the *Cargo* system, while the latter is. This shows the rather ambiguous and tense position of the project

within the *Cargo* system framework and among the *ciudadanos* of Guelatao. Cine Too was created afterwards and runs as part of the Agenda Guelatao project while the infrastructure is part of the ecotourism Yela Too.

Finally, Luna arrived at the cinema, and we sat down with coffee to discuss media and films. We took a brief tour of the cinema, learning about its remarkable architecture: walls of large stones for sound absorption, 75 comfortable seats with folding tables, a professional projector, a high-quality wooden stage for concerts, a full cafeteria, and a small corner for books and souvenirs.

A town of the dimensions of Guelatao anywhere in the world would sign up for having such theatre, I thought. Once we finished, I proposed to her that, since I would be experiencing fieldwork and my PhD dissertation about the cinema, we could do some work together as a form of reciprocity. She rapidly and smiling said, “we do need help in March, because of the basketball tournament, Copa Benito Juarez, you know? Do you want to volunteer in the Cinema? You will work with Carmen, making coffee, screening films, all the work that she does, you know” (Fieldnotes February 2019). I will not deny that I had something else in mind, but since is what they needed, I did not oppose it, and I accepted gladly. From that point on, the cinema would serve as a space from looking out. Above all, I was truly interested in the Cine Too Lab workshops.

During my fieldwork at Cine Too in 2019 and 2020, several significant events unfolded, fostering interactions with the cinema and the tourism agency Agenda Guelatao.

The 2019 Copa Benito Juárez Basketball tournament was particularly noteworthy, as it was a prestigious regional competition with no monetary prize. The event attracted media attention, with radio and video makers from Tamazulapan, Tlahuitoltepec, and beyond. Alongside Agenda's online streaming for transnational communities in the U.S., various age categories represented their towns, culminating in a celebration of Benito Juárez's birthday on March 21. However, the atmosphere changed in 2020 due to the pandemic, which severely impacted the local economy, including revenue from the tournament and Cine Too.

In 2019, the Mexican government under López Obrador initiated indigenous consultations for the National Development Plan (PND) 2019-2024, holding 25 forums nationwide, the last of which was in Guelatao. State and federal agents engaged with local authorities in discussions about programs related to culture, *comunalidad*, communication, education, media, and infrastructure.

The Cine Too Lab workshop, which began at the end of the tournament in 2019, was of particular interest to me. Due to limited resources, I could attend only one session, as workshops were scheduled throughout the year when participants from various cities could attend together. Notably, no locals participated, raising questions about this absence. Cine Too members cited time constraints due to other commitments, such as basketball training and brass band rehearsals. Luna noted that attending the cinema is an urban phenomenon, emphasizing that leisure time – a Western invention – was not integrated into community life, as people primarily focused on work.

Working with Carmen at the cinema and attending the Cine Too Lab workshop provided insights into the perspectives of Guelatao's inhabitants regarding cinema and communal values. We collectively watched films and discussed themes such as othering, cultural values, primitivism, privilege, exoticism, and class. An important event in the Cine Too space was the JEQO feminist filmmaking workshop, which I could not attend; my request was silently denied, but a member kindly agreed to speak with me.

My stay in Guelatao was brief, divided into two periods – four months and two months, the latter interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. I supplemented my fieldwork with online meetings, talks, and archival research. Arriving in Guelatao in February 2020, I had to seek a way back home after the pandemic spread. My advisor, Elke Mader, advised me that the situation was complex and would take years to resolve. Shortly after, I arranged a meeting with Kiado, a media activist from the Sierra, but the next day, Guelatao imposed a strict lockdown.

A few Guelatao *ciudadanos* considered options for smuggling me into town but ultimately declined them ideas for ethical reasons. The second fieldwork period was particularly challenging, not only due to the pandemic but also because the Cine Too members displayed less enthusiasm compared to the first period, leading me to speculate on the change. However, this shift allowed me to connect with others, including those involved with the new “Universidad Autonoma Comunal de Oaxaca” in Guelatao.

What I sought in the Cinema? Relations.

My interest has shifted from media anthropology to the political and economic aspects of media anthropology. I aimed to understand how *comunalidad* is perceived and practiced by Cine Too members, rather than just examining media in Guelatao. Additionally, I closely considered how indigeneity influences the project, particularly regarding identity politics. This approach led me to investigate the positions of Cine Too members within media projects, both locally and beyond.

I believe this ethnography explores two main narratives: first, the emergence of Cine Too and its members' roles within the community; second, the mediation of value forms in community media projects in Guelatao and elsewhere.

In Oaxaca, everyone knows each other. Friends from my teenage years now work as social activists, musicians, or artisans, and many are connected to Cine Too. Their insights into the political and cultural landscape influenced me to move beyond identity politics and focus on class and value within Cine Too, viewing cultural brokerage and management as forms of mediation (see Yanakakis 2014; Dietze 2019). Thus, I offer a preliminary analysis of the key actors' positions in Guelatao and their roles within the media field, emphasizing the interplay between identity and class.

As much as Cine Too emergence, its members and their actions are constituted by considerations in-between worlds, in and outside Guelatao and their class position, and its different rather social structures, that is, that of the internal normative system, *comunalidad* or *usos y costumbres* and elsewhere.

Class, identity, and mediation of value

In the introduction of this anthropological work, I review literature on indigeneity, which often focuses on identity. But, what about class? In one of our conversations, Kiado raised this very point. He expressed concerns about the concept of "indigenous" and its relevance in a post-indigenous context, questioning its validity within the neoliberal framework and current politics of recognition. He dismissed class as a concern, believing he neither owned means of production nor considered himself exploited. Instead, he focused on what the future holds for indigenous projects, lives, and positions in society. He envisions a post-indigenous world and hesitates to emphasize his own Zapotec identity. So, what comes next?

We both left puzzled. However, his role as an NGO worker and funder – alongside his experiences as a conference presenter, scholarship holder, and university professor – granted him various statuses across different social fields, including international, local, regional, and state intelligentsia institutions, as well as within his own community. We agreed that class dynamics significantly influence access to knowledge about new technologies on a global scale.

Following that conversation, I became more aware of class relations as I engaged in workshops and community *tequios*. I observed the extensive social networks of my interlocutors and their positions both within and outside the community. Some of my interlocutors were also part of Kiado's social networks. As he noted, Oaxaca and beyond form a tightly-knit community within the realms of indigenous audiovisual technologies, activism, and academia – a niche with its own gatekeepers. "We all know each other at some point" (Fieldnotes April, 2020), he remarked.

Kiado's insights prompted me to hypothesize whether class relations (in a structural sense) and indigeneity (as a social identity) facilitate mediation between different forms of value across various socio-cultural and political contexts. As I outlined in the introduction, my fieldwork sparked an interest in these value systems. Community members frequently discussed their way of living – *comunalidad* or *usos y costumbres* – using terms of value. They often compared non-profit projects with cultural and ecotourism initiatives, with Cine Too members expressing pride in the significance and impact of their project. What do they mean by this?

Mediation is crucial in understanding who appropriates, enables, and supports projects. Historically, as we noted above, the mediation of values, symbols, and norms between the shadow and colonial systems by indigenous elites and intellectuals has persisted (see Yannakakis (2008) above). Cine Too embodies these values and symbols, revealing the internal contradictions of *comunalidad* while illustrating the mediation of value.

Not everyone has the authority to mediate. While Yannakakis (2008) suggests that local officials, indigenous intellectuals and bureaucrats held this power in the past, the contemporary landscape is more diverse. In the contemporary, as my fieldwork suggest, mediators include white and blue-collar workers, laborers, teachers, cultural brokers, managers, and individuals across different class positions.

Mediation of values is evident when the local population proposes and negotiates cultural projects in assembly meetings and with external individuals and state agents. In these assemblies, community members not only mediate project proposals but also define what they consider beneficial for themselves and their community. Although I did not attend any meetings and lack empirical evidence, my interlocutors frequently mention the consensus approval of Cine Too and other projects. This suggests that the acceptance or rejection of projects reflects community values, even if actual engagement with those projects varies.

For example, Luna often asserts that Cine Too is a community project because it was approved in assembly meetings. However, many community members do not engage with or utilize the project and perceive it differently from those who helped create it. While some residents expect economic returns from community projects, Cine Too members emphasize social value and representation instead. Comparisons of value between different projects are common among the population.

The key factor is the level of involvement of the local population, specifically how much they embrace a project as their own. Approval is just the beginning. Individuals can mediate values, even when they seem contradictory, such as the tension between use of value and value exchange. Let's explore this further.

I understand mediation as a social transaction encompassing the movement of images, discourse, people, and objects, as well as the extensions of human instrumental and semiotic capacities (Boyer 2012). Cultural brokers and intellectuals, in line with Yannakakis's (2008)

framework, play a crucial role in this mediation. Their class positions and social identities facilitate their effectiveness as mediators. The meaning and value that emerge from ongoing practices of mediation are often shaped by a blend of immersion and self-awareness inherent in cultural identification (Mazzarella 2004). However, not everyone can mediate. Many of my interlocutors do not have significant roles in decision-making or mobilizing others, nor do they occupy high-status positions within the community or belong to certain class in and out of their community. They are not recognised as to represent their community on institutional platforms or in broader public spheres. Or simply put it, they have no interest in it all as they do not see any gain from it all.

This raises important questions: Who mediates? Who is authorized to speak, propose projects, and represent community interests? Who is publicly recognized as a mediator of these representations?

Reflecting on my conversations with Kiado and my time in Guelatao, cultural project managers and brokers – essentially the main actors of Cine Too – seem to align with what Kearney (1996; 2002) describes as polybians. Kearney developed the concept of polybians by examining the roles of peasants on the U.S.-Mexico border, particularly those from indigenous communities in Oaxaca. While I do not intend to fully adopt Kearney's reconceptualization of transnational peasants, it is relevant to apply this framework to the Cine Too case.

In a previous section, I briefly explored the role of colonial cultural brokers in relation to *comunalidad* intellectuals. Though limited, this comparison highlighted historical continuities in mediation processes. However, in contemporary contexts, more historical factors contribute to a broader understanding of mediation.

Kearney (1996, 141) characterizes migrants who transition between peasant and proletarian lifestyles as amphibians (amphi, both, + bios, mode of life). While amphibians live in both land and water, Kearney's migrants move in and out of various social niches, leading to the category of polybians. This concept captures individuals who can "visit" or inhabit different social class fields. However, I hesitate to attribute the quality of social mobility to polybians; doing so would imply they interchangeably belong to both middle and lower classes. Instead, they have the capacity to meaningfully engage with these spaces and adapt their "habitus" based on context. This perspective is particularly useful for understanding *comunalidad* and the actors within Cine Too.

Communities are increasingly dependent on the market economy, technological services, and migrant remittances. They are what Kearney would call "post-peasant communities" (Kearney 1996), organizations that have developed multiple identities to combine different sources of income with complex forms of reproduction in an interconnected, globalized world (Robson & Wiest 2014). The agents of such multiple identities, Kearney would have it, have the ability to move within and across classes and identities to enhance their adaptability into different modes of existence as they opportunistically move in and out of different life spaces (Kearney 1996, 141). Although Kearney reflects on the nature and quality of transnational and borderline migrants – namely peasants – in a globalized world, I believe in this case, the polybians take the chameleon quality of adjusting its color to match their immediate environment. *Usos y costumbres* community life and obligations, filmmakers in other, conferences in other, etc.

I understand Cine Too members within this framework, as their social identities – cultural brokers, filmmakers, and indigenous *serranos* – enable them to navigate various environments where social class differentiation is evident, such as academic fields, filmmaking, and activism circles. Kearney starts his discussion of polybians by distinguishing between identity and class. He argues that while class is a crucial dimension of social identity, it often becomes misleading when discussed broadly. This confusion arises when class is subsumed under the identity realm rather than understood structurally. For Kearney (2002, 9-10), class should be viewed as a relationship of uneven value exchange between identities, which is essential for a nuanced understanding. This perspective shifts the focus away from merely cultural interpretations of class – such as class culture or identity—allowing for a more structural analysis. He simplifies this proposal as follows:

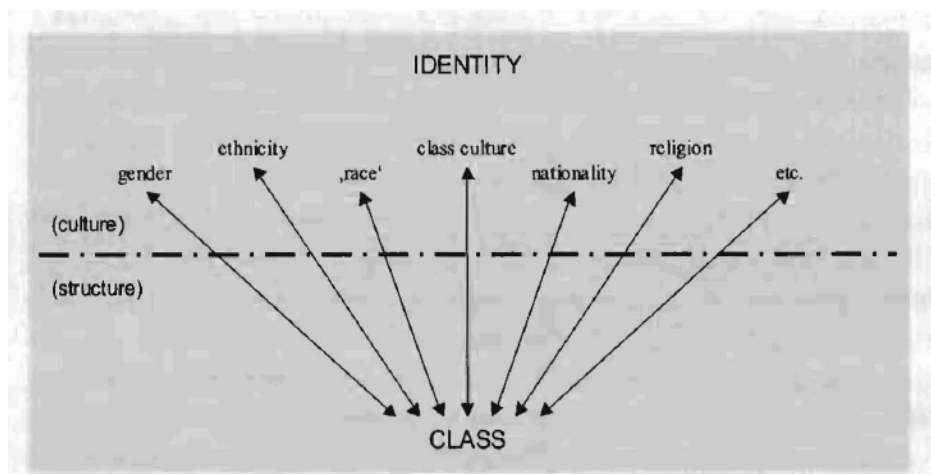


Figure 5. Screenshot taken from the text of Kearney 2002, 9

For Kearney, the

“resurgent expression of ethnicity (a form of identity) in the Oaxacan case is largely a cultural expression of and a proxy for a partial consciousness of subaltern class positions in fields of unevenly distributed value. (In the past) Class consciousness has proved a poor basis for mobilization in post-revolutionary Mexico and, indeed, in most of contemporary Latin America and elsewhere” (Kearney 2004, 308).

Class in this sense, refers to the structural level position allowing individuals the possibility to exchange, I would argue, to extract value between and among identities. Since the 80’s, identity have been a primary source for mobilizing people, overtaking class consciousness, according to Martinez Luna (Fieldnotes February 2019). In the case of Guelatao, indigenous media reflects this trend. Where the first generation was trying to disfranchise from class based struggles and the peasant movements for mobilise people and cultural production, they found in identity – indigeneity – a new framework to mobilize grassroots projects as it is followed by the current “media generation.” Paradoxically, their class and cultural capital, on the other hand, allow them to have access to resources of various kinds and *know how* to produce and maintain leadership in such projects while simultaneously situated them as those capable of mediating, extracting, and exchanging value. Class never left, and it is rather subsumed.

Kearney (2004) reminds us that in the '60s and '70s, peasant social movements were primarily class-based. However, in the neoliberal context, new forms of identity have emerged, highlighting the common experiences of subaltern subjects. Today, the focus is increasingly on ethnic and identity-based realms. As Sahlins notes,

“(m)any peoples now explicitly engaged in defending their culture against national and international domination have distanced themselves from both the national-bourgeois Right and the international-proletarian Left, rejecting the assimilationist pressures that would sacrifice their ethnicity for national unity or the struggle against capitalist imperialism” (Sahlins 1999, iv).

Ortner also noticed this shift in the United States. Reflecting on her study of her high school generation (Ortner 2003), she attempted to explore class in her interviews but found that identity was more prominent in her interlocutors' narratives. However, she observed that class often “hid”

within their discourse, and the challenge was uncovering it. Similar to my fieldwork, Ortner argues that “class, race, and ethnicity are so deeply intertwined in American culture that it makes little sense to separate them” (Ortner 2006, 73). This isn’t just an American phenomenon – it applies to Mexico, particularly in Oaxaca, where ethnicity is often the dominant narrative.

Ortner (2006) also reminds us that, because class is hidden, it tends to be the last factor considered when explaining privilege and power, or conversely, poverty and oppression. Bourdieu (1984) explains that class positions are defined in social space by economic and cultural capital. Ortner elaborates: “People are born into those spaces, and being born there has consequences – an idea that Americans likely find more uncomfortable than any other about social opportunity” (Ortner 2006, 78).

This resonates with my experience. While my interlocutors readily discussed their ethnic identity, especially their indigeneity, they were uneasy talking about class. The subsuming of class into ethnic and racial identity leads to explanations framed in terms of race and ethnicity – whether as a source of credit or blame – or personal initiative, like “pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps (or failing to do so), or a mix of the two” (Ortner 2006, 78).

Another key point Kearney makes is the problem of categorizing individuals as mere objects. He advocates for changing the status of the individual from an empirical object to an analytic category. He distinguishes between external differentiation, the way the state categorizes individuals through bureaucracy and official documents (see Kearney 1995, 140; 2004, 326), and internal differentiation, which is what animates the polybian. For Kearney (1995; 2004), the internally differentiated subject is a dynamic entity. The proliferation and diversification of social types that occupy new micro-social niches foster social differentiation, which, according to him, is more pronounced internally than externally.

In terms of social identities, I observed that many of my interlocutors’ self-references and hetero-references shifted across different social settings. It was not uncommon for them to perform different identities in various contexts – be it social media, legal institutions, academic environments, or within the community. They might identify as *serranos*, *Zapotec serranos*, *Oaxaqueños*, *Guelateños*, *cineastas*, or *comunicadores*, among others. Polybians could present themselves as a peasant in one moment, a plantation worker in another, or a petty merchant at another time (Kearney 1995, 141). In my context, however, polybians might appear as a *topil*, a

committee vocal, a community media producer, a film director, or a cultural broker, showcasing a considerable degree of performativity in their roles.

What is more interesting in Kearney's insights, rather than direct his analysis of identity and class solely on the economic field, he tries to

“ground "identity" primarily in political economy, rather than in the realm of culture, as is common in the works of literature on identity politics and in American cultural studies. Such cultural approaches, in rightly recognizing that class provides little basis for collective action, fail to distinguish the two senses of class identified by Marx: class-in-itself versus class-for-itself. In rightly observing that classes fail to mobilize for themselves, they jump to the fatal conclusion that class, as a dimension of identity is theoretically and politically unimportant” (Kearney 2004, 332).

Thus, the decision to insert class identification into my dissertation is rather simple; moving away from identity as politics since there are an uncountable number of resistance studies framed into politics of identity or identity recognition. Media anthropology on indigenous people in Mexico is not the exception, as they tend to forget about class and jump right into identity and representation as *the* sole category of analysis. I saw it more suitable to see Cine Too actors in the light of identity and class and mediators of value than anything else e.g. political economy.

Kearney's (2004) theoretical model is indeed valuable, but it's essential to consider the historical perspective that Yannakakis (2008) offers, which sheds light on the continuity of cultural brokers in indigenous community settings. Members of specific class positions enable class differentiation and value extraction within these communities. While there are significant differences between the two approaches, both rely on forms of value extraction to sustain their class positions, highlighting class differentiation both within and outside their community membership. This aspect is more pronounced in Kearney's (1995; 2004) work, but Yannakakis (2008, 221) also provides insights that connect colonial figures to contemporary agents and practices.

A notable distinction is that Kearney (1995; 2004) focuses on transnational peasants, while Yannakakis (2008) emphasizes intellectuals and cultural brokers as bicultural agents. I align more closely with Yannakakis's approach above, but it is crucial to engage with the organization and internal constraints of projects when examining media initiatives in indigenous contexts. This

perspective allows us to distance ourselves from studies on indigenous media that often overly emphasize resistance, identity politics, or representation, as I have noted previously.

One critical borrowing from Yannakakis (2008) is the idea that individuals transcend the biculturalism and bifurcated legitimacy seen in colonial agents, indigenous intellectuals, and local elite mediators. Furthermore, we should also consider their class positions, as Kearney (2004) does. This approach defines class in terms of value – specifically, the uneven production and consumption resulting from unequal exchanges among individuals – while viewing identity as a culturally constructed aspect of both the person and the group (Kearney 2004, 314). Identities are not separate from class relations; rather, they interplay to shape the production of value and its extraction through uneven exchanges among different classes and identities.

As we will see in the following section, fieldwork provides enough empirical material and insights to turn a blind eye to class reproduction as Kearney noted. For it, in his jujitsu theories of domination (see Kearney 2004, 316-320), he sees in the case of “Oaxacalifornia,” a delivery construction of *difference* conscious and intentional as a way of amassing social and symbolic capital to oppose oppression.

To understand the mediation of forms of value and value extraction, it is necessary to understand how individuals and their class position act upon such mediation and to grasp their social relations within the town’s *comunalidad* and outside of it. As equally important to understand how Cine Too emerged. I will argue that Cine Too emerged as an interest from a group of media professionals rather than the community itself. Media agents made this possible through their class position within and outside of their community, mediating forms of values, creating it exchanging them in different contexts and groups. The difference in value extraction, however, exists in and out of Guelatao being the closed corporate community of Wolf (1955; 1957; 1986) playing a role in allowing it to or not happen among community members.

Cine Too's emergence and its members

Many versions of the same story about the emergence of the cinema went around, this is of course depending on who is telling them. Cine Too members, seem to converge on the “necessity” of the project to promote and expand the Zapotec cultural production and create cultural and social

awareness through media, emphasizing cinema production for the self-representation of indigenous people. A more concrete continuity of a long tradition of media engagement and production by local *Guelateños*, they claimed. Among all versions, Victor, the self-taught sound engineer of the cinema and photographer, provides interesting accounts of the cinema creation and assembly approval. One thing is clear, Victor has it, and all of the members point out that Juan José brought up the main idea in his term as municipal president, Guelatao's higher authority representative. On one occasion, I went hiking to the *viewpoint* glass. A new ecotourism project, opened in 2019, aided by INPI funds and community *tequio*. At the top you can see Guelatao down below and the wide mountainous majestic landscape. Up there, I met Victor, who at that time divided his time between being a father, working at Agenda Guelatao and Cine Too, and, doing *Cargo* at the ecotourism office. We lean on a huge boulder, which is right on the verge. He knew then my affinities with rock climbing and while discussing the possibility of developing a crag and climbing sectors, he told me how Cine Too came about.

As it turns out, when Juan José held the president *Cargo* and Don Luciano was mayor, they were trying to figure out a way to facilitate young professional *ciudadanos* returning to the community, to give something back to the community. The lack of job opportunities in the region left youngsters with no options other than to migrate elsewhere, to the “big” city. Juan José and the municipality council had the idea of a cultural promotion project focusing on what they have known for decades: media; so the whole Guelatao would benefit from it. Luna and Victor, for instance, suspect that, unknowingly, the lack of young people to occupy *Cargo*³⁹ in the structure of Guelatao is becoming scarcer. Mutersbaugh (2002) develops a perspective on migration that actively engages the political and cultural organization of the home community. He contends that the *usos y costumbres* system, especially the *Cargo* and *tequio* requirements, is used strategically by members of origin communities to limit migration and mitigate the impact of migration. Town authorities’ ideas of new projects, it is suspected, are to gather and bring back people to town and is a good shot to secure *Cargo* holders. Victor and Luna, often state that doing *Cargo* is hard and a burden (*c.f.* Kearney 1986, 16-17), an actual *Cargo* (burden). Their attitudes about *Cargo* are not that different from what Kearney (1986) found in the 70’s in Ixtepeji. A work which has to be

³⁹ As we will see, the cooperatives and community enterprises are rapidly increasing in Guelatao and community members are opting for staying in, rather than migrate. This particular juncture, obey to the new political administration climate of the new political MORENA (Movimiento de Regeneracion Nacional) regime ruling party in Mexico (see VanWey, Tucker & McConnell 2005).

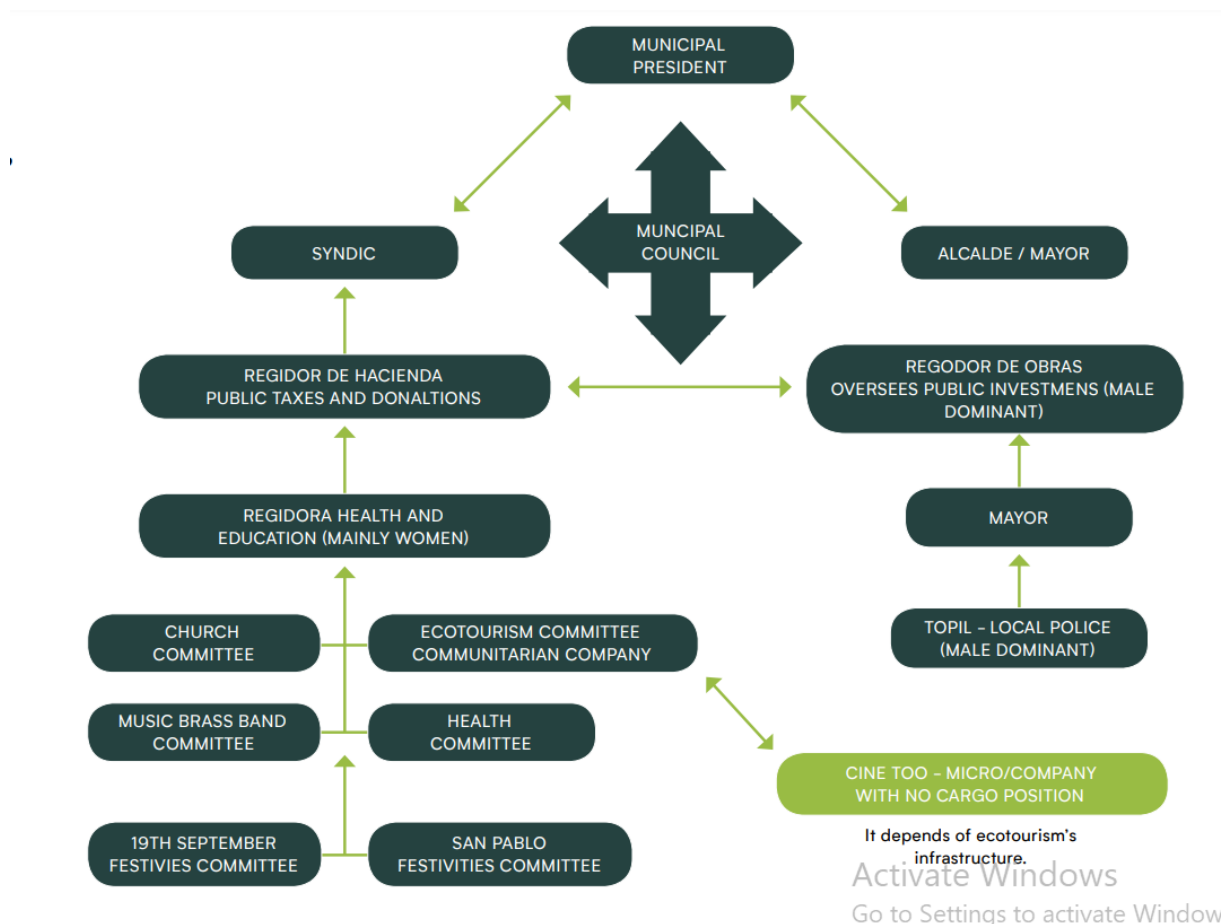
done and most possibly acquiring unnecessary debts. In addition, as Luna reminds us, only work exists while living in an indigenous community such as Guelatao, "...leisure time is a Western invention,..." (Fieldnotes December 2016) she cried. Kearney (1986) assures that in Ixtepeji the relation of work to leisure, which is a meaningful contrast in the United States and I think virtually almost everywhere in Mexico, is virtually non-existent in Ixtepeji. It must be translated instead as an opposition albeit complementary of each other between work and rest. For them, however, they have grown surrounded by media projects and close to Martínez Luna's intellectual and activist history and ideas on media and education. It is no surprise then, that they internalized those ideas to engage in a more concrete – infrastructure – project to develop ideas.

Agenda Guelatao thought on focusing primarily on offering cultural events for the local and regional population. Its repertoire consisted of music concerts, photography, and painting workshops for children and youngsters, promotion of local festivities, and thematic cultural hiking routes, and recently streaming the Benito Juarez basketball tournament for transnational migrants. In short, developing a media agency along the ecotourism office.

In addition the idea and complex Yela-Too, an ecotourism communitarian company was created. The idea behind is economic development through eco, and cultural tourism in Guelatao engaging in the promotion of several aspects of local cultural heritage; the Hostel Ahí Tá'a, created also around 2016, the art exhibition hall TAO; the glass viewpoint – *mirador de Cristal* – created between 2018 and 2019 and Cine Too created in 2016 serve as main infrastructure. All and every infrastructure dedicated to the cultural field, either production, promotion, circulation, or consumption of culture, falls under the responsibility of the ecotourism venture, Yela Too, a body of micro-enterprise. As it is custom, any and every project that intends to occupy a community space must be approved and linked to a community office that already exists or may be created for such purpose. In the case of the ecotourism office, it falls into the responsibility of the commissariat of communal property (Comisariado de Bienes Comunes). This is mainly because such projects occupy several community buildings and spaces. In general terms, each project's management position must be subjected to *rotation*, as it is part of the *usos y costumbres* or *comunalidad*. That means that the position of people changes every term, but sometimes it is not the case. Only positions in the Yela Too tourism office frame to *Cargo* system, whereas Agenda Guelatao and Cine Too are not. In almost every way, Agenda Guelatao and Yela Too, overlap and intertwine efforts for developing cultural offers and building grassroots community cultural seasonal projects.

Although the history of Cine Too's creation, does not change much about the ideas and intentions behind it, nobody seems to be comfortable in telling where the resources came from. For such infrastructure, one truly needs a handsome handful of resources and connections. This small detail yet paramount, came to my ears only at the end of my fieldwork. I will address it a couple of pages below.

The hierarchy in Cine Too is rather ambiguous at first hand. At times, it seemed to me confusing as to who does what, since Luna subscribed the project as non-hierarchical, even in terms of which project is a priority and how they interact with each other. However, members of the projects have it somewhat clear; Agenda Guelatao takes care of Cine Too and media in general, and Yela Too takes care of ecotourism. To simplify these, relatively new projects and micro-businesses and how they look into *usos y costumbres*, I draw a diagram below.



The structure of the “*comunalidad*” and or Usos y Costumbres as I did fieldwork between 2019 and 2020 and the position of the newly created Cine Too and Agenda Guelatao (table made by me).

The position of Cine Too is rather ambiguous within the *Cargo* system scheme. Although I will address this matter in the subsequent section, it seems to be important to provide this scheme sooner since the structure has changed over time and its adaptability or, rather creativity, to create new ways of social arrangements either with the state institution programs or new communitarian business opportunities emerged. Recently, just right after 2022, new business opportunities changed the structure. But again, Cine Too's position in this structure reflects what I consider members' position inside the community. The inhabitants do not go easy in terms of the long legacy of media engagement. Some of them express animosity towards the project and criticism of its members. Jaime Martínez Luna commented more than once that at times fear of profit, ignorance on the subject of media, and internal conflict play a role in the views on his work. Another issue is for instance, how allegedly profitable businesses are rather managed by *Cargo* positions. If we look at the draw above, we see the eco-tourism infrastructure is sanctioned by the authorities and is part of the *Cargo* hierarchies. Cine Too and Agenda on the other hand are not. This is because, at least I suspect, the nature of controlling internally possible value extraction. I will address this in further pages.

As I pointed out above, one of the main ideas – or at least partially – behind the Agenda Guelatao was to bring back those professionals who somehow have been part of the media processes and experiences in Guelatao and sympathizers of the principles of *comunalidad*. By bringing them in, they could also contribute to further development of media production and infrastructure. Most of them are well-educated and with different job backgrounds. Their level of capacity and involvement in Cine Too is rather inconsistent, in rather specific media projects or available time due that they might be employed somewhere else.

During my time in Guelatao, I met different members who responded to different capacities of involvement in the project. For instance, Denis, a political science graduate from UNAM⁴⁰, at that time was not involved in the project and occasionally would come to the cinema. Luna, audio-

⁴⁰ Here, it was distinctively his accounts on how he came to study Political Science. He claimed that he did not know what actually political science was and he just apply. Considering that such degree at UNAM only has less than 40% student's acceptance, his commentary left me puzzle, since he is one of the closest allies to Juan José and Jaime Martínez Luna.

visual graduate from Guadalajara University, is a permanent speak person and member, facilitator, and cultural broker. Victor and Alain come and go, as the project requires but they hold permanent membership. Sandra graduated from a private university in Oaxaca City and was not involved permanently, only when Agenda Guelatao's online streaming Basketball tournament. Alain, Victor, and Sandra graduated in communication sciences from a private university in Oaxaca City. Carmen without any formal education, was the only permanent constant in the project. All of them formed the core of Agenda Guelatao⁴¹. Each one of them has a stipulated role in the project, that is, an official rank. Each one of them rotates accordingly but in practice, all of them do the same and different things, except for Carmen. The level of involvement goes beyond the simple assigned rank. Two noticeable ranks, in practice, seem to stand out among them all. Luna is the visible media face, a spoke person, if you like, of the project, and, Carmen, the lowest rank of them all, cleaner, café manager, and projectionist.

The reason I decided not to mention the official ranks of each of the members is that it did not matter, it mattered to the local authorities only to fulfill internal bureaucratic paperwork. What interested me, however, was the actual *doings* of each member. I spent most of my fieldwork sharing the café space and the cinema with Carmen and, talking with Luna in different scenarios only. With the other members, I engaged mostly occasionally. What was important to me was the networks and fields where each of the members moved socially. Carmen was an important source of information on the matter because at times she would have an outside perspective. And because, as I noted, she was often left from those social circles and internal decision-making. Carmen started to work a few years back somewhat related to media production, mostly as an *intendente* (cleaning lady), while the rest of them have worked as volunteers at Jaime's *Estereo Comunal* project and Juan José's *Ojo de Agua Comunicaciones*. For them, links to the first generation of regional *comunicadores* were firsthand. At the time I did fieldwork in Guelatao, the Cine Too "core" did not hold constantly.

Some interlocutors told me that the consistency of the cinema members stopped drastically, only a year and a half after it opened. Back then, nobody expressed to know the actual reasons. I overheard many times only rumors and ambiguous reasons, which for the moment, I will leave unexplored. A Guelateño, close to the Cine Too members suspects that many of them left or

⁴¹ Here, is important to note that I refer to some of them in past tense. This is because now, March of 2022, I have not been able to estimate the level of impact of Covid-19 on the project. I will tackle this point at the last section of this part.

participated sporadically because there was no more budget designated for wages. Sandra, I heard, went to live in the city and occasionally helps at Agenda Guelatao. Denis found a job at the office of a federal congressional representative. Alain got a job at the regional INPI office. Victor and Luna work on their own projects and remain present but not constant at the cinema. Andrés, Luna's brother, found work as a professor at UABJO University and at the cinema as a program manager, a position which ceased while I was there.

There is an important point I want to make by describing partially my interlocutors' position and involvement with the cinema is that they occupy different niches at the same time. While their involvement is rather inconsistent and ambiguous, their networking allows them to be part of the state bureaucratic system. Likewise, a few conversations and insights from Guelatao inhabitants and local supporters of the project aid me in connecting some of the networks that allow Cine Too to emerge. This exemplifies that not everyone is on the cinema's boat. I rather show that, as some inhabitants may use a high *Cargo* position and alliance to realize what they consider "necessary" for their community. What follows are a couple of descriptive examples.

At the beginning of March 2019, I inquired Carmen about participating in *tequio*. I thought it could be a good chance to get to know people and impressions about the new cinema project. She introduced me to Tavo, who turned out to be close to Cine Too members – another professional in communication science and aligned with *comunalidad* ideas. He asked me if I wanted to give him a hand to paint the basketball court since the tournament was only a few days ahead, so we got to it.

After painting one night, we ended up drinking beer at the local bar, or as they call it, *casa communal* (communal house) serving as a sort of unofficial office of the 25th San Pablo, Guelatao saint patron committee. They raise funds to finance the festivity thereby selling beer and hard alcohol. While there, Tavo and I met Cecilio, a local living in Oaxaca City, and Cesar, a political scientist working in a bank in Ixtlan. Cecilio owns a company assessing the environmental impact of infrastructure projects. They were curious about me and how I came to Guelatao and after I explained to them our conversation turned from Basketball to Football to Politics to then *comunalidad*. All three are one of the younger generation which was close to Jaime Martínez Luna and supporters of *comunalidad* principles. I came to learn that all three shared the same history in media projects since an early age and university studies in similar fields corresponded to a somewhat close relation to *comunalidad* educational media projects.

Cesar however, seems disenchanted with the *comunalidad* idea, although at times helps in some small capacity. He expressed discontent about how assembly plays a role in the decision-making of projects of different natures but it is often conditioned by individual interest or interest of a certain groups of people. Everybody takes sides or plays on their side depending on *la lana* (money) interest. *Todos jalan agua para su molino*, something translated as each one fuels their cause. He then points out that it is very clear in the assembly to identify certain groups by where they sit together. You can see people who are indifferent to everybody, you can see the one who throws *shit* at everybody, and you can see the conservatives and the liberals. His opinions express the motives.

Carmen saw it from the practical side. She applied for the lowest position in the local media agency, what she referred to as a cleaning assistant in the project Agenda Guelatao. Carmen recalls that the “cinema still was not here; they had some ideas but still not clear. We had an office above the municipality, and that is how we started it. I cleaned the windows, brushed the floor, and did whatever cleaning was required” (Fieldnotes March 2019). Her pessimistic views on the degree of the people’s involvement with the project would contrast at times with that of Luna, who for instance seemed more optimistic. For instance, Carmen would tell me that at the beginning of the film screenings, before the Cine Too existed they used to exhibit movies where the TAO is located, and almost nobody would come:

“We invited the community to the cinema; we spoke out through the municipality speaker⁽⁴²⁾. For instance, Fridays were for kids, but nobody would come. When we were upstairs (outside TAO) almost nobody would come. When I talked to the boys of the BIC, they told me they came only because it was obligatory. Something like, if you go, I will give you an extra point for your final grades” (Fieldnotes, March 2019).

Another member, the *avecindado* Goyito, would come to learn from scratch to screen films get knowledge about the sound system, and help with it in Agenda. He and Carmen are the only two who have no degree studies, Goyito divides his time into working as a construction worker and at times, any sort of minor labor job.

⁴² Any sort of issue, invitation or call for *tequio* or assembly it is call out by a main speaker localised in the top of the municipality office.

A few weeks passed by and I was curious about how they funded the cinema. Such incredible infrastructure does not come cheap. At that point, all my interlocutors referred to the process and assembly's decision in simplistic and superficial terms, while enhancing *comunalidad* ideas but nobody would say where the resources came from. I noticed it was a delicate topic. Money is always a delicate topic, Carmen would tell me at some point, especially if it comes from government funds. Not more than once during my fieldwork, people tend to feel uncanny and suspicious when someone applies for government money. Jaime Martínez Luna expressed many times that his *paisanos* suspect that he was profiting at the community's expense. Either way, is a delicate matter talk openly about it. In any case, I found out in the Oaxaca city's media outlets that Juan José's political efforts and *cabildo* solidify the projects, and the PRI party deputy Álvaro Rafael Rubio gave the resources for the whole project. Then, the assembly discussed the project and approved it. As to how the discussion within assembly walls, I never gained any clear picture. I only could write assumptions about the process following what people said about it, but would be far from accurate. My participation as an observer at assembly meetings was a promise but never granted. Which made it even harder to come up with a hint of what may have been. Either because I was not notified or because I was not there. Assembly meetings are not, say periodically, they take place whenever the village needs them. My time spent in Guelatao was simply not enough to grant permission. In any case, Agenda Guelatao and Cine Too were discussed as a matter of communitarian micro-business. Only because they had federal and state funds and local infrastructure it became a public matter. If someone intends to use or modify infrastructure or apply for funds in the name of Guelatao, it becomes an assembly concern.

Cine Too saw the light in December 2016. Local and regional press covered its opening. As is customary in Mexico, the project has *madrinas* and *padrinos*, meaning and social moral sponsors. The internationally renowned singer Lila Downs, actresses Sofía Espinosa and Mónica del Carmen; and film director Ángeles Cruz, and *Padrino* Gael García Bernal. Among the guests were important documentarists and filmmakers, such as Everardo González, and state agents from the Ministry of Arts and Culture. Such renowned media personalities, allow us to see the networks and reach of Cine Too and its members, especially Luna.

At that point, my visits to Guelatao were only periodical. At the beginning of February 2019, I packed my bags, climbed the sierras, and arrived in Guelatao. Carmen recommended me to stay with *Doña* Jael, just across from the cinema. Juan José and, virtually everybody whom I

met previously told me that I should present myself to the authorities and explain what I was doing. “It’s just polite, you know, also in case something happens to you or if you do something, they would know who you are,” Juan José concluded (Fieldnotes February, 2019). This interesting *warning* came to partially unveil Cine Too members' position within the confines of the community. While they differentiated among inhabitants for their outspoken identity as *serranos*, *Zapotecs*, or indigenous and their networking outside the town, the local authorities and the rest of the inhabitants saw them as young and irresponsible at times. For instance, a couple of days after settling in, I went to the municipality, but no actual authority members were there, and someone from the administrative staff told me that, since I was going to work as a volunteer at the cinema, someone from the cinema should accompany me. Several days passed by and nobody would do it.

I decided to step in and introduce myself. The *regidora* received me. She said that it was good I came by my own feet to her office, but there was an agreement between Luna, the lads at the cinema, and the council. “Each individual who is doing something related to the cinema has to come with them to be introduced” (Fieldnotes May 2019), she pointed it out at least three times. The municipal president – Don Angel – came later on while the *regidora* explained. He told me that it was rather ideal if they came along, nevertheless, it was good I came myself. They express how important it is to outsiders who want to stay in Guelatao and introduce themselves to the authorities. They told me, it is as such because in case something happened, they would know who you are, so they would know what you are doing in the town. “It is better for us to know what you are doing and to know your intentions in coming here”, they concluded (Fieldnotes March 2019). This was not the only incident that left exposed Cine Too members, as we will see below, but it indicates certain animosity by the ways they do “things” as some community members told me.

I stayed at *Doña Jael* Lodge, where many people have stayed, tourists, students, locals, foreigners, basketball players, teachers, activists, politicians, and the like. Carmen advised me to stay at Jael’s would be a good place to look out for the cinema and a place where at some point everybody meets.

Enchanted and disenchanted cinema. Cine Too position in and out of Guelatao

A few days before my arrival, I found myself eating in a small fast food kiosk in front of the ecotourism office, when randomly met Alain . He quickly began discussing the Cine Too project, expressing his frustration and emphatically said that *“people here don’t get it, and they don’t get it no matter how much you explain it to them”* (Fieldnotes February 2019). He attributed this misunderstanding to an intergenerational divide regarding work; many locals sharply distinguish between intellectual or cultural work and physical labor. According to Alain, people view farming and construction as productive activities, while they see Cine Too project as unproductive. This perception, he suggested, explained the lack of participation and the negative sentiments surrounding the cinema. n

Surprisingly, in all the months I spent in Guelatao, the cinema rarely had visitors, not to mention locals. On a few occasions, students of local schools came and, rarely tourists. So, why was the cinema approved anyway? Moreover, why do the locals approve the project and after a few months, are dubious about it?

Carmen once mentioned a promising start for the cinema, with steady spectator numbers for a few months. However, as the initial excitement faded, attendance dwindled. I fear Carmen is right; the cinema's current attendance numbers are disappointing. Earlier, I briefly noted the ambiguous and tense relationship between the cinema and Guelatao’s inhabitants, illustrated by the diagram of the *Cargo* system. This diagram also highlights the project's marginal position. In contrast, outside Guelatao, the cinema is celebrated as a remarkable and inspiring project, viewed as a model for cultural policy at the state and federal levels. These contrasting perspectives reveal that while comments about the cinema within the town remain stoic or contemptuous, media movements outside show enthusiastic acceptance and promotion.

Disenchantment

The approval process at the community assembly escaped any attempt to give an accurate account. However, a few commentaries by inhabitants give insights into contrasting opinions and acceptance of the project. Naturally, the commentaries do not escape the practice of gossip and rumor. The community assembly's approval process obscured an accurate account of opinions. However, comments from inhabitants reveal contrasting views on the project, often shaped by

gossip and rumor. Carmen recalled that during the assembly meeting, nearly 90 per cent of attendees supported the project, while a few openly and others quietly argued it was unnecessary and that the funds should go elsewhere. Denis offered a different perspective, noting that many wanted to invest in other initiatives, but the budget was specifically allocated for cultural projects.⁴³ A faction at the assembly resisted the cinema, reflecting differing visions. Denis suggested this resistance stemmed from a fear of change; many *paisanos* worry about new developments in town. He believes the cinema would thrive better as a micro-enterprise since Guelatao's *Cargo* positions last only a year and a half, complicating the project's continuity. However, he emphasized that this isn't a rejection of *usos y costumbres* but rather a need to develop strategies for new ventures that integrate into the *Cargo* system, potentially modernizing it. "Fear of change" and the division of time between work and rest aren't the only issues at play. Gossip and rumors during the assembly often reveal rivalries among participants and their proposals. The Cine Too project faced similar challenges. From day one, my interlocutors openly discussed the rumors and gossip they encountered. In nearly every media project since the *Estero Comunal* days, gossip has lingered around them. Luna once told me that the assembly serves as a space where everyone can express their opinions openly. If you voice an opinion outside that context, it simply becomes gossip. Similarly, when I asked Andrés, Luna's brother and a former Cine Too manager and film programmer for local schools, how the cinema came to be, he shared his perspective.

"I really cannot tell you because I was not there. I only can tell you gossip and rumors. What happened is that the budget came, the project was about to make a cinema and, they asked the community (assembly): you want to make a cinema? Well yes, they said, but with glances of disbelief; and they (Juan and Luna) made the project, and in less than six months, the cinema was built. They adapted an old audio-visual space we got here, which was not really for a cinema and it was not used at all. Suddenly in five or six months, you have this cinema. I think the community did not have enough time to reflect on the matter. But as sometimes happens, the community may have thought, yes of course you can have your cinema, whatever you are dreaming people! They did not have enough time to reflect on what it means to have a cinema in the community, and suddenly they have it" (Fieldnotes April 2019).

Andrés attributes the rapid approval of the cinema project to Juan José's brokerage skills and political position. His role not only allowed him to navigate the complexities of state politicians to secure funding but also to persuade assembly members. Carmen noted the persuasive abilities

⁴³ It is well known that federal budgets sometimes carry on labels on what money must be invested. It is the case for instance of the Ramo 33 designated only for education, health, security, and social infrastructure.

of Andrés, Luna, and Alain in engaging the public and garnering support for the project; “son buenos para el verbo,” she said – they are good speakers (Fieldnotes April 2019). Brokerage and extensive networking skills proved crucial for any project’s emergence in the town. Assembly approval is mandatory, and, like any other community project, rumors and gossip help keep “malos manejos” (bad management) at bay, regulating social relations informally until they reach general consensus in assembly meetings. This aligns with a recurring Mexican saying that surfaced in many conversations: “todos jalan agua para su molino⁴⁴”. As Luna once explained,

“at the assembly, everything that happens and is said is valid but everything that is said outside is just gossip. And Gossip plays a role in “cabildeo”⁽⁴⁵⁾ but still, is gossip. It is just an informal conversation, but that does not mean that it has no value in the assembly. I think all the negative comments about the project are only from a group of people who have a personal opinion. In the moment that their opinion becomes a general collective opinion, could generate a decision in the assembly that could really affect us. As long as it stays as a personal opinion rather than a collective one we do not even take it seriously. If gossip is not mentioned at the assembly, we are ok” (Fieldnotes March 2020).

Luna went on to suggest that I rather should re-direct my research into the practice of gossiping. Gossip and envy are two words often heard by me and spoken by Carmen or Luna, or virtually everyone I talked to, especially if someone displays opulence publicly, gains resources or success outside Guelatao, then gossips around and about corruption surrounding individuals, framing them in profiting in the name of the community.

Kiado provides a clear example of this dynamic from his own community. While discussing Cine Too's position in Guelatao, he shared a story from 2005 in his town, Yagavila, located in the same region. That year, he and others launched a project called *migraternet*, combining “migrants” and “internet.” After studying at UNITIERRA, Kiado recognized a problem in his town: people were paying exorbitant rates to call relatives in the U.S. The only provider was a local telephone cabin, resulting in long queues during weekends.

On one side, *paisanos* in the U.S. were paying high rates for pre-paid phone cards, and on the other, Yagavila residents were charged 15 to 20 pesos to receive calls. Kiado saw this as a barrier to transnational communication. With his technical training in telecommunications, he

⁴⁴ Every man for himself.

⁴⁵ *Cabildeo* means the informal practice of generating consensus by coaxing, could be by gossiping too, a faction of a whole, in short, lobbying.

envisioned a solution using satellite signals, the internet, and Voice IP technology to make calls cheaper and easier. Supported by the Banamex Foundation, they secured 20 computers, a satellite antenna, and a server. The service offered calls at just 1 peso each.

However, Kiado hadn't realized *migraternet* would directly compete with the local phone cabin. Although the assembly approved the project, he later sensed something was wrong, but no one voiced concerns publicly – not even his father, who was aware of the issue.

Much later, Kiado discovered that local elites were spreading rumors, accusing the project team of profiting and gaining fame at the community's expense. In a subsequent assembly meeting, they were told to shut the project down, with the community arguing that the computers were needed for the newly opened secondary school. The project ended after just two years.

A few months later, his grandfather told him to see it as a lesson: the community will always come together, for or against something or someone, based on the collective interest. Kiado believes the rumors and gossip arose mainly because they were making money from the project, even though that money was reinvested in the community. He thought if the community hadn't taken the computers and equipment, the assembly would have assigned them unpaid *Cargo*, forcing them to spend the project's earnings locally, either by sponsoring a festivity or a *mayordomía*, or on personal expenses while doing *Cargo*.

As I briefly outlined earlier regarding the role of gossip in becoming a *ciudadano*, the same principle applies here. Gossip practices shape how the community unites against individual or minority interests to protect the collective. Kiado offers a clear example of how gossip networks can mobilize action (see Thomas 1982).

Projects like Cine Too are *en boca de todos* – on everyone's mouths – for various reasons. Andrés illustrated this when we discussed our (since we graduate from the same faculty) alma mater and reflected on the projects created both at the University and in Guelatao. He knew I had co-founded a cine club at the Department of Historical Anthropology, which led him to reflect on how *comunalidad* fits into the local cultural project landscape. Here's a quote from him:

“Let's put it this way: commonality is not a concept, is a way of life, and as a way of life it is not embedded within the (idea) Cine Too's *comunalidad*. It is part of the community yes. Above all, the community regulates it and the community watches over it, the community supervises it. We would accept that gladly if they breathed in our necks if ... for instance working in the cinema would be taken as *Cargo*. If that work will be, a way to jump a few steps up and would allow us

not to do another kind (lower) of *Cargo* position, but no, it is not like that. Why not? Because the cinema is not a normal side of the communitarian life. It is not necessary. They do not see it as indispensable, so the people are doubtful.

In some way, I think that they love to have this space to say, wow! Such a beautiful place we have. But they do not come around, they do not visit it. They come when music bands play or there is an event for the kids. However, the cinema is an innovative endeavor for us inside the community but they do not pay much attention. Then we have all kinds of comments. People who think is a waste of time that it is a private business, and others who appreciate the place and say is worth it. The comments or the “verdict” of the community in general is – at least, what they told us in the last assembly meeting –, that while you keep working and do not become a burden and a problem for the community and you present clear and straight accounting, just keep on working” (Fieldnotes March, 2019).

Andrés’s commentary is crystal clear and it lets us know his perspective on where Cine Too stands within the community. His views are on the side of turning the cinema project into *Cargo* since it would allow them to climb up hierarchical positions by not starting from the very lower ones and a good stand with the whole community. In short, to fully integrate it into the *usos y costumbres* structure. Interesting to say, he dismisses *comunalidad* embeddedness in Cine Too because it is not a *Cargo*. He thinks *comunalidad* is not different than *usos y costumbres* or internal normative system. However, Andrés’s views contrast sharply with those of Luna or Victor. They do not think that taking Cine Too as *Cargo* would be the best idea for the continuity of the project, but agree that the project carries on the *comunalidad* principles.

Andrés delves deeper into the subject and suspects the reason for the community not liking the cinema project and comparing it to the brass band.

“Maybe they do not like the cinema. I think they do not completely understand it because it is not something “traditional” something needed. For instance, music. The brass band is something that is part of life across generations; in contrast, the cinema is a closed social space. You come and get in and do not talk and do not comment while watching a movie” (Fieldnotes March, 2019).

He then carries on to linking *Cargo*, and legitimacy processes in making a clear distinction between the brass band and *Cargo* with the cinema.

“This (cinema) is not a *Cargo*. It is clear to us. For instance, the band is not that old, maybe 14 or 15 years, and everybody knows that whoever takes responsibility for the care and organization of the band is doing *Cargo* and is validated by the assembly. It is a position appointed by the assembly and here (in the cinema) is something like, so you wanted to get in this mess, then carry on. But be

careful because you are on your own. This means, we have to do all the work but they are just watching over us. Therefore, we have to constantly talk to the authorities, presenting everything at the assembly. In short, it is as if “just do not fucked it up”. Do not fuck up means, do not mismanage it, do not waste what you have, don’t make a profit at our expense, and look for ways to interact better with us, you got to work it out” (Fieldnotes March, 2019).

Gluckman positions gossip as a key sociocultural bond that reinforces group boundaries. It serves as a privilege, signaling and reaffirming one’s belonging to a certain group (Van Vleet 2003). According to Gluckman, gossip “maintains the unity, morals, and values of social groups” (Gluckman 1963, 308). It also allows cliques to control competing groups and ambitious individuals. In Guelatao, the right to gossip is earned upon becoming a *ciudadano*. As Gluckman (1963) observed, animosities between cliques aren’t openly discussed but occur as behind-the-back tattle.

Kiado refers to this forming opposition as an “elite,” though he didn’t clarify what he meant by the term. However, it suggests that status can enable action. Van Vleet (2003) provides a relevant example from the Andes, where gossip helps negotiate moral discourses of reciprocity and modernity. Among the Sullk’ata people, gossip plays a role in organizing labor exchanges, or *ayni*, which are crucial during the high season of harvesting when labor is scarce.

Van Vleet noted that her relationship with the family she stayed with sparked gossip because she helped them during the rainy season without what was considered proper compensation (money, produce, or equivalent labor). Since labor is in high demand during this time, her actions disrupted the accepted patterns of work exchange (Van Vleet 2003, 503). She also highlighted the power dynamics between *gringos* and *campesinos* in Sullk’ata society, where such relationships are seen as extractive, exploiting the local population. Van Vleet (2003) frames her position as a foreigner within the Andes village, and while Guelatao differs in context, it follows a similar trend.

In Guelatao, gossip often revolves around profiting from or taking advantage of the community. As in Van Vleet’s (2003) case, failure to meet expectations for *tequio* (communal labor) or *Cargo* work – or paying others to perform it – often triggers gossip. Additionally, enrichment through high *Cargo* positions fuels suspicion. In this sense, gossip carries moral judgments about the core values of Guelatao society.

Lastly, when doing her fieldwork Van Vleet (2003) noted that the practice of gossip in the Andes disrupts conventional assumptions about gossip. Men and Women gossip (gendered linked to women); gossip circulates through domestic networks, the assumed separation between domestic and public, and households and institutions. The point here is that in Guelatao gossip is not restrictive from the conventional assumptions noted by Van Vleet (2003), they are rather disrupted in her and my case. Again, leveling power through gossiping enables certain social arrangements to prevail crossing the conventional assumptions of gossiping as noted above. A case in point is noted below.

Although only a fist of people talked openly with some contempt about the cinema, most of them informally refer to it, not in the best of terms. Luna, sometimes claims that some *ciudadanos* are *envidiosos* (envious), so Carmen thinks that people are *bullshiting* about them because of *envidia* (envy). Even Luna suggested to me, that I would rather redirect my research about the envy and gossip of her *paisanos*.

During my conversation with Andrés, he remarked that the cinema is seen as a luxury in the town – while not inherently bad, many don't view it as essential for community life, feeling the town could manage without it. The large budget allocated for the cinema, combined with moral debates about the community's needs and the insular group running the project, understandably fueled suspicion and anxiety. As Michael Taussig (1987, 394) notes, envy signals a disruption in “the social bond”, particularly in contexts of real or perceived inequality. Kearney (1986, 70), in his fieldwork in Ixtepeji, a village near to Guelatao, observed envy, locally called *muina*, as a psychogenic ailment resulting from anger or jealousy, which was believed to physically poison the body. While I didn't hear the term *muina* in Guelatao, I know they are familiar with the concept, as it's widely understood across Oaxaca. Growing up on the Oaxaca coast, I often heard it, used to describe envy or animosity and resentment. Kearney, like Rubel (1966), emphasizes the role of envy in shaping social interactions, drawing similarities between Guelatao and Ixtepeji in this respect.

While walking through Guelatao one afternoon, I ran into Luna, and we discussed the upcoming March 21st fiesta and her *paisanos'* openness on gender issues. The conversation shifted to how her *paisanos* only give you a hard time with their remarks when they've had too much to drink. She explained that when they're drunk, they'll say things they'd otherwise consider offensive

or inappropriate while sober; “nobody gives concrete opinions or comments about your work directly”, Luna said, which is why rumors, gossip, and speculation persist (Fieldnotes May 2019).

Around the time Cine Too was opening, a local resident rebuked her, using harsher language: “Outside of Guelatao, you might be famous and good at what you do, but here, you’re nobody—just like the rest of us. “Aquí todos coludos o todos rabones” (Here, everybody is equal)”, she recalled (Fieldnotes May 2019, my emphasis). Some privately expressed discontent, accusing the media projects of profiting in the town’s name. Some even went as far as accusing Jaime of using *comunalidad* as a tool for personal fame and profit.

Accusations of a lack of community participation and cooperation were minimal, though. Luna shared the challenges of managing a project and her position within the village. She felt people placed high expectations on her because she was a professional and well-known outside the town. Despite these struggles, Luna believes the internal challenges and resistance within the community are ultimately positive. “The struggle and hard work are good for us”, she said. “If there’s no struggle, it’s simply too easy” (Fieldnotes May, 2019).

A clearer example of the complex dynamics of community projects and gossip came during the second part of my fieldwork, when Gonzalo, the husband of *Doña* Jael and a local music teacher, invited me, to meet with the *bienes comunales* committee to understand how things functioned. On the way to the meeting, I happened to run into Luna, who was serving as a *topil* at the time. When she asked, where I was headed, I told her about my meeting with Don Gonzalo and Don Jesús, both authorities of *bienes comunales*. She gave me a strange, dubious look. Curious, I asked, why she wanted to know, to which she replied, “Just for the sake of gossip...” I didn’t realize at the time that rumors were circulating about the committee potentially taking back control of the cinema and TAO space.

Don Gonzalo expressed discomfort with how the cinema and TAO spaces were being used, especially regarding profit generation and the lack of educational programs for the community. In “background” discussions, the committee questioned whether the cinema was a good fit for creating profits that could contribute to the town’s development. While the cinema had good intentions, many – especially those in charge of *bienes comunales* – felt it wasn’t worthwhile for generating capital.

The simplified version of the gossip circulating within the community framed families or individuals as exploiting the community's image to position themselves in various external social fields, such as activist-academic or state-political circles. This positioning allowed them to gain symbolic capital, leading to wider recognition and access to resources (*cf.* Kummels 2017, 275-277). On one occasion, Alejandro, a *Cargo* administrator for the ecotourism committee, shared that higher-ranking officials had pressured him to request rent payments from the cinema, as it was part of the town's tourism activities. However, he explained that the cinema wasn't making any profit, so he didn't pursue the rent inquiry.

Gonzalo, on the other hand, believed that cultural projects like Cine Too could only succeed with the backing of state institutions. For him, it was the state's responsibility to fund educational and cultural initiatives, which should be locally managed and tailored to the community. Despite the cinema's budget coming from a state-level representative, Gonzalo criticized the lack of oversight by state institutions. He doubted the intentions behind the Cine Too project, feeling it lacked a clear direction grounded in state institutions and wasn't addressing internal community demands or needs. As a music teacher, he did not view cinema as a form of education but rather as a project aimed at outsiders with personal goals (Fieldnotes May 2019).

Victor expressed hesitancy about Cine Too being recognized as a project backed by either state institutions or fully integrated into the internal Guelatao system. He argued that if the cinema project were to become part of the *Cargo* system, locals would be included as active agents, which, in his view, would dilute any "authentic" interest in the project and likely lead to its eventual closure. Victor believed that people would become more anxious as they saw the project failing to generate profit (Fieldnotes May 2019).

Victor emphasized the importance of media expertise when managing cultural projects, an expertise he found lacking among the Guelatao community. Media and communication were niche fields that only a few community members pursued, and there was little interest in these areas as career or employment options for the rest of the population. For Victor, this presented a significant problem, as he feared that without serious local engagement, Cine Too's future was uncertain.

Gossip about the financial success – or failure – of Cine Too was consistent with how the community handled projects approved by the general assembly. According to Van Vleet (2003), gossip operates as culturally and linguistically situated practices that shape moral discourses and

social relations (Van Vleet 2003, 492). In the case of Guelatao, gossip surrounding Cine Too focused on the issue of profiting in the name of the community. This suggests that *ciudadanos* – community members with recognized standing – had morally sanctioned the project by establishing limits on its operation. They demonstrated their disapproval not only through gossip, but by refusing to offer official help or engage with the project in any meaningful way.

Discontent and gossip were one lens through which the community perceived the cinema and other media projects. Another way to gauge its impact was through local attendance or participation, which, as Victor pointed out, was almost non-existent. This lack of engagement reinforced the idea that the cinema project was not considered essential to the community.

Internal conflicts unrelated to cinema attendance often hindered local participation in the project. The arrangement with the local school proved fragile, especially during miscommunication. At one point, the director of CIS boarding school, stopped sending students to the cinema. Luna asked me to mediate, suspecting that the director might be punishing the students for classroom misbehavior. She often praised them “...as our most affable audience and the true light of the cinema.” Rather than interfere, I was curious about the reason behind the director's decision.

I visited the school to inquire about their agreement with the cinema and talked with the director. “We don’t do that anymore,” the director commented. While he acknowledged Jaime Martínez Luna's work as an activist and his intellectual legacy, he criticized the new generation of *comunalidad* youth for misunderstanding its true meaning and for seeking fame outside the Sierras. He also expressed frustration over their disobedience in taking students for a promotional photo session without permission.

Our conversation became heated when he recalled a previous agreement between Cine Too members and volunteers from IBERO (Universidad Iberoamericana). He claimed that these volunteers, directed by Luna, were working at CIS without his consent, leaving him surprised to find strangers with the kids.

I later discovered that the core issue stemmed from a small vendor kiosk near the entrance of the hike leading to the glass viewpoint. The kiosk, owned by the school and teachers, felt threatened by the ecotourism office, then managed by two cinema members. They accused the teachers of selling beer and competing unfairly, asserting that business should remain an internal

matter and not involve outsiders (Fieldnotes April, 2019). To complicate matters, attempts to resolve the conflict at the council yielded no clear resolution, resulting in only a mild reprimand for the students. The underlying conflict remained unresolved. In rural institutions like CIS, the director's position frequently changes, and students gradually returned to enjoy screenings. However, the new director viewed cinema visits as rewards rather than educational opportunities, resulting in a decline in CIS students attending the screenings compared to before.

These developments highlight the ambiguous position of cinema members. They often wonder whether integrating into the *Cargo* system or continuing with self-management of micro-enterprises would enhance their standing. The project faces intense scrutiny from the assembly, yet it receives little support.

“Not many people care about films and media, and not caring would mean that people holding *Cargo* would not care about the cinema at all. Also, no one has the connections or the expertise of, say, Luna, and nobody knows how the cinema business operates, or media in general. It is too daunting” (Fieldnotes April, 2019).

Victor believes that if people realized, “they do this job *por el amor al arte* (for the love of art)”, they would either stop gossiping or finally shut down the project, because it isn’t profitable for the community. Internal conflicts may seem incidental and a natural part of resistance efforts, as Cine Too members claim. As I mentioned earlier, these conflicts and gray areas enrich our understanding and prevent essentialist views of indigenous media and resistance movements, avoiding their exoticization or romanticization. They reveal how internal conflicts are (or aren’t) resolved and highlight different factions with varying interests that may not align with resistance, reciprocity, or anti-capitalist objectives.

Enchantment

The liminal position of Cine Too within Guelatao contrasts sharply with its perception from the outside. The project has garnered praise from the press, the cinematographic community, indigenous activists, and tourists alike. Luna has built a vital network of acclaimed directors, producers, and social activists within the documentary genre. Additionally, internationally renowned actors and musicians known for their leftist views, such as Gael García Bernal and Lila

Downs, have become involved as *padrinos* and *madrinas*. These artists have expressed their support through social media and online platforms. In 2017, film director and ethnologist Alberto Cortés wrote in the online news portal Des-informemonos, periodismo de abajo:

“It is an ambitious project; creating and training audiences from childhood, with programming linked to education and organized by a Zapotec community. From any point of view, it is an extraordinary event, it is not common in this country to open a theatre with high technical and artistic quality to watch movies” (Cortés, 2017, online, my translation).

Cortés notes that a few decades ago – in the ’80s – villages had cinemas, and attending them was, to some extent, a democratic experience. Now, to go to the cinema, one must travel to the city, which has become far from democratic; tickets are expensive, while pirated films are cheap. He concludes that Cine Too is a beautiful response to the current state of Mexican cinema, characterized by abundant production, but a poor distribution and exhibition system.

Similarly, Leticia Ramírez, writing for Coolhuntermx, highlights a new practice for locals: “When Cine Too opened, it created a new space for coexistence that also implies a ritual – one that did not previously exist in the community’s logic, as going to the movies is typically an urban ritual” (Ramírez 2020, online, my translation).S he emphasizes that Cine Too indicates a growing interest among communities in organizing and generating quality spaces. This engagement with art can lead to projects that culturally enrich the community. Cine Too exemplifies how cinema can unite people and serve as a means of education, entertainment, and training – a process that should continue.

Oaxaca's renowned newspaper, *El Universal Oaxaca* ,(2017, online) describes the project as the culmination of two generations of audiovisual producers, emphasizing that the audiovisual image is essential for constructing the identity of mountain people, including the Zapotec, Mixe, and Chinantec communities. Cine Too is noted as the first digital cinema with a programming focus on linking cinema and education organized by a Zapotec community. Another online portal points out that, despite its brief existence, the history of Cine Too addresses significant issues in the daily lives of indigenous peoples in Mexico, including autonomy, community service, cultural preservation, and modernization. Furthermore, the journalist Diana Manzo recognizes Cine Too, as “cine de resistencia”, cinema of resistance (Manzo 2023, online). These above media articles also recognize Cine Too as a pioneer in communal cinema, marking it as the first movie theater

organized and managed by an indigenous community. Notably, Luna emerges as the face and public relations representative of the project across various media outlets. It would be difficult to tally the online interviews she has participated in. In these above press articles, the filmmaker from Guelatao emphasizes several foundational topics and concepts related to Cine Too, with self-representation in media highlighted as a central commitment tied to the idea of *comunalidad*.

In addition, Oaxaca's filmmakers recognize Luna as the most notorious driving force of communitarian media and film projects. Yovegami Ascona Mora, an Ayuuk (endemic for Mixe people) filmmaker recognizes Luna as an important force in the media fields in Oaxaca. Due to her father and her work, she has established a wide network of important people in the documentary arena in Mexico and even internationally. Yovegami assures that many non-indigenous media actors see Luna's face as representative of Oaxaca's emergence of communitarian cinema. Luna's relationship with wider actors in different media outlets and media, in general, helps in some way to get general attention and generate inspiration for other grassroots initiatives elsewhere in Mexico (Personal communication June 2021).

During its first year, Cine Too was viewed as a model for national cultural policy. Andrés recalls that for the second anniversary, they hosted María Novaro Peñaloza, the new director of IMCINE. The interest from IMCINE in Cine Too stems from its potential for replication in various communities. Andrés is aware of the intentions from people in Ayutla, Mixes, who are interested in establishing a similar cinema there.

Luna also shared that Cine Too serves as direct inspiration for the state's cultural policy, as expressed by the Minister of Culture (CONACULTA), Alejandra Frausto, who indicated a desire to create more Cine Toos across the country (Personal communication May 2021). Additionally, Juan José, a former member of *Ojo de Agua*, expressed enthusiasm about his new role as a federal delegate of INPI, stating his goal to advocate for a cinema in every community.

Besides the highly esteemed by local and national press, Cine Too has worked as an inspiration and hub to widen webs of collaboration. This collaborative web emerges from sympathies and relationships built over a long period between *Ojo de Agua*, Jaime, and Luna with a broader spectrum of indigenous and non-indigenous social activists. This network stems from long-standing relationships between *Ojo de Agua*, Jaime, and Luna, along with a broader spectrum of indigenous and non-indigenous social activists.

The project's political agency can be understood through Ortner's (2023) analysis of alternative and radical media, specifically Brave New Films. Ortner emphasizes the capacity for intentional action within the constraints of society, culture, and history. While political efforts might seem to endorse a neoliberal, individualistic model, Ortner contextualizes political agency within collective action inspired by Freire's (1970) concept of *conscientização*, or critical awareness. Nava (2021) highlights the political work of Agenda Guelatao, which, through sports, enables members to travel to Vancouver to broadcast the Desafío Internacional de Básquetbol de Pueblos Indígenas, featuring a team from Sierra Juárez. During this event, they leveraged technology to denounce Canadian mining companies exploiting indigenous lands in Oaxaca. *Comunalidad* serves as a lens through which Agenda Guelatao articulates the significance of fighting for their territory.

Another example of the widespread acceptance and support for the project arose during the COVID-19 crisis. The challenging conditions prompted Cine Too and three other independent cinemas to launch an online fundraising campaign called *Ayuda a que las pantallas sigan brillando* (Donadora, online). Notable personalities, including Oscar-nominated actor Yalitza Aparicio and director Guillermo del Toro, expressed their support on Twitter and other social media platforms.

As a result, Cine Too has garnered significant recognition among celebrities and within the national alternative media landscape.



Figure 6. This "meme" was taken from the online campaign, which was delisted soon after. It notes how vulnerable the independent self-managed cinemas were during covid. In contrast big cinema theatres and online platforms were doing alright

But to fully the process of the emergency of Cine Too and other projects, I consider it fundamentally important to understand the “guts” of it, insofar as it will provide more in-depth knowledge about what they consider important for indigenous people’s development and the political implication of their action within their community and outside of it and how it became the

inspiration for outside actors and a project which transcends the boundaries of what is called *comunalidad*.

Another Cinema is Possible

From the mountains of Oaxaca, we imagine and create a cinema at the service of our communities, a cinema that responds to our realities, a cinema that dignifies our culture, a cinema based on solidarity, a cinema created in a community.

*Cine Too Lab web page*⁴⁶

A couple of days after my conversation with Luna at the cinema, I returned to Guelatao to inquire about the schedule for the Lab workshop and to look for accommodation. However, it proved challenging to determine when the next workshop would take place, as all participants needed to agree on a date. Many had different commitments, either working or studying in various parts of Mexico and Oaxaca. In February 2019, as I began my fieldwork, I frequently traveled between Guelatao and the city, visiting CIESAS and meeting with some Cine Too collaborators. Residents of Guelatao would approach me with different proposed dates for the workshop, but nothing seemed finalized. I later learned that Luna was in Xalapa, Veracruz, for the premiere of her new documentary, *Tio Yim* (2019), so no one could confirm the workshop details. Even Carmen was unsure and mentioned that the dates had been confused again; she suggested I speak directly with the organizers. She recommended reaching out to Federico, Luna's partner. I was unfamiliar with him, but I saw this as an opportunity to expand my social network. Little I knew at that time, that this would be my only chance for an open and intimate conversation with him, since for the rest of my fieldwork, we did not exchange any conversation anymore. And I am still wondering what happened. When she tried to add Fede's number to my WhatsApp, Carmen instead called him directly and handed me the phone. He was unaware of my presence or the purpose of my visit to Guelatao, but he generously offered me time to talk and a place to stay if I needed it. I packed a few things, said goodbye to Carmen, and climbed up the hill to meet him. There, I encountered a

⁴⁶ Unfortunately, this quote is no longer online as their webpage has changed over the years. However, the motto accurately reflects the intentions and core values of Cine Too Lab. Therefore, I decided to leave the quote above.

Lab member named Africa, from Guadalajara, who was staying at Luna's while preparing his documentary under a film production grant. Fede, originally from Mexico City, grew up in Cuernavaca. He is the son of an anthropologist who, according to him, never practiced anthropology in the academic sense but developed microcredit schemes in indigenous communities. Fede is a graduate of the prestigious CCC (*Centro de Capacitacion Cinematográfica*). With beer in hand, he went on to tell about the Lab project:

“The lab was born out of the necessity to create non-hegemonic ways of telling stories that the community needs to tell to audiences. So, one of the important things, we thought, was to bring elucidation and critical thinking to the participants to make sure their films are produced in a communitarian way” (Fieldnotes March 2019).

Referring to his educational background at CCC, he emphasizes the goal of breaking away from elitist filmmaking practices by establishing independent film productions that are collaborative, self-managing, and free from state funding and private investment. Above all, he aims to create a cinema that is fundamentally anti-capitalist. Africa ended up in Guelatao after participating in the DocsMX workshops, which provide training for non-professional filmmakers to pitch documentaries to potential producers. He explained that while attending both the Lab and DocsMX, he chose the Lab because it resonated more with him due to:

“It is a different way of doing cinema; the fact that there is not a feverish leadership and there is no need to trash other people's work to gain funding for making your movie is what makes it different. In the industry of cinematography, everything is competition, festivals are competition, and pitching is a competition where you must show that your story is worth more than others. And here, in the Lab, what we are looking for is first, that you understand what you want to tell, why the story is important, and how it would benefit the community you are trying to portray. I think, at the end of the day, it is not about looking at the story that gains the most attention, nor the one getting prizes at festivals but helping someone, change someone's vision. Cinema is not a savior, we must be clear about that, but it can be a good starting point for social change” (Fieldnotes March 2019).

Fede and Africa's commentary turned out to be consistent with most of the Lab member's reasons, aspirations, and opinions for attending Lab workshops. Moreover, during the process of Lab, Fede told me that

“(i)t is important that people understand that during the process of filmmaking is crucial to establish more horizontal working roles and relations. That the participants understand and implement the principles of what they call communality (*comunalidad*). Meaning, taking decisions based on consensus and reciprocating with one another and supporting each other to work by mutual aid” (Fieldnotes March 2019).

Africa asserted the ethics and values of Lab, aiming to create social or political impact through films that highlight the common good. “(t)o create social change through filmmaking, it is essential to start by changing how films are produced” (Fieldnotes March 2019), he said. Both he and Fede argued that mainstream filmmaking often produces unilateral images of a community, which is spurious and unfair. Instead, film production should be collaborative, allowing the community to participate in the process. Above all, films must address the narrative needs of the people and include them throughout production. Fede emphasized the importance of filmmakers reciprocating with their community by making films that reflect their stories – stories that the community can identify with. He noted that Cine Too was born from the community’s need to tell media stories on their own terms. While the Lab focuses on the filmmaking process, Cine Too provides a space for this to happen – a hub for ideas and movie-making without the constraints of a studio system, large budgets, or state or private funding, allowing non-professional filmmakers to showcase their projects.

Several key points emerge from the conversation. Fede and Africa’s strong stance against mainstream cinema contrasts sharply with Hollywood studio films; they advocate for an independent cinema that is explicitly political and critical. Ortner (2012) notes similar intentions in the indie movie industry, aiming to create cinema *that matters*, which challenges dominant culture, provokes audiences, and seeks to reveal the truth. Fede and Africa, along with Luna and others, express concern about the distorted portrayals of indigenous peoples in mainstream media, referred to as the hegemonic order, shaped by the worldview of the dominant sector of society (Ortner 2023, 40). They believe that true cinematic truth can only be found within the documentary genre. If documentaries are constructions of reality, then examining the strategies behind their creation is essential (Ortner 2023, 36). For them, the only way to authentically represent reality in films is through collective production that reciprocates with the communities’ central to the stories. Later, Africa critiqued mainstream filmmaking and the so-called “new” Mexican cinema, which he believes has become Hollywood-esque. He openly criticized the common belief of the *all-powerful director* and the notion of *cinéma d’auteur*, framing renowned director Alfonso Cuarón as a jerk and a bully who looks down on others. Africa dismisses the belief that mainstream cinema stems solely from the vision of a singular genius, arguing against the recognition of one actor or

director as the sole creator, as well as the profit-driven nature of commercial cinema (Fieldnotes March 2019).

The narratives mentioned vary by individual but share a common core. The ideas articulated in the Lab are not new; they represent a new generation of communicators striving to produce cinema that fosters social change and justice. However, the lines between identity – specifically indigeneity – and community or *comunalidad* can become blurred, with these terms often used interchangeably. In the cases of Fede and Africa, indigeneity is less emphasized, while community or *comunalidad* drives their work.

I consider Lab's identity and production processes seemingly similar to that of The Liberation Film Group in Argentina and Grupo Ukamau in Bolivia from the late 1960s. Both were part of the Third Cinema movement, which critiqued colonialism, capitalism, and Hollywood's dominance. These collectives developed democratic methods of film production, underground distribution, and exhibition, while networking with contemporary social movements (Cabezón Doty 2012, 23). Particularly Grupo Ukamau which noted for its commitment to showcasing the impact of neo-colonialism on Bolivia's indigenous peoples, often casting indigenous actors, including those with no prior acting experience.⁴⁷ However, in the cinema of the Ukumai group, the perspective of outsiders on indigenous cultures remains pronounced, a point raised by some critics. Jorge Sanjinés addresses these critiques in his film *Para recibir el canto de los pájaros* (1995). In this film, a crew travels to a rural village to recruit indigenous people for a movie about colonization. Monika Wehrheim (2012, 30) notes that the filmmakers realize they cannot accurately capture the indigenous perspective on the history of conquest. The main issue lies in their ignorance and arrogance, which prevents them from understanding indigenous culture. This sentiment echoes the views of contemporary indigenous filmmakers and the Lab, who argue that authentic portrayals of communities must emerge from within those communities.

In the conversations I held with interlocutors, the historical production of communitarian cinema throughout Latin America was never really mentioned or discussed. Their similitude, however, at least in intentions and discourses, is remarkable. The difference among them all is that while the Third Cinema tends to lean on Marxist scholarship, Lab and Cine Too lean on *comunalidad*. While the Third Cinema generally had its distribution and exhibition in underground

⁴⁷ This trend is indirectly followed by Luna Maran in her new film *Chicharras* (2024)] In it non-professional actors participated in the film.

circles, Lab and Cine Too managed a great deal of infrastructure through state funds and a wide network of alternative film festivals, film organizations, and alternative movie theatres. The axis of this cinema is the right of communication. The main reference for this type of cinema is not the cinema and the film industry, but communication as a form of vindication of the excluded and silenced.

Africa as much as Fede are situated as urban filmmakers, distant from the rural realm of the Oaxaca Sierras. Both see in a way, anarchists, to produce cinema, however, targeting a community which is not quite clearly defined by them. But it shows us discourses of independence and new social arrangements to create horizontal relations in the process, practicing self-management based on mutual aid and free association. At some point, it reminded me of Andrés's commentary on direct action. He claimed that, if the community needed something, you just had to announce it and people would show up. For instance, digging a channel for water, building a perimeter wall, or fixing the local school. Government, meaning the state would not be necessary. That is the spirit of *tequio*, he said. The conversation I held with Fede and Africa encompasses and simplifies the general feeling on filmmaking and the purpose of Lab and Cine Too. Lab members generally agree on the terms of the nature and origins of media projects however, while the terms remain equally shared generally, practices and participants of the Lab are varied and generally ambiguous as we will see below (Fieldnotes April 2019).

The Lab consists of year-long workshops, scheduled through participant assemblies based on availability. Fede and Africa are two non-indigenous members of the Guelatao community who have significantly shaped the Lab. Cine Too Lab stands out by offering a series of workshop modules where participants learn both technical and theoretical aspects of film production. These modules cover topics such as *comunalidad*, scriptwriting, photography, animation, sound narratives, critical media history, cinematographic imagery, exhibition, and distribution, totaling nine modules if schedules permit. Instructors, referred to as "facilitators," include nationally and internationally recognized documentarians like Everardo Gonzales, Luisa Pardo, Sofía Gómez Córdova, and Ernesto Pardo, as well as well-known indigenous media producers such as Juan José García, Luna Marán, and Jaime Martínez Luna. Participation in the Lab requires a draft idea for a project in genres like animation, experimental audiovisual, fiction, or documentary, the latter being the primary focus. A registration fee of approximately 15 euros or 300 pesos is charged, followed by a selection process. The production costs are co-funded in a 50-50 scheme: 50 per cent by Cine

Too and 50 per cent through collective fundraising efforts, including selling bottles of mescal (Oaxaca's agave spirit) and organizing raffles for items like books and crafts. Facilitators' payments are also covered within this scheme. Africa noted that during a general assembly, participants discussed the facilitators' compensation, emphasizing the need for dignified living wages. Although specific numbers were not provided, some facilitators only charged for transportation costs, donating the rest of their fees back to the project (Fieldnotes March 2019).

Truly interesting is the heterogeneity of the participants but most of them knew each other from before, as they are linked directly or indirectly to Luna's previous media projects, e.g., CAI, or through friends from friends in the media fields. *Lab* stands out for its diversity. Most of the participants are from different states and regions of Mexico. Their reasons for joining the Lab are also diverse. While some of them were attracted by the *comunalidad* ideas and principles, others saw their participation as organic due to the long-time cooperation and participation with CAI. Others found a possibility to tell stories of their communities, and the rest were excited to participate with renowned filmmakers and learn from them. There are only a very few participants belonging to an indigenous community. Just Victor, a Guelatao community member Cine Too member is a participant. I was puzzled by the lack of participation of the locals and even more when I found none from the Sierras (Fieldnotes April 2019).

Luna, along with others like Victor, argues that local youth are not attending workshops due to a lack of time. They are occupied with various activities, primarily basketball and brass band rehearsals, leaving only holidays available for cinema or workshop participation. Those who do attend are students from the two schools in Guelatao, both of which have agreements with the cinema. BIC and CIS school students are from different Oaxaca regions. The BIC School is particularly notable; its curriculum emphasizes *comunalidad*, teaching students the value of communal work. In October 2018, several students expressed interest in media and cinema, initiating a small radio project with Alain and Victor. However, BIC students never saw the project come to fruition. They perceive Cine Too as a space for cultural creation within the local context, aiming to promote local visions and artistic expression through media and film. Although some students showed interest in filmmaking and participated in CAI, none engaged with the projects offered by Agenda, Too, or Lab (Fieldnote April 2019).

What follows is an account of the Cine Too Lab workshop. As a note, all sources and insights of the following chapter are product of the fieldwork carried out between February to May 2019 if not specifically source is given.

Lab Workshop. Projects and views from *comunalidad* cinema

I consider the Lab an essential aspect of enchanted cinema, reflecting Ortner's (2023, 32) insights on the construction of truth through documentary strategies. It serves not only as a space for individuals from various backgrounds to share and develop their film production ideas, but also as a place where they learn production methods rooted in *comunalidad* principles. Additionally, it fosters networks for future collaboration among peers. Luna views the Lab as an infrastructure enabling filmmaking projects that can positively impact communities beyond Guelatao (Fieldnotes, December 2016). Although I could only attend one workshop, this experience proved significant. It provided a starting point for understanding what cinema, indigeneity, and *comunalidad* mean to the participants. I engaged with several attendees at different times, particularly focusing on locals from Oaxaca.

A little over a month after my arrival in Guelatao and my start as a volunteer at the cinema, the workshop occurred on March 22, 2019, right after the weekend finals of a basketball competition. The day before, I briefly met some Lab participants, but they were busy helping Agenda Guelatao stream the finals online. On the day of the workshop, in addition to Carmen and me, Ariadna, a Venezuelan-born film and TV producer, joined us. Ariadna, who initially studied literature, shifted her focus to cinema and TV due to frustrations with working conditions in Venezuela. She migrated to Mexico after befriending a Mexican activist from Oaxaca, who had arrived in Venezuela during the 2006 social unrest. I learned, she was friends with Juan José and Luna and sometimes collaborated with them on film projects. While at the cinema, she worked alongside Carmen and me, making crepes and coffee, screening films for kids, and charging a standard fee of five pesos for restroom access. Ariadna was also one of the facilitators and co-founders of JEQO.

On the day of the basketball tournament finals at the end of March 2019, waves of people flooded into town: audience members, Lab participants, media agencies, and basketball players of

all ages from various corners of the region and *paisanos* from abroad, mainly the U.S. The morning bustle surpassed previous days, with preparations starting as early as six. Small vendors set up outside their homes, selling ice cream, barbeque meats, coffee, *atole*, and more. During this tournament, only kids and young people played, leaving the adult categories for the final days. From my bathroom window, I could see youngsters training late into the evening. They seemed to take the tournament seriously; as one taxi driver mentioned, it was a great opportunity to gain prestige and pride. I learned that the Macuil team was the one to beat, having won the tournament for two consecutive years. If they won again, they would take the trophy home permanently.

That day, a guy named Eliel came in for a drink. He was streaming and filming the basketball event. Eliel lives in El Rosario, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Oaxaca City, but he is originally from Tamazulapan, Mixes, and is part of the second generation of TV Tamix. We briefly discussed the media landscape in Tamazulapan. He mentioned that they primarily engage in streaming through Facebook, with occasional cinema projections at a local café. As we talked, I shared what I was doing, and Eliel revealed that he was familiar with Kummel's work and knew about her book presentation in Spanish, *Translational Media*, introduced by Salomon Nahmad, a respected anthropologist of Syrian origin. Eliel explained that media initiatives in Tama had to become independent due to a lack of support from local authorities, aside from the *Cargo* system. Media enthusiasts face criticism and scrutiny from both authorities and the community, he said, and there have been accusations of profiting at the community's expense.

Throughout the day, Eliel returned frequently to upload photos and videos of the games to their Facebook page. We also discussed Kummel's work on the production of DVDs for the patronal fiestas aimed at the transnational Tama community. Eliel noted that sales of these DVDs have significantly declined since their collective started streaming the festivities online. The Tama Collective is embracing new forms of media for more direct engagement, and similarly, Agenda Guelatao views streaming as a way to connect with migrants and sell airtime ads for local businesses.



Figure 7. *Agenta Guelatao (Cine Too)* streaming the Benito Juarez Basketball Tournament. Photo: Rodrigo Ruiz (2019)

After a tumultuous day at the basketball tournament and a long workday at the cinema, we prepared

for the early workshop. Carmen and I started making coffee for the participants as I introduced myself. That's when Ernesto Pardo joined us; he was the facilitator for the image construction workshop. Little I knew at the time that he had won several national and international awards as a cinematographer. In 2017, he was invited to become a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in the U.S. and had worked extensively with Tatiana Huezo, among other prominent documentarians.

For Pardo, the construction of a cinema image is

“an idea that comes from a theme and it is fed by the photographer, sound engineer, producer, and director all together. It is a common endeavor. The idea of making cinema is to tell the maximum with a minimum of resources as actions say more emotionality. Cinema is or are spaces where actions take place” (Fieldnotes March 2019).

When he (Pardo) talks about the process of filmmaking, he stresses the collectivist idea behind it. The process of building the main theme or concept image goes by bringing ideas together and brainstorming. He points out that documentaries are a rather grey zone in this regard. There is a possibility of ambivalence or ambiguity. We move in different reference frameworks than any other genre. Not surprisingly documentary genre is what prevails among all participants' projects. Among them, there is a social justice commitment. A commitment, they believe only the

documentary genre can deliver. Some of them stress the *truthfulness* of the message by alluding to the voices of the characters. There is no make-up, if only a little staged, and freedom to speak openly, one of them claimed.

As the group began discussing their projects, Luna approached me abruptly and inquired about what I was doing. I was jotting down notes in my field book, and she seemed surprised, just as I was. Although we had previously agreed on my presence, it appeared she had forgotten. I stopped writing and reintroduced myself to the group, explaining that I would be documenting the workshop.

This miscommunication with Luna hindered my ability to explore the group's projects in depth, and due to confidentiality, some details cannot be shared here. Several participants kindly requested that I not include their work in my research or declined to discuss their projects. However, teasers of their work can be found on the Lab's YouTube channel. In any case, I will briefly summarize some of the Lab members' projects, intermingled with the conversations I had during the workshop.

Lab Projects

Most projects address social issues to expose injustices and highlight cultural practices. For instance, Orestes, originally from the Mixes region and now residing in San Juan Quiahije, Sierra Sur, centers his project on the violent land conflict between his community and neighboring San Jose Ixtapan. He notes that a new generation of youths feels compelled to carry arms day and night along the municipal border to defend their territory. Through audio-visual documentation, Orestes aims to provide a historical context for this land conflict and foster reflection on how both old and new generations perceive the need to protect their community at all costs, resulting in many fatalities.

However, he emphasizes that they do not want to directly confront gun violence but rather illustrate how it impacts specific families in their daily lives. His focus is on how conflict alters perceptions and the experiences of youth growing up in this environment. He is joined by his partner, Maricela Zurita, a prominent feminist activist from San Juan Quiahije. For Orestes, territory underpins the concept of *comunalidad*, which he seeks to clarify within the Lab's intentions. He asserts that territory defines his and his community's identity, a notion that the Lab

often struggles to unify due to the diverse worldviews of its participants. Nonetheless, sharing and consensus-building are vital practices within both his community and the Lab. Orestes perceives a limited understanding of *comunalidad* in both Lab and Cine Too.

Diana, an anthropology student at UAM (Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana) from Oaxaca City, focuses her work on the women's organization Red De Mujeres De La Costa Chica A.C., based in the coastal town of Pinotepa de Don Luis, where she has relatives. She chose the Lab to explore her audio-visual project outside the constraints of UAM's urban anthropology tradition. Diana aims to reflect on the cultural practice of weaving while examining the gender relations embedded in Pinotepa.

Lalito, another student of anthropology at the University of Chiapas is co-directing with Victor, a project sprung out of Lalito's bachelor thesis about the *escoleta*, music brass band schools in several communities in the Sierra Norte region. Lalito told me that, although at the beginning he only brought up interest in a video documenting the practices of music teaching, out of anthropological curiosity, Victor thought of it as a necessity, since he is a musician and a former student of the *escoleta* in Guelatao. Lalito, convinced by Victor, saw a chance to go beyond his anthropological curiosity to tell the story of brass bands, school directors, and composers to acknowledge their importance for the cultural and social life in their communities and the region. In the same way, for Victor, the recognition and value that composers and musicians lack is a fundamental gap between them and the community. Both, pursuit, of audio-visual cultural awareness, through it, the recognition of musicians and composers by their communities in indigenous regions of the Sierra.

Another participant, let us call him George, on the other hand, focuses outside the scope of Oaxaca. He has worked extensively with the hip-hop and rap MC scene in western Mexico as a videographer and music video producer. His documentary project centers on Cristian, a rapper from Guadalajara accused of the disappearance and murder of three cinema students. This case gained notoriety due to its association with organized crime and drug cartels. George aims to address the social issues faced by marginalized individuals and the rap scene, offering a critical perspective on the misjudgments, stereotypes, and prejudices directed at MCs and residents of marginalized neighborhoods. By examining the rapper community in Guadalajara, he seeks to highlight the conditions of violent criminality and the lack of opportunities for young people, which contribute to their criminalization by police, media, and society.

One project particularly caught my attention, though I didn't know who was directing it. Several participants informed me about it. The project critiques the Mexican narco-state through the infamous Narvarte case, which involved the brutal murder of a photojournalist and three women, one of whom was a former classmate of mine, Nadia Vera. Unfortunately, I never had the opportunity to speak with the director, nor did I ever see the project.

Another intriguing project critiqued masculinities and communitarian machismo. The participant examined community authority and morality, highlighting the intransigence of his community regarding moral issues to explore artistic perspectives on masculinity and erotic artworks. Unfortunately, due to confidentiality, I can share only this information. Later, I learned that the participant had canceled his project in search of different artistic viewpoints. While these were not the only projects, they appeared to be among the most articulated and developed at that time.

During the workshop, I gained firsthand insights into various perspectives on how to create less distorted images that convey truth on screen, aiming to demystify conventional knowledge and representations. Participants expressed enthusiasm for discussing this process theoretically, exploring the technological aspects such as camera lenses and color. To facilitate this, we watched and critically assessed a series of documentaries. Two documentaries, in particular, stood out in the students' analyses. The first, *La Primera Sonrisa* (2014), follows a group of midwives and their journey to assist women during childbirth. The film showcases three different locations where midwives convene: Rancho Viejo, Veracruz, Mexico; Florianópolis, Brazil; and Berlin, Germany. The second documentary, *Yuban, Tierra Viva* (2011), captures the nostalgia of a Zapotec village as it strives to preserve its cultural practices. It emphasizes the significance of local myths related to the land and the principles embedded in these practices, echoing the concept of *comunalidad*.

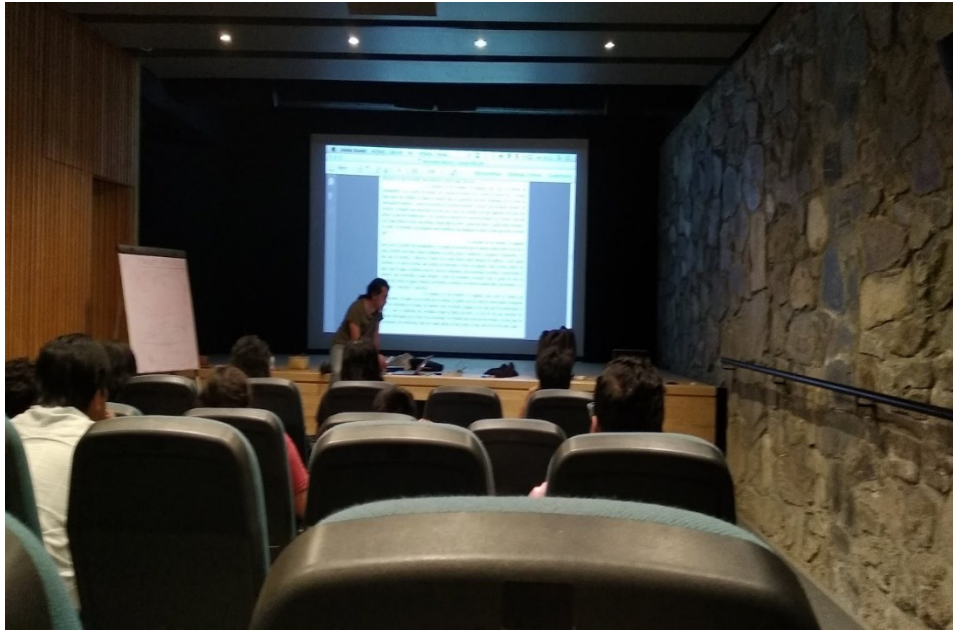


Figure 8. Ernesto Pardo giving a workshop and image construction and camera technique. Photo: Rodrigo Ruiz (2019)

The task for participants was to identify formal frameworks and image composition in both documentaries, but the analysis shifted toward content. A recurring point of discussion in the first documentary was the “privileged”

position of the filmmaker. Race played a significant role in participants' critiques, as they unveiled the production process of the documentary. They pointed out the prevalent practices of gender, race, and class privilege within Mexican cinematography agencies and schools, noting that white, hetero-patriarchal privilege continues to be reproduced at large. Ariadna highlighted that the documentary showcases diverse practices rooted in ancient knowledge, contrasting the common belief that hospitals provide superior care. She argued that conventional medicine misleads us into thinking women are safer in hospitals, portraying midwives as dangerous, while the Western narrative suggests that a woman's fulfillment lies solely in motherhood (Fieldnotes March 2019). In contrast, Africa focused on combating the “privileged” cinema that perpetuates clientelism (read nepotism), enabling filmmakers to access resources through personal connections, often without formal filmmaking credentials. He noted that those with friends at the Institute of Cinematography can easily secure funding and distribution. Although the discussion largely omitted the notion of class, when class privilege was mentioned, it was primarily in relation to whiteness.

Commentaries on the second documentary, however, turned out differently, not only because the documentary in question dealt with indigenous practices, but also because in the setting we were, that of *comunalidad*. One participant suggested that the documentary was an invitation to an exuberant world, full of life of the Zapotec culture: “...the voice in off in the film is describing the good values”, he said, ending with only noticing minimal technical problems on the sound.

Another saw the documentary as only a film *aestheticization* of festivity. “One needs to live it to truly appreciate,” she says. In her *world*, people would not share such rituals and festivities because it is a private issue, only a community affair. Orestes, expressed his preference for this film more, as it connects *culturally*. He adds; that festivities need to be lived, not seen, because many rituals are on display. But separately in the film, it only makes sense if you see only fragments of the whole rather than personally experience the saint patron festivity as a whole.

A particular scene captured my attention: the sacrifice of a bull for the festivity. The film displayed close-ups of the moment a knife pierced the beast's throat while it was restrained by ropes and the wrestling arms of community men. Waves of blood poured out, followed by a close-up of the beast's eyes turning white and lifeless, accompanied by a voice calling for universal reciprocity.

One of the Lab students asked if anyone had an opinion about this scene. His question was met with dead silence, followed by a few timid responses. While not everyone expressed their views on the act of killing, Africa described it as somewhat savage and extremely violent. Others argued that killing for food is acceptable. Orestes added that, in this context, rituals legitimize the act of killing. This perspective will resonate later in my fieldwork when I address themes of value and mediation, which I will discuss in the following section.

The documentary directed by Yaasib Vázquez, a prolific filmmaker, evokes a sense of longing and nostalgia for his world. Through this beautiful cinematic piece, he captures the essence of cosmology in harmony with nature and the land through rituals. The film features community leaders discussing their lives as they navigate social changes while striving to maintain a connection with their culture to ensure the continuity of their social fabric.

Luna stated that the director is of a second generation of people who migrated to the city, and longing for their *terroir* is common among people who do not live in communities. Cultural homogeneity and romantic views on indigenous communities in films were almost omitted and brought up timidly and briefly by Luna; another participant commented that such films are concomitant with migrant filmmakers driven by nostalgia. It seems that throughout the workshop, notions of class and ethnicity were absent however disguised with notions of race and privilege. When we turned to identity, or in this case, ethnic identity e.g. indigeneity it remained unscrutinized and briefly touched on cinema, as the documentary mentioned above.

Equally interesting was the social dynamics in the workshop about *indigenous identity*. None-indigenous members and students, timidly make comments on the subject matter. This is a delicate topic, especially when we have indigenous members in our Lab, one of the participants



Figure 9 Lab "students" discussing documentaries image construction. Photo: Rodrigo Ruiz (2019)

expressed it informally (Field notes April 2019). Some community members sanctioned at times comments and opinions emitted by outsiders. In interactions of people from non-indigenous communities with community members, it became clearer that,

in ethno-political *talking* and indigenous practices discussions from outsiders could be only allowed by the consent of an *ethnic authority*, meaning through the authorized voice of the native's experience and knowledge. This was the case when I recognized Luna as the gatekeeper of community projects and indigenous media in the region, mediating by facilitating discourses on indigenous media resistance during informal social events. After a long day at the workshop, Orestes, Marisela, and I joined everyone at a small dinner place across the street from the cinema. We took some time apart from the crowd and began eating separately. Once we finished, I heard Luna calling out to me, "Rodrigo! Come here, we have plenty of data for your PhD, you're supposed to be taking notes!" We joined the conversation, which centered on colonialism and strategies of resistance, particularly among indigenous peoples. Orestes and Marisela framed adaptability as a key strategy for resisting new systems of power, explaining that the Ayuuk (Mixes) people have successfully resisted through adaptation and negotiation. For them, it's crucial to appropriate and adapt outside influences to survive. Luna moderated the discussion, giving informal turns to speak. Marisela supported Orestes' perspective, stating that resistance efforts are more effective in the political arena than in cultural domains. "Politics of recognition can provide some foundation for dialogue" (Fieldnotes March 2019), she added.

I found myself in an uncomfortable position when I attempted to elaborate on Orestes' points, only for Luna to unexpectedly interrupt me and pass the turn to Juaco, a young man from the Sierra hinterland. At that moment, I interpreted the interruption as a signal that I was not authorized to discuss historical indigenous resistance to colonialism. This still puzzles me, especially considering how differently I could engage on similar topics with Abril and Tavo (see Part I). It seemed that only indigenous participants were allowed to address issues surrounding indigenous matters.

While the rest of us listened, most participants showed approval by nodding their heads. Tensions escalated when we broached the subject of language and translation. Juaco, a Zapotec from Yagavila, argued that certain concepts in Zapotec cannot be translated into other languages. Luna agreed, noting that colonial languages fail to capture the depth of "our" languages. Orestes and Marisela took a different stance, asserting that the issue is not about *translation* but *interpretation*. They pointed out that all languages have limitations; for example, cross-cultural translation between German and Italian, or Chatino and Ayuuk, requires the expertise of interpreters and linguists to facilitate intercultural understanding. Marisela acknowledged that the revitalization of language, which has been a focus of policy in recent years, stems from a broader issue of identity loss and intergenerational change (Fieldnotes March 2019). This reminded me of a conversation with Luna, in which she mentioned preparing a documentary about her reasons for no longer speaking her native language, Zapotec. She jokingly wondered whom to blame for this loss (Fieldnotes February 2019).

Several considerations arise from the above. One key aspect is how indigenous people gain a *voice*. As Ginsburg (2002) notes, they "talk back" to structures of power that have erased or distorted their interests and denied them access to dominant media outlets – an effort Luna frequently highlights as one of *Lab's* tasks. The enduring question of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" has its limitations (see Shohat & Stam 1994, 343). Interestingly, Shohat & Stam (1994) urge us to consider that, as identity politics evolve, individuals from recognizable social groups often delegate representatives to speak on their behalf. This raises an important question: Does the experience of oppression confer a special jurisdiction over the right to speak about it? For instance, could only an African American direct *Malcolm X*, as Spike Lee argues? (Shohat & Stam 1994, 344). Several mainstream examples illustrate this; one of them is Denzel Washington, who discussed the importance of having a Black director for the film *Fences* during a radio show (SiruisXM 2016,

online).⁴⁸ He suggested that although Spielberg directed *Schindler's List* and Scorsese *Goodfellas*, both directors could have succeeded with either film. Washington asserted that it is culture, not race that matters stating that all African Americans know what a hot comb is when it hits their hair on a Sunday morning. This emphasizes a cultural difference rather than a racial one.

The point I want to emphasize is, that identity politics has become a widespread practice, transcending boundaries of class, gender, and other categories. Within these representational positions, we encounter increasingly diverse and complex relationships of domination, subordination, and collaboration. However, the main issue is the consistent omission and neglect of class relations. Identity politics, despite its broader discourse, seems to contain a mechanism that bypasses this challenge. Specifically, in public presentations or conferences, the validity of research often hinges on acknowledging the *locus of enunciation* [my emphasis] (see Grosfoguel 2011), accompanied by an introductory disclaimer: "I speak from my position of power of academia, I speak from my many positions, European, or urban middle class, or indigenous, or working-class mestizo, Mexican, and such and such community..." and so on. As an act of magic, all discomforts disappear.

At the dining table, I encountered one of many instances of unilateral utterances regarding indigeneity and colonialism. Here, I suggest that "talking back" involves self-representation beyond media and the potential to disrupt interpellation. Indigenous individuals, such as Tavo, Abril, or Luna, actively challenge prevailing narratives about "them" (or indigenous peoples in general) and take the lead in constructing their own discourses and narratives about their historical development. In this context, the work of Cine Too members, particularly Luna, extends beyond the production of self-representing films and self-narratives. Indigenous peoples leverage various means to contest any portrayals they perceive as inaccurate or reductive.

Another consideration, however, is the limited space for critical conversations about colonialism, indigenous peoples, racism, and related topics among gatekeepers. During my fieldwork, I observed that most outsiders engaged little, if at all, in discussions about indigenous people, communality, or colonialism – especially when community members were present. This was evident at the dining table, during workshop film analyses, and in informal conversations. For instance, after a session at the cinema, Ariadna voiced her concerns about alternative circuits of

⁴⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Ayf8Iny9Eg&ab_channel=SiriusXM Retrieve May 2022

film production, distribution, and exhibition, including the initiatives that Lab was pursuing. She criticized the involvement of middle-class individuals who fervently support narratives of egalitarian processes and anti-capitalistic trends while comfortably operating within capitalist, neoliberal frameworks, often exploiting their own forms of privilege. Furthermore, she noted that in Venezuela, identity politics have become trendy and lucrative. Claiming an ethnic identity can potentially create value and provide access to public and private resources, she remarked (Fieldnotes March 2019).

Luis, another *Lab* member from the town of Etna, ruled by *usos y costumbres*, just outside Oaxaca City, while asking him about *comunalidad* and his project, looked at me somewhat annoyed and bothered by my question. However, he resolved it by simply saying, “I think they romanticize *lo indigena* too much. Sometimes we think the *indigena*, the communal, the communitarian is cool but we have to question everything, no?” he affirmed. He prefers to think about the essence of the Lab differently. Instead of labeling it as *comunalidad* or *tequio*, or whatever, it is just a way of organizing to accomplish a common goal. Luis hints at the possibility of organizing projects in an anarchist way and dismisses the ethnic and indigenous components of the Lab (Fieldnotes April 2019).

Going back to Ariadna, she describes at length what the *ethnic trend* means for her in the Americas, especially among women, but refuses to discuss Mexico, because “I am a foreigner”, she said. However, she has no problem in doing so about Peru or the whole of South America and pointing out, as she said, only generalities.

“I think there is a certain trend or fashion if you will, to identify oneself as an indigenous woman. This trend is exploited as well. What is exotic is good for business. Exploitation is framed by a definition probably by the state. Consequently, we will have to ask those women if they define themselves as indigenous women. That label, is a commodified exploitation, from Mexico to Argentina. For instance, in the Andean region, they exploit the “cholas” image. Now is cool and trendy to be *chola*. The cultural industries exploit that and vanish community cultural processes. I think now, it is a standardized process of being the cool indigenous woman and it is relational to the *hipster* thing, it is like a package” (Fieldnotes March 2019).

Africa shared similar observations during our discussion of Cuarón’s *Roma* (2019) with Ariadna. They both highlighted the importance of focusing discussions on the figure of Yanitzia, the Academy Award-nominated character from the film. However, they noted that discussions

around class relations were often overlooked and dismissed. This was the first and only instance where class was briefly mentioned. They argued that identity politics have penetrated the current neoliberal landscape, claiming that Yanitzia's character was exploited not only for marketing the film but also within Hollywood's new era, where actors are increasingly reclaiming minority and diverse presences in film and production processes. Ariadna pointed out that this trend reflects the film industry's hunger to commodify diversity. Both agreed that *Roma* serves as a clear example of how film industries in a neoliberal economy co-opt identities, transforming them into commodities while rendering their representations politically obsolete. They expressed concern that some progressive forces, particularly within mainstream discourse, fail to recognize this representation movement in film as part of a broader neoliberal agenda.

Ariadna's remarks on film industries and diversity sharply contrasted with the mainstream hype celebration of diversity inclusion. She opted for deeper insights. For her, social identity is just a starting point for inclusion, only worth it if it leads to control of the means of cinematic production. She gave hints of what projects like JEQO and Lab would try to do on the matter. For her, the means to make a film must be in the hands of each community and not from alien subjects. In the end, not only does the control of production matter, it matters who displays what and which narrative.

“Let us suppose, for instance, that, I, Ariadna from Venezuela, would produce a documentary about the Zapotec community of Guelatao about, say, how the indigenous category affects the community. It simply would be a lie. That reflection (documentary production) process, discussion, and analysis has to come within the community. Now, if there are tools I have learned about filmmaking, technicalities, and so on. The modest thing I can do is to share those tools with the community. I will not provide the narrative. This needs to come from them. I am limited to discussing Venezuelan communities from my urban Caracas context” (Fieldnotes March 2019).

Ariadna argues that films are only legitimate when made by members of the communities they portray, with authenticity tied to self-representation. According to her, subaltern subjects must document their own history and experiences, as only their voices are valid. I disagree; the task is twofold. While self-representation is often seen as the sole truth, it's essential to critically assess

not only the images others create of us⁴⁹ but also those we produce ourselves. This twofold critique helps prevent the reproduction of flawed portrayals. Paradoxically, identity politics often supports affirmative action based on essentialist representations – categories we theoretically reject but still reinforce in practice (Shohat & Stam 1994, 342).

Image Construction and Production

Like any cultural product, Lab's work is shaped by its sociocultural context and constrained by economic and political conditions. Limited time and resources have impacted production. As a self-managed, volunteer-based project relying on *tequio* (communal work) and with participants scattered geographically, few materials have come to fruition. Luna once (Fiednotes, April 2020) compared her process for producing *Tio Yim* (2019) to a fully funded documentary, estimating that a funded project takes one to two years to complete. In contrast, *Tio Yim* took her five years. Her Lab counterparts have produced small clips and teasers, but no feature-length work. When I asked Luna when we might expect finished productions, her reply was, "Whenever they're ready." Still, she has created a few noteworthy pieces, which I describe below. I want to explore, one of two pieces, produced during my stay by Luna. Among all her collaborations in different film productions, two stand out. Her first long-length documentary is *Tio Yim* (2019), and the second; *Here I Lived Aqui Vivi – YAA ĖTS OJTS NTSĖĖNĖ NJIKYATY* (2020). No doubt the first one could be one of major importance. *Tio Yim* has been widely acclaimed and screened in festivals, movie theatres, and Cine Too. In it, she unveils family and personal relationships about the intellectual figure of her father surrounded by *comunalidad* emergence and community practices. However, I would like to focus on the second, *Aqui Vivi*.

This short film – of no more than ten minutes – is a portrait of her town, its joyful people, dramatic landscape, and the *fiesta*. In some way, it is a portrait of herself and her culture. About her identity. Let me explain the context of it.

The short film was commissioned, along with three other videos from different regions of the world, by the Poverty Research Network as part of the exhibition "*Beyond Development: Local Visions of Global Poverty*" at the University of Glasgow. The commissioned videos aim to explore

⁴⁹ As I mentioned earlier, I encountered misconceptions and subtle racial slurs, even from my own colleagues at the university. This PhD journey has faced setbacks – not only academically but also in terms of power dynamics and racial relations. These issues aren't confined to certain spaces; they exist everywhere, including among us – indigenous people of colour and across all gender spectrums.

the concept of poverty in various contexts. A webpage from the University of Leeds (2019) uses Luna's video to present a visual critique of the capitalist value systems that have manufactured poverty and to showcase how communities create spaces both within and outside cities to resist impoverishment. The handout of the exhibition describes that the

“short pieces present specific contextual narratives that aim to fight common stereotypes about representations of poverty around the world. The films will provide a powerful insight into autonomous communities in Mexico, urban groups in Senegal, and grassroots activists in Glasgow” (University of Glasgow, Beyond Development, 2018).

One evening, (Fieldnotes April, 2020) Luna invited me to view a partial edit of a film on which she was working. We went up to her studio, and I watched the footage. She asked for my opinion, catching me off guard – I was not sure what to say. Instead of offering criticism, I praised the cinematography and dramatic soundtrack, only mentioning minor technical issues, like the abrupt transitions caused by different lenses. She nodded, acknowledging she had to work with what was available. I hesitated to openly critique her work, even though I felt it framed culture in an essentialist way, like the *Here I Lived* documentary. At the time, I didn't realize the Poverty Research Network had commissioned the film or understand its purpose. The commissioned short film preceded a workshop called 'Communities of Social Assistance and Resistance' held in 2018 by the aforementioned research network in Oaxaca, Mexico. The workshop focused on the strategies and proposals by communities in social assistance and resistance and met with representatives from civil associations and NGOs to explore the local visions of global poverty and to discuss the roles of history in community action. Sofia Robles from *Servicios del Pueblo Mixe* (SER), Kiado Cruz from *Servicios Universidades y Redes de Conocimientos* (SURCO), and Luna Marán representing Agenda Guelatao among others. Although I did not attend the workshop, one can get a glimpse of what was discussed by reading the report which I found in the research network webpage cloud storage. Let us summarize Luna's take on poverty and the work of Agenda Guelatao.

For her, the issue is not poverty but rather wealth and, the idea of what it means to be rich. In this way, Agenda Guelatao, understanding its cultural focus, creates awareness among regional youngsters about the richness (culture) of the area they are growing up; in and the capacity to organize socially. Also, awareness of who they are (read, indigenous or *serranos*), understanding

its importance. In this way, creating images and sounds is in some way to pay homage to the forms of organization and way of life passed down to generations and recognize their *value*. Moreover,

“the philosophy behind the projects of Agenda Guelatao is that people should be able to enjoy audio-visual culture through the community cinema and thinking about other possible forms of cinema production and *alternative forms of wealth*. It also aims to provide job opportunities to stop people from migrating. Luna stressed the importance of collective financing and collective voluntary labor, with filmmakers, photographers, technicians, and support staff volunteering their time. She stated that this was almost more *valuable* than monetary financing” (Beyond Development: Local Visions of Global Poverty 2018, online).

Luna understands communitarian cinema as a process of unlearning the ways of mainstream production, where power relations and labor exploitation are hidden, and the *art* and outcomes serve capitalist interests. In this way, cinema, and its technologies (read infrastructure) underlay an option embracing cultural production and technology as a solution for inequality and poverty, making media and grassroots cinema projects enablers of possibilities for production, where *labor*, *economic*, and *gender violence* do not exist.

More than focusing on the production side of Luna’s video, I want to emphasize how it visually and discursively navigates themes of poverty, wealth, richness, value, and culture. As Luna mentioned, the issue is not poverty but the idea of wealth. The piece aims to create awareness of the cultural richness – *la riqueza* – of the Sierra region and highlight the value of the lifeways and organizational capacity in Guelatao.

Here is a rough outline of the short film:

The opening scene begins with a black screen displaying a caption in Spanish, Zapotec, and English: “I did not know I was poor until I went to school.” The scene shifts to a sweeping drone shot of the mountainous landscape, accompanied by *son serrano* music, dramatically amplifying the grandeur of the terrain. The camera moves fluidly, mimicking the waves of the mountains, making the landscape come alive. The screen then fades back to black, followed by another caption: “15 years later, I came back”, once again in Spanish, Zapotec, and English.

The camera goes from a wide exuberant landscape to a village close up, to then, finally, shows us the main Guelatao Street. A collage of images shows us a festive parade of costumed

people dancing to the brass band tunes *Sones serranos* during the daytime. The camera goes deeper into the people's faces to show costumes their smiles and a rhythmic festive atmosphere. Suddenly, they take a sharp turn the day to night, however, the darkness is illuminated by fireworks and *castillos*.⁵⁰ A man drives a *torito*⁵¹ in slow motion. Sparkles of different colors illuminate everything. Finally, fireworks break into the sky like rockets. A black screen appears *I came back to dance with who I love*, in Spanish, Zapotec, and English. Here, Spanish and English could have different meanings. In Spanish, it says, *Regresé a bailar con quien quiero*, taking the meaning of; *I came back to dance with whom I want*, or *with whomever I want*, different from *with whom I love*, her English translation.

The Guelatao Festivity now is on the screen. People dancing with numbers on their backs appear to be in a dance contest. I recognize a few faces while the camera turns to the brass band. Framing it as centrally important for the music is in festivities and darling for everyone. The brass band of mostly kids and teens. Again, the camera takes distance, and from above we glance at the shape of houses illuminated by fireworks. The camera then pulls back, offering a distant view of the houses below, their shapes lit up by fireworks bursting overhead.

The camera transports us to daytimes momentary to the landscape from above, like at the beginning. Again, suddenly the scene breaks and with a blurry lens takes girls hoop basketballs. Playfully smiling, the scene reminds us how rooted is basketball in Guelatao and the region. It reminds us of the Benito Juarez tournament, as Gonzalo claimed once, the truly *comunalidad* and Guelaguetza of the sierras. It appears an extending hand. It somehow synchronizes the dramatic serrano music. The hand, in one, motioned turn into a fist, as if pointing out to the closing of something, or as if, it saves something in the palm.

A final scene comes. The orange sky illuminates the outlines of the mountains. It is sundown. The camera is still, but not really, almost motionless. Black screen. *I was never poor, That's what they want me to believe. Here I lived.*

Luna's short film reflects her perspective on poverty, wealth, and culture, both visually and discursively. The vibrant visuals – colors, tones, and festive people – paired with uplifting music, breathe life into Guelatao, while the captions reveal the filmmaker's personal journey. After going

⁵⁰ *Castillos* are small structures emulating vertical columns made out of *carrizo* with fireworks common in Mexican festivities.

⁵¹ In the same way, *torito* is a structure, often made of wood, mimicking a bull, built on fireworks. One person carries the *torito* and dances at the same time the fireworks goes off.

to school, she realized she was considered poor, but upon returning home, she found that this wasn't true. The film highlights the cultural richness and joyful spirit that overshadows the learned concept of poverty. This visual poem consistently conveys that message, echoing themes discussed in Yuban Tierra Viva by Lab participants. Her film presents an idealized world, where culture transcends the material inequities of poverty. *Aquí Viví* also resonates with a quote from the World Bank's website on Social Capital and Ethnicity cited by Hale: "Ethnicity can be a powerful tool in the creation of human and social capital, but, if politicized, ethnicity can destroy capital. Ethnic diversity is dysfunctional when it generates conflict" (Hale 2004, 16). Hereby lies the question. On the one hand, there are the "good" cultural intentions of our film director, to interpret poverty and wealth only in the cultural field, and on the other, at closer inspection, in the subtext of her work, possibly unconsciously, perhaps unaware, such images underline tones of cultural essentialism overlooking poverty and wealth in economic terms. It is clear the context in which the film was commissioned and therefore understandable that the visual piece is trying to offer a visual alternative to what it means to be wealthy. However, the film falls short, seemingly not too distant from what the World Bank's quote above suggests. The video is indeed poetic and cinematographic stunning, however unproblematic and self-indulgence taking ethnic-cultural as primarily driven for richness and posits poverty (economic and any kind) and inequality (of any kind) elsewhere, probably in the measurements of GDP or income, or in times when a person does not emigrate or finding it out when going to school; but not in the richness of one's culture, because after all "we are not poor, we are culturally rich," and the cultural richness could potentially save a determined community from what GDP or what state institutions call poverty.

Luna has been an outspoken adversary of the essentialization of community life and assembly practices. Through social media, she twitted once:

"The (people) that say that we romanticize life in a town (community), surely they have never been in an assembly. There is nothing less romantic than an assembly. The assemblies are a forceful demonstration of what it means to listen to each other in community and to delve into human complexity" (N.D.)⁵²

The above commentary, however, contrasts significantly with her visual production, and at times activist and media creators communicate in public forums such as the one cited above.

⁵² Since I do not have any social media account in any kind or form of online platform, however, I feel compelled to put Luna's tweet. Once, it was possible to take a glimpse to certain tweets without having an account, now it is no longer possible.

Notwithstanding, this contradiction points out contextual positions taken by polybians. Let us explore this in more detail.

Hale (2004) notes that indigenous peoples often align with and subscribe to the policies of multicultural states. The concept of *el indio permitido* ("authorized Indian") becomes a socio-political category rather than a personal characteristic, where "multicultural reforms present novel spaces for conquering rights and demand new skills that often give indigenous struggles a sophisticated allure" (Hale 2004, 17). In neoliberal times, the residual indigenista state policies have shifted for two primary reasons: first, the political agency of indigenous people has been highlighted, and second, there is a democratization of participation spaces. The state now seeks a specific type of indigenous individual – the one who submissively accepts the system's proposals – creating the "authorized Indian". This subject is validated by the government, transnationals, and international organizations, accepting policies without question (Rodriguez 2012). Archaeologist Iris Rodriguez (2012) suggests that these authorized Indians engage in "communitarian" projects and eco- and ethno-tourism ventures, as these provide the best opportunities for sustaining the democratic and neoliberal system through cultural management. This is just one of many tributaries in this complex landscape. Hale, however, notes another one in which "neoliberalism also entails a cultural project, which contributes both to the rising prominence of indigenous voices and to the frustrating limits on their transformative aspirations" (Hale 2004, 20). In this way, the authorized Indian is inserted into this context, and recognizing themselves as a new industrial community, accepts the rules of the capitalist game of market freedom, opening the possibility of cultural heritage as a resource – as a product of a new industrial society – reproduced at macro levels (Rodriguez 2012). The state is not the only way of authorizing indigenous people, nor the only space where political and social recognition is possible for indigenous people. The market, NGOs, international institutions of cooperation, private organizations, and fields like the media and even banking institutions (see the case of Kiado above) function by granting spaces of guarantees, where political positions and socio-cultural projects are possible and where indigenous can discuss, contest, talk-back or position themselves as political agents at the global stage.

Rodriguez's (2012) insights are rather fatalistic in the sense that indigenous people – authorized ones – accept the capitalist game and submissively accept the state policies. Without a doubt, capitalism, the state, mainstream media, and several variables play a substantial role in how, when, and by which means indigenous people are situated in any given historical time e.g., class,

gender, and the like. In this, Hale (2004), and this is truly important, tells us that “one potentially deceptive image that flows from this analysis depicts a small indigenous elite benefiting as representatives of a majority from whom they are structurally alienated. To portray the divide strictly in class terms misses the point and could reinforce the assertion that “real” Indians are poor, rural, and backward, while middle-class Indians are “inauthentic”” (Hale 2004). The issue with Hale (2004) and Rodriguez's (2012) analysis is that an excessive focus on identity could obscure class relations. While Hale (2004) cautions against overemphasizing class, this can lead to a portrayal of a small indigenous elite that appears alienated and dispossessed from their class or "real" indigeneity. I must admit that I have no answer for this problem, but it is hard to believe that the authorized Indians exist without any self-reflective engagement with either the state policies or some sort of capitalist institutions or academic institutions or any platform where different forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986) are available. New political spaces, technologies, and platforms bring different narratives, and each narrative has its audience. Cine Too Lab members, including Luna, have stressed the “necessity” of exploring and telling new stories that contest the distorted portrait of indigenous people by mainstream media. That means, creating and engaging with platforms, spaces where their voices are heard, and narratives – in our case media narratives – that could form new audiences. Now, that brings us back to Luna’s work.

It is a big jump to consider only one video production as an example of a whole phenomenon. However, it makes sense to consider it because the piece is a culmination of an entire social process. A phenomenon that does not only happen in Guelatao, Oaxaca, or Mexico but globally. An example comes from Canada where Coulthard’s critique on indigenous essentialist discourse and multiculturalism, mentions that “it is crucial that advocates of anti-essentialist criticism begin to acknowledge that, as *discourses*, both constructivist and essentialist articulations of identity can aid in either the maintenance or subversion of oppressive configurations of power” (Coulthard 2014, 102; see also Dillingham 2021, 176-177). This may suggest that the essentialist discourses by indigenous people may take effectiveness in defiance oppression via politics of recognition to shape cultural differences as “unique” cultural practices; this is not surprising since *tactical image* making is not new (Burke 1992). In the contemporary indigenous struggles, alliances, media movements, and cultural activism collide in contradictions that, in appearance seem to be irreconcilable. A case in point is when minority social movements pair up with media professionals at a global scale, as McLagan notes (2002). In her piece on the process of the mediatization of the Free Tibet movement, the author tells us that the strategy of objectification of

culture for political purposes in the mass media is not without contradiction. Reliance on essentialized images of difference taps into a discourse of otherness that can deny social actors their historical agency and contemporaneity (McLagan 2002, 92).

A different example is provided by Harald Prins (2002), who examines the politics of exotic imagery in indigenous video. He argues that Indigenous peoples often base their defense on the idea of "natural" law and its inherent freedoms, but simultaneously leverage the construct of primitivism to mobilize outsiders for support. As he notes, "primitivism facilitates a quick wrapping of the "other", and it has long been a defining device in European portrayals of indigenous peoples" (Prins 2002, 60). Prins references the Plains Apache Film, where concerns about the potential loss of traditional culture led to the establishment of a special committee aimed at preserving their language and documenting cultural practices through video. Colonial fantasies⁵³ are not only carried on by the beholder being represented but now they run deep in the producers, creating a sense of cultural unity and uniqueness, apparently denoting political and cultural differences. The case of primitivism in cinema used by indigenous people exemplifies how effective images of such nature could potentially serve political purposes successfully according to the authors above mentioned. This should remind us, however, that representations based on *tactic* essentialism are both tools and traps. While these images have proven to rally pan-ethnic solidarity and create networks of collaboration internationality, idealized images have downsides (Conklin & Graham 1995; Conklin 2002). Practices of essentialist nature are not restrictive to a group, but they are global, thus indigenous struggles, depend heavily on symbolic politics framed around idealized images of indigeneity (Conklin 2013). In addition, Conklin (2013, 66) asserts that all politics makes use of essentializing representations and precisely, contemporary indigenous politics of identity depend heavily on sympathetic imaginary. Their contradiction however or better say, "trap" of such images, works at times on their success in achieving political goals by reaching audiences avid for such "primitive" formula or capitalizing on the utility of positive representations.

Luna's short film *Aquí Viví* (2020) exemplifies this dynamic. Her work encapsulates discourses on *comunalidad*, reflecting the views of various interlocutors while contrasting sharply with their own commentary – such as the tweet by Luna (mentioned above) and the numerous

⁵³ Here, I would echo the reproduction of coloniality of power (Quijano 2000). No one is exempt of reproducing the oppressing structures in some capacity, at the same time recurring to them trying to break its chains.

Kiado comments. It is challenging to determine the extent to which indigenous media and discourses depend on self-constructed, essentialized notions of indigeneity. These representations are often ambiguous and strategically tactical. Responses vary across different stages, platforms, and niches, creating a slippage in how images are mediated. While this slippage may allow for essentialist portrayals of indigeneity, it is increasingly giving way to more nuanced formulations (Smith 2010). Just like the *polybian* move in and out, across and beyond socially.⁵⁴ Would this mean that indigenous mediators accept capitalism and their maladies, – *only if* or *yes but...* as the case of the state and neoliberalism accept of *difference*? Moreover, if so, what are the outcomes? Luna made clear that seeking funding was out of the question. She did not want the project to depend on state “crumbs” or international aid agencies because it would turn them into too dependable of that kind of money to operate, after all, the project's self-management quality is what Cine Too and aside projects stand for – *independence*.

But on the other hand, you have to make compromises!, Kiado said to me once. Understanding the frictions and benefits that may come from such compromises as he takes his transnational telephone communication project aided by a bank as an example of how indigenous communities and projects engage with such financial institutions. Furthermore, Kiado quotes a common expression among activists: “Indios nos conquistaron, Indios nos liberaremos”,⁵⁵ to point out, that such a formula based on the imposed category of Indio, may not work anymore and we must think beyond it to enable a more radical political imagination, that is, a post-indigenous world. In the case of Cine Too, in reality, state agents, regardless of ethnic affiliation, aided the project as these “agents and agencies of the state thus (re)create ethnic categories and communities that are proxies for class to contain subalterns in their class positions” (Kearney 2004, 327). The ever-present state is a partial but important aspect, which is often overlooked by prominent *comunalidad* intellectuals and others. Furthermore,

⁵⁴ In the case of the new generation of activist in the Brazil Amazonia in the 90's due to panindigenous organizations and the flood of NGO's. Such is the case, Conklin mentions, of Davi Kopenawa: articulate, politically astute, and able to move back and forth across ethnic and cultural boundaries to relate to, and mediate among, diverse constituencies and political discourses at the local, regional, national, and international levels (Conklin 2002, 1052). Oaxaca is notorious of this phenomenon: NGO's, international cooperation and panindigenous organisations, especially after the 2006 teachers strike and social unrest.

⁵⁵ Literal translation: As Indians they conquered us, as Indians we will set us free. This reminds us to a sort of jujitsu resistance which Kearney refers to jujitsu, as an apt designation for such theory in that it is a weaponless system of self-defence. The master of jujitsu waits for an opponent to strike and then deftly redirects the blow in order to trip or throw him. The modern martial art and sport of judo is based on jujitsu principles such that each opponent attempts (Kearney 2004, 316-318).

“(t)he state's strategy advances the dialogic by constructing ethnic identity to contain the expression of class consciousness upon which it is based. But such ethnicity is only a permutation of the original contradiction. By the same token, subalterns avail themselves of the social and symbolic capital (ethnic identity) so constructed, employing it to mobilize the communities that are so defined. The social and symbolic capital created in this process serves as currency for the development of the collective identity so formed” (Kearney 2004, 328).

In this way, understanding how identity plays a role in alliances and projects alike is paramount. The process of its treatment or *creation*, as mentioned above, is disguised, and contains its class expression. For this reason, Luna's work media projects process serves as a significant example of this. As the class is subsumed in the identity field, the realization of outcomes as projects, could potentially open spaces for opportunities, and how they are framed, is what we must look at to understand the precondition process of their creation. It is not simple to understand this process staying at the level of identity discourses it is rather necessary to situate identity in the political economy field. Especially when projects of such widespan as Cine Too emerge. The crossroads involve numerous stakeholders, but the example discussed above illustrates that identity is shaped not only by project creators but also by financial institutions, the state and its agents, and people like those at Cine Too, and the community where these projects are embedded. These alliances, regardless of their nature, can lead to projects like Lab coming to fruition. I will explore this further in the subsequent sections. However, I fear it's impossible to integrate Lab production into this equation, as no productions have emerged so far. Their discursive intentions however do not diametrically differ from the foundations of *video indígena* seeking to unveil and expose social injustice and oppression of marginal social groups. Their production process could foster cooperation and, regardless of ethnic affiliation, promote social arrangements that encourage horizontal possibilities in the media field. The art of being in between does not only bring different forms of capital, which enable practices of *speaking on behalf* of, it also constitutes to enable projects such as Cine Too. However, cultural brokerage does not come easy, as the position of Cine Too within the community of Guelatao has shown us. What I found interesting during my stay in Guelatao and all along my research, was to see the process of *mediation* by indigenous intellectuals within their communities. Some people move along and many niches and worlds, people who mediate projects, and so on.

In Part I, I aimed to establish the historical role of the indigenous intellectual. The process of making law intelligible was twofold: mediators were crucial in facilitating the colonial system

while preserving a degree of autonomy within indigenous communities, creating a dialogic process. This dynamic continued during the emergence of the Mexican state through state indigenista policies. Cases of *comunalidad* demonstrate that this dialogic process has remained a historical constant. Today, we can see the diversification of the role of the intellectual. It is not the only form of power where indigenous discuss, contest, and resolve issues of identity and material conditions for their social reproduction, it is also within international and national institutions, private, public, and the like, as in grassroots media initiatives where forms of mediation between producers and general public, activist and the like are taking a preponderant role. This diversification of roles within fields is concomitant with the democratization – economically affordable – of media through technological mass production and new online media platforms. The advancement of technology in the neoliberal era – characterized by market diversification and technological development – opens pathways for cultural brokers and activists, enabling global collaborations. As Conklin articulated:

“NGO networks, as well as the new technologies of fax, Internet, and e-mail communications, create possibilities for bypassing the state's mediation or surveillance and, thus, create new forms of communication and new communities of imagination and interest that enhance local groups' capacities” (Conklin 2002, 1051).

Likewise, since the eighties, we could see how the diversification of *Cargo* reflects new forms of development by the penetration of new business e.g. ecotourism. Here, my fieldwork led to me see how indigenous leaders and their advisers constantly moderate the dialogic process, and how they mediate different forms of value within and outside of the community. It led me to, as Kearney (2004) would have it, to emphatically leave identity in the cultural realm to see it through political economy. The challenge is understand that

“the forms of capital-cultural, social, symbolic, and economic are formed and accrued by indigenous peoples participating in this process have maximum positive value as resources promoting pan-ethnic solidarity, and minimal negative value (...) as signs of "Indios" and markers of specific group identities defined in opposition to others” (Kearney 2004, 331).

It is this which is at the center of my interest.

Enchanted Tequio. The creation of Value (s)

Throughout this dissertation, I have addressed the concept of value – its meanings and implications – particularly as it relates to the inhabitants of Guelatao and members of Cine Too. The distinction among moral, ethical, economic, and symbolic values often became blurred in my fieldwork, prompting me to reconsider how these terms are defined and understood within the community. Below, I explain the evolution of my focus on value. This shift in perspective arose from two key developments. The first one happened due to the absence of a PhD supervisor (see introduction) forced me to test various ideas and discard others. I realized that media anthropology simply was not enough to understand what I would find in the field. During my time in Guelatao, most of the people I talked to, often compared two development projects: Cine Too and the glass viewpoint, an ecotourism attraction. They perceive them as a good chance to develop economically and an effective way to publicize and promote the community. However, perceptions of Cine Too later shifted; it became viewed as alien, serving the personal goals of a few community members rather than the broader community. What once appeared to be a promising job generator evolved into a source of secrecy for some, highlighting the complex discussions surrounding value – what is deemed valuable, necessary, and economically viable. Another aspect is the differentiation people tend to engage in about the kinds of labor (*tequio*) put between them. Cine Too had few people since wage labor was arranged beforehand for its arrangement and renovation; the glass viewpoint, on the other hand, enjoyed a good number of people doing *tequio*. Even I participated in the last part of it. I came to notice that *tequio* – free community labor, community projects, and value are deeply intertwined.

The other happening took place a few months before even I considered writing about a cinema project. I was attending *Ethnocineca*, one of those film festivals scratching genres, from ethnographic to documentary. A long-time friend from Colombia presented a co-directed film, *Wási (Ver) To See*, (2017), a cooperation between Amado Villafañá Chaparro filmmaker and Arhuaco community leader, and my friend Sebastián Gómez, anthropologist and filmmaker. After the screening of his film, we joined with some other colleagues at a nearby bar. Sebastián and I talked about his film, the process of production, and the circuits in which indigenous films flow. At some point, Sebastián argued the value of film production; he did not mean the social value nor the value of its political use or its valuable importance for self-representation but the value forms

within commodity flows in certain circuits, film as a commodity. It has value in the marketplace, he argues. We were hesitant but timidly relied on our understanding of Comaroff and Comaroff's (2009) work, as we identify ethnicity and social identities as a powerful component of a film production and indigenous cinema, circulate in a particular circuit which is not necessarily market-oriented and yet, different forms of values intertwine including exchange value.

We engaged in speculation and preliminary discussions, attempting to grasp the dynamics of film production, distribution, and exhibition festivals within a global context. At that stage, we struggled to find a clear direction. Although we couldn't reach a consensus on whether to directly compare indigenous cinema with ethno- and eco-tourism projects, we recognized that many indigenous initiatives are interconnected. Specifically, in certain indigenous ventures, images of tradition and spirituality are often intertwined with notions of development and the business of "experience." At that time, we abandoned the idea, not because we could not find any answers to such questions and curiosities, but because our political views and sympathy towards the cause of indigenous filmmakers and organizations clouded the possibility to see beyond. Sebastián (Gómez Ruiz 2020), however, in his doctoral dissertation, put forward these questions and links the Santa Marta Nevada Sierra' *Kogi mamó* (*Kogi*, Jaguar people, *mamó*, spiritual leader) indigenous community filmmaking projects with ideas of development, tourism, and the exotic other.

He suggested that it is virtually impossible to live outside capitalism but in some way or another, it is possible to move in the margins. That, we understood at that moment, was the task, to figure out how people move on those edges, to see what's going on. To what extent do forms of capital, value, and its entanglements change, shift, evolve, or mutate, or more precisely, if it is even possible to understand the ways people mediate them, to allegedly create an arguably *community capitalism*. For instance, Bookchin (2015) argues that we must understand with clarity where we stand in the contemporary capitalist order to provide a program and a new movement accordingly to fight back. Capitalism, he follows, has remained dynamic as a commodity exchange – objects for sale and profit –, but is also a highly mutable system, where “growth” never remains the same or in one form; it has always transformed the institutions, wherever and whatever this may be and shape the most basic social relations. There is no “pure capitalism”, he argues, as it even co-exists in the present with other forms of non-capitalist social relations, utilizing using such relations for its own ends.

The task, here is to understand how value is mediated by agents who, as *polybiens* allegedly occupy spaces in various social forms and institutions.

In this section, I aim to ethnographically illuminate how individuals understand and mediate various forms of value. It is essential to clarify, following Kearney (1996, 164)⁵⁶ that value differs from capital in that it does not connote a specific mode of production, which is primarily associated with capitalism. Value, on the other hand, has a *polysemous* function, even more than capital. When a generalized form of value comes into play it is associated with people's relations to things and other people using endowing qualities and quantities to such things. Also, a more prominent is to think of examining the value of action (performative acts). As Lambek (2013) would put it, ethical value is to action (doing something) as material value is to production (making something), however, the objectification and circulation of these two are not the same.

I recognize the risks inherent in engaging with such a vast and problematic concept to address systematically, as noted by Graeber (2001, 1-2). The ethnographic case I will present is limited in its ability to fully grasp the complexities of economic relations and the diverse understandings of value. Instead, it focuses on how Guelateños create value and discern what is valuable to them through examples of community projects. In a context marked by diversified capital and evolving social identities, as well as the indigenous community's new relations with the state and the introduction of various businesses and projects, it becomes increasingly important to understand the actions individuals take to create value.

Value (s) in general

How do we then speak generally about value, and how do we speak anthropologically about value? Not an easy answer I am afraid. Simply put, consensus on the topic of value is virtually impossible (Graeber 2001, see introduction). In everyday life, people talk about them as a set of *ethical* and *moral actions* and behaviors driven in society forming the core of what is acceptable and what is not (Graeber and Wengrow 2021). In these times, we are facing politicians and news broadcasters, especially in the West, talking about liberal values, free choice and speech, and above all, market and social values. This is true when these former views are compared to values from

⁵⁶ Kearney (1996) sees compatible his views on value with Bourdieu's forms of capital. However, he rather speaks in general as forms of value by way of its polysemy nature.

the East; such racist distinctions disguised as cultural values are set to consider what is primitive, salvage, and backward and what is not. These distinctions are increasingly put out in recent wars, the refugee “crisis” and the COVID-19 pandemic phenomenon. A more moderate right-wing advocate makes a distinction of values and asks whether people from the East and the West share the same set of ethical cultural principles, principles that people relate as meaningful and important to them to behave in such a way to make them distinct to others, hence values.

It is common for for-profit companies to articulate "company values," which define the expected behaviors and attitudes of employees. Similarly, "social values" refer to how a company contributes to societal welfare, such as promoting sustainability or ensuring fair labor practices. When consumers perceive they are getting a good deal – good quality at a reasonable price – they often refer to it as "great value for your buck," indicating a relationship between quality and quantity. In parallel, companies frequently employ marketing campaigns that emphasize environmental protection and support for farmers in developing countries who supply raw materials, such as coffee (see Žižek 2009; Brittan 1995). Thus, the spectrum of value is exceedingly broad. Graeber (2001, see chapter 1), in trying to make a coherent and viable way to understand value, states that there are at least three ways of speaking about value. The sociological, as to conceptions of what is ultimately good, proper, or desirable in human life; in the economic sense, the degree to which objects are desired, particularly, as measured by how much others are willing to give up to get them; and the linguistic in the structural sense, might be most simply glossed as meaningful difference.

Value and values, whether singular or plural, often refer to similar concepts as they represent different interpretations of the same underlying idea, be it linguistic, commodity-based, or as expressions of beliefs. This is why Kearney prefers the term "forms of value", as it emphasizes context rather than a fixed set of behaviors or practices. The concept of forms acknowledges that the quantity and quality of commodities, or the value of labor within value exchange, can vary significantly based on context (see Turner 2008). It would mean that a thing or utterance about the thing could mean different things or a particular form of value differently in different contexts, say domestic labor for instance. For instance, what may be deemed valuable to one social group could be essential for their social reproduction, while others may not find it meaningful at all. In this sense, while value itself may be ambiguous, the forms through which it is expressed are not, highlighting the importance of context in understanding value. To illustrate the contrasting forms

of value, consider a common saying in Mexican popular culture: “te dieron espejitos por oro,” which translates to “they give you mirrors for your gold.” There is a historical belief, rather than an actual event, that Spanish *conquistadores* exchanged mirrors for gold during *la Conquista*. In doing so, the Spanish believed the old Mexicans were naïve and dumb in considering such an unbalanced exchange. Hence, when someone is scammed, it is thought the same practice and adjectives occurred, naïve and dumb.

In reality, even from this simple example, there is a lot to learn from this Mexican popular saying. There is a counter position of forms of value onto two alien objects in the context of the encounters of two worlds, that is; gold-mirrors, Spanish-Mexica. The cultural exchange was incommensurable, insofar both cultures endowed different value to objects. While the Spanish saw gold as a commodity exchange, the Mexica could see mirrors as a commodity use. In other words, the old contradiction between exchange versus use value forms that Marx (1990) saw in the capitalist dimension. Furthermore, it's essential to consider not just the utility of mirrors and gold but also how different social arrangements shape their meanings. For the Spanish, gold represents a luxurious commodity, while for the Mexica, mirrors hold practical significance for self-reflection. This distinction highlights how value arises from contextual human projects. By focusing on forms of value rather than merely values, we recognize that the unique characteristics of each society dictate what is deemed valuable in both objects and actions. Our interactions with things vary based on these contextual interpretations, shaping how we validate and assign value. This narrative, although rooted in historical belief, remains a common element of the Mexican popular imagination, illustrating that forms of value are inherently contextual. Today, value becomes increasingly complex and carries manifold interpretations. It is no longer, if it ever was, a sharply defined contradiction, as illustrated by our Mexica-Spanish “fictional” example. Anthropologists have been puzzled by these manifold forms, and it is worth synthesizing certain arguments on the matter. For instance, Graeber (2001)⁵⁷ traces the study of values in the anthropological sense at the early end of the forties and beginning of the fifties with Kluckhohn (1951, 1956) and his project of comparative study of values in Rimrock, New Mexico among five different communities. His assumption was of conceiving values as conceptions of the desirable, as Graeber noted, “conceptions (...) which play some sort of role in influencing the choices people make between

⁵⁷ Here, throughout this whole part of part II, I refer repeatedly to Graeber (2001) because he has been one of the few anthropologists who had tried to put together a coherent relation between value and anthropology and how anthropologists have dealt with value. He is one of the few who tried to come up an anthropological theory on the matter.

different possible courses of action” (Graeber 2001, 3). This, Graeber claimed to be the first serious attempts to find anthropological definitions of values, until then to be found only in philosophy and sociology in different societies. However, it failed due to a lack of theoretical structure. By comparing systemic ideas without a solid theoretical model, these ideas could not be formed into a coherent system. Firth was a contemporary of Kluckhohn and, like him, recognized the vagueness of the notion of values. As early as 1953, Firth noted that while philosophers had already engaged with the concept, anthropologists had hardly begun this endeavor and notes that some have used it “in a restricted sense, as to equivalent to ideals, to social imperatives, to basic assumptions of a society, to the dictates of moral obligation” (Firth 1953, 147). Others would admit it as a part of social process, a concomitant of social action, however, refusing to isolate the notion to study it in its own right, the result is that most anthropologists have, up to that time, treated values in merely distractive ways. However, in the case of using the term for this or that purpose, Firth (1953) claims that it is not the definition that is important but the *refinement* of ideas produced by this discussion. Ultimately, for him, the use of the term 'value' is a way of talking about behavior. Graeber (2001), on the other hand, laments that Kluckhohn’s project did not flourish, above all, because he considers Kluckhohn’s principle idea truly appealing: “what makes cultures different is not simply what they believe the world to be like, but what they feel one can justifiably demand from it. That anthropology, in other words, should be the comparative study of practical philosophies of life” (Graeber 2001, 5).

Like Graeber (2001), I find this idea intriguing and see it as a starting point for an inquiry into the meaning of value. While he began with Kluckhohn’s attempt for the first time anthropologically put together a comprehensive value theory, it is not my intention to render an extensive review of the history of anthropological theory of value (Otto & Willerslev 2013a, 6). This is simply not the place. However, I do not overlook the significant debates of the past century, such as the Formalist-Substantivist debate, which can be viewed through top-down and bottom-up perspectives. This debate serves as a foundation, leading to a consensus that utility maximization and rational choice are flawed assumptions about human nature. Formalists regarded these concepts as universalities or general human laws that justified the emergence of the market (*cf* Polanyi 1944). In contrast, Substantivists argued that the formalist model could only predict behavior within markets, as institutions like the market did not exist in other societies. As Graeber put it:

“Those who start by looking at society as a whole are left, like the Substantivist, trying to explain how people are motivated to reproduce society; those who start by looking at individual desires end up, like the Formalists, unable to explain why people chose to maximize some things and not others (or otherwise to account for questions of meaning)” (Graeber 2001, 21).

In any case, substantivists left us with taxonomies with functionalist assumptions where economic institutions act to integrate society as a whole. Here I see correspondences with the concept of *comunalidad*, a set of things and rules and institutions as a social organism, which integrate the community with a set of practices, which in turn, reproduces the institutions by its members, however, without explaining what ultimately motives them or the meaning of it all. What follows is an ethnographic account of *tequio* considered as actions devoted onto something (projects) and its value creation. It synthesizes exchange-based theories and values-as-worldviews by exploring how actions are influenced by values and, in turn, create value (Otto & Willerslev 2013b; Lambek 2013; Graeber 2001). Why *tequio*? I decided to address it because as *comunalidad* goes, it is one of the pillars which fundamentally allow projects to emerge, the quantity and quality of Guelateños labor and attitudes put into something communally approved (assembly) and created (*tequio*). However, actions towards projects are not limited in time and space when the *tequio* is finished. Actions, in this case, are continuous to create value, “as a project of mutual creation, as something collectively made and remade” (Graeber 2013, 222- 230).

In the case of *usos y costumbres* and the *Cargo* system, particularly concerning *comunalidad*, actions such as *tequio* or taking on an obligatory *Cargo* position create communal value and reaffirm one's ethical commitment to the community. *Comunalidad* is founded on the premise of action – *lo que hace nuestra gente* (What our people do). Community members consistently express that it is action that defines the community, rather than any other factor. As noted in Gonzalo's commentary in the first part of this dissertation, *comunalidad* simply represents local practices and actions. Regardless of an individual's status, even those who are *vecinos* must engage in acts to become *ciudadanos*. Consequently, *ciudadanos* must perform actions to build the community—*hacer comunidad*—which Graeber describes as meaning-making. For *ciudadanos*, it is through the communal universe that things come into being.

The forms in which value is created are rather contextual and situational. To see it in such a way means to break the assumption that people are in pursuit of the same sort of things, or endow similar value to the same things hence acting and behaving similarly upon those things. The

proportions of such forms are rather located in the town's interest and creativity influenced by external and internal forces that is, new projects emanated from the *ciudadanos*, or the local authorities in turn, or the town's relationship with larger systems. Firstly, let's begin with the relation between *tequio* and projects, specifically Cine Too and the viewpoint.

The performative act of the value of *tequio*. Or the incommensurability of value?

Oaxaca takes pride in its cultural practices and productions. To some extent, all feel proud to share the same ground with important people; Toledo, Tamallo, Lila Downs, Macedonio Alcalá, Benito Juárez, etc. More importantly, there is pride particularly when liking productions and practices of indigenous peoples; painters, writers, activists, *tequio*, Guelaguetza, mezcal, and so on. The latter at times mixed up with folklore in different institutional and social contexts or in its most raw form. These cultural practices take the historical form of ancestry or from immemorial times and, in some cases, as cultural heritage from our *abuelo's* legacy. A practice, which always puzzles me, is that of *tequio*.⁵⁸ It always has been framed as an indigenous practice and it is, however, not restrictive to indigenous communities. As I mentioned before, many people in urban areas, including me and family members or friends, performed it. But as Kummels (2017) and others have suggested (see part I), *tequio* is a communal “pillar”, defining the indigenous system; *tequio* links community members with their communal resources (Robson & Wiest 2014, 106). Furthermore, Robson and Wiest, in their fieldwork in the Oaxaca Sierra Norte, maintain that “*tequio* is a *voluntary [emphasis added]* labor to community projects”. In addition, *tequio* is often believed to be a *donation* of labor or money (Mercado 2015). Quite the contrary, it remains obligatory in several communities I have visited in the region and Guelatao as it is associated with social status, an ethical obligation, and a pre-condition for occupying higher *Cargo* positions (Cohen 2000). As *tequio* is structural to the indigenous normative internal system, one simply cannot, not perform it. It is an obligation. I have encountered, however, numerous cases where *tequio* is paid, or when's not performed the member at fault pays a fine. Several issues contribute to paying up *tequio* rather than performing it, having mainly migration as a factor (Barabas 2006);

⁵⁸ Here, at times I refer to *tequio* as an unpaid community labour, I shall remind the reader that I refer it indistinctively. However, I only make evident the relation with activities, or activity, or acts, as for the purpose of this discussion they remain the same meaning, as people doing things and people making things inherited in their community, that of Guelatao as members entangle in their form of social reproduction, that of *comunalidad*.

others, as I have encountered, simply not wanting to participate for other reasons. One of them, contrary to what some of my interlocutors mentioned, is not time. Interest in the participation in a project's *tequio* is so diverse that is impossible to single out one, but *tequio* engagement seems to go beyond the constraints of time.

My interest in *tequio* stems from observing its significance to community members engaged in specific projects. Another promising avenue of exploration is Andre's interpretation of *tequio* as action, which aligns with Lambek's (2013) view that action encompasses all human activity that generates value. By framing *tequio* in this way, we partially set aside the labor formula of labor-production-commodities, adopting a broader perspective on the interplay of value creation. This understanding moves us beyond the confines of cultural activism alone, revealing a more nuanced reality than we might initially perceive.

Tequio is the action, in which community members create value, insofar it's continuously created by *tequio* and engagement. *Tequio*, I argue, is action of mutual creation, as something collectively made and remade as community members act collectively to create, while creating themselves as a community simultaneously. Maintenance and construction are two characteristics of *tequio*, in the words of Arturo Warman:

"The *tequio*, presentation of labor days for the maintenance and construction of public works such as roads, streets, public buildings, and churches, or the introduction of new services such as education, electrification, drinking water, construction of clinics, was essential for marginalized communities by public investment but rarely used to *redistribute wealth or resources within them* [emphasis added]" (Warman 2003, 235-236).

Warman (2003) provides an interesting perspective on how *tequio* functions within indigenous communities. He notes that, despite the communal well-being intentions behind it, *tequio* does not serve as a tool for redistributing wealth among citizens. However, Warman overlooks the significance of *tequio* to indigenous communities, particularly the concept of *comunalidad*, which embodies the ethical value of its practice. He suggests that it reflects a necessity to marginalize communities lacking resources and neglected by public investment. Another approach is looking at the group's engagement in a particular *tequio*. Carmen once highlighted that community members often commit to *tequio* in a project but may choose not to participate in another, opting instead to pay someone to undertake the latter (Fieldnotes June 2019).

This indicates that they perceive a potential benefit for the community as a whole, weighing the value of their time invested in *tequio* for each project. In the case of Warman, the *tequio* on necessary infrastructure is noted – public buildings, roads, streets, water pipes, etc. is a contributing factors to the well-being of the community. Why individuals choose to engage in *tequio* for one project ("A") but not for another ("B"). What factors influence these decisions, and how do they shape the community's overall value system?

The performative act of *tequio* should be viewed as a starting point rather than an end in itself, a perspective often overlooked in *comunalidad* scholarship and broader Mexican studies (Barabas 2003; 2006; 2008; Martínez Luna 2010; 2015, Maldonado 2016; Aquino Moreschi 2013).⁵⁹ For instance, Barabas (2003) conceives *tequio* as a form of reciprocity ranging from altruistic donation to deferred exchange, serving as a model for social relationships across various dimensions of indigenous community life. In addition, Barabas (2003) elevates *tequio* to the category of a *system of values* that prescribes the model of relations between humans and between humans and extra-human entities. She conceives reciprocity as the axis of almost every human and non-human relation.

Historically, *tequio* has been examined through various lenses, leading to different interpretations. Jorge Chapa (1978, 100) notes that in colonial mining labor, *tequio* was the amount (quantity) of ore stipulated by the *minero* or captain. Others, like Paul Gillingham (2021, 198) have noted that *tequio* and other variants are a form of euphemized forced labor used by institutions and politicians. Nethertheless, it is accepted that *tequio* is unpaid labor in indigenous communities. However, my research did not find any detailed studies of *tequio* that extend beyond these established frameworks or the perspectives outlined above.

A constant theme in the literature on *tequio* is its role as a foundational element of indigenous institutions, often viewed through the lens of cosmovision as an ontological or endemic practice. However, this perspective raises questions about the political and economic implications of *tequio*, which are often overlooked. Their way of dealing with it is only a small portion of what it entails, meaning social historical forces and as I say, the *guts*

⁵⁹ Barabas probably is the anthropologist who has worked more closely with indigenous cosmology in Oaxaca. Her scholarship tackles the relation between territory, ritual, value systems, animism, and reciprocity from an ontology approach. My interest here lies in the way she deepens understanding of the aforementioned practices on reciprocity as a whole value system.

Tequio's obligatory nature is fundamental to community building and is influenced by various internal and external factors. One key aspect, as noted by many interlocutors, is its role in curbing individualism. They view *tequio* as a double-edged sword: it fosters social reproduction within the community while protecting it from external threats, such as corruption.

An interesting aspect of *tequio* is how community members engage in the creation process of value of what they are doing, to actually create something that they consider necessary. The question is, is this always the case?

This comparison between Cine Too and the tourist glass viewpoint highlights the engagement and commitment that community members invest in projects. It reflects what Guelateños consider as both necessity and possibility. Additionally, it highlights the significance of *tequio* as an act of ethical obligation that empowers community initiatives.



Figure 10. Cine Too members performing *tequio* at the mirador de cristal. Photo: Rodrigo Ruiz (2019)

Tequio, as obligatory as may be, also can be paid to third parties (see Part I and Warman 2003 above). Paid labor, again, often means that a community member, either has no time to perform it or is not interested in it. In

any case, the practice of *tequio* (or hired labor), is not only labor but at times it reveals actions on what is important and valuable for the community and what is not. Also, the attitudes expressed about the Cine Too project were particularly revealing, as it was oftentimes compared with other projects, particularly the glass viewpoint.

Here I present Andrés's account of the matter.

At the start of my fieldwork, Andrés provided a striking example. After discussing the community's long-standing engagement with media and the concept of *comunalidad*, he clearly distinguished between luxury and necessity. He implied that *tequio* is tied to what people understand as a shared social necessity. I would translate luxury differently whereas in Spanish it might mean, unnecessary, excess, or superfluous. But let us quote him at length:

“To be clear, the cinema, for the community is a luxury. But not because a luxury is a bad or negative thing. For instance, if the potable water tubes break, and then everybody goes to do *tequio* and fix it. Or we have to build a wall for some house or the library, we carry on together, we go to help to fix the clinic. All these things about education, the clinic, and water are indispensable things for our lives. Even the music it is. You cannot understand a community without music because is a heartless town, so the music is part of it, us. You cannot have a religious event, a civic event or social event, a wedding or baptism without the music brass band. The music is what gives you the tone and rhythm. However, the cinema or radio or TV Channel (He points out *Radio Estereo Comunal* and “*Nuestra visión*” *Canal 12*, projects in which his family had a great involvement) well ... we can live without them. Life goes on and we can be happy without those things but is so cool that we have a cinema nonetheless” (Fieldnotes April 2019).

Andrés commentary truly encapsulates the general distinction people make between community projects and the quantity and quality of *tequio* invested in them. It also illustrates the sharp distinction between the media projects and the rest. He points out that people understand “the rest” as necessary for the social reproduction of Guelatao, while cinema, and media projects are seen as non-essential, therefore participation is almost non-existent. In another conversation, Andrés said that cinema is not a normal practice within the communitarian life. It is not necessary. And the community sees it generally as expendable (Fieldnotes March 2019). This contrasts sharply with Cine Too members, who believe the project emerged from a genuine need. Additionally, many in the community perceive it as a private business or the initiative of a specific group, which they consider immoral and unethical.

When discussing *tequio* in Andrés's terms, it becomes clear that it goes beyond the necessity of unpaid labor for social reproduction. The act of *tequio* has a value in itself, which is the value of belonging to the community. This ethical value emphasizes responsibility toward community members in the act of community building. Social sanctions arise when individuals fail to fulfill their obligations, such as paying someone else to do their *tequio*. People make judgments about what they consider necessary and valuable for them and the community to engage in *tequio*,

or not, or pay for it. But in any case, in principle, the ethical value of *tequio* comes to the fore even before making such a judgment because *tequio* is what is ethically correct for *ciudadanos*, what counts is the acknowledgment of what it signifies.

If we follow Lambek (2013), ethical actions can be ordinary and transcend the economic reduction and could be different activities from labor and constituting of ethics – as they are distinguishing from the utilitarian value or market exchange value. But Lambek, combining Marx and Mauss, shed light on the connection of the value of objects and the value of humans, adding action to work (production) to human activity (Lambek 2013, 156). In addition, Graeber reminds us that value is how “actions become meaningful to the actor by being incorporated in some larger, social totality – even if in many cases the totality in question exists primarily in the actor’s imagination” (2001, xii).

And illustrative example emerged when people extern opinions on *Estereo Comunal* and its broken receiver. When I asked some Guelateños why the community didn’t organize a *tequio* to re-establish the signal, some of them replied that there was no need because there was already another radio station. Others claimed that *tequio* is only for community projects and not personal ones. It is important to note that *Estereo Comunal* was indeed a community-sanctioned project, approved in assembly meetings. Jaime Martínez Luna previously mentioned concerns that community members felt uninformed about these projects, viewing them instead as personal businesses aimed at profit.

Indeed, differing perspectives on *tequio* highlight how community members assess ethical and economic values. The value of *Estereo Comunal* reinstalling signal device was, at that time, perceived by some Guelateños as not necessary because they framed it as economic individual value, as a private business. In contrast, those who started working there, such as Andrés, claimed that the project is valuable because it contributes to inform the community and the region about what constituted their identity through political work and cultural production, serving as a platform for political action. In the words of Jaime Martínez Luna, the radio program tried to make valuable their culture, *revalorar lo propio*, and cultural resistance. Two very different visions of large social totalities should be noted here as in Graeber (2001) above. On the one hand, no meaningful actions were taken to repair the broken signal receptor while on the other, *Estereo Comunal* considers that taking action to repair it is fundamental for a community social cultural re-valorization of indigenous people.

In this vein, the enactment of *tequio* denotes which value people tend to endow in any given project. Going back to the cinema such value(s) shift at times through actions, depending what is the situation of the community; needless to say it is difficult to know. Even more so since “ethical values are incommensurable to one another; they cannot be measured along any single standard and cannot be seen as mutually exclusive alternatives or exchangeable for one another” (Lambek 2013, 143). Andrés’s insights point to this direction when he states that such practice of going to the cinema, does not fit into the community realm because community members do not see it as necessary, but the question lies in what community members mean is necessary or meaningful.

Here, the glass viewpoint comes into play, revealing a comparison made by many Guelateños as they required significant investments and *tequio*. Actions are not only mediated by what people consider ethical within the community but also by what is economically valuable for the community. While *tequio* itself is an ethical act, its involvement in community initiatives often reflects a balance between calculation, choice, and judgment. Although the incommensurability and commensurability of action may seem contradictory at times, the performative acts of *tequio* embody both ethical and economic value creation. The emergence of value materializes in several ways for and by the community, objects (projects-infrastructure), and rituals (civic and religious events). The attitudes and care demonstrated by community members create a form of “measurement.” As Marx argued, labor becomes commodified only within capitalism, transforming it into an object rather than an activity (see Lambek 2013, 144). *Tequio*, however, has these two qualities, as to whether one or more community members would hire labor to fulfill *tequio* or *Cargo*, and when they do not and they rather engage in *tequio* activities because they believe is ethically and morally important. Additionally, it’s important to note that paid labor is generally discouraged and considered morally and ethically inappropriate by Guelateños. In Guelatao, I learned that framing labor as an activity alters the understanding of value. Acts and value are contextual relations, both lie “in what, whom, and how they acknowledge or affirm, in acts as the means by which we acknowledge each other (or refuse to do so)” (Lambek 2013, 155). This approach allows us recognize the significance of actions in creating value, as we humans are motivated by various drivers in our interactions with the world. These actions also inform the kind of projects people see possible and the social arrangements they may contain. However, not every act generates value, nor does it necessarily create the type of value that actors envision. Alain and Andrés provide the same comparative example of the two sides of the same coin as similarly enlisted above, precisely about the glass viewpoint.

They recalled vividly when the authorities announced *tequio* for the construction of the new tourist attraction –the glass viewpoint uphill.



Figure 11. A tourist at the glass viewpoint. Photo: Rodrigo Ruiz (2019)

Many people turned out to help in some capacity. The project was partly covered by the authorities, the tourism committee and the INPI in funds for rural development projects focusing on eco-tourism. This initiative is part of a larger tourist complex that includes the Hostel Hostal Ahí Tá'a and Cine

Too, among others. The complex offers themed walks, such as a media and communication circuit, a hike to the glass viewpoint, and the Benito Juárez walk.



Figure 12. Braucher of Yela Too ecotourism agency. Photo, Rodrigo Ruiz (2023)

In rural and Indigenous communities the practice of *tequio* eases the expenses and the responsibility for the development of the community, relying on each citizen to perform *tequio*. However, the situation with the cinema was starkly different; few people volunteered to help, and its budget primarily came from a PRI federal deputy. I was told that, from the beginning, they would hire wage labor from outside to build the cinema. This reliance on *tequio* versus external wage labor highlights a significant contrast in community engagement between the two projects. In addition, both projects, generally among community members, are believed to be part of the same scheme, to create jobs for people, and to gain profits for economic community development, however, the reality differs greatly.



People's motivations to engage in *tequio* for project creation vary widely, ranging from moral and ethical obligations to potential benefits, social networking, gossip, or genuine interest in the goals of *tequio*. The point is not to look at the motivations but at the type of *tequio* in which people choose to participate.

Figure 13. The tourist options of Yela Too include a route of media communication,
A walk through the history of media involvement by the community. Photo Rodrigo Ruiz (2023)

The contrasting perspectives on *tequio* surrounding the viewpoint and Cine Too illustrate differing motivations to engage or not in the *tequio*, among community members. The viewpoint project was framed into eco-tourism and economic development, leading to broader participation. In contrast, Cine Too struggled to garner similar support, as many did not perceive it as a profitable venture. While Cine Too members asserted that their project aimed for moral and ethical value through education and storytelling, some community members expressed discomfort with Alejandro Morales, who managed the eco-tourism office. Members told Alejandro that he should charge rent, since it struggled to cover its electricity costs and did not generate profit, they at least, should pay rent. Alejandro refused and argued that the Cinema's intentions lay somewhere else, not as a business for profit.

Ciudadanos often perceive Cine Too primarily through an economic lens, contrasting sharply with the ethical stance held by its members. This contradiction jeopardizes the continuity of the project. Views from outside Guelatao, press and sympathizers, film collectives, and the like, lean towards the ethical and moral values embedded in the projects. The quality and ethical significance of Cine Too are rooted in its connection to *comunalidad*. Outsiders act accordingly because they consider *comunalidad* and Cine Too of the utmost value because they propose a path to more egalitarian ways of doing cinema as well as pedagogic proposes (ethical value). Actions inform these values in complex ways, overlapping them at times, but the desires of the *ciudadanos* do not always match those of the Cine Too members.

As I stated above (see diagram) only one part of the whole eco-tourism project is mandatory for *Cargo* position. Cine Too is located in a rather marginal position. This points out the lack of actions deployed by the community to create certain value, consequently, enactments from its outside position create a different form of value. These two collided at times, they are almost contradictory. However, this contradiction evaporates by the same communitarian formula that is assembly approval, *tequio*, and community values in the sociological sense, distinguishing what is proper and what is not in a determined social group. More of this “evaporation” is in the next section.

I observed that the forms, as noted by Kearney (2001) above, become clear when actions are directed toward things valued by the community. In this context, action itself generates value. Forms represent the actions through which projects and initiatives gain value. In so, the democratic assembly accepts what actions to take on what they may consider, or not valuable. Regardless of what kind of value they are up to create – ethical or economic, or both simultaneously. The process of action is essential for creating and recognizing these values. Value, in this case, can be just about anything, but the key point is to locate value as it is evoked in discourses and materializes in action leading to either engagement or disengagement. In other words, enchantment or disenchantment.

During my fieldwork, *Cine Too* was generally underutilized by locals and regional visitors, drawing attention only during specific events like basketball tournaments and concerts. Its perceived value is largely internal, as many community members view *Cine Too* as a sterile project due to its inability to provide economic benefits. A former schoolmate once remarked that for anthropology to be viable, it must be recognized – echoing the saying, “santo que no se ve no es adorado” (a saint that is not seen is not worshipped). While this reflects a common sentiment, *Cine*

Too possesses an incommensurable value that transcends the economic framework some community members impose on it.

I believe is not entirely like that Cine Too exists beyond the scope of the community, in such a way that it has an incommensurable value escaping the reducible economic value that community members at times want to endow it with. Whether actions such as *tequio* create value, it is important to note the internal (silent) conflict that sometimes projects could potentially create. The role of the cultural broker is fraught with tension between community desires and contemporary considerations such as social justice, self-representation, and alternative media. Value creation through *tequio* is only one small operation of the broader universe structuring the community's life but I consider it fundamental to understand the mediation between different forms of value internally and externally of the Guelatao and *comunalidad* cosmos.

In which a Closed Corporate Community makes sense once again.

In this final section, I will introduce Wolf's (1957) CCC (Closed Corporate Community), omitting the "P" since Guelatao no longer has peasants. The main point of this is to reintroduce the CCC as it is fundamentally important in regulating value extraction, restricting community membership for outsiders, and most importantly, regulating any form of value creation from community projects. The CCC becomes paramount to understanding how projects emerge and sustain themselves within the community. I have opted to understand Guelatao projects and media in particular, partly, by reintroducing the CCC, rather than frame projects on *comunalidad* or something else. The CCC provides a deeper understanding of the "guts" of the community and its social arrangements as well as its relation with state institutions, mediators, outsiders, and projects accepted within. Naturally, the argument must fit within the context of contemporary internal and external politics and the economic realities of today, especially as we explore the intentions and aspirations of the people and the rise of media projects. There's no need to revisit the entire concept, but a few key points are important. First, there are no peasants anymore. Many *ciudadanos* (citizens) now work in small businesses, own enterprises, teach, hold government jobs, or work in newly established community businesses. In short, there's a significant number of bureaucrats. Land tenure for subsistence no longer exists, and no one lives off the land. Yet, Guelatao still

functions effectively as a closed corporate community. Wolf's (1957) concept is still useful for understanding media projects' shortcomings inside the community and success elsewhere. To simplify things, I will not attempt to point out the misunderstandings and critiques of Wolf's (1957) framework in the past (see Part I). In a way, throughout a long span of time, the *longue durée*, of the CCC, has been named differently in particular historical junctures; in colonial Mexico: *Republica de Indios* or Mexican Spanish scholarship *Cargo* system or the aforementioned CCPC, ladder system or formally known as, *usos y costumbres* and normative internal system and finally, known in activist and native intellectual circles as *comunalidad*. Despite each one of them with historical variations, institutional implications, constitutional legislation, and cultural resistance activism, its social arrangements have functioned historically quite well in managing internal and external affairs for indigenous communities. I have taken as an example the process of media projects based on local intellectuals and external academic and activist bodies known as *comunalidad* to get to know how much social arrangements work in contemporary times using tactics – one may add creativity – and adaptation. Another point is to understand that Guelateños mainly local intellectuals/activists, make a sharp distinction between them and the rest, between community members and outsiders. This distinction is evaluated by contrasting the community forms of government and values which constitute their unique way of life with capitalism, liberal democracy and the modern world. That is why it is useful, at least synthetically, to make such a distinction here. As I pointed out in the previous part, the figure of the indigenous intellectual has played a fundamental role in building bridges, making law intelligible, cross-cultural translations, and so on. Also, I argue that such characters mediate forms of value by being the gatekeepers and cultural authorities on, say, one's own, *lo propio*, indigenous way of life. However, when looking at the Cine Too project, individuals who are recognized by their peers within the community as intellectuals are, well, not always mediators of any kind. I briefly sketched how Juan José and Jaime Martínez Luna, through their activism, media production, and intellectual contributions, created several projects aligned with the principles of *comunalidad*. Additionally, a new generation of professionals is inheriting the knowledge, connections, and skills necessary to create, support, and circulate media projects, often extending beyond the traditional realm of *comunalidad*.

During my fieldwork I observed that media projects did not flourish internally as expected; instead, they gained significant traction among outsiders and collaborators in indigenous media. Many community members expressed a sense of disenchantment, feeling that these projects did not genuinely benefit the community. This collective sentiment highlighted the community's

concern for various initiatives, such as the glass viewpoint project, which some Guelateños believed generated profit and jobs. There was a prevailing sentiment that these media projects served personal interests, often perceived as pursuits for individual fame or similar motivations. However, the true intentions behind Cine Too and other media initiatives lay in a different direction, reflecting deeper communal aspirations and values.

For some community members, the reasons for supporting one project over another are relatively straightforward. They often argue that they care more about projects that promise economic benefits for the community as a whole. Additionally, they tend to engage with initiatives that align with locally recognized cultural practices, such as a brass band school or basketball, rather than those perceived as less culturally relevant, like going to the cinema or making films. However, understanding how the community engages with and derives value from certain projects – regardless of their potential benefits – can be quite complex. Various factors come into play. For instance, the desire to establish the first cinema in an indigenous community holds significant value for individuals who have built networks in the media field. In contrast, others may prioritize different needs, such as improvements to the schooling system or the creation of a new marketplace. The community often reacts defensively when a group or individual is seen as profiting or gaining fame outside the community while representing it through sanctioned projects. The example provided by Kiado, about the conflict between his computer project and the telephone store cabin, illustrates this concern, highlighting the tension between individual aspirations and communal values.

Guelatao is reinforcing its own CCC, by adapting it to contemporary political and economic junctures embracing in practice, through their cultural ways, capitalist forces (see Sahlins 1999, v). While the boom in indigenous media and self-representation is increasing, it has not grown as rapidly as other capitalist ventures. This raises an important question: how does an indigenous community engage with capitalism? It is crucial to note that the presence of industrial goods and capitalist trends does not necessarily lead to the individualization of social relations or the full penetration of capitalism. For example, Sahlins illustrates that Pacific natives have creatively interacted with European merchandise, using it to enhance existing social structures. He notes that by benefiting from market returns linked to migratory labor, coffee production, and other cash crops, traditional interclan ceremonial exchanges – hallmarks of Highlands's culture – have flourished in recent decades as never before (Sahlins 1999, x). Sahlins acknowledges that the

indigenous engagement with capitalism occurs within localized cultural contexts and by indigenizing capitalism, or modernity it also serves forms of resistance, again as Echeverría (2001) would pointed out. If Sahlins (1999) is correct, which I believe he is, then the CCC is very much alive, rapidly adapting to both traditional, communal, and contemporary capitalist practices. This adaptation encompasses cultural practices as well.

Let us rephrase only briefly the argument⁶⁰ once again of the CCPC in the context of Guelatao's *comunalidad* (media) as Wolf would see it to then look at its adaptation to the contemporary.

1. - Communities maintain a body of rights to possessions, such as land.
2. - Communities put pressure on members to redistribute surpluses at their command, preferably in the operation of a religious system, and induce them to content themselves with the rewards of "shared poverty" expending surpluses in a prestige economy.
3. - Communities strive to prevent outsiders from becoming members of the community and place limits on the ability of members to communicate with the larger society.

In synthesis, communities have the

“communal jurisdiction over land, obligations to expend surplus funds in religious ceremonies, negative attitudes toward a personal display of wealth and self-assertion, strong defenses against deviant behavior, all served to emphasize social and cultural homogeneity and to reduce tendencies toward the development of internal class differences and heterogeneity in behavior and interests” (Wolf 1956, 1069).

Nowadays it would be a stretch to consider Guelatao unequivocally under these three characteristics. Endogamy is far gone in Guelatao and other communities and the reduction of internal class differences is somewhat absent. Cultural homogeneity exists in its discourse (*comunalidad*) but is rather absent in practice as evidenced by the significant heterogeneity in behavior and interest. At the core, however, it sort of maintains its function. Needless to say, the same Wolf (1985) recognized later his shortcomings and acknowledged a more nuanced reality provided by, at that point, new historical works and better ethnographies. It's worth noting that

⁶⁰ Here, intentionally I leave out Java communities since we are not dealing with comparison and solely, I am referring to generally speaking those communities which Wolf (1957) considered. In this case, of course Guelatao is the main frame of reference.

Wolf (1985) later recognized his shortcomings, acknowledging a more nuanced reality revealed by subsequent historical research and improved ethnographies. Nonetheless, I believe Wolf's (1955; 1957) work was pioneering in introducing a political economy perspective that many studies on Mesoamerican communities still lack, particularly within mainstream anthropology and “homemade” Mexican anthropology. Now, let's return to our topic.

Guelatao is one of those communities where the territory and land is very present as the backbone of identity. It is interwoven in discourses on autonomy, identity, and sense of belonging. However, land tenure as Wolf (1955; 1957) saw it are rarely existing in indigenous communities, simply because subsistence farming is not the norm in rural Oaxaca. Nonetheless, there is still a great sense of community membership towards the land and territory. However, prevention from outsiders to become members is not as closed as Wolf would remarked more than half a century ago. People can either rent or in some cases buy a house or marry a community member, but membership of the former is not acquired by the latter (see the case of this point in part I). Indeed, community membership is still persistent and there is a process⁶¹ by which outsiders become members and thus have obligations to attend assemblies, hold *Cargo* positions, and in general, rights and obligations to participate in internal community affairs.

Most importantly, the redistribution of surpluses is largely absent, as noted by Warman (2003; see above). There is little sponsorship of civic and religious rituals by upper-class individuals; instead, funding for these *fiestas* is managed by a committee that oversees local bars and donations, fostering a collective approach to celebration. Another mechanism that reinforces a sense of closed corporate community is the restriction of project participation to *ciudadanos*. Historically, migration has served as a means for some communities to bring in remittances, which support family development and community activities, including sponsoring *fiestas* and paid *Cargo* positions, thus sustaining the *Cargo* system even while working abroad.

In this context, communities often reject certain principles of capitalism, yet simultaneously leverage it to preserve what is important to them. As one *ciudadano* from the Sierra town of

⁶¹ At some point the process by which a person becomes *ciudadano*, remind me almost any nation-state process to become citizen. A set of values, in the sociological sense, and papers backing such values from former place of living. In addition, presenting yourself to the local society at the assembly and only after a considerable time – some people say 5 years – and performing *tequio* regularly, you become community member.

Yavesia remarked in an interview, "We are conserving our communal life right from the heart of capitalism" (Rojo & Rojo 2020, online)

Since any project is subject to assembly approval, the assembly aims to assess what are the benefits of approving such a project for the community as a whole. As we understand that, only community members are allowed to make such approval possible, those who are not community members *avecindados*, are left outside; benefits, whatever they may be, are restrictive to only community members. As all my interlocutors stated, the assembly is the most important institution in the community as it has the power to approve, maintain, and remove *Cargo* holders or projects as they may find fit or otherwise. We also have to bear in mind that projects subjected to *Cargo* system, are those who are cherished, cared for, and most thought of creating "value." Indeed, projects framed as *Cargo*, prevent outsiders from taking advantage of the community by extracting value from it since only members have rights and obligations to hold *Cargo* or through communal assembly approve and manage affairs.

The assembly, through various means – gossip, for instance, as mentioned earlier – can potentially marginalize or dismiss projects, pushing them to the edges of the *Cargo* system. This happens as attention and care for these projects wane due to a lack of "results" or their absence from the start. As noted by Cine Too members, individuals involved in projects are often subject to constant scrutiny by the assembly to prevent personal profit.

At the end of my fieldwork, during the early COVID period, a community member shared what he believed were the real reasons behind the growing resentment toward the cinema. According to him, it wasn't due to a lack of interest in the project – on the contrary, people were hopeful it would generate jobs and income. The discontent, he explained, stemmed from other issues. A portion of the remaining project funds had been allocated to pay a monthly salary to Cine Too members, which was discussed, negotiated, and approved in an assembly meeting. However, once the funds were depleted and the salaries stopped, some community members turned against Cine Too. The gossip suggested that if there was no money, there would be no work, and with no work, the project lost its support. Although my informant provided specific salary figures, I will withhold this information, as the figures are not the main issue. The situation remains somewhat unclear, but I believe the bitterness wasn't solely due to the end of the salaries or the lack of funds. Rather, it was likely the result of multiple factors I have outlined throughout this section.

Guelatao New Projects

A brief note before continuing further: I was initially hesitant to address the new projects that emerged in Guelatao after my departure. As Comaroff (2009, p. 148) aptly observes, “it is not usual, as well-advised graduate students are told, to introduce fresh data into the conclusion of a book.” However, I feel it is important to make a point. Specifically, I wish to highlight that the concept of *comunalidad* is evolving, with new business ventures emerging as part of its evolving diversification of community business narratives. Ethnic identity remains a central component of the *comunalidad* framework, but these new projects, which are grounded in communal principles, might be interpreted as efforts to integrate more directly into capitalist systems, rather than remaining marginal or oppositional to state power. Thus, it is difficult to predict the direction in which *comunalidad* is moving. What follows is a narrative of the gray area within these new projects, where some initiatives exhibit genuine self-management and an independent orientation, while others heavily rely on state institutions. Nevertheless, this complexity reveals *comunalidad* as a flexible and strategic principle, one that navigates, adapts, and negotiates between state and capital systems when it is advantageous. These new ventures represent a kind of plot twist, one I did not anticipate. It is remarkable that such a small community, both in terms of population and territorial scope, would engage in large-scale business ventures. However, Guelatao is currently undergoing a period of significant transformation. With each passing month or year, new developments will unfold, offering additional layers to the ongoing narrative. Cine Too is just one example of many such initiatives. While it merits attention, it is only a partial reflection of the broader trend, and all these projects are, directly or indirectly, linked to the evolving dynamics of *comunalidad*.

As mentioned earlier, Cine Too is part of a larger eco-tourism infrastructure controlled by the committee of *bienes comunales* (communal assets). While most eco-tourist projects are subjected to *Cargo* systems, Cine Too and aside from media projects, are not. This makes them situated in a marginal position within the community making them depend on self-subsistence and self-management. This setup only allows them to cover Carmen’s salary, hire seasonal workers like Ariadna, and occasionally bring in volunteers, such as myself, and students from Universidad

Iberoamericana. As Victor explained above, scrutiny falls harshly on them concerning money resources, and productive labor, things which they have failed to deliver. Being part of the *Cargo* system has disadvantages, as Victor and others have pointed out, but advantages could potentially aid the project greatly. Internal formal mechanisms, such as *Cargo*, or internal informal ones like the social power of gossip, certainly prevent the creation of a surplus and profit for individuals involved in community projects or *Cargo*, but it is limited to only one way, meaning that community members could extract value, for the concretion of material means or social relations on the outside. In this formula, internal class differentiation becomes paramount for value extracion.

As noted earlier Cine Too and its related projects faced significant challenges during the COVID-19 crisis. Tourism and regional visitors ceased and film projects were suspended. The town went into lockdown for almost a year. I am unaware of any significant support from the local administration beyond waiving rent, and I suspect there was little to none. Guelatao closed its doors and only a limited flow of people were permitted. They opened up a little local market in one of the basketball courts near the entrance of the town where local and external products were sold; Cine Too members promoted community care vitamin C fruits consumption and healthier food habits to mitigate the disease in a series of online spots in alliance with the local authorities (Fieldnotes May, 2020). Indigenous communities responded to the crisis with increased reciprocity and tradition-based care practices (Cohen & Mata-Sánchez 2021).

Cine Too launched a fundraising campaign on *donadora.org*, joined by three other independent cinemas under the banner *Ayuda a que las pantallas sigan brillando* (Help Keep Screens Bright). The campaign included *Nayar Lab* from Nayarit, northwest Mexico, *Cine la Mina* in the center state of Guanajuato, *Cine Too* in Guelatao, Oaxaca and *El Cineclub* from Playa del Carmen. All four cinemas share a focus on cinema as an important tool for education and social change. Their goal was to raise approximately 14,315.52 Euro, which they exceeded by 15 per cent, marking a significant success. Despite this, Cine Too's standing within the community did not notably improve, though it also didn't worsen. Other community business ventures began to appear on the map of Guelatao. Carmen quit her job and began to work at the new community gas station, which competes directly with the town of Ixtlan. Others found other works and Luna kept on creating new networks and collaborative film projects (Fieldnotes July 2020).

Still, Cine Too remains in the community, and some members keep an eye on it while trying to maintain regular events, holding workshops and seminars. The *comunalidad* endeavors on media, I realized, depend almost entirely on outside networking while internally it is relegated to a marginal position. And as Alain said once, *comunalidad* is a term that explains some things but not all. “I think we have made these bridges (*comunalidad*) between outside and inside to try to explain it (...) so then, *comunalidad* has worked to name some things and try to explain them.” (Nava 2021, 55 my translation).

In the same article, Juan José expresses similar lines:

“(...) it is clear the importance of making visible, resuming and appreciating the sources of our reasoning to explain what we are. But not only explain what we are in order for us to learn, but to recognize ourselves and be able to explain it to outsiders, who always explain and describe us from their hegemonic thought that is not ours” (Nava 2021, 56; my translation).

New opportunities for young people have emerged, offering alternatives beyond Cine Too and Agenda Guelatao. Three new community businesses were established during and after the COVID-19 crisis: Kualani Cooperativa de Ahorro y Crédito (a closed cooperative bank), Gasolinera del Bienestar PEMEX Guelatao, and a planned construction company. Tavo, one of my informants, explained that outside construction companies often did poor-quality work on local projects, so the community felt it necessary to take matters into their own hands. As an additional note, *Kualani* means mutual aid in the Zapotec language (Fieldnotes May 2022).

These ventures were made possible through a trust agreement with the AMLO administration, with funds channeled through INDEP⁶² and INPI. It is important to point out that the president built, in part, his presidential campaign narrative around the figure of Benito Juárez, Guelatao native and liberal republican; and advocated for a new fresh relationship between federal governments and indigenous communities. Appointees from these communities, including lawyer Adelfo Regino and *Ojo de Agua* co-founder Juan José García, took key roles in government, reinforcing the idea that indigenous communities should represent themselves in institutional offices (Fieldnotes May 2022). AMLO visited Guelatao annually during this administration (6 years). I was able to witness his visits for two seasonal fieldworks meaning two terms of AMLO

⁶² Instituto para Devolver al Pueblo lo Robado. In English: Institute to Return the Stolen to the People.

administration. His visits were due to commemorate Benito Juárez's birthday, even during the challenging COVID period, he continued these visits.



Figure 14. AMLO visiting Guelatao accompanying by Adelfo Regino, comunidad adept. Photo: Rodrigo Ruiz (2021)

The AMLO federal administration aimed from the very beginning to engage in a “new relationship” with indigenous communities where Guelatao played a symbolic and significant role. This new relationship opened new ways of engagement for the state with semi-autonomous regions in Mexico but special attention was placed on Oaxaca stressing the qualities of the

historical resilience and resistance of Oaxaca’s indigenous communities. This relation materialized in Guelatao, in the form of financial aid with no precedents from where Guelatao built up the three community ventures.

At the same time, Cine Too members and local sympathizers have expanded their activism into different transregional and transnational projects. Tavo, one of the few members with no interest in media and cinema but very close to Martínez Luna, opted to shift his focus to education employing his pedagogical expertise at the new UACO University (see part I). The most prominent member, Luna Maran, historically involved in several media projects of various kinds, co-founded a new media collective called *Yi' #Hagamoslumbre* ("Let's Make Fire"). The name *Yi'* means "making fire" in Zapotec, and the collective's Spanish translation, *Hagamos Lumbre*, refers to this idea (Fieldnotes May 2023). In form, *Yi'* resembles Ortner's study of *Brave New Films* (Ortner 2023), a small U.S. company with a broad political reach, focusing on documentaries. In her study, Ortner uses the notion of political agency (Ortner 2006) and awareness, *conscientization* (Freire 1970) to understand the distinctions between mainstream media and alternative media emphasizing ethnic identity. At the core of *Yi'*'s work is political agency, reflected through their focus on ethnic diversity and political awareness in their collaborations. These two notions appear to be not only

in the end product – films; but in the process of production itself by enhancing participation of the local community members in film productions.

These latest media collective formations put Guelatao on a wider map, the flow of interest is increasing as well as regional tourism flow after the harsh COVID period; new community businesses offer jobs and new ways of income and surpluses for the community. Every project is framed and has a strong focus on identity and the good social values of indigenous peoples. On the one hand a combination of sorts between media initiatives, eco-tourism, and alternative education all are based on the principles of *comunalidad*. On the other, a more business-like and for-profit-oriented, gas station, financial credit cooperative, and infrastructure emerged not exactly on *comunalidad* principles but out of the assembly and internal normative system. Again, the two are different in their conceptualization and action. And as we've seen both of them do not necessarily create the same form of value when *ciudadanos* take action on something. Mediation works externally, that is, gatekeepers like Luna and Jaime or Juan José and others, mediate the meanings of their community for external audiences, state and international institutions, and social organizations. Mediators and brokers, “stand guard over the crucial junctures or synapses of relationships that connect the local system to the larger whole” (Wolf 1956, 1075).

Just as actions like *tequio* can create value for the community, they can also create value for brokers, mediators, gatekeepers, and indigenous intellectuals. In Guelatao, collective action on projects generates value, though the type and extent of this value vary across contexts and projects. This value creation comes from the act of mediating their world to others, and outside audiences, it comes from their interpretation and understanding of what is indigenous and what is not and conceptualizing their community and their form of life into a package of, say, *comunalidad*. However, not everyone within the community always accepts their mediation or the value their projects aim to create. These cultural brokers legitimize their identity by framing and presenting their cultural practices through various media. In this section of the dissertation, aimed to explore both internal and external perspectives on media projects in Guelatao, focusing especially on Cine Too's key project, Lab. The differing views of *comunalidad* inside and outside Guelatao reveal the various ways that both *ciudadanos* and outsiders understand what it means to be indigenous through the lens of *comunalidad*. The broker creates and negotiates these views both within and outside the community as well as within media projects based on those communitarian principles. At the same time, by their actions of mediation and their obligations within the community,

communitarian projects tend to shed light on their potential and continuity insofar as brokers also mediate value creation vis-a-vis the community in actions.

I began this thesis by emphasizing two key aspects: the enduring nature of indigenous social structures and the mediation role of those who exist between two "worlds," drawing on Yannakakis' work. This between two worlds –bicultural- position is no longer valid, is no longer a quality duality of dealing with business translations and making worlds intelligible between the communities with the business of the crown officials. Their positions are diversified historically, they deal with business between the community and them, their interest and state agents, ventures of capital, NGOs, collectives, and different social groups, that's the quality of the polybians which subscribe to a certain class with access to resources standing out from the other members of the community precisely because of their class quality.

However, the role of the broker in anthropology is not new. We have to remember what Wolf briefly has accounted for in focusing on studies of "broker" groups. It is worth quoting him at very length here.

"In post-Columbian Mexico, these mediating functions were first carried out by the leaders of Indian corporate communities and royal officials. Later, these tasks fell into the hands of local entrepreneurs, such as the owners of haciendas. After the Revolution of 1910, they passed to nation-oriented individuals from the local communities who established ties with the national level and who served as "brokers" between community-oriented and nation-oriented groups. The study of these "brokers" will prove increasingly rewarding, as anthropologists shift their attention from the internal organization of communities to the manner of their integration into larger systems.

Their basic function is to relate community-oriented individuals who want to stabilize or improve their life chances, but who lack economic security and political connections, with nation-oriented individuals who operate primarily in terms of the complex cultural forms standardized as national institutions, but whose success in these operations depends on the size and strength of their following.

Special studies of "broker" groups can also provide insight into the functions of a complex system through attention to its dysfunctions. The position of these "brokers" is an "exposed" one, since, Janus-like, they face in two directions at once. They must serve some of the interests of groups operating on both the community and the national level, and they must cope with the conflicts raised by the collision of these interests. They cannot settle them, since by doing so they would abolish their usefulness to others. Thus they often act as buffers between groups, maintaining the tensions that provide the dynamic of their actions" (Wolf 2001, 137-138).

There is an interesting historical parallel between Braudel's concept of the *long durée* (see part I) and Wolf's observations on the historical evolution of brokers and institutions. This perspective is useful for understanding both the role of brokers and the historical processes of indigenous communities. To unpack Wolf's point, as introduced earlier, he identifies key historical moments in which indigenous communities had mediators and their function as brokers before different economic and political entities: Royal officials, Hacienda owners, and later state agents and institutions. While in the Sierra Norte, the figure of the Hacienda was not present the role of the broker kept functioning as a liaison with larger outside reminiscence of royal and state institutions.

The second paragraph alludes a community-oriented, person-to-person relationship that connects individuals with larger state agents. This is accurate, as we saw above many of the Cine Too members got jobs in state institutions when the political "moments" allowed, and some *comunalidad* intellectuals entered state positions. But this is not limited to individuals, it rather extends the whole community, as a corporate community itself. The new community business was possible within historic junctures in part because of the new relationship of the state with some indigenous communities but also through the efforts of brokers.

The third point encapsulates the core focus of this study: examining brokers and how it illuminate mediations along class and ethnic identity ranks and bring up mediations of forms of value in their local communities and beyond. Furthermore, brokers are a link to relationships between the community and external institutions, revealing how internal and external conflicts arise in specific contexts. The idea of the broker's functions, although Wolf refers to a modern-politician broker, in our case as in the case of Kearney, could come from different niches –like musicians, intellectuals, filmmakers, and anyone "authorized" to talk on behalf of the community, but tends to generally be within the political and economic field actions.

Wolf also tell us that, brokers tend to cope with the possibility of conflicted interest of the community and state institutions and I would add even with their community interests. This is very clear about what projects and community actions approval, and the continuum care of such projects. Their continuity reveals that interest's collision may occur in different temporalities. An example of this may take on *tequio*-value creation-community projects. It is not only what brokers through their social capital could potentially bring for the whole benefit of the community but also how they carry out their interest in a way which do not collide with what the community considers fit

for them. In this way, brokers indeed act as a buffer between groups. It is not only between institutions that brokers act, they also mediate notions such as indigeneity, in such a way that their buffer capacity tends to build an ideal type between the imaginary and the real of what is indigeneity for sympathizers and audiences. As Luna and others have done in some capacity, as mentioned above, *comunalidad* intellectuals offer this buffer zone in other arenas. That is taking us to imagine what indigeneity is like through their work on media, literary, and academic writings. For instance, Diaz (2007) understands indigeneity as a constant quest for consensus contrasting liberal democracy because, after all, “democracy always fosters an oppressive majority and an oppressed minority” (Lagalis 2016, 136).

Diaz offers insight into what constitutes indigeneity by asserting that it is all about consensus, a feature embedded in indigenous culture. However, in the case of Guelatao's media projects, it's challenging to fully pinpoint this consensus, as many group and individual interests in projects run deep in the community and I suspect in any community. As one of my interlocutors put it, *todos jalan agua para su molino (every man for himself.)* Consensus, as I understand it, never finishes with the approval of a project but is in its continuum and care or as Lambek has it, “value circulates through human activity and it rapidly evaporates in the absence of such activity” (Lambek 2013, 150). Media projects in turn proved to be situated in a marginal and ambivalent position within the community, whereas their meaningful value, whatever of the myriad of meanings of value we mean, lies elsewhere, probably outside the community.

Final Notes of the whole thing (a conclusion of sorts)

This is a rather short, non-conclusive conclusion. Let me remind you why I pursued *comunalidad* rather than focusing solely on the media projects in Guelatao. In contemporary times, *comunalidad* embodies the functioning of social organizations and a historical synthesis of “anarchist” philosophy (Lagalis 2016, 136-139). This concept has served as a platform for indigenous communities to build projects, share ideas, and provide resources for mediation, tactics, and identity formation. Its principles reflect the historical unfold of indigenous peoples in various regions of Mexico, particularly in Oaxaca, a history marked by colonization, mediation, resistance, and political leverage.

Diaz and Martínez Luna should be considered serious thinkers and political philosophers in their own right, more so than those who have feverishly attempted to defend themselves against valid critiques. Jaime Martínez Luna once confessed to me that critique is necessary because no one has yet thoroughly examined their work. Such critique is essential for understanding our position and recognizing our shortcomings.

My considerations for studying Too Cinema Theater arose from a desire to closely examine *comunalidad*, as both concepts adhere to similar principles. However, we must not be naïve; *comunalidad* takes the shape of historical structures known by various names throughout time—such as the ladder system, *República de Indios*, *usos y costumbres*, Internal Normative System, and CCPC. Media, in general, has played an important role in the community, particularly for local indigenous intellectuals who strive to create more democratic, independent, and grassroots media projects. They view this work as vital for their indigenous identity and local development. Media is believed to provide education by strengthening local traditions and identities. These media projects overlap with ecotourism ventures, radio, television, and, more recently, cinema-going and filmmaking.

The Cine Too project and associated media initiatives served as an entry point to deeper, more entrenched social arrangements and the mediation of various forms of value. Value, perhaps, is the most elusive concept I investigated. I struggle to discern the neat distinctions among its forms. In this context, it is useful to understand them as "portable values," meaning how value, identity, and meaning are produced through encounters and interactions among locals and outsiders, and how these elements become comparable or incommensurable (see Kockelman 2016). Thus, I conceptualize action (*tequio*) as a form of value through which the inhabitants of Guelatao reproduce themselves as social beings and a community. Projects emerge when inhabitants engage, invest, care, and act upon them through this continuous process of action (*tequio*).

The cinema project allowed me to observe the interplay of value production among locals and outsiders, comparing the often incommensurable forms of value once mediated by *comunalidad*, the power of local assemblies, and internal and external social relations. This shift in focus led me to understand value creation within and beyond Guelatao. I aimed to examine how Wolf's (1955; 1957) CCC (Closed Corporate Community without the Peasants) functioned from a distance, not merely as an economic equalizer, but as a social organization capable of resisting external value extraction. As Kiado's example and Luna's discussion of gossip in Guelatao

illustrate, *Cargo* systems and consensus decision-making tend to reorient internal values according to the town's overall development, influenced by both internal and external factors. For instance, Cine Too was a product of a specific internal political moment, while new projects reflect a combination of these pressures. Although Cine Too aimed to create local youth employment, the new projects (Petro station and financial services businesses, see above Guelatao New Projects subchapter) seek to generate surpluses for the entire town.

However, the predominant focus on media, as presented by Cine Too actors and supporters, has limitations, and can obscure fundamental aspects of its functioning. While I acknowledge the positive dimensions of media – such as self-representation, cultural activism, and critical education, as Luna highlights – the portrayal of media as a tool for emancipation or anti-capitalist resistance, exemplified by Cine Too, risks overlooking how capitalism adapts, subtly infiltrating our lives to perpetuate itself.

Another notable aspect of Cine Too and other media projects is the strong emphasis on the idea that media technology possesses emancipatory potential. This is one of the core principles of the Cine Too Lab—to create a filmmaking hub that educates and empowers minority groups, shedding light on and documenting the power imbalances and social injustices present in society. This theme was further addressed in the second chapter. The relationship between human political agency and technology—and the agency we, as humans, ascribe to it—is far more complex than it initially appears. For example, Drummond (1996) explores the cultural processes involved in 'mechanosemiosis'—the ways in which humans interact with machines, continually shaping and reshaping the meanings we assign to technology. Cabrera (2006) expands on this idea, arguing (following Castoriadis, 1975) that modern society defines itself through its technological achievements. This belief gives rise to the notion that technology, through 'technoscience' (see Smith 2010, Part 1), can be a vehicle for social justice. However, this perspective also obscures underlying class structures and subtle forms of gender and labor exploitation as we know that people and access to resources and the means of production have the upperhand over others. While these issues are not exclusive to media projects, it is crucial to remain cautious of technoutopianism and the potential pitfalls of techno-capitalism and even further, techno-ethnic capitalism.

Since 2019, Guelatao has undergone significant changes in its *Cargo* social structure. In parallel with the establishment of media projects and the boom in regional infrastructure, the

competition in tourist eco-businesses has intensified among Sierra Norte communities; even Ixtlan now boasts an enormous glass skywalk viewpoint since 2022. Guelatao, with its new community gas station, competes for customers with Ixtlan. Additionally, the new "Kualani" mutual aid financial service expands its reach in the region, offering loans and other financial products.

In contemporary times, ethnic identity appears to embrace indigenous businesses and their rapid incorporation into global capital, paradoxically through a community-based resistance movement like *comunalidad*. The contradictions of capitalism, modern life, and indigenous knowledge seem diluted and dissipated by a positive choice, asserting identity through local rituals. Indigenous peoples are not simply passive victims of capitalist exploitation, but active agents in negotiating, resisting, and adapting to the political economic structures around them. Class and political economy are crucial frameworks through which to understand the struggles of Indigenous peoples, as these frameworks help to illuminate the ways in which Indigenous communities are both marginalized and empowered within global economic systems.

In addition, critiques of identity and the commodification of culture within global capital flows extend beyond the Comaroffs (2009), myself, and other scholars – John Holloway's silencing at the *Comunalidad* Congress, as depicted in the first part of this dissertation, serves as an illustrative example. Indigenous intellectuals also voice these concerns, with Kiado's commentary exemplifying this perspective. He emphasizes the need to consider a "post-indigenous terrain," where terms like "indigenous" or "ethnicity" are not the sole flags, but rather expressions of anti-capitalism and anti-fascism, he sees however, the inclusion of identity in capital ventures a symptom of how capitalism in its neoliberal formula mutate to embrace it all. This line is blurred by "good intentions" and dangerous for building up resistance (Fieldnotes March 2020). Moreover, Taussig (1993) discusses how the cultural and political assertion of identity can be a form of resistance that challenges both economic exploitation and cultural marginalization. This political process of asserting Indigenous rights and identities, often through mobilizing collective action, is deeply connected to the economic interests of these communities and their fight for social justice.

When I began this dissertation, I was unsure whether it fell within the scope of the anthropology of media. Although I did not identify a specific sub-field, applying the broader lens of anthropology proved suitable. I chose Cine Too, a media project, to understand the *Cargo* System, the emergence of *comunalidad* in Guelatao, and the community's valuation processes.

Ultimately, we encounter a complex web of interconnected notions operating simultaneously in various contexts, including tactics, identity, self-determination, capitalism, mutual aid, direct action, and *comunalidad*. Empowerment is a key term, yet it can also obscure new forms of domination disguised as relief through engagement in diverse sectors. In media, images possess a deeper power than we often realize, shaping societal imagination. It was not uncommon for tourists at Cine Too to speak about indigenous peoples in essentialist and folkloric terms. Similarly, the new state regime views indigenous peoples as beneficiaries of historical debt, recipients of a noble pre-Hispanic legacy that survives in the present – a contemporary iteration of the outdated and problematic *indigenismo* formula.

Determining who benefits from projects like Cine Too or the Yela Too ecotourism initiative is challenging. Control often rests in the hands of a few, and the community may not be fully engaged, sometimes expressing disappointment over the lack of surpluses for the entire community. Nevertheless, new community ventures have undoubtedly "opened up new means of producing value, claiming recognition, asserting sovereignty, and giving effective voice to belonging; this, not infrequently, in the all-but-total absence of alternatives" (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009, 142). Moreover, ethnic identity operates as "the vehicle of a new moral economy of the polis" (Bayart 2005, 40-42) and to finalised Bayart's quote, the Comaroff's (2009, 144) would add "not only a moral economy. Also, indivisibly hyphenated, a political-economy." Paradoxically, the *Cargo* System may mitigate external value extraction, predatory capitalism, and accumulation by dispossession to some extent, while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of cultural commodification and potentially embracing ethnic or communitarian capitalism. At present, I cannot provide evidence on how the *Cargo* system manages the new project's surpluses, or whether these are shared among community members amidst growing class distinctions and inequalities. The process of communal capital enterprises, or as locals call it, communitarian business, treads a fine line between the commodification of ethnic identity and the intensifying regional business competition – illustrated by the gas stations in Guelatao and Ixtlan, the glass skywalk viewpoints in both towns, and the financial services cooperatives.

What have I learned from this? Did I answer the research questions? What is *comunalidad*, and what role does it play in (media) community projects?

Firstly, *comunalidad* is history in the present; it synthesizes centuries of social arrangements mediating what it means to be indigenous and community, along with its values and

valuation processes. Most importantly, it tells us about political and cultural tactics, moving along the periphery of structural powers, e.g. capitalism, colonialism and the state, just to name a few but not out of it. It is about identity formation and its praxis. It embodies a way of doing things and organizing social life. Its structures are trans-historical regardless of its nomenclature e.g. *comunalidad*, Republica de Indios, Usos y Costumbres or Sistema Normativo Indigena.

Secondly, *comunalidad* plays a central role in media projects in Guelatao; it is the engine driving them. As fundamentally important as it is in Guelatao, its reach extends beyond the confines of the Sierra Norte, evoking possibilities to build projects based on *Comunalidad* principles. Despite the term's ambiguity and nuances, it resonates with local and external activists alike, functioning as source of inspiration.

Thirdly, beyond the *Comunalidad* project, the goal was, and remains, to draw attention to class relations as individuals engage in community social and political life, as well as their class mobility outside their community -*polybians*, in doing so, due to their class position, they can potentially get access to resources and media platforms to speak on behalf of their community and mobilize people for various means. Additionally, class remains a crucial concept in analyzing today's complex identity landscape, especially because class relations do not disappear but are instead reproduced and disguised in ethnic or any form of social identity. In this sense, the identity realm should be framed within political economy perspectives rather than focusing solely on identity politics or the politics of identity. Perhaps this is why I understood the necessity to look at value forms to understand the actions and tequio (activities) identity forms and class when looking at local media projects and their involvement as activists and mediators in and out of the community and the development of community media projects.

I began this dissertation uncertain of what I was seeking and how to engage with my fieldwork and its outcomes. In the end, I believe this dissertation reflects more on my journey and flaws as an anthropologist than on my contributions to our discipline. By flaws, I refer to my incomplete understanding of social realities and in all honesty, to my whole PhD bumpy journey; however, I continue to strive to make sense of these complexities. I acknowledge the risk of misinterpreting the concepts we apply or the "uncompleted" emic notions that arise from the field, yet I persist in seeking new approaches or re-examining old theories and concepts in anthropology with fresh perspectives.

In all honesty, the only modest contribution our discipline can make, in an academic sense, is to pay attention to how social arrangements historically unfold and how these arrangements permit certain forms of autonomy in a world where the capital, the state, and global enterprises exert unprecedented forms of domination and oppression, something not that new, but that more often than not, is omitted or subsumed in new academic trends. These arrangements emerge from the trans-historical unfolding of *comunalidad*, as exemplified by the political/activist and contemporary alternative/indigenous media project, Cine Too.

Comunalidad illuminates political possibilities and, more importantly, indigenous praxis. It enables communities to engage with larger structures of power while shedding light on the socio-cultural conditions that empower communities to mobilize people and create projects through direct action (*tequio*). One of these projects is the long-standing engagement with media in Guelatao and across Oaxaca's indigenous landscape. Additionally, *comunalidad* serves as a lens through which we can examine how identity is constructed and emerges following indigenous historical, socio-cultural, and political conditions and possibilities. I fear that my contributions are merely approximations of what could be, albeit ones that may be riddled with flaws and potential theoretical misunderstandings, particularly regarding value theory. However, as Graeber (2004) articulates, one of our tasks is to illuminate the human possibilities within social arrangements seeking emancipation and liberation, while actively striving to overcome capitalism, state institutions, and their forms of oppression.

Only then can we comprehend how capitalism and capitalists disguise themselves to find alternative solutions and combat these maladies more effectively. My experiences in Guelatao have provided valuable insights into this endeavour; however, its flaws are evident and deeply rooted, reflecting a historical relationship with the state and capitalism that has existed since its inception. Yet, people engage in actions that inspire hope and illuminate a path forward, striving for a better world. Cine Too is but a grain of sand, but many such grains await discovery. We must not overlook the potential of media use. Sufficient research exists to recognize the contributions of indigenous media to the world and its significance in disseminating knowledge and ideas aimed at achieving political and social justice.

For instance, I acknowledge the importance of climate change and forestry, recognizing their global relevance and the extensive discussions occurring in Guelatao. We have dedicated considerable time to researching how oppressed peoples devise strategies to reduce their oppression

and combat racism, capitalism, patriarchy, and other systemic issues from various fronts – media being one, and social organization another. Yet we have also learned how power and domination function and reproduce themselves repeatedly, even in less oppressive spaces – whether in Oaxaca, Vienna, the Balkans, or elsewhere. It is striking that despite extensive research, we continue to identify enduring problems without generating substantive solutions or only offering "patch" solutions. I sadly see peers falling into the pits of bureaucratic academics and hardly go to the streets, or doing stuff “from the bottom up.”

As social scientists, it is insufficient to merely do the research and share findings at conferences and among peers; public discourse is crucial. Activism and public engagement are more necessary today than ever. It was disappointing to see the lack of activist engagement from senior and young anthropology scholars in some parts of Europe, particularly in Central Europe, than in other places I have studied or lived. Rather, there seems to be a deep preoccupation for career driven results than anything else. Here, in Vienna students are constrained to do politics in the old Latin American fashion. “Take the fucking building” as we say. And this is why, one lesson I learned from Cine Too and *comunalidad* is the importance of remembering where I come from and our social activist traditions. They taught me – rather, they reminded me – of the symbolic value of revolt, dissent, and political engagement. There is a pressing need to create something new or to simply create in general seeking a collective radical political imagination. "Go on and do stuff!", as Tavo once told me. As he, along with many activists I know in Mexico, including my father, have emphasized, the key issue is organization; from there, possibilities become palpable. Just as the inhabitants of Guelatao initially regarded the idea of a cinema with scepticism – a dream articulated by youngsters, as Andrés noted in Part 1.

Not everything is lost. Echoing Cine Too Lab's motto, “Another cinema is possible,” and the Direct Action Network's declaration, “Another world is possible,” numerous studies have demonstrated that there exist possibilities for historical or alternative social and political arrangements that diverge from the outdated evolutionary and neo-evolutionary frameworks and racist academic paradigms. Perhaps the *Cargo* System did not emerge from the *mélange* – as some scholars suggest regarding syncretism – of Spanish assembly practices, hierarchical administrative rotations, and unpaid labour derived from indigenous customs. Instead, it may have developed through centuries of experimentation and a schismogenesis process (see Graeber & Wengrow 2021) between the societies of the Valley of Oaxaca and the Sierras on the eve of the Spanish

conquest. This schismogenesis likely arose not as mere adaptations but as manifestations of human creativity, representing a concretization of imaginative horizons within the inevitable process of colonization.

Elucidating all these possibilities extends far beyond the scope of this dissertation, yet by investigating *comunalidad*, a whole field of inquiry opens up. Cine Too is but one of many historical projects that have emerged from a form of social organization still in existence. This example illustrates a historical social and political mode of organizing life, pushing forward toward what is politically and humanly possible at the margins of state, capital, and other forms of modern oppression. While this may not provide a comprehensive solution to contemporary social and political challenges, it offers a glimpse of what could be – a serious path to consider and an example of what people can achieve in the world – a series of arrangements designed to mitigate the impact of today's global capitalism. There, remains hope for the possibility of another world, *un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos*.

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