

# Festivals, Oaxacan Immigrant Communities and Cultural Spaces Between Mexico and the United States: The Guelaguetzas in California

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine the role of the festivals known as Guelaguetzas that are organized among communities of Oaxacan (Oaxaca, Mexico) immigrants settled in California (United States), as a key factor for their internal consolidation process. We argue that all cultural activities displayed in such festivals allow a greater appreciation of the reconfiguration processes linking the places of origin and destination. Furthermore, the organization of these festivals entails the creation of cultural spaces that allow a resignification of their contents by emphasizing three core elements of the social identity for these Oaxacan immigrants: the migrant condition, indigeneity, and the pan-Oaxacan dimension.

*Keywords:* 1. cultural spaces, 2. Oaxacan migration, 3. immigrant communities, 4. cultural practices, 5. California.

## Festivales, comunidades inmigrantes oaxaqueñas y espacios culturales entre México y Estados Unidos: Las Guelaguetzas en California

## RESUMEN

En este artículo examinamos el papel de los festivales conocidos como Guelaguetzas entre las comunidades migrantes de Oaxaca, México, en California, Estados Unidos, como factor fundamental para la consolidación de dichas comunidades. Se considera que las actividades culturales desplegadas en dichos festivales permiten apreciar de mejor manera los procesos de reconfiguración de vínculos con los lugares de origen y con la sociedad de destino. Así mismo, su celebración implica la formación de espacios culturales que permiten la resignificación de sus contenidos, que se hace evidente a través del énfasis de tres componentes identitarios de estos migrantes oaxaqueños: la condición migrante, la condición indígena y el elemento panoaxaqueño.

*Palabras clave:* 1. espacios culturales; 2. migración oaxaqueña; 3. comunidades migrantes; 4. prácticas culturales; 5. California.

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## *Introduction*

During the last decades the study of the processes by which Mexican immigrants are incorporated into their receiving communities in the United States has gained considerable academic attention. Although several relevant factors related to social and economic aspects have been stressed regarding this process of incorporation and the consequent development (and occasionally the implied conflicts that arise along this entire process), the role of culture and the sociocultural processes that enable their settlement into these communities has been overlooked. In this article we evaluate the role of the festivals known as Guelaguetzas that take place in the state of California, the main destination of the Oaxacan communities in the United States. In this work we show that these festivals are a key cultural element shaping the process of incorporation of these indigenous migrants. The Guelaguetzas represent a gathering location of scattered individuals in their respective places of arrival that function as an evocation of their identity as immigrants, indigenous, and Oaxacan community. They also enable the formation and consolidation of ties linking their respective places of origin and destination. The findings presented here are the result of a research project concerning these festivals that took place in several California cities between 2012 and 2014.

## *Oaxacan Migration to California*

In order to understand the widespread presence of the Guelaguetza festivals in California, we must discuss the migration processes that originates in the state of Oaxaca. This is Mexico's most diverse state, from the cultural and ethnical point of view. It is home to about 20 percent of the indigenous population within the country: there are 16 different indigenous groups (*pueblos indígenas*) in the state and the Mixtecs and the Zapotecs are the largest groups with half a million and eight hundred thousand members respectively. Oaxaca's population is distributed among 570 municipalities, nearly a quarter of the national total. In this state, the migration process towards the city of Oaxaca, the state of Veracruz, and Mexico City began in the decade of 1930. Subsequently, migrants from Oaxaca were part of the

Bracero Program (1942-1964) in the United States and were also an integral part of the rapid expansion of the agricultural industry in the Mexican states of Sinaloa and Baja California during the 1960s through the 1980s. In the decade of 1980, this migration flow was redirected towards the north as consequence of several economic crises that occurred in Mexico. This process began in the West Coast of the United States, particularly in California, and it was subsequently extended towards Oregon and Washington (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004).

Among the diverse destinations of Oaxacan migration to the United States, California has been the main destination site. Migration took place on a massive scale during the 1980s and 1990s. In this period, Oaxacan immigrants settled mainly on agricultural regions of California such as the Central Valley and the Central Coast, the metropolitan area of Los Angeles, and the northern part of San Diego County. There are approximately 350 000 indigenous Oaxacans established in California, and around 180 000 live within the southern area of the state. In Los Angeles, Zapotecs are the most representative indigenous community that migrated from the Valles Centrales and Sierra Norte regions in Oaxaca (López & Runsten, 2004). The Mixtecs have mainly settled within the agricultural areas of the San Joaquin Valley (Fresno, Madera, and Selma), the Central Coast (the agricultural corridor extending from Oxnard to Salinas), and within the northern area of San Diego County. In 2010, it was estimated that there were about 165 000 Oaxacan indigenous living in these rural communities and that one third of the total population of Mexican agricultural workers in California were of indigenous origin, mostly Mixtecs and Triquis from Oaxaca (Mines, Nichols, & Runsten, 2010). Their integration is noticeable not only in the agricultural sector, but also in the urban service labor market (Mines et al., 2010; Falconi, 2011; Cruz-Manjarrez, 2013). Because of the ethnic condition of most of this population, that identifies itself as indigenous, and the existence of a structural racism that they face on both sides of the border, Oaxacans generally occupy the lower positions on the labor market, i.e. they earn a lower income and they face the most adverse working and living conditions when compared to those experienced by other mestizo Mexican immigrants

(Nagengast & Kearney, 1990; Holmes, 2013; Villarejo et al., 2000; Zabin, Kearney, García, Runsten, & Nagengast, 1993).

As an increasing number of Oaxacan immigrants were gradually settled, they consequently developed sizeable communities in several geographical areas in California. They also forged social networks based on their places of origin and on their respective cities or regions of destination, a process various migration experts have documented (Bashi, 2007; Mines, 1981; Massey, Alarcón, Durand, & González, 1987; Rouse, 1991; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). It is important to underscore the relevance of social networks as the reinforcing mechanism that supports the transition from an initial series of informal interactions between groups of relatives to their eventual conformation into organizations able to formalize their own leadership and to maintain their organizational capabilities. Based on this, they are enabled to organize long-term activities. This organizational development element will offer an opportunity to better understand the implementation of cultural activities such as the Guelaguetza festival in various locations in California, that enable the staging of massive events that require a high level of organization capacity and complex planning.

### *Social Networks among Oaxacan Immigrants in California*

The classic approach to migration assumed that migrants inexorably tended to cut the ties with their places of origin to follow a common pattern towards their full assimilation within the countries that received them. Nevertheless, in subsequent years, a number of researchers have emphasized that international migration cannot be merely explained as an unidirectional process (Rouse, 1991; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Levitt, 2001; Basch, Glick, & Szanton, 1994; Faist, 2000). Actually, a core feature of modern migratory flows is the sustained mobility of individuals, commodities and ideas, in a greater or lesser extent and with different intensities, between the places of origin and the respective points of destinations. Thus, ties are forged and consolidated, including social, economic, and religious

practices that link immigrants and non-immigrants beyond borders (Levitt, 2001; Smith, 2006; Schütze, 2013).

An essential manifestation of ties between immigrants is represented by their different social networks. Those ties based on their locality or region of origin have been a constant element of the migrant experience and are common among many immigrant groups in the United States. In fact, these social networks have played a central role in shaping the economic and social incorporation of immigrants from different countries in the United States. In contrast to the conventional perspectives regarding the integration of immigrants, the preservation of both ties and allegiances to their place of origin as expressed by their strong social relationships (such as the interaction between compatriots), has contributed to social and economic mobility of immigrants in many cases (Light, 2006; Levitt, 1997, 2001; López & Runsten, 2004; Alarcón, Escala, & Odgers, 2012).

Generally, these networks are initiated by one or several pioneering immigrants in their respective cities or regions and they eventually become a very important social infrastructure that reduces the costs and risks inherent to the migratory process. These represent opportunities that encourage the migration of other individuals from the same community of origin. It also represents an advantage for those who have already migrated in order to have access to key resources to support their subsistence (work, housing, and information) in their new settlement sites (Mines, 1981; Massey et al., 1987; Massey, Durand, & Riosmena, 2006; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Alarcón, 2002; Duquette-Rury, 2014; Bada, 2014; Schütze, 2013). These networks represent the foundation of what a number of researchers have termed *social capital*. In generic terms, it consists on the accumulation of knowledge, contacts, and experience by several members of the network, as well as the consequent social trust among them (Coleman, 1988; Martinelli, 1994; Putnam, 1994; Runsten & Zabin, 1995; Dasgupta & Serageldin, 2000). As some authors point out, social capital is a key resource for immigrants in order to establish work track records and life opportunities in their respective places of destination (Massey et al., 1987; Portes, 1995; Levitt, 2001; Tsuda, Valdez, & Cornelius, 2003).

A crucial aspect that has been previously emphasized on the literature concerning social capital that is also applicable for organized immigrants (e.g. those groups that promote Guelagueltas in California) is the concept of *complementarity* between formal and informal social capital. Pichler and Wallace (2007) state that it is necessary to study the two existing forms of social capital as well as their interaction in order to better understand the culture of participation and the social cohesiveness in different contexts. This proposition is important to understand the integration of immigrant communities within the U.S., particularly in complex urban settings such as the cities of Los Angeles, San Diego, and Fresno. These were the research sites where we studied the organization of these festivals. Traditionally, formal social capital is focused on civic participation of individuals by their involvement and participation in formal organizations and activities that encourage social trust and an associating behavior that promotes public well-being (Putnam, 1994, 2000). Conversely, informal social capital is envisaged as a set of social networks and mutual support derived from social and family ties. As Lin defines it, “[t]he premise behind the notion of social capital is rather simple and straightforward: *investment in social relations with the expected returns in the marketplace*” (Lin, 2002, p. 19).

These social networks become an essential element of the social organization displayed by immigrants, similarly to family or friendship ties. In this sense, the bonds formed with the *homeland*, far from being dissolved or weakened by the distance, they may be reinforced to become a compatriot-based network that will eventually lead to the establishment of a collective identity among immigrants from the same village or region. It additionally leads to the creation of associational organization as the preferred method to form a “translocal” sense of belonging (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004; Fitzgerald, 2000).

These immigrant social networks have proliferated during the history of U.S. migrations and they reveal a strong organizational diversity. The simplest type of immigrant network is the one based on family ties, friendship, and the village of origin. Once settled on their new environment, immigrants gather for different social events, e.g. either to celebrate the patron saint of their villages, or at sport-

ing events in which the teams represent the immigrants' hometown (Massey et al., 1987). Additional organizational modalities with a more formal character are also developed through this extensive range of informal networks among immigrants. This eventually gives rise to more formalized organizations, such as the Hometown Associations or HTAs, which are almost exclusively focused on issues regarding the hometown of origin in Mexico. This parochial nature and the very closed membership of HTAs enable migrants from the same hometown to generate and to consolidate a sense of community and to strengthen the bonds of solidarity between their members (Moya, 1998; Rivera-Salgado & Escala, 2004; Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004; Cruz-Manjarrez, 2013; Bada, 2014).

Whereas Mexican migration expanded dramatically in the mid-1980s to new destinations in the South, Midwest and the Northeast, the Southwest, and especially California, has been historically the primary destination for these migrants. This is the case for Oaxacan migration, since their most important concentration is in this state, as evidenced by the existence of a wide array of immigrant-led Oaxacan organizations, possessing different degrees of formality and multiple social and political agendas (Escala, Bada, & Rivera, 2006; Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004; Mines et al., 2010; Cruz-Manjarrez, 2013).

Within the context of this dense social web developed by Oaxacan immigrants in California it is possible to explain the emergence of ethnic cultural activities such as the Guelaguetza festival. This social web is comprised by multiple social networks established by Oaxacan immigrants. These networks range from rather semi-formal manifestations such as a wide range of civic, social, political, cultural, and sporting associations based on the place of origin in Oaxaca to formal organizations such as coalitions that gather several groups under a common political agenda (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004; Stephen, 2007; Rivera-Salgado & Escala, 2004). Furthermore, these groups are the platform on which the establishment of ties between the members of Oaxacan communities living in different cities and countries take place (Velasco, 2002, 2005; Besserer & Kearney, 2006; Escala, 2014). In this context, the organization of cultural events plays a central role in anchoring these social networks.

### *The Guelaguetza Celebration in California*

The Guelaguetza is a music and dance festival that is traditionally celebrated on a yearly basis every summer in the city of Oaxaca. In this festival, a number of musical and dance interpretations from the diverse regions that comprise the state are performed. It is thus presented as a pan-Oaxacan festival. *Guelaguetza* is a Zapotec word that means *offering* or *gift*, making reference to the reciprocity or mutual help between fellow citizens. Its oldest precedent dates back from the 19th century, to the festivals called *Lunes del Cerro* [Mondays on the Hill], that took place the next two Mondays after July 16<sup>th</sup>, at *Cerro del Fortín*. Within the context of a city with a plethora of religious and secular festivities throughout the year, this event gradually became the main festivity for Oaxacans (Lizama, 2006; Goertzen, 2009).

Nevertheless, as Lizama Quijano (2006) points out, in his historical review of the Guelaguetza in Oaxaca, the direct precursors of this festival occurred in the early 20th century. In 1928, the denomination of the *Lunes del Cerro* celebration was changed to *Fiesta de la Azucena* [Lily Festival], as a remembrance of pre-Columbian traditions and festivities. This change set the stage for the rise of Oaxacan regionalism during the post-revolutionary period. It has as precept the strengthening of local elements in order to assure a national identity. Subsequently, in 1932, the so-called *Homenaje Racial* [Homage to the Race] was celebrated as part of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the City of Oaxaca, as a component of the post-revolutionary *indigenista* tradition in Mexico. Finally, in 1951, and derived from the transformation of Oaxaca into a large tourist destination and the foundation of the *Comité Pro Fiestas Tradicionales de Oaxaca* [Committee for Traditional Oaxacan Festivals], the organization of the Guelaguetza adopted most of its current form. For instance, the addition of *delegaciones* [delegations] consisting of indigenous contingents coming from the different regions of the state, caused the adoption of the term *Guelaguetza* as its official designation. Moreover, a consolidation of the Guelaguetza occurred in the decade of 1950 as the performances by several delegations became an integral part of the official program, including the establishment of a sequence for their respective presentations sanctioned by the *Comité Pro Fiestas Tradicionales*



*de Oaxaca*. From 1958, the presence of every region of the state was finally achieved in the festival, driven by the increase of both national and international tourism (Lizama, 2006).

During the following decades, the Guelaguetza was established not only as a regional Oaxacan event, but also as an identification of a traditional indigenous element at both national and international levels. Consequently, defined guidelines were introduced and preserved in order to offer a defined and carefully curated image that the city wanted to project: that of a city that celebrates its ethnic diversity in positive terms and in harmonious coexistence, and ultimately the celebration of the Oaxacan ethnic unity. Similarly, it was decided to exclude any reference that might convey an image of Oaxaca as being poor, decadent, or backward (Lizama, 2006; Goertzen, 2009).

At the beginning of the 1980 decade, Guelaguetzas were organized throughout California as consequence of the settlement and gathering of Oaxacan immigrants and the consolidation of social networks among them. These years represented those in which migration from Oaxaca to the United States significantly increased. These cultural celebrations were part of a wide array of events that took place in public spaces in the different cities in California where Oaxaqueños had settled. In similar ways as other events, such as religious celebrations or sports tournaments, these entailed public activities intended to reinforce the collective identities of the participants and they are the most visible manifestation of the so-called “migrant civil society” (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004). More specifically, other researchers who study the migration process between Oaxaca and California have highlighted the importance of public celebrations and cultural activities for the establishment of communities as well as their transnational identities (Cruz-Manjarrez, 2013).

Among the Guelaguetzas organized in several California cities, we consider three of them as most important and emblematic. These are performed in different locations by different associations of Oaxacan immigrants.<sup>1</sup> The first one has been organized since 1987 by the *Organización Regional de Oaxaca* [ORO, the Regional Orga-

<sup>1</sup> An internet query for ‘Guelaguetza calendar in California’ shows that these were organized in nine California cities: Santa Cruz, Santa Maria, Oxnard, Bakersfield, Santa Rosa, San Jose, San Diego, Fresno, and Los Angeles.

nization of Oaxaca] in the city of Los Angeles. The second has been organized since 1994 by the *Coalición de Comunidades Indígenas de Oaxaca* (COCIO, Coalition of Indigenous Communities of Oaxaca) in San Marcos, in San Diego County. The last one has been organized since 1999 by the *Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales* (FIOB, Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations) in the city of Fresno, in central California.

As other authors have documented (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004; Escala, 2008; Cruz-Manjarrez, 2013), cultural festivals such as Guelaguetzas are the most important events for Oaxacan immigrants in the cities they have settled. This has been possible because of the activities carried out by several Oaxacan immigrant organizations that were previously established from their social networks. These are grouped to constitute a *critical mass* of such communities, generally comprised by first-generation immigrants, although the second generation also participates actively in the festivals.

Actually, the members of this second generation of Oaxacan immigrants do not only participate in musical bands and in dance groups during the Guelaguetza festivals, but they also occupy leadership positions to organize these festivals. One example is the case of the current ORO president, Isaí Pazos (age 28) originally from the Zapotec community of Villa Hidalgo Yalálag in Oaxaca's Sierra Norte region. He arrived to the city of Los Angeles at age 4 and began to play clarinet for the local Yalálag band at age 7. He also started dancing in the Guelaguetza at age 12. In 2013, the election of Isaí as ORO's president, a broad coalition of organizations comprised by hometown associations of Zapotec immigrants mainly from Sierra Norte and other dancing groups and traditional musical bands, represented the initial participation in a leadership positions of young people whose identity is rather shaped by their experience as Latino youths in Los Angeles and not so much as Oaxacan immigrants (Isaí Pazos, personal communication, Los Angeles, California, July 2015). The situation is similar for the Guelaguetza organized in Fresno, in which Miguel Villegas has been the master of ceremonies in recent years. Miguel is 26-years old and he is originally from the Mixtec community of San Miguel Cuevas. He migrated to the city of Fresno at age 10 and without previous experience he became the master of ceremonies

of the Guelaguetzas held in 2011 and 2012 because of his ability to speak Mixtec, Spanish, and English (Miguel Villegas, personal communication, Fresno, California, August 2013).

The three Guelaguetzas under study are massive public events visited by thousands of attendees (including Oaxacans and others of Mexican origin, both immigrants and non-immigrants). The organization of such events involves a considerable amount of planning and multiple arrangements that take several months to sort out. To achieve all this, organizers must carry out an extensive range of logistical tasks in order to ensure a smooth celebration of the event (Escala, 2008). During the months previous to the festival, these associations carry out multiple activities in order to collect funds (dances, raffles, community carnivals, etc., particularly important are the financial resources collected by dance groups and traditional music bands) and to obtain sponsorships to cover the festival expenses.

In addition to the public and massive nature of the Guelaguetzas in the cities in which they are celebrated and the centrality they attain therein among the Oaxacan immigrant communities, our research shows how the celebration of these festivals represents an important space for social interactions in which many stakeholders interlink in several ways in order to support the event. In this regard, the preparation of this festival mainly represents a space that allows the confluence of different groups, thus creating a space for identification that encourages the creation as well as the re-creation of cultural, social, and even political identities among Oaxacan immigrants. Furthermore, the Guelaguetza is also a space for contact and negotiation with other stakeholders who are not necessarily Oaxacan (local authorities and elected officials, activists, and commercial businesses, among others.) Therefore, most of our research is aimed to document and to analyze how these interactions shape and reinforce the establishment of Oaxacan immigrant communities in those cities on which these festivities are celebrated, and to what extent this occurs. Below we briefly summarize the convergence of several stakeholders that enable the celebration of this event.

When we say that the Guelaguetza is a space for the creation of a sense of collective identity among Oaxacan immigrants, we are specifically referring to the rich set of interactions of Oaxacan stakeholders

who take part in the festival in different ways to make it happen, and in the process they create a new emergent sense of ethnic identity. Firstly, several Oaxacan immigrant associations participate and they comprise those coalitions that interact to organize the event. For instance, regarding the Guelaguetza organized in the city of San Marcos, some groups such as MIGPAO (Migrantes por Ayoquezco, Oaxaca), comprised by immigrants from the Ayoquezco de Aldama municipality, use the event to provide information on their own association and on the projects that they carry out in their community of origin.

Secondly, several dance groups perform at the festival. They represent their respective communities of origin, including their traditional costumes, masks, and props necessary to perform several dances numbers. In turn, these groups represent an important mean to encourage the participation of the association members' children, such as those who integrate the coalition supporting the organization of the event.

Third, traditional wind music bands also perform at the festival. Their participation is emblematic as part of the Oaxacan culture and as core component of the festival. These wind bands are comprised by musicians from first- and second-generation immigrants.

Fourth, Oaxacan handicrafts and foods are commercialized by small family entrepreneurs looking to profit from the vast market of immigrants attending the Guelaguetzas.

Finally, the Latino Spanish-speaking press is also present. They are not only focused on the attendees, but also on gathering information regarding the event and consequently to offer a narration of the festival itself.

The convergence of these components turns the Guelaguetza into a social space that enables the congregation of a large audience mainly comprised by Oaxacan immigrants. In turn, this allows the creation and reaffirmation of a sense of belonging concomitantly with a sense of differentiation embedded in the context of the locality of destination of this migration. The festival has become a massive event, with the presence of thousands of attendees, and it is currently the most important celebration held by the Oaxacan immigrant community in the regions where the Guelaguetza takes place (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004). As shown in Table 1, this is the case for the

Guelaguetza organized in the city of San Marcos as it brings together thousands of people living in different cities in San Diego.

*Table 1.* Guelaguetza attendants in San Marcos, California, 2012:  
City of residence

<i>City</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>
San Marcos	29	23.2
Vista	28	22.4
Oceanside	26	20.8
San Diego	13	10.4
Escondido	12	9.6
Chula Vista	3	2.4
El Cajon	3	2.4
Carlsbad	2	1.6
Oaxaca	2	1.6
Temecula	2	1.6
Fallbrook	1	0.8
La Mesa	1	0.8
National City	1	0.8
Poway	1	0.8
San Ysidro	1	0.8

N=125.

*Source:* Original contribution by the authors.

Table 1 shows that attendees come from in several cities within the San Diego County (excepting Temecula, that is located within the Riverside County), particularly most of them live in the San Marcos, Vista, Oceanside, San Diego, and Escondido cities. Traditionally, they all are destinations for Oaxacan immigrants in southern California (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004; Stephen, 2007; Runsten, 2005). Similarly, most of the audience are individuals born in Oaxaca, as shown in Table 2:

*Table 2.* Guelaguetza attendants in San Marcos, California, 2012:  
Place of birth

<i>Place</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>
Oaxaca	68	54.4
Other Mexican states	34	27.2
California	11	8.8
Baja California	8	6.4
Other countries	3	2.4
Other U.S. states	1	0.8

N=125.

*Source:* Original contribution by the authors.

The sample that consisted of Guelaguetza attendants in San Marcos 2012 shows that most of them were born in Oaxaca. This demonstrates the convening power of these events for first-generation Oaxacan immigrants within the region. Furthermore, the other main categories show the presence of descendants, immigrants, and non-immigrants born elsewhere.

Beyond the descriptive approach provided by these data, the celebration of Guelaguetzas in California implies multiple meanings for the Oaxacan immigrant communities. For instance, the president of the Organización Regional de Oaxaca at that time, who continually organized the festival in Los Angeles for the last 28 years, summarizes that experience in the following terms:

Well, I see it more as an event that cannot stop. It is a necessity. It is its identity [of the Oaxacan community], it is, well, to everyone's liking. I think the Guelaguetza is like a little engine that moves all of us along, as that day we all celebrate, as that day we live our identity more strongly, and our food. It is like our presence identifies us as Oaxacans. I feel we cannot stop doing the Guelaguetza, it is now a tradition (Mauro Hernández, personal communication, Los Angeles, California, May 2014).

Thus, it is noted that the celebration of the Guelaguetza in locations such as Los Angeles enables the creation of a collective space in which Oaxacan immigrants of the region, as well as their families,

immigrants, and non-immigrants gather. Therefore, its implementation becomes an organization *engine* that has allowed the institutionalization of these massive events, with thousands of attendants, in the public spaces of the cities where they take place. Whereas the organizational capacity of the social networks established by Oaxacan immigrants enable the celebration of this festival, the statement made by Hernández speaks about the centrality of the cultural components involved in this festival by referring to it as *a tradition* and the importance of celebrating *our identity* that *identifies us as Oaxacans*. The importance of these cultural components will be addressed in the following section.

### *The Guelaguetza as the Establishment of a Cultural Space*

Amitai Etzioni (2004) argues that despite the limited interest among social scientists to study events such as festive celebrations, holidays, and similar rituals, these cultural events are clearly relevant for socialization processes and also to define normative behaviors, according to their nature as cultural products. They reinforce community ties by dramatic means (i.e., the involvement of symbols, their representation, and the creation of narratives). Similarly, Procter (2004) underlines the importance of these festivals as an important space for civic life and cultural production:

Festivals provide a moment of common experience, a reference point for interaction and reflection in which a broad range of collective participation from local citizens is invited ... Certainly many centrifugal forces exist in the community, including religion, politics, patterns of kinship, class, social networks, mutual interests, and work. But festivals provide a momentary opportunity to transcend these differences and come together as a collective body to produce, reflect upon, and perform community ideals and identity. (Procter, 2004, p. 134).

Something similar may be said regarding the importance of studies focused on cultural processes such as the Guelaguetza festivals as an integral part of the life of the Oaxacan immigrant communities in

California. Although studies on migration have paid limited attention to this type of events, their importance comes not only from the recovery and the continuity of immigrants' traditions in their communities of destination, but especially (and based on Etzioni's observation on the importance of analyzing these events) because participants in these cultural events "find elements of these traditions compelling and meaningful" (Etzioni, 2004, p. 5). These cultural spaces created by Oaxacan immigrants in their respective settlement regions certainly depend on the density and reach of their own social networks (discussed in the previous section of this work), and also on their capacity to use public spaces in their places of arrival. It is also clear that the organization of these festivals involves elements that surpass the scope of this social capital—as pertinently pointed out by cultural critics regarding the restricted use of the social networks concept (Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994)—allowing the configuration and the reinforcement of the community's identity dimension.

We understand cultural space as an accumulation of social practices possessing a historical sense expressed on a specific place and time, linked to the concept of the culture sedimentation theory set forth by St. Claire (2007). The premise of this concept refers to the understanding of cultural representations as social actions that occur in the present but are embedded in the cultural past. As St. Claire explains, citing Mehan and Wood, "It is by using the past to make sense of the present that the social construction of culture comes into existence" (St. Claire, 2007, p. 53). Hence the importance of public rituals and festivals based on historic legacies, as specific social processes that represent a mean for the re-creation and internalization of rules and values for all community members. Consequently, St. Claire points out that "Cultural change involves the retaining of some cultural practices along with the modification, revision, and re-invention of events in the co-present. Just as the present is embedded in the past, the future is embedded in the present" (St. Claire, 2007, p. 53). In this dynamic that entails the construction of the present and the reconstruction of the past, cultural practices such as the Guelaguettzas in California are re-created, redefined, or even reconstructed and thus function as the new present. In this social and cultural context, we can understand why the rise of cultural spaces



creates new meanings based on historical memory recreated by indigenous Oaxacan immigrants in California.

The redefinition of the Guelaguetzas' content in California as cultural spaces may be appreciated under three central elements that are also involved during the organizing and performance of these festivals, as they are included on the interplay between the search for authenticity (i.e., the attachment to the original festival celebrated in Oaxaca, Mexico) and its re-creation in a different environment. The first element is what can be referred to as the migrant condition. The migration process emerges as a constant reference, having different connotations, whether by the Oaxacan immigrant associations that organize the festival, by activists, or even by those who promote community and commercial services. For instance, a master of ceremonies of this festival reflected on this issue as follows:

As a migrant I would say that [the Guelaguetza] represents a piece of Oaxaca here on this side of the border, it represents that there is an event you can go to and feel at home. Why? Because there are typical Oaxacan meals, there is typical Oaxacan clothing ... This is very different from other events that take place here such as the Cinco de Mayo or Independence Day ... Then, as a migrant, it is something that pleases or satisfies you, particularly if you are far from home. (Miguel Villegas, personal communication, Fresno, California, March 2013)

Similarly, a member of one of the bands stated:

[In the celebration of the Guelaguetza in California] there are people from Oaxaca, from other Mexican states, and people from the same country, and white people who are surprised to see the culture, to listen to the music of a band, as if they were there [in Oaxaca]. We display ourselves like a peacock does, oh yes! But what is important is that they see the Oaxacan migrant, that they know what is Oaxacan. Not just only the Oaxacan who works, who cleans houses, but the Oaxacan who also has his or her culture and can enjoy it. (A female member of the band Yaatzachi El Bajo, personal communication, Los Angeles, California, February 2013)

In these cases, references to migration and the migratory status are a constant in all narrations occurring during the event and in explanations offered by organizers and participants. In that sense, this element makes a clear distinction between the search to re-create the *authenticity* of this festival and its novel significance in a different environment when compared to its original representation. As Nájera-Ramírez points out (2009) in her dissertation on Mexican dance performances in the United States and their authenticity, “[a]ll cultural performances provide interpretive frames within which the act of communication ... is to be understood” (Nájera-Ramírez, 2009, p. 285). It is clear that while the concern shown by organizers and performers regarding the dance and musical numbers shown in the Guelaguetza is based on cultural preservation and the re-creation of a sense of authenticity, their performance in such a different environment far from its place of origin involves the generation of new *interpretative frameworks*, which are clearly permeated by the migration process.

A second major aspect of the Guelaguetza as a cultural celebration is the ‘indigenous condition’ experienced by Oaxacan immigrants. This condition is clearly communicated by the names of the associations organizing these festivals (e.g., the Coalición de Comunidades *Indígenas* de Oaxaca, or the Frente *Indígena* de Organizaciones Bi-nacionales). It is also signified in the frequent public use of different indigenous languages to announce some of the performances during the festival and the remembrance of histories (real or imagined) concerning the festival itself, as part of the narrative told by the masters of ceremonies to the public attending the event. This is also a central element in the thinking by organizers and participants. For instance, one of the organizers expressed that the main achievement of the Guelaguetza was:

the cultural development of the indigenous communities ... We think that [the Guelaguetza] identifies us, that it is a commonality among all Oaxacans and perhaps other indigenous communities, as one way or another it is a space where we can meet, where we can greet friends and compatriots, where we can listen to our languages, see the dances with typical costumes we are used to wear and that are still worn in our communities, and the music we would listen to

in our villages. (Leoncio Vázquez, personal communication, Fresno, California, March 2013)

Another interviewee stated on the Guelaguetza:

It helps us as a community. Why? Because if we don't know who we are, we don't know where we come from, and we are confused. And then there are the young people. If we do not inculcate in them to know their own culture, their roots, they can't do things, it is hard for them to progress ... So when they have that, who they are, that they are descendants of the Zapotecs, of the Mixtecs, when they hear that and look into who they were, well, they feel proud about themselves. (Fidel Gómez, personal communication, Los Angeles, California, March 2014)

Finally, another interviewee reflected on the following:

When I was going to school [in Mexico], they always made fun of us because we were from Oaxaca. To them, Oaxaca means indigenous people, poor people. Then, in the school [in California], our own fellow Mexicans made fun of us because Oaxaca is indigenous people, the poor, that always lacks something. Thus, for me it is important that they [the participants in the Guelaguetza] show that poverty does not define them, that they are indigenous people, and that there are many traditions behind them. (Sara Gutiérrez, personal communication, San Diego, California, August 2012)

Although this second element establishes a clear similarity to the original festival, in which the indigenous culture of Oaxaca is praised, this emphasis acquires a new meaning in the case of the Guelaguetzas in California, as previously discussed, because its celebration generates a gathering public space for Oaxacan indigenous immigrants who attend the event in order to reminisce about the culture of their communities of origin. Furthermore, this celebration allows the consolidation of Oaxacan immigrants communities as such, by exposing the younger generation to their own cultural heritage, where they reminisce and resignify their roots of origin. Finally, the possibility that the celebration of the Guelaguetza in California may convey other meanings, despite the poverty associated to the indigenous status in

Oaxaca, again suggests an important separation from the spirit of ethnic harmony in an idyllic context that the original festival in the city of Oaxaca seeks to communicate (Lizama, 2006).

The third element is the pan-Oaxacan nature of the event, that is comprised by several collective identities participating in the festival. Once again, there are multiple references to the state of Oaxaca, by using several images making reference to Oaxacan unity among a rather traditionally heterogeneous population. A performer in one of the dancing groups reflected about this as follows:

We, through the folkloric groups, the music bands, are preserving the culture of Oaxaca and bringing it here. But it is more than all that. It is identity ... The fact of going to dance at a Guelaguetza transports you for a moment to your regions, to the various types of people in each dance ... I think that the Guelaguetza in itself has been like the epicenter of the Oaxacan community, in all senses. (Participant in the folkloric group Huaxyacac, personal communication, Los Angeles, California, February 2013)

Similarly, a musician in one of the bands stated:

Well, I don't know if it is very important, but knowing and understanding that in Oaxaca the Guelaguetza is celebrated every year, and knowing that here [in California] there are many Oaxacans, it is like bringing the Guelaguetza to those Oaxacans who cannot leave [the United States] for various circumstances, because it is there where all the Oaxacans gather and you see everybody. It is like giving them a little bit of what Oaxaca has and what Oaxaca represents here in Los Angeles. (Member of the band Yaatzachi El Bajo, personal communication, Los Angeles, California, February 2013)

In this particular case, the festival is perceived as an important element in the collective identity of the Oaxacans in California, as it establishes a bond, whether real or imaginary, between the places of origin and destination for Oaxacan immigrants. Although this reaffirmation regarding the Oaxaca *over here* and that of *over there* again establishes a clear distinction when compared to the original festival, and allows us to highlight the importance of these celebrations in California as

well as the establishment of cultural spaces by Oaxacan immigrants, and therefore the possibility of endowing these cultural practices with new meanings.

To summarize, these three elements outlined above, appear as a constant in the thinking of the organizers, participants, and attendees of the Guelagueltas celebrated in California, and they represent true meaningful experiences or *narrative episodes* (Velasco, 2005) to establish the collective identity of Oaxacan immigrants in California. These elements highlight the importance of celebrating these festivals as cultural spaces as they become experiential frameworks that confer meaning to the individual and collective lives of these immigrants. Similarly, their performance in the respective places of destination, although it is inspired on the preservation of cultural practices and on a sense of authenticity, they also imply an important resignification of their content, therefore a distinction regarding the original festival.

### *Conclusions*

In this article we have documented and evaluated the role of the festivals known as Guelagueltas for the establishment of Oaxacan immigrant communities in California. We emphasized the importance that cultural elements possess during this process, as it depends on the expansion of the social networks constructed by immigrants. We argue that the creation of these cultural spaces is needed, particularly to nourish a basic dimension in the life of these communities: an identity reassessment within a different environment regarding their respective places of origin, as a consequence of migration.

As we have shown, the organization of these festivals demands an intense amount of work that is provided by the multiple associations of Oaxacan immigrants and their celebration represents an important call for the gathering and interaction of thousands of participants, particularly Oaxacan immigrants inhabiting in several locations within the destination region, their families, and also other immigrants and non-immigrants.

Furthermore, although the organization of these festivals is driven by a sense of cultural preservation on the part of the organizing

migrant groups, in order to search for a sense of authenticity when compared to the original festival celebrated in the city of Oaxaca, it also exhibits marked differences derived from their representation within a different environment. We highlight three central elements converging in the development of the Guelaguetza, as expressed by organizers, participants, narrators, and attendees of the event (reflecting the migrant, indigenous, and pan-Oaxacan status of this population), that demonstrate the capacity to reassess the significance of the contents in these festivals to subsequently turn them into an important cultural space in the life of these communities of Mexican indigenous immigrants.

Finally, it is vital to emphasize the role of the cultural processes occurring within Mexican immigrant communities in the United States nowadays. This is of particular importance because of a constant interest regarding Mexican migration shown by the public and political sectors in the United States as it appears that the images that prevail among the American public concerning immigrants simply do not reflect the complexity of the Mexicans' sociocultural dynamics. Commonly, Mexicans are seen as an amorphous, growing, and chaotic mass, or as perennial and atomized victims. This article aims to emphasize one part of this complexity.

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