



Popular Religion or Lived Religion? Exploring Indigenous Religious Festival Practice in Mexico

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Abstract

This article investigates the practice of lived religion in two contemporary indigenous communities in Mexico (San Juan Mixtepec, Oaxaca and El Espíritu, Hidalgo) by examining some of their unique religious festive traditions to analyze the ways in which human and non-human social actors interact with one another to create networks of symbolic meaning and senses of belonging. Specific examples of embodied practices and materiality in the festive cycle of each community are analyzed as the basis for their religious identities which also, the author suggests, create dynamic senses of community and self through the mutual sharing of symbolically significant cultural discourses. By analyzing different elements of traditional religious festivals in these two communities from the perspective of actor-network theory, the article reveals how the concept of “lived religion” can be used to express the realities of indigenous religious life in Mexico and as an alternative to “popular religion,” which typically resonates more frequently throughout the literature.

Keywords Indigenous communities · Mexico · Lived religion · Festivals · Materiality · Performance

Introduction

Religious practice is an integral part of the construction of cultural identities in many contemporary Mexican indigenous communities, where human and non-human social actors interact with one another through the practice of material and performative elements to create dynamic frameworks of symbolic meaning. These relations underscore the lived experiences and social realities of participants and directly inform the construction of identities and senses of belonging. Religious practices also directly depend upon the constant renovation of symbolically

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significant relations between community members, non-human beings, as well as tangible and intangible objects and are subject to processes of transformation resulting in their perpetual continuation or eventual extinguishment. These active relationships unite material life, religious belief, and performative practice together to inform the ways in which participants reckon who they are both within and beyond the religious context.

By analyzing different elements of traditional religious festivals in two distinct communities (San Juan Mixtepec, Oaxaca and El Espíritu, Hidalgo)¹ from the perspective of actor-network theory, I investigate the ways in which the concept of “lived religion” can be used to express the realities of indigenous religious life and as an alternative to “popular religion,” which typically appears more frequently throughout the literature. Lived religion, I suggest, is better suited for investigating the unique realities present in these communities than popular religion because it specifically takes the following analytical points into account:

- 1) That indigenous social actors are the architects of lived religious practice
- 2) That lived religious practice influences and is influenced by broader discourses of indigenous social organization that build senses of identity and belonging
- 3) That the concepts of materiality and performance directly inform indigenous lived religious practice
- 4) That religious identities are inherently grounded in broader community-based sociocultural practices.

To achieve this, I explore how members of the Mixtec (*Ñuu Savi*) community of San Juan Mixtepec, Oaxaca and those of the Otomí (*Ñähñu*) community of El Espíritu, Hidalgo create multifaceted senses of community through the sharing of symbolically significant cultural discourses grounded in embodied practice and material relations realized in the festival context that also directly inform their religious identities. I begin the article with a critical discussion of how authors have typically framed the academic study of indigenous spirituality via the term “popular religion,” which generally refers to any religious practice that does not conform to official canonical religious doctrine. I contrast this with the concept of “lived religion,” which I argue provides a more multifaceted approach to the study of contemporary indigenous religious identities writ large. The section also emphasizes the importance of considering practice as a fundamental attribute of religious studies

¹ The findings presented here are based on two ethnographic research projects conducted by the author in San Juan Mixtepec in 2013 (12 months) and in El Espíritu in 2018 (2 months) that received funding from The Ruth Landes Memorial Research Fund (The Reed Foundation) and the Fondo del Apoyo a la Investigación (FAI) (Universidad Autónoma de San Luis Potosí), respectively. Qualitative research methods based on ethnographic fieldwork, including unstructured and semistructured interviews, participant observation, audiovisual documentation, and informal surveys, were used by the author to obtain the data analyzed in this paper (Bernard 2006). The author worked directly with the local civil and religious authorities of both communities to obtain the required administrative and symbolic permissions for working in these contexts. The data collected by the author, such as photographs, audio recordings, and interview transcripts, were shared with local authorities as part of a collaborative exchange of information pertinent for community archival use.

in general and frames this perspective within a theoretical discussion of specific concepts present in actor-network theory such as materiality, performativity, and agency.

The next section provides an abbreviated introduction to the history, geography, and sociocultural characteristics of San Juan Mixtepec and El Espíritu and focuses on elements associated with their traditional festival cycles that provide crucial foundations for lived religious practice in both communities of study. The following sections explore specific characteristics that, I argue, constitute intrinsic elements of contemporary indigenous lived religious practice in Mexico: (1) the cult of Catholic saints, (2) indigenous cosmovisions, (3) ritual and spectacle, and (4) the production of social identities. The discussion of the cult of Catholic saints focuses on the ways in which concepts of materiality and embodiment intertwine within the symbolic spiritual relationships the faithful have with physical saint images, which are often imbued with lifelike personality traits transforming them from static figures into “living” saints. The concept of “cosmovision,” though somewhat polemical given its various theoretical interpretations, is nonetheless a noteworthy aspect of contemporary lived religious experience, one directly linked with individual as well as collective interpretations of prehispanic cultural knowledges and highlighted by the specific relationships that the indigenous social actors have with natural world and the spirits that dwell within it. Ritual and spectacle are explored from a performative perspective, specifically considering practices of masking, costuming, animal sacrifice, and other kinds of embodied ritual performance to understand the ways which lived religion resides within and beyond the physical bodies of participants. The production of social identities refers to the multifaceted ways in which festivals and their associated activities inform the construction of imagined communities for indigenous social actors living at home and in diaspora. Lived religion in San Juan Mixtepec and El Espíritu is explored here as an expression of *communitas*, or the collective sense of togetherness or oneness gestated within the festival context that influences the production, maintenance, and transformation of senses of belonging (Turner 1987). Each of these characteristics directly informs the dynamic relationships present between actors and networks in the practice of lived religion.

Popular Religion or Lived Religion? Why Terminology Matters

This article seeks to diversify our academic understandings of the relationships present between religious practices and the construction of sociocultural identities in contemporary Mexican indigenous communities. To begin, it is important to consider the history of how academic investigations of religious or spiritual practices throughout Latin America have traditionally been oriented around the concept of “popular religion” (Garcés Marrero 2020). This term can generally be defined as “the religion of the ordinary people that happens beyond the bounds and often without the approval of religious authorities” (Ammerman 2014: 190). It has also been considered “an adjective for a degraded version of an official or institutional religion; but also, when speaking of the religion of a community, it could be synonymous with a liberating horizon that represents an alternative for

accessing the modernizing values of society” (de la Torre 2021: 262). The supposed utilitarian nature of the term comes from a general assumption that religious life in Latin America is inherently grounded in syncretic practices based on the unique processes of evangelization that occurred throughout the Americas during the Spanish and Portuguese conquests, resulting in the creation of “hybrid” religious identities that combined Catholic doctrine with preexisting indigenous cosmological beliefs. However, syncretism should not be taken to imply an inherently smooth blending of two distinct cultural discourses in equal measure but instead should form the basis for more profound theoretical discussions regarding power and the politics of representation that reflect the reality of Latin American religious, and indeed sociocultural, identities today. This is one reason that continuing to apply the concept of popular religion to the study of indigenous religious practice is in and of itself problematic; it implies a supposed corruption of authentic or canonical practices by participants based on their unique interpretations of religious discourses borne of historically fractured processes of religious evangelization. Or, as de la Torre (2021: 261) explained, “many of the traditions that are considered to be cultural patrimony (tangible or intangible) today are related to popular religion (like patron saint festivals, pilgrimages and their sanctuaries, indigenous dances and those about the conquest, traditional medicine, animistic rituals of the Afro-Latin American cults, pagan and indigenous rites that are connected to nature, shamanic traditions, etc.). The popular religion system represented an archive of knowledges and cosmovisions that were denied and devalued by Catholicism, but that they could not suppress.”

However, it is also important to note here that the exclusionary attitudes toward popular and non-Christian religions were directly addressed by the church after Vatican II, where Pope Paul VI declared that “through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions...they [the sons of the Church] recognize, preserve, and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men” (Paul VI 1965: Passage 2). Popular religion does indeed consider a diverse gamut of performative and material practices and reflects many of the characteristics present in contemporary indigenous religious and spiritual life. However, it also attempts to encompass a wide variety of practices within one homogenous category which, given the nature of the term, frames these experiences as inherently existing in opposition or resistance to hegemonic religious discourses. When categorized as “popular,” the unique religious experiences of participants are “never conveniently defined nor explicitly related to the social and cultural structure of a given society but are instead denoted as a generic reality that is vastly expanded throughout the population and refers to what is “vulgarized” and “generalized” (Parker 1993: 60).

As an alternative, I suggest that discussions of agency, materiality, and performance are essential for understanding contemporary indigenous religious identities. The concept of “lived religion” provides a viable categorical alternative that considers these characteristics and generally better describes the reality of these practices than does the term “popular religion.” Ammerman (2014: 190–191) defined lived religion as the following:

Looking for lived religion does mean that we look for the material, embodied aspects of religion as they occur in everyday life, in addition to listening for how people explain themselves. It includes both the experiences of the body and the mind. The study of lived religion includes attention to how and what people eat; how they dress; how they deal with birth, death, sexuality, and nature; and even how they modify hair and body through tattoos or dreadlocks. Lived religion may include the spaces that the people inhabit as well as the construction of shrines in homes or in public places for instance. And it includes the physical and artistic things people do together such as singing, dancing, and other folk or community traditions that enact a ritual sense of solidarity and transcendence.

The study of lived religion “takes the focus away from the inherent logics and perspectives of religious institutions and relocates it on people” (da Costa et al. 2019: 62). Focusing on participants instead of discourses allows for a more nuanced understanding of religious practices. In general terms, “agency” is a definitive characteristic of social actors, who participate in unique and dynamic networks of social relations that create the fabric of any given society. They are the humans and non-humans, objects, and ideas that interact with each other and work to form meaningful symbolic relations through a diverse gamut of performative actions. The dynamic nature of these actions speaks to the agency of these different actors as both producers and receptors of the cultural discourses that are intertwined within these networks of symbolic relations, or, as Michel Callon (1992: 156) observed, “the actor-network is not reducible to either an actor or a network; it is simultaneously the actor whose activity consists in intertwining heterogenous elements and a network that is capable of redefining and transforming what it is made up of.”

By moving beyond the static and implicitly hierarchical categories traditionally couched within the concept of popular religion, an investigation of lived religion and its relationship with the construction of contemporary indigenous identities implies a specific consideration of the concept of practice.

Practices, in the broadest sense, can be defined as “socially recognized forms of activity, done on the basis of what members learn from others” (Barnes 2001: 27). Ortner (2006: 133) noted that a viable theory of practice considers neither “individuals” nor “social forces” as having “precedence,” but instead focuses on “a dynamic, powerful, and sometimes transformative relationship between the practices of real people and the structures of society, culture, and history.” This also implies active relationships between human beings and objects, ideas, spaces, and other material and immaterial concepts that create webs of symbolic meanings for participants. Bourdieu (1977: 78) famously conceptualized this relationship between system and practice as the *habitus*, defined as “the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations that produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principle, while adjusting to the demands inscribed as objective potentialities in the situation, as defined by the cognitive and motivating structures making up the *habitus*.”

The practices that form part of lived religion reproduce this *habitus* but also have the power to change its characteristics over time. This is precisely why this article

approaches the study of lived religion from the perspective of actor-network theory (hereafter referred to as ANT) by exploring the dynamic symbolic relationships present between “actor” and “network” in indigenous communities. Here, “actors” specifically refer to those members of the San Juan Mixtepec and El Espíritu communities who actively participate in the socio-religious and festive activities present in these two contexts as spectators, volunteers, or as part of the local civic-religious hierarchy. “Networks” are defined as the multifaceted web of social, cultural, religious, and economic connections that members of these communities have with one other, Catholic saints, spirits, nature, and the community itself. The relationship between these concepts constitutes an intrinsic means through which the members of indigenous communities interact with one another and create symbolically significant networks.

ANT seeks to understand everyday life in a non-hierarchical manner, as something that is inherently performative and representative of relationships between human beings and physical as well as intangible objects. The relationships between the material and the performative make up our understanding of some of the most relevant concepts present in the study of contemporary spiritual life, such as “identity” and “belonging.” These ideas are particularly useful because they permit us to situate themes such as power, interpersonal relations, the practice of culture, and the relations between human beings and material culture within analyses of indigenous lived religion, revealing the richness and complexity of each one of these concepts within this particular social context.

Indigenous Lived Religious Practice in San Juan Mixtepec and El Espíritu

San Juan Mixtepec and El Espíritu are indigenous communities that actively conserve religious traditions tied to specific norms of social organization, spiritual beliefs, and cultural discourses that express the multifaceted relationships that exist between indigenous social actors and the networks they navigate through a cycle of festivals (Fig. 1). The secular activities and religious rituals performed within the festive context are a benchmark for the construction, practice, and transformation of cultural identities for participants within and beyond this context. A comparison of the two communities is a means through which to explore indigenous lived religious practice in general, providing critical theoretical and practical insight for the contemporary interpretation of classic concepts such as belief, tradition, identity, and belonging.

San Juan Mixtepec was founded on the border between the Mixteca Alta and Mixteca Baja regions of Oaxaca during the sixteenth century as part of Spanish colonial socio-religious practices of evangelization known as *congregación* that relocated entire native communities from their original hilltop locations to congregated areas typically located in the valleys below (Terraciano 2000). Some of the outlying communities that belong to the municipality of San Juan Mixtepec, such as Los Tejocotes, were founded because of historic mining activity conducted in the region. It is now a transnational migratory community, with many residents living



Fig. 1 Geographic locations of El Espíritu, Hidalgo and San Juan Mixtepec, Oaxaca (map by author)

seasonally or permanently outside of Oaxaca in other parts of Mexico or the USA (Besserer and Kearney 2006).

The original prehispanic settlements where the Mixtec ancestors of Mixtepequenses lived are, according to interlocutors, located on various hilltops surrounding the community, although no obvious archeological vestiges can be observed with the naked eye (Fig. 2). What remains of prehispanic knowledges manifest itself in cultural memory, performative practices, and the oral traditions of the Mixtepequense people. These traditional knowledges are actively situated within a centuries' old framework of externally imposed cultural, religious, economic, and political realities, beginning in the colonial period, that directly shape the ways in which Mixtepequenses construct their identities today.

The community is made up of six officially recognized *barrios* or neighborhoods: San Miguel Centro, San Miguel Lado, San Pedro, San Sebastián, Barrio de Jesús, and Barrio Centro. One of the primary ways in which Mixtepequenses conceptualize belonging is through their natal affiliation with a particular *barrio*, which is also typically grounded in familial or ancestral lineages. The *barrios* of San Sebastián, San Pedro, and San Miguel Lado each have their own chapel, within which the saint images of San Sebastián, San Pedro, and Padre Jesús, respectively, reside. *Barrio* affiliation plays a key role in how Mixtepequenses participate in the *mayordomía*, in festivals, and in a variety of other sociopolitical obligations. Citizens' participation in *tequio*, or communal labor projects, is often directly tied to their *barrio*. Each *barrio* also has its own chapel where the saint image associated with it is housed and some religious events are held, usually directly related to the saint's festival and

Fig. 2 Panoramic view of San Juan Mixtepec, Oaxaca (photo by author, 2013)



mayordomía. For many Mixtepequenses, identity is reckoned through their membership to a particular *barrio* and the social, political, and cultural obligations that accompany it.

El Espíritu is an *ejido*² community located in the southwestern region of the state of Hidalgo in the Mezquital Valley, forming part of the municipality of Alfajayucan. Although no prehispanic archeological ruins remain, the El Espíritu landscape is marked by the two colonial-era churches, the Vicente Aguirre Dam, and the four interrelated community settlements (La Huapilla, San Antonio Corrales, Xamagé, and Boxthó) that surround it (Fig. 3). Members of this Otomí community, like those in San Juan Mixtepec, have experienced relatively high transnational migration patterns based mainly on economic needs, with 18% of households receiving remittances and 19% of emigrants located in the USA (Olivares Ferreto et al. 2008). According to a recent diagnostic study by CONEVAL³ conducted in 2010, 67.7% of the total population of the municipality of Alfajayucan lived in poverty, with 49.7% in moderate poverty and 18% in extreme poverty. The inhabitants of El Espíritu, like other communities in the municipality, depend on agricultural production that includes products such as corn, beans, squash, green chili, fodder oats, alfalfa, and livestock. In El Espíritu, social practices emphasize traditional knowledges and ancestral agricultural techniques, practical and religious connections with the territory and its flora and fauna, and structures of traditional Otomí social organization and festive practices, among other elements (Galinier 2018). The practice of different traditions, many directly tied to the festival cycle, exists in a reciprocal relationship with contemporary economic and environmental realities that are directly intertwined with the practice of traditional indigenous lifeways.

² Refers to a system of communal land tenure, farming, and ownership, independent of the State that is existent in many Mexican indigenous communities.

³ Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social (CONEVAL). “Informe anual sobre la situación de pobreza y rezago social: Alfajayucan, Hidalgo.” Recovered from https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/45182/Hidalgo_006.pdf (accessed on November 9th, 2022).

Fig. 3 Community church and atrium in El Espíritu, Hidalgo (photo by author, 2017)



Both San Juan Mixtepec and El Espíritu practice a festival cycle complete with syncretic representations of Catholic and prehispanic religious belief systems, iconography, and cultural traditions that celebrate the unique history of each community. The festival cycle of El Espíritu is primarily centered around the patron saint celebration for El Espíritu Santo, whose festival occurs in May, and Carnaval, as well as a handful of events related to the traditional agricultural cycle, Día de los Muertos and Navidad, among others. In San Juan Mixtepec, the festival cycle is oriented toward the celebration of the patron saint San Juan Bautista as well as approximately a dozen other saints and virgins that make up the pantheon of images present in the municipal church. In both communities, a *mayordomía*⁴ manages and organizes the Catholic religious festivals. With Carnaval, however, there exists a major difference between the communities. In El Espíritu, *delegados*⁵ organize Carnaval because it is considered a religious event associated with the extended celebration of their patron saint. In San Juan Mixtepec, the municipal authorities, who make up the “civil” side of the civil-religious hierarchy, organize Carnaval because it is considered a more secular event, although closely tied with Mixtec cosmological beliefs.

In both communities, nature, and the objects, animals, plants, and other beings that inhabit it form an intrinsic part of the embodied symbolic networks present in the social lives of human beings and directly inform indigenous lived religious practice. The relationship between human and non-human actors emphasizes “the artificiality of borders established between human and non-human worlds and the imperative of situating things in constant flow, within the framework of human activities and social relations, that is, bringing things back to life” (Moreyra and

⁴ The *mayordomía* refers to the religious side of the civil-religious hierarchy. The term “*mayordomía*” refers to both the institution of the *mayordomía* as well as the individual *mayordomías* that make up that institution. Specifically, the institution of the *mayordomía* is made up of volunteers who care for particular saints. Each group of volunteers constitutes an individual *mayordomía*. These individual *mayordomías* organize themselves within the larger institution also known as the *mayordomía*.

⁵ Considered part of their community service, or *cargo*, *delegados* are male representatives of the community who are responsible for organizing festivals, rituals, and other religious activities who serve rotating, 1 year terms.

Mateus Ventura (2020: 3). Certain physical places in the landscape, famously termed “ethnoterritories” by Barabas (2006), are where animals, plants, and supernatural beings interact with the human world. Ethnoterritories are typically recognized as physical places or locations that have specific religious or mythological significance for the local population. Specifically, “for social actors, there do not exist abstract territories, but instead those that are marked as powerful places, tattooed by the works of mythic heroes and the rituals that carry cultural significance” (Barabas 2006: 53). Within these ethnoterritories reside the *dueños de lugar*, who can be defined as “potent territorial entities, with willpower and figure, that travel from site to site establishing places and marking emblematic figures of ethnoterritories; they are manifestations or revelations of the sacred” (Barabas 2006: 53). It is in these natural spaces that members of these indigenous communities interact with the supernatural and the divine through spiritual and religious practices. In these two communities, lived religion thrives in the space between the spirituality oriented toward and around the natural world and the practice of Catholic religious doctrine, creating a web of multidimensional relations between indigenous social actors and the networks they navigate.

The Cult of Catholic Saints

In indigenous lived religion, the physical images of Catholic virgins and saints hold just as much importance as the rituals that accompany the practice of spirituality. Any physical object that exists in the social environment is, in a certain way, the representative of a network of historic and contemporary interactions between human beings in a particular social context. When analysis is focused on the material object, these intangible connections become visible and can be studied (Latour 2005; Law 1999). A focus on the relationship between material objects and practices is also indicative of a focus on “things,” the tangible and intangible elements that define indigenous lived religion. Or, as Meyer and Houtman (2012: 16) explained, “calling the attention to “things” (rather than simply to “objects”) in the field of religion opens up a broad field of inquiry. Instead of taking at face value how certain objects are employed (or despised) in religious practices, taking “things” as a starting point requires studying processes through which the spiritual and the material—animation at work—are conjoined in religious forms. Counter to the categories of fetishes, idols, and totem, there exist more positive valuations of “things,” imbuing them with a spiritual presence and power.”

By mapping the ways in which material culture constitutes an active element in the lives of human beings, objects become entities that “act” with us, resulting in the establishment of relationships that have a potential symbolic significance through the process of “mattering,” originally proposed by Hay (2001). Mattering occurs when the members of a society create “media to make both material artifact and symbolic meaning at the same time, programming a regime of behavior into the materiality of the phenomenon” (Kein 2009: 28). In this way, mattering represents the process of applying symbolic significance to physical objects. This reinvokes

the physicality of the object as well as its social and emotional value at the same time.

The relationships that Mixtepequenses and members of the community of El Espíritu have with physical saint images are an intrinsic part of lived religious practice and the construction of their contemporary sociocultural identities. Here, the saints are seen as “alive” and are imagined as social actors themselves, sentient representations of faith and community intertwined in reciprocal relationships with human beings. This material embodiment occurs via performative practices that focus on a conscious conversion of the physical image present in the church and *cargos*⁶ cared for by the *mayordomía* and *delegados* into sentient beings. It specifically involves the conceptualization of these material representations of saints as “social bodies,” symbols for thinking about “relationships among nature, society, and culture” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987: 6). As distinct social bodies that inhabit, and move fluidly between, various locales in the festival context, saint images and saint *cargos* undergo individualized processes of embodiment from which they emerge as active members of the community.

“Saint images” refer to the carved wooden representations of individual saints and virgins, varying in size from 1’ to 6’ in height that are placed in alcoves, niches, chapel areas, or glass display cases throughout the church (Fig. 4). The *mayordomos*⁷ and *delegados* commonly refer to these saint images as needing to be cared for, sentient beings that have belongings that need to be dressed, cleaned, cleansed with incense, adorned, processed, and most importantly, celebrated with festivals. If festivals and their associated rituals are not performed for a saint image, or if an individual negates their responsibility of participating in the *mayordomía*, as a *delegado*, or as a festival volunteer, the saints may become angry, chastising the individual, the *barrio*, or the community itself. Conversely, when the appropriate activities are performed, the saints are satisfied and content and will answer prayers and provide economic success, abundant crops, good health, a good rainy season, safe passage to the USA, peace, or any number of other “blessings.” When the saints are brought out for public interaction during their festival, spectators often leave offerings on the physical “body” of the saint image, such as money pinned to its robes, balls of human hair stuffed into its clothes, flowers, pictures of family members, personal notes, or jewelry placed in its hands. Members of the public often kiss the hands or robes of the saints and rub flowers over its body, which are then considered “blessed” and are placed on personal altars in their homes.

The “aliveness” of saints is also demonstrated through religious processions when the images temporarily leave the church to “see” and “bless” their community and its residents during the saint’s festival days (Fig. 5). Festival participants

⁶ The *cargo* refers both to a tradition of “burden” grounded in a hierarchy of community service connected to various institutions such as the *mayordomía*, *delegados*, municipal authorities, and *comités*, as well as the small silver saint images housed in boxes that reside in the homes of *mayordomos* during their *mayordomía*.

⁷ Refers to either a male or female member of the *mayordomía*.



Fig. 4 Saint images for San Juan Bautista in San Juan Mixtepec (left) and El Espíritu Santo in El Espíritu (right) (photos by author, 2013 and 2017)

Fig. 5 Religious processions with the images of El Espíritu Santo in El Espíritu (left) and San Salvador in San Juan Mixtepec (right) (photos by author, 2018 and 2013)



physically process their bodies with that of the image, notifying the public of the saint's impending arrival with bells, fireworks, and chants, and erecting temporary altars or celebratory spaces, filled with food and drink, in the saint's honor at its destination or at specific stopping points in the procession. Typically, at the beginning of a procession, only *mayordomos*, *delegados*, and their associates carry the saints, but as the procession continues, other volunteers may be granted the opportunity to carry them. Carrying a saint demonstrates a sense of pride, personal sacrifice, and faith made manifest through physical effort. Carrying a saint is considered an "honor" because the individual takes over the physical and emotional "weight" of the saint and oversees transporting the image to its destination, something that they believe that the saint will remember. Carrying a saint is also a form of "sacrifice" because of the expenditure of bodily energy necessary to carry a saint image can be extreme. A processed saint can be tremendously heavy, not only because one not only carries the image itself, but also the wooden litter upon which it is placed, which, in total, can weigh hundreds of pounds. Even the smallest saints require at

least two people to carry them. Larger saints, by contrast, can require six people or more to carry them.

Indigenous Cosmovisions

Another important characteristic of lived religion is cosmovision, an admittedly polemical concept within anthropology that nonetheless forms an important part of the study of indigenous religious belief systems. Cosmovision generally refers to the reciprocal spiritual and social connections present between nature, supernatural entities, and humans expressed through rituals, festivals, or other socioreligious practices grounded in prehispanic or neo-Mesoamerican⁸ sociocultural worldviews. Broda (1991: 462) defined the term as “a structured vision within which ancient Mesoamericans combined their notions about the environment in which they lived and the cosmos within which the lives of men were situated in a coherent manner.” Other interpretations of the term include those of López Austin (1994: 13) who considered cosmovision as “a historical fact, the product of social thought” or of Good Eshelman (2014: 94), who proposed approaching the study of cosmovision as “an analysis of the processes of cultural creation and innovation of indigenous groups according to their historical experiences” or even that of Viveiros de Castro (2004) regarding “Amerindian perspectivism,” which refers to a specific point of view that does not distinguish between humans and non-humans but instead maintains them in reciprocal relationships charged with symbolic meanings.

In the lived religious practices present in El Espíritu and San Juan Mixtepec, the concept of cosmovision expresses itself in a variety of ways within the festival context. Because lived religion in these communities is syncretic in nature, Catholic canonical traditions exist in a dynamic relationship with indigenous cosmological beliefs that are broadly based on the religious traditions of specific prehispanic cultural groups. Material objects utilized in rituals and other practices are indicative of participants’ relationships with the gods, spirits, and other beings that inhabit the natural realm. These can include rocks, trees, plants, bodies of water, mountains, animals; elements such as fire, earth, and wind; celestial bodies such as the moon, sun, and stars; and even the carved stones, rock paintings, and artifacts found at archeological sites. Physical spaces erected by humans such as shrines, altars, bridges, and prehispanic ruins, as well as those created by nature such as caves, mountaintops, waterfalls, rivers, springs, and forests, all figure into indigenous religious practice (Fig. 6).

The festival cycle is layered with infinite symbolic meanings related to Catholic beliefs and prehispanic spiritual traditions connecting humans to the natural and spiritual realms. The existence of Carnival (realized annually between February and March) in El Espíritu and San Juan Mixtepec is a clear example of

⁸ “Neo-Mesoamerican” refers to the suite of religious and cultural practices adopted by some contemporary indigenous as well as non-indigenous persons that are loosely based on prehispanic cultural knowledges combined with New Age or neo-pagan belief systems.



Fig. 6 Ethnoterritories: the Río Mixteco in San Juan Mixtepec (left) and the Valle de Mezquital in El Espiritu (right) (photos by author, 2013 and 2018)

indigenous cosmovision in action. Carnaval always takes place during the spring, normally between the months of February and March in accordance with the beginning of Lent in the Catholic liturgical calendar. It is a period of liberation and social enjoyment before the beginning of the solemn period of Lent observed by the faithful and the subsequent ritual activities realized during *Semana Santa* (Holy Week). Carnaval is also thought of as a celebration of the beginning of the spring season, associated with the spring equinox which always occurs around March 21st each year. This date in the traditional indigenous cosmological calendar also represents the beginning of the planting period and, in general terms, the beginning of the time of the growth of new shoots and flowers on plants and the birth of young animals and other acts of the natural world associated with a cyclic renewal of life that occurs after winter. Carnaval not only reflects seasonal changes but also the cyclical renewal of the entire community. In El Espiritu, Carnaval is a celebration of community, religiosity, and identity where the practice of traditions specifically associated with the worship of the Catholic image of the Espiritu Santo (Holy Spirit), syncretic rituals associated with the harvest of tree branches to create special crosses erected outside of the church, and other activities such as masses, processions, communal meals, and fairs occur (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7 Carnaval celebrations in El Espiritu (photo by author, 2018)



In San Juan Mixtepec, it is celebrated exclusively with secular spectacles such as rodeos, horse races, concerts, a fair, and community dances, and the inauguration of this Carnival is always marked with words from the civil authorities thanking the spirits of earth and rain and petitioning them for a productive planting and growing season (Fig. 8). In both contexts, a connection to nature is prioritized, as is making ritual offerings to gods, spirits, or Catholic saints that petition for the wellbeing of the community, general prosperity, and a productive growing season.

Ritual and Spectacle in Lived Religious Practice

Indigenous lived religion relies, in large part, on the embodiment of various forms and beings during specific rituals or other activities, such as masked dancing, that occur primarily within the festive context. Embodiment configures both individual and collective perceptions related to belonging and the social roles that these entail in a particular community. Culture is not simply written upon the body; the body itself becomes the basis of perception. Therefore, the body is the principal vehicle that helps us understand ourselves and each other and navigate “being-in-the-world.” Merleau-Ponty (2005: 171) observed that “the experience reveals objective space, in that the body finally finds its place, a primitive spatiality of which experience is merely the outer shell that merges with the very being of the body. To be a body is to be tied to a determined world; our body is not principally in space; it is of it.”

To think of embodiment as something connected with being-in-the-world orients analysis to the unique and varied experiences of social actors and their interactions with the cultural frameworks present in their surroundings. For the members of the communities of El Espíritu and San Juan Mixtepec, embodied practices form an intrinsic part of lived religion and are expressed in a myriad of ways, ranging from masking and dance to processions and even ritualized conflict.

Performance, as Schechner (1993: 1) argued, is “amoral...this amorality comes from performance’s subject, transformation: the startling ability of human beings to create themselves, to change, to become—for worse or better—what they ordinarily

Fig. 8 A Norteño band and *disfrazados* (masked jester characters) entertain the crowd during Carnival in San Juan Mixtepec, Oaxaca (photo by author, 2013)



are not.” Performative or embodied practices are an essential part of the practice of culture as well as the creation and reinforcement of senses of belonging experienced by social actors. The concept of tradition also figures greatly within performative practices of culture, particularly surrounding concepts like “authenticity.” The practice of lived religion in El Espíritu and San Juan Mixtepec encompasses a diverse array of practices that exist in a dynamic relationship with both material and performative elements. These include those associated with Catholic religious traditions, such as the specific rituals and actions that occur during mass and during individual prayer sessions, those associated with indigenous cosmological beliefs such as rituals that honor non-human beings that inhabit the natural and supernatural realms, festivals and their associated activities, rituals associated with the practice of traditional medicine as well as those associated with witchcraft and sorcery, shamanic rituals, individual petitions made to different gods and spirits, and pilgrimages, among others. Each of these activities involves a myriad of embodied practices that inform the ways in which participants define who they are as members of these communities.

Masking, and the presence-costumed characters in both El Espíritu and San Juan Mixtepec, provide a pertinent example of embodied performance in action. Masked characters, known as *disfrazados* or *chilolos* in San Juan Mixtepec and as *enmascarados* or *xhitas* in El Espíritu, complement the indigenous agricultural and religious festival cycle as markers of the transformation of the seasons and as moments where social norms are temporally suspended. The *disfrazados* of San Juan Mixtepec make their appearance during Carnival in the spring and during the religious celebrations in honor of the patron saint San Juan Bautista and the *barrio*-level patron saint of San Pedro and San Pablo in June (Fig. 9). In El Espíritu, the *enmascarados* accompany the saint image of the Espíritu Santo during processions and adorn the “masked” crosses made of *madroño*⁹ branches that form part of their Carnival festivities (Fig. 10). In both cases, the presence of masked, costume characters forms part of the ludic celebrations associated with these religious festivals.

Certain rituals realized during religious festivals, such as the *despescuezada de gallos* in San Juan Mixtepec, include performative elements that hold symbolic significance for participants and spectators alike. The *despescuezada de gallos* is a ritual animal sacrifice that is held exclusively during the June festivals to honor the patron saint of San Juan Bautista and the saints of San Pedro and San Pablo with an offering of rooster blood that also satiates the spirits of the earth and rain and prompts the arrival of the rainy season (Fig. 11). This ritual is composed of different performative elements, beginning with a coordinated procession followed by a dance where the *mayordomos* honor the roosters they will individually sacrifice by adorning them in colorful crepe paper streamers, giving them beer, and dancing with them in their arms. The ritual continues with the *mayordomos* hanging the roosters by their feet from a rope extended between two tall wooden poles, whereby volunteers mounted on horseback ride underneath the roosters and proceed to twist

⁹ The *madroño*, also known as the “Strawberry Tree,” is a type of hardwood evergreen tree with white flowers, red berries, and glossy leaves native to western North America.

Fig. 9 *Disfrazados* during the festival of San Juan Bautista in San Juan Juan Mixtepec (photo by author, 2013)



their heads off with their bare hands, letting the blood freely flow onto the ground below. As during the Carnival activities, the *disfrazados* also make an appearance here, dancing, interacting with spectators, and even occasionally picking up decapitated rooster heads to use as adornments on their own costumes.

Other performative activities, such as the *floreo de banderas* during Carnival in El Espíritu, provide a poignant example of the invention of new traditions that serve as hallmarks of “ancestral” indigenous cultural identities and are directly associated with lived religious practice (Fig. 12). *El floreo de banderas*, or “the flourish of the flags,” is a ritualized spectacle created by local historian Francisco Luna Tavera to commemorate the prehispanic spiritual roots of Carnival in Otomi culture. During this performance, which occurs on the principal day of Carnival following the religious mass in honor of the Espíritu Santo, two volunteers emerge from the church with two multicolored flags with symbols representing a jaguar and an eagle. They enter a square space in the church atrium with lines in the colors of red, white, green, and yellow, representing the four cardinal directions, outlined on the ground. The volunteers make several passes dancing in arm and waving the flags over an offering of seeds and sweets that had previously been blessed during the mass, which they then throw to the crowd as an offering of abundance and fertility to symbolize

Fig. 10 *Enmascarados* carry *madroño* branch and orange crosses with a *xhita* mask during Carnaval in El Espíritu (photo by author, 2018)



the beginning of spring and the cyclical rebirth of the community itself. Although this performance is not part of the original religious practices associated with Carnaval, it has nonetheless become a centerpiece of contemporary festivities due, in large part, to the social prestige its creator held in the community as a guardian of cultural knowledges and the connection it creates with prehispanic Otomí heritages.

Fig. 11 Volunteers perform the *despescuezada de gallos* during the San Juan Bautista in San Juan Mixtepec (photo by author 2013)



Fig. 12 The *floreo de banderas* ritual performed during Carnaval in El Espíritu (photo by author, 2018)



The Production of Sociocultural Identities

Lived religion speaks directly to the practice of cultural identities and the production of community, and festivals reflect the active relationships present between social actors and the various cultural networks they inhabit. One theme that recurs throughout the festival cycle of San Juan Mixtepec and El Espíritu is the maintenance of social bonds among members of the community, specifically related to trends of outward migration and even the physical fracturing of community itself, where performative concepts of separation, liminality, crisis, and reintegration are commonplace (Turner 1967). Patron saint festivals represent a community's socio-cultural and religious identities and are often a symbolically charged point of reference for migrants that are representative of "home." In both contexts, migrants periodically return to participate in the local religious festival cycle as spectators, volunteers, or *mayordomos* to honor the patron saint, their Catholic faith, and the community itself. In San Juan Mixtepec, the patron saint festival has even travelled to California, where migrants have celebrated San Juan Bautista on the saint's holiday with a festival that includes a mass, dancing, and communal meal in Arvin, California since the early 2000s (Fig. 13). During this time, a replica image of the saint was brought from Oaxaca to California by Mixtepequense migrants who desired to have its representation present in their local church because many were not able to physically return to San Juan Mixtepec for the festival. The image was not only a representative of their faith but of their desire to maintain a symbolic connection with their community of origin, despite the physical and temporal distances present between them. Although the specific characteristics of this festival in diaspora have inevitably transformed over the years, residents continue this tradition as an inextricable part of their cultural and spiritual heritage.

In El Espíritu, the festival of Carnaval includes a specific ritualized spectacle that also points to relationship between lived religious practice and the construction of community-level identities, known as *los naranjazos*, or "the battle of the

Fig. 13 Dancing with *disfrazados* during the festival of San Juan Bautista in Arvin, California (photo by author, 2017)



oranges” (Fig. 14). This activity consists of the participation of the members of the four communities of the municipality who divide into teams, according to community and gender, and throw oranges at each other in a brutal competition where the participants suffer heavy blows until they run out of oranges (which is usually full bushel’s worth), and the judges determine a winning team, and the event ends with the explosion of two airplane-shaped rockets that hit each other in the middle of the field, marking the conclusion of the battle. This ritual marks the symbolic reunion of these communities that were separated due to the creation of the Vicente Aguirre Dam by the federal government during the 1950s, which inundated residences as well the original El Espíritu church and convent located in San Antonio Corrales, making these areas uninhabitable and causing a physical fracturing of the community. The spiritual connections between these communities remain, however, and are rekindled specifically during Carnaval as a symbolic representation of collectively shared sociocultural identities that continue today.

Fig. 14 Performing *los naranjazos* during Carnaval in El Espíritu (photo by author, 2018)



Conclusion

This brief introduction to the spiritual and festive activities present in San Juan Mixtepec and El Espíritu provides a glimpse into the multifaceted nature of the relationship contemporary indigenous that the social actors have to their religious identities and, by extension, lived religious practice in their communities. It includes an inextricable relationship between prehispanic cosmological beliefs and Catholic doctrine, one which is indeed syncretic in nature but is in no way limited by this label. The different practices associated with the creation of material and performative relationships with objects, human and non-human entities, and with nature and the divine explored here directly inform what lived religious practice looks like. This discussion of lived religion in two Mexican indigenous communities analyzed participants as social actors who are the architects of their own belief systems, specifically what practices demonstrate faith, identity, and cultural heritage. These practices exist in a dynamic relationship with hegemonic belief systems and individual interpretations of what religious identity means. For many, this identity is directly intertwined with traditional indigenous social organization and ways of knowing. This means that lived religious practices in indigenous communities exist as part of a complex network of components including the traditional civil-religious hierarchy, Catholic and indigenous religious belief systems, experiences of transnational migration, and inherited cultural knowledges (Odgers Ortíz 2008). The existence of various kinds of networks within which participants interact, which may include forming part of a migrant diaspora community, or being a member of the local *mayordomía*, or being a ritual specialist or mask maker, automatically broaden and deepen the parameters of what it means to practice religion in indigenous communities today. Each aspect is also filtered through the individual experiences of participants and expressed in collective, public contexts. Given this, concepts of materiality and performance directly inform lived religious practices, as discussed throughout the article. The study of materiality, or the relationship between human beings and non-human entities with material objects, can serve to understand how emotions associated with faith, adoration, interpersonal relations, and even nostalgia inform lived religious experience. Performance, or the use of the physical body in religious practice, informs us about how participants imagine their own bodies and the bodies of others and what this means for the physical expression of religious faith, belonging, and cultural identity in these specific contexts. The article also demonstrates that religious identities are inherently grounded in broader community-based socio-cultural practices and are, arguably, inseparable from them. The constantly renewing relationships between actors and networks inform the production, maintenance, and transformation of lived religious practices, revealing that although lived religion is grounded in preexisting social discourses, it is also, by definition, dynamic and subject to the shifting perspectives and worldviews of its practitioners. Far from being an unofficial alternative to canonical occidental religious discourses, indigenous lived religion in Mexico demonstrates its own agency through the various practices that make up its unique spiritual traditions.

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Declarations

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