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2023

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Communal Education:

Efforts to Reimagine Higher Education

at the *Universidad Autónoma Comunal de Oaxaca* in México

A master's thesis in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in Latin American Studies

by

Dylan Isaac Dornfeld

2023

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2023

ABSTRACT OF THE MASTER'S THESIS

Communal Education

Efforts to Reimagine Higher Education

At the *Universidad Autónoma Comunal de Oaxaca* in México

by

Dylan Isaac Dornfeld

Master of Arts in Latin American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2023

Professor Kevin Terraciano, Chair

This thesis examines the *Universidad Autónoma Comunal de Oaxaca* (UACO) in the Sierra Norte community of Guelatao de Juárez. The UACO is a new university that implements communal education methodologies in an attempt to reinvent higher education, to preserve ancestral wisdom, to form new communal leaders, and to systematize communal knowledge. The UACO curriculum examines the living, fluid concept of *Comunalidad* as a way of life that governs the communities' relationship with the territory, organizational systems, collective labor activities, and festivities that form the cornerstone of communal life. Additionally, this research analyzes the evolution of the Mexican public education system, investigating the State's approach to assimilate indigenous communities to a single, nationalized *mestizo* identity. I examine the historical trajectory from post Mexican Revolution assimilationist curricula to intercultural education methodologies, including the communal education pedagogies that form the base of the UACO' curriculum. This research demonstrates how the UACO implements pedagogical approaches that systematize communal knowledge and reinforce ethnic pride in Oaxaca.

The master's thesis of Dylan Isaac Dornfeld is approved.

Bonnie Taub

Raul Hinojosa

Kevin Terraciano, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2023

“A university that is born out of indigenous cultures.”

- Academic Coordinator of the UACO CUC Guelatao, Gustavo López Mendoza

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Acknowledgements:

First, I would like to thank the *Universidad Autónoma Comunal de Oaxaca* in Guelatao de Juárez. The university received me with open arms, allowing me to actively participate in *Comunalidad* courses for the duration of my fieldwork. I am eternally grateful to the inspirational community leaders in Guelatao de Juárez who tirelessly work to uplift the ancestral knowledge of their people, illuminating distinct forms of social organization and ways of life. I express the utmost gratitude to the UACO knowledge facilitators, who provided essential conceptual guidance in analyzing the elements that make up *Comunalidad*. Thank you for the interviews and enriching conversations accompanied by delicious Sierra Norte coffee. This research is dedicated to the empowerment of local voices within the UACO and is an attempt to spread autochthonous knowledge in order to envision a better world.

To my friends and family who've provided unwavering support throughout my Master's program, fostering an environment of positivity, light, and love.

To my thesis advisors, Professors Kevin Terraciano, Raul Hinojosa, and Bonnie Taub who showed great enthusiasm about the project from the start, encouraging me to further investigate the concepts and literature that complements this research. Your advice throughout the writing process was invaluable and I am grateful for your contributions.

Lastly, I would like to thank the Latin American Institute for funding a portion of my research through the 2022 Latin American Studies Summer Research Grant. I am also thankful for the Monical Salinas Latin American Studies award to conduct my fieldwork over the summer of 2022.

Introduction

Comunalidad is a conceptual framework that attempts to define uniquely autochthonous approaches to life. This concept was born out of collective struggle in the Sierra Norte region of the southern state of Oaxaca, México. This research seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the evolutions of *Comunalidad* in the educational space. It will thoroughly examine the history behind this localized conceptual framework that defines communal ways of living. In addition, the research lays out the Mexican State's approach to educating autochthonous peoples following the Mexican Revolution, highlighting various shortcomings of a public education system that prioritized homogenization and monolingualism based on a nationalized *mestizo* identity. The contributions of this work center on ethnographic observations and interviews conducted through participatory action research methods, while engaging in the *Universidad Autónoma Comunal de Oaxaca's* (UACO) Bachelor's Program in *Comunalidad* at the Communal University Center (CUC) in Guelatao de Juárez.

The research is structured to provide answers to the fundamental question of how the UACO has constructed curriculum and pedagogies to effectively teach *Comunalidad*? It also attempts to provide context that explains how communal education methodologies have developed in Oaxaca, while analyzing the socioeconomic impacts of decentralizing higher education in the region. Additionally, the research examines the apparent presence of certain Freirian pedagogical concepts that inform the communal classroom. This thesis approaches these complex dynamics by first building an adequate definition of *Comunalidad* according to the local intellectuals who coined the term, and then exploring the collective actions that brought about the consolidation of an autonomous communal university. This work is essential to understanding how communities within the Sierra Norte region of Oaxaca have successfully organized to preserve ancestral cultural customs, to defend their territories from foreign intrusion, and to systemize communal knowledge into comprehensive university curricula.

At the end of the 1970's, in this mountainous region of dense pine and oak forest, the first ethnopolitical organizations were created in order to defend communal territories from further extraction and deforestation. Some of these ethnopolitical groups include the Organization for the Defense of Natural Resources and Social Development in the Sierra Juárez (ODRENASIJ for its acronym in Spanish), the Committee for the Defense of Natural Resources and Mixes (CODREMI) and the Organizing Committee for Consultation for the Union of the Peoples of the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca (CODECO) (Maldonado, 2002, 94). Within this regional struggle for self-determination and communal resource control, two indigenous anthropologists and intellectuals, Jaime Martínez Luna from the Sierra Juárez (1951) and Floriberto Díaz from the Sierra Mixe (1951-1995), coined the phrase *Comunalidad*. This word is much more than simply a concept that describes a static reality. *Comunalidad* attempts to frame the organizational, territorial, laboral, and festive social structures across diverse indigenous communities in the Sierra Norte; it is something that is lived and constantly in evolution (Morales, 2020, 3). One of the fundamental questions posed by Jaime Martínez Luna and Floriberto Díaz concerns how to devise a localized educational model which incorporates indigenous language and self-determination in adherence to traditional communal values. The research presented in this thesis examines how *Comunalidad* is practiced in an educational space within the *Universidad Autónoma Comunal de Oaxaca* (UACO) at the Guelatao de Juárez Comunal University Center (CUC).

The *Universidad Autónoma Comunal de Oaxaca* (UACO) is a direct manifestation of communal struggles to resist neocolonialism, specifically providing alternative curricula that highlights local knowledge, effectively decolonizing previous pedagogies that focused on homogenizing indigenous cultures to consolidate the Mexican nation-state model. The communal education model emanates from a clash of civilizations which author, Guillermo Bonfil Battalla, titles *México profundo* (profound México) and *México imaginario* (imaginary México). Imaginary México historically represents the colonial origins of a group of dominant elites who

promote westernizing the country in favor of “progress.” Historically, this powerful ideology in México utilized the nation’s public education infrastructure to indoctrinate the populace, instill a common westernized value system, and stifle plurality. *México profundo* refers to the Mesoamerican peoples who continue to resist these strategies of colonial domination by creating educational curricula that localizes knowledge production. *México profundo* is not a passive or static idea; it works to re-create culture and reproduce the collective acts that are an essential expression of its identity (Bonfil Batalla, 1996: xvii).

It is not a coincidence that the UACO was created in a region of México that is known for teachers’ resistance and intercultural educational methods, championed by Oaxaca’s Educational Workers Union Section XXII locally known as “*El Magisterio*”. For decades, social leaders in the educational arena have been advocating for an intercultural approach to education that incorporates indigenous language and cultural customs into the classroom, better catering to the specific needs of historically marginalized communities around the state. The theoretical foundation of the UACO has been meticulously constructed by its intellectual architect and current president, Jaime Martínez Luna, along with many other influential community leaders throughout Oaxaca who are committed to providing viable alternatives to the current educational system. These monumental efforts have evolved into 16 *Centros Universitarios Comunes* (CUCs) across Oaxaca where the UACO provides a wide variety of Bachelor’s and Master’s programs that emphasize the communal knowledge in each locality.

In order to grasp how communal values are incorporated into a university space in this region, it is important to begin with a description of the state of Oaxaca. Oaxaca is located in the southwest part of México and is composed of eight regions: the Cañada, Sierra Sur, Sierra Norte, Isthmus, Central Valleys, Mixteca, Cuenca de Papaloapan, and the Coast. Within these eight regions there are 570 municipalities. The number of municipalities across Oaxaca surpasses that of any other state in Mexico by far and indicates the tremendous cultural and ethnic diversity of the state.

Map 1.

Regions and Districts of the State of Oaxaca



Source: Oaxaca.gob.mx

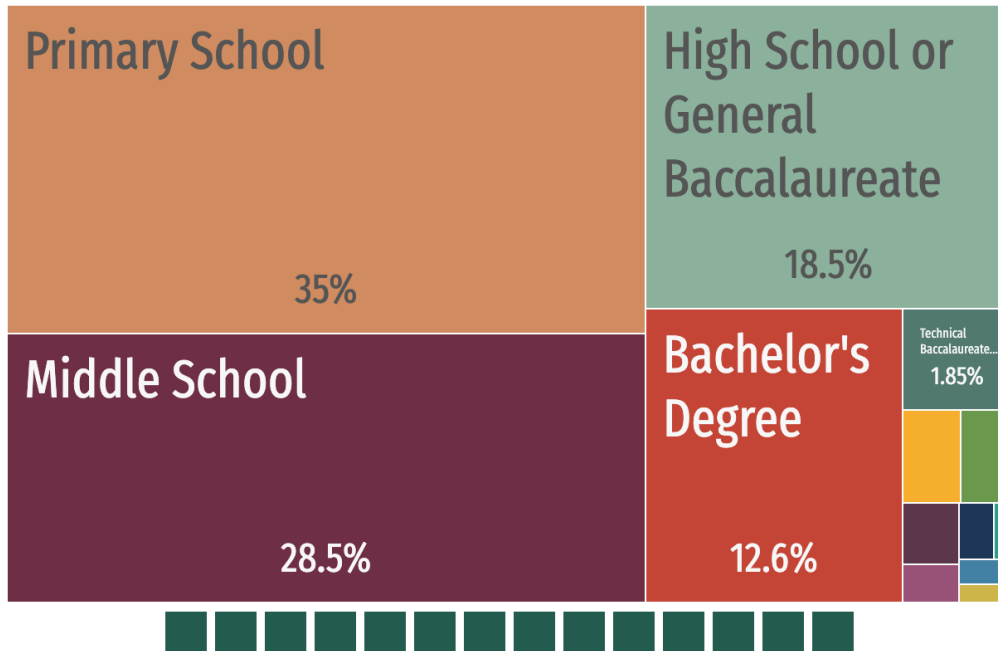
Oaxaca is also home to 16 different indigenous ethnic groups, including the Amuzgo, Chatino, Chinanteco, Chocho, Chontal, Cuicateco, Huave, Ixcateco, Mazateco, Mixe, Mixteco, Nahuatl, Triqui, Tzotzil, Zapoteco, and Zoque peoples (Barabas, 2004, 6). All of these ethnic groups speak indigenous languages with many variants, depending on the region. According to Data México, a website which publishes digital models based on census data collected in 2020 by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), the state of Oaxaca has a population of 4,132,148 people. A full 1.22 million of those inhabitants speak an indigenous language (Data México).

In order to construct a comprehensive understanding of the educational system within the State of Oaxaca, it is essential to include some quantitative data from the previous 2020 Census. Data México organizes its data based on the Education levels of the population aged

15 years or older. The table included below illustrates the percentage distribution of the population in accordance with approved academic degrees.

Table 1

Educational Levels of the Population Aged 15 Years and Over in Oaxaca
(Distribution of the total population)



datamexico.org/en/profile/geo/oaxaca-oa

Source: DataMéxico.org

This table reveals the accessibility and effectiveness of public education infrastructure in the state of Oaxaca. Although 35% of the state’s population attained an approved degree for primary school, the data shows an evident decline in secondary school and high school education. For the purpose of this research, I would like to focus on the number of Bachelor’s Degree graduates in the state, which represents only 12.6% of the total population. This low percentage is a testament to an educational system that is not only a signal of Oaxaca’s socioeconomic realities, but also reflects the difficulties of educational access in the state.

These institutions are often concentrated in municipal capitals or faraway urban centers, leaving rural populations with limited schooling options. With communal educational projects like the UACO continuing to evolve in the region, it is certainly possible that a decentralized higher education model that provides more opportunities for university education within autochthonous communities could significantly augment these numbers.

Another important factor to understand educational access in Oaxaca is the current illiteracy rate. According to the 2020 census data, the average illiteracy rate in the state of Oaxaca for people 15 years and older is 11.8%. Within the Ixtlán de Juárez district, census data reports that 3.92% of the population is illiterate (Data México). This data allows us to construct a more holistic image of some traditional measurements of educational effectiveness. In 2021, the Oaxaca State government invested a total of \$2,601,130,451 MXN (\$1,464,692.92 USD) in the public education system. In addition to this money the state allocates \$1,942,667,425 MXN (\$1,093,913.31 USD) to the higher education system, distributing these funds among various public universities throughout the state (Gobierno Constitucional del Estado de Oaxaca Decreto No. 1810). Although there is certainly investment within the public education sector, the number of students who complete their Bachelor's degree in Oaxaca remains low. This research will explore the educational system in Oaxaca within the national context of México, highlighting an innovative communal education model which has created its very own higher education institution. Within the pluri-ethnic context of Oaxaca, we can observe how various processes of collective resistance, social movements, and local forms of organization have contributed to the consolidation of *Comunalidad*.

History of Comunalidad

One can trace the roots of *Comunalidad* as a spoken concept back to a regional social movement struggling against displacement, extraction, and the drastic alteration of communal territories in the Sierra Norte by the nationalized paper company, *Fábricas de Papel Tuxtepec*

(FAPATUX). FAPATUX was created by presidential decree in 1955 in order to reduce Mexico's dependence on imported pulp and paper products. The company received a concession to harvest the communal forests in the Ixtlán district for 25 years, during which communities affected received a fixed rent in exchange for the right to harvest timber (Ganz, Burckle, 2002, 35). In 1977, the company began to present plans to Sierra Norte communities proposing its next harvesting cycle for the following 17 years. By this time, many communities were beginning to organize and advocate for greater control over their territories. Indigenous organizations such as ODRENASIJ and CODREMI were actively resisting a new forestry concession to FAPATUX, a process which set the stage for an enriching exchange of cultures, ideas, and strategies to thwart the further extraction of natural resources. The collective resistance of these Sierra Norte organizations was successful in halting the concessions in 1982 and the management of communal territories reverted back to the communities (Ganz, Burckle, 2002, 35). Yet, through this process of organization and struggle, Floriberto Díaz from the Sierra Mixe and Jaime Martínez Luna from the Sierra Juárez arose as prominent community leaders, formally trained in anthropology within traditional academic spaces, but with a distinct approach to the discipline. Given the fact that Luna and Díaz come from indigenous communities, they are uniquely positioned to analyze the complex compositions of their communities from within.

Floriberto Díaz is one of the conceptual architects of *Comunalidad*. In order to construct a complete image of the principles that guide the UACO Bachelor's program in *Comunalidad* it is essential to provide space to analyze Díaz's reflections on the topic. Floriberto Díaz Gómez was born in the municipality, Santa María Tlahuitoltepec, in the Sierra Mixe in 1951. Díaz left Tlahuitoltepec to continue his studies at the university level in Theology at the *Escuela Normal Juan Ponce de León* in Puebla and then continued in his academic pursuits studying anthropology at the National School for Anthropology and History (ENAH for its acronym in Spanish) (Hernandez, Jimenez, 2007, 1). Following his studies, he returned to his native Mixe

community to participate in historical territory defense processes and created numerous autonomous educational projects that prioritized the Mixe cosmovision. Díaz exhibits his distinct understanding of *Comunalidad* in his compilation of essays, *Escrito Comunalidad, energía viva del pensamiento mixe*, when he writes,

“*Comunalidad* expresses universal principles and truths with respect to indigenous society, what one has to understand is that it is not something opposite, but different from western society. To understand each of its elements one has to realize certain notions, the communal, the collective, complementarity, and wholesomeness. Without having a communal sense present and integral to every part we aspire to understand and explain, our knowledge will always be limited.

Having said that, we can understand the elements that define *Comunalidad* as such:

- The earth, as a mother and as territory.
- The consensus in assembly for decision-making.
- Free service, as an exercise of authority.
- Collective work as an act of recreation.
- The rituals and ceremonies as an expression of the communal gift.”

(Díaz, 2007, 40).

In this excerpt, Díaz lays out the conceptual framework that he has used to attempt to provide a written definition of *Comunalidad*. He synthesizes *Comunalidad* into five key components, offering tools to understand how this distinct value system interacts within the social fabric of a community. Here, a citizen's value is constructed around their participation in communal affairs. Díaz lists the central tenets that he believes to be at the heart of *Comunalidad* which include, territory, assembly, free service, collective work, and the festivities. Díaz does not explain this model as a direct affront to western society, but eloquently lays out its differences in comparison to individualistic cultures that implement nation state models of governance. The curriculum at the UACO often incorporates Díaz's written reflections on *Comunalidad*, autonomy, and collective work in order to enrich students' theoretical framework of their lived experience in the Sierra Norte. Another of the acclaimed conceptual architects of *Comunalidad* is local author, Jaime Martínez Luna from Guelatao de Juárez.

Jaime Martínez Luna studied Social Anthropology at the *Universidad Veracruzana* in Xalapa, Veracruz. Following his studies in traditional academic spaces, he decided to return to

his native community of Guelatao de Juárez to actively participate in ODRENASIJ advocating for communal resource management bodies and the protection of his ancestral territory against further deforestation. One of the principal characteristics of *Comunalidad* is its practical relationship with the evolving contexts it attempts to explain. *Comunalidad* continues to adapt to different realities throughout the region and has diverse elements which can be analyzed on an individual level (Delgado González, 2022, 34). Luna provides a definition of *Comunalidad* in his community in the Sierra Norte when he writes,

“*Comunalidad* is a living concept that permits the integral, total and natural comprehension of our collective way of approaching life; it is a logical and natural reasoning that it is founded upon the interdependence of its temporal and spatial elements; it is the capacity of the living beings that shape it; it is the exercise of life; the organic form that reflects the diversity of nature, an integral interdependence of the elements that compose it” (Martínez Luna, 2015, 100) .

Luna connects *Comunalidad* to the ecological diversity of natural systems, to the interdependency of forests to share resources and ensure that beings of the same species are able to survive challenging circumstances that arise. *Comunalidad* is a concept that evolves depending on the beings that shape and participate in its daily manifestations. It is a way of approaching life in which community members are interdependent on one another deconstructing the traditionally “western” individualistic value system of material success, or individual wealth. The idea behind *Comunalidad* as a living and adaptable concept is fundamental to understanding not only the inner functionings of a community, but also the circumstances that gave way to the creation of communal education pedagogies. To construct a panorama of the circumstances that permitted communal education pedagogical approaches to flourish in Oaxaca, it is essential to comprehend the problematic historical trajectory of pedagogies related to indigenous education in México.

Methods

This research was conducted over a three month period of fieldwork during the months of June, 2022 to September, 2022 in Guelatao de Juárez in the Sierra Norte region of Oaxaca.

During this time, I periodically traveled to participate in the *Universidad Autónoma Comunal de Oaxaca* Bachelor's program in Comunalidad. The data presented in this study was collected through ethnographic research methods while actively participating in UACO classes along the four fundamental pillars of Comunalidad with third-semester students. In addition to attending Comunalidad classes at the UACO, I spent extensive time in the community to deepen my understanding of how citizens integrate the fundamental principles of *Comunalidad* into their daily lives. This included participating in a reforestation *tequio* announced by the community and observing one of the UACO students in their *cargo* as a *topil* in Guelatao.

I also participated in extracurricular events with the UACO, traveling to the Cañada region of Oaxaca for two days to participate in a traditional medicine fair in August. UACO students and knowledge facilitators collectively engaged in workshops on traditional medicine practices and shared information about the university. This fair opened space for students to talk about their experience in *Comunalidad*. In addition, the UACO offered organizational suggestions on how communities, Teotitlán de Flores Magón and San Andrés Hidalgo in Huautla de Jiménez could strengthen their communal assembly and expel political party rule. This extra time with classmates in the UACO *Comunalidad* Bachelor's program exhibited how the four central tenets of *Comunalidad* are presented to others from different regions. Additionally, the time spent in Guelatao created a palpable trust where people felt comfortable speaking freely and sharing the stories that contribute to these research findings. The photos included in this research were taken by the author in order to provide visual imagery to aid in the comprehension of communal education dynamics.

The methodologies of this research are primarily qualitative. All of the quotes, excerpts of interviews, and tables included in the literature review were translated from Spanish to English by the author. During fieldwork, I kept a detailed field log, observing the nature of curricular activities during UACO classes, course content, homework assignments, and classroom dynamics. This thesis opts to use the terms, indigenous and autochthonous, in order

to describe the people who possess ancestral linkages to a common territory. I implemented a participatory action model of research in which I actively engaged in *Comunalidad* classes and communal activities as if I were another UACO student. The principles of this approach to research consist of deconstructing a traditional paradigm of ethnographer and subjects of study, in order to facilitate a more collaborative, non-extractive environment. When I first approached the UACO with my research questions and desires to conduct fieldwork they expressed that it was essential that this study not be considered extractive, and followed a participatory action methodology. Even throughout the process of writing my thesis, I consulted with communal leaders, administrators, and educational facilitators in order to ensure that their perspectives were being accurately characterized. Participatory action research models give the community an active say in the research being conducted, proposing collaborative forms of study and granting community members agency in the way their educational models are portrayed. During class, I participated in course activities, read the same literature, and completed assignments along with other students in the *Comunalidad* program. I also contributed in a knowledge facilitator role to the methodologies course, Communal Political Exercise, presenting on the strategies I used in my Master's program to construct relevant research questions and build confidence with interviewees.

The tables that are referenced in this research were constructed after a comprehensive literature review on *Comunalidad* and communal education methodologies. The tables which concern population and percentages of graduates in Oaxaca's educational system were accessed through Data México.org, which provides statistics on economy, education, employment, equity, and quality of life in each municipality in México. Other tables referenced in this research are directly cited from relevant literature on communal education or elaborated by the author in order to synthesize the key points of a particular concept.

The qualitative research data consists of a compilation of observational field notes written during *Comunalidad* classes in Guelatao de Juárez, and seven interviews conducted

with administrators, educational facilitators, and students in the UACO Comunalidad Bachelor's program in Guelatao. It was essential that my research incorporated the perspectives of this diverse group of figures within the UACO institution in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the project. At the UACO many of the administrators are also educational facilitators, working simultaneously in both roles. The student body of the *Comunalidad* Bachelor's program was composed of six students, including five who are originally from the Sierra Norte region. Some of the students lived in the Central Valleys region and would commute to the UACO every other weekend for classes.

The interview questions were elaborated prior to arriving in Guelatao and were occasionally slightly modified depending on how the conversations evolved. After transcribing these interviews, I selected overarching themes that emerged from the research, which make up the contents of the section of my thesis designed to give voice to community members working with the UACO. I recorded these interviews using my phone and subsequently transcribed the contents of the recordings in order to detect recurrent themes in the data. The interview qualitative research method imparted a certain depth to this research. Educational facilitators, students, and administrators at Guelatao's CUC were able to speak freely about their pedagogical approaches to communal education, while also highlighting some challenges. Students reflected on their studies at the UACO, highlighting how the program contributes to the systemization of communal knowledge. The methodological approaches in this thesis attempted to make this research a collaborative effort in which community members felt their knowledge was profoundly valued and respected.

The Evolution of Indigenous Education from Assimilationist to Communal

The turbulent period of the Mexican Revolution is an appropriate time and place to begin our analysis of the historical context of evolving educational methodologies for indigenous communities in México. The *Porfiriato* is a notorious period of dictatorial rule (1884 - 1911),

when President Porfirio Díaz exerted control over the nation by engineering successive presidential terms that were built on a consensus among elites and the brutal repression of alternative voices. During this period elites viewed autochthonous peoples as the principal impediment to economic, social, and cultural development in the country. It was of the utmost importance to the nation-state that indigenous communities were educated in order to “civilize” them (Martínez Buenabad, 2015, 104). Following the Revolution, which ousted Díaz as president of the country, the federal government began to implement laws that attempted to address this supposed nemesis that stifled the developmental progress of the nation. A clear manifestation of this trend was the Law of Rudimentary Instruction of 1911, signed into law by Gregorio Torres Quintero and Jorge Vera. This law explicitly laid out the Mexican government’s concrete strategy to assimilate indigenous cultures through a public education system that solely taught Spanish (Martínez Buenabad, 2015, 104). Attempts to establish a monolingual and homogeneous educational system that imposed the Spanish language on indigenous communities, in an effort to systematically assimilate them, demonstrate the colonial mentality of the country's governance. These types of policies could be characterized as calculated forms of ethnocide, designed to undermine communal ways of life by promoting a modernized, individualistic, and capitalistic society.

In the context of this educational paradigm and the political turbulence of the Mexican Revolution, José Vasconcelos, the first Secretary of Public Instruction in 1921, created policies in the educational arena that were designed to consolidate and reproduce the common values of the nation-state. Vasconcelos is considered one of the first reformers of the educational system in México; he was a leader in integrating philosophies of cultural nationalism within governance structures (Ocampo López, 2005: 147). One of his widely published books, *The Cosmic Race*, theorized that miscegenation in México would produce a new racial structure, a supposed “fifth race”, creating a superior civilization free of discrimination. The racist and assimilationist undertones of this literary work demonstrate the value system that Vasconcelos

brought to the Secretary of Public Instruction. Vasconcelos believed at the time that the education of autochthonous communities was one of México's fundamental education "problems" and the nation needed to divert resources to assimilate this marginalized population (De Knauth, 1975, 352). The architect of the post-revolution national education system was convinced that indigenous people should not be isolated in pueblos, but systematically integrated into Mexican society. Vasconcelos later reflected in his book, *El Desastre*, on the creation of the Department of Indigenous Teaching in the Secretary of Public Instruction when he wrote, "I insisted that the Indigenous Department had no other purpose other than to prepare the indian for entrance into common schools, initially giving them notions of the Spanish language" (Vasconcelos, 1998: 62). This vision of extending the Mexican national education apparatus to the far reaches of the country, assimilating indigenous communities and "enlightening" them by forcing them to accept Mexican national culture was the primary task of the Secretary of Public Instruction in the early 20th century. Vasconcelos was at the heart of this assimilationist philosophy that permeated the public institution. He viewed Spanish as fundamental to initiating this integration process, asserting that its widespread instruction would bring progress to the nation. Vasconcelos certainly made positive contributions in constructing a nationalized educational system that organized literacy campaigns, opened 5,000 schools, and incorporated 9,000 new school teachers into the classroom (Ocampo López, 2005: 149). Yet, his approach to indigenous education was ultimately built on the flawed philosophies of the time, which devalued indigenous languages, ancestral knowledge, and communal social fabrics in favor of imposing an educational system which failed to embrace the ethnic plurality of México. Vasconcelos' systemic approach to mono-linguistic, homogenous, and assimilationist schooling inflicted severe damage on the nation. Other intellectuals of the time theorized distinct approaches to indigenous education which concerned developing specific curricular materials that were applicable to the lived realities of those who lived in communities.

This newly created national education system was built upon a foundational principle that alphabetizing a primarily rural and illiterate population would miraculously provoke profound social transformations that would modernize the nation. One of these distinguished intellectuals was Manuel Gamio, who recognized the need for special pedagogical materials when interacting in an educational setting with indigenous peoples. Gamio, who at times is called the “father of Mexican anthropology,” was an integral part of a movement of the so-called *Indigenistas* who set out to study indigenous civilizations. He was primarily an archaeologist whose crown achievement was the reconstruction and subsequent restoration of the archaeological site of Teotihuacan (Brading, 1988: 77). He also was invited to form part of the Calles administration as a sub-secretary of Public Education. In one of Manuel Gamio’s prominent literary works *Forjando Patria (pronacionalismo)*, published in 1916, he provides a structural critique to the indigenous educational system when he states,

“Not even the bases of alphabetism or mathematics, or even the disciplines of a traditional uniform curriculum can transform the indians. The cultural evolution of the Mexican nation demands methods, teachers, and special materials in an educationally holistic program” (Gamio, 1982, 12-19).

In this excerpt, Gamio evidently recognizes that simply imposing the Spanish language on people living in indigenous communities will not achieve the transformation that the nation desires. He advocated for diverse pedagogies, methods, teachers, and curricular materials to provide a more holistic approach to education. This quote demonstrates Gamio’s understanding that there was a need for creating specialized curricula in order to educate the autochthonous populace. Gamio went on to become one of the principal architects of indigenous education methodologies in the country.

Post revolutionary intellectuals like Gamio and Vasconcelos were complex and multifaceted characters in Mexican history. They were convinced that México needed to unify the country following the chaos of the Mexican Revolution, and the only way to do this was through the formation of a common cultural narrative. These thinkers opposed Social Darwinist

circles who theorized that white nations were destined to progress through the inherent superiority of their race (Brading, 1988: 79). Instead of dividing societies through racial exclusion, post revolutionary México opted to nationalize the predominantly *mestizo* culture. Gamio was careful to construct his critiques of indigenous peoples as retrograde cultures, as opposed to suggesting that the problems indigenous peoples faced were rooted in their race (Dawson, 1998: 292). To build a more homogenous México required profound socio-cultural transformations where cultural productions in the country praised the achievements of past indigenous civilizations. All the while, the state constructed nationalized educational programs that systematically assimilated autochthonous peoples, stifling their autonomy, communal agency, and the country's cultural plurality. This nation-building strategy is the great contradiction of post revolutionary México. The homogenizing model is built on the flawed premise that indigenous peoples must be transformed, which essentially advocates for the eradication of communal approaches to life, replacing them with individualistic and capitalistic values. The notion that indigenous peoples must be shaped in order to fit the mold of the nation state was commonplace in the early 20th century in Latin America. The Mexican government's educational policies for its indigenous populace continued to evolve throughout the 20th century to include a bilingual pedagogical strategy.

An important event in the evolution of the State's strategies to integrate indigenous peoples into a predominately assimilationist education system occurred in 1925, when the first House of the Indigenous Student (*Casa del Estudiante Indígena*) was established in Mexico City (Martínez Buenabad, 2015: 105). This project sought to integrate indigenous communities by incentivizing migration to the capital city in order to attend a school exclusively taught in Spanish. These newly educated indigenous students were then expected to return to their communities as teachers, preaching the benefits of development and progress in the national language. The perspectives within the power structures of education in the country began to shift in 1939 under the Lázaro Cárdenas administration with the creation of the Tarascan Project

(*Proyecto Tarasco*). Although the foundational narrative of indigenous education was still rooted in integration through alphabetization, the State modified its strategy and began to teach the written indigenous language of the community. In this pilot project we can observe the development of an innovative bilingual approach to education. Twenty students of the Purépecha community in Michoacan enrolled in the program to learn how to write and read their language. These teachers published journals, weekly murals, wrote stories, songs, and other forms of cultural production in Purépecha (Swadesh, 1939: 222-223). The Tarascan Project marks a paradigm shift in the approach to the education of autochthonous peoples. It is the first moment that the Mexican State devised methods to integrate indigenous peoples without perpetuating the linguistic ethnocide of their cultures. Despite certain advances, however, this pilot project was short-lived and would suffer serious cutbacks due to changes in political administration in Mexico City, leading eventually to the abandonment of the project.

In 1948, with the creation of the National Indigenous Institute (INI), the federal government began to establish Indigenous Coordinating Centers (*Centros Coordinadores Indigenistas*). The primary function of these centers was to prepare bilingual educational promoters to travel and teach in indigenous communities. There was a deeply ingrained colonial undercurrent within the national education system in México at this time, which permitted certain linguistic policies and assimilationist curricula to flourish in these centers. Powerful colonial hierarchical structures permeated the educational system and many scholars critiqued these pedagogical approaches, asserting that they incentivized out-migration and subsequent domination by the *mestizo* culture. In addition, many bilingual educational promoters were missing essential curricular materials in local indigenous languages, which prevented classes from implementing effective bilingual instruction (Martínez Buenabad, 2015, 105-106). These promoters were transplanted to teach in faraway communities without specific knowledge of the local cultures, which caused distrust among community members.

Throughout the following decades, the Public Education Secretary (SEP) created various other

organisms, such as the National Service of Cultural and Bilingual Teacher Promoters (1976), with a similar structural model. This system moved teachers, who were mainly trained in urban centers, into faraway communities where they might speak the same indigenous language, but lacked a fundamental understanding of the local communities in which they taught. These teachers brought nationalist curricular materials, predominantly in the imposed language, and promoted pedagogies that measured success only in terms of literacy rates, ignoring the culturally rich oral histories of autochthonous communities.

In 1994, the nation of México witnessed the plight of indigenous communities with the uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN). The Zapatista Army of National Liberation uprising on January 1st, 1994 left an indelible mark on México, forcing the prevailing power structures to recognize the existence of a diverse plurality of indigenous communities living in systemic poverty on the margins of society. This armed social movement brought indigenous issues and the educational system to the forefront of Mexican discourse, fomenting concrete policy conversations with the federal government (Martínez Buenabad, 2015, 110). The Zapatistas viewed the educational system as a homogeneous mechanism to instill individualistic and capitalistic values in direct contrast to the communal social fabric. Following the armed movement and the establishment of 38 autonomous municipalities within the state of Chiapas, Zapatista communities began to design curricula specifically applicable to the lived realities of each place (Silva Montes, 2019, 110). Educational promoters implemented critical pedagogies, converting schools into spaces of resistance and the creation of viable alternative communal projects. Promoters based much of their pedagogical approaches on the ideas of Paulo Freire, who believed that an emancipating curricula required a profound reconceptualization of the professorial role of teachers, so as to deconstruct hierarchical positions within the classroom. Professors should embrace a shift to the role of transformative intellectuals willing to collaborate with students in order to co-design and construct effective learning methodologies (Giroux, 1997, 15). The Sierra Norte region of Oaxaca was not isolated

from these monumental transformations occurring in Mexican society. The Zapatista uprising encouraged indigenous communities across the nation to issue decrees that articulated alternative visions of autonomy, self-determination, and education.

This phenomenon can be analyzed through various decrees issued by Sierra Norte municipalities that voiced solidarity with Zapatista communities and advocated for alternative models of education. In 1994, when the Zapatistas exposed the plight of indigenous communities and sought to re-envision their autonomy in Mexican society, Guelatao de Juárez and surrounding communities issued a decree titled, *Autonomy for the Peoples of the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca*. For the purpose of this research, Title 6 of the decree addresses educational autonomy in Guelatao, highlighting essential demands that provide context for how the community envisioned the future of educational space. Article 35 of Title Six in this document states: “The General Assembly of Regional Autonomous Authorities in the Sierra Norte will be the maximum authority making decisions with regards to educational methodologies imparted in all of the indigenous territory” (Martínez Luna, 2016, 215). The articles of Title 6 shed light on significant proposals in terms of regional, localized education. The document advocates for the naming of specific commissions dedicated to implementing and evaluating the efficiency of regional education. The decree states that the selection of professors would be the responsibility of communal authorities and all economic resources required for effective communal education would correspond to the state and federal governments (Martínez Luna, 2016, 215). This document presents strong critiques to the intercultural educational model implemented by the Mexican state, which was viewed as transmitting nationalist and individualistic curricula. Its demands center on autonomy within the educational system and the ability to reimagine pedagogies that reinforce communal ways of life. These pedagogies fundamentally depend on the locality, they are regionalized and increasingly diverse reconstructing traditional academic spaces. The Sierra Norte is a bastion for critiques of the Mexican government’s intercultural educational model.

The extension of the public education state apparatus into indigenous communities is analyzed by some scholars as a fundamental clash between two distinct forms of organizing society: the individualistic model and the communal. Intellectuals in local communities have questioned the values of the individualistic model of education promoted by state governments and the SEP. They regard national pedagogies as incentivizing private property, promoting individuals as owners of nature rather than beings living in cohesive harmony with the natural world. Jaime Martínez Luna critiques this nationalized educational system when he writes, “In México there was Ricardo Flores Magón, after Manuel Gamio, and then José Vasconcelos, education is a trough of names of men who accumulated knowledge and gave identity to the power structures of their moment in history. All of this from the perspective of the individual, his property, his religion, his relations, his knowledge.” (Martínez Luna, 2016, 52).

Martínez Luna recognizes the contributions of fundamental figures within the state educational model in México as deriving from an individualistic and capitalist approach to life. This conceptual framework of organizing society is in stark contrast to *Comunalidad* and the lived realities it defines. Martínez Luna specifically names these post-revolutionary figures in Mexican society due to their contributions to the power structures of the national government. The educational paradigm that these individuals created and attempted to export to the faraway reaches of the Mexican state were predominately monolingualistic, homogenizing, and individualistic, which is seen as a direct contrast to *Comunalidad*. The traditional education system is described as stemming from a society that values the division and privatization of the territory. It derives from a cosmivision that sanctifies humans instead of nature, and celebrates the intellectual accomplishments of individuals. Communities in the Sierra Norte strive to implement pedagogies that value the communal context of life, preaching sacred relationships to the earth, and celebrating the collective work of the community.

Another essential critique to traditional pedagogies perpetuated by the Mexican state is that they were substantiated on the premise that reading and writing is the foundation of the educational system. The priorities for the State that figures such as Vasconcelos and Gamio

represented was that society should focus on learning how to read and write. It was considered fundamental for indigenous peoples to learn how to read and write in order to abandon their “ignorant” ways (Martínez Luna 2016, 43). Before the nationalized apparatus of public education in México, knowledge was passed through ancestral oral histories along with observation, and participation in communal customs. This emphatic shift to alphabetization facilitated the creation of the classroom, the chalkboard, and desks. This new educational space awarded memorization, repetition, numbers, grades, competitions, and uniforms (Martínez Luna 2016, 53). This transition provoked a widespread abandonment of educational plots of land set aside to teach youth about local agricultural practices. The community was isolated from the institutional buildings designated as educational spaces. Direct methodologies of learning rooted in work and relation with the communal authorities were replaced by the classroom. Floriberto Díaz provides a framework for new pedagogies emanating from communal realities when he writes, “We should not forget that we are not travelers on our lands, we form an integral part of the land, and therefore, all education must be oriented to truly better the economic and spiritual conditions in our relationship with our mother, the Earth” (Díaz, 2007, 331). Díaz reflects on how the nationalized educational system served to distance community members from their territory. Oaxaca is a place of tremendous cultural diversity. Communities have distinct cosmovisions that shape ways of relating to the natural world. The Secretary of Public Education did not prepare curricula that respected the pluralistic nature of México, rather it devised curricula that attempted to homogenize the nation. However, this paradigm is beginning to shift and the state government of Oaxaca is recognizing the unique ethnic plurality within its territory, paving the way for the creation of educational projects that integrate *Comunalidad*.

Plural Recognition and Legal Frameworks that set the stage for the UACO

The Oaxacan state government has explicitly recognized the plurality of its cultural composition through the 16th article of its Constitution. Yet, Article 16 goes further than simply acknowledging the state's cultural diversity; it also recognizes the self-determination of indigenous and afro-mexican communities in their forms of socio-political organization. In this article, the State Constitution legally recognizes the fundamental elements that make up a communal approach to life. The 16th article declares,

“The State recognizes the forms of social, political, and governance organization in indigenous and afro-mexican communities and towns, their internal normative systems, the jurisdiction they have over their territories, the access to natural resources on their territories, and their participation in education, as well as plans, and development programs” (Constitución Política del Estado Libre y Soberano de Oaxaca).

With a state government that acknowledges the self-determination of indigenous communities and permits their distinct forms of social and political organization, the Oaxaca state government is at the forefront of progressive legislative bodies granting indigenous communal rights. This document refers to internal normative systems, formerly denominated *usos y costumbres*, which concerns the political systems that govern communal organization. Additionally, It makes specific reference to communities' jurisdiction over the creation of educational programs that are applicable to their lived realities.

Once the pluri-ethnic composition of a determined territory has been legally acknowledged, the challenge shifts to focus on how to create educational curricula that incorporate communal visions of life, reframing education in accordance with the unique traditions and customs of each community. The Oaxaca government has implemented numerous policies and created organizational bodies within the national educational apparatus under the banner of intercultural education. Acclaimed anthropologist and expert in communal education methodologies, Benjamín Maldonado-Alvarado, identified the Coalition of Indigenous Teachers and Promoters (CMPIO) as the first structural bodies of intercultural education in the state, founded in 1974 (Maldonado-Alvarado, 2015: 49). The CMPIO is a coalition of

indigenous educators that was formed by the Institute of Investigation and Social Integration of the State of Oaxaca (IISEO). The objectives of this coalition were to fight against integrationist curricula, creating spaces for pluralistic pedagogical approaches within the SEP and the educational workers union in order to influence public education policies. Important legal developments in Oaxaca education laws and state proposals have started to integrate *Comunalidad* into the fabric of public education legal frameworks, advocating for pedagogies that embrace Oaxaca's plurality.

One of these documents is the Plan for the Transformation of Education in Oaxaca (PTEO), which is an educational proposal constructed by the Public Education State Institute alongside Section XXII of the National Educational Workers Union (SNTE). The PTEO presented strong critiques of the educational reforms implemented by the Enrique Peña Nieto administration from 2012 to 2018. The PTEO presents alternatives to the official approach to education and emphasizes the importance of reenvisioning an educational system that specifically contemplates the particularities of Oaxaca, a state where 65.7% of the population in 2015 described themselves as indigenous (Casco Peebles, 2022: 7). This document was written in January of 2012 and represents monumental shifts in the state's recognition of diversifying pedagogies to incorporate *Comunalidad*. In Section XXII of the National Educational Workers Union, commonly referred to in Oaxaca as *el Magisterio*, communities have found an ally willing to advocate for the integration of communal curricula and a reimagination of the educational system's role in indigenous communities. The PTEO attempts to transform public education within the state of Oaxaca through a critical formation of educational workers, integrating communal pedagogies and constructing collectives of projects that achieve a comprehensive education of children, adolescents, and adults (Faustino Zacarías, Education Futura.org). Within the legal framework section of this document *Comunalidad* is specifically mentioned as a principal guiding the educational curricula of

Oaxaca. The PTEO makes reference to *Comunalidad* when it states the four concepts that direct its educational approach,

“Legally the current proposal is based on four principles that orient education:

1. Democratic, considered a system of life favoring the betterment of economic, political, social, and cultural conditions of peoples.
2. Nationalist, students should comprehend the political, economic, and social problems of the nation in defense of our political and economic independence along with natural resources and culture.
3. Humanist, considered the human as the principle and end of institutions based in ideals of social justice, liberty and equity.
4. Comunalidad, as a way of life and reason of existence for indigenous communities”

(PTEO, 2012).

This specific mention of *Comunalidad* within the PTEO demonstrates that Oaxaca has not lost connection with indigenous lifeways or the desire and ability of local communities to organize on their own or with other nearby communities. In proposing an educational system that considers *Comunalidad* is one of four guiding principles in the creation of pedagogies that recognizes many decades of collective struggle that transformed intercultural education from an assimilationist structure to one that values plurality. In addition, *Comunalidad* was officially enshrined into Oaxaca’s Education Law through legislative approval of modifications in September of 2018 (Ley de Educación Para el Estado Libre y Soberano de Oaxaca, 2018). This evolution is restructuring the educational system to include communal concepts of organization, territory, work, and festivity. As *Comunalidad* is integrated into educational spaces, the state has taken fundamental steps towards adopting an educational apparatus that recognizes the pluralistic ethnic makeup of its territory.

Oaxaca is a testing ground for the implementation of both state-sponsored and municipal intercultural educational initiatives. The state has multiple educational spaces for all ages which have embraced interculturality, constructing educational environments that explicitly value cultural diversity and promote intercultural dialogue within México. In order to fully comprehend the progress and limitations of intercultural education in the state, I include a table based on the work of Benjamín Maldonado Alvarado and Carlos Luís Maldonado Ramírez, who

in their article “*Education and Interculturality in Oaxaca: Progress and Challenges*,” lay out the progress of these communal educational initiatives in Oaxaca. [See Table 2]

Table 2: Communal Education Experiences in Oaxaca and their year of creation

Educational Level	Public Education	Private Education
Initial Education <i>(referring to education provided to children below the age of 6)</i>	<i>Nidos de lengua (2008)</i> and certificate in Communal Kindergarten Education (2011-2012)	N/A
Preschool Education	Schools of the Coalition of Teachers and Indigenous Promoters of Oaxaca (CMPIO), Schools of Mixtec leaders under the Direction of Indigenous Education (DEI) (Teachers of the Nation Ñu Savi) (2009)	N/A
Primary Education	Schools of the CMPIO, Mixte Schools under the DEI, (Teachers of the Nation Ñu Savi) (2009)	N/A
Secondary Education	Communal indigenous secondary schools (2004)	N/A
High School	Communal Integral High School Ayuujk Polivalente (1996) Communal Integral High Schools (2001) Communal <i>Telebachilleratos</i> (2013)	Jose Martí High School in San Francisco Ixhuatán (1982) Asunción High School Ixtaltepec (1987)
University Education	Normalista Bilingual Intercultural School in Oaxaca (2000) Unit of Superior Studies in Alotepec (2011) Communal Intercultural University of Cempoaltépetl (2012) Autonomous University of Benito Juárez in Oaxaca (UABJO 2016)	Superior Intercultural Ayuuk Institute (2006)

Source: Benjamín Maldonado Alvarado, Carlos Luis Maldonado Ramírez, 2017: 3.

This table includes the founding dates of each educational project, which enables us to analyze the historical progress of communal education initiatives in Oaxaca. Although this research does not purport to fully grasp the unique pedagogical strategies of each institution listed above, we can observe certain trends in the progress of communal education. At the time of the publication of this article in 2017, the Coalition of Teachers and Indigenous Promoters of Oaxaca (CMPIO) were coordinating activities in more than 300 preschool and primary schools around the state. The Teachers of the Nation ÑuSavi were working in hundreds of schools supervising indigenous education in the Mixtec region. Also, there were 11 communal secondary schools, 49 communal highschools and 73 tele-high schools in the region. (Maldonado Alvarado, Maldonado Ramírez, 2017: 4). The extension of communal alternative education models is due to the organizational efforts of the educational workers union to promote communal pedagogies in the state. In analyzing this table, it is possible to extrapolate certain regions which have been particularly successful fomenting communal educational projects.

Indigenous communities in Oaxaca have also actively pursued the formation of their own “autonomous” educational spaces. A municipality that has dedicated a great deal of time and effort to creating communal education curricula for their youth is Santa María Tlahuitoltepec in the Sierra Mixe. This Mixe community has been consolidating localized educational proposals since the end of the 1970’s. Some of these educational spaces include the communal secondary, *Sol de la Montaña*, the prestigious music academy, *Centro de Capacitación Musical Mixe*, the high school, *Bachillerato Integral Comunitario Ayuujk Polivalente* and the university, *Universidad Comunal Intercultural del Cempoaltépetl* (Maldonado-Alvarado, 2015: 49). The Sierra Mixe has been exemplary in proposing alternative educational strategies that integrate *Comunalidad* into the curriculum. Although *Comunalidad* within education is now being

recognized within Oaxaca state laws and proposals, a fundamental question remains as to the nature of its pedagogies. Benjamin Maldonado-Alvarado has taken his extensive research into Oaxaca's communal education methodologies. He has synthesized these practices into seven fundamental characteristics. Maldonado-Alvarado states,

"The coinciding aspects of Oaxacan communal education are at least seven:

- The articulation of knowledge around local and regional wisdom,
- Research as a central pedagogical concept,
- Communal philosophy as the horizon,
- Communal participation as a process of learning,
- Extensive use of indigenous language,
- A curriculum adequate to the working reality of the community,
- The collaboration of teachers as people who don't necessarily teach, but facilitate one's learning" (Maldonado-Alvarado, 2015: 48).

These central elements of communal education in Oaxaca contrast with the Mexican nation-state approach to intercultural education analyzed above. Communal educational methodologies value autonomy, focusing on the preservation and production of local wisdom, as opposed to adhering to homogeneous curricula produced in faraway urban centers. Decision-making bodies in the community ensure that schools are places where *Comunalidad* is promoted, emphasizing student participation in festivities and collective work as integral parts of the learning process. Research is designed to deepen one's knowledge of communal processes, enabling students to focus on aspects of communal life that interest them. Research can entail many diverse activities, breaking a structural emphasis on the written production of knowledge. Education is not confined to a classroom, but opened up to the community. The indigenous language and spoken dialect of the community is actively encouraged in the educational space, deconstructing the collective trauma associated with using indigenous languages in traditional classrooms. Overall, this approach favors the pluralistic nature of Oaxaca, giving municipalities the autonomy to reimagine educational spaces in accordance with their lived realities. In the context of this paradigm shift from nationally imposed, assimilationist

monolingual curricula, to communal education that respects the cultural diversity of Oaxaca, we can analyze how certain educational proposals make way for the pedagogies of the future.

The UACO

An educational project based on the central tenets of *Comunalidad* was initially conceptualized as a class and subsequently a Master's program through the *Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca* (UABJO) in Oaxaca City. The information presented in this section primarily derives from an interview conducted with the Academic Coordinator of the UACO Guelatao, Gustavo López Mendoza. In 2013, local academics at the Institute for Educational Sciences at the UABJO in Oaxaca City devised strategies to diversify their curriculum by providing students with an opportunity to take a course with Jaime Martínez Luna, one of the conceptual architects of *Comunalidad*. These courses were focused on the anthropology and sociology of education, proposing *Comunalidad* as a methodology to research distinct forms of organization in rural communities outside of the capital. Martínez Luna assembled a team of communal leaders, local intellectuals, and educators like Arturo Guerrero, Maribel González Santiago, and Gustavo López Mendoza who began to give classes for this innovative multidisciplinary course. Following the apparent success of the course and the growing interest in studying *Comunalidad*, these educators began to envision making the class the cornerstone of a Master's program at the UABJO.

In 2016, the UABJO began the process of approving a Master's program in Communal Education. This exciting news prompted communal leaders and educators to organize to determine their methodological approach and select the literature that would provide a theoretical framework for the program. There was no shortage of pedagogical material from which to select. Martínez Luna and other community members had extensive experience creating educational programming for communal radio stations (Interview with academic coordinator of the UACO Guelatao CUC on August 4th, 2022). In the Sierra Norte, one of the most effective ways to disseminate information in communities and promote localized

educational programming is through communal radio programs. These educators drew upon their ample experience in communications to create lesson plans and assemble materials that would contribute to a communal education curriculum. During the preparation phase of this two-year Master's program, a university-wide strike in 2018 halted all academic and administrative processes within the UABJO. This strike continued to delay the announcement of the first Master's program in Communal Education and prompted the collective of teachers led by Martínez Luna to begin searching for different locations that could serve as a home for this innovative educational program. The pilot program to study *Comunalidad* began to open applications for students to study in three communities within the Sierra Norte region: Santa María Yaviche, Guelatao de Juárez, and Calpulalpam de Méndez (Interview with academic coordinator of the UACO Guelatao CUC on August 4th, 2022). However, launching these academic programs faced serious administrative challenges.

Upon announcing this new Bachelor's program in three communities, administrators lacked a sense of academic, financial, and administrative certainty that permitted them to work full-time to consolidate the *Comunalidad* program. In the case of Guelatao de Juárez, the absence of steady economic resources prompted organizers to communicate with students that their studies would have to be canceled. However, they were able to direct students to Calpulalpam de Méndez, a neighboring community in the Sierra Norte. Due to the fact that the majority of educational facilitators in Calpulalpam were university professors who worked primarily on weekdays, they were able to actively participate on weekends by giving classes in the *Comunalidad* program. In September of 2019, Jaime Martínez Luna began to organize among collaborators in the program, announcing a plan to convert the *Comunalidad* classes into the curriculum of a public university called *La Universidad Autónoma Comunal de Oaxaca*. This decision prompted another mass mobilization of active civil society members, communal educators, and local intellectuals around Oaxaca who believed in the power of communal pedagogies to transform society. The collective began to contact sympathizers around the

state, traveling to the eight regions of Oaxaca to attend communal assemblies and present their new educational proposal. They began structuring what would be the foundation of this new communal university. Jamie Martínez Luna presented the project to a conference where a state congresswoman, Juana Aguilar Espinoza, who had previously worked in the educational sector, expressed interest and solicited a formal proposal. Espinoza had a great deal of influence within the governing party at the time and was able to present the proposal for the creation of a new public university to the state congress.

The UACO was initially approved by the institutions of the Mexican state on January 15th, 2020, by legislation in the state congress, which approved its creation with the elaboration of the Organic Law (*Ley Orgánica*), officially published in the Journal of the State Government April 20th, 2020 (Delgado González: 2022, 119). The UACO is made up of 16 Communal University Centers (CUCs) which are dispersed throughout the eight regions of Oaxaca. Organic laws consolidate the official structuring of public universities in Oaxaca and include important information such as how the university will organize its corresponding organisms for administration, conditions for becoming university president, and objectives of the institution. These goals demonstrate an almost century-long evolution in educational curricula which has granted communities the autonomy to develop their own pedagogies and construct teaching methods that are localized to their lived realities. In Article 2 of the Organic Law the UACO lays out its principal academic objectives when it states,

“The *Universidad Autónoma Comunal de Oaxaca*, based in the principle of autonomy, will have as an objective the following:

- I. Impart undergraduate and graduate higher education; courses of specialization, in its academic and extracurricular modalities, forming professionals that are sensitive to cultural and communal knowledge;
- II. Organize and develop research activities, communal projects, humanist and scientific, in attention, principally, to the problems of the community, as well as regional, state and national in relation to the conditions of cultural, social and historic development
- III. Preserve, promote, spread and grow the culture and communal knowledge.

(*Ley Orgánica de la Universidad Autónoma Comunal de Oaxaca*, 2020: 1)

This official document demonstrates the UACOs goals, based on the principle of autonomy, to create their own pedagogies that benefit the communities they serve. The UACO lays out its specific approaches to academia, constructing their classes with a principal focus on research and communal projects. There is a fundamental idea at the core of the UACO to instill inextricable links between university education and the community. These two spaces complement and enrich one another. The UACO systematically enables the practice of *Comunalidad*, organizing events with communal authorities in order to promote and spread local knowledge. University is not an educational space confined to an institutional building for theorizing esoteric academic concepts. It is a place to deepen one's knowledge of communal realities through action participatory research methods, the implementation of communal projects, participation in collective work, and celebrating the fruits of collective labor through the *fiesta*. Once the UACO was officially approved through the implementation of the Organic Law, the Universal Community Center in the Sierra Norte Region was transferred from Calpulalpam de Méndez to Guelatao de Juárez.

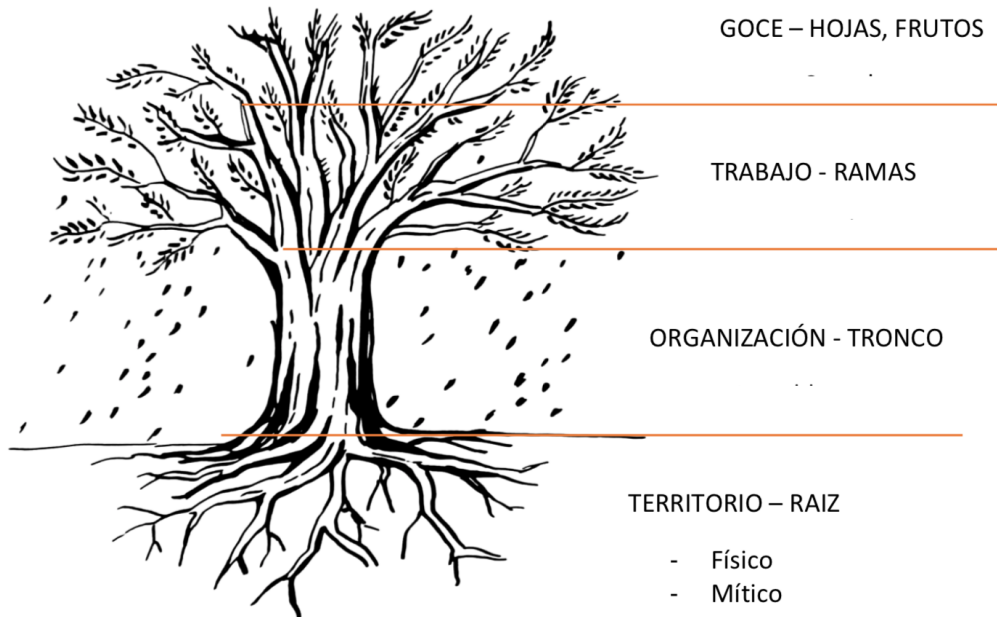
Guelatao de Juárez is a community with a unique history that dictates its regional and national importance in México. The former president of México and first indigenous president of the Americas, Benito Juárez, was born in this small town tucked away in the Sierra Norte mountains. The fact that Guelatao is the birthplace of one of the most important figures in Mexican history has drastically altered the community's trajectory, incentivizing a vast array of economic and political actors to propose "development" projects to the community (López Mendoza, 2023: 2). Many of these projects have been collectively resisted and discarded, while the community has remained committed to implementing its own projects which adhere to its ancestral forms of social and political organization. Historically, Guelatao de Juárez was touted as the regional hub for education and "progress." The community was subject to the post-revolution indigenous education strategies which sought to homogenize indigenous

cultures, forming a monolingual nation state of *mestizos*. Students from around the region attend its Center for Social Integration No. 3 (CIS), a primary education institution in the community. The name of this institution and the framework with which it educates is exactly the paradigm that the UACO is working to transform. The name evokes images of a juvenile detention center or an incarceration facility. Multiple generations of indigenous children in the region have attended this boarding school to be subsequently “reinserted” into society (López Mendoza, 2023: 3). The UACO’s Guelatao CUC as an institution is working to promote a decolonizing narrative and to formulate pedagogies in accordance with the communal conceptualization of life in the Sierra Norte, which is based on the four fundamental pillars of territory, organization, work, and festivity. The following section seeks to explain the conceptual framework of the four central tenets of *Comunalidad*, which provide a structural basis for the curriculum of the Bachelor’s program in Guelatao.

The Tree Metaphor

Comunalidad can be aptly described through the metaphor of a tree. The tree metaphor (*metáfora del árbol*) was presented to the author during fieldwork as a guiding principle that orients the structure of *Comunalidad*. Philosopher Raimon Panikkar initially presented societal structure based on a tree of life. Arturo Guerrero later applied this metaphor to his study of *Comunalidad* in the Sierra Norte. Connecting *Comunalidad* with the natural world reinforces the local cosmology that humans are an integral part of nature. Community members do not see themselves as owners of natural resources, rather as stewards of a shared territory. In Gustavo López Mendoza’s comprehensive study of *Comunalidad* in Guelatao de Juárez, he constructs an image which illuminates how this tree metaphor connects to the communal way of life.

Image 1: The Tree Metaphor



Source: (Gustavo López Mendoza, 2023: 13)

Territory is seen as the roots; without roots the tree cannot grow tall and strong. The physical territory is managed in a communal way, inviting all citizens to share in the responsibility of its conservation. Yet, López Mendoza divided this conceptualization of territory into both physical and mythical components. The mythical element of territory is based on the ancestral cosmovision of the Zapotec people, which is manifested through the designation of exclusive sacred spaces for the performance of rituals venerating the natural world. Mythical stories and collective legends are an integral part of the territory, as they categorize certain spaces as divine and incentivize the protection of nature.

The trunk of the tree is the socio-political organization of the community, which provides the tree with structural fortitude through consensus building in the general assembly. It is the base for the delegation of the collective work and responsibilities that give life to the community. The branches of this tree are representations of communal work, which is characterized in this

research as *tequio* or *gozona*. These collective work opportunities ensure that the community's infrastructure is maintained and the territory is managed in a way that contributes to the common good.

Finally, the fruits of this tree represent festive expressions and occasions. In the natural world the fruits are pollinated by birds, bees, or some other animal aiding in the reproductive cycle and subsequent spreading of the tree's seeds. Similarly, *fiestas* reproduce *Comunalidad* through transnational networks. *Comunalidad* is reimagined and reproduced in urban spaces throughout the United States and other parts of México where there are high rates of indigenous migration. These migrants often send economic resources back to their communities in Oaxaca to provide economic support for the festivities. In addition, many migrant communities create hometown associations and sponsor traditional festivities in their homes outside the community. These transnational networks fortify and extend *Comunalidad* to other geographic locations. While some fruits are spread to different spaces, fortifying communal networks abroad, others fall onto the ground and with time decompose into the necessary nutrients to continue sustaining the soil which gives life to the tree. The organization of this research follows this structural presentation with the specific intent to pay homage to the extraordinary intellectuals who were willing to share and contribute to the findings of this research.

Territory

Comunalidad defines how the distinct lifeways of Oaxacan communities were born out of a collective struggle to defend territory from extraction. Almost 70% of Oaxaca's territory is communally managed by municipalities that practice *Comunalidad* (Martínez Luna, 2016: 321). Oaxaca's territory is a reflection of the collective history of its inhabitants; it presents profound physical and spiritual connections for communities. The territory of Guelatao de Juárez includes both sacred sites and areas in dispute with neighboring communities. There is a profound connection between the people and the territory, which is manifested in local rituals, daily practices, and ancestral stories, cultivating a common respect for the earth. Gustavo

López Mendoza, local author and current academic coordinator at Guelatao's UACO defines territory as such,

“The territory consists of the physical and geographic limitations of a community. It doesn't belong to a few fortunate people, but thanks to the organization implemented by towns, it is communal, which is to say it belongs to all members of the community. Under the existing cosmovision of the Sierra Norte region, communal territory is seen as a mother, with which we aim to live in harmony, avoiding practices that damage the environment such as, unregulated deforestation, the exploitation of aquifers, and mining.” (López Mendoza, 2023: 6).

Territory does not solely refer to the geographic limitations of the community, but evokes an intrinsic relationship with the earth, which is conceptualized as a mother that provides sustenance and protection. The unique cosmovision of Guelatao is manifested in the collective rituals and stories that are performed throughout the community. Before initiating a project in the community, whether by the UACO, a cooperative, or a small business, community members perform a ritual asking permission from Mother Earth (Delgado González, 2022: 123). Through communal organizational processes, the territory is managed and protected from outsiders who seek to extract essential resources. Historically, these outside interests have consisted of logging companies, mining corporations, and hydroelectric projects looking to construct dams which would catastrophically damage the ecosystems and biodiversity of the region. The communal education methodologies implemented at the UACO demand that knowledge facilitators possess a deep consciousness of the territory.

Educational facilitators who aspire to give classes with the UACO must demonstrate an understanding of the communal territory. They should be aware of the geographic and spiritual components that make up the territory, comprehending the very soil that gives living beings existence and forms an integral part of communal history. To fully grasp communal territory is to recognize the first pillar upon which every other component of *Comunalidad* is built. A collective territory creates a communal approach to life, it reinforces the concept that humans are an integral part of nature, rather than the owner of natural resources (Martínez Luna, 2016: 321). The physical and spiritual elements of the community conceptualize territory as a maternal

figure that provides sustenance and is to be respected. The second pillar of *Comunalidad* that students learn about through their plan of studies at UACO's Guelatao CUC is organization.

Organization

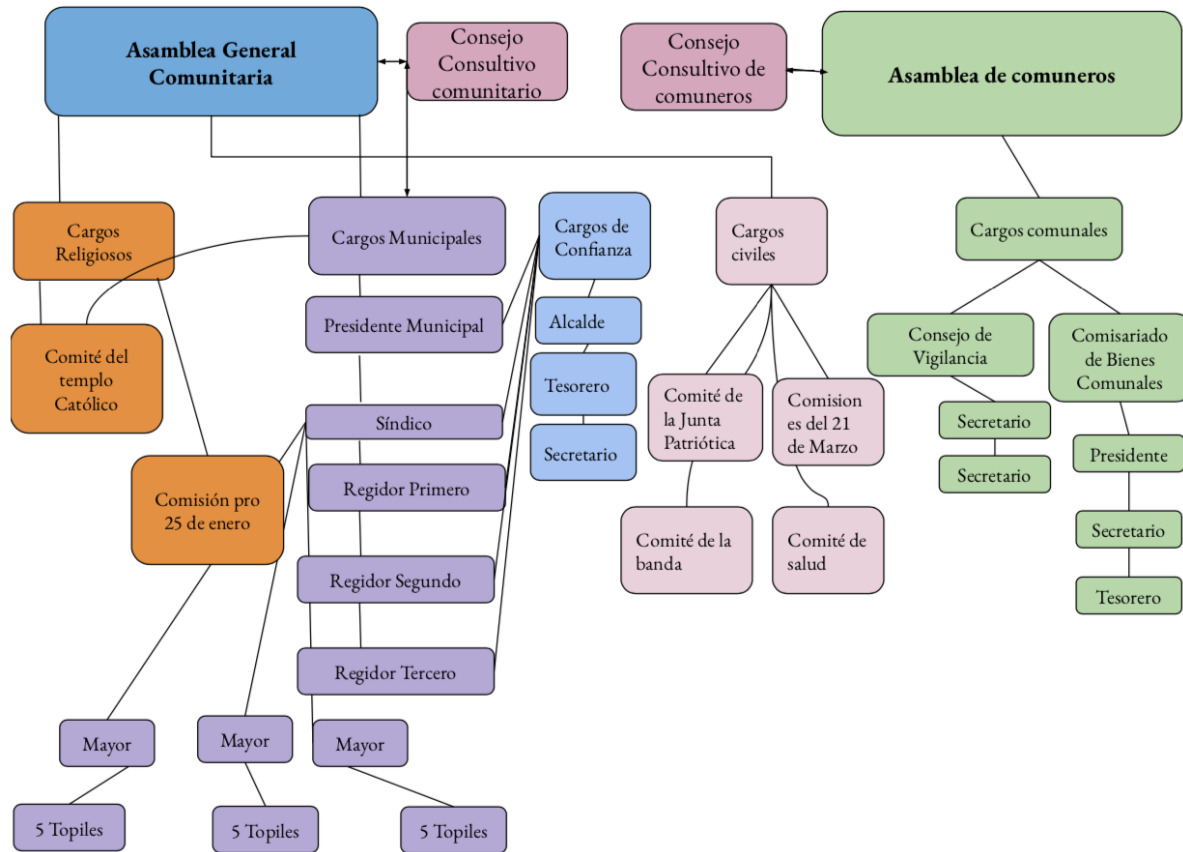
The second pillar of *Comunalidad* highlights the distinct ways in which a community makes decisions, assigns positions of authority, and governs the territory. The socio-political organization of a community is based on two central elements: the communal assembly and *cargos*. The maximum decision-making authority within Guelatao de Juárez is the general assembly of its citizens. The general assembly is a diverse space where a citizen's personal formation, labor, and values are expressed to the collective. Communal issues are discussed and incite citizens to take the necessary actions to remedy a certain situation. Within the general assembly, decisions are made through a delicate construction of consensus. The community establishes agreements with regards to the issues that should be discussed, the order in which they will be addressed, as well as the ways they are presented to the assembly (Guerrero, 2015: 116). The assembly is seen as the ultimate manifestation of the collective. It is a place that does not individualize the population by granting each person a vote, rather it constructs a collective "We" through citizens working together to establish a consensus and acting to resolve a certain issue. It is important not to idealize the communal assembly as a type of utopia; socioeconomic inequalities do exist and certain opinions are valued over others. Yet, the primary goal remains to value the collective participation of community members, placing citizens at the heart of decision-making processes within a town. In the community there are various types of assemblies which discuss and agree upon certain actions within their particular sector.

An example of the diversity of assemblies within Guelatao is the assembly of *comuneros*. These assemblies participate directly in decisions concerning the management of the territory. Agrarian conflicts, territorial disputes, and the management of communal resources are some of the topics that are discussed within this particular assembly. There are

also assemblies which govern the activities of each committee within Guelatao de Juárez. One of the fundamental actions of the general assembly is to elect a certain number of citizens to serve in positions of representative authority within the town. These positions of authority, formally denominated *cargos*, are seen as a citizen's obligation to the community. Citizens in Guelatao de Juárez do not receive monetary compensation for their *cargo* assignment, which can last from one to three years. *Cargos* represent an opportunity to accumulate a certain "political prestige" within the community, which greatly depends on the quality of a citizen's work during their cargo. (Delgado Gonzalez, 2022: 64). These *cargo* assignments ascend on a pyramid or a *escalafón de cargos*, which dictates the appropriate position for a citizen dependent upon their experience, skillset, and history of service to the community.

Although, various authors have written about the distinct features of the *cargo* system in Guelatao de Juárez, the most accurate table representing the current pyramid of *cargos* in the community was constructed by Nadia Massiel Delgado González, along with the collaboration of Gustavo López Mendoza and Carlos Martínez.

Table 3: The Cargo System in Guelatao de Juárez



Source: Nadia Massiel Delgado González, 2022: 74

This table exhibits how *cargos* are distributed within Guelatao, dividing them by the assembly responsible for assigning each position. The table shows the division between *cargos* assigned by the General Assembly and those assigned by the *Comunero* Assembly, which primarily deals with agrarian issues. Delgado González also includes the *Consejos Consultivos*, which are councils of consultants composed of citizens whose opinions are greatly valued due to the prestige they have accumulated through the quality of their work. In this table, *cargos* are also separated along thematic lines, such as religious *cargos*, municipal *cargos*, financial *cargos*, civil *cargos*, and communal *cargos*. This comprehensive table exhibits the sociopolitical structure of Guelatao de Juárez. *Cargos* such as *topíl* (public safety officer) is at the bottom of the pyramid and generally represents a citizen's introduction into the cargo system once they

turn 18 years old. Following their *cargo* a citizen will usually rest for three years until the assembly calls on them again for another *cargo*. The majority of educational facilitators at the UACO's CUC in Guelatao were experienced community members from Guelatao who had performed multiple *cargos* of importance in their community.

UACO classes structured around the second pillar of organization provide students a space for reflection on the *cargo* system. The educational facilitators in *Comunalidad* classes had performed extensive *cargos* throughout their lives in the community, and shared that lived experience with students. UACO students also actively experience some of the changes that have occurred in communal dynamics, with certain citizens paying others to perform their *cargo*. This phenomenon is a response to out-migration rates of the active working population and an interjection of western individualistic values that permit those with access to capital to pay an "employee" to perform their communal obligation. The UACO classroom provided students with an analytical space to reflect on the *cargo* system, analyze these dynamics, and learn from educational facilitators who have accumulated prestige within the community. The third pillar that forms part of the UACO's curricular base is the *tequio*.

Tequio

This third pillar of *Comunalidad* consists of the collective work that is necessary to address deficiencies within the community and promote the service of the common good for all. The word *tequio* is derived from the Náhuatl word, *tequitl*, which translates as a type of tribute or work. In Guelatao de Juárez, *tequios* are convened by the general assembly and coordinated by communal authorities. There is a wide range of activities that would be considered *tequio*, but the main characteristic is that these collective work opportunities emanate from the particular necessities of each community. An example of some of those necessities could be fixing certain potholes on the highway, or cleaning up the overgrowth on ecotourism hiking trails, or reforesting a nearby hillside. In the specific case of Guelatao de Juárez, *tequios* are considered mandatory collective work in the community and if active citizens do not contribute

to these *tequios* they run the risk of being sanctioned by the municipality (Delgado González, 2023: 55). During fieldwork multiple *tequios* were convened in order to reforest certain areas of the community and clean up the overgrowth surrounding a new ecotourism project called, “*El Camino Benito Juárez*”. The *tequio* was announced through the municipal speaker and members of the community mobilized to perform the tasks that corresponded to each group. *Tequio* can be conceptualized as community members giving their time and effort for the betterment of the community. A fundamental characteristic of *tequio* in Guelatao is that they are traditionally finalized with a small communal celebration that includes food and beverages. *Tequio* solidifies the collective responsibility for the improvement of the community and reinforces the social fabric that is essential to *Comunalidad*.

Depending on the community, *tequio* can involve a wide variety of activities. Participation in *tequio* is another way that a citizen can accumulate prestige before other community members, which is recognized through the assembly and possibly awarded with a *cargo* of higher influence in the future. The following table presents an understanding of the concept, based on a review of Floriberto Díaz’s literary reflections on *tequio* in the Mixe community of Santa María Tlahuitoltepec.

Table 4: Conceptualizations of Tequio

<i>Variants of Tequio</i>	<i>Concrete Communal Actions</i>
Physical Work	Elaboration and maintenance of public works, roads, communal buildings, clearing of paths, cleaning and preparing communal parcels to plant corn.
Reciprocal Support	Occurring on the family level, inviting neighbors to sow crops or help in the construction of a home with the explicit understanding that the favor will be repaid in the future.
Communal Festivities	Attending to all invitees during patron saint festivals by ensuring all guests are provided for.

Musical Interexchange	Extending invites to philharmonic bands of another community during festivities with the understanding that invitees will be reciprocated.
Intellectual / Economic <i>Tequio</i>	Those who study outside the community or have migrated are held responsible to return and share acquired knowledge or provide funding for certain projects

(Elaborated by the author based on Source: Floriberto Díaz, 2007: 60)

This table reveals the complexities of *tequio*. It does not solely address the necessities for manual labor to fix, clean, or maintain communal facilities, but interacts within a complex social fabric that values reciprocity. *Tequio* extends beyond the geographic limitations of the community, interacting in a transnational space, where migrants are expected to donate economic resources for festivities, construction, and other communal projects. There can be inter-communal *tequios* where musical exchanges are facilitated between bands during festivities. In addition, *tequio* interacts within the relationships between neighbors and families in the community. A family can solicit the help of their neighbors to sow the seeds of the familial plot, or to aid in the construction of a new house, with the explicit understanding that these favors will be reciprocated in the future. In the Zapotec communities of the Sierra Norte, this particular demonstration of solidarity and collective work that occurs at the neighborhood level can take on various terms such as *gozona*, *guelaguetza*, and *manovuelta* (Delgado González, 2023: 54). The UACO CUC in Guelatao is not seen as an institution separate from the community, but an active participant in constructing the common good.

UACO students and educational facilitators actively participate in municipal *tequios* when they are announced in the community, even if these activities interfere with scheduled classes. Classes structured around this third pillar of *Comunalidad* build a literary and theoretical framework for *tequio*, yet at the UACO there is nothing that substitutes for the importance of practice. This theoretical framework based on local literature allows for interesting cultural

comparisons to be made between indigenous communities comparing their distinct conceptualizations of *tequio*. Knowledge is facilitated through the lived experience of *tequio* and during fieldwork there were multiple opportunities for UACO students to participate in *tequio*. One of these opportunities was during a reforestation *tequio* on the nearby hillsides of the *Polideportivo*, where the community was convened to plant varieties of pine and oak trees. Another *tequio* occurred when the UACO organized a small goodbye party as my fieldwork was coming to a close. This *tequio* occurred at the *Polideportivo*, a small sports complex that is used during the *Copa Benito Juárez*, a regional basketball tournament that occurs during the month of March. When asking for permission to use the space, we used the opportunity to provide a *tequio* to the municipality by organizing the cleanup of communal spaces that had been damaged when someone broke into the *Polideportivo*. This collective clean up and restoration of the space, preceded by a small festivity amongst UACO members, is a microcosm of what occurs at the communal level in Guelatao de Juárez. Citizens are expected to give their work, good faith, and effort for the maintenance and improvement of the community, and members of the community reciprocate by organizing a collective festivity.

Festivity

The final element of *Comunalidad* is where all of the hard collective work, organization, and efforts bear the fruits of celebration. Guelatao de Juárez is by its nature a very festive place. These festivities are manifestations of unity, voluntary cooperation, and collective effort based on the previously discussed pillars that make up *Comunalidad*. There are civil celebrations, communal celebrations, and familial festivities in Guelatao de Juárez (Martínez Luna, 2016: 325). The principal communal *fiestas* in Guelatao are the celebration of the birth of Benito Juárez, which is celebrated on March 21st and the patron saint festival of *San Pablo Apostol*, which is celebrated on January 25th. These events are means to reinforce *Comunalidad* and congregate thousands of people for collective celebration. During these festivities, community

members who are performing a *cargo* with the municipality are extremely occupied with preparations. There are specific commissions for these *fiestas*, which are assigned by the general assembly and coordinate all of activities before these important events occur (reference Table 3 pg. 38). *Fiestas* are an integral part of life in the Sierra Norte, but there are few which demand as much coordination, collective effort, and voluntary cooperation as the *Copa Benito Juárez*.

The Benito Juárez Cup is the ultimate celebration of *Comunalidad* and intercultural exchange between communities in the Sierra Norte. This annual event has become one of the maximum expressions of identity and ethnic pride for indigenous peoples in the region. The *fiesta* is attended by Mixes, Chinantecos, and Zapotecos from different parts of Oaxaca, generating cultural exchanges through a sport essential to the identity of the Sierra Norte. Basketball arrived in the Sierra Norte in the 1930s and has been a vehicle for intercultural exchange through the organization of regional tournaments. These competitions interact in an entirely transnational space with games being transmitted live through Facebook and later uploaded to Youtube for those who are living outside of the community to enjoy. Migrants from the Sierra Norte primarily working in the United States or Mexico City also organize similar tournaments between communities where teams represent their hometowns. In 2019, the festivities around the birth of Benito Juárez brought approximately 15,000 people to Guelatao de Juárez. An event of this size required all citizens within the community to actively participate in their commissions, ensuring that the waste generated from the event was managed properly and guests felt welcome (Delgado González, 2023: 82). In addition, community members throughout Guelatao work to provide sufficient food, drink, and lodging for the basketball players and their families. These festivities reinforce communal identity through the meticulous collective organization necessary to be able to provide services to so many visitors.

Another communal festivity that is celebrated in Guelatao de Juárez takes place from January 23rd to January 25th, in honor of the patron saint of the town, San Pablo Apostol.

What occurs during these patron saint festivities in the Sierra Norte is a complex intersection of Zapotec ancestral heritage combined with Catholic imagery dating back to the colonial period. The *fiesta* of San Pablo is an apparent manifestation of the syncretic practices of the town, combining elements of the traditional Zapotec cosmovision with Catholic beliefs. The UACO academic coordinator at the CUC in Guelatao, Gustavo López Mendoza, describes the syncretism present within the patron saint festival in his community when he writes:

“In the case of Guelatao, they gave the town the name San Pablo Guelatao, in which we celebrate the day of his conversion to the catholic religion on January 25th, the date that is used to celebrate the patron saint festival in the community. This festivity gathers cultural elements from both civilizations, on one hand the offerings, dances, communal organization that is carried out, and on the other, the religious activities, which are principally manifested in masses, processions, and hymns” (López Mendoza, 2023:24).

Here we can observe how the communal *fiesta* is a syncretic space where the ancestral practices of the Zapotec civilization and the Catholic religion interact. The festivity combines some of the traditional rituals conducted to honor the natural deities, while also celebrating through Catholic masses, processions, and hymns. The patron saint festival is a celebration of two intrinsic elements of religious communal identity. The syncretism present within the *fiesta* demonstrates an incorporation, validation, and reinvigoration of these predominantly marginalized autochthonous traditions within a revised Catholic doctrine (Norget, 2007: 93). The *fiesta* is a manifestation of communal socio-political organization which is based on the commission’s assembly, which delegates citizen’s work responsibilities in order for the event to function. The patron saint festival reinforces citizens' sensations of belonging to the community, while also fomenting mutual support and collaboration. Yet, it also perpetuates the institutionalization of an imposed religion which promotes principles foreign to the community, and devalues the ancestral practices of the Zapotec people (López Mendoza, 2023:25). UACO classes regarding the final pillar of *Comunalidad* provided an analytical space to understand this complex juxtaposition and offered practical opportunities to organize communal festivities.

The final component of the UACO Bachelor's program in *Comunalidad* concerns the fourth pillar of festivity. Class topics and local literature are organized to construct a theoretical framework around the importance of communal recreation. Within this educational space students analyze the local legends of the community and build an understanding as to why certain spaces are considered sacred. The local cosmovision of the Sierra Norte Zapotec community is examined, which promotes efforts to rescue certain traditions suppressed by colonialism. The UACO class in *fiesta* rescues elements of Zapotec spirituality promoting the performance of certain rituals of gratitude towards Mother Earth and asking permission to the prehispanic deities. In addition to building a theoretical framework to understand localized forms of spirituality and ancestral stories, the UACO organizes an annual *fiesta*, which gives students the opportunity to put this knowledge into practice.

The "*Feria de la Milpa*" is organized and financed entirely by the UACO and is celebrated at the time of the harvest in November. This fair commemorates the Three Sisters agricultural system that has served as the nutritional base for Mesoamerican communities for millenia: the primary crops of corn, beans, and squash. The *Feria de la Milpa* mimics the festivities of the town, as students must demonstrate their socio-political organization, making concrete decisions through assembly and delegating responsibilities to each community member. This integral activity emphasizes the practice of *Comunalidad* as students must collect resources, organize, solicit a space from the municipal authorities, and work in a team to manifest this celebration. Additionally, this celebration convenes citizens throughout Guelatao de Juárez, further contributing to the solidification of the social fabric between the UACO and the community.

Freirian Pedagogies and their Impacts on Communal Education

There is a deep and diverse literature that focuses on deconstructing the traditional classroom, building an educational space that promotes ideas of decolonization and liberation from institutionalized forms of oppression. Although this literature does not specifically address

the lived experiences within the Sierra Norte communities of Oaxaca, educational facilitators and administrators that work in the communal education space have certainly implemented some of the influential pedagogies promoted by prominent authors. One of the authors who innovated new forms of instruction to dismantle our previously held notions of education was Paulo Freire. Freire was born in 1921 and grew up in the northeastern region of Brazil to a middle class family in Recife. The hunger and poverty his family experienced during the global economic crisis provoked by the Great Depression contributed to a monumental transformation in his worldview (Bentley, <https://ptoweb.org/>). This experience of marginalization illuminated how traditional forms of education work to further alienate members of certain social classes. Freire believed that the social condition of widespread hunger, exploitation, and oppression ostracized potential students from the classroom and further stratified society along class lines. The pedagogies that Freire reimagined deviated from the traditionally imposed models of Secretaries of Public Education in nation-states such as México and Brazil, where education was based on a hierarchical system primarily focused on reading and writing in the language imposed by colonizers.

Freire addresses a few fundamental pedagogical concepts that emerged in communal education models throughout the Sierra Norte. In his revolutionary literary work, "*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*," originally published in 1968, Freire provides fundamental critiques to traditional education models, while providing a toolkit to restructure the classroom by making it a place that foments ideas of liberation. One of the central concepts to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is the idea of "banking education." This idea presents essential critiques to the hierarchy of the classroom and makes relevant comparisons to socioeconomic stratification. Freire expands on the concept of "banking education" when he writes,

"Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the "banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. (Freire, 2005: 72)."

What Freire is fundamentally critiquing in his analysis of traditional educational spaces is the lack of involvement by the student body. A teacher is analyzed as a depositor who provides the students with the necessary information for them to memorize, repeat and subsequently regurgitate onto some form of evaluation. Freire believes that this educational model constricts any possibilities for further involvement by the students, limiting their participation to a merely receptive role. This exclusively receptive approach to education consolidates a defined hierarchy within the classroom and stifles students' ability to think critically about their social situation. Communal pedagogies at the UACO seek to increase students' agency within the classroom and facilitate spaces for profound reflection that form critical outlooks on neo-colonial ideologies.

Freire continues throughout this revolutionary literary work to highlight additional pedagogies with the explicit goal of liberating marginalized communities from institutionalized oppression. Another fundamental concept that appears in Freire's work and manifests in the communal educational space is the idea of "dialogical education." This approach attempts to reorder the hierarchy of the classroom, creating equal spaces for students to demonstrate their agency and present reflections which elevate the consciousness of the collective. Freire considers dialogue an integral component of liberating educational methodologies. This dialogue promotes interexchange and a unified reflection that lays the framework for the action necessary to achieve liberation (Freire 2005: 87). Educational facilitators who teach in these dialogical spaces must be able to validate the knowledge of each participant, entering into the reality of their lives and promoting an exchange that spreads collective awareness about a given topic. At the UACO's CUC in Guelatao all of the educational facilitators must live within the community, which cultivates a deep awareness of the realities students experience each day. The communal education classroom adapts various collaborative learning methodologies to the local reality of each place. It promotes meaningful dialogue around the fundamental pillars that

make up *Comunalidad*, which inherently values each participant's lived experience. Freire's pedagogies are not indiscriminately applied to each communal classroom. Yet, it is apparent that certain influential methodologies are selectively adapted to the challenges of a given community.

The communal education methodologies applied at the UACO in Guelatao de Juárez are rooted in action. Freire's literature promotes the idea that action and reflection are the two inseparable mutually-enriching and authentic human capabilities that facilitate conscientization (Blackburn, 2000:7). Freire coins this concept, praxis, and views theory and practice as intrinsically intertwined in the educational process. UACO classes work to construct a theoretical framework around the central concepts of *Comunalidad*, but the primary learning occurs when a citizen actively engages in the processes of *Comunalidad*. The UACO promotes *praxis* by canceling certain classroom activities if there is a scheduled *tequio*, or organizing a collective *fiesta* to celebrate the "Three Sisters" agricultural system. Classes are seen as vehicles for facilitating meaningful dialogue and constructing a theoretical framework, but the educational methodologies as a whole are rooted in the practice of *Comunalidad*. A citizen learns the necessary skills required by the community when they are selected by the communal assembly to perform a *cargo*. They build an understanding of the complex social fabric of the community when they engage in *tequio*. They explore the territory in order to enrich their understanding of its limitations, its soil, and the plant medicines that exist within it. Participants bear the fruits of *Comunalidad* when they organize festivities and invite community members to participate. The emphasis on action, reflection, and collective dialogue that deconstruct hierarchical positions within a "banking system" of education are some of the Freirean pedagogies that are enacted in the UACO classroom.

The UACO adopts pedagogical approaches that provide realistic alternatives to the homogenizing curricula imposed by the nation state. These pedagogies are designed to reinforce local knowledge and cultivate collaborative classroom environments that apply

liberation methodologies to the communal context. Authors María Bertely Busquets, María Elena Martínez Torres and Ruben Muñoz Martínez cite some of these specific activities when they write,

“all of the contributions shared [in their studies of indigenous educational methodology] in addition to the worry of creating a territorial and judicial base which values new educational demands, the necessity to cultivate collaborating and decolonizing methodologies founded in self-ethnography, participatory action research, and the intercultural inductive method” (Bertely, Torres, Martínez, 2015:9).

The decolonizing methodologies mentioned in the quote suggest that communities are reimagining pedagogies and constructing dynamics that emphasize self-ethnography, participatory action research, and student-focused learning. The UACO Bachelor’s program in *Comunalidad* utilizes these specific methodologies in order to restructure hierarchies within education and reinforce local knowledge. The self-ethnography emanates from certain Freirian ideologies that encourage action and then reflection. Students at the UACO live in a community where daily practices are formed around *Comunalidad*. The self-ethnography encourages students to produce written reflections on their communal actions, and validates the student’s lived experience by acknowledging their inherent wisdom on the topic. Participatory action research is an integral part of the UACO curricula, as the last two years of the *Comunalidad* Bachelor’s program are focused on the student’s ability to elaborate research projects that can generate positive impacts in the community. The intercultural inductive method encompasses a diverse range of instructional methodologies, such as problem-based learning, project based learning, and case based learning. This methodology localizes curricula so that it is oriented to the realities of students and focuses on developing regional projects that will influence the community. The following section is based on ethnographic fieldwork during the authors participation in the UACO Bachelor’s program classroom, illuminating how these pedagogies are applied to the context of Guelatao de Juárez.

Ethnographic Findings: An Analysis of Classroom Pedagogies and Dynamics

The *Comunalidad* Bachelor's program in Guelatao de Juárez is structured around the four central tenets that make up *Comunalidad*. These essential concepts consist of territory, organization, work, and festivity, all equally integral principles that guide the lives of community members within Guelatao. The *Comunalidad* Bachelor's program bases its curricular activities, assignments, and participatory action research projects on these four pillars. During fieldwork with the 3rd semester students in the UACO *Comunalidad* Bachelor's Program in Guelatao de Juárez there were 6 students officially enrolled.

The student body in the UACO *Comunalidad* Bachelor's program was composed of students from Guelatao, San Pablo Macuilianguis, Ixtlán de Juárez and San Luís Beltrán. Half of the participants in the program are originally from Guelatao de Juárez, and the majority of the students come from communities within the Sierra Norte that embrace the central tenets of *Comunalidad*. Participants in the program are aware of the complex value system and traditions that make up *Comunalidad* because they have been immersed in the lifeways of their respective communities for the greater part of their lives. For these students, the UACO is a vehicle for systematizing their understanding of communal practices and building a theoretical framework around the primary concepts. In addition, the UACO is a place where students can use the institution's agency to propose projects promoting positive change in their communities, organizing festivities, participating in *tequio*, and engaging in activities that nurture certain ancestral customs of the Zapotec people. One student, Gamaliel Bautista Sanchez, brought a unique vision of *Comunalidad* to the cohort, due to the fact that his hometown, San Luís Beltrán, is an agency within the municipality of the capital city, Oaxaca de Juárez. Gamaliel's proximity to the capital made his experience with *Comunalidad* one of active organized struggle to ensure that political parties did not replace the internal normative systems (*sistemas normativos internos*) that make up the ancestral forms of communal governance. It was apparent that Gamaliel's leadership within his community has helped San Luís Beltrán reject political party

interference in favor of the communal assembly and *cargo* system that make up the organizational pillar of *Comunalidad*. Although the majority of students within the UACO *Comunalidad* program were from Sierra Norte communities, each participant brought a unique lived experience which shaped their relationship to *Comunalidad*.

Another example of the diversity within the *Comunalidad* program were the contributions of student Gilberto Pardo Aquino, who contributed to classes by sharing some of the internal dynamics present in a larger community like Ixtlán de Juárez. Ixtlán de Juárez is the district capital 3 miles from Guelatao and according to 2020 census data, has 8,385 inhabitants (Data México). This population is significantly larger than Guelatao's 657 inhabitants. *Comunalidad* manifests in distinct ways depending on the community and Gilberto was able to provide some examples of Ixtlan's approach. One of the primary differences he mentioned during our organization class was the designation of "diets" (*dietas*) for community members performing important municipal *cargos*. These "diets" consisted of small payments that the communal assembly delegates to those performing their municipal *cargos*, which acts as a way to incentivize community members to serve. The issuing of these payments does not exist in Guelatao de Juárez and sparked engaging conversations around socio-economic transformations within the region that have affected the organizational traditions of the *cargo* system. The diversity of opinions and lived experiences within the *Comunalidad* program attest to the dynamic nature of communal practices, which are modified due to the geography, the population, migration rates, and the citizens that make up a community.

UACO *Comunalidad* classes in the Bachelor's program occur on a bi-weekly basis with courses beginning Friday afternoon and ending in the late afternoon on Saturday. The schedule is organized in this way in order to provide ample time for students to complete their familial, laborial, and communal obligations. The educational facilitators at the CUC in Guelatao are sensitive to the socioeconomic realities of the region and comprehend how communal work can occupy a large amount of a citizen's time. This mutual understanding is due also to the fact that

the educational facilitators at Guelatao's CUC live within the community and have completed various *cargos* with the municipality. Therefore, course scheduling is designed to meet the necessary requirements put forth by the Public Education Secretary (*SEP*), while also respecting the regional socioeconomic realities. Throughout fieldwork in Guelatao, it became increasingly apparent that local celebrations, *tequios*, *compartencias* (a concept of sharing ideas, knowledge, and experience with one another), and educational trips to different communities around the state were valued over time in a physical classroom space.

An example of this tendency occurred when students in the Master's and Bachelor's programs in the Guelatao CUC were convened to participate in a Traditional Medicine Fair in Teotitlán de Flores Magón and the Mazatec community, Huautla de Jiménez, both towns in the northeast Cañada region of Oaxaca. The UACO CUC in Guelatao was convened to attend a Traditional Medicine Fair in order to facilitate a *compartencia* where the UACO would provide local leaders strategic guidance on how to strengthen their communal assemblies. In addition, UACO students and educational facilitators received workshops on traditional medicine to cultivate a deeper appreciation for ancestral medicinal practices and learn more about the healing elements of the local ecology. Teotitlán de Flores Magón and Huautla de Jiménez are governed by a political party system in direct contrast to the municipality of Guelatao which is run by internal normative systems. The UACO's participation in this conference gave students the opportunity to share their lived communal experience while also being enriched by the Mazatec medicinal traditions. These dynamic exchanges exhibit how the UACO is more than simply an educational institution. It periodically enacts the role of a communal political organization, which builds coalitions and strengthens communal assembly processes throughout Oaxaca.

Photo 1: Offering at the Traditional Medicine Fair



*A Mazatec offering to Mother Earth during the Traditional Medicine Fair
Photograph: Dylan Dornfeld, August 6th, 2022.*

These excursions to different communities around the state of Oaxaca to facilitate exchange with academic and civil society members provide students with the opportunity to diversify their understanding of *Comunalidad*. The experiences are centered around active student participation with educational facilitators encouraging students to share their lived experience in open forum spaces. Local intellectual and president of the UACO, Jaime Martínez Luna, argues that these types of exchanges constitute one of the foundational goals of communal education. Martínez Luna refers to this phenomenon when he writes, “The fundamental principle is to make accessible the exercise of knowledge. To make this a reality is labor for everyone, the so-called universities, but also construction workers, the teacher’s union, agricultural workers, and finally, everyone who inhabits this natural world” (Martínez Luna, 2015: 227). What occurred at the Traditional Medicine Fair was an attempt to deconstruct what Martínez Luna calls, “*educación enclaustrada*” (enclosed education) where universities isolate themselves from the community, turning into elitist spaces for knowledge accumulation. The UACO inherently recognizes the capacities of every human to facilitate dialogue that results in a symbiotic knowledge exchange. In addition, these *compartencias* facilitate a network of civil society members and educational facilitators who look to foment positive changes in the region and an embrace of Oaxaca’s plurality. The Traditional Medicine Fair was the ultimate combination of the theoretical frameworks constructed in UACO classrooms and the practice of *Comunalidad*. The fair gathered UACO students to travel to a different region and immerse themselves in the ancestral practices of the Mazatec community. This dynamic further contributes to the concept that teachers are not the principal educational figures, and therefore should not solely dictate what students must know (Martínez Luna, 2015: 227). Rather, at the UACO, educational facilitators help provide opportunities for students to explore the tremendous cultural diversity of their state and be inspired by the people who make up a collective ancestral knowledge.

Photo 2: Traditional Medicine Banner



Banner for the Traditional Medicine Fair
Photograph: Dylan Dornfeld, August 6th, 2022.

Classroom Spaces at the UACO

Classrooms at the UACO are ever-evolving spaces that take place in buildings that represent Guelatao's commitment to resistance, autonomy, and collective education. The Cine Too theater was inaugurated on December 17th, 2016, with the mission to provide community members with access to independent films and high quality cinema. This unique space in the region was entirely organized and constructed by community members and is currently the only movie theater in the Sierra Norte. With a consistent schedule of independent cinema highlighting relevant themes of resistance in the region, Cine Too forms an integral part of communal educational spaces. Titles that are screened in Cine Too include *Tio Yim*, a locally produced documentary covering the life achievements and community activism of Jaime Martínez Luna, and *Gente de Mar y Viento*, a documentary that highlights displacements of indigenous peoples through the territorial intrusions provoked by wind energy power plants in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Cortés, 2017). The UACO uses the Cine Too for its classes because it is a communal space committed to promoting an informed and conscientious populace. Another communal area that was converted into a classroom during our Territory classes was the Pemex Gasolinera de Bienestar.

The *Gasolinera de Bienestar* is a pilot project for *Petróleos Mexicanos* (PEMEX) in which community members in the municipality of Guelatao formed a cooperative that sells PEMEX fuel at accessible prices to compete with private oil companies such as Chevron, Shell, and British Petroleum (Hernandez, 2022). The *Gasolinera de Bienestar* served as an ideal space for territory classes because it contained a conference room with access to a television for projecting powerpoint slides. UACO classrooms are ambulant and shift locations depending on the needs of knowledge facilitators, students, or administrators. The fluid nature of classroom environments adds to one of the fundamental proposals of the UACO which is to take students outside the walls of a traditional schooling facility, converting the community into the educational space.

In the case of territory classes, the educational facilitator, Melquiades Cortés Pérez, a cartographer originally from Guelatao with extensive experience working on local geography research projects within the Sierra Norte, often required a digital screen to present his powerpoints. This particular pedagogical tool was not common in other classrooms and stifled the possibility to facilitate more interactions within the community. Yet, Melquiades's work required presenting geographic models and territorial limitations which were aided by visual presentations. During fieldwork in Guelatao, one of the courses students were taking in the territory pillar was the historic processes of communal territory. Territory classes took place in the Cine Too theater, the Pemex Gasolinera de Bienestar, and the Cine Too café. During action participatory research observations at the UACO, various themes emerged in the study of communal territory.

Territory Class: Historic Processes of Communal Territory

Territory is that initial link that connects a people to their common shared place. It is a tangible connection that inspires essential collective narratives among members of the community. Territory represents an inextricable link between humans and the earth that provides for our sustenance. To be able to understand the significance of territory within the UACO's Comunalidad Bachelor's program, one must grasp that deep connections are formed with the territory through learning to embrace its many lessons. The teachings of territory demonstrate that its vitality is necessary to strengthen life, its communal ownership is integral to extract solely what is necessary to be healthy, exist, and enjoy its many fruits (Martínez Luna, 2015, 33).

During fieldwork educational facilitators and students emphasized that *Comunalidad* is not a concept, or a theory, but a well calculated approach to life that organizes society through deeply rooted values of service to the collective good. To be part of a community is to share a territory that is integral to the production of identity and belonging. Guelatao uses a communal

land sharing system called “*tenencia comunal*”, which is essential to preserving municipal environmental resource management programs, protecting communities from corporate or governmental intrusions, and facilitating traditional agricultural methods that actively replenish the land's fertile soils. According to the 2020 census conducted by the *Instituto de Estadística y Geografía* (INEGI), Guelatao de Juárez encompasses a rather small communal plot of land with 4.507km² of territory and a population of 657 (Data México). Guelatao de Juárez is a municipality that belongs to the district of its northern neighbor, Ixtlán de Juárez. For many years these two communities have been engaged in agrarian conflicts and territorial disputes that have occasionally escalated into violence. Territory classes at the UACO examined certain conflicts with Guelatao's neighbor, Ixtlán de Juárez, in an objective manner that focused on resource distribution. During fieldwork in Guelatao de Juárez there was an ongoing territorial dispute being adjudicated in the state judicial system between the two communities in an attempt to peacefully settle what Guelatao interpreted as an extrajudicial seizure of land by Ixtlán's authorities. The UACO classroom creates space for dialogue and analysis of the territorial issues affecting the population. Much of these territorial disputes are related to land use and essential resources for creating new communal development projects.

The territory course proposes to educate students on topics such as climate change, communal land distribution, and local ecological resource management. Melquiades Cortés Pérez presented the geographical limitations of Guelatao's territory through digital modeling in an attempt to inspire students to propose and develop collective projects that could bring about sustainable growth initiatives. One of the essential elements of this territory course was to cultivate an understanding of the geography of the community in order to prepare students to propose impactful projects. During one class, Melquiades posed a question to students on how to designate an ideal place for a communal dump. This specific activity sparked the interests of students living in Guelatao, because it is directly applicable to their lived experience. This type of fundamental knowledge of the territory is integral to proposing successful initiatives within the

communal assembly that value the local ecology and common good of the community. In addition, when Melquiades posed the question to the students, the educational facilitator grants students agency in the learning process, ensuring that the curriculum is specifically tailored to the needs of the community.

A key component of UACO curricula involves encouraging student reflection on their lived experience. All of the students have grown up in places rooted in the central tenets of *Comunalidad* and are inherently conscious of its principles. Opening up space for discussing communal trash separation prompted local student, Habid Odoret Andrés Pérez, to share his experience as a *topil*, or a communal public safety officer. One of the *topile*'s many responsibilities is managing the trash in the community and ensuring that all of the waste generated is either recycled or transported to the communal landfill. Habid reflected on his different obligations as *topil*. He proudly told other students about his responsibilities to make announcements via the municipal building speaker in order to remind community members to wash and separate their recyclables. *Topiles* are responsible for picking up citizen's trash every fifteen days and communicating the times for citizens to bring their waste outside. Creating a classroom environment that encourages profound reflection on students' lived realities and their communal obligations makes for a uniquely enriching exchange that is typical at the UACO. Another theme that appeared in territory classroom observations concerns the historic struggle for communal management of forest resources.

The history of forest management in the region is one that is intrinsically tied to regional ethno-political organization and self determination. In the territory classroom, Melquiades covered relevant history that actively influenced the coalition of Sierra Norte communities to expel a state-run paper company and consolidate communal forestry management municipal bodies. Melquiades highlighted the details behind the state government's twenty-five year concession granted to the company, *Fábricas de Papel Tuxtepec (FAPATUX)* in 1956, which gave the company the right to log the communal forests of Ixtlán for harvesting and paper

production (Ganz, Burkle: 2008, 35). The communal mobilization that ensued during the late 1970s, as FAPATUX attempted to renew its forestry concession with the state government, was monumentally important to the region. This topic enabled Melquiades to introduce a student in the role of knowledge facilitator. Juan Hernández Velasco, a student from San Pablo Macuilianguis, is a carpenter whose livelihood depends on how he navigates communal resource management bodies in order to gain access to the raw material with which he needs to work. Juan actively contributed to constructing a deeper understanding of the historical movements that shaped communal resource management bodies. As facilitator, Melquiades questioned Juan's personal experience with forestry authorities. In the UACO territory course, students built connections between this historical regional mobilization, which canceled the forestry concession to FAPATUX in the 1980's, granting communities autonomy over their environmental resources .

The historical processes of communal territory class also made an important comparison between two types of forestry management: "*aprovechamiento*" (taking advantage of), and forest "*explotación*" (exploitation). *Aprovechamiento* was conceptualized in the UACO classroom as an inherently communal practice, responding directly to the *Unidades de Aprovechamiento Forestal* (Units of Forestry Extraction), the local resource management organization in Guelatao. In contrast, the term *explotación* is framed as a neocolonial term, part of an old paradigm in which transnational corporations and state-run enterprises indiscriminately exploited the forest's resources, leaving behind devastated environmental landscapes. This comparison was made repeatedly in the territory courses at the UACO. These local governing bodies that monitor forestry *aprovechamiento* consider how forests are fundamental for capturing carbon in the battle against global climate change. Students fiercely defended their community's methods of *aprovechamiento*, highlighting how communal resource organizations implement policies that avoid intense extraction, allowing the natural landscape sufficient time to

replenish the ecosystem. The UACO contributes to forming knowledgeable citizens, educated in local history, who are uniquely prepared to defend their territory against foreign incursion.

During territory classes there were no specific activities that dealt with strategies to defend communal territory, yet it was apparent in discussions with students and educational facilitators that the underlying importance of this curriculum is rooted in territory defense. A community with a deeper understanding of its territorial history and geographic limitations is better prepared to defend itself when external actors such as multinational corporations, or neighboring communities come vying for its resources. In this course, territory is not only defined by the limits established by cartographers, but it is also rooted in the local communal legends which contribute to mystical conceptualizations of the landscape. Territory is an integral part of a collective cosmovision that finds sacred deities and stories within nature. Although the topics addressed in the course presented many contrasts to more conventional educational spaces, the pedagogical strategies that Melquiades implemented during his territory course were at times comparable to that of a traditional classroom.

The historical process of communal territory contained visual powerpoint displays to aid in comprehension of geographic models, which often required hierarchical direct instruction from the educational facilitator. Much of the visual aids in the course content were centered around complex digital models that demonstrated territorial divisions divided into agrarian nuclei, municipalities, and regions. INEGI geography software installed on Melquiades's computer gave students access to geographic statistical measures in communities throughout the state. Although this information was certainly interesting and engaged some learners, students expressed that at times the course content did not feel applicable to the lived realities of community members. The territory course's dependency on technology restricted the class's ability to interact with the citizenry in communal spaces. While his class did provide ample space for students to share their lived experience, the class would occasionally drift into geographic modeling and technicalities that students struggled to comprehend or care about.

The UACO's program in *Comunalidad* implores knowledge facilitators to deconstruct the classroom, transforming a predominately hierarchical educational space into spaces of innovative and collaborative dialogues. This approach can present difficulties for many educators who have studied their entire academic careers in more conventional academic spaces. Although territorial classes did rely on formal powerpoint presentations and direct instruction, the course content certainly reinforced the collective identity in Guelatao. Students were encouraged to reimagine new ecological communal projects that would bring benefit to their communities. This course deepened students' understanding of important historical triumphs, defending communal forests from foreign exploitation, contributing to one of the university's main goals of forming active communal leaders who are committed to preserving local resources in the future.

Organization Class: Communal Political Exercise

Classes in the organization pillar of *Comunalidad* focus on constructing a strong framework of knowledge surrounding the governing bodies of the community. These governing bodies include the communal assembly, the highest decision-making authority in the community. The organizational pillar also facilitates knowledge of the *cargo* system, and essential committees that together form Guelatao's governmental nucleus. For this fundamental pillar in *Comunalidad*, UACO students were taking the course, Communal Political Exercise (*Ejercicio Político de lo Comunal*) which was imparted by knowledge facilitator, Nadia Massiel Delgado González. The course content centered around the distribution of public labor through the *escalafón de cargos* (the public labor scale). Nadia additionally covered important topics such as the functions of a communal assembly, and presented participatory action research methodologies to orient students on how to begin thinking about the projects they will be developing during the last two years of the Bachelor's program. These final projects are

conceptualized as the practical application of all the communal knowledge that students have learned in the first two years of the program.

The Communal Political Exercise course is a methodologies course that is designed to provide students with the adequate tools to create an effective research project in their communities. The Bachelor's program in *Comunalidad* is divided into two parts. The first two years concentrate on constructing a theoretical framework around *Comunalidad*, attempting to build a base of relevant communal literature that contributes to a deeper understanding of the four central tenets. Students are encouraged to read the literary works of indigenous intellectuals such as Jaime Martínez Luna and Floriberto Díaz. This conceptual literary base then provides students with the tools to produce written reflection on their unique lived experience with *Comunalidad*. In the following two years of the Bachelor's program, students are expected to elaborate a central research project, or manifestation of their accumulated knowledge. This project must be completed in order to graduate from the UACO. They can range from audiovisual representations of *Comunalidad*, to establishing a cooperative in the community, or writing a research project on the inner functionings of the communal assembly. Communal Political Exercise dedicated most of class time to exposing students to research methodologies, such as the participatory action research model, and presenting innovative pedagogical activities that reinforced communal knowledge.

Some of the innovative pedagogies that emphasize decolonization and reinforce the local ancestral knowledge, include a compelling educational strategy that emerged during the Communal Political Exercise course. Knowledge facilitators at the UACO implemented the *auto-etnografía* or self-interview pedagogical exercise in order to elicit students' reflections. During the Communal Political Exercise course, educational facilitator, Nadia Massiel Delgado González, used this exercise to aid students who were struggling to write down their research interests. The self-interview is a way to reflect and learn about the depth of one's understanding of *Comunalidad*. It is a tactic that consciously reinforces local knowledge and facilitates a space

for students who tend to struggle with written assignments. The effectiveness of this exercise to engage students in their research was apparent in the classroom. Students who previously struggled to answer certain questions about their research suddenly became active in the classroom because their unique lived experience had been validated. Self interviews attempt to deconstruct traditional anthropological patterns of outsider participant-observation. Historically, most of the literature written on Guelatao de Juárez was produced by people external to the community. Students are certainly encouraged to seek out this literature to enhance their theoretical framework of communal life, but the UACO focuses on challenging students to be the anthropologists of their own communities. The idea behind pedagogical exercises such as the self-interview is to empower new local authors to share their concepts of *Comunalidad*.

Students in the Communal Political Exercise course were organizing research projects on a wide range of subjects. Some of the research topics included an investigation into the role of *mayordomos* (the people in charge of festivities in a given community throughout the year) in San Francisco Lachigoló, and an examination of the *escalafón de cargos* (public labor scale) in Guelatao. In class, students presented their interviews with *mayordomos*, committee members, and municipal workers. Nadia then encouraged students to synthesize these interviews into relevant themes that students would analyze in class discussions. These *compartencias* during class were characterized by an enriching exchange whereby students would contribute ideas to help their colleagues further develop their research projects. Although, one of the challenges that Nadia faced in facilitating this methodologies course was ensuring that profound analytical discussion in class eventually turned into concrete written reflection.

During class, Nadia would strategically address the fact that many students did not complete their assigned written reflections. UACO educational facilitators commonly deal with this dilemma by organizing activities that aid in developing writing and reading skills. Classroom space is organized for students to collectively support one another in the development of their research projects. One example of this phenomenon is when student, Habid Odoret Andrés

Pérez, presented his interview questions to the class. Habid's research project focused on the *escalafón de cargos* in Guelatao de Juárez and he was preparing to interview members of the municipal government to investigate the topic. His presentation of his preliminary interview questions sparked a collective brainstorming session in which fellow students helped him to reformulate certain phrases and expressed ideas for additional inquiries that would help him better achieve his research goals. This activity, along with the guidance of the knowledge facilitator, led students to analyze the responsibilities of different positions within the cargo systems in their communities. We discussed *cargos* such as the *Regidor de Educación*, whose primary responsibilities in Guelatao include organizing the public services provided by the health clinic, sporting events, and trash separation. We also analyzed the different functions of the *Regidor de Obras*, who is responsible for infrastructure projects in the community, the adequate management of communal sewage, and cleaning the communal water filtration system that is responsible for separating potable water and water destined for agricultural use. These types of exchanges are common in the UACO classroom which facilitates a deeper understanding of the local systems that foster a comprehensive communal governance. Communal Political Exercise additionally served as a space for reflection on how certain social dynamics surrounding *cargos* have evolved over time.

The ways in which *cargos* are performed in Guelatao de Juárez have transformed to adapt to prominent socio-economic phenomena such as outmigration from the community. Migratory patterns have shifted in the Sierra Norte region throughout the past decades. What was once cyclical migration has now turned into a more permanent migratory pattern, which depletes communities of an active, working population. These demographic shifts have prompted communities to create new social conventions to organize territorial resource management bodies, *tequios*, and municipal governance (Robson, Berkes, 2011: 179). There is no specific quantitative data related to migratory patterns within Guelatao, yet scholars have studied some regional effects on communal institutions. James Robson and Fikret Birkes

provide context through their study of migratory patterns in two predominantly agricultural communities within the Ixtlán de Juárez district of the Sierra Norte. The municipalities, San Juan Evangelista Analco with a population of 407 inhabitants and Santiago Comaltepec with a population of 1,157 inhabitants, shape the lens through which we can analyze migratory patterns in the region (Data México). During the time of the study in 2011, 52% of the population in Santiago Comaltepec lived outside the community, with 44% of migrants residing in the United States and 56% living in other places within México. In the case of Analco, 43% of citizens were living outside of the community, with 43% of migrants residing in the United States and 57% in México. (Robson, Berkes, 2011: 182). Although this data is not specific to Guelatao, it provides a sample size of migratory phenomena within the Sierra Norte region. This type of population loss strains communal organization bodies and in the case of Analco, requires some community members to perform more than one *cargo* at a time (Robson, Berkes, 2011: 183). Another institutional response to migration patterns has been to allow citizens living outside the community to provide monetary compensation for non-participation in *cargos* and *tequios*.

The monetization of the *cargo* system was a prevalent topic in the UACO classroom; students often reflected on how this socio-economic phenomenon has the potential to affect communal life. In the past, migrants living abroad or in other parts of México were expected to return home to serve their communities if they were nominated for a *cargo* by the communal assembly. Yet, as migration patterns become more permanent, transnational hometown associations have been created to strengthen communal ties beyond the border, providing economic stimulus to fund infrastructure projects and festivities. Manifestations of these transnational ties are predominant in Zapotec and Mixtec migrant communities within the United States. Some of the public expressions of communal transnationalism within the United States include the construction of civic-political organizations, public celebrations of important local festivities, the organization of basketball tournaments, and regular mass celebration of the prominent Oaxaca music and dance festival, *Guelaguetza* (Fox, Rivera-Salgado, 2004: 105).

Out-migration rates and large numbers of community members living outside the territory has forced municipalities to adapt the organizational pillar of *Comunalidad*. The monetization of the *cargo* and *tequio* system provides non-resident citizens with the ability to finance projects within the community, yet it also presents the possibility of negatively impacting communal institutions.

One of the principal changes occurring in Guelatao, in response to the transnational realities provoked by out-migration, is that the municipality has enabled citizens to pay other community members to complete their *cargos*. This payment substitutes the hard physical labor, time, and energy that citizens must dedicate to their *cargos*. Communal Political Exercise invited open analysis of these evolving socioeconomic dynamics in Guelatao. Students would discuss the merits of a community member who completed the work required of a *cargo*, compared to payments offered by other citizens. A theme that emerged from these dialogues is the central concept of “prestige” and how citizens perceived success in Guelatao de Juárez.

Social concepts of success in Guelatao are constructed through a complex value system that represents a distinct difference from how success is measured in more individualistic, capitalist societies. Value and recognition are interwoven into a citizen’s willingness to serve their community. When a citizen actively assumes their responsibility by performing *cargos* and voluntarily offers their work in the form of a *tequio*, they accumulate communal prestige. Benjamín Maldonado Alvarado provides a succinct definition of communal prestige when he states, “On the individual level, the fundamental factor of differentiation is prestige, which is won through generosity and the quality of services provided to the community in the exercise of power, festivity, and work” (Maldonado Alvarado, 2010: 40). This model of prestige differs from the value system of individualistic and capitalist societies, where successful people are considered those who accumulate tremendous amounts of wealth and goods through their efforts. Communal values of success center around the quality of a citizen’s participation in the organizational bodies of internal governance and their willingness to volunteer their work through *tequio*. Prestige is manifested in the UACO classroom by engaging in dialogue where

students clearly demonstrated their dissatisfaction with the current practice of allowing citizens to pay for others to perform their *cargo*. They conceptualized this monetary interference in traditional *cargo* systems as a dangerous reorientation of a citizen's communal obligations. Students asserted that completing *cargos* and *tequios* is a way of gaining professional experience within the organizational bodies of *Comunalidad*. If a citizen can simply avoid engaging in the *escalafón de cargos* by offering monetary compensation, it could provoke the detrimental possibility of disintegrating certain aspects of the organizational pillar of *Comunalidad*. These types of enriching dialogues were a constant in Communal Political Exercises, and Nadia strategically navigated these complex topics by allowing students sufficient time to lead conversations and reflect on their lived experience.

Tequio Class: Forms of Communal Work

The Bachelor's program in *Comunalidad* in Guelatao constructs curricular activities for the *tequio* pillar of *Comunalidad* that analyze the collective work, reciprocity, and mutual support that make up the social fabric of a thriving community. *Tequio* is one of the cornerstones of communal life. It represents the coming together of citizens to contribute collectively to the improvement of their community. *Tequios* can take many forms in Guelatao de Juárez: from reforestation projects on nearby hillsides, cleaning up the local hiking trails for ecotourism, maintaining the water filtration system, or repairing potholes on the highway. During fieldwork, UACO students at Guelatao's CUC were taking the class, *Formas del Trabajo Comunal* (Forms of Communal Work), which provided opportunities for the analysis of local literature surrounding *tequio*, and opened avenues to compare and contrast approaches to *tequio* in other Oaxacan cultures.

Forms of Communal work was led by knowledge facilitator, Jenny Pacheco García, who has extensive practical experience working in *cargos* of influence in the municipality such as *Regidora de Hacienda*. At the time of study, Jenny was additionally serving on the *Cuerpo*

Consultor de Guelatao, which acts as a consulting body for project proposals and citizens completing their *cargos*. Jenny is originally from Guelatao and has lived in the community for most of her life. Her teaching style differed from that of her colleagues in that she recognized that it was difficult to expect most UACO students to complete all of the assigned readings due to communal life's many obligations. Jenny opted to make classroom space a place for collective reading and analysis of local literary works, which led to many enriching discussions and facilitated cultural comparisons.

Conceptualizations of *tequio* are different, depending on each community's unique approach to practicing *Comunalidad*. Our class initially read an article from one of the conceptual architects of *Comunalidad* from the Sierra Mixe, Floriberto Díaz. The class collectively read "*Tierra, Comunalidad y Tequio*", a text written by Díaz which illuminates the Mixe vision of collective work, opening opportunities to compare and contrast with Guelatao's understanding of *tequio*. Díaz's work conceptualizes the *tequio* as reciprocal help that occurs on a familiar and communal level. Such acts include soliciting a community member's help to sow seeds on a familial plot of land, or aid in the construction of a home, with the implicit understanding that this favor will be returned over time. The Mixe conceptualization of *tequio* includes different forms of *compartencia*, like inviting musical bands from other communities for artistic exchange, and putting one's intellectual prowess on display for community service (Díaz, 2021: 16). After the class finished reading Díaz's text, an important discussion emerged comparing the Mixe vision of *tequio* with Guelatao's concept of *gozona*. *Gozona* is this reciprocal support that occurs throughout Guelatao whereby favors are exchanged with fellow citizens with the expectation that they will eventually be paid back in the future. Students compared the Mixe vision of *tequio* with *gozona*, engaging in a dialogue which compared the distinct approach of Mixe communities with the primarily Zapotec vision of *tequio* that predominates in Guelatao de Juárez. The collective analysis seems to suggest that Mixes have a broader conceptualization of *tequio*, which includes the communal value systems that

emphasize mutual support and reciprocity. *Tequio* in Guelatao is more specifically defined as the labor that a citizen gives to the community. These cultural comparisons provided space for students to appreciate the breadth of *Comunalidad* and analyze its manifestations in distinct cultures around Oaxaca. The literature that Jenny shared in her Forms of Communal Work class additionally facilitated discussions that compared communal forms of governance to that of nation-state models.

In our collective analysis of *tequio* and its significance in communal life, students compared *Comunalidad* with the nation state governance model in México. Some of the distinctions that were manifested in these conversations focused on the tremendous economic sacrifice of citizens and their families once they are assigned a *cargo*. *Cargos* can certainly be economic burdens on citizens and their families, occupying precious time that could be dedicated to income-generating activities. There is a political ritual of summoning a citizen to complete their *cargo*. Municipal government officials travel to the citizen's home to ask for the family's permission. When one of the family's primary income generators is asked to dedicate time and energy exclusively to the community, it is a family matter because such a task can cause financial stress. This admission of how public service can cause financial hardship stands in stark contrast to the pervasive corruption that enriches individuals in Mexican politics. Students highlighted how once a citizen enters into a position of power in México, they commonly use their political influence to enrich themselves and their families. UACO students juxtaposed the economic sacrifice required of communal public servants in the *cargo* system with the Mexican political party model, which reeks of corruption. This exchange did not romanticize communal forms of governance or assert that the *Comunalidad* model is entirely absent of corruption, but it revealed how students critically examined the nation state model and appreciated their own local forms of organization. In highlighting the moral obligations that citizens owe to the well-being of their community, the Forms of Communal Work classroom creates a space where students reinforce the inherent values of communal life.

The Forms of Communal Work curriculum followed a common curricular model which began with a collective reading, then transitioned into open space for literary analysis and dialogue about personal lived experiences. This was the only class at the UACO that consistently began with communal literature. Students would begin reading pages and once they finished, pass the pages on to the next student in order to continue reading. One of the excerpts that knowledge facilitator, Jenny Pacheco García, pulled from Jaime Martínez Luna's book, "*Aquí el que manda es el pueblo*", (Here, the people are in charge) spoke about the importance of accumulating prestige in a communal context. The text highlighted how *cargos* are a way to gauge a citizen's aptitude in communal work. Students surely had been previously exposed to Luna and Díaz's literature from other UACO courses, as these two indigenous authors in their respective communities constructed the conceptual base for understanding *Comunalidad*. Our conversation transitioned to highlighting what occurs when a community member performs well in a *cargo*. These citizens are surely to be promoted to a position of greater authority the next time they are called upon, and thus accumulate more prestige within the community. If a citizen fails to demonstrate a successful body of work or was problematic during their *cargo*, the communal assembly will likely select that person for a *cargo* of less importance in the future. "*Aquí el que manda es el pueblo*" additionally presents Luna's reflections about his childhood in interpretations of communal life. *Comunalidad* is lived and observed from the time a child develops consciousness. This reflection prompted an enriching dialogue in which students shared their childhood experiences within *Comunalidad*, exchanging stories about their first *cargos* and comparing their lived experience in their respective communities.

Comunalidad is something that is interpreted through the lens of a family's participation in communal activities. A young person's first *cargo* becomes a type of experiential schooling, in which they bond with other citizens, building an understanding of how a community functions, and assume responsibility for the well-being of the populace. *Comunalidad* student, Juan

Hernández Velasco, originally from the town San Pablo Macuilianguis in the Sierra Norte region, shared about the excitement of performing his first *cargo*. As a young child he had watched his father complete his *cargos* and felt honored to finally be able to contribute to his community. When he was 20 years-old he was summoned by the municipality to complete the cargo of *secretario municipal* (municipal secretary). Juan was highly sought after for this cargo because of his advanced reading and writing skills. While analyzing the impact of this first *cargo* on his life, he reflected on the pride associated with completing his cargo. Juan's gratification is directly linked to receiving a positive evaluation from a communal assembly of his peers and fellow citizens, accumulating prestige within his community.

Another student, Gamaliel Bautista Sánchez is from San Luís Beltrán, an urban community approximately 6 kilometers outside of downtown Oaxaca City. His experience differs from that of his *compañeros* because he has grown up in a community near the capital. Despite what he determines to be intrusions of political parties and attempts by the Oaxacan government to interfere with community internal affairs, San Luis Beltrán has maintained internal normative systems as its organizational structure and is regarded as a model for other urban municipalities aspiring to shift to communal models of governance. Forms of Communal Work provided Gamaliel with a space to reflect and systematize his lived communal experience. He began his first *cargo* as a *topil* at the age of 16. This is when Gamaliel first learned how to ride a bike to be able to survey the perimeter of the community. Gamaliel also spoke of the joy of sharing this communal work experience with other citizens of his age. For Gamaliel, communal work represented a place where he formed connections with other citizens, solidifying friendships and building a sense of comradery through a collective commitment to the well-being of the community.

These types of *compartencias* were commonplace in the Forms of Communal Work course. The knowledge facilitator encouraged these exchanges, as they met one of the overall curricular goals of systematizing students' lived communal experiences. Another student from a

neighboring community, Ixtlán de Juárez, Gilberto Pardo Aquino, participated by sharing his experience in his first *cargo* and comparing Ixtlán's approach to public work in the Guelatao system. With a larger population than most communities in the region, and more economic stimulus, Ixtlán's municipality incentivizes citizens to complete their communal work by offering small stipends, or "*dietas*", for completing certain *cargos*. The distribution of *dietas* is highly dependent on the *cargo*. Certain "lower-level" *cargos* on the public labor scale such as *Topil* and *Mayor* do not receive monetary compensation, but *Secretarios*, *Regidores*, and municipal presidents receive small payments from the community in exchange for their service. This practice differed greatly from how Guelatao conducts its *cargo* system. Facilitating these types of exchanges are invaluable to deepening students' understanding of *Comunalidad*. Activities that facilitate comparisons of how other communities practice *Comunalidad* construct a profound conceptual framework of communal life that prepares students to be active agents of change in their respective communities.

Festivity Class: Communal Recreation

The final course in the *Comunalidad* Bachelors program is structured around the pillar of festivity. The *fiesta* is essential in bringing together citizens to celebrate and reinforce communal identity. It is when all the hard work throughout the year is rewarded with celebration, food, music, mezcal, and dance. The festivity requires an extraordinary amount of coordination, logistics, and service to ensure that all those who attend are provided for. During fieldwork, third semester students were engaged in the course, *Recreación Comunitaria*, (Communal Recreation) for this final pillar of *Comunalidad*. The course was imparted by knowledge facilitator, Freddy Fortino Jiménez Tolentino, who is originally from Nejapa de Madero in the Yautepec district of Oaxaca's Sierra Sur region. Communal Recreation was the only course that actively converted outdoor spaces of Guelatao into classrooms, providing ample opportunities to incorporate autochthonous cosmovisions of nature into curricular activities.

The first Communal Recreation class consisted of walking around the community and identifying recreational landmarks. Once these places were identified, students were encouraged to share their significance. We paused to collectively analyze the mystical value of spiritual places like *la peña* (the rock) and *la laguna* (the lagoon). *La Peña* is slightly north of the lagoon and sits on a nearby hillside where a recent pathway was constructed for those who want to take a stroll around the community. The lagoon is the natural centerpiece of Guelatao, providing a certain serenity and tranquility to the surrounding environment. The name of the community originates in the Zapotec word “*Yelato*” whereby *Yela* means “lagoon” and *too* is a diminutive (Delgado González, 2023: 13). It is common for citizens to refer to this tranquil natural space as the delightful lagoon. The lagoon primarily constitutes an area for families to take a stroll or community members to convene for a coffee. Its serene nature gives a tranquil energy to the community and is fundamental to the identity of Guelatao. Our visit to these sacred landmarks prompted an exchange about finding divinity within the natural world. Freddy asked probing questions to elicit students' reflections on why community members will not touch the rock or swim in the lagoon. These questions provoked students to construct their own unique conceptual frameworks of divinity. Students created their own notions of sacred space and explained how their ancestral cosmovisions are intrinsically intertwined with the ways they perceive nature. These types of dialogues were facilitated with the utmost respect for each students' individual religious beliefs. This was a space to discuss the syncretic nature of festivity.. Some students identified more with Catholicism, while others found greater spiritual meaning in beliefs and practices associated with the ancestral Zapotec natural deities. Once we reached the amphitheater on the shoreside of the lagoon, Freddy brought out his laptop and began a formal class presentation with visual aids. Students were encouraged to define the term “recreation” and consider some of the benefits of healthy recreation in their community. They recognized the need to foment recreational spaces in order to improve economic conditions, generate employment, encourage cultural expression, and promote athletics within

the community. Freddy incorporated pedagogical tools such as Powerpoint presentations with excerpts from relevant literature to aid in building a conceptual framework for students' perspectives on recreation.

Photo 3: Festivity Class



UACO student presents his understanding of the word cosmovision in a Festivity class
Photograph: UACO Comunalidad Student, August 20th, 2022.

The UACO is not a separate entity from the community, rather it is an integral part of communal activities, where it participates in *tequios* and organizes events that contribute to preserving local traditions. One of the primary themes of Communal Recreation class focused on how festivities can be vehicles for generating knowledge. The collective organization of Guelatao's patron saint festival celebrating *San Pablo Apostol* on January 25th demands a great

deal of practical knowledge to coordinate the logistics and ensure that all attendees are accounted for. The UACO additionally organizes its own communal events, including the *feria de la milpa*, which praises the three sisters agricultural system that has sustained Mesoamerican communities for millennia. These types of festivities provide a space for students to improve their organizational abilities, coordinate with their classmates, and demonstrate how they practice *Comunalidad*. The communal recreation classroom reinforced the importance of these cultural events, promoting healthy habits, and facilitating experiential learning through organization.

A relevant comparison that came up in our Communal Recreation course concerned the differences between two epistemologies: *el conocimiento* (knowledge) and *el saber* (wisdom). The conceptual framework of these two ideas is crucial to understanding the objectives of the UACO to effectively systematize local knowledge. In our course, the knowledge facilitator gave a visual presentation in order to explain these two ideas and facilitate an exchange about their differences. Wisdom was categorized as predominantly intrinsic knowledge that evolves throughout childhood. This wisdom is cultivated through observing the communal environment and mimicking the behaviors of others. Knowledge was characterized as something that can be acquired through academic pursuit, but is not necessarily applicable to the communal reality. This comparison highlights an essential component of communal education, which is to value the inherent wisdom present in the community while constructing curricula that is entirely relevant to each locale. Most of the students possess innate knowledge of *Comunalidad* from the accumulated wisdom of growing up in a community. Communal Recreation courses facilitated dialogue that validated the value of communal wisdom. Freddy sought to inspire students to value both external knowledge and internal wisdom, so as to be prepared to assume positions of agency within their communities. Another recurrent theme that was discussed in Communal Recreation courses deals with the diversity of spiritual cosmovisions across distinct Oaxacan cultures.

The local Zapotec cosmivision of Guelatao is an integral part of communal education and is represented in the UACO curriculum. On multiple occasions, Freddy would use his extensive experience living in the Sierra Mixe to spark debate, encouraging students to compare their customs with those of other autochthonous cultures. One of the primary ways that the cosmivisions of these distinct cultures are manifested is through diverse rituals that pay homage to the four elements that compose Mother Earth. The class analyzed certain Mixe customs of animal sacrifice to the earth, comparing this approach with the *ofrendas* (offerings) performed in Guelatao to express gratitude to the natural world. This exchange between students and the knowledge facilitator transitioned into a conversation about how one conceptualizes communal territory. Territory is both mystical and physical, presenting complex links to local rituals associated with sacred mountains, lagoons, rivers, and springs. Deepening students' comprehension of their ancestral roots reinforces local traditions and contributes to the formation of community members who will fiercely defend a pluralist México.

Comunalidad is fluid and diverse, evolving depending on the circumstances and characteristics of each community. Curricula at the UACO is not the same in every CUC, but is strategically constructed to be applicable and relevant to that community's specific context. The idea is not to romanticize *Comunalidad* as a perfect utopian concept, but construct a thorough analysis through the comprehensive examination of its advantages and shortcomings. The ethnographic findings section was dedicated to presenting fieldwork observations conducted during three months, when the author attended classes in the *Comunalidad* Bachelor's program in Guelatao. The following section is designed to explicitly lend a voice to local thinkers, leaders, knowledge facilitators, administrators, and students in the description of their own experience at the UACO.

Giving Voice: Interviews and Analysis of *Comunalidad*

This section is composed of excerpts of interviews conducted during fieldwork and analysis of relevant overarching themes in an attempt to better understand the significance of

the UACO's work in Oaxaca. According to knowledge facilitators interviewed, one of the primary objectives of the UACO is to effectively systematize communal knowledge. When community members attend the UACO, many of them already possess an innate knowledge of *Comunalidad*. They may have grown up in the community their entire lives and observed family members actively participating in the four fundamental pillars which make up *Comunalidad*. This systemization of knowledge seeks to evaluate and contextualize the experiential knowledge which already exists. The UACO approaches this systemization by facilitating opportunities for students to share their communal experiences, elaborate written reflections, and deeply contemplate the significance of *Comunalidad*.

The UACO emphasizes experiential education travel whereby students have the opportunity to visit different communities around the state in order to participate in *compartencias*, which enables them to share their communal experiences. These enriching opportunities also offer students the ability to interpret the diverse realities of the state of Oaxaca. An example of this practice was when *Comunalidad* classes were canceled in order to travel to the Traditional Medicine Fair in Teotitlán de Flores Magón and Huautla de Jiménez. In an interview with a *Comunalidad* student, Gamaliel Bautista Sánchez, he expresses the value of these types of *compartencias* when he explains,

“We start serving the community from a very young age, we begin learning communal music, we begin participating in communal radio. And all of these experiences connect to finally being able to say ‘I am from here.’ Then, everything that I said a moment ago, we internalize it in an unorganized way, but we can organize these experiences. And now with more consciousness we can write about it and share about it if our comrades would like to, such as the case of Huatla, where we could share about the *cargo* system. So then it begins to flow a little easier, because we have systematized lived experiences, so we reconcile both experience and wisdom, as a methodology, an epistemology of the methodology of *Comunalidad*” (interview with *Comunalidad* student, August 22nd, 2022).

This insightful commentary highlights how integral the UACO is to the process of organizing and systematizing the communal experience. When you begin observing the community from such a young age, it can be difficult to truly comprehend the value of your way of life. A community member can participate in *tequio* and observe their family members performing their *cargos*, but

the student admits that at times this knowledge can become unorganized. *Comunalidad* courses offer the opportunity to reflect on the communal experience, encouraging students to complete written reflections and then share their experience with others from different regions of Oaxaca. All of this works to solidify a consciousness among students of *Comunalidad* and comprehend its unique role in organizing autochthonous societies in the region. Once this systemization has occurred, this student specifically referred to *Comunalidad* as a methodology that connects both the communal experience and wisdom.

Systematizing communal knowledge was a theme that continued to emerge throughout all of the interviews conducted during fieldwork. It is essential to consolidate our understanding of the pedagogical tools knowledge facilitators implement at the UACO in order to encourage the organization of the communal experience. During an interview with knowledge facilitator Nadia Massiel Delgado González, she described a UACO methodology to encourage students' written reflections when she states,

“How did we do it? Through a daily journal, observing, for example, the ritual a year ago to celebrate the beginning of the semester. And when students began reading their journal entries, every comrade's entry was completely different, it created a dynamic image. Because the way each student wrote was different. They began like: 'Hello I am... or Good afternoon' as if they were giving a speech. So, I said 'this is the way'. The principal problem I have confronted is that it's hard for students to write, but not speak. So I thought we should develop a technique. This technique began here. It emerged between the 3rd and 7th semester, which is what we have discussed, that students describe their experience as specialists and that they do an auto-ethnography or an auto-interview; that has really served us well” (Interview with knowledge facilitator, September 1st, 2022).

In this excerpt, the knowledge facilitator explains the development of the auto-ethnography activity, which emerged at the UACO as a way to confront the reality that many students were struggling with written reflections. Assigning students activities such as the daily log, which encourages them to produce written reflections on communal rituals shared with their peers, was an effective strategy for systematizing the communal experience. Students are encouraged to analyze their reality from the point of view of an ethnographer, which helps them to comprehend that they are the real experts of *Comunalidad*. It reinforces the fact that students'

participation in *Comunalidad* is valued and the UACO acts as a vehicle for inspiring the next generation of communal authors who act as their respective culture's own anthropologists, profoundly analyzing their lived experience.

The systemization of the communal experience was a foundational principle within the pedagogies implemented at the UACO *Comunalidad* Bachelor's program. Engrained within this systemization is an acknowledgment that experiential knowledge already exists within each community member. The UACO concerns itself with facilitating educational spaces for profound reflections, constructing a comprehensive context of what it means to live in a community. One of the knowledge facilitators in the Masters program on Communal Education, Mario Fernando Ramos Morales, best explains this dynamic when he expresses,

"It is to say, you do not need a specialization, what you need is to think about your reality. What do I mean? I mean you perform a *tequio*, you go to the festivity, you have your *cargos*, but now think about that, think about communal life, reflect on each element within the total context of communal life. What value does it have, what significance does it have, what exactly are you doing? Ok you went to a *tequio*, but what exactly are you doing, and what value does it have in the absolute context of communal life. Instead of going here and there, up and down in terms of specialization, we go down attempting to think of the totality, the integral nature of the communal experience, and organize it" (Interview with knowledge facilitator, September 2nd, 2022).

Essentially, the knowledge facilitator explains that students inherently possess a specialization in *Comunalidad*; what is missing is the ability to reflect on their realities. The UACO focuses on constructing a value system based on communal action, encouraging students to think about the significance of each action within the totality of the communal context. Knowledge facilitators and students alike understand the unique qualities of their communal approach to life. Facilitating profound reflections and systematizing the communal experience evolves into a strategy to preserve *Comunalidad*, which has been an integral way of life in autochthonous communities for thousands of years.

Another theme that appeared in interviews conducted during fieldwork was how the UACO provides educational alternatives in order to discourage out-migration of young, active community members. The UACO's decentralized model of higher educational spaces has

brought universities to many isolated communities, where attending universities in faraway municipal capitals or urban centers would be impossible. The appearance of higher education opportunities in rural communities demonstrates to youth that they do not need to migrate in order to further their education. This principal goal of the UACO is explained when educational facilitator, Gustavo López Mendoza, elaborates,

“One of the specific objectives is to halt migration. For Zapotec and Mixtec cultures migration has been something that has affected communities for years.... Because when one migrates, and returns as an adult or an elder, it's not the same, it is not that same way that one integrates into their community.... That is one of the objectives. The other is that students within the community have the capacity and creativity to create distinct activities that can help them attain financial resources and professionally grow. That can be from professions such as a communal professor, a traditional medicine healer, a certified tour guide, having a business, a pharmacy, a book store... and one of the advantages is that there are many students from communities, but the principle advantage is that they realize that they can generate their own forms of economy in their community, to gain resources, and to be a communal leader and not migrate” (Interview with academic coordinator of the UACO Guelatao CUC on August 4th, 2022).

The academic coordinator makes specific reference to providing reasonable educational and economic opportunities for students who decide to study at the UACO. Students' formation does not concentrate solely on the systemization of their knowledge and the construction of a literary framework around *Comunalidad*, but in the last two years of the Bachelor's program, evolves into a practical manifestation of students' knowledge. In order to graduate, students must use the final two years of their program to design and implement a project within the community. This project can focus on anything from audiovisual representations of *Comunalidad* to creating cooperatives, or becoming a certified ecotourism guide within the community. The UACO aims to show students that there are possibilities within the community to generate economic resources and become a professional. By providing opportunities to study in Guelatao de Juárez, the UACO deconstructs notions that traditional models of study in faraway urban centers is the only path towards accumulating more economic resources for a citizen's family. Migration has depleted many communities of their active working population, forcing those communities to adapt the pillars that lay the framework for the practice of *Comunalidad*. The UACO acts as an institutional response to combat out-migration rates,

illuminating various possibilities for students to accumulate economic resources without abandoning the territory.

Through meticulously designed localized curricula, the UACO forms active communal leaders that are prepared to participate in communal institutions and devise strategies to confront future challenges. For *Comunalidad* to function in a cohesive manner, the citizenry must be engaged in the foundational pillars and be willing to be active participants in communal institutions. The UACO works to ensure that future generations remain engaged in *Comunalidad* in a world that is progressively more globalized and individualistic. The complex process of forming a new generation of active community members is described when knowledge facilitator, Mario Fernando Ramos Morales states,

“There are only a few young people who are interested, but this is a process. We call this a process of re-education, it is returning to re-educate ourselves. Why? In order to construct and reconstruct communal life; to produce and reproduce communal life. This will give you a different perspective, a totally distinct horizon... So, what do the graduates of this Bachelor’s and Master’s program have to do? Guarantee the production and reproduction of this project of communal life. With or without money, we are all carrying the flag” (Interview with knowledge facilitator on September 2nd, 2022).

The knowledge facilitator explicitly recognizes that communal life is being threatened by a progressively globalized world that emphasizes individualism and the accumulation of goods. The UACO organizes a communal value system and ensures that graduates comprehend the significance of their lived experiences. Community provides a distinct horizon for individuals and entirely restructures the values that we tend to associate with success. The traditional educational system championed by the Public Education Secretary for decades following the Mexican revolution focused on reproducing a nationalized and monolingual *mestizo* identity. The UACO reimagines nationalized educational curricula and reverts this paradigm to reproducing communal life, which inherently values the pluralistic diversity of autochthonous communities throughout México. The community members who graduate from this program will possess the necessary tools to be active agents of positive change within their communities, effectively “carrying the flag” that represents communal approaches to life.

The UACO *Comunalidad* Bachelor's programs is also a tool for preserving vast multi-generational ancestral knowledge and builds a profound sense of ethnic pride. The fact that *Comunalidad* is gaining notoriety in global spaces of exchange represents a societal shift to empower autochthonous leaders to guide the transition to sustainable ways of life. In indigenous communities where people have faced centuries of displacement, ethnocide, and assaults on ancestral knowledge, the mere existence of a communal university demonstrates to students that their way of life is valuable. This phenomenon is apparent when *Comunalidad* student, Habid Odoret Andrés Pérez explains,

"I feel very proud, it's something surprising, something incredible, because it is something that you live every day. For example, in my case I am from Guelatao, and *Comunalidad* is something that you live everyday, and suddenly it is a Bachelor's program and it's a Master's program, and we never could have imagined that something that we live everyday would transform into an important level of studies. Because this is going to continue, we hope that the UACO becomes one of the most important universities in Oaxaca" (Interview with UACO student on August 22nd, 2022).

The pride that this student eloquently describes is something that was truly palpable in the UACO classroom. To see a university form around systematizing the communal experience that citizens live everyday makes students keenly aware of the value of communal life. As previously noted, only 12.6% of the population in the state of Oaxaca has the opportunity to graduate from a higher education institution. The simple existence of this university and its decentralized approach to education will surely extend access to academia in certain regions. Yet, one of the most fundamental components of this educational project seems to be making students proud of their roots in *Comunalidad*. The fact that foreigners and students from around México would be interested in learning about *Comunalidad* represents a shift to uplifting the voices of autochthonous communities in the midst of global crisis. The UACO as an institution empowers students by demonstrating the tremendous importance of maintaining communal approaches to life.

Conclusion

The UACO is a manifestation of an alternative vision towards education that has been growing in Mexico since the late 1970's. It began in Oaxaca through the ethnopolitical organization of communities within the Sierra Norte whose leaders and citizens have struggled to fight extractivism and defend their territories. Through decades of social movements, popular struggles, and efforts to diversify public education curricula the UACO has consolidated communal education methodologies to form a higher education institution with 16 Communal University Centers that spread across the state. The UACO is a form of educational resistance that derives directly from communal ways of life. In its very essence, the Bachelor's program in *Comunalidad* confronts the individualistic values that are reinforced in traditional education institutions. *Comunalidad* is rooted in an entirely contradictory conceptualization of life, one that is rooted in the four fundamental pillars of territory, organization, *tequio*, and festivity. The UACO works to spread a vision that everyone is part of a collective. Community members are all intrinsically connected with one another and the natural world, sharing the responsibilities to work together for the improvement of the common good.

The pedagogies implemented at the UACO are constructed to decolonize the classroom, uprooting hierarchical structures in favor of a more collaborative environment. This educational environment certainly seems to have found certain inspiration in prominent Latin American educational theorists such as Paolo Friere. Knowledge facilitators implement pedagogical tools such as the self-ethnography, participatory action research, and intercultural inductive methods to systematize a lived communal experience. Deconstructing traditional educational methods and reimagining new models that inherently value communal experience is not without its challenges. Knowledge facilitators asserted that this reimagination of higher education institutions can only occur when the community undergoes a re-education process that deconstructs previously held notions of what a classroom should be. The idea that class should be held in a formal classroom with students calmly sitting at their desks in uniform is a notion

that persists in Guelatao. The UACO and the entire communal education system aims to provide alternatives that are rooted in autochthonous traditions which value the praxis of knowledge and do not restrict their teachings to a formal classroom, but rather transform the community into the classroom.

This thesis investigates only one of 16 Communal University Centers throughout the state of Oaxaca. One of the unique elements of the UACO is how they customize each Bachelor's and Master's program to the realities of each specific community. This localized educational system provides rich opportunities for deepening our understanding of communal education methodologies. I actively encourage scholars to continue to research Communal University Centers in other regions of Oaxaca, in order to gauge the breadth of the UACO's impact. The consolidation of universities rooted in *Comunalidad* uplifts autochthonous traditions and preserves the ancestral knowledge that exists within each community. The UACO systematizes lived communal experience with the specific intent to encourage profound reflection and transformative dialogue, forming a new generation of active community leaders. In addition, it works to diminish out-migration rates and increase Bachelor's graduate percentages in the state by providing decentralized educational opportunities within rural communities. Students use their last two years in the Bachelor's program to conceptualize a final project that could create opportunities to bring economic resources and support their families. Finally, the *Universidad Autónoma de Comunal de Oaxaca* instills pride in the ancestral wisdom of communities by deconstructing previously imposed ideologies that conceptualized autochthonous peoples as impediments to progress. This reimagined higher education system turns communal leaders into knowledge facilitators who help to ensure that communal life is reproduced and thrives in the present and future.

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