

Community, Migration, And Youth Cultures in the Northern Mountains of Oaxaca

Alejandra Aquino Moreschi*
Isis Violeta Contreras Pastrana**

Migration has been part of Mexico's First Peoples' lives throughout their history. For most of the twentieth century, they migrated internally toward other rural areas and the country's major urban centers. However, beginning in the 1970s, they increasingly joined the migratory flows toward the United States. By the 1990s, an entire field of studies specializing in indigenous migration had already developed with important results such as the analysis of trans-national communities and the study of racialization processes and their links to labor relations.¹

Among these studies, one issue still underexplored is that of young indigenous migrants, whether international or domestic, to large urban centers. The systematic exploration of how young indigenous migrants experience their youth and what effects their migration has on their communities of origin and their own lives can no longer be postponed.

This article is an effort to contribute to that analysis. Our central aim is to explore from an ethnographic perspective how youth is constructed and experienced in different Ayuujk and Zapotec communities in Oaxaca's Northern Mountains, which are immersed in both domestic and international migratory processes. To do that, we will look at the generational disputes and negotiations over the definition of subjectivities, particularly the tensions around issues of the body, identities, and individual and collective life projects.

* Professor-researcher at Mexico City's Center for Research and Study in Anthropology (CIESAS); alejandra.aquinom@yahoo.com.
** Doctoral candidate at the Berlin's Freie Universität; yolotzina.catl@gmail.com.



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GENERATIONAL DISPUTES OVER MIGRATION AND LIFESTYLES

Young people from the Zapotec municipality of Yalalag migrated massively to the United States in the 1990s. This caused a great deal of tension with their parents' generation, which had dreamed of their children studying and then committing themselves to their struggles for indigenous rights and community spaces. As Flor, a young woman of that generation, explains, "My Dad's hope was that we would get a little more involved in town issues, in its struggle; he would

send me to the meetings of women, the community meetings that happened. My Dad got me involved so that I would love the popular movement” (interviewed in Los Angeles, 2006).

Even though Flor quite liked participating in community life, her plans did not include “dedicating her life to the struggle.” Like many other young people, she was concerned with earning a living. For people in her age group, particularly the women, it is not easy to get a good job in their town. They can embroider, make shawls and sandals, wash clothing, or work in the fields, but these activities are not enough to support themselves. As Flor said,

I was in the movement’s youth group and we could study dance. It was all very nice culturally and politically and in terms of education, but when I thought in terms of money, I realized there was no way forward. So, that’s when I said “What is there in this for me? It would be better to emigrate.” (interviewed in Los Angeles, 2006)

Her parents were against her leaving because it was not the future they had dreamed of for her and because they knew that most of the young people who leave do not come back. Her mother said, “I don’t want to lose another child. I don’t want to go through that again. This business of the money is just a lie. What you always need is family unity; it’s no use to us if they leave to help us if we lose them anyway. Because, once you leave, you won’t come back” (interviewed in Los Angeles, 2006).

For the adult generation, their children’s migration was painful. They were convinced that no great future awaited them, since they had seen that, although most migrants managed to save money and build big houses in the town, on the other side of the border, they faced being “illegals,” racism, and exploitation every day of the week. In addition, the problem is that it is very difficult for young people to earn a living in a situation devastated by neoliberal policies.

DISPUTES OVER CONTROL OF SEXUALITY

Another of the areas in which the subjectivity of young people and adults came into conflict is sexuality. Until the 1970s, the Yalalag controlled young people’s sexuality, particularly that of the women, in different ways. So, a great many of the women from the previous generation had been locked away in the home as soon as they entered puberty and went into

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marriages arranged by their parents without ever experiencing courtship before marriage, among other practices.

While young Yalaltecs have obtained greater autonomy in leading their lives, strict control continues to exist over their intimacy, producing a great deal of tension between the two generations. For example “it looks bad” for a young woman to walk through the community by herself. One of them, Elvia, explains: “Here, nobody walks down the street; everybody is locked up in her house. Very few people visit other homes, even of family members, because right away, tongues start wagging” (interviewed in Yalalag, 2005).

Gossip or outright criticism are ways the community exerts strong pressure for young women to stay at home, and when they do not, they run the risk of being stigmatized: “Since I’m somebody who says hello to other people and I do go out because I got used to doing that when I was a young girl because I used to go out to sell things, sometimes people bad-mouth me and don’t want their daughters to associate with me” (Elvia, interviewed in Yalalag, 2005).

For parents, controlling their daughters’ leaving the house is to “protect” their reputations and preserve their “honor” and that of the family, something still closely perceived as being related to their children’s sexuality. As Clara, a young migrant, says,

In my time, I was brought up with that custom that said that starting in primary school, nobody could go out. That happened to me. My grandfather locked me up; that’s why I think to myself, thank God my mother came in time and took us to the United States with her. Otherwise, they would have married me off already.” (interviewed in Yalalag, 2005)

Young people also are pressured to behave in accordance with dominant gender codes. A girl is expected to be “decent” and hard-working, which for the past generations means doing all the housework, being demure, serious, not having boy-friends, and not going out with friends, among other things. In the case of the boys, while their mobility is more accepted, they are also pressured to behave according to the norm.



As Mauricio, a young man of 23 who has been in the United States for some time, explains, “People are really closed off and quick to judge there [in Yalalag]. People are really critical. You can’t do anything. For them, if you have a girlfriend, it’s a sin; if you’re seen kissing her in the middle of the street, even worse” (interviewed in Yalalag, 2005).

In the face of all this control, they imagine the North as bursting with freedom, where they will be able to live their own lives without being criticized or judged by the community. Even though that is not always the case, for many young people, the United States represents a place of greater freedom where they have the possibility of enjoying this period of their lives for longer. As one young woman says, “There, you have the freedom to express yourself and do what you want. Nobody criticizes you. I see that clearly, for example, in the way they dress, how they can go out of the house and have a boyfriend. Here [in Yalalag] they judge you for that” (Irma, interviewed in Yalalag, 2005).

DISPUTES OVER “DRESSING RIGHT AND BEING A GOOD AYUUJK”

José González was walking in downtown Tlahuitoltepec, in the Oaxaca Mixe Mountains, sporting his “punk Mohawk.” It was the 1990s, and the whole aim of the fashion of the time was to “look evil, heavy, and crazy” (José, interviewed in Tlahuitoltepec, 2012). Countercultural performances and music like rock and reggae were part of how this generation of young Ayuujk was constructed, by appropriating certain elements of urban youth cultures and breaking with their parents’ generation.

While the young have inherited the struggles of those who came before them, they are putting forward other ways of being young, of being Ayuujk or Zapotec.

Toward the end of the 1980s, many young people who emigrated to cities to work came into contact with different urban youth cultures and, on returning to their hometowns, congregated around rock music, which became an element for marking their identity that broke with older generations.

Young rockers questioned the communities’ principles and discourses about “being a good Ayuujk,” linked, for example to wearing “traditional” clothing, but also to a code of “good” behavior. These new identities were rejected by the communities, which saw them as “cultural contamination” and “ethnocide.” As one young man of that generation said, “They [the previous generation] were the ones who would say ‘get those kids in line’ or ‘it makes the community look bad for them to walk around like that’” (interviewed in Tlahuitoltepec, 2012). This led to community assemblies often discussing the issue of “gangs” and taking preventive measures like censoring young people’s bodies: “When some kids were brought before the justice system, they would have their hair cut at the local alderman’s office and be made to dress properly in white shirts, dress shirts” (Rigoberto, interviewed in 2012).

In the late 1990s, violence among gangs and punishment condoned by the community increased throughout the region; after that, the Ayuujk youth countercultural movement took other forms.

DISPUTES OVER THE AYUUJK IDENTITY²

One generational debate in some Ayuujk communities continues to be about identity. This is the case of a collective of Tamazulapam youth, who identify with reggae music and the Rastafarian movement. They are between 15 and 30, and in 2005, they created the Ayuuk Culture and Resistance Collective (CCREA). These young people have inherited from their parents a commitment to community life and an interest in continuing to value their own language and culture.

The direct Ayuuk-Rasta inspiration was the Rasteca movement that they encountered during their stay in Mexico City.³ They saw coincidences between the Rastafarian philosophy

and Ayuujk philosophy, but think of their community of origin as a place in which their most significant cultural references meet and which they want to be the starting point of a “cultural return” and a critique of society. They have created their own Rastafarian music in Ayuuk and Spanish and have adopted certain performative elements like dreadlocks and the colors green, yellow, and red, also the colors of the Ayuuk flag.

In the words of one member of the collective, “A Rasta-Ayuujk is a person with self-awareness, awareness of what he/she is and what he/she does, and who also maintains his/her tradition and language” (anonymous, Tamazulapam, 2012). These young people say that being Rastafarian is synonymous with living with “respect among brothers,” being “respectful of nature,” “thinking positively,” or “having a positive vibe,” “being interested in the community” and “being aware of what’s going on in the community and the country.” For others, Ayuuk Rastafarianism is also a way of opposing the individualistic system promoted by “Babylon” or “the oppressive system.” For them, this is represented by “the government, injustice, inequality, and the oppression of the indigenous peoples of the country.” However, they have been severely questioned by the community; for example, some say that reggae and Rastafarianism come from “outside.” All this generates reflections inside the collective about what it means to be Ayuuk today.

As one of the young founders of the movement says, “We would meet and talk about whether we were still Ayuuk or not. . . . We eventually said that, yes, we were Ayuuk because we spoke the language, we were born here, our parents are from here, and we also wanted to continue being from here” (Timio, interviewed in Tamazulapam, 2012). However, being a Rastafarian inside the community continues to be viewed as a bad attitude; this means that they have often been accused of promoting “something alien to the community” and of no longer being Ayuuk. They, however, feel differently, saying, “We are Ayuuk and we want to continue to be. Just because we like it [the Rastafarian philosophy] doesn’t mean we’re no longer Ayuuk. On the contrary, we want to be



and to be in the community, to be a part of it and contribute what we can to it” (Timio, interviewed in Tamazulapam, 2012).

CONCLUSIONS

We have covered generational conflicts between systems of aspirations and hegemony over the production of subjectivities among adults who try to change younger people’s behavior and preferences. While the young have inherited the struggles of those who came before them, they are putting forward other ways of being young, of being Ayuujk or Zapotec and of being in the community;

these new forms have destabilized the prevailing subjectivities and practices. The young are therefore questioned when they see in migration a new life project or when they appropriate urban youth cultures. However, in the cases we have analyzed here, this leads them to create new youth identities previously not experienced in their towns, which spark tensions there and question the national hegemonic representations of “indigenous” identities as immutable and defined by tradition. ■■■

NOTES

¹ See Federico Besserer, “Luchas culturales en la agricultura del capitalismo tardío,” *Alteridades* vol. 22, 2000, pp. 15-22; Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado, comps., *Indígenas mexicanos migrantes en los Estados Unidos* (Mexico City: University of California, Sta. Cruz/Universidad de Zacatecas/Miguel Ángel Porrúa /LIX Legislatura, 2004), pp. 9-74; Michael Kearney, “The Effects of Transnational Culture, Economy and Migration on Mixtec Identity in Oaxaca,” in Peter Smith and Joe R. Feagin, eds., *The Bubbling Cauldron, Race, Ethnicity and the Urban Crisis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. 226-243; and Carol Nagengast and Michael Kearney, “Mixtec Ethnicity: Social Identity, Political Consciousness and Political Activism,” *Latin American Research Review* vol. 25, no. 2 (1990), pp. 61-91.

² People in Tlahuitoltepec call themselves “Ayuujk,” while those in Tamazulapam refer to themselves as “Ayuuk.” This accounts for the different spelling.

³ The Rastecs merged the basic principles of Rastafarianism with what they imagined as the Aztec culture.