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Becoming Autonomous: Indigeneity, Scale, and Schismogenesis in Multicultural Mexico

Four towns in the state of Morelos, Mexico, are lobbying the state government for the right to become independent “indigenous municipalities” operating under local customary law. Focusing on one of those towns, Hueyapan, this article ethnographically and ethnohistorically examines the process that has led the people of Hueyapan to overwhelmingly favor the decision to opt for municipal independence. In doing so, it attends particularly to the ways that discourses of indigeneity and sovereignty have interacted with local political conflicts between the town of Hueyapan and the municipal seat, Tetela del Volcán. Using an analysis based on Bateson’s concept of schismogenesis, I argue that today, for the first time, Hueyapan is in a position in which demanding independence is feasible, because it has successfully established itself as a competitor to the municipal cabecera (municipal seat) community of Tetela, rather than as a subordinate and marginalized community. Nevertheless, by framing the quest for independence within the narrative model of indigeneity, Hueyapan can represent its demands with a stronger ethical and historical force than it could otherwise. [indigeneity, scale, Mexico, multiculturalism, schismogenesis]

One day in spring 2009, people in the town of Hueyapan, Morelos, woke up to the news that during the night a group of men from the neighboring town and *cabecera* (municipal seat), Tetela del Volcán, had again cut the PVC tubes supplying Hueyapan with water, and added insult to injury by dumping a dog carcass into the water deposit. The people were angry at this injustice, which was the culmination of a long feud over water rights between the two towns, a conflict that had taken on a new bitterness after the election of the municipality’s first president from the community of Hueyapan. They assembled on the plaza, discussed the matter, and decided to send a delegation to the state capital to protest the abuse from the Teteleños with the state governor. Their protest used the language of human rights, and they argued that as an indigenous community their territorial sovereignty and primordial rights to the water source had to be respected. This marked what was likely the first time that Hueyapan locals took on the identity of indigenous community as a political argument.

Seven years later, on June 15, 2016, the Morelos State Congress voted in favor of revising the state constitution’s Article 40 with an amendment that would allow the creation of new municipalities with populations smaller than thirty thousand inhabitants. This revision was specifically meant to facilitate the creation of new “indigenous municipalities” governed under *usos y costumbres* (customary law). The ability of the small indigenous communities of Morelos to achieve political autonomy as independent municipalities had, until then, been hindered by the population size requirement. Even before this revision, the four towns had to fulfill various criteria to demonstrate that they were indeed sufficiently indigenous to merit the right to function under customary law. The successful vote was a major step in the quest of the four Morelos towns to separate themselves from their cabeceras to become autonomous.

In this article, I analyze Hueyapan's quest for autonomy by focusing on the way that its rivalry with Tetela fomented a new identity politics, framed in the discourse of indigeneity and its associated right to self-determination. I point out that it is not a historically given fact that Hueyapan is more indigenous than Tetela, and I argue that the current ethnic identification of the two towns emerged through a political process that has shaped the relationship between the communities over the past century, which I describe as a process of schismogenesis.

I begin by situating the rivalry between Hueyapan and Tetela within the anthropological literature on indigeneity, and note how the de-colonial perspective tends to assume indigeneity as a historically given identity rather than contingent on local level political relations. I introduce the concept of scale, and suggest that attending to political processes at the local and regional levels may achieve a more fine-grained understanding of how discourses on indigeneity, concrete state policies, and indigenous communal agency work together in practice to produce indigeneity as a political outcome. I then describe the political and legal contexts of municipal independence and customary laws in Mexican legislation. I also describe the history of political and economic relations between Tetela del Volcán and Hueyapan from 1916 to 2016. I turn to focus on the wider political context of contemporary Mexico and the state of Morelos, where indigenous communities have been motivated to pursue independence, because the state has incentivized the cultivation of indigenous cultural identity. I show how, in Hueyapan, local movements of ethnic revival and political independence have mutually reinforced each other and interfaced with state-sponsored cultural policies. Finally, I discuss how the reliance on discourses of indigeneity and indigenous sovereignty has enabled Hueyapan to produce a narrative that frames their independence as a process of de-colonization, although the ethnic difference between Hueyapan and Tetela is of recent origin, and today they are largely equal in political and economic power.

Indigeneity and Historical Scales

Anthropologists have studied how indigeneity is produced in specific cultural political contexts; in the interactions among different forms of governance and social formations; and among different understandings of self and other and community and history (de la Cadena and Starn 2007, 3–4; Medina 1998; Postero 2013). If indigeneity is the result of the social production of difference, the kind of difference that it represents is one that is articulated as a field of power with predefined “slots” or positions (Hernández Castillo 2000; Murray Li 2000). This social field narratively emplots the indigenous as the Other of the settler-colonial, and vice versa. When the discourse of indigeneity is deployed, it pushes social actors to inhabit the social and political positions that it provides if they wish to be recognized as such within the historical narrative. The politics of recognition forces those who want to benefit from the rights associated with the “indigenous slot” to represent themselves in ways that are legible as “indigenous,” a system that has been rigorously critiqued by anthropologists over several decades. Some early critiques rejected the category of indigeneity as artificial or harmful (Friedlander 1975; Kuper 2003), while other approaches saw the transformative potential of the category not as coercive or phony, but as a site of analytical intervention where social relations and the production of difference could be scrutinized (Muehlmann 2009; Povinelli 2002; Postero 2013). Murray Li (2000) has focused on how indigeneity may be understood not only as imposed but also as the result of a more complex process in which communities articulate their own politics in relation to various actors. The analysis of Hueyapan's history that I present here follows Murray Li's suggestion to attend to the complex ways that indigenous identity articulates with multiple

social and political processes, and I also incorporate recent arguments for the importance of looking at multiple scales in analyses of identity and political processes (Carr and Lempert 2016). Linguistic anthropologists have found that discursive manipulation of scale is central to how groups and relations are defined and erased and how political oppositions are articulated. Reflexive attention to scale is also essential in studies of political processes; the scalar perspectives through which we as scholars frame our research questions and direct our attention affect which relations we are able to discern and how we understand them.

As an analytical move meant to center the discursive effects of scale on claims about identities, in this article I understand “indigeneity” as a meta-historical master narrative that structures conceptualizations of political relations between communities within a set of particular framings, roles, relationships, and political and historical scales. The structure of the historical narrative of indigeneity pits the indigenous ethnic community against a colonial or postcolonial state. This narrative works by tracing political groups and their interrelations deep into the colonial and precolonial past. The discourse of indigeneity tends to posit indigenous identity as historically rooted and primordial, and political models of indigeneity in turn tend to assume it as a given. For example, the “ethno-development” model of indigenous policy—developed by anthropologists in the 1980s as a part of the critique of previous clientelistic and assimilatory policies—assumes a difference between “own culture” and “foreign culture” that stems ultimately from the colonial process (Bonfil Batalla 1995). In this way, the scale at which indigeneity works in this perspective is defined by the colonial moment that separates the indigenous from the settler-colonial. Reading this de-colonial narrative against the grain, I focus instead on the smaller scale of the past century and on the political relations between two neighboring local communities, not between the indigenous community and the state. Added to this is that only one of the communities is currently claiming to be indigenous. In the final discussion, I use the concept originally developed by Gregory Bateson (1935) to propose that rather than a process of de-colonization, it may be more illuminating to understand the political process in which Hueyapan is engaging as a process of schismogenesis. Schismogenesis, a concept which focuses on cumulative changes in local political relations and practices, offers us a new way to understand the production of indigenous politics that may complement approaches focusing on national-level politics and discourses—approaches that often assume indigeneity as a given rather than as the product of complex political interactions.

Indigenous Autonomy in Mexico and Morelos

The Mexican Constitution does not include any political arrangement corresponding to US Indian reservations. The only political unit below the state level is the municipality, which, since the 1917 constitution, has been considered a “free municipality administrated by the municipal government established by direct popular election and without any intermediate authorities between these and the state government.”¹ However, the constitution provides for the possibility of electing municipal authorities through processes that are not part of the national electoral system—for example, under customary law. This possibility has been used in several Mexican states as part of a strategy of “ethno-development” (Bonfil Batalla 1995), meant to increase the self-determination of indigenous communities by giving them responsibility for making their own decisions on how they want their community to make use of development possibilities offered by the state. Under customary law, a municipality is free to use traditional political forms, such as elder councils or public assemblies, to elect local authorities. Municipalities are also free to enact local ordinances and laws, to levy taxes or forms of labor services such as those typical of the cargo system, and to limit the religious

and civic practices of its citizens—although this sometimes creates conflicts with human rights legislation that are complicated to solve (de la Peña 2002). In this way, municipalities under customary law have a significant degree of autonomy comparable to that of tribal governments and reservations in the United States. The creation of municipalities within a state is governed by the constitution of each state. Previous studies of the creation of indigenous municipalities in the state of Oaxaca found that they often helped the ruling party, Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) to maintain control of municipalities when faced with more intense multiparty competition (Benton 2011; Eisenstadt 2007). The Morelos case seems quite different from the Oaxacan cases because: the municipalities are split from existing municipalities (further motivating the schismogenetic perspective); the state government supports their creation; and established PRI-rule effectively ended in Morelos in 2006.

In Morelos, four towns have petitioned for municipal independence citing indigenous rights to self-determination. In addition to Hueyapan, which is part of the municipality of Tetela del Volcán, the three towns and their municipalities are, respectively, Tetelcingo, (Cuahtla), Xoxocotla (Puente de Ixtla), and Coatetelco (Miacatlán). They have historically all been Nahuatl-speaking regions, but in three of the towns the language is spoken only by the older generations. In Coatetelco, there are no more native speakers at all. Each town has had to demonstrate the territorial limits of the potential municipality and the fiscal feasibility of independence. Moreover, and crucially, each community has had to support its claim of indigenous status by fulfilling specific cultural and historical criteria, such as demonstrating a pre-Hispanic origin, with historical sources, and showing that the local indigenous language and cultural forms are being maintained. In addition to language, the cultural forms that are accepted as signs of authentic indigenous traditions are social organizations based on reciprocity and a civic-religious hierarchy, communal forms of land tenure, craft production, and the existence of a distinct *traje típico* (folk dress), even if worn only occasionally.²

The process in which the state formulates what counts as “authentically indigenous” and actively imposes this identity on indigenous communities is exactly what Judith Friedlander (1975) denounced in her seminal ethnography of the community of Hueyapan, the same community studied here. In her 2006 revised edition, she also describes the current turn toward encouraging, and even rewarding, expressions of indigenous culture that were previously stigmatized as a new form of imposed identity: “In the old days, villagers learned to take the Indian out of their everyday lives. Now they are learning to put it back in, with the help of human rights organizations and government agencies that actively encourage them to practice their *usos y costumbres*” (Friedlander 2006, 218). Nevertheless, Murray Li (2000), in her analysis of the process through which Indonesian tribal groups choose to take the “tribal slot,” suggests understanding this kind of choice not only as a process of imposition but also as one of articulation, in which states and communities respond to the actions and discourses of the Other. Friedlander’s analysis primarily examined the interactions between Hueyapan and the representatives and discourses of the Mexican state. The narrative of forced identity emerges naturally from this perspective because Hueyapeños have relatively little agency in relation to the state. In the following, I tell a political history of Hueyapan, focusing on the articulations between the community and the community that has been its immediate antagonist for most of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century: Tetela del Volcán. In producing this historical narrative of Hueyapan’s changing articulations with Tetela, I rely partly on Friedlander’s account of the community’s history, other authors’ writings of Hueyapan and Tetela (Arias and Bazán 1979), as well as my own ethnographic and ethnohistorical research over the past ten years.

Tetela and Hueyapan: The Story of a Rivalry

In the state of Morelos, most town communities gradually shifted from speaking an indigenous language to Spanish. Historically, in Mexico, when an indigenous language is no longer spoken, it is considered the point when a town is no longer “an indigenous community,” even if other traditions such as political organizations or religious practices are maintained. In Morelos, the genocidal disruption of the revolution caused indigenous languages to almost disappear from the state except for a handful of localities, one of which is Hueyapan. Before the revolution, it would have been hard to argue that Tetela was any less “Indian” than Hueyapan; instead, the difference between the towns emerged gradually as Tetela integrated itself into the national political mainstream at a quicker pace than did Hueyapan.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Tetela and Hueyapan were both minor satellites within the municipality of Ocuituco. Tetela was itself a rural town and Nahuatl was still spoken there; in contrast to Hueyapan, it had a handful of elite families who had established themselves as local merchants in the late nineteenth century (Arias and Bazán 1979). While the towns of Tetela and Ocuituco had mestizo elites who were merchants, the elite group of Hueyapan was composed of local Nahuatl-speaking families who supported their status through ownership of agricultural lands. In the 1930s, elite families of Tetela and Hueyapan led a movement for municipal independence from Ocuituco. This was achieved in 1937, but with two important conditions: the municipality would not be eligible for state resources or allowed to levy taxes. These conditions both made for a very tight economy for the new municipality and provided few occasions for conflicts over resource allocation between the two communities. The question of which of the two main towns in the new municipality would become the cabecera was not difficult. Even the people of Hueyapan realized that Tetela, with its local elite, would be the logical choice, and they even signed a document known locally as *El Pacto* (The Pact), in which it was stipulated that the presidency of the municipality would always be occupied by a Teteleño, and that Hueyapan would be represented only in the *cabildo* (municipal council) with two *síndicos* (syndics). There were two primary reasons this was acceptable to the people of Hueyapan at the time. The first was that they accepted that few people, if any, in Hueyapan had formal education. The town had a small rural school, but probably no one in Hueyapan at that time, including the teachers, had received more than an elementary school education. The second reason was that Hueyapan was geographically cut off from the cabecera because of the wide Amatzinac river canyon, making the trip to unremunerated cabildo meetings in Tetela strenuous and time-consuming. In the municipal archive of Tetela, I located a complaint filed in the 1950s by the two *síndicos* from Hueyapan, who refused to attend cabildo meetings because the costs in lost labor and time made it too hard on their families.

Thus, Tetela initially established its dominance over Hueyapan not because it was less indigenous, but because its elites had better access to the national economy and political system. Hueyapan simply did not have the geographical and educational infrastructure that gave Tetela access to the process of development and modernization. Therefore, Hueyapan remained politically isolated and dependent on Tetela while receiving little to no resources from the cabecera, and continued to have only symbolic political representation. In both towns, however, rifts arose between the elite families, who were in favor of the revolution and its ideals of secularism, economic progress, and social development, and more traditionalist families. In Hueyapan, the elite were centered in the central *barrio* (neighborhood), and included schoolteachers who were the main local representatives of the PRI ruling party. Less convinced of revolutionary ideals were the families of subsistence peasants in the outlying barrios, many remaining largely skeptical of the government and sometimes

attracted to the different radical political movements that opposed the PRI rule (Friedlander 2006, 76–79).

The popularity of the traditionalist and isolationist stances can be understood as related to the mode of production for many of Hueyapan's subsistence farmers, and was partly based on the community's isolated status. In the 1890s, Mexico experienced a boom in the consumption of marijuana among the lower classes, which made this plant an important cash crop for many rural Mexicans. When marijuana was outlawed in 1923, it became an even better cash crop due to the rising prices, but it had to be produced in out-of-the-way areas (Tsing 1993) where the *federales* (federal police) had limited access. Marijuana had a long presence in indigenous communities, where it had been integrated into the local herbarium since the colonial period (Campos 2012). For much of the twentieth century, marijuana was an important crop in Tetela and, especially, in Hueyapan, which was better protected from government control. This meant that the political and geographical isolation of Hueyapan was beneficial to a significant segment of its population. Marijuana production was concentrated in the town's outlying barrios, whereas the central barrio was the seat of the town's cultural elite, including those with church affiliations and the teachers—mirroring the division between progressive and conservative political views. The decline of Nahuatl as the main community language also broke along the class divide in Hueyapan: it was the families of the town center who were more outward-oriented, valuing education and relations with the outside world. They were the ones who first started to emphasize the speaking of Spanish over Nahuatl, whereas the people in the outlying barrios maintained the Nahuatl language longer, and continue to do so to this day. When studying the meaning of the cultural emblems of indigeneity to the people of Hueyapan, this class-based difference in attitudes toward, and attachment to, indigenous identity must be considered.

Nonetheless, gradually the progressives succeeded by constructing the necessary infrastructure piece by piece. They built schools in all five barrios, and in 1947 they built a road to the neighboring community of Tlacotepec, thus connecting the town with the rest of the state. It was the teachers who promoted the road-building project, and they lobbied the state government for dynamite and a truck. The teachers then used the schoolchildren as sources of labor, making them work on the road with picks, shovels, and dynamite during class time. In an interview, one man, who had participated in the project as a boy, described these experiences as a formative moment in his sense of community.

As described by Friedlander (1975), with the help of SEP—the Ministry of Education (*Secretaría de Educación Pública*)—and the use of “cultural missions,” additional schools were built in town, and by the 1940s several locals were studying to become teachers. In the same period, Hueyapan started being serviced by INI, the National Indigenist Institute (*Instituto Nacional Indigenista*), which provided some services and economic support, but which required the community to be visibly “Indian” to qualify for assistance. Simultaneously, with the arrival of the INI and SEP in Hueyapan, a group of neo-Aztec cultural activists arrived in the town. These representatives of the urban Aztec nationalism movement took it as their responsibility to make sure that the Indians of Hueyapan were the “right” kind of Indians—and legible to the state as such. This dynamics of a culture-based patron–client relationship between the state and the community led to the paradoxical situation described by Friedlander as “forced identity.” At the time when Friedlander wrote her famous ethnography of the community, progressive ideas were clearly dominant, particularly in the town center, where she lived with a family of teachers. In the progressive view, being an *indio* (Indian) was clearly and unequivocally a bad thing, but in the view of those Hueyapeños who lived outside of the town center and relied on subsistence agriculture and marijuana production, the signs and traditions that designated them as indios were also

the signs of solidarity with the local community, its values, and its forms of life. Hence, the “traditionalist” Hueyapeños of the outlying barrios were the ones who maintained the cultural forms that are today embraced by much of the community as constitutive of a local ethnic identity and on which the town’s claim to political independence rests.

Simultaneous with the opening of Hueyapan to new ideas, technologies, and infrastructure, the marijuana industry became both more lucrative and violent. A few families who particularly prospered from the trade began feuding. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, violence was endemic in Hueyapan, and it got the reputation of being a closed-off “narco” town. It had its own justice system, in which outsiders who committed crimes in the community were occasionally lynched as a deterrent, and, in some periods, police patrol cars were attacked and burned. The beginning of the “War on Drugs” saw the army begin to conduct frequent drug raids in Hueyapan, and hundreds of local people were arrested. This offensive finally ended the marijuana business in town, but it also sent many Hueyapeños to search for other places to live and work. Many hundreds, or perhaps even thousands, traveled to the United States as undocumented migrants and began sending money back to their families. As Hueyapeños increasingly integrated themselves into the (legal) national and global economy, the power balance began to shift between Tetela and Hueyapan.

Political Resurgence of Hueyapan in the Twenty-First Century

Around the turn of the millennium, the economic situation changed in Hueyapan. Remittances from abroad enabled the creation of a multitude of new businesses, from grocery shops and hair salons, to construction companies and wholesalers of building materials. Many Hueyapeños bought cars, which created a fleet of local taxis and an unofficial route of collective minivans between Hueyapan and Cuautla. Remittances were invested in intensifying agricultural production that focused on cash crops; and as the local farmers developed an extensive system of irrigation and planted new peach and avocado groves, others used their connections in the United States to establish a plant in which local produce was packaged and shipped to the California market. This cash flow produced economic growth in the community, extended access to education, and increased the social status of the community of Hueyapan relative to Tetela.

Concurrently, Hueyapan also experienced a political resurgence. In 2006 Mario Soberanes Pérez became the first Hueyapeño to be elected mayor of the municipality. The Soberanes mayoralty was turbulent, as Teteleños were reluctant to accept being ruled by someone whom many of them considered an “indio” from Hueyapan. In spring 2009, tensions turned into violence when Teteleños, disputing Hueyapan’s ownership of the main aquifer of the municipality, formed an armed group, kidnapped Soberanes, and subjected him to a mock execution. They threatened him to sign the rights to the water source over to Tetela, and they cut off the water supply to Hueyapan. The aggression only steeled the people of Hueyapan, who resolved to travel to Cuernavaca to support their mayor and denounce the violence. This was the first time that Hueyapan used its indigenous identity politically against Tetela, as it framed the conflict as an attempt by a colonial power to strip the indigenous community of their lands and natural resources. At that point, masked men killed Hueyapan’s *ayudante* (the local deputy mayor elected through customary law), who had been a strong voice against Tetela. Public sympathy quickly favored Hueyapan.³ As a result, it was legally established that the Amatzinac water source was within the territory of Hueyapan.

Having discovered their political strength, the main challenge for Hueyapeños was to settle on a single candidate to run for mayor, and two factions quickly emerged: one formed around the Montes family, who had become powerful through their export business, and the

other around Mario Soberanes, the first mayor from Hueyapan. The failure of Hueyapeños to rally around a single candidate meant that the 2009 election was won by Teteleño Jorge Hernández, whose platform was explicitly formulated as a rejection of Hueyapan-centric politics, and who systematically marginalized Hueyapan in word and deed. Whereas earlier Teteleño presidents had successfully used clientelistic practices such as buying votes, the strategy of Hernández and subsequent Teteleño candidates in the 2012 and 2015 elections was one of overt antagonism. Nevertheless, in 2012, Hueyapeño Javier Montes Rosales was elected mayor; in 2015 he was elected as the first Hueyapeño delegate to the state congress, and Ana-Bertha Haro Sánchez, the wife of former Mayor Soberanes, was elected mayor.

As municipal president, Javier Montes changed the municipal motto to the Nahuatl *titekitigan tonochtin sejkan* (Let's all work together). The new lemma was a plea for reconciliation between the communities of Tetela and Hueyapan, but the phrasing in Nahuatl also symbolized the new political status of the indigenous community of Hueyapan and the political importance of indigeneity itself. Hueyapan had finally established itself as a full-fledged competitor for political authority within the municipality, and the use of Nahuatl was an emblem of governance that symbolically emblazoned its indigenous voice on all the municipality's official buildings, vehicles, uniforms, and stationary.

In the 2015 campaign, the leftist party MORENA (Movimiento Regeneración Nacional [Movement of National Regeneration] candidate successfully established a group of followers in Hueyapan. However, during a rally in Tetela, he made a reference to "sending truckloads of sandals to Hueyapan"—*indios huarachudos* (sandal-wearing Indians) being the traditional Teteleño slur against Hueyapeños. He lost any support he had in Hueyapan, and the Hueyapan constituency instead rallied around local candidate Haro Sánchez.

The deployment of indigenous rights discourses emerged out of increasingly polarized political relations between Hueyapan and Tetela, and became an important tool with which Hueyapan could address local grievances. The goal of independence from Tetela, which just fifty years earlier the Hueyapeños could not even have imagined, emerged from the same process. Such a cycle of cumulative feedback is exactly how Bateson (1935, 1958) understood schismogenesis: a social process through which human communities split into new ones. He defined it as "a process of differentiation in the norms of individual behavior resulting from cumulative interaction between individuals" (Bateson 1958, 175). Bateson also proposed a fundamental distinction between "symmetrical schismogenesis," a process in which a group splits through internal competition between equals, and "complementary schismogenesis," in which it splits as a weaker group is oppressed or ostracized by a more powerful one.

The concluding discussion examines whether the case of Hueyapan exemplifies a complementary or a symmetrical process of schismogenesis. This question, however, also requires a look at the way that Hueyapan's political struggles with Tetela articulated with the state government and its indigenous policies.

Multicultural Governance in Morelos

In addition to its renewed economic and intellectual strengths, Hueyapan's transformation into a political force was also facilitated by developments that were taking place in the wider political spheres of Mexico generally and in the state of Morelos particularly, which made the "indigenous slot" a more favorable position to inhabit.

Beginning in the 1990s the Mexican state, like several other states in Latin America, changed its cultural politics away from idealizing the culturally homogenous nation and toward multicultural policies based on discourses of inclusion and diversity. This change emerged from a series of critiques of the ethno-national state, and the emergence of global

human rights discourses that increasingly focused on cultural rights of minorities (de la Peña 2006). As a result, indigeneity and indigenous peoples' rights are currently hot topics in the Mexican public sphere and are actively used by media and politicians (cf. Hale 1995). Today, overt public racism tends to be called out and castigated, and, generally, the media are sympathetic to indigenous causes, even when politicians may not be.

Multiculturalist governance also reached the state of Morelos. After two periods of right-wing Partido Acción Nacional (National Action Party) rule, leftist Graco Ramírez was elected as governor in 2012. Although indigenous communities in Morelos account for only around 2 percent of the state's population, his election platform prominently included several promises aimed at the handful of indigenous Nahua communities. Significantly, he promised to work to offer indigenous communities the possibility to become independent municipalities under the law of *usos y costumbres*. Among his first actions as governor was appointing a *coordinador para la reforma política de las comunidades indígenas* (coordinator of the political reform of indigenous communities), choosing the local filmmaker, anthropologist, and activist Francesco Taboada.

A major project undertaken by the new administration promoted education by offering all college-age youths a stipend to attend school, the *beca salario* (salary stipend), on the condition of participating in one year of social work during their education. Conditional cash transfer programs have been one of the main social policies with which the Mexican state has promoted social development and education: one such program, *Oportunidades* (Opportunities), is widely considered successful in promoting education (Behrman, Parker, and Todd 2011). Whereas *Oportunidades* sees development as a family-based process, with conditions predicated at the family level, the *beca salario* program is community oriented and sees participation in community projects as ways to improve social cohesion and promote development. Additionally, the communities have a role in deciding which specific projects work toward the stipend. For example, in several communities, community organizers have requested support from the state to organize Nahuatl language classes for youths, which would then count towards their stipend. Initial responsibility for organizing these courses fell on Taboada, since it was argued that to qualify for status as an indigenous municipality, having a living indigenous language in the community was a requirement. In this way, state policy made the teaching of Nahuatl a key point both for college students' access to economic resources and for the collective political project of communities becoming independent municipalities. This created a strong incentive for communities to start Nahuatl revitalization projects, and for youths to participate in them.

Ethnic Revival and Independence in Hueyapan

In this way, the emergence of Hueyapan as a political force that could compete with Tetela and the Mexican state's promotion of indigenous culture combined to provide support for a local movement of cultural resurgence in Hueyapan. Under these conditions, the community experienced a renewed attachment to the traditions and symbols that marked the town and its inhabitants as ethnically different from Tetela and Teteleños.

Another important factor in this revalorization took place among the Hueyapeños abroad. Many of them have now been outside of the community for decades, only maintaining contact with their families and community through phone calls and packages shipped back and forth across the US–Mexican border. The largest expatriate community of Hueyapeños in the United States is in New York City, and they began using social media as a platform to cultivate hometown nostalgia. Websites and Facebook pages, with idealized photos of Hueyapan, started appearing around 2010, and today several Web fora exist in which Hueyapeños abroad reminisce and share the things they love about their community of

origin. These online media have allowed expatriate Hueyapeños to engage in “diversity talk” (Faudree 2015), a kind of local patriotism in which the signs of the community’s ethnic identity are idealized and reaffirmed as a shared property. Clearly, the combination of nostalgia and local-centric pride motivated a renewed perspective on, as well as idealization of, their cultural heritage and traditions among the Hueyapeños in the United States. In these celebrations of ethnic heritage, the folkloric elements are foregrounded, with images of young couples dressed in *traje típico* in pristine landscapes beset with flower and fruits, or photos of a girl in a traditional Hueyapan *chincuete* skirt standing under the Brooklyn Bridge with longing in her eyes.

The folklorization and indigenization of Hueyapeño identity have affected the ways in which Hueyapeños relate to their culture in Hueyapan, resulting, for example, in the local indigenous identity suddenly taking a new centrality in town celebrations. In a short span of time, there were no less than three townwide celebrations of Hueyapan’s indigenous heritage: In October 2013 there was a festival of local gastronomy, in which the virtues of local cuisine were exalted as the people flocked to the central plaza to taste or sell mole chili sauces, pickled fruits, and tacos. A banner in Nahuatl—*ximopanoltitigan toaltepechan* (Welcome to our hometown)—welcomed visitors from other towns—although the vast majority of visitors were locals. This was followed in April 2014 with the United Nations’ International Day of Indigenous Peoples, during which the community celebrated a festival of the mother tongue by local elders taking the stage speaking both Nahuatl and Spanish to the audience to implore the gathered youths and children to learn Nahuatl and appreciate local customs. The third event, in August 2014, was the annual celebration of the patron feast of St. Domingo. This included several performances in the Nahuatl language, some by the youths of the *beca salario* Nahuatl course. In contrast to the public expressions of indigenous culture described by Friedlander (1975), which she saw primarily as empty performances of indigeneity for political dignitaries, these events were organized by locals and primarily targeted at local audiences and the migrant community, who participated by watching the videos online.

Many of the individuals who have participated centrally in the current wave of ethnic resurgence in Hueyapan are migrants, who have had the experience of seeing and remembering Hueyapan at a distance. For example, it was a Hueyapan youth, who had grown up in New York City but returned to Hueyapan, who took the initiative to organize a Nahuatl language course through which local youths could fulfill their requirement for social work under the *beca salario*. The course was a success: eighty college students signed up the first semester and began teaching classes every Saturday. Two of three students who participated in the project had experience as migrants in the United States before returning to the community. The fact that these individuals had grown up in Hueyapan, left, and returned to their roots shows the role of education and experience outside of the community in making locals reconsider the value of their language and culture. It also means that, whereas in the 1970s the Nahuatl language was associated with a lower-class peasant identity, among many youths today it is connected to a middle-class identity and seen as a sign of cosmopolitanism and educational ambition as well as signs of community values and solidarity. The sudden appreciation of local culture seems to be closely tied to the general neo-indigenist discourse, which values indigenous artistic expressions as important to the Mexican national spirit, made possible by the nostalgic gaze of migrants and, even more so, by the economic power they represent in the community. To be sure, the political and economic resurgence and the ethnic revival of the community are closely linked, but neither can be considered the effect of state cultural policies. As pointed out by Murray Li (2000), the articulations between the increased appreciation of identity symbols, state

discourses and policies, and community-driven political projects is more complex than either of the narratives of primordial indigeneity or imposed identity would permit one to recognize.

Toward Autonomy

Concurrently with cultural and political revivals, the people of Hueyapan started talking seriously about opting for municipal autonomy, as Governor Graco Ramírez had offered. If the communities of Hueyapan were to become an indigenous municipality ruled under customary law, it would entail a shift to the use of “customary” rather than the electoral democratic processes for appointment of local authorities. In Hueyapan, such a “customary” process is currently used to appoint the municipal *ayudante*, the persons in charge of the different committees of water and of communal and *ejido* lands, and other public committees (see Friedlander 1981). These officials are appointed through direct elections at public meetings. There is no formal process of candidature; instead, the gathered community members simply appoint the person they find fittest for the position, whether that person is interested in the office or not. Appointments are obligatory, and service has, until recently, been entirely unremunerated (today a small salary is provided by the municipality). This is in contrast to the elections of candidates through the national electoral process, with the elected receiving healthy salaries. Becoming an independent municipality would also entail the need to leverage taxes to pay for municipal expenses, and given that there are few potential taxpayers in Hueyapan, where most are employed in subsistence agriculture or informal commerce, balancing the economy of an independent municipality would likely be a challenge for Hueyapan. Independence would seemingly require Hueyapeños to give up many of the political advances that they have fought for, exactly when Hueyapan has finally proven itself to be a worthy equal to Tetela. When I asked the municipal vice mayor under Mayor Javier Montes what she thought about the municipal plans, she was unsure, saying, “We need more information about what the advantages will be.” This sentiment was echoed among other Hueyapeños I interviewed, and was a frequent comment in Facebook discussions. In the end, the resistance to being governed from Tetela was stronger than the fear of the consequences. There was a widespread impression that particularly the elite families and the politically elected leaders were opposed to independence, as it might mean that they would lose their hard-won influence and privileges. When Hueyapan’s town assembly posed the question of whether or not to pursue municipal autonomy, fewer than one hundred of the approximately two thousand people in attendance were against the proposal. A committee was formed to write the formal petition and present it to the state government. Following similar processes in the three other towns, and with the support of Javier Montes, who had by then been elected to state congress, Governor Graco Ramírez decided to put to the vote the change in the state’s constitution (paragraph 40). On June 15, 2016, the vote to allow the creation of new municipalities having fewer than thirty thousand inhabitants passed. Hueyapan was on its way to becoming an independent municipality governed under *usos y costumbres*.

In concluding the story of Hueyapan’s move toward independence, I consider why only four towns in Morelos have sought autonomy as indigenous municipalities (Hueyapan and the previously mentioned Tetelcingo, Xoxocotla, and Coatetelco). Others have not. For example, Cuentepec, in the municipality of Temixco, is the only town in Morelos in which almost all inhabitants of all ages speak Nahuatl as a first language and most women wear folk dress as everyday garments. The community has not requested to become an independent municipality. Neither has the town of Amilcingo, in which a couple of elderly Nahuatl speakers still live, and which is currently embroiled in intense communal resistance

against the state's gas pipeline, which is being built through the town's communal lands. Nor has the town of St. Catarina, in the municipality of Tepoztlán, despite being home to Nahuatl speakers and a thriving language revitalization program teaching the language to local youth and having a strong local identity. Determining the reasons in each of these cases would require further study, but looking at the specific case of Hueyapan, it might be that despite fulfilling the criteria for being officially classified as indigenous, these communities may simply lack the adequate political and economic bases for positioning themselves as feasible political rivals to their cabecera communities, making independence an unrealistic strategy. Perhaps, paradoxically, indigenous communities are unable to claim sovereignty until such a time when they have already integrated well enough into the national political system to have a platform for their claim.

Articulating Identity: Schismogenesis and Scales of Indigeneity

One element that distinguishes my analysis from Friedlander's, as well as from the analysis implicit in the de-colonial narrative of indigeneity, is in the scalar perspective. The de-colonial narrative, which Hueyapeños and government officials in Morelos are invoking, works at the historical macro-scale by positing a conflict between that which is primordially indigenous and an oppressive colonial legacy. Friedlander's analysis demonstrated the fiction of primordial indigeneity, as she contrasted the macro-scale of Mexican nationalist policy with the micro-scale of everyday life in Hueyapan in the 1970s. My analysis, by contrast, looks at the intermediate scales at which Hueyapan's communal identity articulates directly with the political organizations of the municipality and state; this perspective shows that indigeneity is at once part of an historical legacy and contingent on specific political conditions that make it more or less relevant to the community. The Hueyapan case offers a look at how these conditions may be very different than the ones generally assumed by the narrative implicit in discourses of indigeneity.

Hueyapan's gradual, emerging interest in independence is a textbook case of schismogenesis. To further analyze the case, I ask if it is best understood as an example of the complementary or symmetrical schismogenetic process. Importantly, these two processes, though intended by Bateson (1935) to be objective descriptors, motivate different narratives with different ethical implications. When the state of Morelos adopts the view that Hueyapan is an "indigenous community" and, therefore, has a right to self-determination and protection, it follows that the schismogenetic process between them is understood to be of the complementary kind. However, my analysis of the history of political relations between the state and Hueyapan suggests that such framing risks misconstruing the relationship and the process. Hueyapan could eventually demand autonomy precisely because it had become a serious political contender of roughly equal political and economic clout as its municipal seat. The ethno-historical analysis underscores the historically contingent nature of indigeneity by showing that the currently existing ethnic differences between Tetela and Hueyapan is of recent origin, emerging only in the beginning of the twentieth century and only reaching its current sharp definition within the past decade through a process of boundary making. Nevertheless, the narrative of indigeneity places the difference within a framework of colonialism and conquest, even though Tetela and Hueyapan were colonized simultaneously. One may conclude that the *conceptual* category of indigeneity applies at different temporal, political, and moral scales than that at which the *concrete* political relationships between Tetela and Hueyapan developed over the past century; that is, the scale at which Hueyapan's current claim to indigenous status is produced.

In this way, the attention to scale demonstrates how boundaries may be drawn narratively through time and landscape at an epic scale, while the concrete differences that these

boundaries enact are both produced and experienced locally. Lomnitz (1992) has argued that by attending to the interfaces between political cultures at the national, regional, and local levels of Mexican society, one may avoid the impasses hidden by sweeping unified accounts of history and society. Ideologies and concepts are transformed as they move across scalar divides (Medina 2016), creating new political potentialities of the type that Tsing (2005) has labeled “friction.” Indigeneity as a concept tends to operate at the grand scale, produced by deep historical relations, crass injustices, and the monumental power disparity between a nation-state and local community. Bateson (1935) formulated the principles of schismogenesis at the social micro-scale by watching the splitting, relocating, and regrouping of small-scale societies through cumulative interactions, each of them political in nature. By placing indigeneity and schismogenesis together in a single analysis of the municipal project in Morelos, I seek to elucidate the scalar aspects of the project and the kinds of friction that drive it.

In view of this analysis, I suggest that in the study of indigeneity as a political category, scholars may do well to leverage theoretical concepts that are not already part and parcel of the de-colonial conceptual tool kit. In cases where communities are using indigenous status as a basis for a claim to political independence, Bateson’s concept of schismogenesis and his account of the differences between complementary and symmetrical schismogenetic processes may offer a fruitful way to approach other social processes that work to create or emphasize difference at local and regional scales.

Notes

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1. *Ley del Municipio Libre*” artículo único (The Law of the Free Municipality: Article 1). http://www.constitucion1917.gob.mx/es/Constitucion1917/Ley_del_Municipio_Libre_
2. For a description of the Hueyapan folk dress and its origins in colonial period sumptuary codes, see Friedlander (2006, 85–89).
3. For an example of public media sympathizing with Hueyapan and the framing of Hueyapan as an indigenous community confronted with colonial violence, see López y Rivas (2009).

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