

Reclaiming the Sacred

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Reclaiming the Sacred: Implementing a Community Based Museum in Santa Maria el Tule, Oaxaca.

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Monstrance, Community Museum in Santa María el Tule

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Unlike the rest of the community museums established in Mexico, usually focused on pre-Columbian traditions, agrarian histories and contemporary craft production, the museum in Santa Maria el Tule, Oaxaca is devoted to religious objects, paintings, books and antiques. These pieces were found in the local church by residents who, holding a position in the Chapel Committee, came up with the idea of creating a museum to display these pieces. They sought support from the Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca and presented the project to the rest of the community during an assembly. Although the idea of making a museum was accepted by the majority, the local priest openly condemned the project. Despite the priest's protests, the community decided to use a fraction of the annual Church donations to implement their plan. With this moral and economic support, the Church committee carried on with the venture and started working along with the Union. Is the museum a setting where clerical authority and power are put into question? Or on the contrary, is it a setting where religious objects become a vehicle to challenge the picturesque way the Mexican State has imagined and represented both- indigenous and peasant communities- as carriers of a glorious pre-Hispanic past and a traditional culture?

Santa Maria el Tule is a small municipio (municipality) located in Oaxaca's Central Valley, 6 miles west of the state capital, Oaxaca City. The community takes its name from the village patron saint, Santa Maria, and the famous ancient cypress tree, El Tule, which is a natural monument visited by tourists everyday. The church, dating from the 17th century, commands the central plaza, where the tree is also located. Together they compose the dominant landmark and form tourist industry of the town.

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~~Santa Maria el Tule~~
~~As in many other villages in Mexico, life in Santa Maria el Tule is governed by popular religiosity.~~
Especially in Southern Mexico, popular religion has been understood as a syncretic fusion of Mesoamerican and Catholic beliefs. Since the conquest, the clergy has attempted to impose Catholic orthodoxy by prohibiting folk practices and rituals. Today, an important aspect of “Folk Catholicism” especially in indigenous but also mestizo communities, like Santa Maria el Tule, is the cargo or mayordomia system. This civil-religious hierarchy is based on ranked offices that together comprised a community’s public, civil and religious administration. The men in the community aspire to attain lifelong positions in the hierarchy, which brings prestige and influence, but also requires a generous financial outlay, (Chance and Taylor 1985).

Besides its colonial origins, and the social inequalities it reinforces within the communities, the cargo system is also understood as a manifestation of spiritual authority and political resistance (Russ and Wassertorm 1980:466-477). According to Chance (1985:2-22), during the period of post-revolutionary consolidation in Mexico, the cargo system in many states such as Oaxaca began to decline. The State sponsored an “anti-mayordomia” campaign which portrayed the institution as wasteful and primitive. The system was abolished in many villages, but in many others such as Santa Maria el Tule it endured.

In July 2007, the Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca invited me to work with the Church Committee of Santa Maria el Tule. The Committee, one of the most influential, prestigious and esteemed in the local cargo, was responsible not only for maintaining the chapel and organizing saints’ festivities, but also for the implementation of the community museum. Since my first visit I was aware of the political significance of the project. The museum location in the main plaza, next to the patron saint and sanctuary, was revealing: the museum is located in a sacred space which historically, has symbolized community identity and autonomy (Bantjes 2006:147).

For one month I worked with the members of the Church Committee. They explained to me that, as guardians of the temple, they needed to be with me every time I wished to work in the museum space. Their company and public support not only legitimized my work but also justified my presence in the village. Each day, at least one member of the Committee would open the doors of the museum space for me, and together we would measure, clean, and photograph most of the pieces that became part of the collection. Surprisingly for me, most of the items “selected” were orthodox ceremonial objects regularly used by parish priests: crucifixes, corporals, old bibles, and chasubles among many others. There was no popular imagery that could represent the “Folk Catholicism” (specific rituals, beliefs, organizations) that not only gave birth to the museum project but also characterized the community.

Ciborium. Community Museum in Santa Maria el Tule

Although the museum was intending to show conventional religious content, the parish priest discarded the project from the beginning and suggested it would be better to “turn everything into ashes”. Defiantly, the members of the Church Committee decided that the antiques found in “their” church should be “invested” in a way that benefited the community. The members of the

Church committee believed that if displayed in a museum context, the objects could be incorporated to the local tourist industry, which is mostly controlled by local people.

There were several occasions in which the whole Committee met in the museum space while I was doing my work. The parish priest's discomfort was a recurrent theme in the conversations held between them. I realized the museum was not simply a neutral ground for presenting religious art but rather a site where clerical authority was being contested. Don Enrique, the president of the committee, once told me that the parish priest felt he had been excluded from the project, "What happened, is that nobody asked for his permission...the priest thinks we still live in the times before the Revolution, when people used to listen to whatever they had to say".

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Don Enrique's response depicts the long history of popular anticlericalism that has existed in Mexico. As Bantjes (2006:144) pointed out, the role of the village priests has always been controversial mainly because of the authority they exercise, their close ties with elites, and their engagement in business. Don Enrique, once commented "You know, the priest charges a fee to the foreigners who want to celebrate mass in this Church. But he does not tell them that we (The Church Committee) also required a donation because, at the end, this is the community's Church not the priest's". Anticlericalism was also a key element in the popular liberalism that framed the revolutionary struggle during the 20's, a struggle that led to the inhabitants of El Tule to reclaim land a decade later. Today, conflicts over control of these communal terrains are not rare and often involve clerical authority. According to Don Enrique, the priest demanded control over a fraction of the communal lands a few years ago. The community, during an assembly, decided not to accept the priest's petition: "that was something he did not like at all", he said. Don Enrique's remarks and stories illustrate how this liberal anticlericalism is still part of local discourses of autonomy that frame the creation of this community museum. The first day Don Enrique, took me for a walk to visit the main plaza, he said to me, pointing to the recently renovated Church façade: "We are the ones who take care of all this: the Tree, the Chapel and now the museum, we don't received any help neither from the Church nor for the State".

In Mexico, the battle for cultural hegemony essentially involves the church, the state and the people. The relationship between these three elements has always been extremely complex and ambiguous. The creation of the community museum in Santa Maria el Tule reflects these historical conflicts, which are an integral part of the nation-building process.

After the antiques were found in the Church of Santa Maria el Tule, conflicts over their meaning, ownership, and future arose. Were they sacred material? Or were they mere objects once used by clergy? Did the objects belong to the priest, or did they belong to the community? Which vision of the sacred are they representing? Why should a museum be created? The community's final appropriation of the orthodox religious objects was an attempt of the village to gain control over local religion and tourism. The community sought to raise money through the display of these objects for the benefit of their local economy and their own religious organizations. The integration of the museum into the local tourist industry is a way of inverting the traditional order in which, the clergy gains economic benefits from the community.

The religious objects displayed in the museum also become a medium to criticize the "State's Utopian Projects" (Vaughan and Lewis 2006:9). For example, the discourse of indigenismo is rejected when the Indian component of the population, traditionally exalted in state museums, is absent. In the same way, the liberal discourse that considers popular religiosity and fanaticism an obstacle for modernization is put into question. Through the appropriation and display of religious antiques, the authority of both, the Church and the State is being challenged.

References

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