

# FAREWELL TO FIESTAS AND SAINTS? CHANGING CATHOLIC PRACTICES IN CONTEMPORARY RURAL OAXACA

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## ABSTRACT

This article\* discusses recent changes in Catholic festivities, especially the system of fiestas in rural Mexico. The ethnographic focus of the discussion is on indigenous Zapotec communities of the State of Oaxaca. Collective religious practices in Mexican villages contribute to social cohesion. Fiestas commemorating patron saints of the villages play a particularly important role in (re)constructing communal identity and the feeling of collective belongingness. Various global processes like secularisation, integration of local economies into the capitalist market system, increasing out-migration from villages, and the rise of Protestantism have undermined the position of the Catholic Church in the region. The article scrutinises the changing organisation and role of fiestas in the communities, concluding that the impact of secularisation, migration and Protestantism in particular is not simple and always negative – these changes can actually invigorate certain dimensions of the fiestas.

KEYWORDS: fiesta • patron saint • folk Catholicism • Mexico • Oaxaca

## INTRODUCTION

When I first arrived in Capulálpam, a Zapotec community that since 1998 has served as the base of my research in the State of Oaxaca in Southern Mexico, nearly everyone in the village was making preparations for the fiesta to commemorate Saint Matthew. Every 21 September, the “capulines”, as the villagers sometimes refer to themselves, celebrate the day of the patron saint of their village. The festivities that last for three days are a time of heightened religious fervour and social activities. The fiesta is a cathartic event in village life that is joyous and solemn at the same time.

Orlando's<sup>1</sup> family, with whom I initially stayed, was preparing for the reception of the so-called “procession of the drunkards” (*la calenda de los borrachos*) that was to pass by their house that night. In this procession, hundreds of people, led by the village

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brass-band, move from household to household, dancing, drinking and socialising. Households receiving the crowd had been pre-selected from a large pool of applicants who considered it an honour and their religious duty to serve food and drinks for free to such a large number of people. Preparations for the reception were an enormous task and Orlando's family had invited their relatives to "do the *guelaguetza*", or offer their co-operation, as it is called in the local idiom. Men were constructing a stage for the brass-band and arranging tables for food, women were preparing *mole* and making *tortillas*. Meanwhile they were discussing the route of the *calenda* that was to start moving from in front of the Catholic Church at sunset. Some of the women were planning to join the procession after it had passed Orlando's house at around midnight. Laritza, one of Orlando's numerous sisters, did not contribute much to this conversation and seemed to be feeling rather uncomfortable about the topic. When I asked whether she was also planning to go with the crowd, she hastily replied, "Oh no, I don't like the fiesta, I am not a Catholic". Being a Seventh Day Adventist, Laritza like most other non-Catholics considered the veneration of saints a despicable idolatry. She did come to help her relatives on such festive occasions, although this often meant a bitter compromise between the loyalty to her family and her own religious convictions.

This article scrutinises the role of Catholic festivities, the fiesta of the patron saint in particular, in the changing social and religious landscape of rural Mexico. The ethnographic focus of the discussion is on indigenous Zapotec communities of the Sierra Juárez, a mountainous northern region in the State of Oaxaca, where I have done field-work for longer and shorter periods for over ten years, but the analysis could easily be extrapolated to most of rural Mexico. In the majority of Mexican villages, religion has played an important role in the creation of a collective communal identity. Folk Catholicism, religious ceremonies and especially the fiestas to commemorate the patron saint of the village constitute not just a moral but also a social "glue". Fiestas bring people together and contribute to the production and reproduction of community as a "collective self". However, owing to various forces of globalisation, most importantly secularisation, integration of local traditional economies into the capitalist market system, and out-migration from villages, as well as the success of Protestant Churches, the role and the meaning of the Catholic Church and Catholic religious practices have recently been changing. This is characteristic not only of Oaxaca or Mexico but most of Latin America. Allegedly, these processes have a devastating impact on the system of rural religious fiestas. In the discussion that follows I will critically map some of the impact that these processes have had on Catholic fiestas in the Zapotec villages. I will conclude, however, that although the impact of secularisation, socioeconomic changes, migration and the rise of Protestantism on folk Catholicism and Catholic practices cannot be denied, the influence is not as straightforward and simple as often thought.

#### RURAL OAXACA AND COLLECTIVE CATHOLIC PRACTICES

With sixteen ethnic groups and an indigenous population that amounts to approximately 50 per cent of the total population of its roughly three million inhabitants, Oaxaca is the most indigenous Mexican state. Together with the neighbouring Chiapas it is also one of the poorest states in the country. The population of the Sierra Juárez, the re-

gion where I have mostly worked, is predominantly indigenous Zapotec or Chinantec. Most communities in the area are fairly small by Mexican standards, with a population between 500 and 2,000 inhabitants. All villages are socio-politically organised on the basis of customary law. The body of indigenous norms and practices is locally referred to as *usos y costumbres*, the most important aspects of which are the cargo system and religious fiestas. The system of cargos refers to a hierarchy of communal responsibilities and positions that all men have to fulfil as members of the community. The cargos can be both civil and religious, they are generally obligatory and non-remunerated – individuals are nominated for these positions that last for 1–3 years by village authorities or the communal assembly. The decline of traditional economic activities, the increasing role of the money economy, social stratification and unemployment are characteristic to many villages in the area. Catholicism is the dominant religion in most communities, although like in the rest of Oaxaca, the region has recently experienced a considerable increase in Protestant population.

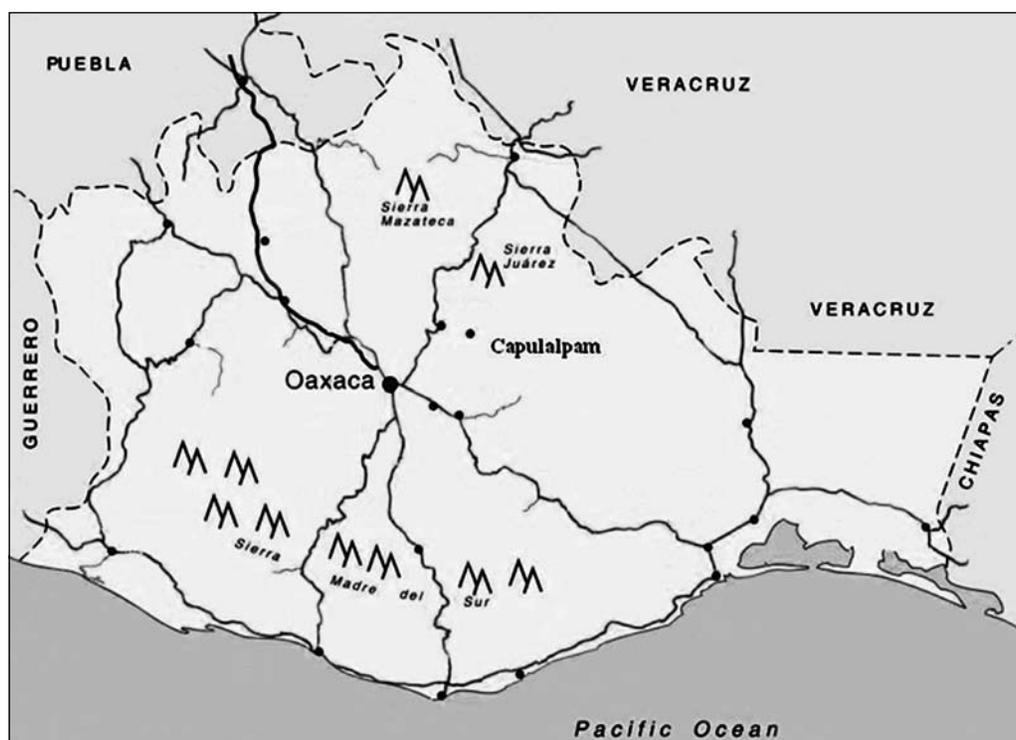


Figure 1. Map of Oaxaca.

According to the last general census held in Mexico in 2000, Catholics make up 84.6 per cent of the total population of Oaxaca (INEGI 2005: 153). This is considerably less than in the traditional Catholic strongholds of Mexico like Guanajuato (96.4), Jalisco (95.4) or Aguascalientes (95.4).<sup>2</sup> The reasons for such differences between states are rooted in the spread of Catholicism during the colonial era. Owing to the high percentage of indigenous population, a multitude of different indigenous groups and native religious ideologies, Catholicism in colonial Oaxaca could never develop into a monolithic and

homogenous phenomenon. Dominicans, the main Catholic missionaries in Oaxaca during the first decades of the colonial era, were few and the Christianisation process was often superficial (Whitecotton 1985: 235). The relative weakness of Catholicism in Oaxaca might also explain why the “Cristero Rebellion”<sup>3</sup> there took place on a much smaller scale than in most other states (Olivera Sedano 1966: 253), and why Oaxacan Protestant churches have been growing relatively rapidly.

Catholic practices at the communal level in Oaxaca are nevertheless multiple. The following description of collective Catholic events in Capulálpam should illustrate the ceremonial activity of folk Catholicism in the villages of the Sierra Juárez. The description is based on my experience of nearly two years of continuous fieldwork in the village in 1998–2000 but it is by no means exhaustive. I have singled out only the most populous events that engage the whole Catholic community and could be interpreted, along the lines of functionalistic approach to rituals, as a source of social integration. In reality different suburbs (*barrios*) and even individual households organise plenty of other festivities of religious (Catholic) nature.

The first significant yearly celebration in Capulálpam takes place on the very first day of the year, when a procession in which hundreds of people participate, takes the effigy of the Jesus-child from the local church to the house of its *madrina*, as she is called. Such patrons are pre-selected each year from a pool of candidates. The effigy stays in the *madrina*'s house till 2 February and during this period the house is regularly visited by other Catholics. On 2 February another procession returns the effigy to the church. During both rituals, food and drinks are served to all participants, the village brass-band plays and the ritual culminates in a mass held in the local church. Between these two occasions, on 6 January, the Catholic community also celebrates Epiphany (*Día de los Reyes*).

Starting on Ash Wednesday and lasting throughout the Lent, morning prayers are held and the whole village is woken up daily at 5:30 with religious music and an invitation to prayer through the loud-speakers on top of the Catholic Church in the middle of the village. The fourth Friday of the Lent – the “Day of the Samaritans” (*Los Samaritanos*) – is celebrated with a procession through the village. The Easter Week (*Semana Santa*) celebrations in Capulálpam start on Palm Sunday (*Domingo de Ramos*), and comprise many populous social and religious activities. Central to these is the dramatic re-enactment of the last days of Jesus's life. The procession led by a cross (*viacrucis*) and Jesus's crucifixion on Good Friday (*Viernes Santo*) are the peak moments of the week from both the religious and social point of view. Often more than five hundred villagers and visitors participate in this solemn five-hour procession (see Photo 1).

In May, the two days in the Catholic calendar that are celebrated yearly in Capulálpam are the Day of the Holy Cross (*Día de la Santa Cruz*, 3 May) and the Day of St. Isidore, the Farmer (*Día de San Isidro Labrador*, 15 May), the patron saint of farmers and villages. On 15 August, the whole Catholic community commemorates the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (*Solemnidad de la Asunción de la Virgen María*).

The peak moment in the Catholic calendar for Capulálpam is the day of Saint Matthew, its patron saint, on 21 September. The three-day fiesta starts on 19 September with two processions (*calendas*). The “procession of the flowers” (*calenda de las flores*) is mainly attended by children and women. The “mid-night procession” (*calenda nocturna*)



Photo 1. The enactment of *viacrusis* on Good Friday.  
Photo by Toomas Gross.

or the “procession of the drunkards” (*calenda de los borrachos*), as it is sometimes also called, is – not surprisingly – more popular among men. Both *calendas* are emotionally elevated events of collective merrymaking, music, dancing with *marmotas* (coloured wooden balls attached to a pole), and drinking. The processions pass various households, like Orlando’s, as described above. These households donate food and drinks to all participants in the procession. On 20 September, fireworks (*castillo*) are lit in front of the Catholic church. On 21 September, the actual day of Saint Matthew in the Catholic calendar, a mass is held in the local church (*Templo de San Mateo*) and the festivities close with a dancing party (*baile*) in front of the church building. The organisation of all these festivities is the responsibility of a fiesta committee (*comité de los festejos*), and they are financed from the obligatory payments (*cuotas*) by all members of the community.

In early November, Catholics celebrate All Saints’ Day (*Día de Todos los Santos*, 1 November) and on the Day of the Dead (*Día de los Muertos*, 2 November) families convene at the village cemetery to commemorate their deceased relatives. 22 November is the day of Saint Cecilia (*Santa Cecilia*), the patron saint of musicians and Church music, who is particularly honoured and commemorated by the village brass-band. December and weeks leading to Christmas (*La Navidad*) are a time of particularly heightened religious activity. Processions and collective events are held during most of the month, starting on 5 December when the effigy of the Jesus-child is taken to the house of its first *madrina*. The day of the Virgin of Juquila (*Virgen de Juquila*), one of the patron saints of the State of Oaxaca, is celebrated on 8 December, and the day of the Virgin of Guadalupe (*Virgen de Guadalupe* or *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*), the patron saint of Mexico, on 12 December. Nine consecutive candle light processions (*Las Posadas*) that also include the reenactment of the holy family’s quest for lodging in Bethlehem are held on 16–24 December.



*Photo 2. People gathering in front of the Catholic church for calenda de las flores.  
Photo by Toomas Gross.*



*Photo 3. Posada.  
Photo by Toomas Gross.*

Nativity scenes (*El Nacimiento*) are set up in houses and on the village square. Christmas activities culminate on Christmas Eve (*Noche Buena*) with the so-called "Rooster's Mass" (*Misa de Gallo*) at midnight.

#### FIESTA PATRONAL AND COMMUNAL INTEGRATION

Of the above-listed celebrations and festivities, the commemoration of Saint Matthew on 21 September is without doubt the most important social and religious occasion in Capulálpam. In most Oaxacan communities, the celebration of the community's patron saint (*la fiesta del santo patron* or *la fiesta patronal*) is the prime moment for recreating and reasserting communal identity. It is the time when most members of the community, including the "compatriots" (*paisanos*) who have migrated, reassemble. According to the Catholic perception, the community is sacred and is embodied in its patron saint. Catholics can establish a link with God by *collectively* celebrating the day of their patron saint who acts as the mediator between them and God. In other words, by participating in the fiesta villagers are paying homage to and celebrating their very own community.

As Marroquín (1996: 255) has suggested, already before the Spanish conquest every Zapotec territory was considered the property of a certain *numen* – the master of a mountain or a place who gave permission to use the territory. With Christianisation, missionaries "converted" these antique deities into new saints and the saint names were added to the village names, which were usually of Nahuatl origin (*ibid.*) Often saints continued to be interpreted as ancient deities, indigenous religious elements blended with Catholic ones, and communities accepted and acknowledged the patron saints rather quickly.

The first Catholic missionaries in Oaxaca, mainly Dominicans, gave names of patron saints to the Sierra communities, although little is known about the bases on which this was done. According to Aguirre Beltrán (1992: 84) who has studied the naming process in the Sierra Zongolica of the State of Veracruz, only a few names of patron saints were imposed. This was to avoid confusion and the saints chosen were generally involved in the birth and development of early Christianity. In order to limit the knowledge of the new religion to its most pristine, irreproachable and spectacular moments, only those saints whose life and death constituted an example to be followed were selected. They had to symbolise similar values embodied in the native deities to make the interchange, combination and synthesis of the features of the two religions easier (*ibid.*).

As a result, the complete official names of nearly two thirds (110) of all the 172 communities of the Sierra Juárez now include a supplementary Christian "label" (see Table 1). The names of male saints are the most common; among those Saint John (*San Juan*) (altogether 16 communities, for example, San Juan Tabaa), Saint Michael (*San Miguel*) (9, for example, San Miguel Yotao) and Saint James (*Santiago*) (9, for example, Santiago Xiacui) occur with most frequency. Among female saint names, Saint Mary (*Santa María*) is by far the most common (16 communities, for example, Santa María Yavesia), followed by Saint Catherine (*Santa Catarina*) (4, for example, Santa Catarina Ixtepeji).<sup>4</sup>

Table 1. Supplementary names of the 172 communities of the Sierra Juárez.

Source: CONAPO, 1999.

	Male saint name	Female saint name	Other biblical term	Patriotic name	No additional name
Number of communities	75	26	9	9	53
% of the total	44	15	5	5	31

Adding saint names to village names, missionaries also imposed the saints' commemoration on the respective day in the Catholic calendar. Commemoration of the patron saint is a special moment that breaks the routine of communal life and enables people to temporarily leave aside their everyday problems. "It is an event that allows one to change daily activities and it also gives some happiness to people", a young woman in Capulálpam suggested. Marroquín Zaleta (1995b: 94) claims that the fiesta is a "cathartic moment" in communal life, the best way to create and maintain internal cohesion. As a periodic reunion of the dispersed natives of a particular village, it contributes to communal integration and the maintenance of collective identity. Fiesta is the moment of recognition and reaffirmation of *belongingness* to a community, both as a physical and as a social entity. "It is the joy of the village to be together with the people from outside", I was told in Capulálpam. "It is like celebrating one's father and family", a student studying in Oaxaca City but returning to Capulálpam on every such occasion, suggested.

Despite its obvious problems, reductionism in particular, the functionalistic approach to rituals has in my opinion considerable explanatory value when analyzing fiestas in rural Mexico. It is not my aim here to present a synopsis of anthropological theories of ritual, and I will limit my discussion only to selected ideas from Émile Durkheim. These, in fact, serve as antecedents of the anthropological approach to religion and rituals as a cohesive and integrative force.<sup>5</sup> In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, first published in 1912, Durkheim suggested that the function of ritual is to strengthen the bonds attaching the believer to God and that God is actually a figurative expression of the society itself. Consequently, ritual serves to attach the individual to society.

In a similar vein, the fiestas of a patron saint in the Sierra Juárez could be regarded as a celebration of the community itself. This idea corresponds to Durkheim's (1971) view of religion as a social phenomenon and society as the actual object of religious worship. People, as Durkheim suggests, often worship their own reflection, without being aware of it. Although severely criticised (e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1965; Stark and Bainbridge 1996), I find Durkheim's analytical triangle of society, religion and collective action useful for understanding the wider meaning of communal fiestas. As Durkheim argues:

Society cannot make its influence felt unless it is in action, and it is not in action unless the individuals who compose it are assembled together and act in common. It is by common action that it takes consciousness of itself and realises its position; [...]. Then it is action, which dominates the religious life, because of the mere fact that it is society, which is its source. (Durkheim 1971: 418)

In the quote above, the last sentence is in my opinion particularly significant. It could be

interpreted as a programmatic guide for anthropology of religion, stating the primacy of studying ritual (action) over the study of belief (e.g. myths).<sup>6</sup> Durkheim further suggests:

Thus religion, far from ignoring the real society and making abstraction of it, is in its image; it reflects all its aspects, even the most vulgar and the most repulsive. (Ibid.: 421)

And still further:

There can be no society, which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and the collective ideas, which make its unity and its personality. (Ibid.: 427)

As I will demonstrate below, however, contrary to Durkheim's argument that in rituals society is worshipped *unconsciously*, people in Oaxacan villages are quite *conscious* about celebrating their community and not just the patron saint.

## CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES TO THE FIESTA SYSTEM

Various processes – especially secularisation, integration of local economies into the capitalist market system, migration and the rise of non-Catholic churches have a considerable impact on rural communities of contemporary Oaxaca. From the perspective of Catholic religious practices, the impact of these processes has generally been regarded as devastating (e.g. Aguirre Beltrán 1992; Montes García 1995). It is believed to lead to the decline of the religion's role as an element of social cohesion. In the following discussion I will briefly look at the alleged relationship between these processes and the changes in the Catholic fiestas in the Sierra Juárez. Firstly, I will scrutinise some of the broad structural explanations of the decline. Secondly, I will look at the increasingly contested meaning of the fiestas for those who participate in them. And finally, I will discuss the impact of conversion to Protestantism on collective Catholic practices.

### *Globalisation and Structural Level Changes*

The idea that different forces of globalisation have an impact on religious systems in rural Mexico is a widely shared view. For example, Aguirre Beltrán (1992), one of the pioneers of Mexican anthropology, has regarded secularisation as leading to an inevitable end of traditional religious practices in the Mexican countryside. In his apocalyptic forecast he suggests:

The traditional religious system based on the cult of saints, conspicuous consumption and the fulfilment of *cargos* as means to acquire prestige and power is probably arriving to its end; [it] seems to have given everything that it could give of itself during its long existence of almost five centuries. The secularisation of indigenous life is an irreversible process that now comes collecting dividends. (Aguirre Beltrán 1992: 196)

Not just secularisation, but also migration, poverty and structural changes in local economies are believed to affect collective religious practices. Due to out-migration various rural communities in Oaxaca have turned into “ghost-villages” (*pueblos fantasmas*) as they are often called. Men have migrated to the United States, or big cities in central and northern Mexico, while the local population now mostly consists of women, children and the elderly. Such villages literally live off the remittances sent by migrants, and collective communal practices have nearly vanished. No out-migration and no remittances means poverty and marginalisation that can likewise contribute to the decline of religious practices. Binford (1990) has demonstrated this in the example of the poor Zapotec peasants in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in the South-Eastern part of Oaxaca. Because of the prohibitively high cost of membership, increasingly fewer members of the community joined the so-called *vela* associations, Catholic circles that organise certain smaller fiestas.

In a thought-provoking analysis, Montes García (1995) relates the decrease of the role of communal fiestas to the economic crisis of the “traditional” community and agricultural changes since the middle of the twentieth century. According to her logic, the decline of the cultivation of corn has played a particularly important role in this.<sup>7</sup> Most of the fiestas commemorating patron saints in Oaxacan communities take place in summer or in autumn. Historically these have been periods of sowing and harvesting corn, and the Catholic fiestas were thus originally related to agricultural rituals. Growing other crops, especially the cash crops like coffee and banana has now replaced the cultivation of corn. The new agricultural calendar no longer coincides with the festive calendar. Consequently, when fiestas are held, people have no money to spend because they have no agricultural products to sell. Moreover, the new crops are not so dependent on weather and climate, and hence the protection by the patron saint is no longer necessary.

#### *Fiestas as “Economic Suicide”*

Besides scrutinising the impact of global and structural changes on collective religious practices, it is also worth looking at the growing local resistance to fiestas and Catholic rituals. Protestant rejection of the fiestas will be discussed in the next section, but collective Catholic practices are not contested by religious “dissidents” only. Although ritual occasions are powerful vehicles of collective identity, they can also reinforce existing divisions in the community. In some contexts, rituals may be interpreted as a tool of hegemonic control in the hands of the local elite. Such argumentation is in line with various theoretical discussions of ritual in anthropology. The so-called Marxist approach in particular interprets ritual as a means of legitimising social authority. Maurice Bloch (1986, 1989, 1992), for example, has in numerous studies analyzed ritual as a form of ideology that legitimates several types of domination – gender hierarchy and state domination, to name a few. Recent practice-oriented approaches to ritual, in turn, highlight the potential disjunction between different and even conflicting interpretations of ritual by different participants.<sup>8</sup>

Such ideas can be fruitfully applied in the Mexican context, where public rituals are remarkably numerous.<sup>9</sup> Brandes (1988: 186), for instance, suggests that rural fiestas in

Mexico are means of “power and persuasion”. Fiestas reinforce power relationships, moral guidelines and informal sanctioning mechanisms. Through convincing dramatic and artistic modes of expression they persuade people of the value and efficacy of traditional norms and beliefs. Annis (1987: 90) eloquently calls the fiesta-related obligatory expenditures the “Catholic cultural tax”. Discontent with these expenditures is growing in rural Oaxaca, especially in communities where the fiestas are still financed through the *mayordomía* system or individual sponsorships.<sup>10</sup> According to this system, a nominated *mayordomo* or, more often, a small group of *mayordomos* is responsible for financing the festivities.

The obligatory nature of nominations for the position of a *mayordomo* can be a source of conflicts, as village authorities often taken advantage of their power to impose the task on certain persons, especially wealthier migrants. An illustration of this is a well-documented case from Santa Ana Yareni, a Zapotec community in the Sierra Juárez.<sup>11</sup> In 1995, Yareni Union, an association of natives of Yareni living in Mexico City, sent a letter to Diodoro Carrasco Altamirano, then the governor of Oaxaca. They complained that the village authorities were intentionally nominating persons living outside the community or their relatives in the village for the *mayordomo* positions. The authorities in turn justified their behaviour by acting according to “the customs and religious traditions of the community”, and threatened to arrest anybody who would not accept the nomination. Complaining migrants claimed that accepting the *mayordomo* position was an “economic suicide” for their families. Most people in Yareni had no monetary income, while the estimated cost of serving as a *mayordomo* was around 10–15,000 pesos (1,000–1,500 USD), a substantial amount of money in the local context. The authors of the letter suggested that religious *cargos* should be voluntary and pleaded the state government to intervene immediately.

Collective financing of the fiestas generally causes fewer tensions. The fact that everybody is supposed to contribute to the fiesta adds to its “communal” nature and increases its symbolic meaning as a manifestation of unity. It can also be used as a moral argument against those who refuse to collaborate, especially Protestants. But even in those communities, where fiestas are financed from everyone’s monetary contributions, nominations for time-consuming responsibilities in fiesta committees can be a source of severe criticism. As Adriana, a teacher from Capulálpam, argued:

It is pressure, nothing else, because they say that otherwise they will put you in prison. It is moral pressure. My brother, for instance, was once elected as the head of the organising committee of the fiesta of St. Matthew. He did not want this *cargo* but was told that he had to do it. [...] [T]hey said they cannot accept his resignation.

The blending of the religious and recreational dimensions of the fiesta can also divide opinions. In Capulálpam, for example, one of the reasons for conflict has been the fact that the communal dance party (*el baile*), an integral part of the fiesta of St. Matthew, is organised right after the mass and in front of the Catholic church. This is regarded as a blasphemy by some more conservative Catholics.

Another phenomenon contributing to the decline of traditional Catholic rituals in rural Oaxacan communities is the recent success of Protestant churches, especially among the indigenous population. Protestants in most villages still constitute a minority, seldom amounting to more than 10–20 per cent of the total population. However, despite their relatively low numbers, Protestant growth can have considerable socio-cultural impact.<sup>12</sup> Here is not a place to discuss the overall socio-cultural impact of “Protestantisation” of the religious field in Latin America. Suffice it to say that individualistic values, emphasis on religious and human rights, as well as the gospel of prosperity, preached by some Pentecostal churches, do not change only the lives of individual converts but influence entire communities and societies.

In rural Oaxaca, the impact of conversion is most immediate and discernible namely on collective practices related to Catholicism, especially the fiestas and religious *cargos*. As argued above, for Catholics, the community is embodied in its patron saint who also acts as the mediator between people and the God. Protestants do not need such a mediator because their relationship with God is established through individual study of the Bible. Protestants’ opposition to being nominated as *mayordomos* was the reason for the earliest religious conflicts in the region (Ramírez Gómez 1991: 93), and it has also contributed to the substitution of the *mayordomía* system with collective financing of the fiestas. Until the 1990s, in most communities monetary contributions for the fiesta (*cuota*) were obligatory and charged from everyone regardless of their faith. Often the arguments used to convince non-Catholics to pay were based on the idea of moral responsibility to contribute in return for the feeling of “belonging” that the community offers to its members. Balthazar, an ex-Municipal President of Capulálpam, recounted his experience with the non-Catholics who refused to contribute:

Occasionally, some [Protestants] did not want to pay the *cuota* – those who were of another religion and did not like saints. I, as the representative of the authority, had to talk to them and I said: “I have seen you during the dances, playing basketball, during the fairs. Why don’t you want to cooperate? The money that you are going to give is not for the saint, it is for the procession and other things, for the fiesta of the *community*.” You have to explain to them so that they will not misunderstand – not everything in the fiesta is religion.

More recently, however, payments by Protestants have become voluntary, or special denomination-specific deals are made. In Capulálpam, for example, Jehovah’s Witnesses are allowed to make alternative payments directly to communal authorities. These are used to purchase light bulbs and not included in the budget for the organisation of the fiesta.

With the increase in the number of non-Catholics, the splendour of the fiesta decreases because of the decline in contributions as well as due to the diminished number of participants in the festivities.<sup>13</sup> An example of such a community is Madero, a small Zapotec village of approximately 300 inhabitants. Madero’s population is split into five different religious groups, and Protestants clearly outnumber Catholics. Most collective communal events, including the fiesta of the patron saint, have disappeared and social life in Madero is centred almost entirely in religious congregations. Many Catholics

in the neighbouring communities have referred to Madero as the prime example of the disastrous effect of religious fragmentation on communal life and used it to justify their xenophobic attitude towards religious “dissidence”. In Capulálpam, for example, religious pluralism was discouraged namely by suggesting that “it would lead to what has happened in Madero, where customs (*costumbres*) have disappeared and the community is dead” (Gross 2003b: 483).

Protestants do not participate in the fiestas not just because they consider worshipping of saints idolatrous but also because they regard fiestas as harmful in many other ways. Such festivities promote drinking, are a waste of money and cause poverty, Protestants often explained. A consequence of religious heterogeneity within the villages is that the previous “fiesta of the community” has now transformed into the “fiesta of the Catholics”. When everybody was Catholic, religious practices did not constitute a basis for a distinctive collective identity. With the fragmentation of the religious field, however, the fiesta comes to be associated with one particular group in the community rather than the community itself.

#### THE PERSEVERENCE OF FIESTAS

Despite the seemingly compelling evidence of the impact of the above-scrutinised phenomena on ritual life in the villages of Oaxaca, conclusions that can be drawn from the discussion are not simple and straightforward. It is true that the spread of secular values is one of the reasons for the diminishing role of religion in the villages. Unemployment, poverty and out-migration from the rural communities undoubtedly render them socially and economically more vulnerable and this has influence on cultural and religious practices as well. The rise of Protestant churches evidently undermines the role of the Catholic Church and the importance of collective Catholic rituals. And yet, positing a definite negative relationship between these processes and the religious and social importance of fiestas in rural communities is too simplistic. In various circumstances, these very processes could be seen as having much less obvious, more complex or even reverse, invigorating impact on ritual life.

Secularisation undoubtedly leads to the decline of the religious dimension of fiestas, judging by the often rather meagre number of people attending the Catholic masses during these otherwise populous festivities. But it does not undermine the social meaning of fiestas. On the contrary, secularisation can be interpreted as adding to and “liberating” the recreational and carnivalesque dimension of the event as a form of social catharsis and breaking of the everyday routine. According to the results of my survey of 125 inhabitants of Capulálpam, nearly half (47 per cent) of the 86 Catholic respondents considered the *fiesta patronal* as the most important aspect of the traditional social life in their village. Only six per cent of the Catholic respondents claimed that the fiesta meant nothing to them at all. When asked to free-list the associations one had with the fiesta, relating it to the manifestation of Catholic faith was obviously most frequent (45 per cent of Catholic respondents), but associating fiestas with “happiness” and “the opportunity to socialise” were likewise quite common (26 and 22 per cent, respectively).

The impact of Protestant growth on Catholic festivities is also by no means plainly negative. Protestant presence in the villages can, almost paradoxically, augment the

religious (Catholic) meaning of the *fiesta patronal*. Clear association of the event with a particular religious group transforms the previously *communal* ritual into a *Catholic* one. Also, Protestantism and local traditions rooted in folk Catholicism are not always as antithetical to each other as it is generally believed, and Protestant growth in Oaxacan communities does not necessarily have a strong “de-culturising” effect (Marroquín Zaleta 1992: 24). Instead, recent decades have seen the emergence of syncretic forms of Protestantism, especially Pentecostalism. As Olga Montes García, a sociologist and native of Yatzachi, told me in an interview:

[One says] that other religions destroy the communities and their identities, but this is not true. The identities are simply re-formulated. Take Christmas in Yatzachi, for example. Although there are so many Pentecostals, it has remained the same – the music, the food and so on. The Pentecostals in Yatzachi consider themselves Zapotecs as much as the Catholics do.

In Capulápam, my observations have been somewhat similar. Protestants often participate in communal festivities and rituals “selectively”. Adventists, for example, generally took part in Catholic funerals, although they did not enter the church for the mass, waiting outside until the coffin was carried out to the nearby cemetery.

Similarly, the impact of migration on Catholic rituals in the villages is not overly negative. Increasing migration out of the communities can actually boost the role of fiestas as moments of expressing social solidarity with one’s community of origin and reproducing the “collective self”. According to my interviews with migrants from Capulápam to Los Angeles, fiesta retains its symbolic significance for those living abroad because “it reminds us of our community”, as they argued. Even migrants who reside in the United States illegally visit Capulápam for the fiesta on a regular basis, despite the fact that this is risky and costly.<sup>14</sup> Migrants’ relatively high level of income, and considerable remittances sent to their families contribute both directly and indirectly to the organisation and financing of the fiesta. Often richer migrants act as main sponsors of certain ritual events.

Hence, apocalyptic visions of the fate of fiestas and other Catholic rituals in rural Mexico, like Aguirre Beltrán’s suggestion cited above, seem as yet over-dramatised. The religious life and practices in the communities are changing and so is the role of fiestas, but commemorating the patron saint of the village continues to be the most important yearly event in most communities and for most people.

## NOTES

1 All names in this article are pseudonyms.

2 The state with the lowest Catholic population in Mexico is Chiapas, where Catholics constitute “only” 63.8 per cent of the total population (INEGI 2005: 140).

3 The so-called Cristero Rebellion (1926–29) was the culmination of the tension that escalated between the Catholic Church and the State in the first decades of the 20th century and especially during the years immediately following the Mexican Revolution in 1917. On Cristero rebellion, see, for instance, Olivera (1966), Meyer (1976) and Blancarte (1992).

4 It is perhaps worth stressing that the lack of a saint name in the full name of the village is not an indication that the community has no patron saint. The official name of Capulápam, for exam-

ple, is Capulálpam de Méndez, even though the patron saint of the village is Saint Matthew.

5 An interested reader can consult Bell (1992) or Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) for more general theoretical overviews of the study of ritual in anthropology.

6 This division reflects the late 19th and early 20th century debate between “idealists” (the “myth school”) and “pragmatists” (the “ritual school”) in the study of religion. The latter favoured the empirical study of performed, external forms of religion over the study of narratives, myths and beliefs (Bowie 2006: 269).

7 Montes García (1995: 27) proves statistically that since the 1950s the amount of arable land used for the cultivation of corn in Oaxaca has been decreasing constantly, while increasingly more land is used for growing fruits, coffee and sugarcane.

8 The focus on practice and power has proven to be particularly useful in anthropological approaches to carnivals (e.g. Cohen 1993).

9 In their study of public rituals in Mexico Beezley et al. (1994: xiv) refer to a survey from 1977 according to which altogether 5083 civil and religious occasions were celebrated in the country yearly; there were no significant public celebrations on only nine days a year.

10 In most contemporary communities the *mayordomía* system has been replaced by collective financing of the event. The fiestas are organized by special fiesta committees (*comité de los festejos*) that collect fixed obligatory contributions from all households in the community. This does not mean, however, that individual sponsorship of festive events has vanished altogether. “Sporadic *mayordomías*,” the ritual content of which is concerned with life cycle events like baptisms, engagements, weddings and funerals still exist (Stephen, Dow 1990). Although these occasions are more family-centred, they can still mobilise considerable numbers of people. The same applies to sponsoring particular events during the fiestas, like Orlando’s family’s reception of the *calenda*, as described in the introduction to this article.

11 The following description is based on an exchange of letters and documents preserved in the State Archive of Oaxaca (District of Ixtlán de Juárez section, 1993–95, 8/1243).

12 This has been demonstrated in numerous studies focusing on Protestantism in Oaxaca (e.g. Marroquín Zaleta 1995a; Montes García 1997; Gross 2003a; 2003b), Mexico (e.g. Dow, Sandstrom 2001; Dow 2005) and Latin American in general (e.g. Martin 1990; Stoll 1990; Cleary, Stewart-Gambino 1997).

13 Kearney (1991: 347) cites Catholics from Ixtepeji who in the 1960s similarly pointed to the alarming examples of the neighbouring Ixtlán and Yotao. According to Kearney’s informants, the role of fiestas in Ixtlán and Yotao had declined because these communities were “divided by religion”.

14 Illegal migrants generally have to cross the Sonora desert to return to the United States. “*Coyotes*”, special guides who take the illegal migrants over the border charge them up to 3000 dollars for the service.

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State Archive of Oaxaca, Mexico (District of Ixtlán de Juárez section, 1993–95, 8/1243).  
Author's fieldwork notes 1998–2008.

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