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Singing for the dead, on and off line: Diversity, migration, and scale in Mexican *Muertos* music



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ABSTRACT

This article examines the recent emergence of online debates about Day of the Dead music, one of countless sites worldwide where conversations about diversity take place in the shadow of state policies. There, people engage diversity not through the state-centric “managerial discourse” of “diversity talk” but through localized interpretations of sameness and difference. I discuss the social effects of semiotic processes through which people consider sameness and difference: the emergence of a regional venue for debating contentious issues and the consolidation of an implicit consensus of linguistic practice. Attending to local understandings of difference can reduce the risk of taking state-sponsored views of (linguistic) diversity as natural kinds while recovering diversity and surrounding ideologies as ethnographic objects.

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1. Introduction: Mazatec *Muertos* music and discussions about sameness and difference

In May 2012, I stumbled on a homemade video, uploaded to YouTube, of a Mazatec *Muertos* musical performance.¹ This style of music is widely popular in the Sierra Mazateca, a mountainous area of southern Mexico where I have conducted research since 2000. As an instrumental form, the music has been performed for decades, perhaps longer, by groups of musicians and dancers who embody and address the ancestors. Their performances are held in houses and graveyards across the Sierra as part of annual Day of the Dead celebrations (aka *Muertos*). As discussed elsewhere (Faudree, 2013, 2014), around 30 years ago this musical performance style was transformed into a sung tradition featuring lyrics in Mazatec. A tonal indigenous language, Mazatec has some 200,000 speakers, making it one of Mexico’s most widely spoken.

The addition of sung lyrics and individual song authorship dates from the introduction of an innovative cultural and linguistic revitalization project: the Day of the Dead song contest. The contest’s founders included a Catholic priest and several local catechists, all native Mazatec speakers who were heavily influenced by Liberation Theology; they invented the contest to promote literacy in Mazatec by encouraging local people to write and perform songs in their language. The contest has been wildly popular, garnering region-wide participation by groups entering the contest and attracting large audiences when it is held every year. Within a few years of its founding, the popularity of the contest and its music led to the emergence

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¹ Research for this article is based on online research as well as offline fieldwork conducted in the Sierra Mazateca over the last 14 years, beginning in 2000. I conducted 36 months of field research between 2000 and 2003 and 12 months across calendar year 2011; I have also made yearly trips to the region, mostly for summer stints. This research was supported by organizations that include Social Science Research Council, Wenner-Gren Foundation, Ford Foundation, Fulbright IIE, Fulbright-Hays, and National Science Foundation.

of a popular market in Mazatec *Muertos* music recordings. At first, these took the form of cassettes and occasionally analog video recordings. Now compact discs and digital video recordings of these musical performances are sold in town centers across the region.

This development further altered the musical style. Though it continued to be anchored to activities surrounding the Day of the Dead fiesta, the performance style was now loosened from the fiesta in important ways, as music from the holiday began to infiltrate the soundscape of daily life year round. The online migration of Mazatec *Muertos* music marks yet another transformation – and one that surprised me because the Sierra has relatively low rates of Internet access, stemming from the region’s general poverty and poor infrastructure. In the last few years, however, there has been a dramatic explosion in the online availability of Mazatec *Muertos* musical performance videos. As of November 2014, there are more than 7000. This total is exponentially larger than the five hundred or so that I encountered when I first began tracking them in mid-2012, with more going up each week – and hundreds going up daily in the weeks surrounding the fiesta.

I have now reviewed and analyzed nearly 4000 of these videos, including their online commentaries. I focus on them here as a form of conversation – often contentious – about diversity, particularly about what counts as acceptable and unacceptable difference within such social categories as “Mazatec.” The following examples offer an illustrative sample of these commentaries. They discuss the video of a performance that took place during the 2007 fiesta, featuring musicians and dancers from the small Sierra town of Chilchotla. The video discussed in these comments is one of the oldest and – with a view count of more than 21,000 – the most widely viewed on YouTube.²

patuka2008

naska tsu suni atunikanu nga nijkeneo,,,je nat’ni xi naskatsu si un na tsu,,,jkua siene mi kja si chingajen kui jkuax-kunsunre chuta chingana,,,tu si’ñuundatsu

It sounds beautiful, the music, put your heart into playing. The guitar sounds great, it sounds really good. It’s a [sacred thing], doing this for our ancestors. It sounds really beautiful.

jumarlo76

jajajajaja no mames we me muero de las ganas porque ya se acercan esos dias tan chidos esta pinche tradicion ... saludos desde Puebla ... extraño la hermosa cultura que tenemos ... exelente video ... saludos a toda la raza imperio mazateco

Hahaha no way dude I’m dying of excitement because we’re getting so close to those cool days, this fucking tradition.... Greetings from Puebla... I miss our cool culture.... Great video... greetings to the whole imperial Mazatec race

Before considering more examples, let me note a few general trends that occur across them. Like these, most of the comments made about Mazatec *muertos* music videos are overwhelmingly – and obscenely – celebratory. They frequently invoke ethnic solidarity, as when the poster above addresses “the whole imperial Mazatec race.” Yet others introduce themes of diversity and difference, taking up assorted contentious issues related to ethnic belonging. Such points of contention include the meaning of folkloric tourism and cultural commercialization, regional rivalry between different Sierra towns, and musical piracy. These various disputes share a concern with the boundaries around past tradition and acceptable innovation. In addition, they rely on invoking and inscribing the borders around groups of people that adhere to or depart from “ancestral tradition,” which in turn relates to the definition of ethnic social categories like “Mazatec” and “indigenous.”

These conversations about sameness and difference are marked by a complex and shifting architecture of belonging, distinction, and exclusion that spans different scales and maps onto social groupings that are sometimes nesting or overlapping, sometimes conflicting and mutually exclusive. Posters sometimes reference social categories with clear, fixed spatial correlates: residents of the Sierra, residents of particular towns (including rival ones), migrants who have left the Sierra, and even would-be tourists. But they also invoke categories of indeterminate or shifting scale, which sometimes have conflated temporal and moral dimensions as well. This occurs, for example, when particular groups are positioned as opposed in a moral cosmos that locates value in fidelity to the ancestral past or alternatively in orientation towards innovation. Finally, these videos and their commentaries are overtly, even exuberantly multilingual, yet are undergirded by an implicit language politics. In addition to occasional words or phrases in English, the comments appear primarily in Spanish (as in the second posting given above). But they frequently feature postings in Mazatec, too (as in the first posting); often, both languages are used in the same comment. However, the songs are performed exclusively in Mazatec. These linguistic practices have important implications for the social work accomplished by the online circulation of *Muertos* performance videos and commentary about them. The socially productive nature of these videos and commentary turn around the process of making ethnic definitions and navigating the diverse challenges to ethnic categories.

I make two overarching points about that process of ethnic inscription. First, I claim that these online discussions of sameness and difference are helping to create a venue for conversation about ethnic diversity and identity that is regional in scale. Yet that scale in this case is not exclusively spatial: the scalar dimensions of this emerging forum are at least as ethnic

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k288d-PJ1Q> (accessed May 24, 2014). Posters’ user names appear in bold; my translations of the original entries appear in italics. Throughout, I have preserved speakers’ orthographic choices, including punctuation and spelling.

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