NON-THEMATIC ARTICLES

The *Disfrazados* of San Juan Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico: Practicing Tradition and Cultural Identity in a Contemporary Indigenous Transnational Migratory Community

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ABSTRACT

This article explores what work the *disfrazados* (jester characters) do to sustain and promote the construction of contemporary cultural identities and senses of belonging among the members of the Indigenous Mixtec community of San Juan Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico. *Disfrazados* are poignant examples of what anthropologist Peggy Levitt termed “social remittances,” key elements for creating social and cultural capital in this transnational migratory community. The article extends theoretical discussions about Indigenous peoples in Mexico beyond traditional analyses of economic remittances by exploring their “non-monetary contributions to development,” specifically regarding the construction, maintenance, and practice of cultural identities and senses of belonging through performance.

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Introduction

One always hears the disfrazados before one sees them. High-pitched cries in the dead of night, accompanied by drunken, joyful shrieks of “Hi hi hi, ahahahahaha!” echoing throughout the otherwise silent streets in the days before carnival, which occurs annually in the spring (typically during late February or early March depending on the Catholic liturgical calendar), and the June festivals (occurring between June 24 and 30), acting as harbingers of the activities to come. These “spirits of the festival” only make their physical presence known when the bells ring to conclude the saint’s mass and the people begin to gather in public spaces to await the continuation of other festival activities. Then, as if on cue, the disfrazados fill the streets, appearing seemingly from nowhere with their masks, black suits, harmonicas, “hi hi hi” shrieks, goat hair “beards,” skirts, canes, beer cans, artificial breasts, lingerie, and high heels. As they march, dance, and twirl their way through the streets they begin to mix with the crowd, inciting cheers, gasps, and laughter as they pass. Once at the festival site they dance chilenas with each other and with members of the public as the spectacle continues to grow.1

The dancing crowd pulsates with the rhythm of the music, and the goat hair “beards” of the disfrazado masks bounce jubilantly up and down with each dance step. It becomes almost impossible to move on the dance floor, as more and more bodies enter the fray. The air becomes thick with the combined scents of leather, sweat, and cologne, an aroma uniquely associated with the disfrazados. After hours of dancing, the disfrazados exit the scene just as they entered, diminishing into the shadows of alleys, fields, and the patios of houses, as if they had never appeared at all.

Disfrazados are costumed jester characters who appear during such occasions as festivals, parades, public social events, and specific holidays as part of the cultural traditions of the Mixtec community of San Juan Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico. They are ubiquitous performative elements historically associated with the local celebration of carnival (known as Kastalenche in the Mixtec language), the patron saint festival of San Juan Bautista, and the religious festival of San Pedro y San Pablo, all of which form part of an annual festival cycle that celebrates approximately thirteen distinct virgins and saints throughout the year. These three festivals in particular correspond with specific dates or times of year associated with the pre-Hispanic Mixtec cosmological and agricultural calendar, marking important climatic and seasonal transitions that continue to be observed in Indigenous communities throughout the region of the Mixteca Oaxaqueña.2 The disfrazados are also generally associated with concepts of “fertility” and “community prosperity,” concepts embodied by the rituals and other cultural practices that take place during these events. In recent decades, the emergence of local cultural performance groups created by community members and the heightened presence of disfrazados in diaspora communities have extended the contexts within which they appear, as well as their social meanings, beyond traditional boundaries.

1. The chilena refers to a genre of dance as well as a specific type of instrumental music that is unique to San Juan Mixtepec and performed specifically during festivals and community social events.


5. The use of the term “Mixtepequenses” reflects a general tendency of San Juan Mixtepec residents and migrants to commonly refer to themselves as “Mixtepequenses” and/or as “Mixtepecanos.” Abigail Hernández Núñez and Francisco López Bárcenas, eds., La fuerza de la costumbre: Sistema de cargos en la mixteca oaxaqueña (Mexico City: Centro de Orientación y Asesoría a Pueblos Indígenas, 2004); Ignacio W. Ochoa, Ñuu Shuviko: La Fiesta Patronal de San Juan Mixtepec (San Diego, CA: Center for Latin American Studies, San Diego State University, 2005); and Ivy Alana Rieger, “La tradición camaleónica en las prácticas festivas de una comunidad mixteca transnacional,” Reflexiones 98, no. 1 (2019): 111–29.
Here, I suggest that disfrazados are a valuable lens through which to analyze the construction of contemporary Indigenous cultural identities as experienced through the embodied practice of festive tradition in this Indigenous migratory community. Specifically, I argue that disfrazados and the festival cycle itself are poignant examples of what anthropologist Peggy Levitt has termed "social remittances," key elements for creating social and cultural capital in this Indigenous transnational migratory community. The article extends theoretical discussions of Indigenous transnational migratory communities beyond analyses of economic remittances by exploring members' "non-monetary contributions to development," specifically regarding the constitution, maintenance, and practice of cultural identities and senses of belonging. For the residents and migrants of San Juan Mixtepec (referred to forthwith as "Mixtepequenses"), the practice of the disfrazados is interconnected with pre-Hispanic Mixtec sociocultural discourses, cosmological beliefs, a long history of sociopolitical interactions with non-Indigenous peoples in the region, and a longstanding tradition of outward migration within Mexico and to the United States and beyond.

Understanding why certain traditions continue to matter in San Juan Mixtepec can inform us about the characteristics of the practice of belonging and the construction of identities in this and other contemporary Indigenous communities. The research presented in this article is directly based on my ethnographic fieldwork experiences with Mixtepequenses living in Mexico and the United States during the years 2013–17 and is intended to represent a snapshot in time of contemporary Mixtepequense social life.

Mixtepequense Festival Practice as Social Remittance: Producing and Practicing Capital through Embodied Performance

The festivals present in San Juan Mixtepec are actively intertwined with the various "norms, practices, identities, and social capital" that form part of social remittances. This reciprocal and dynamic relationship involves sending, receiving, and variably interpreting different knowledges between origin and diaspora communities, where different cultural meanings are situated, produced, and transformed. These social remittances are symbolically expressed by Mixtepequenses through the different performative embodied practices they consider indicative of the cultural traditions present in the community.

The practice of embodiment, and the creation of special social spaces within which acts of embodiment take place, is also an essential part of how Mixtepequenses create social and cultural capital. Because human bodies are, as sociologist Marcel Mauss has observed, "man’s first and most natural instrument," practices of embodiment are a critical part of how Mixtepequenses reckon who they are, both within and outside of the festival context. It is within the space of the festival, however, that embodiment takes on magnified dimension that speaks directly to questions of belonging, specifically regarding how Mixtepequenses practice embodiment and how others interpret those acts of embodiment. During the fiestas of carnival, San Juan Bautista, and San Pedro y San Pablo, practices of embodiment specifically related to the expression of cultural traditions through the physical embodiment of disfrazados speak directly to the dynamic relationship that exists between embodiment, identity, and belonging.

But what does the concept of “tradition” actually mean for Mixtepequenses, and how is it put into practice? According to anthropologist Nelson H. Graburn, following the work of anthropologist...
Alice E. Horner, “tradition” refers to both “the process of handing down from generation to generation, and some thing, custom, or thought process that is passed on over time.”\(^{11}\) As “folklore in potential … knowledge that is secured in the minds and memories of the people only to be performed on appropriate occasions; the sense of appropriateness itself is subject to rules of tradition,” the concept of tradition is also intrinsically multifaceted.\(^{12}\) Therefore, the festivals in the Mixtepequense cycle, especially the larger ones, such as carnival, San Juan Bautista, and San Pedro y San Pablo, are, in many ways, “mediating agents” in the lives of Mixtepequenses.\(^{13}\) Some Mixtepequenses participate in festivals because they consider them part of the traditions of their parents or grandparents, and not because they necessarily feel a particular religious, cultural, or social attachment to these practices. Others consider them as representative of the cultural identity of their community and themselves as individuals that should be actively preserved. Still others have no emotional or symbolic attachment to festivals at all and do not participate in them in any way.

This article explores the creation of social and cultural capital via embodied practices of tradition through an analysis of the disfrazados, specifically touching on themes related to authenticity, norms of community social organization, the practice of gender, and the evolution of the traditions themselves in Oaxaca and diaspora. The festival cycle and its associated practices are an invaluable part of the production and maintenance of cultural and social capital for residents, migrants, and the community of San Juan Mixtepec itself that helps construct senses of belonging.\(^{14}\)

The production of cultural capital can occur through what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu termed the “embodied state”—“a process of embodiment, incorporation, which, insofar as it implies a labor of inculcation and assimilation, costs time, time which must be invested personally by the investor.”\(^{15}\) For many Mixtepequenses, cultural capital is produced through the embodied practice of tradition, be it verbally, through the continued use of the Mixtec language, and/or corporeally, via the physical body, such as in the case of the disfrazados. Many Mixtepequenses living in Oaxaca and abroad actively engage with these practices to express who they are and where they come from.

Social capital is “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network … to membership in a group … [and] provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a credential which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.”\(^{16}\) For many Mixtepequenses, active participation in the mayordomía and other positions related to the traditional civil-religious hierarchy of the community (known colloquially as the sistema de cargos) and systems of social reciprocity (known as tequio) build social capital.\(^{17}\) Mixtepequenses indeed feel pressure to actively contribute to the social well-being of their community. This pressure is alleviated through reciprocal acts of service, such as volunteering on different civic comités (committees), contributing financially or physically through participation in tequio projects that directly benefit their barrio or the community, joining the mayordomía, or assuming a paid position in the local government. Once a particular social debt is paid, an individual is temporarily relieved of this cargo (burden), although these reciprocal relationships of service continue in various forms throughout a person’s lifetime. Because festive traditions are interwoven with the practice of individual and community identities, they have the potential to produce, maintain, and even transform what counts as social and cultural capital for...
Mixtequequenses living in and outside of Oaxaca.

Festivals provide rich contexts for the creation of both social and cultural capital and, in the Mixtequequense context, are intrinsic for the practice of social remittances and, more specifically, for the conservation of their intangible cultural heritage, also known as ICH. In the specific context of festive practices, ICH can include dance, processions, language, music, gastronomy, costumes, rituals, and an endless number of other customs and activities. Despite the undeniable influence of such socioeconomic phenomena as migration, Mixtequequenses maintain a complete cycle of traditional festivities. This insistence on the preservation of festive practices speaks to their ongoing importance in the contemporary life of many members of this community, particularly regarding their conceptualizations of tradition and the construction of senses of belonging. It is important to note, however, that conservation of these practices is typically realized through performative embodiment and the passing down of oral traditions and collective memories, although more recently digital recordings of festive events, many of which are posted online on such social media networks or platforms as YouTube, are commonplace and often used as valuable reference points for participants in Oaxaca and in diaspora.

Organized municipal governmental (or, for that matter, at the state or federal level) cultural heritage initiatives in the community have historically been few and directly depend on the political climate at the time. Mixtequequenses have, therefore, generally taken the conservation of their ICH into their own hands, with individuals or independent social collectives creating the “archive,” or textual or audiovisual documentation, while civic and religious authorities, such as the mayordomia, continue to safeguard knowledge of festive traditions and disfrazados as part of their performative “repertoire” as official guardians of these traditions.

Who Are the Disfrazados?

This article explores how the embodied practice of tradition, and the disfrazados, continues to have sociocultural value for many Mixtequequenses living in and outside of Oaxaca today. In many ways, the disfrazados are iconic representatives of Mixtequequense cultural identity at home and abroad. They are both carriers and catalysts for the continued practice of cultural traditions that play an important role in the construction of senses of belonging for participants. They also represent an inversion of social norms through the practice of masking, which is ubiquitous throughout the Mixteca region, especially during carnival. There are four main types of disfrazados, often referred to as chilolos by the local population: the ñaña chaa (also known as a catrín, comparable to a “dandy”); the tatsanu (anciano or “old man”); the natsanu (anciana or “old woman”); and the ñaña ñaa (chicas sexys or “sexy ladies”). A fifth type of disfrazado, also known as the tatsanu, refers to those who wear a generic costume often accompanied by plastic Halloween-style masks that are not considered part of the official canon.

The disfrazados originally only appeared during the festivals of carnival, San Juan Bautista, and San Pedro y San Pablo, their appearance tied directly to seasonal periods of natural transition and growth. However, they now can be found within other performative contexts within and beyond San Juan Mixtepec. Cultural performance groups have appeared over the years and expanded the contexts within which disfrazados appear. Delegations have visited other cities in the region, such as Tlaxiaco, where they have become part of local parades and festivals.
and participate in the state-organized annual Guelaguetza celebrations, hosted every July by the Oaxacan governmental tourism board in Oaxaca City. These cultural groups have also performed in the diaspora community of Abasolo del Valle, Veracruz. Furthermore, because of the “migration” of the festival of San Juan Bautista to the Kern County diaspora community in California, disfrazados have also begun to appear there, thousands of miles away from their place of origin. The majority of disfrazados who appear in Kern County take the form of ñana chaas or generic tatsanus. Some residents are also custodians of cultural knowledge regarding the harmonica songs and special discourses in Mixtec used by the ñana chaas during festivals and have begun to pass along what they know to anyone interested in becoming a disfrazado in this community.

In Abasolo del Valle, a specific local cultural practice involving the disfrazados does not exist. Instead, residents are more likely than their Kern County counterparts to return to Oaxaca, where they participate with a special cultural delegation and as disfrazados during the San Juan Bautista festival. To foment this valuable fraternal relationship between the two communities, the San Juan Mixtepec municipal government has also spearheaded cultural activities in Abasolo del Valle over the years, through such offices as the Coordinación de Proyectos Culturales (Cultural Projects Coordination, or CPC), which was only active during the 2011–13 political administration and traveled to Abasolo del Valle with the cultural group Grupo Yoso nu Viko in 2013.

The cultural performance group Ñana Cha'a Ñana Ña', formed in February 2016, continues the pioneering vision of Grupo Yoso nu Viko as an independent community project exclusively focused on the preservation of the disfrazado tradition through performances, trips, and online research. On their official Facebook page, the group describes itself as “a cultural group made up of people originally from San Juan Mixtepec who are making the culture and traditions of our community known.”23 The group is made up of approximately forty male and female volunteers, between twenty and forty years old, who are interested in preserving and learning more about the practice of the disfrazados but who also express frustration because they have had limited success in acquiring pertinent historical or practical information about the tradition. Primarily organized by a Mixtepequense man living in Tlaxiaco, the group searches for any information available about the practice online and through interviews conducted with community elders. The group has participated in a variety of social events for holidays and festivals within and beyond San Juan Mixtepec, including in the Guelaguetza in Oaxaca City and as part of the on stage spectacle for the Mixtepequense band La Soberana at a concert in Chiapas. They have also participated in the pre-carnival activities of Tlaxiaco after being invited by a resident who said he “saw a video about carnival in San Juan Mixtepec and liked the way we dressed up and how we danced.”24

Although there exist four “official” types of disfrazados, their presentation varies depending on a variety of factors. Furthermore, the disfrazados call attention to various characteristics of contemporary Mixtepequense sociocultural values imbued with historical relevance. One such characteristic that carries weight has to do with gender. The disfrazados are, in many ways, representative of traditional gender roles, both in terms of how the characters are imagined and who participates.25 As described in detail below, each character embodies a clear masculine or feminine gender orientation. These representations directly inform the personalities and performative aspects of each. Furthermore, an individual’s gender orientation also directly
influences how they participate. The four principal types of disfrazados are typically embodied by male participants. The reasons for this vary from perspectives regarding the disfrazados as a predominantly “masculine” tradition to practical considerations regarding the safety and well-being of potential female participants. The characters themselves are also usually interpreted by men because they are perceived either as “masculine” by representing the male physical form or as a parody of supposedly “feminine” personality attributes or physical characteristics, making their cross-dressing as “female” characters even more amusing for spectators. Education about the disfrazado tradition is also generally patrilineal in nature, with men typically teaching their sons about it from a young age.

When women do participate, which is rarely, they typically embody the unofficial fifth type of disfrazado, or tatsanu, due to the character’s generic characteristics. Some female participants also express their unwillingness to become other types of disfrazados, specifically the ñana ñaa or the natsanu, as these more “feminine” characters often get physically accosted by the public during their performances. Women do occasionally appear as ñana chaas, but this is highly uncommon, because Mixtepequenses generally perceive the disfrazado tradition, in general, and the ñana chaas, in particular, as more aligned with masculine identities.

Every character embodies a diverse array of movements, actions, voices, dances, language, and personality traits that are specific to each one and are generally taught to participants by other Mixtepequenses, typically friends or family members. They can also be modified by the individuals embodying the character and/or are copied via the direct observation of others without any formal instruction, although some are taught by their parents, specifically their fathers, during childhood. One of the most important sources of inspiration is the observation of other disfrazados. Participants often replicate what they see their friends or acquaintances doing, or they recall from their childhood how male family members, such as fathers, brothers, or uncles, danced.

For many who are involved in the disfrazado tradition as stewards of its preservation and as participants, important considerations include how specific costume elements are physically created, how these elements are represented and distributed within and beyond the community, what aesthetic and performative characteristics count as “authentic,” and what the contexts are within which the disfrazados appear. Preservation of the practice of the disfrazado has historically relied on knowledge transference about the tradition via oral, not written, sources based on the personal perspectives and expertise of community elders. This has shifted in recent years, however, with increased accessibility in cellular network coverage and internet service in the area, promoting an increased use of social media platforms and websites, such as YouTube, to document, distribute, and consume audiovisual information about the tradition among a seemingly ever-increasing online audience.

San Juan Mixtepec: Understanding Festival Practice in an Indigenous Migratory Community

To analyze how the disfrazados exist as both carriers and producers of cultural and social capital, it is first necessary to contextualize the community itself and its festivals, the social contexts within which they most frequently appear. When discussing the festivals of San Juan Mixtepec, many Mixtepequenses categorize them as invaluable community cultural traditions. Regularly
referring to them as costumbres, they often speak of the rituals, such as the despescuezada de gallos, the music of the chilenas, the dances, the feasts in the homes of the mayordomos, and, of course, the disfrazados, as some of the most noteworthy elements of these events. In general, the festival cycle of San Juan Mixtepec and its diaspora communities can certainly be defined as one of the most “traditional” cultural practices within the community. These festivals are steeped in rich symbolic meanings related to specific cultural knowledges and oral histories. Mixtepequenses remember and continue to honor this tradition of the celebration of festivals based, in large part, on their own childhood experiences; the stories their parents, grandparents, or even great-grandparents told them about these events; and a collective socioreligious obligation regarding their preservation. These ancestral and cultural connections are what also inspire many Mixtepequenses who live in diaspora communities located in other regions of Mexico or the United States to return periodically to San Juan Mixtepec specifically to participate in its festival cycle.

Although a clear majority of Mixtepequenses participate in some way in the traditional festival cycle, whether as mayordomos, spectators, or volunteers, this participation is contingent on a variety of factors, such as geographic distance, active socioeconomic ties to the community, and even religious orientation. The realities of Mixtepequense social life as a transnational migratory community directly corroborates the findings of anthropologist Joyce M. Bishop, who has suggested that “Latin American notions of communal identity, in which locale is symbolized by saints and other sacred figures, make the re-creation of contextually charged ritual dances in new settings difficult at best.” Participation by community members is indeed disproportionate and in many ways contingent on the participation of returned migrants. Although some individuals do indeed return to the community to complete these important social obligations, others consecutively repeat these positions because there is “no one else” to take on the role or avoid service altogether. A minority of Mixtepequenses are also members of the Church of Latter-day Saints and other Protestant religious organizations, precluding their participation in a variety of community events that are associated either directly or indirectly with the Catholic Church. For these groups, the festive celebration of the saints, which includes dancing, music, and, on some occasions, disfrazados, is considered idolatry and representative of pagan beliefs.

San Juan Mixtepec and Its Diaspora Communities

San Juan Mixtepec, known as Ñuu Snuviko or “Place Where the Clouds Descend” in the Mixtepequense variant of the Mixtec language (known as Tu’un Savi, meaning "Word of the Rain"), refers to both the cabecera (head) community of San Juan Mixtepec itself and the sixty-one outlying ranches and hamlets that make up the municipio (municipality) of the same name belonging to the district of the neighboring city of Juxtlahuaca, Oaxaca. The size of the municipio of San Juan Mixtepec is approximately 359,000 square kilometers, or over 8,880,100 acres, stretching over seemingly impassable mountain ranges where forests of tall conifers grow into the principal valley where the cabecera of San Juan Mixtepec is situated between the banks of the Rio Mixteco (also known as the Rio Grande) and a smaller tributary river known as the Rio Chiquito. According to recent census information, the population of the municipio of San Juan Mixtepec is 7,611 inhabitants, with over 93 percent of the municipal population self-identifying as Mixtec speakers.
counterparts has even provoked the destruction of saint images and the incineration of other religious objects present in some barrio chapels and has prompted the migration of these individuals to form majority Protestant barrios on the outskirts of the community, near where these churches are also located.


33. Steven T. Edinger, Camino de Mixtepec: Historia de un pueblo en las montañas de la Mixteca y su encuentro con la economía norteamericana (Fresno, CA: Asociación Cívica Benito Juárez, 1985).

34. Anonymous, interview by author, March 18, 2013, San Juan Mixtepec, Oaxaca.

35. Federico Besserer and Michael Kearney, eds., San Juan Mixtepec: Una comunidad transnacional ante el poder clasificador y filtrador de las fronteras (Mexico City: Casa Juan Pablos, 2006).

36. Cabecera municipal is the Mexican equivalent of a “county seat” and literally translates to “municipal head.”

The community is made up of six officially recognized barrios, or neighborhoods: San Miguel Centro, San Miguel Lado, San Pedro, San Sebastián, Barrio de Jesús, and Barrio Centro. One of the primary ways Mixtepequenses conceptualize belonging is through their natal affiliation with a particular barrio, which is also typically grounded in familial or ancestral lineages. The barrios of San Sebastián, San Pedro, and San Miguel Lado each have their own chapel, within which the saint images of San Sebastián, San Pedro, and Padre Jesús, respectively, reside. Barrio affiliation plays a key role in how Mixtepequenses participate in the mayordomía, in festivals, and in a variety of other social and political situations.

The cultural identity of San Juan Mixtepec also includes that of its diaspora communities, which reflect historical patterns of outward migration that began throughout the Mixteca Oaxaqueña region during the first decades of the twentieth century. Such factors as a general decline in agricultural productivity due to drought, erosion, and the increased sterility of the soil, coupled with a dramatic increase in population, political instability, and a depressed economy, resulted in Mixtecs from communities all over the Mixteca seeking other means of economic support, primarily, although not exclusively, in the form of transnational migration. Mixtepequenses began outward migration to the Mexican states of Veracruz, Baja California, Sinaloa, and Mexico City during the 1930s, establishing diaspora communities in these areas, which continue to prosper today. Seasonal or permanent migration to the United States in particular has been actively documented since at least the 1950s. Although many Mixtepequense diaspora communities have emerged over the years throughout Mexico and the United States, three stand out: Abasolo del Valle, Veracruz; Naples, Florida; and Kern County, California.

Abasolo del Valle is a mestizo (non-Indigenous) community where Mixtepequenses comprise a small portion of the general population. During the 1930s, the state government of Veracruz offered subsidized loans for farmers in the agricultural areas surrounding Abasolo del Valle, and Mixtepequenses began migrating there to “search for better opportunities for themselves and their families.” Despite having established themselves in Veracruz for almost a century, many Abasolo Mixtequenses continue to speak the San Juan Mixtepec dialect of Mixtec, dress in the traditional style, and retain many other cultural traditions, such as the chilena and specific culinary dishes. For many, although Abasolo del Valle is where they physically reside, they still consider San Juan Mixtepec as their ancestral home and the foundation of their cultural identity.

Naples is an intermediate-sized Gulf Coast city in the southern part of the state of Florida where Mixtepequenses have made their home for decades. To date, this diaspora community located in the greater Naples area remains highly influential in terms of remittances as well the actions of its migrants, many of whom return periodically to occupy community cargos and participate in the traditional festival cycle. The migrants of Naples work in a variety of occupations, particularly farming, landscaping, and construction. Although many of these migrant families permanently make their homes in Florida, there continues to be a vibrant socioeconomic and cultural connection between the members of this diaspora community and San Juan Mixtepec. Many of the smaller hamlets surrounding the cabecera municipal, such as El Llano and San Miguel Lado, are home to the families of migrants to Naples, and the landscape in these areas is dotted with multistory constructions built by these migrants for their families and for themselves for use when they periodically or permanently return to Oaxaca.

Another important diaspora community is found in two small farming towns, Arvin and Lamont, in Kern County. Here, Mixtepequenses have made their livelihoods primarily as farmworkers who labor in the surrounding orchards and berry farms that make up this highly productive agricultural region. The origins of this community primarily stem from migrants’ participation in the Bracero work exchange program, which was active in this area beginning in the 1960s. Mixtepequense migrants arrived in the area during the late 1970s, where they worked in the grape and melon fields as well as in local almond and olive groves or, as one interlocutor noted, “in whatever field paid the best.” As time passed and local economic opportunities continued, more Mixtepequenses arrived to work in other farming communities in the area. As of the writing of this article, at least three generations of Mixtepequenses call the Kern County area their home.

The Traditional Festival Cycle of San Juan Mixtepec

The traditional San Juan Mixtepec festival cycle consists of three types of festivals: thirteen religious festivals associated with the adoration of Catholic saints and virgins tied to mayordomías, several festivals that specifically honor Mixtec cosmological beliefs, and Mexican national religious and secular holidays. The festival cycle includes such performative elements as the disfrazados, the chilena dances, music, processions, and a variety of religiously syncretic rituals. As of the writing of this article, the Mixtepequense festival cycle includes the religious celebrations honoring saints and virgins organized primarily by the mayordomia, a festival that honors the beginning of the traditional agricultural cycle and the Mixtec New Year (carnival), and between three and four secular or civic festivals independently organized by the municipal government and other members of the community. The calendrical organization of these festivals intertwines the Catholic religious calendar following the events of the life of Jesus Christ with the Indigenous cosmological calendar, creating a story of planting, growth, harvest, death, and rebirth that frames many Mixtepequenses’ religious, economic, and social experiences throughout the year.

There are twelve mayordomías currently operating in San Juan Mixtepec, each caring for a particular saint’s image and organizing their corresponding festival. The individual saints celebrated by the mayordomías with festivals are: San Sebastián (January 19–20); Día de la Candelaria, also known as Día del Niño Jesús (February 2); Cristo (March to April, depending on the liturgical calendar); the Virgen de Dolores (March or April, depending on the liturgical calendar); Santísimo Sacramento, or Corpus Christi (late May or early June, depending on the liturgical calendar); San Juan Bautista (June 24–25); San Pedro and San Pablo (June 29–30); the Virgen del Carmen (July 16); San Miguel Arcángel (September 28–29); the Virgen de Guadalupe (December 1–12); the Virgen de la Soledad (December 17–18); and San José (December 12–25).

In Mixtepequense diaspora communities, migrants’ relationships to the traditional festival cycle center mainly on their participation in, or local interpretation of, the patron saint festival of San Juan Bautista. In Abasolo de Valle, Mixtepequenses who reside there regularly send cultural delegations to Oaxaca to participate in the San Juan Bautista festival; these delegations are made up of Abasolo community representatives and trained riders who showcase performances with Paso Fino horses, a local tradition from this part of Veracruz. These delegations are considered guests of the Mixtepequense municipal authorities and accompany them during public events throughout the duration of the festival. For many years, the Mixtepequense
government has also sent a delegation to Abasolo del Valle for their patron saint festival in honor of San José, which occurs in March. In years past, the delegation has included cultural performers who reenact different Mixtepequense cultural traditions, such as the wedding ceremony and carnival, which comes complete with performances from the disfrazados.

Participation in the festival of San Juan Bautista by members of the diaspora community located in Naples is generally characterized by trends of migrant return to San Juan Mixtepec (to a lesser extent, they return for other festivals as well). Such factors as the young age of the Naples diaspora residents (many are, as of the time of this writing, in their forties), the relative geographic proximity of Florida to Oaxaca, and the presence of an active network of remittances all contribute to these migrants’ notable participation in social obligations related to the Mixtepequense mayordomía, festivals, and local tequio projects. Although it is uncertain exactly how many migrants return to Oaxaca annually for the San Juan Bautista festival, it is nevertheless common to overhear Mixtepequenses speaking in English and talking about their lives in Florida during this festival. Mixtepequenses living in Naples do not celebrate a local mayordomía in their community, but local bands from San Juan Mixtepec do intermittently travel to Naples to perform chilenas at dances, weddings, and other events in the community.

The Mixtepequense diaspora community located in Kern County is unique in that it celebrates its own festival in honor of San Juan Bautista. This tradition began in the late 1990s when a replica image of San Juan Bautista was specially made for the community and transported by a local religious delegation from Oaxaca to California. Additionally, some migrants even continue to participate in the mayordomía, returning periodically to San Juan Mixtepec to fulfill these obligations. Although the residents of Kern County hold a strong nostalgic cultural connection with San Juan Mixtepec, most migrants from this community do not frequently return to Oaxaca, as in the case of Naples. Even those who return to participate in community events and serve in its social institutions note that their visits are usually limited to between two to three months in total during a given year, when traditionally a complete year of service is required. This has to do, in part, with geographic distance, overall expense, migratory status, familial obligations, and time away from work that can be spared, all factors that characterize the Kern County diaspora community more as an “isolate” community than those more actively connected with San Juan Mixtepec.

Ñana Chaas, Generic Tatsanus, and the “Authenticity” of Tradition

The concept of “authenticity” plays a large part in how the disfrazado tradition is practiced, what elements are considered “traditional” by participants, and how social and cultural capital are produced in the community. What authenticity means for participants depends on a multitude of factors, and the perspectives of Mixtepequenses on the subject are generally divided into discussions regarding the two primary socio-spatial contexts within which they appear: festivals and cultural performances realized beyond the festival context. However, what determines “authenticity” in a disfrazado has even more to do with its physical appearance and personality characteristics than with the performative context itself. “Authenticity” is a term that is most often used by members of the mayordomía, municipal authorities, or individuals directly associated with cultural conservation projects, as explored in detail below. For the public, however, “authenticity” is a fluid concept, reflecting both individual and collective imaginings of what it
means to be a disfrazado and what their presence symbolizes, underscoring what anthropologist Dimitrios Theodossopoulos defines as the “co-existence of different simultaneous understandings of the authentic—the negotiation of parallel authenticities in tension,” which appears to occur in San Juan Mixtepec.  

![Figure 1. Ñana chaas during the San Pedro festival in San Juan Mixtepec, June 30, 2013.](image)

This “tension” can be directly observed in the ñana chaa, or catrín, probably the most popular and easily recognized character in the canon of disfrazados (figure 1). The ñana chaa is regarded as the disfrazado whose physical characteristics cannot be altered in any way, due to the character’s supposed complexity and its symbolic status as a representative of the community’s unique cultural traditions. In diaspora, however, the ñana chaa appears in the Kern County festival of San Juan Bautista with a white coat and tails, instead of the traditional black uniform, because these costumes are usually purchased at costume stores in Los Angeles instead of being imported directly from Tlaxiaco. It is also easily the most popular disfrazado to interpret among participants and, for many, is representative of the identity of community itself. The ñana chaa is representative of a collectively shared history of social, economic, and cultural relations between San Juan Mixtepec and the neighboring mestizo city of Tlaxiaco, known as El París Chiquito, or “Little Paris,” due to a period of French immigration that occurred there during the French intervention of Mexico during the 1860s.  


41. Edinger, *Camino de Mixtepec*.  

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reinforced social interactions for centuries between Indigenous Mixtecs from San Juan Mixtepec and other communities, non-Indigenous mestizos, and French immigrants living in Tlaxiaco.

The ñana chaa costume directly recalls the collective memory of these diverse historical encounters.

When the French intervention occurred in Mexico, Tlaxiaco was known as “Little Paris” and felt very “French.” [The tuxedo jacket, tails, and slacks] were what the elites of Tlaxiaco wore during this time. So, the people made fun of them, because the Tlaxaqueños always made fun of the indios (Indians) from Mixtepec, and they were always fighting, so they used their own fancy clothes to make fun of them. The mask also imitates the blond beards [of the French residents of Tlaxiaco].

The ñana chaa costume also draws on other historical elements from sociocultural interactions between the people of San Juan Mixtepec and foreigners or perceived outsiders. The miner’s boots complementing the tuxedo coat and tails of the ñana chaa, for example, are indicative of a recollection about how members of an American-based mining company dressed; they worked in a local antimony mine located in the agencia of Tejocotes, San Juan Mixtepec, during the early to mid-twentieth century.

The specific elements of the ñana chaa costume include: a vintage pilot’s or captain’s helmet (black or navy blue); several bandannas to cover the face completely; a felt mask with cut-out eye and mouth holes and hand-painted with a variety of designs, including jaguar spots, and glued-on goat hair “beards”; a tie; a black tuxedo jacket with tails, colloquially referred to as a traje pingüino (penguin suit); a white cotton T-shirt; a vest; a belt; black tuxedo pants folded underneath and tied to the lower leg so they reach only slightly past the knee; long white socks; and miner’s or construction worker’s boots.

Ñana chaas also include musical accompaniments, such as a harmonica, on which they play a variety of songs that change according to the specific context. When dancing in the street moving to certain locations, for example, they play a “traveling” song announcing their impending arrival. This song is distinct from the one played when stopping and entering stores and public establishments to “refresh” themselves with bottled water or alcoholic beverages while talking to gathered patrons. There is a specific song for when the ñana chaa dance during the despescuezada de gallos, another for when they dance in the public baile after the ritual is completed, and yet another for when they “retire” for the evening after all the festivities have ended, their music dreamily filtering into the air as they disappear into the night.

Apart from their harmonica music, ñana chaas adopt specific vocal pitches, accents, and other ways of speaking that are unique to their character. They rarely speak in Spanish, primarily using Mixtec to converse with people they encounter. They use an extremely high-pitched tone while speaking rapidly, producing a hilarious, comically embellished form of speech that is immediately identifiable. Ñana chaas are almost constantly dancing, interchanging dance steps with high-pitched screams of “hi hi hi, ahahahahaha!” Their dance steps can best be described as exaggerated foot stomping, which creates bouncing motions that make the goat “beards” adorning their masks shake wildly up and down. Ñana chaas also often add twirling motions to their dances, which make the tails of their tuxedo jackets whirl. Often while dancing, and always
when playing the harmonica, ñana chaas also hold one arm behind their backs, keeping the other hand tucked in a fist underneath one of the jacket tails centered in the middle of their backs while making an exaggerated "bowing" motion at the same time.

Some Mixtepequenses conserve the disfrazado tradition as mask and costume makers, skills, exclusively patrilineal in nature, that were taught to them by their parents or close relatives. Nana chaa masks, for example, are created from round pieces of felt that are painted with different colors and motifs based on the artisan's imagination, although specific patterns, such as jaguar spots, are generally recognized as "traditional" adornments. To be "authentic," according to community elders, as well as civic and religious authorities, they must also include goat hair "beards," of which there should always be between five or seven attached. These masks are a valued part of the ñana chaa costume; without them, the costume is not a ñana chaa. Although other elements may change depending on the wearer, the masks have an immediately recognizable standard form. Produced by only a few male artisans, they are sold during festivals for between two hundred and four hundred pesos, depending on the intricacy of the design and the producer. A local resident in Kern County also imports them from Oaxaca for the Kern County festival, where they are sold to the public for approximately forty dollars each.

Because the disfrazados primarily appear during the traditional festival cycle, their activities are closely tied to those of the mayordomía. Mayordomía members are, in many respects, stewards of cultural memory and authorities on what practices are considered authentic. They demonstrate this during specific festivals, such as the festivals of San Pedro y San Pablo and San Juan Bautista practiced in San Juan Mixtepec and Kern County, respectively, where authenticity contests are commonly held. During these contests, prizes for the "best dressed," most "traditional," and "best dancing" disfrazado are awarded; these prizes can consist of such items as a bottle of tequila, gift basket, or gift certificate. These contests echo the emergence of an unofficial type of disfrazado, also known as tatsanu, where individuals dress up in masks and costumes that fall outside the canon of the four traditional archetypes. During carnival, the festival of San Juan Bautista, and the festival of San Pedro y San Pablo, these disfrazados are commonplace. One can easily spot the likes of George W. Bush, Che Guevara, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, the Hulk, Chucky, and Fidel Castro, among others, dancing alongside the other kinds of disfrazados. Those who embody generic tatsanus tend to do so because they cannot afford, have not purchased, or are not interested in acquiring the costumes necessary to perform the other characters, or because they do not possess the cultural knowledge or experience necessary to embody the other types of disfrazados. Women, adolescents, children, and visiting migrants typically, although not exclusively, dress up as these tatsanus.

The generic tatsanus' use of plastic Halloween-style masks and costumes automatically eliminates them from competing in the "best costume" contests, as do incomplete or incorrect representations of the traditional types of characters. Or, as members of the prize committee during the 2013 San Pedro y San Pablo festival announced during one such contest, "if you're wearing plastic masks, you can't participate. We are only giving prizes to the authentic chilolos here."

Mayordomos expressed a similar sentiment during the 2017 festival of San Juan Bautista in Kern County, when they requested that "anyone dressed up in a Halloween costume" leave the stage so that judges would not be distracted from evaluating the "real" disfrazados.
The existence of authenticity contests suggests that, although generic tatsanús have increased in number over the years and are not forbidden from participating in festival activities, it is unlikely they will ever be included as part of the formal canon of disfrazados. Furthermore, these activities prove that how the original types of disfrazados practice continues to matter to Mixtepequenses. Giving out prizes by judging dance steps, gestures specific to the characters, and costume elements reinforces this as well as the idea that disfrazados are potent vessels for the practice of Mixtepequense cultural traditions and situates the mayordomía as the prominent authority of what does or does not count as “authentic.” Those who dress up as generic tatsanús, however, justify their participation in several ways, with some simply regarding it as a “fun” activity that takes place during festivals, while others speaking more specifically to the fact that their personal lack of cultural knowledge regarding the traditional disfrazados directly influences their decisions.

Mixtepequenses outside the mayordomía also have specific opinions regarding the concept of “authenticity” as it relates to disfrazados. When the practice is taken beyond its original context—for example, when individuals portray disfrazados as part of cultural performances—some believe that the tradition runs the risk of becoming a “show,” a decontextualized theatrical spectacle well removed from its original cultural origins and significance. Transformations in the practice observed over time are also a sign for some that the tradition is changing and that important elements are being lost. Generations of Mixtepequenses have migrated away from the community, and generations more have continued to return to San Juan Mixtepec to participate in the festival cycle as disfrazados. However, the question remains as to how, and to what extent, Mixtepequenses engage with the established cultural or collective memory of these traditions.

Jorge López Bautista, a lifetime resident of San Juan Mixtepec and participant in various local musical conservation projects, touched on these issues when he discussed his observations of the practice changing over time:

> My grandfather told me that when you dress up as a catrín [ñana chaa], when you pick up the harmonica or another musical instrument for songs, there are different dance passes for the different songs, there are songs for when you go near where the women sell tortillas, there are different songs for when you are dancing in the street. And you have to yell, let out a good scream when you do it. And you have to be aware of how you dress, that you dress appropriately. Nowadays, it’s not like that. Young people just dress up like generic chilolos, and you can’t tell them apart. There’s no originality anymore, no authenticity in what is the catrín. The same thing is happening with those who dress up as women too… So this is my concern, that in fifteen or twenty years the tradition will cease to exist. Maybe they’ll continue the festival … but not the originality of the costume, not the real history of it. Everyday it’s disappearing a little bit more because migrants and the children of migrants come for the festivals, and they just want to dress up for a little while, and that’s it. But they don’t even have all the pieces they need to authentically represent the catrín. This is the risk, this is the concern, that one day it will all be lost.  

Indeed, generational differences and geographical distance affect the transference of cultural knowledge regarding the disfrazado tradition, thus influencing how community members think about authenticity. Community elders possess the knowledge and history of the tradition but may only speak Mixtec, have passed away, or live outside of the community, making them, in many ways, inaccessible. Some participants are simply not interested in learning the history
or the rules of etiquette associated with “properly” becoming a disfrazado, while others are interested in knowing more so they can more “authentically” practice the tradition. There also appears to be communication issues between elders and younger generations, including an absence of formal organization regarding community-level strategies for cultural preservation, as well as logistical problems related to geographical separation of the population in general. Furthermore, some Mixtepequenses are not interested in maintaining the tradition, stating that the festival cycle and such traditions as the disfrazados are “excuses for people to get drunk” and “are not as interesting or attractive as other festivals like the Guelaguetza.” These variable perspectives reinforce individualized practice of the tradition, one that is actively performed, embodied, and recognized as a valuable cultural discourse for many but also situated within the collective memory of the community and subject to generalized processes of forgetting.

**The Tatsanu, Natsanu, and Traditional Norms of Mixtepequense Social Organization**

In San Juan Mixtepec, the construction of social capital is grounded within the practice of traditional norms of community organization, commonly expressed through participation in the civil-religious hierarchy and tequio projects. Community elders are socially valued as authorities on these institutions and a variety of other subjects and generally regarded as respected members of the community and as the symbolic heads of families and households. The tatsanu (old man) and natsanu (old woman) are two types of disfrazados who represent these elders, typically appearing together as a pair, embodying an elderly married couple dressed in traditional Mixtepequense costume (figure 2). The costumes of the tatsanus reflect Mixtepequense gender roles, traditional clothing fabrication methods, the natural materials used in the mask and costume production, and the cultural importance of local mythology. Unlike the ñana chaas and ñana ñaas, becoming a tatsanu or natsanu is not meant to parody foreigners but is instead seen as an homage to the elders and traditional social organization in Mixtepequense society. As one of my interviewees stated: “You can’t dress up like a tatsanu to make fun of old people. No. Being a tatsanu is a tribute, a recognition and respect for the elders, who hold la palabra [the sacred word]. So, dressing up like a tatsanu doesn’t mean you’re making fun of them but instead honoring their place in society.”

48. Based on anonymous comments by spectators present during carnival, author’s fieldwork notes, 2013.

49. Tobón Chávez, interview by author.

![Figure 2. Natsanu and Tatsanu pair during carnival in San Juan Mixtepec, February 12, 2013.](image-url)
The tatsanus’s traditional costume speaks directly to the importance of cultural preservation present in this embodied practice. Masks specifically produced for the tatsanu are extremely rare. The traditional version is carved from the *pipi* or *colorín* tree (*Erythrina coralloides*), an all but extinct practice in the community. As of the writing of this article, no new masks are actively produced because the male artisans who made them are all very elderly. Masks that remain in circulation are prized as important historical testaments to this almost forgotten woodcarving tradition. Other masks tatsanus use include rustic versions made from plastic gasoline canisters as well as generic paper mâché and plastic masks with the face of an “old man” or “old woman” that are produced on a massive scale throughout Mexico.

The tatsanu archetype consists of the following characteristics: a sombrero (a straw brimmed hat); bandannas completely covering the face and head; a mask, either hand-carved from wood in the form of an old man with attached goat hair “beards” or made from plastic or paper mâché; a sarape, or wool poncho, woven with black, white, and gray designs specific to San Juan Mixtepec; a long-sleeved white cotton shirt, embroidered with red *nochebuena* (poinsettia) flower designs, traditional to San Juan Mixtepec; white cotton pants; a cane; and braided leather open-toed sandals. Although seemingly less complicated than those of the ñana chaas, tatsanus also have movements particular to their character. The tatsanu speak in a high-pitched voice in Mixtec, carry a cane, walk with their backs hunched, and even pretend to be blind in some cases. Sometimes, they walk with their arm around another disfrazado, typically a natsanu, pretending they need assistance to walk. When interacting with audience members or with the ñana ñaas (sexy ladies), the tatsanu sometimes flirt with them while carrying a baby doll, adopting a “dirty old man” character that highlights their supposed sexual virility and continued physical ability to father children at an advanced age.

The social activities of a tatsanu performed during a festival historically included jokes and playful games with the audience, especially with young unmarried Mixtepequense girls:

> The ancianitos would walk around with their jokes, predicting the future, and saying things like “Your grandpa has arrived,” “I’ve brought you money so that you can get married,” and things like that. Or, they would jokingly choose a girl from the crowd and offer her as a wife to someone. That was what it was about, making people laugh. Of course there were always one or two who said something offensive, but the majority of them were respectful with their jokes and didn’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings. Before, they would paint the faces of the teenage girls in the crowd. If they saw a pretty girl passing by and they had paint, they would grab her and paint her face black. And sometimes, the girls would get offended or hurt and their mothers would get upset and would chase the tatsanus down with a cane and hit them until they ran away. So, to some degree, being a tatsanu was risky!

The tatsanus have all but abandoned these practices, which many interpreted as an aggressive form of harassment, in favor of a more theatricalized performance they act out only with each other. Now, the tatsanus typically only chase after the natsanus, stealing the baby dolls they sometimes carry, and flirt with other disfrazados instead of directly engaging with members of the crowd.

The natsanu, the feminine counterpart of the tatsanu, frequently appears with her “husband,” often reprimanding him for his lewd behavior by acting like a “crazy” old woman. The
characteristics of the natsanu are: a rebozo (shawl) covering the head; bandannas to cover the face and head; an “old woman” or “grandmother” plastic mask; an embroidered blouse with traditional designs (typically a colorful combination of embroidered brocade floral or animal motifs and ribbons sewn onto the front of the garment in a row pattern); the nagua, the traditional pleated skirt of San Juan Mixtepec; a cane; a tenate (woven palm frond baskets women use to carry tortillas or other food items); and braided leather sandals. The natsanu also speaks in a high-pitched “old woman” tone in Mixtec and, like her counterpart, imitates the motions and movements of an old woman, walking with her back hunched and shuffling her steps while often carrying a plastic baby doll. When dancing, the natsanu typically dances chilenas with her partner, the tatsanu, imitating patterns of traditional gender relations present in Mixtec social organization.

Although tatsanus and natsanus regularly appear during the festival cycle, they are not as frequently interpreted by participants as the ñana chaas or ñana ñaaas. A general absence of knowledge about, interest in, and access to the masks and costumes necessary for interpreting these characters coupled with a categorization by many Mixtequequenses of these disfrazados as more “historic” representations reflects the realities of the social changes present in Mixtequequense familial and social organization today. Outward migration by members of younger generations has left palpable voids in the community’s traditional social hierarchy. Many families remain in San Juan Mixtepec while the predominately male members of their households migrate for varying periods of time. Household incomes also generally, although not exclusively, depend on economic remittances received from these male family members. Because of migration, some Mixtequequense elders even live alone, without the presence of caregivers or extended family members. This reality stands in stark contrast to traditions of multigenerational living patterns still present in San Juan Mixtepec and its diaspora communities and is a cause for concern for some elderly residents who fear dying alone.

Dialogue with community elders regarding cultural traditions is also an issue: transmission of these knowledges is oral, not written, and relies on younger Mixtequequenses actively interacting with community elders, primarily in Mixtec, as apprentices or archivists in order to document and preserve them.

Ñana Ñaaas and the Practice of Gender

The practice of gender in San Juan Mixtepec is firmly contextualized within binary cisgender norms. Open discussion or acceptance of homosexual, nonbinary, or transgender identities does not exist, although gossip, clandestine sexual and amorous relationships, and even acts of bullying actively situate individuals who never marry and/or never have children into these categories, whether they apply to them or not. The fourth disfrazado archetype, the ñana ñaa, also known as chicas sexys, or “sexy ladies,” uses the liminal context of the festival to play with the norms, tropes, and stereotypes associated with the practice of gender. While either a man or a woman may, theoretically, embody the other three types of disfrazado, women typically do not become ñana ñaaas because of the high probability of being groped or physically accosted by spectators. The personality of the ñana ñaa is specifically grounded in performed characteristics of burlesque sexual attractiveness, wantonness, lewd behavior, and scandalous clothing choices. Part of the fun in “flirting” with a ñana ñaa as a member of the public comes from the fact that,
underneath the risqué clothes and artificial breasts, they are usually men.

There are two types of ñana ñaas who appear during festivals. The first, the more “traditional,” has the following characteristics (from head to toe): a cowboy hat; bandannas to cover the face and head completely (this is the only type of disfrazado who does not wear a mask); a rebozo wrapped around the arms; the traditional women’s blouse of San Juan Mixtepec, stuffed with tissue paper or balloons to make artificial breasts; a nagua, or pleated skirt; calf-length socks; and miner’s or hiking boots (figure 3). This disfrazado does not have special speech patterns; tends to speak in a normal male voice; can dance with male or female partners, which include all other types of disfrazados; and makes a twirling motion when dancing so that her skirt and rebozo whirl.

The traditional ñana ñaa costume embodies the collective memory of the community in terms of social relations with outsiders as well as shifting social and gender norms experienced within the community and historical trends in Mixtepequense women’s fashion.

During the Mexican Revolution, women began using the nagua, and the blouses that we see now. Because, before, women’s clothing was made of sheep’s wool, and they used a white huipil, a white rebozo. After the revolution the women started changing the way they dressed, and the disfrazados also began changing the way they dressed to match what the women were doing. They covered their faces with bandannas, and by the ’70s and ’80s you began to see them using plastic women’s masks as well, and they would borrow their friend’s or girlfriend’s clothing so that they would have the appropriate skirt, blouse, etc., for their costumes. Just like with the ñana chaa, the finer the clothing, the better the costume.52

52. Tobón Chávez, interview by author.
The ñana ñaas also incorporate the use of miner’s boots as an homage to the Tejocotes miners. Over time, the ñana ñaas split into two groups: the traditional ñana ñaas and the chicas sexys, the second type of ñana ñaas. Although the chicas sexys are characterized as a raunchier, more contemporary version of the traditional ñana ñaas, both groups continue this long historical tradition of borrowing their friends’, relatives’, and girlfriends’ clothes and underwear for their costume, replicating feminine fashion trends that also speak to generational differences among Mixtepequense women.

The second type, the “sexy lady,” is the lowdest and most ill-behaved of all the disfrazados. These ñana ñaas have the following characteristics, though personal interpretations vary greatly: a synthetic wig; bandannas to cover the face and head; a plastic “baby doll” mask; diverse arrangements of bras, mesh body stockings, tube tops, and all manner of risqué upper body wear and lingerie stuffed with balloons or tissue paper to replicate the appearance of breasts; a mini skirt or skimpy dress; stockings or mesh hosiery; high heels; and a feather boa or other “feminine” accessories, such as satin gloves (figure 4). The ñana ñaas almost always travel in groups, flirting with the public and with other disfrazados as they go, simultaneously waving and blowing kisses with coquettish gestures while raising up their skirts, showing off their legs, and pulling down their tops. When a male “admirer” gets too close or gropes too much, the ñana ñaas typically slap his hands away in an exaggerated motion, yelling in high-pitched, feminine voices with a flirty tone for the assailant to cease and desist.

Parts of the diversion in the contemporary practice of the disfrazado are the anticipation, the associated processes of preparation, the final presentation of the costume, and, of course,
the reactions of the public. Every participant undergoes a process of extreme physical transformation, and many people who may normally be nervous or uncomfortable about wearing clothing that does not align with their personal gender or sexual preferences actively engage with these gender discourses via their experiences as disfrazados, specifically as ñana ñaas. Ricardo Martínez, a returned migrant who now lives and owns a small business in San Juan Mixtepec, reflected on this process of temporary gender transformation by recounting the first time he dressed up as a chica sexy during the festival of San Juan Bautista:

The first time it happened was in '96. I was dressed up as a woman and this guy comes up to me and says, “Hey, do you want to mount this horse?” I shook my head yes, and he got down. I was so nervous but I didn’t think twice about it and just got up there, and my skirt lifted up, and all the people were whistling at me! Hahaha! And then people came over and started touching my bare legs, and they didn’t let the horse move, because I was trying to get to where they do the despescuezada and they just kept messing with me and saying “Wow, what legs!” And you know what, they even started a bet about me afterward, because they weren’t sure if I was a real woman or not!

As indicated by Martínez’s story, the breaking of cisgender norms is not just limited to participants. The practice of the disfrazado represents an embodied encounter with members of the public that is not demarcated by spatial limitations, such as stages, barricades, or the like. Therefore, being a disfrazado becomes an intimate corporal experience for the participant as well as for the members of the public with whom they interact. In the embodied space of the festival, generations and genders mix as men dance and flirt with men dressed as women, women dress up as men and dance and flirt with women, and an endless number of other combinations and couplings arise that do not normally occur within any other public social context in San Juan Mixtepec. The practice of the ñana ñaa can therefore be said to be, on one level, somewhat of a mix between wholesome entertainment and gender-bending debauchery. On another, the ñana ñaas are used by some members of the community who identify as homosexual, nonbinary, or transgender to express themselves (albeit temporarily) in ways not traditionally or necessarily openly accepted by the community.54

Conclusion

This article has explored the embodied practice of festival tradition as a type of social remittance that (re)produces social and cultural capital and is indispensable for the practice of individual and collective identities for the residents and migrants of San Juan Mixtepec. The expression and variable interpretations of different discourses and knowledges via the disfrazados reflect the reciprocal nature and flow of information present in both the community of origin and its diaspora communities, as shown through the creation of different types of social and cultural capital expressed through a performative medium. The disfrazado is, therefore, a practice of tradition as well as innovation, one that helps shape senses of belonging for both residents and migrants.

The disfrazados form an essential part of the festival cycle and are, for many, representative of the identity of the community itself and its cultural traditions. The image of the disfrazado has even been exported beyond the original festival context, appearing not only in cultural events throughout Oaxaca but also as abstract illustrations that form part of the logo for San Juan

53. Ricardo Martínez, interview by author, October 11, 2013, San Juan Mixtepec, Oaxaca.

54. Based on my informal discussions with ñana ñaa participants during June 2013.
Mixtepec taxi companies, as miniature versions of the ñana chaa masks that hang from the rearview mirrors of many cars and trucks driving around San Juan Mixtepec and abroad, and even as tattooed images that adorn the skin of Mixtepequenses living in diaspora. Those who do not become disfrazados look forward to seeing them during the festival, and those who become them often do so not because they are formally educated in the practice but because of the sense of pride and excitement they experience in participating in such an integral part of the cultural traditions of their community.

The embodied practice of the disfrazados reveals that tradition is indeed a diverse and multifaceted concept for Mixtepequenses. The residents of San Juan Mixtepec and its diaspora communities rely on the continued practice of such traditions as the disfrazados to shape senses of who they are, even if they no longer reside in their place of origin. For many Mixtepequenses, the simple act of participating in or observing embodied practice, even if they are not familiar with the historical origins or the subtle intricacies of the characters, helps frame their experiences of belonging. Furthermore, although questions of authenticity figure into the practice of the disfrazado, the continued cultural preservation of this tradition in its many forms is what matters for Mixtepequenses, despite disagreement regarding how the tradition is practiced by individual participants.

For many Mixtepequenses, becoming a disfrazado or seeing them during festivals forms part of their imaginings of what comprises contemporary Mixtepequense identity. Being a disfrazado is a dynamic practice that influences and is influenced by the actions, attitudes, and perspectives of individual Mixtepequenses. The tradition reflects the variable life experiences of Mixtepequenses today, many of whom, although they may live in diaspora in other parts of Mexico or in the United States, actively maintain ties to their cultural heritage through embodied practice and/or a physical return to San Juan Mixtepec to participate in festivals and other community events. Many Mixtepequenses become disfrazados to create senses of belonging for themselves as well as others. The practice is, in essence, a way to demonstrate and approach what it means to be Mixtepequense through the celebration of Mixtec cultural traditions and the community itself. Therefore, “being” Mixtepequense entails, in part, the embodied practice of cultural knowledges, even if that body of knowledge is incomplete. Furthermore, the dynamic relationship between memory and forgetting present in the practice of the disfrazado tradition reveals the constantly shifting natures of identity and belonging on a larger scale. San Juan Mixtepec is an Indigenous community defined by the historically fluid movements of its members, and the nature of belonging, as evidenced by lapses and changes present in its cultural memory, reflects this fluidity. However, belonging is also defined by a stalwart adherence to the practice of tradition and “authenticity” in its many forms, such as the conservation of the San Juan Mixtepec dialect of the Mixtec language, the continued practice of festivals and disfrazados, and the maintenance of traditional forms of social organization, such as the mayordomía and other cargos. It is precisely within this space where the construction of cultural identities takes place and where individuals learn, practice, and reimagine what it means to be Mixtepequense in an increasingly globalized world.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Ivy Rieger received her doctorate in anthropology from the University of Colorado Boulder in 2015. She primarily specializes in theoretical questions related to practice, belonging, and performance among Indigenous groups in Mexico where she has conducted extensive ethnographic research focusing on festivals, rituals, cultural memory, and the production of identity. She is coeditor of the volume *These Thin Partitions: Bridging the Growing Divide between Cultural Anthropology and Archaeology*, published by the University of Colorado Press (2017). Rieger is a Level I investigator in the Mexican National System of Investigators (SNI) and currently works as a postdoctoral researcher at the Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas, Universidad Autónoma Nacional de México (UNAM).

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