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Indian Time, Walking as Mapping, and Decolonial Methodologies in Mixteco Geographies

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There has been an emerging shift by Indigenous geographers and non-Indigenous researchers to integrate decolonial methodologies into research protocols to challenge the Western Cartesian production of geographic knowledge across Native and Indigenous geographies. The commitment of geographic research with Indigenous communities must be to engage in a methodology guided by Indigenous temporality and Indigenous autonomous governance structures that allow the emergence of decolonial possibilities. This article extends the use of a decolonial research approach with Indigenous communities by applying it to Oaxaca, Mexico, in an Indigenous Mixteco municipality. I use a series of salient narratives from my field work in the summer of 2022 in a *pueblo* Mixteco to inform a decolonial method that engages with Indigenous normative governance structure (Altamirano-Jimenez 2020), “Indian time” (Blackwell 2023a) or Indigenous temporality (Curley and Smith 2024), and walking as map-making (Sletto et al. 2021) to suggest a decolonial Mixteco methodology with *pueblos* Mixtecos of Oaxaca, Mexico. I suggest that it is our responsibility as researchers, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, to uphold Indigenous governance across these differing temporalities and geographies, even once we leave the “field site” when dependent on Western academic timelines. **Key Words:** decolonial, Indigenous geographies, Indigenous temporality, Mixteco, Oaxaca.

For geographic research to serve and be of use to Indigenous peoples and their communities, there needs to be an upending shift in how research is designed and enacted among Native communities. More important, research must acknowledge the plurality of Indigenous intelligence, leadership, and self-determination (Richmond, Coombs, and Paulani Louis 2023). Yet, there exist countless examples of poorly conducted mapping projects of Indigenous communities led by Global North geographers that furthered foreign and Mexican settler-governments’ technologies of territorial dispossession and surveillance (Cruz 2010, 2021; Bryan and Wood 2015). Given this, there has been an emerging shift by Indigenous geographers and non-Indigenous researchers to integrate decolonial methodologies into research protocols to challenge the Western Cartesian production of geographic knowledge across Native and Indigenous geographies (Oslender 2021; Sletto et al. 2021). For an Indigenous method to emerge in geographic research, however, Indigenous knowledge, temporality, and sovereignty must be interstitially woven throughout and during the research process. More important, research protocols with Indigenous communities must align themselves to upholding the political project of decolonization (Tuck and Yang 2012) by harnessing decolonial methodologies (Smith 2021) as the vehicle to coproduce knowledge with Indigenous communities. This article extends the use of a decolonial research approach with

Indigenous communities by applying it to Oaxaca, Mexico, in Indigenous Mixteco¹ geographies. I use findings from my field work in the summer of 2022 to inform a decolonial method that engages with Indigenous temporality, walking as map-making, and Indigenous normative governance structure, to coproduce knowledge with *pueblos*² Mixtecos of Oaxaca, Mexico.

I situate this article among the series of dialogues within Indigenous geographies (Johnson et al. 2023; Richmond, Coombs, and Paulani Louis 2023) and decolonial geographies (Daigle and Ramírez 2019). Indigenous geographies influenced by Native and Indigenous scholars have assisted in encouraging scholars to refrain from reproducing an oversimplification of Native people’s engagement with gender, land, and colonial legacies of dispossession (Goeman 2013). Johnson and Larsen (2013) encouraged the use of Indigenous ontologies within research approaches to understand a vast array of experiences outside of Western temporality and understanding of space, that offer a “deeper sense of place” in Indigenous territories. Radcliffe (2017) and Radcliffe with Radhuber (2020) engaged in a discussion of “Indigenous” to explain categorical and spatialized relationships to geography in relation to settler-colonist nation-building in Latin America and the United States, making discerned efforts to challenge the use of discourse regarding decolonization. Thus, decolonization is, as explained by Daigle and Ramírez (2019), “a diverse and interconnected

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landscape grounded in the particularities of each place, starting with the Indigenous lands/waters/peoples from which a geography emerges, and the ways these places are simultaneously sculpted by radical traditions of resistance and liberation embodied by Black, Latinx, Asian and other racialized communities,” thus, “decolonial shapeshifts depending on the land you stand upon, including the differential decolonize desires layered into a place (Tuck and Yang 2012)” (2). Decolonial geographic method includes a wide range of engagements, from storytelling as grounded theory building (Million 2014), to challenging the colonial paradigm of extractivist research models (Rivera Cusicanqui 2012), to centering a community’s refusals to being incorporated into a settler-nation (A. Simpson 2014). Indigenous geographies and decolonial geographies are useful to this article to bridge Indigenous lifeways, epistemes, and community struggles grounded in Indigenous ontologies, as the foundations for creating decolonial methods that ensure liberatory and life-affirming research projects in Mixteco geographies.

In this article, I share my experience of engaging in my first summer research month as a first-year doctoral student in the Mixteco pueblo of Yucu Nduchi³ in the Mixteca Alta highlands of Oaxaca, Mexico. I situate myself as a diasporic Mixteca geographer, narrating how my insider and outsider experience as Indigenous diasporic kin as well as a researcher from a Global North institution, unravel the colonial past-present entanglements (Faria and Mollett 2016; Faria et al. 2021) that created friction in my experience in Mixteco geographies. I narrate a story bringing forth the initial rejections of my proposed research methods by the communal land-holding governing branch (*Bienes Comunales*) of the pueblo of Yucu Nduchi, as well as invitations by *Bienes comunales* to join them in *recorridos* (walking tours), to show the emergence of a decolonial method in Indigenous Mixteco geographies. I first bring into frame the Indigenous governance structure of *La ley del pueblo*⁴ in Yucu Nduchi, to explain the context of autonomy, self-determination, and communal land resource management that is central to the community’s efforts of Indigenous sovereignty. Second, I posit the initial experience of rejection by the Presidente Comisarado de *Bienes comunales*⁵ as not a direct repudiation of my proposed research in the municipality; rather, I focus on an instance of rejection as a direct practice of Indigenous autonomy that was situated in Indigenous temporality. I engage with Blackwell’s (2023a) “Indian time” to further complicate this rejection, as *Bienes comunales* shared a distinct experience with temporality that existed outside of my frame of reference as bound to institutional timeline from my university. Third, I explain how after my rejections *Bienes comunales regidores* instead invited me to join in on *recorridos* to

understand the Indigenous governance tenet of *asamblea*, the land-holding tenure system of Mixtecos, and intracommunal participation in *asambleas* with other pueblos. I use the experience of the *recorridos*, as the action of walking with Indigenous communities, as aligned with what Johnson and Larsen (2013), as well as Sletto et al. (2021), came to understand as embodied and performative acts of walking with collaborators through landscapes and storyscapes that assist in understanding place-based struggles. It is through the threading of these narratives that I offer the field of Indigenous and decolonial geographies, to consider how a Mixteco methodology necessitates a commitment to include Indigenous autonomy, temporality, and sovereignty every step of the way from the scale of the individual to the communal (Altamirano-Jimenez 2020; Blackwell 2023b).

Le Ley Del Pueblo

Located northwest of Oaxaca City, Yucu Nduchi sits within the floodplain foothills of the Nochixtlán Valley in the Mixteca Alta highlands. Blackwell (2023b) explained that in Oaxaca, “Among the 570 Oaxacan municipalities, 417 are governed by Indigenous normative systems, which are forms of governmentality that have resulted from precolonial and postcolonial formations mixed with state impositions and Indigenous negotiations” (148). The pueblo of Yucu Nduchi uses *la ley del pueblo* to describe their identity and government as a semiautonomous *pueblo originario*, Indigenous municipality. Most often in Zapotec (*Bene Xbon*) and Mixe (*Ayuuk*) territorialities, the word *comunalidad* is used instead of *usos y costumbres* to describe this embodied sovereignty that is intertwined with the Oaxacan Indigenous community’s relationalities to different dimensions of the living and nonliving (Aguilar 2020; Altamirano-Jimenez 2020). I use semiautonomous as it captures the complexity of both the right to self-determination that pueblos have used to manage their governments prior to fiduciary accords, as well as the spatial politics of recognition (Daigle 2016) they have engaged in, such as the plight of the 1995 Law of Indigenous Peoples in the Oaxacan constitution (Rivera-Salgado, Stephen, and Jonathon 2010), to negotiate their relationship to the settler-colonial nation of Mexico.

Although the ways in which the systems might vary slightly—for example, the number of years a *cargo* (one- to three-year government posts) is held or the dances that occur for the patron saint festivity—the key characteristics Indigenous pueblos of Oaxaca share are the *Bienes comunales*, *tequio*, *asambleas*, *cargos*, and *fiestas patronales* (Cruz 2010; Martinez Luna 2010). *Tequio* is collective communal work for the municipality (Altamirano-Jimenez

2020). This can be convened by the municipal president or by Bienes comunales to engage in communal activities such as the cleaning of the graveyard for Día de muertos, or infrastructure projects such as building a school or canal. In this article, I invoke la ley del pueblo not only as a sole governance structure, but also as an embodied sovereignty that grounds our relationships to land, subsurface and sky, river, and Mother Earth, as well as to living and nonliving relatives (Cruz 2010; Daigle 2016; Moreton-Robinson 2021). I emphasize asamblea, or general assembly, which is central to understanding the elasticity of ways community assemblies can be carried out to make collective decisions about the use of land, changes in communal municipal laws, decisions over pueblo citizenship and participation, and other negotiations of Indigenous collective power across Mixteco geographies.

On Indian Time in a Pueblo Mixteco

I lay the grounds for this story through my own position as a diasporic Mixteca geographer who is intimately bound to a pueblo Mixteco (Blackwell 2023b; Ybarra 2023), yet also occupies the position as a researcher training at a land grant/grab university located in Texas, United States (Smyth 2023; Curley and Smith 2024). Although in my pueblo, I can be identified by family name, lineage, and relationality to the municipality, I am still a diasporic child who is not yet a *comunera*⁶. I carry the lineage of my mother's participation in two distinct cargos within a pueblo Mixteco, however. By centering the transmission of my mother's cargos, and her passing on these expectations of my participation across spatial and temporal scales of transborder Mixteca activism in both the pueblo and in U.S. contexts (Blackwell 2016, 2023a), I situate my research as an Indigenous feminist (Goeman 2013) intervention committed to a decolonial praxis embedded throughout the research design and process. In no way do my identifiers absolve me from the complexities of this research, as engaging in field work complicates my body as positioned within a broader "colonial past-present" of research in the Global South (Faria and Mollett 2016; Faria et al. 2021; Smyth 2023). Yet these navigations of identity, self, and scales of power necessitate that I devise and employ methods that aim to challenge hegemonic forms of knowledge production by centering my community's autonomy through la ley del pueblo and Mixteco ontological understanding of temporality.

Given Yucu Nduchi's reliance on la ley del pueblo (noted earlier as the system of cargos, Bienes comunales, *tequio*, asamblea, and fiesta), I understood it necessary to undertake a participatory research design, where there needed to be a mediated consultation with the Bienes comunales along

with the municipal president in an asamblea (Cruz 2010). I intended to begin supporting community-grounded projects in the pueblo with the technical skills I could offer as a doctoral student geographer. From research carried out during my master's thesis, I stayed connected with several members of Yucu Nduchi through Whatsapp and phone calls, which facilitated me in receiving information about the changes to the Bienes comunales president comisariado in 2021. As I carried out research in Austin, Texas, through literature reviews, I aimed for my field work research in Oaxaca to begin in June 2022, after the end of my academic semester. I sought a virtual dialogue with the incoming president comisariado through Whatsapp while still in Austin, to tentatively plan a presentation date during an asamblea prior to my arrival. I was eager to present, as I had carried large-scale maps of Yucu Nduchi's territorial bounds downloaded from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography in my luggage from Austin to Oaxaca, with many other plans and visions of what could be achieved through participatory mapping methodologies and cartographic projects with youth and adults. Although there had not yet been dates set for my presentation to the asamblea, I arrived in Oaxaca expecting a meeting over asamblea in the days to come.

Although I maintained telephone conversations with the Bienes comunales president comisariado about potential methods, on arrival, I was quickly informed by the comisariado that given the inability to fully fill the twelve Bienes comunales seats, I was unable to present to the asamblea. The comuneros did not want to make decisions without the full number of positions filled. Initially, I processed this news as a direct rejection, leaving no place to understand it as an assertion of the community's decision-making power through the structure of la ley del pueblo. As a graduate student with the expectations of Western academic institutional time frames on grants and fellowships, I immediately had to devise another plan to move forward with research as I felt the pressure of the doctoral requirements reducing me to a limited view of how research is enacted in the field. These untenable and messy emotions temporarily cornered me to consider myself in a static position within the field through the colonial and binary lens of "researcher" and "subjects." In the immediacy of this rejection, I had yet to understand how it would lead to comprehending the negotiations of Indigenous temporality and autonomy in Yucu Nduchi. Unexpected to me, after my self-appointed rejection, the comisariado asked me to report to the municipality at 3:00 p.m. the following day to join the Bienes comunales on a *recorrido*.

As I made my way to the municipality offices on 27 June 2022, I expected to arrive and find the Bienes comunales team at the front offices ready to embark on the trek right at the top of the hour. As I

waited with the minutes passing, and no familiar face leaving the municipal hall, I became impatient with the information I was given. As I paced between the hall and the open-air meeting space that doubled as a basketball court, I vigorously calculated every passing minute. As a researcher, the time within my day differed from those of the municipality and the members that held cargos. Often, the cargo labor came at the end of the day, after all the duties of the *siembra* were finished. This is where Blackwell's (2023a) discussion of "Indian time," particularly of Mixteco municipalities, brings a rich discussion of Mixteco temporality. While as a researcher I would wake up at 7:00 a.m., put on a *café de olla*, work on a literature review, or respond to e-mails, the comuneros were on a different schedule. On the days I would join in the tasks of the *siembra*, I learned how in this municipality the temporality of the day would begin with the plot of *siembra*, where morning duties such as cutting alfalfa in the early dew to feed livestock, pumping water from the tributary for the *siembra*, or moving the animals from their posts to grazing areas, began as early as before the first rays of sun. When these early obligations are completed, these activities become cyclical throughout the day, as adults go to other jobs and children head off to school. Between breaks, the comuneros return to move the animals to other grazing locations and offer more feed. I explain this vignette to offer how the temporality of the day follows the temporality of the milpa, at the scale of the yearly change of crops, to the scale of the everyday (Blackwell 2023a). I theorize from Blackwell's (2023a) "Indian time" to think through the different temporal scales in Yucu Nduchi where she stated:

While there is not one "Indigenous time" ... These temporalities might include *pueblo* time, ancestral time, ceremonial time, the cycle of the milpa, and the ways migration compresses and mixes up time, as well as communal temporalities that cross borders and are intertwined with life cycles, capitalist-labor logics, dominant temporal frames, and even the racialization of temporalities as Indigenous/past, mestizo/present, and the struggle for Indigenous futures. (94)

In my pacing between the municipal hall and the plaza, fixated on whether I was too early, or they were too late, I had yet to comprehend the notion of Mixteco temporality. It was not until the municipal government doors opened, and between bustling laughter, teasing, and questions among comuneros I realized I was not too early, nor was anyone too late. By considering Indian time throughout this experience, as a researcher, I was forced to grapple with the relationship between the cargo, the milpa, communal temporalities, the relations between the

living and nonliving entities, and Indigenous autonomy within the same plane. It is necessary to bring in Curley and Smith's (2024) discussion on Indigenous time, and more important, their argument that "Centering Black and Indigenous time draws our attention to different kinds of politics and solutions, moving away technological fixes to revolutionary futures. It draws our attention to land back, abolition work, decolonization, and radical forms of climate justice" (14). By considering Blackwell's (2023a) earlier quote with Curley and Smith's (2024) provocative argument, I extend this argument to consider how Indian (Mixteco) time is the driver of an emerging decolonial method with Mixteco communities. By grounding *pueblo* time, milpa time, communal temporality, and cyclical times, Mixteco ontologies are the driving force of the time that a method can be employed, respecting and aligning itself with the autonomous decision-making power of *la ley del pueblo*. In the next section, I situate the *recorridos* as walks that not only engaged in the emergence of land-based pedagogies (L. Simpson 2017) but can produce community mappings through storytelling and walking (Johnson and Larsen 2013).

Walking as Mapping in Mixteco Geographies

I return to the reflection of the *recorridos* on 27 June 2022. Following the rumble of the Bienes comunales team exiting the municipal hall building, we quickly piled into the two-door pickup truck owned by the municipality for the Bienes comunales, beginning a drive through the contours of the eastern border between Sayutlepec and Chindua. By accompanying the several members of the Bienes comunales, I came to understand the territorial bounds of Yucu Nduchi as we conversed about the shifting topography, the built environment, the cycle of *siembra*, and the incoming development projects dotting the rolling hills. By opening the door and entering the two-door truck belonging to the municipality of Yucu Nduchi, I was entering a space of reciprocity to the community, which was meant to extend across time-space. I came to understand that the initial "no," this "decline" to present to the *asamblea* about a potential mapping project described earlier in this article, was not a move to keep me away, but rather an invitation to walk with, and to understand the grounded oral mappings of the community (Cruz 2021) through the storytelling, memories, and knowledge held at the scale of the individual comuneros to the overall Bienes comunales team. Sletto et al. (2021) implied that "the role of walking for the continual (re)making of participatory maps, specifically engaging with work in Indigenous methodologies to consider how an emphasis on performativity in map-makings may foster a post-representational perspective on

Indigenous cartographies" (611). Through these recorridos (walking tours) I engaged with the comuneros and regidores in the (re)making of maps as I was encouraged to ask questions, take photographs of the landscape, and offer my own stories of how I remembered the Mixteca Alta throughout time.

I continue with Sletto et al. (2021), who conceptualized how "the invitation to walk the territory [is] not merely extended for empirical reasons (to provide more or better data), or for leisure, or for spiritual purposes. Understood as a politico-territorial strategy, the invitations [are] intended to disturb the formal space of the participatory mapping project" (613). Through the individual stories shared with me as we traversed small sections of routes carved into the mountain, I learned about the tributaries that separated Chindua and Sayultpec from Yucu Nduchi, the communal grazing grounds for livestock, as well as the tensions of communal land use for state institutionalized development programs. These stories confided in me follow deep-seated ancestral oral mappings, many of which are passed on through ancestors, elders, and familial and communal memories. Zapotec geographer Cruz (2021) explained this as "Our oral world [which] represents a multiplicity of temporalities and memories that are flexible enough to fashion a collective narrative of community, a cartography of history, a map of the fabric of community" (22). It was within these recorridos, with narratives, stories, and reflections of place across time between comuneros of Bienes comunales, that I began walking through nonrepresentational mappings of Yucu Nduchi. It was along these walks that we broke from Western cartesian forms of mappings to instead allow for "other mappings" informed by autonomy and Mixteco temporal scales of time that gave meaning to the tracings across the landscape. Informed by the work of Goeman (2013), Sletto et al. (2021) explained, "a post-representational style of thinking also sheds light on Indigenous agency and the potentials of participatory mapping for 'decolonial spatial justice'" (623). For example, through our walking in recorridos, not only was I asking questions about the landscape between Chindua and Sayultpec, but comuneros were also questioning my interests, intentions, and participation in the pueblo during my stay there. They were able to ask me questions that would most often have been asked in asamblea, but through our walking, an informal assembly came to exist through this recorrido. This informal asamblea gave way to consider these participatory recorridos as the sites where the expectations of reciprocity and accountability with Yucu Nduchi would become mediated, toward decolonial spatial justice principles.

On 18 July 2022 I was once again invited to accompany Bienes comunales to a regional assembly in the municipality of San Andres Sinaxalta. By

entering the Bienes comunales truck, sitting in the main cabin of the interior, with five other comuneros, I was once again challenged with my own expectations of the unfolding of time across Mixteco geographies, and my position as researcher within the assembly hall of another pueblo Mixteco. Although I was not a comunera, and I did not hold a seat in Bienes comunales, I was invited by the comisariado and thus was granted access to a regional asamblea in the District of Nochixtlán. I participated in a similar fashion as if I were to be in Yucu Nduchi's. I sat on the edge of the balconies and not in the main center, to denote my body as not a direct participant who made decisions, but as another Mixteca listening in. Blackwell (2023b) described how Mixteca women have negotiated their participation in Indigenous governance structures through multiscalar processes and in unexpected places, especially in male-dominated asambleas, in which I found myself often. Through sitting, listening, and feeling the emotions between the comuneros in the assembly hall, however, I was actively witnessing the active intracommunal dynamics that allowed for more than fifteen Mixteco municipality's Bienes comunales teams to gather collectively to make decisions over the Indigenous futures of pueblos Mixtecos of Nochixtlán Valley's Mixteco geographies.

Conclusion

A Mixteco methodology thus must keep in mind asamblea, whether at the scale of the municipal or the regional, depending on the vastness of the project. A research process informed by "Indian time" (Blackwell 2023a) or Indigenous temporality (Curley and Smith 2024)—which can vary across community, municipality, or territoriality—offers more cyclical processes to take shape at the communal and regional scale. Presenting to the asamblea of a pueblo Mixteco might not only happen once, but several times throughout and after the research process and in different locations. It would take until August 2023, after another return to Yucu Nduchi at the end of yet another academic year of graduate studies, for me to finally become designated as a formal collaborator in reforestation and community planning efforts by the Bienes comunales regidor. I was provided a signed document with Yucu Nduchi's seal. This document's seal not only ratifies Yucu Nduchi as an autonomous pueblo Mixteco, but serves as a reminder of the time that research with Indigenous communities must follow. The stories presented through this article embody what Athabascan scholar Million (2014) suggested as the power of our quotidian stories as Indigenous peoples to provide a grounded theory that is informed by our epistemologies of self and community, especially

by those who are not ascribed as knowledge holders in institutionalized academic settings. The oral mappings shared with me by Bienes comunales comuneros, as well as the invitations and access to their governance system on their temporality, are the foundations for a Mixteco methodology to emerge.

I finish with the salient reflection that rejections also have the bandwidth to hold invitations as this space, when negotiated through Indigenous temporality in Indigenous geographies, is what facilitates Indigenous governance to give shape to the methodologies used for research. Indigenous governance is enacted in a multitude of ways. More important, the negotiations of rejection and invitation are forms of agency, autonomy, and self-determination. Informed by “Indian time” (Blackwell 2023a), decolonial geographies emerged through a praxis where the Bienes comunales comuneros, and me as interlocutor, engaged in dialogues about the possibilities of research in Yucu Nduchi, the methods that should be enacted, and the Indigenous knowledge systems that must drive the research (Daigle and Ramírez 2019). Our responsibilities as researchers, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, thus become to uphold Indigenous governance across these temporalities and geographies, even once we leave the field site when dependent on Western academic timelines. In sum, the commitment of Indigenous and non-Indigenous geographers conducting research with Indigenous communities must be to engage in a methodology guided by Indigenous temporality and ontological systems of being that affirm the multitudes of decolonial autonomies and possibilities. It is through the dialogues, invited walks, and oral mappings with Bienes comunales that a decolonial methodology emerged from what Mixtecos of Yucu Nduchi were already building in their Mixteco territories. ■

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Notes

¹ There is a vast range of variations that are used to signal the multitude of Mixteco identity—such as *Da'an Savi*, *Na Savi*, *Ñuu Savi*, and *Ñuu Davi*, among others—for this article, I use the term *Mixteco* as this is the preferred term of the municipality in which this research was carried out.

² Both Blackwell (2023b) and Ybarra (2023) suggested to not translate *pueblo*. Although it translates to nation or ethnic community, or village, the signifier of *pueblo* is a politicized relation to a collective Indigenous identity. I use this definer as a reason to also refuse to translate the term.

³ In *Tu'un Savi* (Mixteco language), *Yucu* means mountain, and *nduchi* means bean. The original name of this municipality is *Yucu Nduchi*, or “mount of bean.” Although now marked by a Nahuatl name along with a Spanish Catholic patron saint, in this article I choose to refer to this *pueblo* originario by its original *Tu'un Savi* name.

⁴ *La ley del pueblo* has variations across distinct Indigenous municipalities in Oaxaca, such as *usos y costumbres, communalidad* and *pueblos de cargo y tequio*, among others.

⁵ The Presidente Comisarado de Bienes comunales is the title for the president of the Bienes comunales team.

⁶ *Comunera/o* is the title of the communal land-holding member who can vote in decisions over communal lands during assembly. The manner and roles of who is designated a *comunero* ranges from *pueblo* to *pueblo*.

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