

Community Museums and Global Connections: The
Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca

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In this paper we will attempt to discuss three points: first, how globalizing processes have impacted rural, indigenous communities in general terms; secondly, how we can comprehend community museums as one of the multiple strategies communities have developed to resist imposition and strengthen their own culture in the context of globalization; and thirdly, how local community museums have become a vehicle for international and global connections. To illustrate this last point we will develop a brief case study of the of the Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca, an association of nineteen villages in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, that grew out of exchanges on a state level, and subsequently promoted the development of networks throughout Mexico and several countries of America.

Globalization.

Recent global changes, such as the transformations springing from the gigantic world market, the increasingly complex division of labor, the accelerated development of means of transportation and communication, and the concentration of immense resources and power in the hands of a few nations and corporations, have led to radical changes in the relationships between different cultures and societies. ⁱ The Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Velho asserts that different cultures were affected by external variables that in many cases were enormously harmful and destructive, as they acted upon their physical environments, traditions, and values. As a result, in the last two centuries, hundreds of traditional and tribal societies were destroyed or seriously damaged. Jason Clay of the human rights group Cultural Survival, offers a summary of this situation, as he states:

"The outlook for indigenous peoples, who number 600 million worldwide and live in more than 5,000 groups, is deteriorating. In excess of 5.5 million tribal people have been killed as the result of warfare waged by their own governments since World War II, and 150 million have been displaced. This century has witnessed more extinctions of native peoples than any other." ⁱⁱ

Development experts demonstrate, such as Kevin Healy does for the case of Bolivia, that globalization has brought indigenous communities under tremendous strain, as unemployment and underemployment grow, income distribution is remaining the same or worsening, domestic markets are flooded with imported agricultural goods that local producers cannot compete with, and migration rapidly escalates. Easy access to Western artifacts contributes to cultural homogenization, and migration erodes local cultural identity. On the other hand, there are some global trends that offer limited economic opportunities to local indigenous communities. For example, wealthy societies have grown to value indigenous designs, intricate craftsmanship, and organic produce. There is also an expansion of small adventure travel, ecological and community tourism. ⁱⁱⁱ

Nestor García Canclini has a somewhat different focus. He defines globalization as a stage of history that took shape in the second phase of the 20th century, in which economic, financial, communicational, and migratory processes converged, accentuating the interdependence between vast sectors of many societies and generating new dynamics and structures of supranational connections. He argues that globalization heightens international competition and dismantles endogenous cultural production, favoring the expansion of cultural industries that have the capacity to both homogenize and attend to diverse sectors and regions. It destroys or debilitates inefficient producers, and concedes to peripheral cultures the possibility of remaining encapsulated in local traditions. In a few cases, it offers these cultures the possibility of becoming stylized and disseminating their music, festivities, and culinary traditions through transnational companies. ^{iv}

García Canclini considers that the central dilemma is not between the defense of local identities and the acceptance of globalization. He argues that the challenge is to understand the opportunities of action and being with others, how to face heterogeneity, differences and inequalities. More than confronting "essential" identities with globalization, he proposes to explore if it is possible to construct subjects in expanded social structures. "It is true that the greater part of current production and consumption is organized in scenarios we do not control, and often do not even understand, but within the tendencies towards globalization, the social actors can open new interconnections between cultures and circuits that catalyze social initiatives."

As García Canclini goes on to discuss who the current social actors are, he includes NGOs that link distant local movements, networks dedicated to the "negotiation of diversity," and civil organizations that project the perspective of peripheral societies on a transnational scale. I think however, that he does not sufficiently acknowledge that many such networks and organizations are mobilized precisely by the defense of diversity, by the defense of specific cultures, not as ideal "essences" but as dynamic ways of life. Are not members of local cultures and subcultures important social actors of the future? Diverse cultures are demanding respect for their own projects and visions of the reciprocal influences and interactions they wish to participate in, and will have an impact on the kind of globalization that will develop in the years to come.

By emphasizing the need to comprehend interdependence, heterogeneity, and the complex transmutations between global and local dimensions (how the global is stationed in each culture and the local tries to survive in exchanges that are becoming global), García Canclini downplays the role of contradiction and struggle. We think it is useful to consider the notion of civil society developed by Antonio Gramsci, as Ivan Karp proposes. He

asserts, "civil society includes...the social apparatuses [families, voluntary associations, ethnic groups and associations, educational organizations, etc.] responsible for providing the arenas and contexts in which people define, debate, and contest their identities and produce and reproduce their living circumstances, their beliefs and values, and ultimately their social order." Karp clarifies that the process of social reproduction and education is not always harmonious and benign. Class, ethnic, and racial conflict is a basic characteristic of civil society. We can visualize civil society as "a stage, an arena in which values are asserted and attempts at legitimation made and contested."^{vi}

In this sense, globalization can be seen as the expansion of the relations of civil society to global dimensions. On this global stage, agents of wealthy industrialized societies have enormous resources to expand the consensus around their own social ideas and moral values. But other cultural groups, including indigenous communities, contest these ideas and struggle against the imposition of identity. Perhaps many agents of industrialized societies relate to traditional, indigenous communities of peripheral cultures as a new kind of commodity that can be stylized and marketed through their exotic expressions in music, festivities and cooking. But these communities have a different vision of themselves. Wealthy industrialized societies expend significant resources attempting to direct the processes of social change throughout the world, but diverse societies and communities have different values and projects of the future they would build for themselves, and propose to others as well.

Paradoxically, while globalization has contributed to the destruction of indigenous communities, as they are increasingly dispossessed of their territory and resources, increasingly marginalized or transformed into commodities, it also increases their access to new tools to impact global awareness and defend their integrity.

On the one hand, globalization has made possible the transference of technology for communication and cultural expression to local communities on an unprecedented scale. The use of the world wide web to mobilize public opinion, the development of community radio, indigenous video programs, and community museums all offer examples of the appropriation of western technologies by local communities. Projects using web-sites include fascinating cases, such as the Ashaninkas, composed of 50 indigenous villages at the mouth of the Amazon jungle in Peru, who organized their own internet server and website to tell their story, using web-based educational tools and village internet kiosks to enable small villages to communicate with one another.^{vii}

On the other hand, globalization has made possible the development of networks of local communities and social organizations that never existed before. It has facilitated communication between remote communities and made it easier for them to identify with one another. New international organizations are being created. For example, Via Campesina is an international peasant union uniting farmers, rural women, indigenous groups and the landless. It has members in France, Brazil, Thailand, India, Bangladesh, Ecuador, New Zealand, Mexico, Colombia, and Nigeria, who belong to organizations such as the French Confédération Paysanne, the Landless of Brazil (MST), and the Karnataka State Farmers' Association.^{viii}

Community museums.

Community museums are a good example of the imaginative strategies communities have developed to sustain their culture, appropriating tools for cultural preservation and expression originated in a different context. A cultural institution created by the dominant classes of 18th century Europe, the museum is transformed as it comes into the hands of different social agents. However, to clarify some the challenges of a community museum, it is helpful to re-examine the idea of community.

The concept of community is vague and problematic. Hector Tejera Gaona points out that many of its constituent elements appear in romantic, conservative reactions following the French Revolution. What was perceived as social upheaval and chaos was contrasted with a period of idyllic order and harmony, in which non-industrial communities were sustained by unifying beliefs in family and religion. He traces from Bonald and Maistre to Comte and Durkheim, how romantic and non-historical perspectives were adopted in Anthropology and Sociology. In searching for a world apart from modern society, tribal, peasant and indigenous societies were portrayed as the "other", communities that represented harmony, solidarity and the absence of conflict. In this way the concept of community was constructed as a utopian ideal, outside of history.^{ix}

The idea of community has been manipulated to justify policies and power structures. In Mexico, for example, "colonial and modern state policy of isolating communities and reinforcing the importance of locality has limited the possibility for regional movements of ethnic autonomy." ^x In this volume, Ciraj Rassool points out that "community was defined in racial and ethnic ways through the workings of the state and its apparatuses. Even when understood in geo-political terms to refer to localities and neighbourhoods where people

lived, it was racialised because of the operation of racial legislation."^{xi} In Mexico, the state has used the concept of the indigenous community to propose new legislation that recognizes the rights of small, local communities while refusing to consider the rights of indigenous peoples.^{xii}

However, we think it is possible to argue that as a tool for constructing a site of engagement and contestation, the idea of community has retained a great deal of significance and power. As "an imagined identity of communality and interest"^{xiii} it is often the most direct reference for what people sense is worth defending, and becomes the center around which many of the greatest social struggles and commitments emerge.

The concept of community is the touchstone for a tradition of grassroots struggles and organizations in many parts of the world. In South Africa "community was also the focus of anti-apartheid mobilization, particularly in the 1980s, which saw community organizing emerge as one of the most decisive 'sites of struggle'."^{xiv} The "comunidades de base" (grassroots communities) promoted by advocates of the theology of liberation movement were the catalysts behind popular organizations all throughout Latin America since the 1970s. In Mexico, the idea of community has been appropriated by small rural, and especially indigenous, populations, and is the term they use to define themselves.^{xv}

For us, a community is a group that shares a territory, a common history and a memory of its history. Its constituents have a common experience of constructing meaning and a way of life. It is a group capable of collective action in the interest of its members, capable of developing initiatives and struggles to contest those who act against its interests.

The concept of community museum we propose builds on the idea of community as a site for contestation and struggle. As communities contest the imposition of cultural practices and values, the museum becomes a useful instrument. George Orwell has said,

“Whoever controls the past, controls the future; whoever controls the present, controls the past.”^{xvi} The community museum is a strategy for communities to control their future by controlling their past. To control the past, communities take action regarding their cultural heritage. They struggle to possess their material heritage, which has often been expropriated by private or public agents. They struggle to preserve their own symbols and their own meanings, and to legitimize these meanings through the museum. The histories and memories that are not told in official textbooks come to life. As the process of collecting and representing stories develops, the community museum also becomes a vehicle for a collective process of interpretation, through which new elements of debate and consensus are created.

The museum requires the community to make decisions: decisions about what the museum will speak about, how its contents will be represented, who will organize and direct it, even where it will be built. These decisions require the community to strengthen and expand consensus-creating mechanisms, reinforcing forms of self-government and community engagement.

In this sense, far from being posed on the absence of conflict, the community museum can be understood as a dynamic tool communities use to create consensus and manage conflict from within, as well as a method to resist imposition from the outside.^{xvii} . In general, it reinforces the group's capacity to be a community, to imagine its identity collectively, and to project its imagination in action.

For the community museum is a platform for a wide variety of actions that respond to community needs. The museum can develop effective ways to engage and educate children and young people, strengthening their bonds to community culture, and offering new skills for creative expression. The museum can contribute to the revitalization of a great variety

of cultural traditions, including dance, music, and native languages. The museum can make diverse forms of training available and provide skills that allow community members to develop projects that respond to their own needs and aspirations. The museum can become a window through which the community relates to other communities, carrying out cultural exchange and building networks to impact diverse projects and policies. Through the museum a community can organize services for visitors, designed by community members, in a respectful and orderly exchange, instead of remaining an object of consumption by commercial tourism agencies.

While the museum re-builds community from within, it also strengthens community resistance to pressures from without. It is difficult to appreciate the dimensions of this task of without remembering to the almost overwhelming challenges involved. As already pointed out, globalizing processes have seriously compromised the economic sustainability of local communities, disarticulating community life and values. National institutions reinforce instead of counteracting this process and the centralization and power and wealth continues. The proposal to create a museum is part of a strategy of community resistance.

Resistance implies the mobilization of important resources. In the museum, material heritage, collective property, the effort of its members through community service, and a reservoir of traditional knowledge, is channeled to sustain the collective existence of the community at a moment of accelerated change. But to re-build community means to re-imagine the future, and in the museum a central challenge remains to contribute new visions and skills to make that future possible.

The Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca

One element that can help construct skills and provide vision for the future, is the development of networks that link communities with common interests and enable them to act jointly. In this sense, community museums have been able to generate regional, national, and international connections. These networks allow communities to put their own experience in a wider framework and develop projects that go beyond the strictly local dimension. The challenge is to create networks that allow local communities to exercise ownership over regional, national, and even international projects, and at the same time to nourish their community base and capacity to respond to local needs. To illustrate this point we will develop the case of the Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca, an association developed by a group of indigenous and mestizo communities in the state of Oaxaca, in the South of Mexico.

Oaxaca is one of the most mountainous states of Mexico, somewhat smaller than the country of Guatemala, with great biodiversity and multiple ecosystems. Of its population of 3,400,000, 49 percent belongs to indigenous communities, who have been grouped into 15 different ethnic categories according to the native languages they speak. Oaxaca has 570 municipalities, a fourth of all the municipalities in Mexico. The majority of the state's population lives in small communities of less than 2,500 inhabitants.^{xviii}

Oaxaca is considered one of the poorest states in Mexico. The indicator of poverty used by the Mexican government shows that 80 percent of the population is considered poor or very poor. In 2000, more than half of the working population earned less than a minimum salary (around 4 dollars a day). The majority of the active labor force in Oaxaca is

employed in agriculture, primarily for subsistence. Most farmers work small plots of less than five hectares (about twelve acres) and struggle annually to meet their subsistence needs. The average number of years of formal education is 5.9, much less than the national average, 7.8 years. Illiteracy is estimated to be around 22 percent. ^{xix}

Approximately 1,000,000 people have migrated from Oaxaca to other states in Mexico, the USA and Canada. It has been estimated that 20 million dollars were received in remittances during 2000 in the region of the Central Valleys of Oaxaca alone, an amount that represents five times the investment of the federal government for the same period. ^{xx}

Although such a significant proportion of the population is highly mobile on a national and international scale, the indigenous population of Oaxaca has an extremely localized sense of community and ethnic identity. The political fragmentation of Oaxaca through the colonial and post-independent actions of the state and the national policies in the 20th century aimed to integrate the indigenous communities in an isolated fashion have contributed to this development. ^{xxi}

Today, the indigenous community of Oaxaca is a group of families linked by blood and ritual kinship who have inhabited a common territory for hundreds of years. Their inhabitants identify themselves as members of their community who share the culture of their ancestors. Families are linked in an intricate web of reciprocal relationships. Each family possesses a plot for their home and a plot for cultivation, but the lands are communal property. The land is not only an economic value but a sacred space linked to supernatural forces that community members interact with individually and collectively. ^{xxii}

To be a member of the community, it is not enough to have been born there. One must repeatedly show the will to fulfill community obligations, in communal government, communal labor, and communal celebrations. All adult men, as heads of households, have

the obligation to participate in the village assembly, which is the main decision-making body. They also must fulfill the cargos, or positions of civil and religious responsibility. In Oaxaca, over 400 of the 570 municipalities have chosen to elect their municipal authorities through customs and usages, which means that the cargo system extends to all the positions of civil government within the municipality. But not only the municipal authorities fulfill cargos; there is also a large group of committees elected by the village assembly that must create and sustain diverse community services. There are committees to support the public schools, the health clinic, public works and so forth. In this way there can be almost 200 heads of households performing community service without any pay in towns of 600 families. ^{xxiii}

We began working with indigenous communities to create museums in 1985, as social anthropologists working for the National Institute of Anthropology and History of Mexico (INAH), the federal agency in charge of the research, conservation and dissemination of the cultural patrimony of the nation. Most of our background was in formal and informal education, focusing on Anthropology as a tool for community development. In 1985 the community of Santa Ana del Valle requested the support of INAH to create a community museum. We responded to their request and began working in this field.

There was already a federal program of INAH to develop community museums in existence, but it was not operating in the state of Oaxaca. We learned about its methods, that had been developed from the experience of "Casa del Museo" of the National Museum of Anthropology and History from 1972 to 1979, and the program of "school museums", also initiated in 1972. From our point of view, the great disadvantage of this program was its top-down promotion methods that frankly contradicted its stated objectives. Although it claimed to represent the cutting edge of the "new museology" in Mexico, it trained

elementary school teachers to select appropriate communities and convince them of the benefits of a community museum, without attention to community initiatives or strategies to construct grassroots community organizations.^{xxiv}

We decided to continue in an independent fashion, and began to develop the community museum program of Oaxaca by supporting the communities that manifested their own interest in creating museums, guiding them in a process to build consensus and organization around the museum project, and offering academic and technical assistance together with our co-workers at INAH, archaeologists, exhibition designers, restoration workers, and staff of the regional museum. Since 1987 we have been the only personnel of INAH dedicated to the program in Oaxaca on a full-time basis: our colleagues collaborate occasionally as their work- load permits.

The interest in community museums in Oaxaca grew very rapidly. Although few inhabitants of the communities had ever been to a museum, commerce and migration were creating opportunities to see the Regional Museum of Oaxaca, an impressive facility presenting the archaeology and ethnography of the state, and the National Museum of Anthropology, an internationally famous museum for its dramatic presentation of Pre-Colombian artifacts. Archaeological excavations carried out in San José Mogote, San Martín Huamelulpan and Santiago Suchilquitongo also fueled interest in these communities. Fortuitous discoveries of archaeological remains was very frequent, as it is today, and communities began to demand that these artifacts remain in their possession, instead of becoming part of the collection of regional and national museums. The possession of extraordinary historical documents from the colonial period, and the need to reconstruct the history of land tenure, also triggered interest in many communities. These

concerns were complemented by a growing desire to attract tourism, which was quickly expanding in Oaxaca.

Over the years we developed a methodology to enable these communities to create their museums. We envisioned the first stage to be focused on developing the basic consensus around the project and the establishment of a team of community representatives to plan and coordinate its activities. A second stage includes orienting the team to construct and manage the project, while continuously identifying segments of the community and strategies to involve them. In this phase, fund-raising, the adaptation of the building, and a participatory process to research and design of the exhibits are central elements.^{xxv}

In Oaxaca it quickly became apparent that to develop consensus around the museum project it was necessary to establish direct links to the fundamental decision-making body (the village assembly) and to traditions of local self-government (the cargo system). Decisions concerning the museums are brought continuously to the attention of the village assemblies. The assembly determines the themes to be addressed and the building to be occupied, as well as dealing with any specific conflict that might arise. Assemblies together with municipal authorities promote campaigns for donations to the museums, agree to dedicate "tequio" or days of collective community labor to the museums, and hear the museum committee's proposals and reports. Village assemblies also call to account people who are reluctant to preserve historical objects and sites, individuals who try to obtain personal gain from museum projects and committee members who spend funds in a fraudulent manner.

Throughout this process the museums are developed and directed by museum committees established in the same fashion as all the other village committees.^{xxvi} By their appointment through the cargo system, the museum committees are constituted as

legitimate community representatives, with the moral authority to invite and engage community participation.

At the same time, the museum committees reflect the patterns of exclusion that are practiced in the community. For example, the committee members elected by the assembly are most often men, as men are still considered the heads of households and responsible for performing community service through the cargo system. This pattern is changing as women gain greater access to education, and as they become heads of households when their husbands migrate.

Throughout the process of developing the museum we work with the committees to implement methods to include individuals of different age groups and community organizations in the creative and technical tasks of the museum. These methods include planning techniques, strategies to organize festivals and events, organization of meetings and workshops that enable community members to participate collectively in choosing and collecting objects, in researching and analyzing their history and culture, and in representing their stories creating drawings, murals, photographs, scale models and life-size installations. In this process the participants have the opportunity to become dynamically engaged, strengthening and developing direct, personal bonds to their collective identity. They also have the opportunity to share a learning experience, to take distance and collectively analyze the elements of community unity and conflict through a process of creative interpretation.^{xxvii}

Since the themes represented in the museums are chosen through a series of community consultations, the exhibitions are very diverse. However, all of the fifteen museums, except one, include a section on the Pre-Colombian past, since this theme remains one of the communities' fundamental interests. The exception was the museum of Natividad, Ixtlán,

which the community chose to develop around the history of their gold mine and the miner's union. Since all the museums, except Natividad, include two or three exhibitions, there is a wide variety. For example, there is an exhibition concerning a period of the Mexican Revolution (1915-1920) in which the community of Santa Ana del Valle was practically destroyed, and the process of resistance to the federal troops. There are exhibitions concerning the struggle to possess the land of the hacienda, or the history of conflicts over land tenure with haciendas and neighboring communities. There are many exhibitions on folk art, the weaving with the Spanish loom, back-strap weaving, basketry, stone carving, palm-leaf weaving. There are exhibitions explaining the institution of the *mayordomía*, an important community resource to sustain the *fiesta*, on traditional medicine, and a very particular exhibition on the “*Gal ruuchi nia sa guili*”, translated from zapoteco as the "wedding with music", created by the community of Teotitlán del Valle to represent their traditional weddings.

Once the museum is open, it faces the challenge of translating the vision of that has been collectively represented into concrete actions that continue to strengthen and re-create the community. In Oaxaca the museums carry out a variety of initiatives and grassroots projects. The museum committee continues to play a critical role: their members direct, administrate, open the museum to the public, and create projects according to the work plan they establish at the beginning of their term. We offer them guidance and training to fulfill this role.

The initiatives and projects have been very diverse. A large part of the museums' projects have developed around cultural revitalization. Museum committees from several villages have identified the need to revitalize traditional dances, and established dance groups that involved up to 40 young people over several years, training and performing

within their community and other locations. Others have carried out oral history workshops and created temporary exhibits to revitalize traditional medicine and traditional knowledge used in crafts. Several museums have supported traditional music by organizing groups, celebrating festivals and donating instruments. Two communities have organized festivals around traditional cooking, and another two have organized workshops to revitalize the use of their native language, by training young people to write legends in mixteco. Several museums have developed radio programs and projects to create videos to document and disseminate traditional culture.

Another group of initiatives is related to income-generating activities. Eight of the fifteen museums present exhibitions describing the history and social impact of different forms of folk art, that the communities use to promote the sales of local products, either directly from artisans or through the museum store. Temporary exhibitions of folk art have traveled and generated sales in several states of Mexico and in the South of California. In one community, a traveling exhibition motivated a group of artisans to set up a cooperative, through which they bought raw materials and opened access to new markets, increasing the income of a group of 25 artisans for a period of approximately five years. ^{xxviii}

The organization of services for tourists is another important area the museums contribute to. The museum committees together with the municipal authorities have designed visits to offer to national and international tourists, including the visit to the museum, to historical and natural sites, to artisans' workshops, and demonstrations of how traditional food is prepared. These visits are designed to share local culture in a framework of respect and mutual exchange. The communities close to the city of Oaxaca attract more visitors, but even in some more remote ones these visits generate supplementary income for

community guides, artisans, and families who prepare meals. In two communities the museums have generated projects to create lodging for visitors.

Since community members consider that the museum must to serve community needs in general, they often become a vehicle to address needs for diverse forms of training. Several communities have organized workshops on organic fertilizers, reforestation techniques, and nature conservation. As we will see ahead, the communities jointly organize training events in leadership development, including workshops in strategic planning, project development, fund raising, and how to develop a community newspaper to publish on the internet.

All the museums organize services for children, such as programs to visit the museum, and a variety of workshops. These include initiatives to strengthen children's bonds with their traditional culture and to also offer new methods of creative expression. There are workshops in traditional crafts, traditional medicine, archaeology for children, restoration, creative writing, photography, and mural painting.

The museums are sustainable in the sense that they are linked to fundamental community organizations: the village assembly, the cargo system, and the municipal authorities. They have presence and a role in the community. They are also economically sustainable in the sense that funds from the municipality and the entrance fees cover basic maintenance costs, and committee members open and maintain the facility without charging for their services.

However, the scope and creativity of the museum programs varies as different groups and their proposals make themselves present through the museum. These shift and fluctuate according to the dynamics of specific groups within the community. A teacher with a history of cultural activism will not provide the same leadership as someone in the

process of migrating outside the country. Many museum committees are able to respond effectively to community needs and interests in the projects they propose and carry out. However, as the terms of each committee comes to an end (once every year or two years) it is often difficult to maintain the momentum and commitment behind these projects. Again, the museums reflect the patterns and tensions of community organization as a whole.

On the other hand, the museum is not only a reflection; it also impacts and expands the experience of community members. The experience of studying, representing their own history and culture, and participating in keeping traditions alive provides increased self-esteem and identity, in ways that are difficult to document, but that testimonies and evaluations offer evidence of. Through the museum community members learn new skills in planning, negotiating, raising funds and developing projects. They establish new relationships to other communities, to public and private organizations and institutions that can enrich community life. Several people who have been members of museum committees and later go on to become municipal authorities affirm that their experience in the museum was particularly valuable.

In several cases, the museum has gained such presence and momentum that it generates support not only for the museum itself but for other important community projects: the reconstruction of the hacienda in San José Mogote, the reconstruction of the church and other historical monuments of San Miguel Tequixtepec, and the creation of the children's museum in Santa Ana del Valle.

To offer the museum committees training, motivation and organizational support, in 1988 we began to organize meetings to bring the committees together once every two months. Over the years, these meetings allowed the different community representatives to identify with one another, recognizing common problems, learning from the mistakes and

taking inspiration from the successes of their peers. The training sessions provided a framework to continuously clarify their vision of the community museum and its role. They decided to formalize their network, to develop and raise funds for individual and collective projects. In 1991 the Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca was established as a formal, non-profit association.

The first projects included a program of traveling exhibits, the publication of series of brochures and guides, a project to create radio programs, and a project to create an international traveling exhibition. They were granted support from the National Institute of Anthropology and History, the National Indigenous Peoples Institute, the Direction of Popular Culture, the French-Swiss Foundation "Traditions for Tomorrow", and most of all, the Inter-American Foundation.

Eventually, the Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca was able to hire a team of anthropologists and community organizers to support their efforts. This represented a fundamental step, allowing the network to provide on-going guidance and training to the museum committees. The continuity of this team and the community representatives that participate in the leadership of the Union has provided a new platform to strengthen collective projects.

At present, the mission statement of the Union is as follows: "The mission of the Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca is to support each participating community in the task of creating and strengthening their community museums, to know who we have been, who we are today, and who we can become, building a future rooted in the ancestral values of our peoples; to unite all our communities, exchanging our experiences and establishing a network to face our common problems, at a state, national and international

scale; and to strengthen our community action in education, training, promotion of local art, and community tourism, through collective projects." ^{xxix}

Currently the Union is concentrating on two main projects, the Training Center and the Cooperative for Community Tourism. The Training Center was established in 1997, with the objective of providing a more systematic series of training services to museum committees, municipal authorities, and community groups. It was designed to facilitate community participation in the creation of the museums, to help each museum respond more fully to community needs, to develop multiple relations with other non-governmental organizations, private and public institutions, and to strengthen the autonomy of the association. At present it is offering workshops in five different areas: creation of community museums, development of community museums, strengthening children's bonds to traditional culture, leadership development, and community capacity-building.

During four and a half years, the Training Center has offered 196 workshops to 4,550 participants of 19 communities that belong to the Union, 7 communities of Oaxaca that are not yet members, and 54 communities from other states in Mexico. It has facilitated the creation of four community museums, and developed collaborative relations with 25 non-governmental associations, 11 governmental institutions, 5 educational institutions, and one private enterprise. The center has begun to generate income for operating expenses by offering training services to the study abroad programs of Kalamazoo College and the School for International Training. Its' programs have been supported by the Inter-American Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation. ^{xxx}

The Cooperative for Community Tourism was created in 1996. Its' mission is "to provide community tourism services, as an alternative form of cultural and ecological tourism generated by indigenous and mestizo communities of Oaxaca, who plan, design,

and control the services offered, with the objective of developing, protecting, and conserving their natural and cultural heritage, promoting an exchange between visitors and community members in a framework of mutual respect." A small central staff guides the museum committees in a process to design visits, and markets them to specialized travel agencies, local schools, and universities in Mexico City, the USA and Canada. Income is generated for the community museum, community guides, families who provide meals, folk artists, and people who lend their bicycles and horses. The economic success of the cooperative is modest, but significant for the communities involved.^{xxxix}

In this sense, the Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca has been able to expand the scope of local projects without losing sight of the community base. Only together were these communities capable of creating their own training center, which in turn is able to provide new visions and tools to community groups in each village. Together they have been able to organize and market community tourism services they could not have promoted individually. As collaborations are constructed from the horizontal relationships between villages instead of a vertical relationship between each village and a central institution, the Union has given the participating communities a sense of organization, unity, and power.

National and International Networks

As Kevin Healy has pointed out, the social process of "federating" is a common element in the history of many grassroots organizations, but not often found in cultural associations. In the museum field, networks exist among professionals but not among the communities that are involved in the museums. Even the International Movement for the

New Museology (MINOM), that championed the idea of alternative, community-based museums, did not build links between community groups. However, when the Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca began to be recognized as a model that could be developed in other parts of Mexico, its most significant characteristic was that it brought together representatives of grassroots community organizations. Thus, the proposal was unusual in that it developed a "federating" process of grassroots organizations in a cultural project, but more so because it did so in the museum field, which had rarely linked communities in networks.

This proposal responded to a need so keenly felt that, when the first national meeting of community museums was held in Oaxaca in 1994, community representatives from 82 towns and villages belonging to 16 states immediately agreed to establish the National Union of Community Museums and Ecomuseums.^{xxxii} They quickly saw the advantage of building an organization in which they could be empowered to develop their own initiatives in the areas of training, fund-raising, exchange programs, and dissemination. The self-representation that they had begun to develop in their museums could now be expanded by joining in a larger network that could represent and respond to their interests without governmental intervention. Each small, community-based museum had little opportunity to make its voice heard if it continued in an isolated fashion, but as a member of a state and national network, it could tell the story of its past and work to create its own future with new and more powerful resources. These resources could be developed from the independent association of similar community groups, instead of the negotiation in unfavorable terms with, or subordination to, official institutions.

One of the outstanding characteristics of the National Union is the great diversity of the groups involved. There are indigenous communities that are represented by committees

elected in their general assembly, as in Oaxaca. There are mestizo communities that are represented by volunteer groups organized into non-profit associations. Most of the participating communities are rural, but urban communities are represented as well. **None** of the community representatives are museum professionals, or receive payment for their work in the museum. They include peasants, artisans, teachers, employees and owners of small businesses. But they are united by their aspiration to know and represent their own history, to strengthen their cultures, and to offer their communities new instruments for change and development.

The diversity of the communities involved, the opposition of governmental agencies, the precarious nature of several of the museum projects, and the distances involved have made it difficult for the National Union to advance in its goals as quickly as it would have liked. However, it has organized national meetings every year since 1994, including discussions of a wide variety of issues such as sustainable development, education, tourism, management of cultural patrimony, and changes in legislation regarding cultural property. Planning meetings, diverse workshops and exchanges for youth and children have been carried out. Recently the National Union received a grant from the Inter-American Foundation to organize national workshops in leadership development, state and national exchanges, as well as supporting the development of museum stores, traveling exhibitions, and fairs as venues for local folk artists. ^{xxxiii}

With this experience, the Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca decided to expand the initiative of creating networks to an international level. The basic principle was the same; grassroots community groups could achieve their own goals more effectively by joining forces with similar groups. **In an independent network of their peers they could develop resources to respond to community needs, not the needs of other institutions and**

power groups. As the network grew in variety and scope, its' potential strength grew as well. The challenges that local communities faced were generated by global economics and new processes of cultural domination: the response to this situation had to be global as well.

The Union thus invited representatives of five states in Mexico and ten countries of the Americas, including USA, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, to come together in Oaxaca in the year 2000. A large part of the participants represented indigenous communities, which had created or wanted to create museums to represent themselves, instead of being represented by others. Another concern of many participants from Central America was to represent what had happened during recent wars, to preserve the memory and the lessons of these conflicts. All were concerned with finding new tools for community self-determination.

The group agreed to set up a coordinating committee to continue and consolidate the network, and to organize a second meeting in Rabinal, Guatemala. There was also consensus around the need to develop a communication network, training programs, funding strategies and cultural exchanges.

Since then, the network has been able to organize workshops for the creation of community museums in nine countries (2001), and celebrate another two international meetings in Guatemala (2002), and El Salvador (2003). The subsequent meetings included representatives from Honduras and Brazil, and the workshops reached 288 people from 107 communities, belonging to 32 indigenous groups. Support for this effort has been received by the Inter-American Foundation, UNESCO, and the Rockefeller Foundation. ^{xxxiv}

The network functions as a support system for community efforts carried out in very difficult and precarious conditions. It provides community representatives support to clarify

their objectives, build new skills, and learn from one another. The group strengthens each one as it offers a sense of common vision, commitment and motivation. One participant expressed: "What is most important (about the network) is the learning, the orientation, the motivation, the hope, the energy to continue. The globalization of the unity between our first peoples to make our voice heard in the continent."

Conclusion

Globalizing processes have confronted local communities with the need to invent new ways to maintain their unity and solidarity. In Oaxaca, one of the most disruptive processes is the massive migration of community members to the United States. Community representatives of the Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca wanted to respond to this situation, reinforcing their bonds with the migrant community and helping them gain greater presence in their current circumstances, presenting them as the heirs to a rich and valuable cultural tradition. From 1991 to 1993 they worked on an exhibition of communities and folk art to be sent to the South of California. "Our countrymen deserve our support," said one of the committee members. "It's our turn to help them show that our culture is important here and anywhere." They negotiated the aid of several institutions and managed to present the exhibition in San Diego, Los Angeles and Fresno. [The community museums had become an instrument to recreate identity and affirm their cultures' value beyond national borders.](#)

As Ivan Karp establishes, museums are one of the social apparatuses of civil society, in which "values are asserted and attempts at legitimation made and contested." Thus the

community museums are vehicles for local cultures and subcultures to legitimize their presence in global civil society. On the one hand, they can contest the imposition of moral ideas and social values of wealthy industrialized societies, by validating their own world-views and histories. In this sense, their role for community members is to build and re-build identity, rescuing their own perspective, spanning enormous distances in time and space to recover their own story in the face of social and economic upheaval. *On the other hand, they are also platforms for people outside of the community and culture to recognize a value in life-styles different from their own.* They are messages in a language that global technologies have made intelligible to a supra-national audience. Finally, they are also vehicles for many local communities to come together in networks that reach the international scale. In these networks, many communities speaking from their own locality can find a common voice. They are able to identify common causes and build linkages that bring them new strengths to face the challenges to their survival. In this way, it is possible for globalizing processes to bring, not only destruction of local cultures, but also new capacities to act on the global stage.

- ⁱ Gilberto Velho, 2001, 57-59.
- ⁱⁱ Jason Clay, 1989, 52-57.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Kevin Healy, 2001, 417-428.
- ^{iv} Néstor García Canclini, 1999, 24, 63.
- ^v *Ibid.*, 30-31.
- ^{vi} Ivan Karp, 1992, 4-6.
- ^{vii} Manny Frishberg, 2002.
- ^{viii} Katharine Ainger, 2001.
- ^{ix} Héctor Tejera Gaona, 1995, 217-227.
- ^x Lynn Stephen, 1991, 19.
- ^{xi} Ciraj Rassool, 2002, 24.
- ^{xii} Benjamín Maldonado Alvarado, 2002, 9-18.
- ^{xiii} Ciraj Rassool, *Op.cit.*, 25.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*, 24.
- ^{xv} John Monaghan, 1995, p.3.
- ^{xvi} Quoted by Waldo Ansaldi, 2000, p.1.
- ^{xvii} For a discussion of the notion of resistance, that underlines how it does not imply complete isolation and rejection of the dominant culture, see Lynn Stephen, 1991, 13.
- ^{xviii} Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, 2001.
- ^{xix} Dirección General de Población del Gobierno del Estado de Oaxaca- Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, 2002; Informe Anual de la Red Oaxaqueña de Derechos Humanos, 2000; Anuario Estadístico del Estado de Oaxaca, 1999.
- ^{xx} Centro de Apoyo al Movimiento Popular Oaxaqueño, A.C., 2000.
- ^{xxi} Lynn Stephen, *Op. Cit.*, 19.
- ^{xxii} Benjamín Maldonado Alvarado, 1999, 1-21..
- ^{xxiii} *Ibid.*, Alicia M. Barabas y Miguel A. Bartolomé, 1999, 30.
- ^{xxiv} Cuauhtémoc Camarena Ocampo and Teresa Morales Lersch, 1997.
- ^{xxv} Cuauhtémoc Camarena, et.al., 1994; Cuauhtémoc Camarena and Teresa Morales, 1995; Cuauhtémoc Camarena and Teresa Morales, 1999.
- ^{xxvi} Cuauhtémoc Camarena and Teresa Morales, 2001.

^{xxvii} Cuauhtémoc Camarena and Teresa Morales, "Ideas on Starting a Community Museum," n.p. The concept of community museum shares many aspects with the concept of ecomuseum. See Nancy Fuller, 1992, 327-365; René Rivard, 1984; Andrea Hauenschild, 1988.

^{xxviii} Cuauhtémoc Camarena and Teresa Morales, 2000.

^{xxix} Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca, 2001a.

^{xxx} Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca, 2000; Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca, 2002.

^{xxxi} In the eight months from September, 2001 to April, 2002, the cooperative organized services for 599 visitors, and generated sales for 11,850 USD. This amount does not include the sales local artisans make during visits. See "Financial Report to the General Assembly of the Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca", Cooperative of Community Museums of Oaxaca, May 19, 2002.

^{xxxii} The extension of the network was facilitated, in part, by the development of a national program for community museums and ecomuseums, created jointly by the National Institute of Anthropology and History and the Direction of Popular Culture in 1993. This program was based on the methodology developed in Oaxaca, and concentrated on identifying community initiatives, strengthening them and building links between them, in contrast to the previous INAH program.

^{xxxiii} National Union of Community Museums and Ecomuseums, 1995a.

^{xxxiv} Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca, 2001b, 2002a, 2002b.

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