

Media Anthropology Network
European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA)
E-Seminar Series

<http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>

E-Seminar 53

**Negotiating Land Tenure in Transborder Media Spaces: Ayuujk People's
Videomaking between Mexico and the USA**

by
Ingrid Kummels
Free University Berlin

Discussant Comments by
Gisela Cánepa
Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to make a few comments on this article. I am particularly excited about its findings since they derive from a series of discoveries and discussions that are highly relevant to the field of media anthropology and ethnography of the media. Ingrid Kummels' broader study deals with the uses and appropriations of audiovisual and digital technologies by indigenous communities in the context of transnational migration. On the basis of an extensive ethnographic exploration, this article examines the multiple uses and appropriations of photography, video, and social media by various members of the Ayuujk indigenous community, in particular the municipality of Tamazulapam del Espíritu Santo in the Mexican state of Oaxaca, as well as the migrant satellite communities based in the United States.

Like other indigenous groups, the Ayuujk people were beneficiaries of the *Transferencia de Medios Audiovisuales a Comunidades y Organizaciones Indígenas* program, introduced in 1989 in the context of the indigenismo policies of the Mexican government with regard to the country's indigenous population. For this reason, the audiovisual productions of the Ayuujk people are quickly ascribed to the category of *Video Indígena* and thus associated with the policies that have been imposed upon the communities. However, field research reveals a media context in which a variety of film genres, audiences, circuits and reception contexts have emerged. It also shows the audiovisual treatment of various topics, and the creation of different visual languages. Finally, it exposes the trajectories of stakeholders with regard to production, distribution, and the archiving of audiovisual material.

In this regard, the argument that runs throughout the article refers to the need to problematize the notion of *Video Indígena*, specifically with respect to three key issues. The first is methodological in nature. It concerns the fact that the category of *Video Indígena* is reductionist in the sense that it obscures the diversity and complexity of the Ayuujk media scenery, as well as the social

heterogeneity that underlies it. Additionally, it fails to recognize the role that media diversity and complexity plays in the constitution of heterogeneity itself.

The genre of land dispute videos that Professor Kummels mainly discusses in her article is just one instance in which the role these productions play in shaping the Ayuujk social fabric can be observed. The videos in question are used either as evidence, as a form of argument, or as a tool for mobilization in situations of conflict over land property. More precisely, Ingrid Kummels argues that in the context of transnational migration these videos grant validity to the Ayuujk people's widely used strategy of resorting to land disputes to strengthen internal solidarity, and even extend it to the migrant communities. The land is a sensitive issue because of its sentimental, symbolic and material associations for migrant communities, which further explains why land dispute videos constitute an arena of public debates in which they participate. Even from a distance migrants actively intervene and negotiate the terms of their status as members of the Tama community. In this way, the very meaning of the Ayuujk commonality is effectively redefined, contributing to the social integration of residents abroad.

The second issue regarding the critical approach to the category of Video Indígena concerns the fact that local audiovisual production is misunderstood from its perspective as simply being the result of the indigenista policies dictated by the Mexican nation state and therefore as a development that was largely influenced by external forces. This, however, downplays the dynamics and internal processes, as well as the agency of local subjects. A significant proportion of audiovisual production in Tama aims to mediate land disputes which are part of an internal dynamic and not directly related to agendas of indigenous claims. This circumstance shows how a vibrant Ayuujk media world has in fact emerged from the community's own history and internal dynamics, as well as from the phenomenon of transnational migration.

Here, it is also worth noting that the production of the land dispute videos is inscribed in a pre-existing visual tradition that originated in colonial times. So-called lienzos were canvases that contained visual representations of the geographic boundaries of properties awarded to different indigenous communities. It is precisely the connection to such a tradition which gives particular meaning and value to the appropriations that Ayuujk people have made of the new audiovisual technologies. In this regard, Ingrid Kummels has discovered that, today, photographs and videos are used in the same way that paintings were once used as evidence and cited in the context of land claims made at the Spanish courts. Photographs and videos that document and dramatize land conflicts are being produced in order to perform these same functions, although, in this case, at the level of communal politics.

The article further highlights the important role played by communal leaders as key actors in the creation, production and storage of the land dispute videos. The strategic and political use of the videos is further underscored by the fact that such audiovisual material is only circulated for local consumption because of its sensitive content. Connected to this, the third issue concerning the inadequacy of the Video Indígena category thus refers to its essentialization of the indígena as a political subject.

Such essentialization reduces the political agency of indigenous communities to an indigenista agenda that responds to the politics of identity and authenticity which place ethnicity and territory, understood in an ecological sense, at the center of political struggle. The category of indigenous video is hence further reductionist, because the invisible agendas and political leaders at the level of the Ayuujk community refer either to local or transnational boundaries.

Professor Kummels finds that these agendas and leaderships, on one the hand, translate into local film production and aesthetics and she therefore offers an interpretation of land disputes from the perspective of the actors. On the other hand, Ayuujk producers rehearse alternative languages when they produce videos for international circuits. Although these productions have had a differentiated reception according to specific audiences, they invite us to think of the producer as a political subject in so far as he/she acts through diverse filmic proposals which are strategically handled according to the specific context of reception. The identity politics which is implied here is, accordingly, less committed to ethnic vindication than to a policy where the terms of the visual representation are being negotiated.

Finally, I would like to comment on some questions that emerge from my reading of the article and leave them open for discussion.

First, I refer to the local private photo and video collections, which Professor Kummels discovered during her field research and so effectively incorporated into her analysis. In addition to identifying the material contained in these collections as a data source, which can be subjected to formal and content analysis, she understands it as a resource for both media and political practice. It is in this sense that she discusses the key role that local leaders such as Adolfo Martínez Mireles play in gathering these collections. She also highlights the different ways in which these materials are used politically by different actors, such as when photographic material circulates through Facebook and becomes accessible even to those Ayuujk community members residing in the US.

The discussion of Adolfo Martínez Mireles' trajectory as a community leader aroused my interest. The first question it raised has to do with how media production mediates leadership and its political practice. What kind of power does the ownership over the collection grant to the community leader, even when he is not in office anymore? How is this power affected by the circulation of this material on the Internet and its appropriation by other actors?

A second concern relates to the relationship between Mexico's National Archive, which keeps the lienzo of the Tama community, and the personal audiovisual collection of someone like Adolfo Martínez Mireles. His private collection certainly implies the creation of a corpus of documents that record and legitimize land ownership at the level of local politics, while operating in parallel with the corpus of official documents held by the state. What does such a strategic move involve in terms of belonging to the national community? What tensions between autonomy and dependence in relation to the nation state are being expressed?

The last question I would like to pose relates to the author's argument regarding the crucial role that the land dispute videos play in terms of communal solidarity at a local level, and social integration at a transnational level. One might also ask, however, about the role these videos play in regard to the creation of new criteria of social differentiation and the redefinition of power relations. Since the participation of migrants in the media debate entail the discussion and negotiations of the criteria themselves that will define the right to communal land, one could argue that media practices not only function as a political and ideological device through which migrants negotiate their emotional and symbolic attachment to the land, but also their right to actually and materially access it. This issue rises particularly in the context of local disputes, where the principle of "the land belongs to the tiller" is debated intensely. This could be interpreted as an example of the migrants' inclination toward a principle of individual property over that of community property.