

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

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This contribution explores the production, circulation and reception of a film genre created by actors from the village of Tamazulapam del Espíritu Santo in the Sierra Mixe and its satellite communities in the USA: land dispute videos. Focusing on this film genre provides key insights into the dynamics of autonomous media and their wider entanglement in an 'indigenous' village in Mexico, which has meanwhile expanded transnationally to the USA. Photography and videotaping and their use in social media have become vital fields of activity for the negotiation of land tenure in the village of origin. By opening up new media spaces in a geographical, practice-oriented and imagined sense, Ayuujk people recreate a communal way of life despite the highly restrictive immigration policies that migrants from the Mexican village face in the USA.

Keywords: audiovisual media, Ayuujk, Mixe, land tenure, migration, Mexico

1. Introduction

Tamazulapam del Espíritu Santo is one of the many villages in the Oaxacan Sierra Norte that have expanded transnationally in recent decades to cities such as Los Angeles and Milwaukee in the USA following the migration of its residents. At the same time it is one of 570 municipalities in the Mexican state of Oaxaca; in terms of its language, culture, institutions and inhabitants' sense of belonging it clearly positions itself as Ayuujk ja'ay, Ayuujk people (in scholarship still frequently referred to by the exonym Mixe). To this day people both in and from the village of Tama – as the community is popularly called – develop by definition a strong relationship to the land, since only those who have inherited and cultivate agricultural plots are recognized as *comuneros* or *comuneras*. Land disputes are common and the lines of conflict run within the family, between factions of the community or between villages.

In addition to the 6 700 inhabitants in the village, several thousand people from Tama have been living since the end of the 1990s in a number of satellite communities dispersed throughout Mexico and the USA. In contrast to other Mexican indigenous people, such as the neighbouring Zapotec and Mixtec, mass migration of the Ayuujk ja'ay, including residents from Tama, began relatively late, i.e., shortly before 9/11, so that job-seekers faced particularly restrictive immigration policies. Residing undocumented in the USA with no hope of obtaining a green card, these migrants live under precarious circumstances and visit their country of origin at considerable risk.

As a means of overcoming these constraints, people in and from Tama began to appropriate mass media such as photography and videotaping, and to use them in their own interests in combination with social media, e.g., Facebook and Youtube. Land and water disputes in the village of Tama and

between Tama and its neighbouring communities are audiovisually represented and circulated in Mexico and the USA. What astonished me initially was the passion that people still display today when they quarrel about issues of land tenure in their home town, although migrant livelihoods in particular no longer depend on agriculture. Recent disputes such as the ongoing conflict between Tama and the neighbouring village of Ayutla over a water source at the boundaries of both villages are discussed emotionally in the mass media. This contribution focuses on the production, circulation and reception of photographs and videos, and explores the motives involved in mass mediatizing land disputes, how land tenure is redefined in a transnational context and the way in which audiovisual media are used for transnational community building.

I contend that land dispute videos exemplify how actors from this village and its satellite communities in the USA have set new priorities by means of media practices¹, forms of collaboration and self-fashioned representations. They open up new media spaces in a geographical, practice-oriented and imagined sense. Unlike Arjun Appadurai's term mediascape², the concept of "media spaces" gives greater emphasis to the spaces that actors have extended beyond their marginal position in terms of geography, practice and imagination, and highlights the interstices and interrelations between these fields. These spaces likewise allow them to reposition themselves in terms of collectivity, social status, ethnicity and gender in a way that exceeds simplistic dichotomizations and binary codes (cf. Kummels 2012:9). At the same time, actors have constantly localized media practices and representations, as demonstrated by the land dispute videos. Notwithstanding the increasing mobility of people, ideas and capital, the emotional and social relationship to a concrete place (in this case to the land in the village of origin) and the will to anchor themselves there are by no means obsolete (cf. Morley 2000:2ff; Pries 2008:78).

2. The Emergence of Local Media Genres in the Course of Transnational Expansion and the Appropriation of Mass Media

This paper is part of a broader study that seeks to retrieve the diversity, intensity and historical depth displayed in the culturally specific uses of photography, radio, video and television in Tama and one of its satellite communities in Los Angeles, USA.³ So far, the appropriation of audiovisual media, in particular of video, in Mexico's 'indigenous' communities has primarily been studied from the perspective of the so-called Video Indígena.⁴ According to the respective master narrative, it is assumed, firstly, that the decisive impetus for indigenous communities and movements to use audiovisual media emanated from the Mexican government's *indigenismo* policies. Hence, the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI)⁵ and "Transferencia de Medios Audiovisuales a Comunidades y Organizaciones Indígenas", the programme it introduced in 1989 to provide training, equipment and organizational structures to indigenous communities, was what allegedly motivated indigenous people and their movements to adopt a particular concept of audiovisual mass media. Secondly, current research suggests that film production in indigenous communities is basically synonymous with the Video Indígena movement, which later broke away from INI. Altogether, this approach draws a rather homogeneous picture of audiovisual practices and representation strategies in the villages and urban settings. From this perspective, collectively organized teams make documentaries with the sole intent of giving a unified voice to the local needs and demands of indigenous collectives.⁶

When I came across photographs and videos of agrarian conflicts, however, I soon realized that Tama's transnational media products cannot be pigeonholed as "indigenous media" or simply identified with the documentary genre taught at Mexican government workshops, which convey an image of indigenous communities as homogeneous. Land or agrarian disputes (the actors involved prefer the term *luchas agrarias*) between neighbouring municipalities have a long tradition in the Oaxacan Sierra Norte. In general they are triggered by individual *comuneros/as*, who are perceived as trespassing community boundaries by cultivating land claimed as the property of that community. Land dispute photographs and videos are locally produced by the village parties involved. On the one hand, they are used as a means of gathering evidence against trespassers by documenting controversial agricultural uses on the part of adversaries. They occasionally include the testimonies of affected *comuneros/as* in the village and statements by the local cargo officials in charge of land affairs or *bienes comunales*. On the other hand, events can be recorded by local videographers in an observational documentary style or as emotionally charged partisan accounts, as land dispute dramas. In certain instances during the conflict, videos are screened and used politically to mobilize members of the community against the neighbouring village. In other cases videos are kept in a private archive with the aim of using the material as evidence in the future.

Land dispute videos epitomize how the lines of conflict and the priorities set in Tama diverge from the ethnic concept promoted by the Mexican state and its portrayal of the country's indigenous peoples as ethnic "others". The fact that people from the same ethnic group, in this case the Ayuujk ja'ay, are antagonists in cases of intervillage conflict contradicts the ethnicizing logic of the state, according to which Mexico's approximately sixty *pueblos indígenas* have each respectively a common language congruent with culture and territory, and consequently a joint political stance. Using mass media on their own terms, people in and from Tama convey instead their negotiation of the more complex horizons of identity and dimensions of belonging that permeate culture, society, politics and the economy. Their engagement with photography since the 1960s and of video since the 1990s is diversified and ranges from political purposes to the interests of business, art and entertainment, depending on the different perspectives of community members in terms of age, gender, education and migrant experience. Tama entrepreneurs, for instance, produce popular fiesta videos for the entertainment of their village of origin and its satellites, young artists and activists create avant-garde audiovisual representations that incite debate within the village, while community-oriented professionals concentrate on ethnopolitical documentaries that are showcased and consumed at international festivals. The local distinction between commercial and community-run media fields is part of the current debate on the role of local media in the social and cultural relations of the transnational village. This includes the question of whether local media should serve community purposes exclusively or also embrace commercial goals. Expectations of what is a "good" communal way of life, a principle to which everyone refers, are evolving in the face of transnationalism. The concept of *comunalidad* formulated by Floriberto Díaz (1951-1995) and Jaime Luna Martínez in the 1980s refers to the principles of communal living as practised in real life in the Sierra Norte.⁷ They could not have known then, however, what it means to be a *comunero/a* in times of geographical dispersion or the role of local media in the social and cultural relations of a transnational village.⁸

Being a "good" *comunero* or *comunera* today, however, is still conceived of as implying ownership of communal land in this Mexican village and as a commitment to voluntary service as a cargo

official every five years (as part of the religious-political cargo system now frequently referred to as *usos y costumbres*), as well as participation in communal labour (*tequio*; cf. Díaz 2007). Ayuujk people consider grass-roots self-administration and democratic practices fundamental to their villages and perceive them as the basis of their autonomy vis-à-vis the Mexican state. The demands of Oaxaca's indigenous movements to which they contributed and those of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) in Chiapas in 1995 put pressure on the state government of Oaxaca to legally recognize their and other ethnic groups' local governance system as so-called *usos y costumbres*.

Most migrants send remittances to family members on a regular basis and as the fulfilment of community obligations. The civil-religious cargo system and its supreme organ, the General Assembly (*la Asamblea General*), solicit financial contributions as compensation for the traditional community service that migrants would otherwise have performed in the home village. Migrants in the USA are systematically integrated by the cargo officials in charge as sponsors of Tama's patron saint's fiestas.⁹ They donate prize money or the silver-plated trophy for the winning team at sports events, for example, as well as decorations and food, and even sponsor the ostentatious *castillo* fireworks. In doing so, migrants reserve the right to communal land even in their absence and without personally cultivating the land. At the same time, they long to see their community participation and to experience it as reinforcement of their bond with the land and their home town. Although the videos do not permit viewers to experience the land or the fiesta physically or haptically, they do allow for auditory and visual participation. Migrants in Los Angeles sometimes commission videographers in Tama to document their donations, fiestas, building projects and land ownership. When video recordings are produced in Tama, the potential viewers in the USA are constantly present in the videographer's thoughts so that the final product intimates the virtual co-presence of those living in two nation states. Events that take place expressly for a transnational audience have therefore become an integral part of video and photographic production.

3. Mediatizing Agrarian Disputes

I will now relate a controversy that became the subject of heated debate in Tama's transnational Internet community, since it illustrates the topicality of these disputes. In December 2014, international users of the "Reunión de Tama" Facebook page posted their comments on an internal land issue in Santa Rosa, one of Tama's *agencias*.¹⁰ Young people from Tama, including those now living in the USA, are passionate users of social media. They have created virtual discussion forums that compete with the traditional local General Assembly, as displayed on "Reunión". The latter's rival position to the General Assembly, where *comuneros/as* meet face to face once a month in the community centre, is also a bone of contention within the community. Burning issues that had been given short shrift or not even a mention at the General Assembly are presented on the website in a text that conveys objectivity, accompanied by a photograph. As to the internal land conflict in question, first the following breaking news was published on the virtual "Reunión" wall:

"Members of ten families from [Tama's *agencia*] Las Peñas criticized that after having looked after and worked on their plots situated at the level of Patio del Diablo, a hamlet near [*agencia*] Santa Rosa – which had been disputed in recent years –, the authorities of this

agencia, urged by a group of professed leaders from this locality – whose names we omit for obvious reasons – stipulated that their one-hectare land plots were to be converted into small parcels of 20 x 14 metres each, with the aim of distributing them to the rest of the *comuneros*. [...] They claim they are being harassed, since a few days ago a young man was beaten, threatened and thrown into jail. He had tried to pull his father away from a brawl with an official from Las Peñas. As a result, they plan to expose the case to the General Assembly of *comuneros* to be held next November 21 [2014] at the municipal centre, so that the community (*pueblo*) will know about it, analyse the problems and look for a favourable solution for the parties involved. They do not want people to be driven apart. Finally they emphasized that “the land belongs to the people who work on it”.

In the year 2000, families from the Tama *agencia* Las Peñas had been encouraged to resettle close to a contested border zone during the agrarian dispute between Tama and its neighbouring village Tlahuitoltepec – known as Tlahui. Both villages had come to an agreement and the then cargo officials were eager to secure land in the *agencia* Santa Rosa, which at the time had been allocated to Tama. Only ten pioneer families took up the challenge and succeeded over the years in reclaiming the land and gaining visible prosperity. In September 2014, however, an internal conflict erupted in the same zone, which was now on the verge of splitting Tama’s transnational community. Las Peñas officials suddenly began to demarcate the land in Santa Rosa anew with the aim of dividing it into smaller plots to be distributed equably to all of the Las Peñas *comuneros/as*. This faction justified the measure as being consistent with a General Assembly agreement from the year 2000.

The posting on the current agrarian dispute sparked a thread of comments on Tama’s virtual “Reunión” on Facebook in November 2014. One user in the USA, who calls herself “Meetsk Neex” (in Ayuujk: “little girl”), commented:

“THE LAND BELONGS TO THE PEOPLE WHO WORK ON IT! They are not wealthy, so it’s easy to steal everything they have worked for.”

Numerous other users apart from “Meetsk Neex” expressed solidarity with the ten peasant families, with some blaming the “group of alleged leaders” for the outbreak of the current dispute.¹¹ The latter pointed out that the group consisted of retired teachers and engineers from Las Peñas, alluding to the social divide and the conflict of interest between peasants and teachers in Tama. Here it should be remarked that since migration began in the 1960s with a view to seeking new educational and work opportunities, a growing number of Tama residents who were originally peasants and merchants had become teachers and professionals. The interests of members of the community now also diverge in accordance with their professional fields and the opportunities they provide.

Other users such as “Ayuujk migrants from Tamazulapam” (“Migrantes Mixes de Tamazulapam”) picked up on this case to discuss communal land tenure as a matter of principle. Agricultural lands in Tama are owned by the community but may be held and worked by individuals (cf. Lipp 1991:3). The apportionment of communal land to individuals with *comunero/a* status is thus standard practice.¹² These parcels of land can be handed down or sold individually. Community rights over these plots are exerted only in cases where the General Assembly decides to punish a *comunero/a*.

Should the latter fail to fulfil the requirement of voluntary service as an official every five years, for example, their land can be confiscated. In social practice, the communal principle is combined with a free-enterprise attitude. Hence “Ayuujk migrants from Tamazulapam” complained that land tenure in Tama was in practice not genuinely communal in the strict sense and should be thoroughly reformed. No longer in a position to work their own land, migrants are more inclined in this case to take a radical stance:¹³

“First of all we should stop using ‘plot’ and ‘communal land’ as synonyms, since these terms refer to different forms of land possession. And that’s why I think the meaning of what is ‘communal’ has been exhausted. Why not have the land produce in a strictly communal way and allow all of the inhabitants to benefit from its output? We have a young generation of engineers, administrators and architects, for instance, so why don’t we create projects to exploit the soil? Why does ‘communal land’ have to be handed over to individuals?”

These spotlights on the sensitive issue of land call attention to how rights to communal land are renegotiated in the process of mediatization and transnationalization. Despite the geographic dispersion of Tama inhabitants and their varying interests, land tenure is still considered indispensable to a sense of belonging to the community, as illustrated by the Facebook debate. Communal land by no means loses its meaning for migrants; they nevertheless call for a departure from the practice of apportioning land to individuals, who may transfer it provisionally to another person for a cash payment, a procedure hitherto considered legitimate.

4. Land Dispute Videos

The production of local photographs and video genres is a bustling business in transnational Tama. Video Rojas, Video Tamix, Video Mecho and Video Cajonos are small family enterprises that specialize in recording social events such as patron saint’s fiestas and school graduations or family celebrations such as christenings, *XVañera* festivities and weddings. Their main activity is to document the five-day patron saint’s fiestas and travel as itinerant merchants to as many as forty patron saint’s fiestas a year. They offer their services on site in Tama, but their chief clientele for fiesta films are *paisanos* and *paisanas* who live in the USA. In fact, small-scale entrepreneurs based in Tama produce most of the video films in response to customer demand in the USA and purchasing power. Some businesses like Video Tamix pursue a broad range of commissioned work and apart from social events also accept assignments dealing with delicate issues such as agrarian disputes. Video Tamix is exceptional in that it is owned and operated by Genoveva Pérez Rosas, a female video pioneer, and her sons Romel and Illich Ruiz Pérez, who work for her. Romel specializes in editing films.

When I visited Romel in the Video Tamix shop at the end of December 2014, he showed me his latest land dispute documentaries. They deal exclusively with the internal conflict in Las Peñas, which saw members of the same village, all of them Ayuujk people, in a state of hostile confrontation. Commissioned by the ten families living in the Santa Rosa *agencia*, Romel shot ten eighteen-minute films, each of them labelled with the name of the *comunero* or *comunera* representing the peasant family concerned. All ten films have the same structure: the protagonist

leads the viewer around the family property and addresses the camera when talking about what they and their family had accomplished with the land over the last fifteen years. Ernestina Hernández¹⁴, for example, points out her impressive production of greenhouse tomatoes. Part of the video consists of pan shots and close-ups that capture the fertility of the soil, with Ernestina's narrative as the voice-over. The ten pioneer families, however, now felt the fruits of their labour under threat of confiscation. In view of the land demands of their own *agencia* they were willing to concede some of their land, but insisted on financial compensation for the investments and years of work that had made their land productive. They planned to present their complaint to the General Assembly in Tama on 21 November 2014 and show the documentaries to the General Assembly audience in Tama's urbanized centre in order to give an impression of the agricultural work carried out in the remote *agencia*. I asked Romel how the Las Peñas *comuneros/as* had come up with the idea of commissioning these documentaries:

Romel: Our video was something like their last resource. The ten families appealed first to the authorities in Las Peñas and said: "Hey, why are you invading our plots? Why don't we try to reach an agreement?" Well, it seems that the authorities of Las Peñas refused because of an existing agreement and said there was nothing they could do about it now. They [the ten families] then went to the municipal officials here in Tama, who just said the same thing: "We are not in charge of those plots, we can't intervene because they have already been distributed and therefore belong to Las Peñas." So the last resort was to record a video and they explained to us: "We want to file a complaint because they're taking the land away from us. We want people to see where we live and what we do. We're not getting rich with the land. We just live from hand to mouth." [...] Since the General Assembly is the highest authority they wanted a video to show this, so people there could see and think: "Why is this happening?" They could see exactly how they were affected and say: "Well, if Tlahui took away twenty hectares of land from them, that's what they should get back." Just hearing this is not the same as seeing it on a DVD projected with a beamer and then realizing: "Oh, it's true. That's what really happened!" That's the reaction they had in mind.¹⁵

Consequently video is seen as a key instrument for the relaying of an auditory and visual land experience that attendees of the General Assembly, which is approximately three kilometres away from the plots in question, are unable to verify on site. It bridges geographical and sensory distances in order to mobilize the audience. The Las Peñas *comuneros/as* not only envisaged showing the film at the General Assembly but likewise in the state capital of Oaxaca to government institutions and NGOs that intervene as mediators in agrarian disputes.

I came across land dispute documentaries in a number of archives in Tama: the members of TV Tamix, for example, a local communal TV station in operation from 1992 until 2000 (not to be confused with the commercial video enterprise Video Tamix), stored many hours of unedited footage on the topic.¹⁶ In 1996, the *comuneros/as* and community officials concerned commissioned a team from this local TV station to document the then acute disputes at the village boundary with Tlahui (see below). Tama's pioneer professional photographer, Alberto Pérez Ramírez, who began to take pictures of social events as early as 1987, was probably the first person confronted with special requests by local costumers, who wanted him to capture visual evidence of land disputes, such as undergrowth that had been cleared and trees felled by alleged trespassers. Time and again I

stumbled on this genre when I set about looking for historical photographs of Tama and village life. Tama's municipality has not yet created its own audiovisual archive. In reality, former officials and particularly those who were responsible as *presidente* or *secretario de bienes comunales* for agrarian disputes with bordering villages or within the town itself are the people who carefully stored photographs (and since 2006, digital video recordings) of these occurrences during their term of office.

This discovery inspired me to ask Adolfo Martínez Mireles, who served as *secretario de bienes comunales* in 2005, about the use of photography and video in the context of offices and their mediatization. Before analysing Adolfo's collection as an example, I will briefly contextualize Tama's ongoing land disputes, which began in the second half of the twentieth century.

5. The Context of Agrarian Conflicts

Land and water disputes, and particularly those with neighbouring villages, are of crucial importance to life in Tama: they shape the course of people's lives as well as their understanding of history and of community. Although no serious or indeed violent disputes took place during my stay (2012-2015), references to them were omnipresent, since almost all of the adults in the community had experienced or participated in this type of conflict: elderly residents still remember fleeing from violent hostilities with the village of Cacalotepec in the 1950s and 1960s; at the end of the 1990s, the male population organized militias in the community to ward off opponents from neighbouring Tlahui and for weeks performed sentry duty at the contested lands and water sources. In recent years men, women and even children were engaged in marking the municipality's territory. They erected concrete boundary markers, felled trees to clear an aisle through the forest and cultivated the land there as a measure of delimiting the village border. Photographs and films that chronicle these events revealed to me unimagined dimensions in the lives of many of my interlocutors: they showed some of the extremely peace-loving people I had met in the course of my ethnographic research as armed guards on watch at the contested areas. Some may even have participated in the destruction of the houses and crops of their opponents. As early as the 1940s, Tama began establishing settlements (*agencias* in Spanish) on its borders as a land procurement measure. For years, *tequio*, a key communal institution, has been organized on a grand scale each October for the purpose of removing underbrush from the eight-metre wide border zone that delimits village boundaries. In addition to these defence measures, communal land is sacralized: fowl's blood offerings (*costumbres* in Spanish and *jotmäy* in Äyüüjk, the language spoken by Äyüüjk people) are carried out at the boundary markers under the guidance of leading village diviners (*adivinos/as* in Spanish, *xëmääpy* in Äyüüjk). *Tequio* communal labour is performed ostentatiously in cooperation with members of neighbouring villages. Once the border strip has been cleared, residents of both villages eat and drink together in a display of agreement and celebration of the reigning peace. In the 1990s, *tequio* was still the primary means of accomplishing labour-intensive tasks such as road construction. In times of peace, however, it is primarily a manifestation of community power and at the same time a highly enjoyable "communal picnic", as some villagers jokingly refer to it among themselves.

Land ownership and service in cargo offices are a prerequisite for *comunero/a* status. Those who fail to fulfil both criteria are not considered fully fledged members of the village. As late as the 1980s, this stipulation saw most women as second-class *comuneras*, since family property was passed on to sons. Daughters, on the other hand, only had rights to family lands if they married and settled in the village. This changed in the course of women's advancement by means of migration and they now enjoy equal rights to land inheritance. Central rites of passage emphasize the close relationship to the land, knitting together material, symbolic and religious aspects: after birth, the child's umbilical chord is dedicated to the place of birth and buried there. The strong affinity to the Mother Earth (*naaxwi'iny* in Ēyuujk) is reinforced regularly in collective rituals, which also serve to mark communal land: residents bring offerings to numerous sacred sites on Tama municipality territory as instructed by the diviners in consultations on personal difficulties. Hence economic interest in land ownership goes hand in hand with religious feelings of belonging to the land and social recognition within the village.

This also holds true for Tama migrants living in the USA who are in the process of building retirement homes in their village of origin and hence on communal land. They invest a substantial amount of their income in erecting multi-storey houses they themselves rarely occupy to capacity. On the other hand, these buildings are showcases of their willingness to continue participating in community affairs and village life (cf. Pauli 2008:179). Migrants reset their priorities from agricultural cultivation to support for the urbanization of Tama's town centre, seen by some as a paradox. Rogelio is a prosperous entrepreneur in the Los Angeles *taquería* business with a staff of more than thirty people. As part of their migration experience, a number of people from Tama have established *taquería* as a profitable line of business. These are restaurants that sell *tacos*, originally not part of their traditional food. Rogelio said he thought his brother, who was also his business partner, had "gone mad" because he was investing some of his income in a large house in Tama he will probably never be able to visit. "Why does he need a house in Tama? He should build his house in Los Angeles." As our conversation proceeded, however, Rogelio made comments that indirectly explain migrants' eagerness to invest money in Tama. He told me of his identification with the song "The Golden Cage" ("La Jaula de Oro") by the Los Tigres del Norte band.¹⁷ Although Rogelio now earns a considerable amount of money, he is afraid to travel by plane or buy a prestigious car he could easily afford. The fear of attracting the attention of the US police and of being arrested and subsequently deported is overwhelming, so that he sees no possibility of displaying or enjoying his wealth to the full in Los Angeles.¹⁸

Intervillage land and water disputes and their tendency to flare up once in a while have a long history in this region. Their persistence calls for clarification. Some scholars claim that intervillage conflict in Oaxaca can be traced back to the Spanish colonial government's imposition of its forms of organization and administrative units on the autochthonous population. These ran counter to local social entities and their boundaries (Dennis 1987; Santibañez 1995, in Nahmad 2003:126-127). Other researchers, however, point out that internecine strife over land cannot be blamed exclusively on the legacy of the colonial era. Purely economic motives likewise fall short of the mark. Cargo officials may choose to instigate conflict with neighbouring villages to strengthen communal solidarity and use it as a form of social control within their village (Chassen-López 2004:444). Tama residents argue accordingly and often allude to agrarian disputes positively. In their understanding the five villages of Ayutla, Tama, Tlahui, Tepuxtepec and Tepantlali are "siblings".

Local history as recounted in a myth has it that five brothers founded the five villages at the dawn of time, a unity that many Tama residents regard almost as a natural given (López García 2005:26-27).¹⁹ In 1712, during the Spanish colonial era, these *cinco pueblos mancomunados* were granted a common land title.²⁰

Several researchers have remarked, however, that this common land title has since become the source of vicious quarrels between the five towns concerned (Beals 1945:18; López García 2005:28ff). There were no unequivocal boundary markers within the *mancomunidad*, as each community used natural landmarks, such as mountains, rocks, rivers and even trees, to define the boundaries of their land. As a result, agreement on the precise border is not always forthcoming; what one village sees as the “invasion” of its land could well be regarded by another as a “legitimate use”.

Three protracted land disputes still crop up in everyday conversations. One case repeatedly brought up by middle-aged residents alludes to the border disputes between Tama and Tlahui that took place from 1996 until 2000. When people from Tama and Tlahui in their mid-thirties or forties meet today they usually refer jokingly to the old enmities. At the same time, these male adults had once been in a village militia themselves and learned that land is something worth fighting for with arms. Land seizures by individual *comuneros/as* around the border area of the future *agencia* Tierra Caliente triggered this particular conflict. Tlahui villagers had settled across the border in Tama, while people from Tama did likewise on territory claimed by Tlahui. These activities were encouraged by the respective cargo officials. According to the Tama version, the dispute gained momentum when Tlahui villagers began in a concerted action to erect concrete boundary markers to “cement” their land seizures, which in turn Tama inhabitants considered illegal.

In 1996, the landowners concerned on the Tama side appealed for help to TV Tamix as their communal media makers. A crew of three from this local television station arrived at the site and documented the fresh landmarks in war coverage style.²¹ In line with local “visual warfare” tradition, people from Tlahui began cutting down trees on a wide strip of land at the controversial borderline to enhance their claims, all of which is carefully documented in the film. As several of my interlocutors remarked, clear cutting is carried out so that the forest aisle causes great pain (“seeing that hurts”; “*duele ver eso*”) to those affected when they see it even from a great distance. Vicente Antúnez from TV Tamix gives a running commentary on camera as though he were a war reporter at the front. He accuses the Tlahui cement landmark “commando” of recklessly disregarding the natural environment. Shot at the remote village border, the film was also screened at the General Assembly, where it whipped up sentiments against Tlahui. Consequently the TV Tamix film team by no means adopted the role of objective documentarist. On the contrary, their attitude was biased in favour of Tama and they acted as the executive arm of the *bienes comunales* officials. Village residents awarded the filmmakers the same recognition and respect as officials in this situation. TV Tamix functioned here as the “fourth estate” in the village and attained a position almost on a par with that of officials. 1998 saw Tama and Tlahui each setting up militia to control their village borders, thereby presaging their intention to defend the land they claimed as community property with armed violence should the need arise. The residents of Tama eventually committed an act of violence and burned down the house and plantation of a Tlahui family that had settled on what the former perceived as Tama land. The state government urged both villages to

enter into negotiations at an agrarian tribunal held at the Ministry for Agriculture in Oaxaca City. The year 2000 saw bilateral agreement on a new boundary line between the two villages, which considered and offset the land seizures in question.

The most recent case concerns a dispute that began in 2004 over a water source at the border with Ayutla. While Tama pleaded for division of the source equally between the two villages, Ayutla claimed it in its entirety. Despite several negotiation attempts, the conflict spiralled to the stage where Tama residents occupied the water source terrain. In retaliation Ayutla blocked the main road access to Tama from the south for months. This meant that the inhabitants of Tama were cut off from their primary connection to the state capital and forced to make wide detours to obtain processed food and other basic items. When they occupied the water source armed with rifles, the state governor of Oaxaca sent in the federal police. Officials from both villages subsequently sat at the negotiating table of an agrarian tribunal and reached a temporary agreement that saw the problem solved exclusively through further conciliation talks. To this day, however, Tama and Ayutla have failed to reach agreement on the distribution of the water source at their border. Four of the *cinco pueblos mancomunados* have meanwhile mutually agreed on their boundaries and dissolved their original unity. Due to the ongoing water source dispute, Tama and Ayutla have not been able to demarcate this last piece of their border.

Although no one was injured in the above-mentioned dispute with Ayutla in 2004, mutual provocation and hostility led to a great sense of bitterness that exists to this day. One example is Ayutla's vilification of Tama on vast wall spaces, where abusive slogans were painted over the classic patterns and colours of the shawls worn by Tama women. This also constituted a form of "visual warfare" waged by the respective villages. Interestingly, the dispute prompted the organization of Tama's satellite communities and of young people's solidarity with the home village. Bachelor and master degree students at Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (UPN) in Mexico City collected food and clothing at their cultural events and sent them home. Even migrants in faraway Los Angeles began to organize in reaction to their irritation at Ayutla's roadblocks in the (distant) Sierra Mixe. A *comité* (i.e., a *hometown association*) was set up for the first time in the satellite community in Los Angeles specifically for this purpose. Up until then the approximately 300 to 400 migrants from Tama had not established a community with formal institutions and a political representative to the same extent as migrants from other Oaxacan indigenous communities.²² The analysis by Francie Chassen-López (2004) of how intervillage conflicts are exploited to strengthen internal solidarity in Oaxaca could also be applied in the transnational context to the social cohesion that officials – and in this case media makers too – are able to achieve by means of agrarian disputes.

6. The Persuasiveness of Photographs and Films in Agrarian Disputes

The analysis of Adolfo Martínez Mireles's private audiovisual archive demonstrates how agrarian disputes have been mediatized through photography and video recordings. In the course of this process land dispute documentaries became a local genre. It is typical of political actors like Adolfo to systematically use them as a political instrument and store them. Born in 1963, Adolfo was a community leader and the first person in Tama to exceed the traditional one-year term of office

when he became *presidente municipal* in 2010 and again in 2011. Given that his parents were both merchants with no school education, he embarked on an unusual career. He studied law in Puebla and as one of the few local lawyers specialized in land issues he is now highly sought after across the Mixe Region. Similar to many members of the prosperous educational elite in Tama, he is domiciled both in Oaxaca City and in Tama, and commutes on a regular basis.

When I asked Adolfo if he had perhaps kept audiovisual documents from his term of office, he immediately referred to the year 2005 and his office as *presidente de bienes comunales*. In his house in Tama one afternoon in September 2013, he spread out a sweep of photographs and DVD camcorder recordings that he keeps in his office in Oaxaca City. He had commissioned the films for a significant event: the villages of Ayutla, Tama, Tlahui, Tepuxtepec and Tepantlali took the decision in 2005 to dissolve their political and territorial unity as *cinco pueblos mancomunados*. Four of them agreed to demarcate the borders of each village (that is, municipality) individually. With the help of photographs and DVDs, some of which we watched on his laptop, Adolfo explained the individual demarcation procedure in detail, which in the case of Ayutla has not been carried out due to the ongoing water source dispute. He explained that he had carefully collected this audiovisual material because he firmly believed it might one day be crucial to resolving the dispute and determining the border with Ayutla. Since the material is not used for other purposes, it is not in normal circulation.

Adolfo first explained to me that the residents of the five communities concerned had basically been reluctant to accept individual border demarcations: many were still convinced that these agrarian disputes were precisely what had strengthened intervillage cohesion. Adolfo disagrees and sees the *cinco pueblos mancomunados* as a structure imposed by the Spanish. For this reason, while serving as *presidente de bienes comunales*, he pushed for the individual survey of community boundaries:

Adolfo: ... I think the *mancomunidad* was introduced much later. Beginning with the Conquista, the Conquistadores began to merge communities for greater control. I think that's how it happened, but other people say *mancomunidad* stems from their [the Ayuujk ja'ay during the precolonial period] having defended their land boundaries against other communities that were inhabited by Zapotecs and not Ayuujk ja'ay. So that's the other point of view. But the historical origins were based on a primordial land title and those who generated that recognition as land possession were clearly the Spanish authorities.²³

Most of the audiovisual material Adolfo spread out on the large table is unedited footage of negotiations and conciliation talks between Adolfo as the highest authority in Tama on agrarian issues and his colleagues in Ayutla. Shortly before he attended these conflict-ridden meetings with representatives of the neighbouring village, Adolfo in his function as *presidente de bienes comunales* asked local camcorder owners and teachers to capture them on tape. In his remarks on this type of audiovisual documentation, he stressed that it was notably situations of tension, disunity and conflict that demanded audiovisual recording.

Ingrid: How are decisions taken by the *bienes comunales* office recorded?

Adolfo: It used to be done in verbal form and decisions were not recorded in an archive. Up

to the 1960s, almost everything was declared orally. There were no files then to record who had possessions. People were simply usufructuaries. But there weren't that many disputes then either, since the population was smaller than it is today. When the population grew, *bienes comunales* officials saw the need to record the apportionment [of land] and find individual problem solutions. That's why an agreement is recorded. Those participating in the agreement sign it, the record of possession is passed on to the beneficiary and everything is kept in the *bienes comunales* archive to maintain some kind of order. [...]

Ingrid: Are photography and video used in the work of *bienes comunales*, too?

Adolfo: Well, when conciliation is based on good will and mutual comprehension, there is no need for the media. But if the case is controversial, if a quarrel arises, then in certain instances photography is used. Why is this the case? Because if land plots are invaded, then there is this medium that captures images and you begin to use video cameras, photographic cameras and mobile phones. In the case of more serious conflicts, let's say when one party invades someone else's land or when the authorities of *bienes comunales* delimit land plots, then they use this sort of media.²⁴

Adolfo was also in possession of two films with non-partisan descriptive titles: *Agrarian Activities : Tama – Tepuxtepec – Tepantlali* and *Construction of Boundary Markers : Tama – Tepuxtepec – Tepantlali*. Both films capture the consensus reached on these village boundaries. Besides boundary measuring, inspections and the construction of boundary markers, they also record the celebrations that concluded the long weeks of work on these measures. The films testify to the significance of fiestas as a traditional medium, where dissenting parties can meet on neutral ground and talk to each other, and also demonstrate how fiestas set a seal on the fresh marking of each village boundary.

Apart from this modern audiovisual material, Adolfo's agrarian dispute archive also contains a reproduction of the medium with which communities recorded their land during the colonial era: a photograph of the painted copy of a *lienzo* stored in the archive of Tama's *bienes comunales* office. It portrays the *territorio mancomunado* of the five villages. *Lienzos* are documents that inhabitants of Mesoamerica drew on cloths, using hybrid characters and images to outline the geographic boundaries of their village and its ruler genealogies. These "maps" were often produced for the purpose of suing for community land rights at Spanish law courts during the colonial era.²⁵ The writing and visual imagery were thus "streamlined for Spanish eyes" (Terraciano 2001:19). Tama's *lienzo*, which measures approximately one square metre, depicts a mountain landscape traversed by a water system that flows down into the lower left corner. Five churches slightly apart from each other take up the middle section and represent the five *pueblos mancomunados*. According to Adolfo each of the five villages secured a painted copy of the original *lienzo*, which is reported to be stored in the Archivo de la Nación in Mexico City. Each village added their own written explanations to its *lienzo*, such as the village name to the church, interpreting and complementing it to meet their own needs.

The *lienzo* cached in the Tama office of the *bienes comunales* is used in community rituals as an emblematic symbol and a ritual object. At one time it was at the heart of a special village ceremony held annually in February. As a "primordial document", the *lienzo* was placed on a woven mat on

the ground. The rites performed on this occasion served to protect the village boundaries and ensure their observance. A fixed number of sacred offerings of maize in a specific numerical and symbolic amount were placed in five positions on and around the *lienzo*, and sixty-five chickens sacrificed (López García 2011:92-93). Following a concept once described by James Frazer as “sympathetic magic”, the *lienzo* stands for the land of the village itself. The faded colour print that Adolfo keeps of a photograph showing a *lienzo*, the original of which has been lost, indicates how photography incorporates older visual material and transforms it in the process.

On the whole, Adolfo Martínez Mireles’s private archive bears witness to the significance of agrarian disputes for the local usage of photography and video, and to the creation of a local film genre due to political interest in representation of the topic. Its target audience once consisted of the Tama General Assembly and a more inclusive circle of officials. In the course of transnational expansion of the village, however, land dispute photographs are also circulated and consumed by users of the Facebook page “Reunión de Tama”. This virtual assembly is in some aspects less inclusive than the face to face assembly (in terms of age) and more inclusive in others (with regard to the place of residence of *comuneros/as*). In the latter case, audiovisual evidence of land quarrels is designed for internal community use and not disclosed lightly to outsiders, since the content is considered a sensitive issue.

7. Conveying Agrarian Disputes to an International Film Audience

In 1999, interestingly, the local television station TV Tamix and Hermenegildo Rojas in particular produced the film *Serving the People (Këdung Ajdk/Servir al pueblo)*, which addresses the internal topic of agrarian disputes for an external international audience. At this time TV Tamix was part of the Video Indígena circle and hence not only made films that served local uses and tastes, but also adopted Video Indígena’s “classic” documentary language. With films like *Fiesta Animada/Animated Feast* (1994), *Maach/El machucado/The Meal* (1994) and *Moojk/Maíz/Maize* (1996) it was hyped as a shining example (“*caso estrella*”; Cremoux 1997:10) of indigenous media in Mexico. When the TV collective was awarded grants from the Rockefeller and MacArthur Foundations in 1996, it resorted to unedited video material of the Tama-Tlahui conflict initially recorded for local use only in order to make this documentary.²⁶ From an outside perspective, *Këdung Ajdk* treats this topic in a somewhat obscure manner, since it appears for the most part to be a film about the cargo system (*këdung* is the Ayuujk term for cargo officials). The protagonists in the film are the *presidente de bienes comunales* in 1998, Hermenegildo’s uncle Victor Rojas García, and his vice-president (*suplente de bienes comunales*), Daniel Martínez Pérez. On camera, the latter speaks in great depth about the cargo system and the duty to serve in it and to perform communal labour on a voluntary basis. The second half of the film deals with the controversy between Tama and Tlahui, where Daniel explains the problems that stem from the common land title of *cinco mancomunados* from 1712. Here a number of communal labour scenes show men, women and children from the village as they clear, prepare and plough a vast strip of land as a demarcation. Traditional *son* music of an evocative nature forms the soundtrack to these sequences. Insiders can read these scenes as an adaptation of traditional “visual warfare” to the medium of video. They enhance the palpable determination of the work carried out and the massive community participation involved, testifying in turn to the strong will to defend communal territory. The

documentary culminates in scenes of chickens sacrificed along the border and the construction of a man-sized concrete boundary marker at the border with Tlahui bearing the inscription “Tama 1998”.

Primarily designed for an external audience, TV Tamix submitted the documentary to the Native American Film and Video Festival in New York in 2000. Media anthropologist Erica Wortham (2013:169) discusses its critical reception by the film festival jury (of which she was a member). Since most of the jury members failed to grasp its meaning (“other selectors ‘didn’t see it’ and found the program hard to follow”), it was not selected. The film treatment of the dispute among the Ayuujk communities is not straightforward. It chooses instead to emphasize that “serving the people”, i.e., community service as a cargo official, is a cornerstone of the Ayuujk way of life. Hence viewers who are unfamiliar with local conditions and the intricacies of land tenure and agrarian disputes might indeed occasionally wonder about the point of all this activity involving so many people.

Despite its ‘failure’ at international festivals, the film *Këdung Ajdk* is nonetheless a courageous effort to explain to an outside audience for the first time the complexities of an intervillage conflict from an emic point of view, based on the deep-seated relationship of the villagers to their land. The film was distributed in the Video Indígena circle, where it is held in esteem. Given the communication endeavours of TV Tamix, it is paradoxical that in Tama itself *Këdung Ajdk* remains almost unknown today, although at the time it was screened there following completion. Since this militant film threatens to bring painful memories to the surface, TV Tamix has no intention of distributing it at village level. In this sense *Këdung Ajdk* fits into the local category of agrarian dispute documentaries, which the villagers prefer in times of peace to leave well enough alone in their private archives.

8. Conclusions

Local photography and videography open up new media spaces in a geographical, practice-oriented and imagined sense. Videographer activities surrounding the production of land dispute documentaries and dramas, both as a local and an international genre on the Video Indígena circuit, extend beyond Tama village to the USA and further afield. Traditional media such as orality *lienzo* “maps” and the “visual warfare” used to evidence land limits and their violation, all of which convey the emotionally appealing qualities of the land and people’s relationship to it, have been transferred to and/or combined with modern mass media such as photography and videotaping, as well as social media like Facebook and Youtube. These processes involve the (re)mediatization of core elements of the cargo system and specify land tenure within the context of the community’s new geographic expansion to the USA. Within the wider frame of mediatized community politics, photography and videotaping have become vital fields of activity in negotiating agrarian disputes with neighbouring villages or in Tama itself as part of transnational community building. Despite the constraints that migrants endure as a result of restrictive US border and immigration policies, they have nonetheless been able to (re)define “home” as a social relation to a concrete place, to land in the village of origin. Ayuujk people in and from Tama even succeeded in establishing land ownership as the distinguishing characteristic of a transnational *comunero/a*.

1 This paper focuses on practices, that is on what people do and say in relation to media (Couldry 2004) and conceives these practices as differentiated and as including discursive practices such as “practices of knowing, explaining, justifying and so on” (Hobart 2005:26, in: Postill 2010:5).

2 Appadurai (1996:35) coined the term mediascape in view of a similar context to describe deterritorialized though stable landscapes centering on image-based narratives and based on pre-electronic or electronic hardware, which viewers can relate to despite their global dispersion. Faye Ginsburg (1994:366) is among the media anthropologists who adopted Appadurai’s concept of mediascape to “take account of the media practices with the local, national, and transnational circumstances that surround them” in the context of Aboriginal media in Australia.

3 The book manuscript currently under consideration for publication is entitled "Transborder Media Spaces: Ayuujk People’s Videomaking between Mexico and the USA". I wish to thank my interlocutors in Tama and Los Angeles for their generosity in sharing with me their insights into and opinions on land tenure and agrarian disputes.

4 ‘Indigenous’ is written in simple quotation marks to remind readers that this is a problematic term. It homogenizes people unduly according to the historically constructed ethnic category of colonized inhabitants of the Americas and elides much more varied self-conceptions, which may also include differences in gender, age, profession and locality. The inhabitants of Tama widely reject this term as a self-designation. The word indigenous, however, has been appropriated as a political term by some actors and redefined as a positive self-reference. Today, politically engaged actors prefer to self-identify as *pueblos originarios*, “original people.”

5 The National Indigenist Institute (INI) founded in 1948 was absorbed in 2003 by the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CDI).

6 The filmmakers Juan José García (in: Wortham 2004:365) and Carlos Efraín Pérez Rojas (2005, in: http://www.nativenetworks.si.edu/esp/rose/efrain_c_interview.htm, consulted on June 6, 2013) emphasize this communal orientation. As Erica Wortham (2013:9) explains, “Video Indígena [is a] specific media categor[y] that [was] deliberately constructed in institutional settings in the 1990s”. While dealing with Tama as a case study, Wortham does not focus specifically on Tama’s media production as part of a wider and diversified media field that initially adopted mass media independent of INI and was later co-opted as part of Video Indígena. The Video Indígena movement in Mexico during this period of the 1990s has meanwhile been well researched from a media anthropology perspective. See, for example, Cremoux (1997), Plascencia y Monteforte (2001), Castells i Talens (2011), Smith (2005) and Wortham (2004, 2005, 2013).

7 Floriberto Díaz (1951-1995) was an Ayuujk anthropologist, intellectual, and political leader from the neighbouring community of Tlahuitoltepec. His work bears witness to the Sierra Mixe as a site where self-determined forms of knowledge are constantly being developed and transmitted. The extensive oeuvre of Díaz and Jaime Martínez Luna, a Zapotec anthropologist, intellectual and media maker from Guelatao, has been published in recent years.

8 Alejandra Aquino (2013) collected important contributions on this topic in a special issue of the journal Cuadernos del Sur. She emphasizes that *comunalidad* as practised in the communities of the Oaxacan Sierra Norte should be reassessed in the light of gender issues and the challenges migration poses today (Aquino 2013:13-18).

9 Financial contributions to the fiestas are deducted from the one-year long cargo service, estimated at 100,000 pesos. It is with this calculation in mind that many migrants donate to the fiestas. Tamazulapam del Espíritu Santo's main patron saint is the Holy Ghost, as can be deduced from the town's name. It celebrates another major fiesta dedicated to Santa Rosa de Lima.

10 The name of the Facebook page is changed.

11 See the comment posted by "Pueblo Mixe": "As always happens, those who pretend to be defenders of the peasants are the ones who most exploit the rights of the poor. Those who agitate against the authorities and exploit the people of Las Peñas include the retired teacher [I omit the name, I.K.], the family of [ditto], the engineer [ditto], the engineer [ditto], among others. LET'S CALL THINGS BY THEIR NAME." (Translation I.K.)

12 As retired teacher and local historian Fortino López García (2005:100) remarks: "A *comunero* is understood to contain a building plot, agricultural land, a house [...] and to have been bequeathed in front of the communal authority [...] When a person reaches the age of 18 or more and did not receive his inheritance from his parents or does not meet any of the above criteria, he is not a *comunero* and cannot function as a village authority."

13 Another user, Agustín Pérez, commented that "tamazulapam mixe is the most expensive place to buy land after Cancun and Acapulco... and it's supposed to be communal land" (Translation I.K.)

14 I use pseudonyms for individuals personally affected by land conflicts.

15 Interview with Romel Ruiz Pérez, Tamazulapam, December 23, 2014.

16 For more on the history of TV Tamix, see Wortham (2004, 2005, 2013).

17 The song written by Enrique Franco in 1983 deals with Mexican migration to the USA: "For what good is the money, if I'm like a prisoner in this vast prison. I even cry when I think about it. And although the jail may be made of gold, it's still a jail." (Translation I.K.)

18 Informal conversation with Rogelio, Los Angeles, July 25, 2015. I use pseudonyms for Tama villagers living in the USA.

19 The original myth is as follows: "As is known through the transmissions from mouth to mouth of our ancestors and their descendants, the Ayutla, Tlahui, Tepuxtepec, Tama and Tepantlali stem from the same parents, who produced five sons. They provided or bequeathed to them the land or villages of these five communities" (López García 2005:25; Translation I.K.).

20 Consult González Camargo (2005). The land title of the *mancomunidad* is kept in the Archivo General de la Nación, August 2, 1712. The *mancomunidad* is highly unusual, since there are only two other cases in the state of Oaxaca.

21 My sources are the films that TV Tamix made on this conflict in 1996 and in November 1998, and the discussions on them with Hermenegildo Rojas in March 2013. TV Tamix had been commissioned by the *bienes comunales* officials, including Daniel Martínez, to document the trespassing and the construction of land markers from the perspective of both Tlahui and Tama. These recordings were shown at the Tama General Assembly during the conflict.

22 This hometown association in Los Angeles was discontinued, however, due to accusations of corruption against one of its founders.

23 Interview with Adolfo Martínez Mireles, Tamazulapam, September 14, 2013.

24 Interview with Adolfo Martínez Mireles, Tamazulapam, September 14, 2013.

25 “Maps” is written here in quotation marks because *lienzos* did not align with European cartographic conventions.

26 Guillermo Monteforte, the founder of Ojo de Agua Comunicación, played a decisive role in procuring these grants for TV Tamix. Interview with Guillermo Monteforte, Oaxaca City, July 21, 2013.

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