

Prestige and alcohol in South Mexican *fiesta*

Drinking with saint patrons in the central valleys of Oaxaca

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Food and alcohol are the key elements of celebrating a Mexican *fiesta*. I show that drinking at patronal feasts can be the way of constructing a respectful position, as presented in the ethnographic material collected in the three suburban communities of the Central Valleys of Oaxaca (in the years 2012–13). I discuss the relation between drinking alcohol at fiestas, participation and collective identity. I analyse the issue of prestige in the context drinking at fiestas and its relation to gender. I also discuss the role of alcohol in ritual exchanging of gifts at the patronal feasts which were under study and its relation with prestige. Other questions being analysed include the problem of refusing drink and the Catholic and non-Catholic critiques of patronal feasts as based on perceptions of excessive drinking.

*Para todo mal, mezcal,
para todo bien, también,
para lo que no tiene remedio,
un litro y medio.*¹

When I brought a bottle of mescal as a ritual gift at the *fiesta* organised by the members of local authorities in San Bartolo Coyotepec, at the entrance I met one of the municipal councillors responsible for culture and education. She smiled and said it seemed that I had been learning the customs.

The *fiesta* is a spectacular way of being-together-in-community, considered by some authors as the quintessence of Mexican-ness, expressing as it does national and local identity. The organisation of *fiestas* is an interesting phenomenon, diverse and vivid, which still plays an important role in the life many local communities in Oaxaca and throughout Mexico (as well as in other Latin American countries).

1 A commonly known proverb used in Oaxaca: 'For everything good – mescal, for everything bad too, and for what has not its remedy, a litre and a half' (my translation). All translations from Spanish into English in this text are mine.

It is a phenomenon which is undergoing global influence and experiencing social changes which provoke the need to ask new questions. The festival days of the patron saints are usually the most important feasts in the calendar of local communities in Mexico. The organisation of a *fiesta patronal* will gain members of a local community in Mexico respect, and their prestige will also grow. The positional prestige, which is obtained by the organisers in exchange for their positions, can in the case of men be transformed into nominations to certain positions in local government. In the case of women, as Holly Mathews shows (1985), this relationship is more complicated, because, until now, there have been few women in local government, though despite this fact, many women have financed *fiestas*.

It is also possible to gain positions other than civil service posts which are not connected directly to political power, but are nevertheless prestigious and influential on the life of a community, in exchange for organising a *fiesta*.

As Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska (2008–9) suggested, the issue of prestige wasn't commonly used in anthropological writings as a research category, but mostly as an explanation, especially in the context of gift exchange systems. Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead (1981) have analysed the issue of a 'prestige system' in the context of social structure: they have used 'prestige' as a synonym for status, and in similar fashion Jon Abbink (2002) discusses questions of prestige and power in relation to the consumption of alcohol in Maji (Africa). He focusses on the differing status of the various forms of alcohol such as wine in France (Bourdieu 1984). Jean G. Peristiany (1965) and Julian A. Pitt-Rivers (1965) discusses the relationship between prestige and honour, which is close to Marcel Mauss's (1922) understanding of prestige in his classic writings about gift exchange systems, which also treat the term prestige as something close to social status. The issue of individual prestige in the organisation of *fiestas* was recently discussed by Baraniecka-Olszewska (2008–9). She focused on the difference between positional and individual prestige and its attribution to gender.

My focus is on drinking at patronal feasts as a way of developing a good reputation, showing respect and maintaining prestige. I discuss the relation between collective drinking, prestige and participation, *inter alia*, in the context of gender. I understand prestige to be a dynamic phenomenon, not a stable value attributed to an individual, but arising from an exchange of meaningful gestures, their rating manifested in acts that attribute value, in exchange for certain practices (Domański 1999).

Food and alcohol are the key aspects of celebrating a Mexican *fiesta*. My interest in the subject of alcohol began from being surprised at how complex

the ritual of drinking alcohol at *fiestas* appeared to be, how broad its spiritual² background is, by contrast with drinking in the cultural context I come from, although it is considered to be, similarly, Catholic (and probably even more heavy-drinking). I was prepared for the fact that people drink a good deal of alcohol at *fiestas*, but at first I was not aware of how they do this. Alcohol was not the main subject of my research – it came out in the fieldwork as a ‘by-product’. This has happened to many anthropologists before, according to Mary Douglas (1988: 3).

This article is based on field research conducted by me from August 2012 to July 2013 and funded by the Mexican Government.³ Its results were presented at the Donner Symposium on Religion and Food in Turku in June 2014.⁴ My research focussed on power and prestige in *fiestas* ‘backstage’ – the questions of social changes, gender and agency.⁵

During the above-mentioned period I participated in more than 20 *fiestas* in the Central Valleys of Oaxaca (Mexico), mostly in San Bartolo Coyotepec, which was my main area of research fieldwork.⁶ San Bartolo is world famous

2 I mean the spirit, not spirit as in distilled alcohol.

3 As part of its scholarship for foreigners programme.

4 My participation in the Donner Symposium was sponsored by the Foundation of the University of Warsaw, the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of Culture, PhD Students Council and the Council of the Students Scientific Movement at the University of Warsaw.

5 The research project title was ‘Fiesta in the communities of the Central Valleys of Oaxaca, State of Oaxaca, Mexico. Organization of patronal feasts as a way of gaining power and prestige’. Travelling costs were sponsored by: Rector of the UW, the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of Culture (UW) and PhD Students Council (UW).

6 The researched communities are suburban municipalities centres (with easy travelling to the capital of the state), with good access to education and a high level of literacy. They are relatively wealthy and non-marginalised, the main businesses being trade, crafts, tourism and services (old trade traditions). They are recognised nationally and internationally. San Bartolo Coyotepec is an artisan town in the Central Valleys of Oaxaca, in the south and west it borders la Villa de Zaachila. The area of its municipality is 31 km². The municipality has 8,015 inhabitants; 3,981 of them live in the centre of the municipality. Most of the inhabitants (45.31%) are dedicated to trade, tourism, and services, and 24.85% of them are craftspeople. Most of the inhabitants (87.54%) are Catholics. La Villa de Zaachila is a district with an archaeological site and an important traditional market (tianguis), in the Central Valleys district of Oaxaca, 12 km southwest of the capital of the state of Oaxaca. This ancient cultural and ceremonial centre of the Zapotecs occupies an area of 81 km². In the municipality of Villa de Zaachila 28,003 people live, 13,959 of them residing in the centre of the municipality. It has the largest number of inhabitants and covers greatest area of all the studied communities. Most of the inhabitants (55.26%) are dedicated to trade, tourism

for its community of black pottery producers, living 11 km south of the city of Oaxaca. I have also collected additional comparative materials in Santa María Atzompa (a green pottery producers' community) and in la Villa de Zaachila (the neighbouring city of San Bartolo, a former ceremonial and political centre of the Central Valley's Zapotecs). My research was based on participant observation, individual in-depth interviews and audiovisual documentation, as well as bibliographical research. My interlocutors were mainly individual *fiesta* organisers called *mayordomos*, and other *cargo* holders⁷.

Drinking alcohol as participation: collective identities

Many authors argue that drinking during celebrations and rituals is a common way of constructing a collective identity in many cultural contexts (Brandes 1988, Douglas 1988, Heath 1988, Mitchell 2004, Stepaniuk 2007). Why is the question 'to drink or not to drink' so important at *fiestas*? My interlocutors emphasized that drinking alcohol during a *fiesta* amounts to participation. Therefore avoiding alcohol can be taken as a refusal to participate; a rejection of being together in the community, and thus symptomatic of a lack of respect for the group. There is a word *convivir* (similar to 'conviviality') in Spanish which is close in meaning to the sense of the Turnerian term *communitas* (Turner 1969). It is used in the context of the *fiesta* by its participants.⁸ It means to live together, to meet but also to have fun together, sometimes including drinking. Drinking at the *fiesta* helps individuals to socialise, to feel like they are in the right place, to take root in the community, which – in my opinion – is related to constructing a collective identity.

and services. 84.58% are Catholics. Santa María Atzompa is an artisan town in the Central Valleys district of Oaxaca, 5 km northwest of the capital of the state of Oaxaca. In the east it borders the City of Oaxaca and it is situated close to the most popular archaeological site in the State of Oaxaca, where the famous pyramid Monte Albán is located. It also possesses its own archaeological site, recently opened to visitors. The municipality occupies an area of 31 km², and it is the smallest of the studied communities. The municipality estimates 27,465 inhabitants, 21,788 of them living in the centre of the municipality. Most of them (49.90%) are dedicated to trade, tourism and services; in the centre of the municipality 90% of inhabitants are artisans, pottery-makers of traditional ceramics, and 24.37% of all inhabitants of the Municipality are dedicated to craft-making. Majority of the inhabitants (83.70%) are Catholics. (Mexican Governmental statistics 1–2)

7 Here 'cargo holders' means position holders, mostly members of groups involved in *fiesta* throwing.

8 I noted it in interviews as well as during informal conversations.

As one of my interlocutors, a *fiesta* organiser said: ‘Tomar, si, licor, porque eso no puede faltar’ (‘to drink, yes, liquor, because that cannot be missing’). So I understand that strong alcohol is something which is obligatory at the *fiesta*. There is also an expression used by a former member of a religious committee: ‘tomadera como debe ser’ (‘binge-drinking as it should be’), referring to the *fiesta*. I interpret it that binge drinking is expected at *fiestas*, as a proper way of honouring, and showing respect to the patron saints. As one of the *fiesta* participants emphasised with pride: ‘en San Bartolo la gente es fiestera’ (‘in San Bartolo people like to feast’). I observed that people who drink at *fiestas* are popular and are considered sociable. I noticed also that drunk people at *fiestas* are usually treated with great respect; the same as in the sober state. They are not considered to be ‘pigs’, and clear signals of their inebriation are treated with understanding. It is parallel with the pre-colonial Aztec attitude to the drunkenness of elites and also equates with the biblical attitude to wine, as in the Old Testament’s tale of Noah’s inebriation. Sergio Navarrete Pellicer explains it as follows: ‘... there is something deeper in excessive drinking in the ritual context than the relation between living people: in drinking great amounts of alcohol, often to the point of unconsciousness, there is a declaration of trust in the communion of souls, the living and the dead’ (Navarrete Pellicer 2001: 69).

The mode of drinking and even drunken behaviour, although it seems hard to control, is culturally constructed, as anthropological literature shows (Heath 1988: 46). Some behaviours are accepted, and others prohibited, considered as a lack of respect to other participants. At *fiestas* in San Bartolo I observed cultural rules of drinking; getting drunk was not a pretext for showing aggression. It was allowed to dance vigorously, shout, display affection and joyfulness, but acting with hostility was not seen in a favourable light.⁹ An aggressive person would be excluded from the party; nobody sat next to or talked to such a person, except in asking the aggressor to behave better (cf. Navarrete Pellicer 2001: 69–70). From my point of view, this was surprising as in the Polish context it is common to see drunk people (mostly men) acting violently and it is seen as an obvious hazard associated with drunkenness at parties (especially at weddings or dancing parties in rural communities). Ramona L. Pérez’s (2000, 1997) studies proved something similar – in contrast to my observations – an acceptance of violence (especially against women) as a rule, while men were getting drunk in Atzompa:

9 In Navarrete’s fieldwork (2001: 69, 70) conflicts and aggression were attributed to strangers, and only outsiders were blamed for it.

The movement of gendered psychical, emotional and mental abuse into a public space, such as the *fiesta*, is a clear indication that such behaviour is not only acceptable to the larger social unit, but sanctioned by it, albeit hidden behind notions of uncontrolled behaviour resulting from excessive drinking. (Pérez 2000: 367)

But if there are rules for getting drunk when participating in *fiesta*, which are about constructing collective identities, those rules are also about defining boundaries. Drinking or not drinking at fiestas expresses differences between groups. Firstly the attitudes expressed in participating in a *fiesta* reflects a space-community division along the lines of ‘the uptown *pachangueros*’ (‘party people’) and ‘the downtown *tacaños*’ (‘scrooges’).¹⁰

As the *padrino* or godfather of the opening parade of the Candlemass *fiesta* said:

In the same village, there is a line that divides us, I don’t know, it has certain traditions, certain customs, I don’t know what it is, but it is well defined. On this side of the highway, people don’t spend money on *fiestas* ... You cross the highway, and there *fiestas* are crucial... During the *fiesta* time, I don’t know from where they get it, but they throw a huge party. And this is a question of those from downtown and uptown. (Interview with the *padrino* of the opening parade of Candlemass Fiesta in San Bartolo Coyotepec, 2012)

Secondly, the decision to abstain can effect a rejection by community members. The same interlocutor told me that he had decided to organise his children’s baptism party to be alcohol-free. One of his relatives brought some beer, despite the fact he had been asked not to do so, and the *fiesta* participants were disappointed at such a small quantity of alcohol being available at the party.¹¹ His choice was commented upon as being not the proper way to organise a baptism feast (perhaps also as a lack of respect to the guests). He had broken a rule which was not negotiable; his resistance to ritual drinking was not accepted.

Of those who criticise *fiestas* there are two main groups, and their critiques are based on the concept of excessive drinking. Both seem to be inspired by new orthodox ascetic religious movements and rational neo-liberal ideas. Within

10 Both mentioned terms are commonly used as I noted during informal conversations.

11 It could be one crate of beer or more; one hundred people in rural Mexico is usually a modest party with only family members and closer friends.

the Catholic critique *fiestas* are in themselves binge-drinking and nothing else, and they are an offence to the patron saints and God. The fact that the patron saints' images are carried by drunk people signals a lack of respect, and risks damaging those images. The saints do not need such a celebration and can even use their power to take revenge if they feel offended. Other Catholic arguments against *fiestas* are based on expert discourse; alcohol is seen as evil because it damages the health of individuals and families as well as society as a whole.

According to non-Catholic, mostly Protestant (Evangelical) opinion, drinking, *fiesta* and Catholicism are synonymous with each other. Drinking is not acceptable to God, and drinking at a *fiesta* in the name of the saints is a form of idolatry. This evil tradition is also considered to be a waste of both money and time in the name of a God who does not approve. Some non-Catholic, mostly Protestant, churches offer a release from alcohol addiction by means of religious conversion. On their posters, displayed in public places, they invite people to join them if they have any problems with alcohol. It is a commonly-known fact in Oaxaca, and they are believed to be equally supportive of AA meetings, which are common in this area.

As anthropological literature shows, the AA movement can be interpreted as a quasi-religious organisation (Antze 1988, Brandes 2002 and others). In San Bartolo its members mostly avoid *fiestas* (and other non-AA events). They consider it to be a temptation to start drinking. If they participate, they refuse to drink, which in this case is accepted and understood by the community. As we can see, there are exceptions to the rules about drinking.

Alcohol in ritual gift exchange and as a manifestation of prestige

Sergio Navarrete Pellicer (2001: 68, 69, 77) argues that drinking together in the context of the *fiesta* is considered to be a form of sharing; an exchange of gifts. Organising *fiestas* in the Valleys of Oaxaca is based on a ritual gift exchange called *guelaguetza* (a Zapotec term). According to classic texts, participation in a gift exchange is a way of showing respect and constructing prestige (Mauss 1922). One of the most common gifts in the *guelaguetza* ritual is alcohol: a bottle of tequila, mescal, or a crate of beer. In a situation of food offerings by women, men will give drinks, according to Stanley Brandes (1988: 174–5). It reminded me of the rules that I observed in a completely different (but also mainly Catholic and patriarchal) fieldwork project carried out in the Kurpie region of Poland, where men were always the ones who distilled alcohol and women were responsible for preparing food (Zamorska 2006). There is a tradition in Atzompa of giving alcohol as *guelaguetza* on the first day of the *fiesta*, and soft drinks the following day. It may be another remedy for a hangover.

In all of the communities mentioned, the people of high status (i.e. the authorities, or *fiesta* organisers) are in certain moments greeted with or brought music, alcohol and snacks by religious brotherhoods or committees. As I was informed by the president of a religious brotherhood, alcohol and snacks are called *carino* ('hospitality') or *regalo* ('gift', 'present'), as well as *presente* ('present') in this context. The *fiesta* organisers have to give presents in return, which usually means drinking together, initially with those who directly helped them to organise the *fiesta*. So the ritual of gift exchange remains, as Candlemass *fiesta* organisers from San Bartolo told me:

- They also come for us with a brass band, it is taken... what is this... the bottles.
- It's another present...
- Sometimes we are accompanied by relatives in receiving hospitality. Because it is the hospitality of the house. (Interview with the former *mayordomos* of the Candlemas *fiesta* in San Bartolo Coyotepec, 2013)

Alcohol in this way emphasises structure. It can be seen also in terms of the Turnerian sacred *anti-structure* (1969), where religious positions play a more important role than those of the civil authorities, in contrast with everyday life, and the organisation of the *fiesta* is the main theme. In one of the most important celebrations in San Bartolo – the Holy Week – the symbols of power are placed in the church, and the power of the police is symbolically passed to young men playing centurions (also called the Jews). They must catch criminals and to pass them on to the police station, where the police are still in charge.

According to literature, in pre-colonial Aztec ceremonial centres drinking was restricted, and only used by the elite, who were expected to drink excessively during celebrations (see De Sahagun 2012, as well as many other authors, e.g. Mitchell 2004: 15). This ritual lack of control over the body during celebrations, reverted to daily life, was attributed to prestigious people.

In San Bartolo Coyotepec, a less official form of showing esteem and cordiality to former and actual *cargo* holders (the *mayordomos*, authorities and the like) is giving them the task of pouring the alcohol. The *mayordomos*'s decision concerning who is going to play the role of alcohol 'pourer' is significant, as my interlocutors emphasised (mostly during informal conversations); it is not an obligation or a duty, but splendid. Alcohol pourers cannot refuse to drink, and it could be offensive to refuse the honour of pouring if he or she is not sick, and seen to be drinking. Distilled alcohol is served by a pair of people (often a man and a woman though it is not a rule); one of them pours alcohol (usually a man)

with the other holding cups and pouring some kind of soft drink as a chaser. Beer is given out in 0.33 litre bottles, the size small enough so that on a hot day its contents will not get warm before it is finished.

Refusal, prestige and gender

In my opinion the drinking in Atzompa was the most ritualised and controlled of all – people took their drinks at almost the same time, with the words ‘voy a recibir’ (‘I’m going to receive’) in front of the eldest and most prestigious people, as observed at the *fiesta*. It is quite hard to refuse to drink alcohol in Atzompa; to do so is considered to be lacking in respect.¹² Especially those people (mostly men) who are sitting at the main table are expected to drink the minimum symbolic amounts of strong drink. There are places only for non-drinking women at the children’s table and to have a beer is not considered enough to be fully participating. Two of my interlocutors (a man and a woman) involved in the *fiesta* preparation in Atzompa were complaining that at every preparatory meeting, or before rituals they had to drink. For them it was not the amount that was hard to take, but the obligatory repetition of drinking was quite intrusive. This is also the case for *fiesta* organisers; I heard from the female member of municipal council about one of the *mayordomos* who died of alcoholic poisoning immediately following a *fiesta* he had been involved in.

For prestigious people in San Bartolo, it is hard to refuse drinking and maintain their status, while it is virtually impossible to do so in Atzompa, especially for women. Ramona Pérez (2000: 368) describes a case of the female president of the potters’ association in Atzompa, who could not refuse to participate in drinking at the *fiesta*. Although she was seriously sick, she was too afraid of losing her prestigious status to quit the *fiesta*. Two female members of the municipal council of Atzompa, as one of them told me, refused to drink distilled alcohol at *fiestas*, so they were strongly criticised for their perceived lack of respect for the tradition, even though one of them was diabetic. A third one drank ‘as it should be’ on every occasion and subsequently she was considered a drunkard. The husband of a female municipal council member in Atzompa also had a hard decision to make, according to his wife. As a non-authority member he could not join his wife at the main table. Although he did not like to drink, he would lose his prestige as a man and a former *cargo* holder if he sat with non-drinking women and children. So in the end he chose to abstain

12 There are also strict rules of receiving cigarettes – to show respect you have to light it, refusal is considered as offensive, as I unfortunately experienced myself.

from participating in the *fiesta* altogether, although it was hard for his wife to be there without him, and he risked being considered an unsociable person as a consequence.

In my opinion, the question of refusing to drink alcohol is as delicate as it is because of two factors: the importance of reciprocity, or gift exchange, that includes exchanging drinks, which is a mechanism for constructing collective identities; and the importance of alcohol itself, as a liminal, sacred substance. That is why refusal is seen not only as avoiding being together but also a lack of respect for that which is held to be sacred; close to blasphemy. It reminds me of the travesty of an old Polish proverb that I once heard from a drunkard 'Pijanego pan Bóg strzeże' ('God watches over the drunk', my translation).

A *fiesta* is thought of as a sacrifice in a religious sense at many levels. The *fiesta* organisers offer themselves to God, patron saints and to the community they represent. But also the pouring of alcohol and collective drinking could be interpreted as making an offering to a patron saint. In case of pouring, alcohol usually follows food or goes with it, so the combination of food and drink together is a complete offering, either at the *fiesta* or in other contexts. Here the nutritive value of alcohol is emphasised as having the effect of enhancing fertility; for example, when alcohol is poured onto the ground by the *mayordomos* of Saint Bartholomew, having placed food (raw chicken) there on the occasion of the spring blessing (1st May in San Bartolo). In the case of collective drinking as a form of making an offering, alcohol usually goes with music and dancing, and this triad is a gift for the saints. On such occasions its psychoactive potential is of greatest importance (it encourages participants to have fun, it makes them feel happy and allows them to experience an altered, sacred state), and it is closely connected to conviviality. In both cases it is a gift exchange not only between people, but first of all between them and the patron saint (who represents God and the collective self at the same time). The idea of sharing is also emphasised by the alcohol pourers using the same two cups for liquor and the chaser for all participants, in contrast to food dishes, or beer bottles which are individually distributed.

In all three communities there is a common tactic of drinking only symbolic amounts in order to avoid the effects of alcohol, but in San Bartolo there are also refusal tactics. As I heard during an informal conversation, when someone offers you a drink, you may say 'en buenas manos está' ('it is the right hands'), that means that it is the alcohol pourer's turn to have a drink. It does not refer to *fiesta* organisers who sometimes have to drink, for example three cups for every single one of the seven women working with *fiesta* preparation, as in the case of the Candlemass *fiesta* in San Bartolo. Fortunately, they may share it among



The author drinking mezcal in San Bartolo Coyotepec, 2007. Photograph by Joanna Dubrawska-Stepniowska.

family members, because the household as a whole is considered to be the *fiesta* organiser. The specific number of cups is suggestive of drinking's religious background, and reminds me the carnivalesque use of the eastern proverb 'Boh Trojcu lubit' ('God loves the Trinity', translation from Russian by the author) (Stepaniuk 2007: 30), often cited in the context of drinking alcohol by the Orthodox Church followers in Poland as well as in the former USSR. In San Bartolo gender is also an important factor in avoiding intoxication and maintaining participation. During any *fiesta* preparations a female who joins women preparing food can refuse to drink, by contrast with the men sitting at the table, discussing, drinking and waiting for something to develop.

In Zaachila, those who have prestige and do not want to drink can ask someone from amongst their relatives to drink instead of them at every turn (a stand-in drinker), as one of the past *mayordomos* told me. A hangover is expected in Zaachila, although not welcomed, so there is a special herb called *yerba de borracho* ('herb of the drunk') also called *té de poleo* and given out by the *mayordomos* after masses which open the main patronal *fiestas*. It can be used fresh or dry with hot water, like herbal tea.

In some cultural contexts, for example in Eastern Europe, interlocutors considered talking with an abstinent researcher to be a pointless exercise (see Śledziecki 2008: 20), so practically speaking the ethnographic research was impossible to carry out without full participation. I argue that co-consumption can be treated as phenomenological *destrangement*, as defined by Ilja Maso (2001: 139–40). As Navarrete Pellicer (2001: 78–9) assumes, getting drunk with members of an indigenous community in Latin America is considered a means of showing trust and confidence. It can be hard, especially for the researchers, to refuse and not to offend their interlocutors.

I consider the Polish perspective (which to a large extent is rooted in Catholicism) to be one of non-abstinence, arising from a familiarity with the

cultural intimacy which is constructed by means of drinking. I usually partake moderately of mildly alcoholic beverages, but I do like mescal and I did not want to feign abstinence, so I tried both tactics (*destrangement* and *estrangement*), depending on whether refusal was well received or not. *Fiesta* organisers invited me to play the role of an alcohol pourer several times, which I appreciated and understood to be a gesture of hospitality and trust. Alcohol pourers usually ultimately get drunk only at the end, though they cannot refuse drinks. In moments of *destrangement* I experienced a feeling of being-in-the-right-place, as well as of being-together-in-the-community (as a sort of 'adopted' and accepted stranger).

Conclusion

I have aimed at arguing that drinking alcohol at south Mexican patronal feasts has many ritual, mostly religious and social meanings. It is a way of expressing participation, community and trust. It helps in constructing identities, and plays an important role in making contact with the past, ancestors, and higher spirits.

I argued that in the communities of the Central Valleys of Oaxaca mentioned here, practices connected with drinking alcohol are common ways of manifesting prestige. The important role of drinking alcohol in the outlined fieldwork, in my opinion, explains how the decision as to whether to drink or not impacts on the construction of prestige.

Cultural practices of drinking alcohol in the Central Valleys of Oaxaca vary depending on community, gender and religion, and they are also related to community divisions. Drinking alcohol at *fiestas* in the communities mentioned is the subject of critiques and arguments against *fiestas*, traditions and Catholicism. The drinking of alcohol at *fiestas* as researched here is assumed to be a culturally-constructed, meaningful practice.

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