Santa Cruz Mixtepec: community engagement and religious heritage in Mexico

12 Santa Cruz Mixtepec

Community Engagement and Religious Heritage in Mexico

Alanna Cant

12.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses community engagement in heritage development at an active religious site, Santa Cruz Mixtepec, in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, placing it within the broader historical and economic contexts of heritage and tourism in the region. Santa Cruz is the site of a ruined 16th-century Dominican convent (*exconvento*), of which the chapel is still in use as the main church for the local Catholic parish, also called Santa Cruz Mixtepec. From 2015 to 2018, the cloister roof, walls and sections of the refectory were conserved and partially restored by heritage professionals through a collaboration between the municipal government of Santa Cruz Mixtepec, the Mexican federal government via the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) and the Alfredo Harp Helú Foundation of Oaxaca (FAHHO), a privately funded cultural and public health organisation that is maintained by one of the wealthiest families in Mexico.

Notably, the Catholic archdiocese and the parish priest were not included as formal project partners. This was the result of historical circumstances relating to the designation of churches as national property in Mexico and to the legal arrangements that grant Indigenous communities like Santa Cruz Mixtepec a high level of autonomy in Oaxaca. While on one level, this autonomy enables communities to choose whether or not to participate in heritage projects, the legislative frameworks that define churches as property of the officially secular state can also result in mismatched priorities and outcomes.

Before discussing the conservation project and the benefits and challenges it presents in terms of community engagement, I introduce the site and its historical and cultural setting, placing the project within the larger context of Mexican heritage and Oaxacan cultural tourism today.

12.2 Historical and Social Context

Santa Cruz Mixtepec is a relatively small municipality located in the Zimatlán District of Oaxaca, about 55 kilometres south of the state capital Oaxaca de Juarez (not to be confused with the Mixtepec area of the Sierra de Miahuatlán in

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Figure 12.1 Map of the state of Oaxaca, showing the location of Santa Cruz. Mixtepec. © Molly Halloran.

NW Oaxaca; Figure 12.1). It is located in the Central Valleys region of the state, which is historically and culturally associated with the Bën za (Valley Zapotec) Indigenous people, whose language forms one of the four basic Zapotec language groups (the state of Oaxaca has 16 distinct Indigenous languages, with significant linguistic variation in each). The current name 'Mixtepec' is Nahuatl rather than Zapotec, dating to the mid-15th century when the region was conquered by the Aztec Empire, during the reign of Moctezuma I (1440–1469) (Isaac 1983); Mixtepec appears to be the translation of the original Zapotec placename, 'Danicahue': both are toponyms meaning "hill among the clouds" (Pérez Cruz et al., 1991, p. 83).

Nestled in the foothills of the Sierra Madre del Sur mountain range, Santa Cruz and its three neighbouring municipalities form a cultural and ecological transition zone between two distinct regions: the arid fields and rolling hills of the Central Valleys and the temperate humid forests of the Southern Sierra mountains. The village proper of Santa Cruz Mixtepec sits within small valleys and steep ravines at the confluence of the San Juan and San Bernardo rivers, the latter of which drains into Río Atoyac, the largest river in the region, about 5 kilometres south of the municipality. The village is surrounded by high hills that have numerous pre-Hispanic Zapotec occupation and burial sites. Although there have been no excavations, a surface survey conducted in the 1970s of Cerro de la Cueva (Hill

of the Cave) on the northwest edge of the village indicates an extensive palace complex. It includes several classic Mesoamerican architectural features, such as platforms, patios, a ballcourt and a significant number of tombs, in which pots and other vessels were found. The earliest occupation at this site is between 100 BCE and 100 CE [Monte Alban II], with the principal occupation from 200 to 500 CE [Monte Alban IIIA] (Winter 1978). It is likely that the other sites in the Mixtepec area share this chronology. These archaeological sites have not been designated as formal 'archaeological zones' by the Mexican federal government, but they fall under the protection of the Federal Law for Archaeological, Artistic and Historical Zones and Monuments, 1972.

Because of its established Zapotec population, Mixtepec became one of the first sites of Christian evangelisation in this part of what became New Spain. The Dominicans initially had exclusive permission to evangelise the Zapotec peoples, granted in 1536 by the infamous conquistador Hernán Cortés, who was by then the Marquess of Oaxaca (Martínez Sola, 1998). Dates attributed to the convent's establishment vary. The records of the Dominicans in Oaxaca first mention Santa Cruz in 1556, when it was recorded that there were ten friars living there (Mullen 1975, p. 235). By 1557, Santa Cruz was incorporated into the Diocese of Antequera and the friars had already established a mill and were developing the local economy based on agriculture, timber, and mining (Burgoa, 1934 [1674], p. 24–25; Mullen, 1975, p. 234–237; Pérez Cruz et al., 1991, p. 83–84). However, by the 17th century, they were losing influence in the region due to epidemics of European diseases, which killed up to 1.35 million people in Oaxaca in less than 100 years, and because the Spanish Crown increased its control over the mendicant orders due to worries about their allegiance to the Pope (Norget, 2008, p. 145; Romero Frizzi, 2000, p. 310–312).

By the end of the War of Independence (1810–1821), the convent in Santa Cruz was abandoned by the friars, enabling wealthy outsiders to establish an hacienda and sugar mill (*trapiche*), the ruins of which can still be seen today. In 1859, the last Dominicans left Oaxaca, after the new republic's government suppressed and expelled the male Catholic orders across the country (Morales, 1998; Torres Torres, 1997, p. 338). By the end of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), the convent site was in ruins. It was further damaged by a large earthquake in January 1931, and in the summer of 1936, it was occupied by the Mexican federal army in its attempts to put down an insurrection by Catholic partisans against the new anti-clerical government; in November of that year, the community was taken by Juventino Montaño, the self-proclaimed 'brigadier general' of the Oaxacan Catholic rebels (García Morales, n.d.; Meyer, 2007, p. 194–195). As such, Santa Cruz Mixtepec directly speaks to the three most significant periods of Mexican history, in terms of contemporary perceptions of the country's national identity and heritage: the Mesoamerican cultures of the pre-Hispanic period, the colonial period of New Spain and the Mexican Revolution and its aftermath (Benjamin, 2000; Bueno, 2016; Salas Landa, 2024, p. 107–137).

Today, about 1,200 Cruzeños (people from Santa Cruz) live in the village proper of Santa Cruz Mixtepec, which serves as the administrative centre (*cabecera*

municipal) of the larger municipality of about 3,700 people (INEGI 2020); 22% of the population speaks Zapotec in addition to Spanish, which is the primary language used outside of the home in this region (INEGI 2020). Santa Cruz is also the centre of the Roman Catholic parish, which includes the neighbouring but independent municipalities of San Miguel Mixtepec, San Bernardo Mixtepec and Magdalena Mixtepec. Although each village and hamlet in the parish has its own church or chapel, most of which date to the colonial period, they are all served by the single parish priest, who is based in Santa Cruz.

The vast majority of Cruzeños identify as Roman Catholic, although two small Evangelical Protestant churches are also present and active (INEGI, 2020). As in other communities across Oaxaca, Roman Catholic Cruzeños practise their religion through a dynamic combination of 'official' and so-called popular practices and beliefs (Norget, 2006; 2021). They most regularly engage with the Church through Mass, catechism and sacramental rituals, directed by the parish priest; some travel to the larger church in Zimatlán for other prayer and social activities, such as rosary groups. Weekly Mass is well attended by men, women and children of all ages, and the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and marriage are especially important to their social identities and standing in the community. The celebration of many saints' days, especially the large *fiesta* on September 14th for the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (the village's patron), includes a special Mass and procession led by the priest. At the same time, Cruzeño Catholics engage with the sacred and supernatural through activities and beliefs that stand outside of the official teachings of the Church. These include devotional, penitential and magical activities directed to saints' images both inside churches and on home and workplace altars, pilgrimage to sacred places in the local landscape and further afield and the observance of religious traditions not officially recognised by the Church, but which build on normative Roman Catholic beliefs and practices (Cant, 2018a; cf. Norget, 2021). A noteworthy example is the making of household altars and collective celebrations/commemorations in and around the municipal cemetery for the Day of the Dead (*Día de Muertos),* which takes place over the annual Catholic feasts of All Saints and All Souls, on November 1 and 2 (see Norget, 2006 for a comprehensive account and analysis).

The parish church itself, which was the main chapel of the colonial convent, is at the heart of all Catholic activities in Santa Cruz, even those that fall outside of the official Church's remit (Figure 12.2). Access, physical maintenance and the organisation of services and other activities are coordinated by the parish church committee, which is overseen by the municipal authority.

Although it may seem odd that the church is controlled and managed by parishioners rather than the priest, this is in part the result of traditional Indigenous governance systems in Oaxaca (*usos y costumbres*), which are centred upon communal decision-making through citizens' assemblies and public service roles (*tequio*) undertaken by married men and, in some cases, women (Canedo Vásquez, 2008). In Santa Cruz, positions on the church committee are included in the formal governance system, which had practical and political implications for the convent

Figure 12.2 Exterior of the front (west side) of Santa Cruz Mixtepec. © Alanna Cant.

heritage project (see below). Since 1995, these systems have been protected by the Oaxacan state constitution, which guarantees that in the municipalities where such systems are used (418 of 570 total), communities' self-determination is legally protected from outside influence by the state and political parties, and in effect from other organisations and corporations, sometimes including the Catholic Church itself (Anaya Muñoz, 2005; Magaloni et al., 2019). Additionally, ownership of the parish church lies with the Mexican federal government, not the Catholic archdiocese, a point I return to below.

12.3 The *Exconvento* of Santa Cruz Mixtepec

The religious complex of Santa Cruz Mixtepec is set within a large walled atrium or yard, which forms one side of the village's central plaza. The main structure is made of locally quarried stone and lime mortar. It has a small chapel (43.5 m × 9.2 m) of a single nave with no transepts (Figure 12.3). The nave is oriented east to west, with the chancel/presbytery and main altar on the eastern end, as was typical of this period. The chancel includes a small rectangular apse, which is separated from the nave by a triumphal arch. The apse contains a 17th-century neoclassical wooden reredos (*retablo*) altarpiece, which obscures remnants of 16th-century murals on the wall behind. The western end likely had a choir, as indicated by

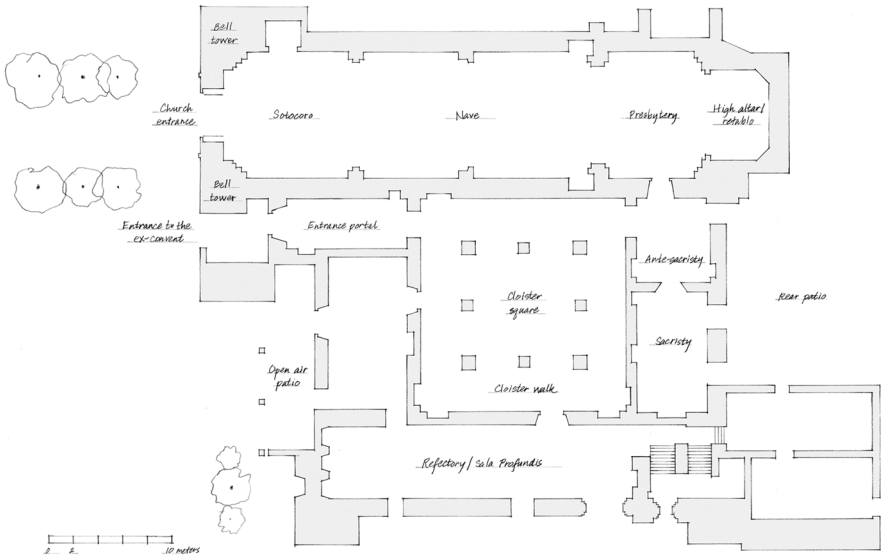

Figure 12.3 Floorplan of the existing structures at the Convent of the Holy Cross. © Molly Halloran.

the vestiges of arches that can still be seen high on the interior wall. The ceiling has barrel and domical vaults, the roof has two tiled domes, and there are two belfries on the western end. Also on the western end is the arched entrance to the church, which includes an 'alfiz' (rectangular moulding around the arch) and Dominican fleur-de-lis motifs (see Figure 12.2; the domes and belfries were likely added in later stages of construction) (Mullen, 1970, p. 68–74; 198; FAHHO, 2022, p. 45–46).

The southern wall of the nave is shared with the convent area of the site, and there is a door between them in the chancel end of the nave. Embedded in this very thick shared wall is a confessional, where penitents would have entered from the church and the confessor from the convent side (see Mullen, 1970, p. 68). The convent also has an entrance on the western external façade, to the right of the chapel's entrance (Figure 12.2). The central part of the convent was two stories high and centred around a small, arcaded cloister, which had beamed wooden ceilings, red adobe brick floors and plastered walls with niches and very fine murals. Other spaces in the convent included the ante-sacristy and sacristy, refectory, kitchen, dormitories and an outdoor portico or porch for pilgrims, which today are in various states of disrepair (FAHHO, 2022, p. 46; Figure 12.3). To the south and east of the main site, there are also the undated ruins of further outbuildings associated with the convent, which were sold off to local people before and after the property was taken over by the state (see below).

12.4 Heritage in Mexico and Cultural Tourism in Oaxaca

To understand the development of the Santa Cruz Mixtepec project and the relationship between the community and the other parties involved, it is necessary to provide a brief sketch of the broader context of heritage in Mexico and cultural tourism in Oaxaca.

Mexico has a long history of heritage protections, which effectively began with a series of regulations governing pre-Hispanic sites and the collection and export of artefacts in the 19th century (Bueno, 2010). The first comprehensive heritage law was passed in 1939 with the incorporation of INAH by the post-Revolutionary government; an average of nine national laws and amendments pertaining to heritage have been passed in each decade since then (UNESCO, 2023).

As has been extensively documented by scholars, heritage became one of the key pillars used by the government and intellectuals in the mid-20th century to repair the social fabric and foment a new national identity after the horrific violence and divisions caused by the Mexican Revolution (Coffey, 2012; García Canclini, 1993; Knight, 2015; Rozental, 2016). Pre-Hispanic archaeology and contemporary Indigenous arts and cultural forms played an important role in this throughout the 20th century, as they were seen as the 'deep roots' of indigeneity upon which the new mestizo national identity was built (Alonso, 2004; López, 2010). At the same time, colonial architecture such as town squares, theatres, villas and churches became central to this political project, often with only their exterior aesthetics preserved for their heritage and touristic value, as many were repurposed for government offices, schools, museums, hospitals, et cetera (Lira Vásquez, 2014, p. 73).

Churches and former convent buildings were especially suitable for such 'heritagisation', firstly because many had suffered significant material damage during the Revolution and its aftermath: their large sizes and strategic positions had made them ideal barracks and headquarters for different factions (Knight, 2015, p. 317). Through their restoration and repair, the new national government could reframe these overt symbols of colonial rule into symbols of legitimacy for the Republic (Knight, 2015, p. 317). Secondly – and perhaps more importantly for the case here – the constitution of 1917 rendered all churches property of the federal government, rather than the Catholic Church (Bantjes, 2007, p. 112–113). This was initially part of the broader agrarian reforms and anticlerical politics of both the early independent and post-Revolutionary republican governments, but it remains enshrined in law to this day: all church properties (of all denominations) built before 1992 are federally owned as 'national patrimony', and therefore, the state, and not the Church, has control and is legally responsible for them.

As early as the 1930s, the celebration of pre-Hispanic sites, colonial architecture and contemporary Indigenous cultures in the emerging national imaginary enabled Oaxaca to develop as a culture and heritage destination for tourists from Mexico City and the United States (Lira Vásquez, 2014, p. 73). Boosted by strong government sponsorship and marketing for its traditional and Indigenous crafts, foods, cultural activities and archaeology, Oaxaca became dependent on its 'economies of

culture' by the end of the 20th century, increasingly marketing itself as the place to experience the 'most authentic Mexico' (Cant, 2019, p. 8–14; Poole, 2004). While the state has several small but popular beach destinations, investment and marketing continue to be focused on the promotion of tangible and intangible heritage in the state capital and throughout the Central Valleys region. As anthropologist William Wood has observed, Oaxaca's photogenic character is not the spontaneous effect of ordinary people going about their daily lives: the Oaxacan state has gone to great lengths to produce, control and disseminate an image of picturesque authenticity through marketing, urban planning, and by directing investment towards specific types of businesses and organisations (2008, p. 32; Lira Vásquez, 2009). Indeed, the belief in Oaxaca's cultural uniqueness continues to spur tourism today: the past decade has seen exponential growth in this market, with the development of traditional and very high-end culinary tourism, focusing especially on mezcal, the currently very trendy agave spirit of Oaxaca's countryside (Brulotte, 2017; Brulotte and Starkman, 2014).

Although Oaxaca's cultural and heritage tourism may appear to be less commercial than the large beach resorts elsewhere in the country, it is in fact very big business. In 2018, the state registered over 5 million tourist arrivals, generating around 15 billion pesos (ca. £705 million) of revenue (SECTUR, 2018), and there are indications that tourism in 2024 will exceed pre-COVID-19 levels (Valadez, 2024). Mexicans make up the largest percentage of tourists, a majority of whom are from Mexico City and the larger regional towns of central and northern Mexico. They are especially drawn to Oaxaca during the two most important religious/cultural holidays, Holy Week and Day of the Dead. Americans, Europeans and others have always made up a significant number of arrivals, too, and have typically spent longer (and more money) in the region, sightseeing, visiting craft-making villages, regional marketplaces, et cetera (see Cant, 2019; Wood, 2008). However, the shift towards culinary and spirits tourism over the past decade has now attracted younger, wealthier Americans and Europeans to the state, with many increasingly searching for business and investment opportunities in mezcal, in addition to an exciting holiday or opportunities for social media careers.

Despite the growth and the very visible influx of tourists and cash into the capital and those communities that profit from the new mezcal market, the benefits of the tourist economy remain in the hands of the few: Oaxaca is characterised by high levels of poverty and inequality. The 2020 national census shows that 66% of Oaxacans live in either 'moderate' or 'extreme' poverty, and only 8.5% are classed as living without poverty or another vulnerability (CONEVAL, 2020, p. 13–14). In Santa Cruz Mixtepec itself, 81% of people live in 'moderate' or 'extreme' poverty (INEGI, 2020). In such a context, it is not at all surprising that Santa Cruz was interested in improving the condition and profile of the convent ruins: not only would it support the preservation of a site that is extremely important to their own sense of community and identity (Cant, 2024a), but it could potentially allow the village to attract day tourists from the capital or those passing along the highway to the coast, seemingly offering economic opportunities for small businesses – especially since traditional mezcal production also takes place in Santa Cruz and the

neighbouring village of San Bernardo Mixtepec. Tourism is a key area of development in the most recently published Municipal Development Plan (Santa Cruz Mixtepec, 2020, p. 114–115).

12.5 The Santa Cruz Mixtepec Project and Its Formal Stakeholders

Initial surveys conducted by engineers and conservationists from the FAHHO's Restoration Workshop identified several areas of concern with regards to the condition of the material fabric and maintenance of the ruined convent. The most significant problems were in the cloister: ever since the second storey disappeared, quite possibly in the 1931 earthquake, the ground level has been exposed to the elements. This was causing structural deterioration, staining and vegetation growth on the walls and adobe floor, as well as greatly damaging the remnants of the 16th-century murals on the lime plaster walls, which showed "partial detachments [of pigments], stains caused by humidity and loss and degradation of pictorial strata" (FAHHO, 2022, p. 50, translation by author; Figure 12.4). Twentieth-century additions to the building, including reinforcements for concrete walls and a metal spiral staircase, which had been drilled into the original 16th-century walls, were also causing structural issues (see Figure 12.5). Other rooms, such as the refectory and those adjacent to it, were in a bad state of repair – in 2017, they were impacted by the

Figure 12.4 The murals in the cloister, after conservation. © Alanna Cant.

Figure 12.5 Interior of cloister during conservation. The staircase can be seen on the right. © Alanna Cant.

very large earthquakes that struck central and southern Mexico, and they likely would have fallen in the near future had the project not already been underway (see Cant, 2018b, for more about these earthquakes and their effects on religious heritage).

To address these issues, a formal collaborative partnership was undertaken between three stakeholders: (1) the Restoration Workshop of the FAHHO; (2) the community of Santa Cruz Mixtepec, through its municipal authority and the church committee; and (3) the Mexican Federal Government, via INAH.

The project was conducted in four distinct phases: informally from 2013 to 2014 and then under three separate formal agreements from 2015 to 2018 (FAHHO, 2022, p. 44). In 2013, members of Santa Cruz's church committee were directed by the municipal president to attend meetings and grant development workshops run by the FAHHO Restoration Workshop, and they began to undertake research and fundraising to support their application. The project was officially announced in 2015, after it won the required federal permission and grant, with work beginning on site in 2016. The funding for the project was subsequently renewed for the second and third stages in 2017 and 2018. Although there was still a significant amount of work on the site that could have been done after the third stage, projects of this size rarely receive funding for more than three rounds. The total cost was

approximately 2.2 million pesos (ca. £104,000), with 1 million pesos (ca. £39,000) from the FAHHO, 800,000 pesos (ca. £31,000) from the federal government via a grant from the Secretariat for Culture (Secretaría de Cultura) and 410,000 pesos (ca. £16,000) from fundraising by the citizens and municipality of Santa Cruz Mixtepec (FAHHO, 2022, p. 44). No financial contributions from the Archdiocese of Oaxaca were permitted.

Founded in 2005, the FAHHO's Restoration Workshop provides technical support and expertise, project and grant management, and funding for the conservation of Oaxaca's built heritage (see FAHHO, 2024). As part of the larger 'family' of the FAHHO, which includes museums, cultural institutes and programmes, research libraries and archives, children's libraries and centres and a baseball academy, it seeks to enact its founder Alfredo Harp Helú's declared principle of apolitical philanthropy (see Gazzo Reisman, 2022). However, some observers have expressed concerns about the personal power of the Harp Helú family and their control over such a high number of cultural institutions and historic buildings in Oaxaca. Drawing on the wealth and connections of its founder, an extremely wealthy businessman from one of the most well-known elite families in Mexico, the FAHHO has been accused by some of shepherding in gentrification and shoring up plutocratic power in Oaxaca (see Rodríguez, 2014)

As mentioned above, the community partners in the convent project were primarily members of the church committee, who did this work as *tequio,* or unpaid public service, within the traditional governance system of their community. The church committee is accountable to the municipal authority and president, who in turn are accountable to the entire community via the citizens' assembly process. As work on national heritage properties requires permits, oversight, reporting and the engagement of professionally trained conservationists and architects, the project required a large amount of start-up time and work from the church committee in addition to their regular responsibilities. While capacity-building activities are provided by the Restoration Workshop, most members of the church committee did not have post-secondary education or relevant experience that would help them to navigate the complexities of the paperwork and planning, although one member was trained as an electrical engineer, which helped the committee enormously.

Apart from funding and permits, the federal government was more removed as a partner in the project itself, although INAH's Oaxaca office provided expertise from art historians and the conservator who worked on site for three months to stabilise the murals in the cloister. As INAH and the Restoration Workshop work together on over twenty projects per year in Oaxaca, their staff know one another very well, and they work together to coordinate with communities and support the projects that are funded through these partnerships.

12.6 Community Engagement: Benefits and Challenges at a Religious Heritage Site

As is clear from the discussion above, the Santa Cruz Mixtepec project included a huge amount of community engagement from the outset. This enabled the

project to successfully deliver the three significant stages of work that have greatly improved the condition of the convent site and ensured its future for the community and the wider public. Although the realities of the traditional governance systems mean that such projects would be effectively impossible without community agreement, all the heritage experts were genuinely interested in working with community partners and co-producing project proposals, budgets and plans. The engineers, conservators, archaeologists and architectural historians of the Restoration Workshop have become experts in communication and engagement, as they assist communities in navigating the complex landscapes of research, permits and grant applications that enable them to undertake their work of restoration and conservation across the state. This is the result of almost twenty years of institutional development and learning on their part.

An important reason the FAHHO requires communities to contribute a portion of the project costs is that it increases 'buy-in' and a sense of responsibility towards the project by those beyond the church committees and municipal authorities; this is particularly so as most need to fundraise through community networks to meet their contribution targets (this also helps increase 'buy-in' from former residents who have emigrated, who often have more funds available to contribute). The importance of the commitment from the entire community is illustrated by a project in another region of the state that came to a halt when the municipal president's term came to an end; the new president rallied the citizen's assembly to withdraw its support, leaving the project uncompleted and the funds wasted.

There are also cases in which the heritage values of historic churches become exploited in larger political issues between autonomous communities who have conflicts over land or between communities and the federal government: the legal status of churches as 'national patrimony' can make them a focus for expressing frustration and disagreement. In one case a community expelled some heritage inspectors from the federal government, closed its borders and tore down its historic church: building a new church from scratch was far cheaper than the costs associated with restoring a 16th-century building. As many hundreds of communities across Oaxaca have historic churches, there is no shortage of opportunities for the Restoration Workshop to develop projects, so there is no need to work on projects where they are not wanted. But it is essential that once a project has begun, they do everything possible to ensure that community support is maintained, especially with autonomous municipalities where leaders have the capacity to expel non-residents from their territories.

Despite these efforts and the quite effective systems of community engagement that are now in place, when it comes to religious sites the strongly secular (and even anti-Church) foundations of the Mexican state, heritage legislation and practices of heritage experts can result in more subtle forms of disconnect between heritage values and communities' own values and desired outcomes. Of course, those heritage professionals who have spent sufficient time living and working in rural communities have knowledge and respect for the so-called popular Catholic practices described above. Additionally, recent discussions about professional ethics in the heritage sector, including higher education, museums,

and academic research in Mexico have encouraged better community engagement and pluralism in the treatment of objects and spaces, especially where these are central to local identities and local spiritual practices. However, as much as these experts approach community members as partners, their primary professional and legal responsibilities remain firmly rooted in secular heritage, conservation and art historical values (INAH, 2016). Although we must not assume that individual heritage experts themselves are not religious (78% of the population in Mexico identifies as Roman Catholic [INEGI, 2020]), the nature of their work does not allow them to fully take into account particular spiritual perspectives when it comes to decision-making, valuation, interpretation or planning at religious heritage sites (although this is a little more fluid in projects that include 'intangible heritage' components).

This tension was most evident in Santa Cruz Mixtepec when it came to the identification and treatment of historic statues of saints, which are understood by many Catholics as actually embodying the saint that they represent, through the Catholic doctrine of immanence. One statue was thought by the villagers to be San Jacinto (St Hyacinth of Poland), which they believed was an object of significant historic and religious value. San Jacinto had been a holy patron of the community when it was first founded, and the statue itself was considered to be spiritually active and particularly important to local perspectives on identity, history and placemaking (see Cant, 2024a). The heritage experts, on the other hand, dismissed it as just another colonial statue of San José (St Joseph), which are exceedingly common in Mexico. The upshot of this was that there was no official support for the conservation of the statue, which was not in good condition, and it was not included in any of the project stages, even though 'moveable heritage' could have been included in the project plan. The community responded by fundraising to contract a 'black market' (i.e. self-taught and uncertified) art conservator to undertake the work, as they felt the repairs were essential for themselves and their relationship with San Jacinto and other saints.

A second issue is the way that 'community' is defined in relation to religious heritage and the assumptions that are built into processes about who is considered a rightful partner and stakeholder in the first place. The Restoration Workshop always approaches community engagement by building relationships with municipal authorities. This makes logistical and political sense, as they really do need the cooperation of the authority for the project to even get off the ground. However, in Santa Cruz Mixtepec, there are other groups that could rightfully be considered part of the 'community' of the religious site and have very real interests in the outcomes and funding of the project but were not directly involved or consulted. The most obvious of these is the parish priest and the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Oaxaca. Although the expropriation of Mexican churches by the state in the 19th and 20th centuries means that the Church no longer owns them *as property*, they were not deconsecrated and they remain used as places of worship and are considered sacred spaces. The deep sacredness of church buildings for Catholics is due to the presence of Jesus Christ in the transubstantiated bread and wine of Mass and to the spiritual consecration of the *entirety* of church buildings, not just the

chancel, altar, bible or holy objects. For Catholics, the entire material fabric of their religious heritage is fundamentally sacred and intrinsic to their spiritual beliefs and practices (Cant, 2024b; cf. Gilchrist, 2020).

A second group that was not consulted about the project were Catholics who do not live in the municipality of Santa Cruz Mixtepec, but in the neighbouring villages covered by the Roman Catholic parish (see above). The church in Santa Cruz is their main parish church and is where many attend weekly mass and visit their priest for confession or other needs. Although it is likely that they would be happy with the project overall, they do not have representation on Santa Cruz's church committee, as they complete their public service *tequio* in their own municipalities and participate in their own, separate, citizens' assemblies.

Finally, a third group that the project did not engage with is those residents of Santa Cruz Mixtepec municipality who are not Catholic. Because only Catholic Cruzeños would accept *tequio* on the church committee, and Catholics are a very large majority in the village, the municipal authority and church committee only effectively represent Catholic villagers' perspectives and opinions. One man who belonged to one of the small Protestant churches in the village told me that he was unhappy with the amount of time, energy and resources that the municipal authority directed towards Catholic fiestas and activities and that the conservation project was a particularly conspicuous example of this. Although he recognised that the site was historically significant to the community and its identity, he and his family would not even enter the grounds of the church and the convent for religious reasons. Although in principle he could have raised these concerns at the citizens' assembly before the project was initiated, or during the subsequent stages of renewal, non-Catholics often experience discrimination in these communities organised around traditional governance, especially when they decline to participate in particular *tequio* roles. Punishments can include the withholding of public services, such as water and electricity, and in extreme cases, families might be jailed or expelled from the community altogether (e.g. Mundaca, 2023; Rodriguez, 2021).

12.7 Reflections

The case of the religious heritage at Santa Cruz Mixtepec shows the complex interplay of legal, social, economic and religious dynamics, which should be taken into account when considering community engagement with religious heritage projects. Although Mexico is a particularly good example of how entrenched ideas about religion and community can become woven into current frameworks of heritage development and tourism, the case can serve to highlight particular features that should be considered in religious heritage projects more generally.

The collaboration between the FAHHO and Santa Cruz's municipal authority highlights both the potential and the challenges of engaging communities in religious heritage. The clear benefits were that the project developed in ways that furthered the desires of the community to improve the condition of the convent site, hopefully making it more appealing to visitors as Oaxaca's tourism economy

continues to grow. This also benefited the FAHHO and the broader heritage sector, as the material fabric of the site is now secure and its future is ensured.

However, the project was not without points of disconnection, which indicate areas of friction within the overall concept of community engagement with religious heritage in this context. In particular, the prioritisation of secular heritage values over the spiritual needs of the Catholic community and the Catholic Church highlights a broader issue about what and whom churches are for in the 21st century. At the same time, assumptions that everyone in a local community is necessarily of the same mind, or that communal structures effectively represent everyone who lives there, can lead to some people being excluded from projects or not having their objections sufficiently considered. Nevertheless, the example of the FAHHO's Restoration Workshop shows how heritage organisations can be proactive and flexible when engaging with communities by supporting them through capacity-building and with their heritage and project management expertise.

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