

The Role and Style of Meetings in a Native Village in Mexico City: A Contribution towards the Analysis of Meetings

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Abstract

This article explores the role of meetings and the style in which they are carried out in the local community of San Lorenzo Acopilco in Mexico City. The community predates the Spanish conquest, and thus forms part of this megacity's 200 native villages (*pueblos originarios*), which to this day reproduce distinctive social, political and religious practices. Ethnographies of three meetings are presented and analysed with concepts and theories from a variety of disciplines; these may also be helpful in the analysis of meetings in other locations. The meetings are regulated by laws of either citizen participation or agrarian issues. The choice of meeting style influences the outcomes of meetings, and thus figures in the repertoire of elements which substantially influence the community's capacity to preserve its distinctive way of life from the encroachment of the megacity. *Keywords:* meeting style, analysis of meetings, *pueblo originario*, democracy, participation, Mexico City, ethnography.

Resumen: El papel y el estilo de reuniones en un pueblo originario de la Ciudad de México:
Una contribución hacia el análisis de reuniones

Este artículo explora el papel de las reuniones y el estilo en el que éstas se llevan a cabo en la comunidad local de San Lorenzo Acopilco en Ciudad de México. Dicha comunidad antedata a la conquista española y por consiguiente forma parte de los 200 pueblos originarios de esta megaciudad, que hasta la fecha reproducen prácticas sociales, políticas y religiosas distintivas. Se presentan etnografías de tres reuniones y se analizan mediante conceptos y teorías de varias disciplinas; todo este material también puede ser útil para el análisis de reuniones de otros lugares. Las reuniones se rigen por la ley de participación ciudadana o por la ley agraria. La elección del estilo de las reuniones marca los resultados de las mismas y consecuentemente figura en el repertorio de elementos que influyen considerablemente en la capacidad comunitaria para preservar su modo de vida característico frente a la invasión de la megaciudad. *Palabras clave:* estilo de reunión, análisis de reuniones, pueblo originario, democracia, participación, Ciudad de México, etnografía.

Introduction

Over the past ten years, I have collaborated with a group of Mexican anthropologists studying the *pueblos originarios* (native villages) within the boundaries of Mexico City, with my specific fieldwork taking place in San Lorenzo Acopilco. My interest has been to clarify the issues of democracy and participation in this context (Hagene, 2007; 2009; 2010a; 2010b; 2010c; and 2015). During fieldwork I frequently observed meetings of various types. However, they often struck me as unusual and not what my readers would imagine if I would simply refer to them as meetings, without further description. Although the meetings might start out formally yet amiably, at some point in the proceedings they would shift into complete chaos with everybody shouting out their opinions at the same time, often on entirely different issues. These meetings raised my curiosity, and I started looking for ways to make sense of them.

About half the inhabitants of Acopilco have their origin in the village and call themselves *nativos*¹ (natives); 2,345 of them are *comuneros* (registered in the agrarian census). The remaining population is called *avecindados*, who have in common that their origins are outside the community (Hagene, 2010a). Some of the *avecindados* are prosperous, though most are not. The distinction between these groups is not of prosperity, class, race or religion, but more about origin, belonging and identity. There is no communal assembly for the natives, or any forum where the entire population may make decisions. A Commissariat (*Comisariado*) for the communal property organizes agrarian assemblies for the *comuneros*. There are also several groups and associations for political and cultural activities and numerous gatherings concerning the communitarian religious practices. In addition, different state agencies call meetings concerning matters within their competence, for instance *citizen consultations* (*consulta ciudadana*). Furthermore, I have also observed on several occasions that any citizen or group may organize a meeting.

What, then, is a meeting (*reunión*)? Following Goffman (1961, p.7), it is a specific type of focused interaction or gathering, a communicative event (Irvine, 1979). Schwartzman (1987, p. 274) stated that a meeting is characterized by multi-party talk, where participants develop specific conventions for regulating this talk.

I present three meeting-cases (see Table 1). They have been chosen to enable a series of comparisons. Meetings 1 and 2 fall into the category of citizen consultation under the Law of Citizen Participation, Art. 42 (ALDF, 1998). In these, an officer from citizen participation in the Delegation (the lowest state level in Mexico City) summoned all citizens, *nativos* and *avecindados*. Both meetings concerned the highly contentious issue of an underpass under the federal road that crossed village territory. They were not held to make decisions, but they were nevertheless important as they yielded other outcomes, instrumental or expressive (Fine, 1990, p. 241). The meetings, however, differed in how they were organized, by whom, and how they evolved. Meeting 3 or

Assembly was an agrarian assembly (*asamblea agraria*) regulated by the Agrarian Law (Procuraduría Agraria, 1995), where only *comuneros* are allowed to participate (not to be confused with communal assembly) and the highest authority of the *bienes comunales* (communal property), and thus formally required to make or ratify all important decisions. Meeting 2 and meeting 3 or the Assembly were organized by the same people, thus facilitating further comparison. The two cases also covered different legal regulations governing the meetings, different mandates and participants. The laws and the organizers of meetings define what kind of instrumental outcomes the meetings could have (for example, decisions, information, consent), while the expressive outcomes (for instance, impression management) are produced in the interaction among the various actors involved.

The meetings will be explored not only as arenas where struggles of various kinds are played out, but, following Schwartzman (1989), as objects of study in their own right, thereby identifying a) their role in village politics, b) the characteristics of the meeting style, and c) the interaction between the meeting style and the normativity of the laws which regulate the meetings. Goffman maintained that unfocused interaction result simply ‘by virtue of persons being in one another’s presence’ (1961, p. 7). Therefore, in order for the situation to be acknowledged as a meeting or assembly, certain dramaturgical steps needed to be taken. With *meeting style*, therefore, I refer to the rules and procedures and the dramaturgical assumptions which govern the ways in which meetings are conducted. These rules structure the outcome (Fine, 1990, p. 241), and ‘frame the behaviour’ at the meeting (Schwartzman, 1987, p. 274). The concepts I have developed for the analysis of the meetings may also be useful for researchers who wish to analyse meetings they themselves have observed.

I collected ethnographic material in Acopilco village during eight periods of fieldwork for a total of 16 months in the course of 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2015. I used semi-structured interviews, life stories, informal conversation, several public and private archives, and participant observation. The latter is particularly important for this article, a method which, as Bryman noted, entails ‘the extended involvement of the researcher in the social life of those he or she studies’ (2004, p. 291). Living in the village on and off for more than ten years has given me access to the rumours and gossip that flow through the local networks regarding religious, family and clientelist practices (Hagene, 2010c and 2015). These are extremely important in the ongoing negotiations concerning local policy decisions. Village subjects granted me access to many of their activities, thus collaborating in material I present in this article in the sense that Marcus explores (2008, p. 7). It was thanks to my long-standing contacts in the community that I was invited into the assembly hall before the Assembly started, since I am obviously not a *comunera*, and would not have been able to pass the entrance controls. During my frequent visits I had also previously become acquainted with the secretary who prepared the minutes from the Assembly, and who afterwards shared this document with

me. I have avoided using names of local informants in order to protect their identity.

The village of San Lorenzo Acopilco has a population of around 24,000 (INEGI 2010) and lies along the road from Mexico City to Toluca. This community forms part of the greater urbanized area of 20 million people that live in the Mexico City Metropolitan Area (MCMA) surrounding Mexico City (Aguilar, 2008). It is one of 200 *pueblos originarios* (Correa 2010) dating back before the Spanish occupation and colonization in the sixteenth century, which is why I prefer to use 'village' and 'community' to describe it. Acopilco used to be an agricultural and forest community, and today still features 1600 hectares of communal property, mostly forest, at 3000 meters in elevation. Agrarian Law protects the land against any form of sales (Procuraduría Agraria, 1995, p. 66). The forest is of vital environmental importance to the community, and even more, to the mega-city, and is protected by the local Environmental Law (ALDF, 2000) and the Delegational Land Use Plan (SEDUVI, 1997) as an ecological zone where logging, construction and habitation is prohibited. All of these, nevertheless, take place. The 2,345 members with agrarian rights (*comuneros*) registered in Acopilco are the legal owners, but there is practically no legal way they can benefit economically from this property, either collectively, or individually (Hagene, 2010b).

Irregular sales of plots also take place directly from individual *comuneros* to *avecindados*, generating irregular settlements where half the *avecindados* live. Illegal sales agreements without property deeds imply relatively low prices for the land. The problem of illegal sales is never discussed in the Assembly; nor does anyone suggest taking steps to stop it (Hagene, 2010c). The communal property is presided over by the Commissariat, a board of twelve persons elected every three years by the *comuneros*. Generally, no conflict of great importance is addressed on the agenda of agrarian assemblies, which nevertheless are reputed to be disagreeable, conflictual and aggressive, to the extent that many people warned me against attending them (see Meeting 3, Assembly). From the literature on communities it appears that having frequent assemblies often reduces the private appropriation of communal funds (Korovkin, 2001, p. 53) and strengthens communities over time (Schwartzman, 1987, p. 288; Klooster, 2000, p. 9; Garibay, 2002, p. 124). The way in which meetings transpire, therefore, seems to be important for the community's chances in solving its problems.

Every issue in the village tends to be interpreted in the light of Acopilco's vulnerable position vis-à-vis the expanding city. All natives experience a deep attachment to their community, its territory, forest, and way of life, whereas only *comuneros* may have an opportunity to profit from illegal sales. The line of conflict, therefore, is not necessarily between the community and public authorities (Hagene, 2010 b). Issues tend to develop force fields around them (concept from Nuijten, 2003, p. 12-15, 194-195) with different combinations of actors and groups forming and reforming in collaboration or conflict, according

to the issue at hand. These individuals, networks and power groups articulate with government institutions, parties and external power groups, forming relationships that inform the role of meetings and the style in which they unfold. Of particular interest is the habit of shouting down the assembly. This serves to scare off attendance, prevent discussions of issues such as illegal sales, and, ultimately, to preclude achieving communal accords.

The main issues of contention in the village are related to the forest with its water springs, irregular sales, the relationship between natives and *avecindados*, and the revision of the Delegational Land Use Plan. There are rumours that a new Delegational Land Use Plan will transform the village into upper echelon residences, where the present inhabitants could not afford to live. Whatever the issue may be, however, confusion abounds; rumours circulate incessantly, while official documents and decisions are inaccessible. Those who possess documents keep them to themselves, and I have observed public websites that seem to deliberately obscure the information.² This lack of public information opens the way for wild rumours. Furthermore, most villagers deeply distrust the authorities and tend to believe more in rumours than official information. Villagers often told me that officers and politicians make promises, and apply ‘make-up’ (*maquillaje*) to the information, in order to conceal what is really going on.

Literature and concepts

There are some texts about meetings in Mexican communities, but most concern the communal assembly as an ideal type (Rendón Monzón, 2003, p. 44-45) or as practices of murmuring towards consensus (Lenkersdorf, 2004, p. 22), reproducing communal identity (Sierra Camacho, 1987, p. 21). Another approach is represented by Nuijten’s (2003, p. 52, 67) descriptions of Mexican *ejido* meetings, which had much in common with the ones I present; however, they are not analysed as meetings. Nuijten made the interesting point that decisions were generally not made in meetings, and we might add, even if formal regulations demanded it.

Some articles contain descriptions of meetings, but few analyse them *as meetings*. In anthropological studies, for example, ethnographic descriptions of meetings approach them as diagnostic events for the conflicts, values and norms that they reveal (Moore, 1987), de la Peña (2002, p. 133-149) and Ekern (2005, p. 147-189). Howe (1986, p. 171), used the description of a meeting to argue that small talk may buttress the production of consensus. Black (1983) offered an interesting narrative of a meeting on a Micronesian island, and though parts of it resembled the simultaneous speaking and shouting observed in my cases, the point that Black made concerned the way the chief acted to silence the racket, demonstrating that his authority was superior to that of the magistrate. Analyses of actual proceedings of meetings often use linguistic approaches, as for instance Sierra Camacho (1987), who used discourse analy-

sis to highlight the exercise of power in the communal context. The meetings, however, are not analysed in their own right.

A meeting, thus, is a focused gathering, but the degree and ways in which the gathering is focused will vary according to sociocultural and historical settings. What most attracted my attention with the meetings in Acopilco was the way in which deliberation was virtually impossible; at some point meetings tended to break down into shouting and uproar. Aspects of formality, such as *taking turns, tone and vocabulary* (together termed *code structuring*), stand out as important features to analyse (Irvine, 1979, p. 776). The breakdown, or not, of a meeting also seemed related to another aspect of formality, which Irvine terms the *situational focus*. It could be conducted as a *lecture*, which is centralized throughout, despite possible side mutterings in the audience, or as a *cocktail party* featuring a main sequence with a constraint on the topic, continuity and relevance, which does not apply in the decentralized side sequences (Irvine, 1979, p. 779).

The meetings had both *instrumental* and *expressive* aspects (Parsons, in Morgan, 1975, p. 29), which concerned the performance itself, and the outcomes. The expressive aspects contributed significantly to shape people's attitudes and opinions; therefore it is vital to see beyond the instrumental outcomes.

The meetings also clearly had dramaturgical aspects, and thus may be analysed as *stages*, with open and hidden *regions*. Each region is used for different tasks (Goffman, 1971, p. 115,126; Bailey, 1977, p. 114-115, 201-205; Stirling, 1979, p. 357; Brison, 1992; Arno, 1994, p. 477). The regions I apply here are: *frontstage* (public), *backstage* and *understage* (private). Frontstage and understage are concerned with shaping attitudes (expressive aspects, impression management), whereas backstage is negotiation- and action-oriented, experimental and responsible (instrumental aspects). Here solutions can be sought, even if principles are declared to be non-negotiable by the actors when frontstage. The frontstage deals with information about goals and principles, whereas the understage imparts information about people, and the backstage processes information from the two others.

The Law of Citizen Participation in the Federal District mandates that information be given to the population before public works are initiated, so that people can *inconformarse* (protest) if they think they will be negatively affected. Accordingly, citizen consultations were organized in the village concerning an underpass (*paso a desnivel*) project to improve road safety. The project had been initiated at the petition of the Commissariat seven years earlier. The federal road between Mexico DF and Toluca divides the Acopilco land area, separating some mostly irregular settlements from the village centre and from the other settlements. Those who live in these settlements have no security measures when crossing this road with its heavy high-speed traffic, and a series of serious accidents have occurred. Earlier projects that considered constructing a bridge had been turned down. The underpass was the third project that

was proposed and ready to be implemented with public funds, equipment and work force in 2006. However, some natives were worried that making the road safer was part of a secret scheme to transform their village into an upper echelon residential area where they themselves could not afford to live.

Meeting 1: Citizen consultation (summoned by the Delegation)

Just one week before the general elections in July 2006, a meeting was summoned in the village civic centre to introduce the underpass project. The gathering was termed a citizen consultation and convened, opened and partly moderated by an officer of citizen participation from the Delegation. He stepped onto the platform together with road engineers from the Ministry of Communication and Transport (SCT – *Secretaría de Comunicación y Transporte*). Some other speakers also stepped onto the platform during the meeting. There was no sound equipment in the room and no chairs. Well over a hundred persons were present at the time of the opening, with more than double that number by the end of the meeting an hour later.

The officer explained that the purpose of the meeting was to present a new project, a tunnel under the federal road to Toluca, referring to the series of accidents that had occurred there. He termed the place the *paso de la muerte* (death pass). The officer pointed out that the project would not negatively affect any houses. Nearly all the land involved was communal, and the Commisariat had already ceded the land. He took the opportunity to thank God that no major accident had occurred during the festivals, when the blocked-off village road had forced everybody to use the death pass instead on their way downtown or back from Toluca, not to mention those who lived on the other side of the federal road. Then he opened the meeting for questions and invited people who thought they might be negatively affected or disadvantaged by this project to speak up so that possible problems could be sorted out. He pointed out that in all public works that benefit the majority, there will be someone who is negatively affected, and the authorities have to take both parties into consideration.

Then one woman who is a teacher stepped onto the platform and began talking, pointing out that although the underpass would unite the community, it would be seriously detrimental to ‘us who live here’. ‘We have to think,’ she said, but by now a large crowd (in the usage of Thompson, 1971, p. 82) had started shouting, speaking their minds all at once. The woman tried to go on, but everybody was shouting; she managed to say, ‘I want you to reflect’, but the crowd shouted, ‘We are not your students!’ There was no sign of any moderator. In some quieter moments, she succeeded in expressing some of her arguments: the land tax would increase, the value of the land would rise, more people would sell, and population growth would accelerate. Now and then the people shouted, ‘*Que se haga el puente, que se haga, que se haga!*’ (Let the bridge be built, let it be built, let it be built!). Actually, it was an underpass. Then, each person shouted his or her own ideas aloud at the same time, so it

was hard to make out what they were. It turned out that this particular debating style was also used in the agrarian assemblies, and people told me it was a common way of conducting meetings. They said that women, and especially older women, also participated in this manner of debating style. Often meetings are interrupted, and agrarian assemblies may thus end up invalid due to this kind of interaction; those who shout the loudest also tend to have a menacing attitude, and consciously seek to prevent accords from being made. The majority at meeting 1, however, did not want to stop the project, but they applied the same style to stop its critics.

After the teacher left the platform, a man stepped up and, speaking with authority, expressed the view that perhaps the project had not been properly presented, and that all those who might be negatively affected by it should be summoned to another meeting. Then one of the engineers from the ministry explained that this was exactly why this meeting had been called, and that the important thing now was to ‘let me inform you before you start screaming and dispute everything. We must be pro-positive here, not negative.’ Another man began talking, pointing out the need for gathering everybody who would be negatively affected by the project; this provoked a response from the loud majority, ‘No, no, no!’ The engineers continued to reassure those who feared that the project was not open for dialogue, which again met with shouting from the majority. Finally those who considered themselves negatively affected by the project were asked to stay longer to agree on further procedures, and the rest were asked if they were in favour of the project, upon which they shouted ‘Yes!’ and applauded.

One of the engineers also pointed out that now was the time to actually carry out this project because very soon there would be a *corte de caja* (end of disbursement),³ and the budget allocated to the village would be lost. Some thirty persons stayed behind to organize the follow-up with the authorities. Meanwhile, everybody was asked to sign the list, indicating a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’ to the project. The meeting disintegrated into a series of different activities, some people still discussing, and the children jumping and shouting on the platform.

I noticed that the topic of the meeting continued to be a central issue in many conversations of village gossip during July and August. Signatures were being collected, one list in favour of the underpass, and the other against (according to several sources, the total of collected signatures was 3,000 for and 40 against). Most of the people I talked to wanted the project to be carried out, but one woman from the Neighbourhood Committee (*Comité Vecinal*) doubted that it would be, because she had experienced similar situations before when some *tercos* (stubborn persons) had stopped projects. One previous commissioner pointed out that the *comuneros* who opposed the project did so because of resentment against himself. He explained that they used to be on the committee of vigilance (*comité de vigilancia*) of his list of candidates (*planilla*) but later they joined another list, and now they wanted to stop the project to prevent him from taking credit for it. He thought everybody should participate in

the decision about the underpass, but the opposing *comuneros* claimed that the *avecindados* should be excluded.

One of my informants voiced very strong views against the underpass, which she consistently termed ‘the bridge’. She was herself a *comunera*, in her 60s, and active in village politics and communitarian religious life. She was very cross with the people who had shouted at the meeting; not because of the shouting, but the fact that they wanted ‘the bridge’ without considering those who were against it. She was also upset about the Delegation, because she maintained they did not listen to those who disagreed. Her view was that the legitimate owners of the community, the *comuneros*, and not those *avecindados*, should decide the issue. She exclaimed that they had obtained their ‘next-to-free plots, their houses, water, electricity, sewer, everything, and still they want roads to go by car and leave their kids at the doorstep of the school! Formerly, if we wanted to go to La Pila (the north end of the village), there were no *combis* (small, local transport); we had to go on foot on this path full of big stones’. I pointed out that crossing that road was extremely dangerous and people might get killed, but she answered, ‘*Allí que se maten, entonces!*’ (Let them die, then!).⁴

The *comunera* continued, ‘Some people say the *avecindados* are not to blame; they just bought a piece of land here. But they knew it was not legal, because they never got a property deed. The *comunero* who sells and the *avecindado* who buys are equally to blame. Some people, when they are confronted, say they sell out of necessity, but I tell them, when I don’t sell, it’s not because I don’t have needs’. So in her mind, the main issue here was the conflict between *comuneros* and *avecindados*. In addition, she also thought it important to defend the right of the community to make their autonomous decisions; she scorned the Delegation for coming up with their ‘little projects’, which they expected to be accepted right away, but no, the *comuneros* would take their time to consider things, and not allow the horizon to be ruined by some ‘bridge’! It did not impress her that the project actually was about an underpass.

Meeting 2: Citizen consultation (summoned locally)

A model of the underpass project being planned was presented at the village *zócalo* (plaza) on Sunday, 20 August 2006; this was also a citizen consultation, but summoned by the Commissariat and the Neighbourhood Committee. Although there was a kiosk elevated above the ground, nobody used it; everybody was standing on the ground, including the chairperson from the Commissariat. He was holding a microphone that he handed to persons called on to impart information, but he did not give it to any member of the audience. There were no chairs. Some hundred persons gathered around the model of the underpass, and there were well over two hundred before the event was over.

One engineer started explaining the model; after a while, people were asked to step back so that others could have a better look. Again there was a list that people were asked to sign, to document their support of the project. One engineer explained that the work would take about five to six months, and added that they were consulting with the people who felt the project affected them negatively. He also mentioned by name three prominent men in the village, and said that, as soon as these men had authorized it, the work could begin. Since the *sexenio* (six year term of the president) was drawing to a close, he maintained the village should make good use of the time left before the disbursements would be rescinded.

Then another line of argument ensued about whether any one person would be able to take credit for the project, because, as the ex-commissioner had suggested, this was to be avoided. The engineer explained that the financing was from the federal budget and thus belonged to everyone 'because we pay taxes'. He also expanded on the content of an anonymous flyer that had been circulating; it contained a map illustrating that the underpass would come in very handy for the 'three economically most important businesses in Acopilco', which are a few disputed holiday cabins, a sports field, and a bar. The flyer argued that these businesses were located on communal land that had been appropriated by private persons who consequently would benefit from the project. The commissioner disclosed that the Commissariat had initiated trials of restitution in these cases, and that it was untrue that the underpass project had been developed in order to benefit these businesses. He added, 'We are doing things publicly and officially signed', alluding to the anonymity of the flyer. From the side, however, a voice was heard saying: 'Those gentlemen want this project to be carried out as their achievement!' But the commissioner finalized: 'This project is a necessity for the entire community,' and many people shouted 'Yes!' and applauded. Formally, the meeting seemed to be finished, but some carried on in smaller groups. One debate was about the possibility that members of the Commissariat were defending the project because they would receive some personal benefit from it; rumour often suspected such dealings. Another line of debate was between *comuneros* and *avecindados*, a debate which attracted many listeners and participants, heating up the atmosphere.

One man, who professed to be an *avecindado*, appealed to everybody to unite and get this project done, but one *comunero* shouted, 'No *señor*, here we are *comuneros*, we are autonomous!' The *avecindado*, however, related that his grandfather came from this village, but he himself had lived in different parts, and pointed out that other villages are better off than Acopilco. 'From now on we want to see some progress! Let us unite; the division, year after year, has left us in this condition'. The crowd shouted, '*Que se haga!*' (Let it be done!). 'We will not lose this project just because of some ignorant person!' The *comunero* maintained that they were the ones who should decide this, and the *avecindado* asked: 'Why do you hate us?' To which the *comunero* replied, 'When did you shoulder the burden equally with us? The Commissariat has its

offices, come to us there!’ So the dialogue ended with the *avecindado* asking: ‘When is anything going to be done about unity?’, and the tension dissolved in everybody laughing.

Analysis of the two meetings

The style in which the meetings were conducted calls for some reflection. The organizer of meeting 1 tried to operate along the lines of a lecture, with strict turn-taking for individuals in the audience. This scheme broke down as soon as a woman from the community stepped onto the platform, which might have indicated that she had a higher social ranking. She was a teacher, which we might have expected to command some respect; there was, however, something ambiguous about her higher status; clearly the crowd held it against her, shouting, ‘We are not your students!’ Since there was no microphone, the lecture form requires strict turn-taking, which should have entailed restraint on the part of the audience. However, gossip had it that this particular woman would always ‘*llevar la contraria*’ (disagree),⁵ and instead of eliciting respect, she provoked resistance.

Meeting 1 was organized by government officials; from the audience reactions we could infer that the ideology, or mutually implicit expectations as far as conducting meetings was concerned was not shared between the community and those who organized it. The organizers represented state authority; thus the implicit definition of the situation would be that they organized the meeting in accordance with the meeting style that they took for granted. However, the audience, as they say there, ‘*protestaron con las patas*’ – protested with their feet (actually, their voices).

The simultaneous talking which occurred in meeting 1 was transformed into an acoustic blockage of all voices. This might be taken as something that resembles descriptions in the literature of meeting styles from various communitarian settings (for example Myers, 1986; Graham, 1993; Lenkersdorf, 2004). However, in those cases the simultaneous talking constitutes a process which allows consensus to be reached. This is obtained through a constant talking process, which involves listening at the same time, thus permitting each speaker to incorporate the views of others into her or his own discourse. In the civic centre of Acopilco, however, I observed what Recondo termed (2005, p. 13) an ‘ear-splitting cacophony’, even if he reported that in the indigenous communities of Oaxaca this practice has given way to ‘a give-and-take exchange of opinions’.

What might have represented a lifeworld of communitarian participation ended up silencing other opinions due to the acoustic level. The crowd used the force of communitarian practices to counteract and nullify the intervention of the teacher. What changed, first of all, was the code structuring, from turn-taking to simultaneous talking and shouting, and the tone from friendly to aggressive, using a vocabulary more like slogans. The situational focus in the

opening phase dissolved into an unfocused form, where any issue might be addressed simultaneously; thus it was neither a 'lecture' nor a 'cocktail party'.

Nevertheless, although the underlying differences in expectations of meeting styles were not explicated at meeting 1, when meeting 2 was organized, things were approached differently. The organizing and chairing were left to local authority persons from the Commissariat and the Neighbourhood Committee, who took steps to facilitate a decentralized form or, in Irvine's terminology, a cocktail party. This still allowed for a situational focus in the main sequence assisted by the microphone, which was used exclusively by the moderator and other authorized persons. Organized in this way, the simultaneous talk played out differently; it was not disruptive or aggressive, but allowed everybody to voice their views, though in smaller decentralized groups. Thus, many discussions were carried out at the same time; nobody could sum up everything that was said and draw a conclusion, but all of them could certainly feel they had participated and spoken their minds.

The form of the cocktail party was masterfully deployed by the local organizer. The auditive hierarchy created with the microphone was perfectly suited for this form. The fact that the local authorities refrained from using the kiosk at the *zócalo* further underlined their emphasis on egalitarianism, while at the same time retaining a situational focus.

As noted above, *comuneros* and *avecindados* represent two different identities; during the first meeting, these were not invoked. Instead the majority identified against the teacher and in favour of the underpass. However, at meeting 2 the *comunero* and *avecindado* identities were invoked as the basic identities, thus representing one of the few occasions that this tense relationship was addressed publicly. I submit that this demonstrates the wide acceptance of this particular meeting style.

Both meetings shared the same instrumental purpose, which was taken care of back stage: a) to bring about compliance with the Law of Citizen Participation (ALDF, 1998), b) to produce lists of signatures, and c) to identify people who claimed to be negatively affected by the project. The meetings did not have any decision-making faculty, but were occasions for impression management which constituted the expressive outcome of the front stage event. For example, meeting 1 was (partly) chaired by a representative of the authorities, who found the opportunity to demonstrate and highlight the democratic practices of the administration, pointing out that even if the project would benefit the majority, it might negatively affect someone with whom the authorities would have to reach a settlement. However, it turned out that this demonstration of democratic openness was not well received by the majority, who seemed to fear that consideration for the interests of those who were negatively affected by the project would threaten the project itself, so they shouted 'No!' and did not welcome other opinions.

At meeting 2, the Commissariat had taken over the organizing from the Delegational authorities and was able to successfully perform impression man-

agement. The expressive outcome, therefore, was to show that the community was better managed by its own authorities. Even so, several of the *comuneros* made it clear that what mattered to them, more than any road safety project, was their autonomy. So community autonomy in this case came into conflict with the interests of the majority population.

In September 2006, however, with the machinery in place to start digging, the project was blocked. This had little to do with claims of community autonomy or any other demand expressed at the meetings; it was the result of unilateral exercise of power by two specific families who claimed to be the owners of parts of the communal construction site.

Meeting 3: Agrarian Assembly

An Assembly should be summoned two weeks in advance of a meeting and be announced in visible places (Procuraduría Agraria, 1995, p. 40-43). An Assembly should have a quorum with the presence of 50 per cent of its members plus one, which is impossible in Acopilco since many *comuneros* have left or died without being replaced. A second summons, however, can achieve a quorum with any number of *comuneros*. As this is common knowledge, people generally do not turn up for the first summons. The agenda as announced in the first summons cannot be changed, or else the process will have to start all over again. Only natives with agrarian rights (*comuneros*) or persons with *carta de poder* (power of attorney) from a *comunero* may enter carrying their voter ID, which is checked against the official register of *comuneros*.

February 2007 was the first time an Assembly was held in the new *Casa Comunal*, which had been built with financing from the Federal Electricity Commission (CFE).⁶ There were some 400 chairs distributed in rows throughout the room, a podium in front with a long table, five chairs, and a microphone. According to the register, 341 *comuneros* attended the meeting, which was chaired by the commissioner in collaboration with the secretary. Five men sat down behind the table on the stage: the commissioner, the secretary, the treasurer, the president of the committee of vigilance, and a younger man with a laptop, who I recognized as the personal secretary of one of the general directors of the Delegation.⁷ At noon the commissioner asked everybody to come inside, while others started whistling and shouting ‘*Ya son las doce*’ (It’s 12 o’clock now). The man with the laptop said in a loud and steady voice: ‘Please, close the door, it’s now 12 o’clock’. A man entered the room with a video-camera, recording the event; I recognized him as the son of one of the *comuneros*. The door was closed. The commissioner took the microphone and began the meeting, ‘We will open the Assembly as we always do, but now for the first time in our new multi-functional hall’. He thanked people for the turnout, glad to see that so many were interested in community affairs. The secretary then said, ‘Let’s begin’, and started reading the agenda out loud. The commissioner then addressed the first entry on the agenda: attendance. He proposed

that the register from the tables outside be accepted as the list of attendance, noting that 341 persons had registered. Nobody protested, so this was authorized.

Having thus stated that the meeting was legally constituted (this was the second summons), the floor was again given to the secretary, who started reading aloud a long list of works or tasks which had either been carried out, or were in progress, for instance various legal proceedings in the Agrarian Court (*tribunal agrario*), briefly stating the status of each case. The terminology, however, was highly technical/legal, and the tone of voice and speed with which these items were presented clearly did not encourage questions. I had great difficulty grasping the content of the list. It was not until I read the minutes afterwards that I came to understand it. During this part of the meeting silence prevailed.

The next item to be discussed was an application for payment of environmental services and other issues concerning the community forest, activities which generated some employment. Having concluded the reading, the commissioner asked, 'Do you agree?' Many people shouted 'Yes!', while others yelled 'Let's vote!' So the Commissioner said, 'Those who agree, show your hands'. Then he quickly reported 'Approved by the majority'. Considering it was about obtaining payment to the community, and securing some more sources of income, approval seemed obvious to me. However, while some applauded, others shouted 'Contra!', but no notice was taken of this, and the issue was left at that. No votes were counted. In the middle of this, one lady got up and left the room; she slammed the metal door shut, which produced a big bang, then kicked the door from the outside.

The next entry on the agenda was also about payment, this time for reforestation work the community had carried out in 2006 and earlier. At the same time it was suggested that they apply for funding from the *Fondos Comunitarios para el Desarrollo Sustentable* (Communitarian Funds for Sustainable Development) and from two similar programmes offering employment in the community. It was now difficult to hear what was being said, since many *comuneros* talked and shouted simultaneously. The commissioner, using the microphone, spoke favourably and at length about the proposition. Those against were asked to vote, and some 15 to 20 did vote against it. Though the votes were never counted, they clearly represented a minority. 'Approved by the majority' was the commissioner's verdict, and many people applauded, while a number of women in the back of the room loudly shouted about the lack of a chance to discuss the affairs voted on. Two elderly ladies stood up and shouted, '*Están engañando al pueblo!*' (They are deceiving the people!). One man also rose and said, 'It is not as if we oppose ourselves, we just want something clear to vote on, some clear alternatives'. The ladies kept yelling, and the commissioner, assisted by the microphone, said that there were as yet no detailed projects; the people in front applauded, but the elderly women continued to shout.

The meeting had now come to the final items on the agenda. However, one man identifying himself as a lawyer by the name of Villanueva demanded that

‘... an item be entered on the agenda that would allow us to ask questions if we feel we need to, so things will be clear to us’. The commissioner had wanted to say something, but by now 10 to 20 persons were standing up and shouting their opinions on different matters, while others did the same although they remained seated. It became apparent to me that those in the back supported the opposition, while those in front mostly backed the commissioner. I was seated among some women with whom I had shared many processions and ceremonies and, once the general commotion had started, it became clear that we were in the section of the hall that supported the commissioner. Certainly, my presence had been noticed; I am relatively tall, white, and thus conspicuous in this setting, and the only non-*comunera*. I would have preferred to be in a more neutral position, but that was impossible. Finally Mr. Villanueva managed to be heard: ‘When will you give us an Assembly where we can make communal accords?’

The commissioner did not respond to this, but declared that they would pass to the final point on the agenda, the closing of the Assembly. He repeated how pleased he was that for the first time ever they had had their own hall for the assemblies. He then declared the Assembly to be over, and asked people to come forward to sign the minutes. This was possible, since the man with the laptop from the Delegation had already prepared them. The time was 12:40; the entire meeting had lasted 40 minutes.

After the Assembly, the commissioner invited me to a small celebration in the Commissariat’s office; *tacos* were served by two women with posts in the Commissariat. The commissioner characterized the Assembly as the most successful in their history, with less shouting and disputes than ever before, and it had only taken 40 minutes! Later he explained to me that they only needed the minutes in order to be able to claim payment from the corresponding authorities.

Analysis of the Assembly

This Assembly took place six months after Meeting 2. It was organized and chaired by the same local authorities who had so masterfully employed the cocktail party meeting style at the *zócalo*. The stage was set for successful impression management by the Commissariat; the commissioner could introduce the *comuneros*’ new assembly hall⁸ and report a long list of merits at the beginning of the meeting. A situational focus was intended, but not in the form of the cocktail party, which would have been open to the multi-centred simultaneous talking so well received at Meeting 2. Instead the meeting began in the form of a lecture, and a monotonous one at that, with the secretary reading out loud. Implicitly the commissioner conveyed strict turn-taking as the expected form. Having seen how fruitful the cocktail party form was at the *zócalo*, how can we explain why the same style was not employed here? The items on the agenda as such did not call for any debate; instrumentally they were simply about producing valid minutes in order to obtain financial support from gov-

ernment agencies, which under other circumstances might have been done simply by informing the audience that this was the case and making a consensual decision, since this would benefit everybody.

This meeting, however, was carried out in a formal tone, part of which was due to the regulations in the Agrarian Law which, for example, required a very strict ID check at the entrance. The discourse that the Commissariat employed, both in the meeting and in the prepared documents, was replete with formulas pertaining to professional legal knowledge, exemplifying a choice of vocabulary to increase formality. Furthermore, social distance and rank were emphasized by the platform and microphone. By staging a very formal meeting, the leaders on the podium defined the situation (Goffman, 1971, p. 15) as one where the audience was not expected to talk. By these measures, they invoked their own superior rank as members of the Commissariat by all the means at their disposal. Furthermore, the audience had chosen their seats according to their preferences for or against the Commissariat: those up front supported the Commissariat, and those in back opposed it.

The entire development of this Assembly testifies to the existence of deep conflicts in the community, following the insights about meetings as diagnostic events (Moore, 1987, p. 730; Jackson and Ramírez, 2009). Although it was difficult to grasp what the issues of contention were during this meeting, there were many *comuneros* who were angry because there was no opportunity for a discussion, as summed up by Mr. Villanueva asking when this would be done. I have mentioned some of the contentious issues before: the Delegational Land Use Plan, water usage, illegal sales of plots in the forest, and irregular settlements. Ultimately, the villagers felt that these issues affected the community's continued existence; these are all agrarian issues which belong in Assembly discussions, as well as in other forums. However, once the agenda is announced, it cannot be changed, so if the Commissariat does not include the contentious issues in the first place, the Assembly cannot make any formal accords on them. What is more, due to the meeting style, these issues are not even ventilated. Rumours have it, furthermore, that consecutive Commissariats have not rendered accounts, or passed on documents to their successors; therefore some Commissariats might have had additional motivations to avoid open discussions in the Assemblies. It seems likely that the goal of the present Assembly was not to have fruitful deliberations.

Numerous *comuneros* told me about aggressive verbal and physical fights in these assemblies; these informants made it clear that they themselves did not like the style which had developed, and that's why many people have stopped attending them. This is similar to what Nuijten noted in the *ejido* she studied in Jalisco (2003, p. 51). In Irvine's study of formality in meetings, she noted that a group with internal conflicts might try to avoid formal meetings, so as not to have to contend with such conflicts. However, in Acopilco it is not possible to completely avoid organizing assemblies; the Agrarian Law (1995, p. 41) demands a minimum of two per year. Also, valid Assembly minutes are needed

in order to apply for financial support from various government agencies, since formally the Assembly is the supreme authority of the community. The effect of the Agrarian Law, where strict rules have been laid down, is therefore ambiguous. It obliges the agrarian communities to organize meetings, while at the same time the formalities concerning the agenda provide the Commissariat with an instrument for avoiding discussions of conflictive issues in Assemblies.

Finally, I noted that the instrumental purpose of this Assembly was to play a formal game in order to produce the required minutes, so expertly pre-prepared back stage by an employee of the Delegation. The front stage, meanwhile, was dedicated to the expressive aspects of performance and impression management. The commissioner struggled to give the impression that he was in control and able to secure multiple benefits for the community, whereas the opposition, not necessarily united, joined forces to counteract this impression by playing out their disruptive protests against a series of other issues.

Among the several different forms of meetings in the village, the Assembly is the only one with formal decision power. The only decisions that can be made, however, are for or against what the Commissariat has put on the agenda, so decision power here for those who oppose the Commissariat is virtually reduced to rejecting its propositions. Sabotaging the meetings is also a possibility, which according to many informants often happens.

Concluding remarks

First of all, most meetings in the village do not have any formal decision-making power, nor do they generally constitute an arena for deliberations on problems in the community, as revealed in the ways in which the meetings unfolded. And even the Assembly, with formal decision-making power, does not really function in this way. This illustrates Nuijten's contention (2003, p. 55) that influencing decisions is not so much about participating in important meetings as it is about networking where the issues are discussed and decided. The Agrarian Law is, however, also active in the force field around the Assembly and the resources at stake demand that certain instrumental outcomes must be processed there. I would therefore suggest that meetings can be understood as nodal points in networks where gossip and influence are negotiated and decisions made (Hagene 2010c, p. 37, 43).

The meeting style chosen structures the outcomes of meetings, both instrumental and expressive. The style, then, is composed of the specific ways in which the regions (front stage, back stage and under stage, the latter signifying mostly gossip) collaborate, and the degrees or forms of formality with which they are organized. I have used two aspects of formality: code structuring (turn-taking, tone and vocabulary), and the situational focus, divided into two main forms: the lecture and the cocktail party. I have assembled these aspects

Table 1. Central aspects of the three meetings

	Meeting 1, July 2006
Called by	Delegation, citizen participation (state)
Law regulating meetings	Citizen participation
Moderating	Low-profile, part-time moderator
Setting	Indoors, with platform, no seats, no sound equipment.
Type of hierarchy	Visual
Mandate	Information
Code structuring -Turn-taking -Tone, vocabulary	Intended turn-taking, interrupted by simultaneous talk and shouting, blocking intervention of female speaker; Informal, friendly until break-down.
Situational focus, lecture, cocktail party	Intended lecture, breakdown for long stretches
Instrumental outcome (back stage)	List of signatures for underpass; Comply with Law of Citizen Participation; Call for meeting with victims; No underpass built by 2011.
Expressive outcome (front stage)	Delegation authorities attempted impression management as democratic, taking into consideration also possible victims of the underpass; Not well received by audience.

Meeting 2, August 2006	Meeting 3, Assembly, February 2007
Commissariat and Neighbourhood Committee (community)	Commissariat (community)
Citizen participation, but only back stage	Agrarian Law
Formal moderator for the main sequence	Formal moderator
Outdoors, flat, no seats, sound equipment.	Community hall, 400 chairs, platform, sound equipment, controlled entrance.
Auditive	Visual and auditive
Information	Decision and information
Turn-taking with the microphone, used by the authorities, audience left to talk in groups, while also allowed to ask questions without microphone; Informal, friendly.	Strict turn-taking with the microphone and in conversation with selected voices in the audience, while at one point (3 on agenda), breakdown into a cacophony of shouts of opinions on various matters; Formal, technical/legal vocabulary.
Cocktail party, and situational focus with microphone	Lecture with the microphone, though partial breakdown at agenda points 3 and 4
List of signatures for underpass; Comply with Law of Citizen Participation; Call for meeting with victims; No underpass built by 2011.	Valid minutes to release financial support; Comply with requirements in Agrarian Law of minimum two Assemblies per year.
Local authorities commanded leadership and respect; Openly addressing contradiction natives/ <i>avecindados</i> ; Evidence of contradiction: community autonomy vs. road safety and expressed interest of majority population.	Struggle over impression management concerning Commissariat performance; Commissariat successful until breakdown from agenda point 3; Opposing power-groups disrupt Assembly.

of the three meetings in Table 1, which also comprises several other variables (moderating, setting, type of hierarchy and mandate), which contribute towards the specific style of any of these meetings. Table 1 thus facilitates a comparison of the three meetings.

We can see that the choice of meeting style depends on the organizers' cultural knowledge of the audience/participants (Meeting 1 and 2). Meeting 1 was organized by the public authorities, who tried to run it in the form of a lecture without a microphone. This meeting broke down. In Meeting 2, on the other hand, the local authorities (the commissioner and the Neighbourhood Committee) chose the form of the 'cocktail party', combined with a microphone, while allowing non-focused participation in the side events. This form was well received. It invoked the positional identities of natives and *avecindados*, while providing a friendly tone, which facilitated a very rare, open, public debate on the relationship between these two groups without provoking any major hostility between them.

Extending the comparison to include the Assembly, we notice that cultural competence is not the only variable that influences the choice of meeting style. At the Assembly the same Commissioner strove to apply high levels of formality in all its aspects, doing his best to construct a formal, top-down, controlled style, which appeared to militate against participation from the audience. Both visual and auditive hierarchies were employed, tone and vocabulary created distance and inequality, and the preferred form of situational focus was the 'lecture', which so clearly had broken down at meeting 1; however, in the Assembly the commissioner was rescued by use of the microphone. The entrance control and the minutes were imposed by the legal norms, but the remaining elements do not seem to have been mandated by any laws. Why would the Commissariat put aside its knowledge of how a reasonably pleasant meeting should be conducted? The comparison of these three meetings makes it clear that 'pleasant' was not the aim of the Assembly, even if we take into consideration that the Commissariat was not necessarily in total control of how the Assembly evolved (Schwarzman, 1989, p. 38); the style chosen for this Assembly needs further analysis.

To this end, I would suggest an aspect which concerns the balance between the expressive and the instrumental outcomes of the meetings. The Assembly had a formal and legal decision power and function, which meetings 1 and 2 did not possess. Even though there was a serious power struggle over the expressive format of the Assembly, the Commissariat seems to have prioritized the instrumental outcomes: compliance with the Agrarian Law and the statutory need for valid minutes, which entitled them to economic resources. And the minutes needed to be signed. Apparently they thought it would speak badly of them if they failed to secure benefits available to the community. If the Assembly had broken down in chaos before formal closure, the instrumental outcome would have been spoiled.

Another observation concerns the interaction between the meeting style and the legal norms laid down for the Assembly; they foreclose popular participation in suggesting constructive projects, whereas resistance, postponement, sabotage and blockage are enabled. Ideas and plans can only be presented by the Commissariat, and the only way to exercise power by competing power groups is to block its propositions or sabotage the assemblies. Meetings 1 and 2 fall into the category of consultations, and legal norms do not demand much of the instrumental outcomes, while the expressive outcomes indicate the importance of choosing a meeting style that the participants accept.

Finally, I wish to emphasize impression management as a way to influence people's perception of events, and consequently how they will act. Therefore, even meetings without decision-making power have important expressive functions. At meeting 1, the representative from citizen participation strove to present the Delegation as a democratically minded agency; it failed, both due to the breakdown of the meeting, and to the fact that the general public did not share the preoccupation with the rights of the minority (those negatively affected by the project). At meeting 2, however, the Commissariat managed successfully to present itself as a group of respected leaders. However, this was not the case at the Assembly, where the instrumental outcomes appear to have taken priority.

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Notes

1. The original inhabitants use the term *nativos* (native) or *originario* (originals) about themselves, not *indígena* (indigenous).
2. For example in 2007, the Cuajimalpa Delegation, where Acopilco is located, received over 5000 suggested changes to the Delegational Land Use Plan. All these were scanned separately, numbered and posted on the delegation website one by one; if people wanted to know what proposals existed, they would have to open 5000 documents! However, the proposed revision of the Delegational Land Use Plan sent from the Delegation Chief was not posted; there was only a format with unexplained abbreviations and incomprehensible information.
3. Alluding to the elections, and the end of term of the present authorities.
4. Conversation with *comunera*, 7 July 2006.
5. Disagree in a context or in a way that is not generally well regarded.
6. CFE (Federal Electricity Commission) compensated for community land confiscated for the benefit of high-tension electricity cables.
7. It was for this agency the Assembly minutes were needed in order to release financial support.
8. It is a multi-functional hall, also rented out for parties; I participated in a wedding there the night before.

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