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BLURRED EDGES, OPEN BOUNDARIES

The Long-Term Development of a Peasant Community in Rural Mexico

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Wolf's dichotomy between open and closed corporate communities has become axiomatic for the study of social organization in rural communities in Mesoamerica. In this paper I argue that this dichotomy is of limited use for understanding the vital dynamics behind the evolution of social groups typically classified by anthropologists as peasants. To overcome the conceptual limitation of Wolf's original classification I propose a network model that focuses on social relations. This approach can more adequately capture the variability and complexity we observe in everyday practice in rural communities in past and contemporary times. The paper examines aspects of the social organization of Belén, a rural community in Tlaxcala, Mexico. Using data from parish registers and two ethnographic surveys, I demonstrate how the social networks of compadrazgo (ritual kinship) and marriage can be reconstructed back into the seventeenth century. Since the beginning of the eighteenth century Belenos have formed most of their compadrazgo relationships with people from outside, indicating that social boundaries had started to collapse long before industrialization led to new economic relationships. The driving force behind the change was a severe epidemic shock. These findings have substantial, theoretical implications for the model of peasant society commonly applied in Mesoamerica, especially for earlier historical periods.

WHEN BLOM AND LA FARGE RETURNED FROM THEIR EXPEDITION to southern Mexico and Guatemala in 1925, they wrote with surprise that the "tribes" they had found were very different from those which anthropologists had studied before. Kinship did not seem to play the role usually attributed to it in non-Western societies, and the group was bound simply by "similar customs, common interests and geographical proximity" (Blom and La Farge 1927:354). Tax followed this line of thought and concluded that the territorial unit would be a more appropriate focus for ethnographic description and analysis than kinship structures (Tax 1937:435). In the 1940s and 1950s, Redfield and Camara were the first to offer an analytic typology to compare local communities. Redfield's rural-urban continuum and Camara's classification of "centrifugal" versus "centripetal" villages were attempts to develop a comparative basis for the study of social organization in Mesoamerica (Redfield 1941:13). The concept of the *closed corporate community*

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introduced by Eric Wolf resembles these earlier terminologies. Although Wolf builds on many ideas of his intellectual predecessors, he goes a step further: he takes history into account and asks how these types of social organization evolved (Wolf 1955, 1956, 1957, 1986). Wolf defined the *closed corporate community* as a bounded social system with clear-cut limits in relation to both insiders and outsiders. Those limits correspond to the territorial boundaries. They enable the community to resist external penetration by the state and guarantee the highest possible level of internal integration. In most of his analysis Wolf focuses on the economy (production) and political relations with the outside world.

To describe peasant villages as *closed corporate communities* almost sounds nostalgic when it comes to a migration-shaken country like Mexico. Today global flows of people, goods, and money shape the social organization of most rural communities in Mesoamerica (Cohen 2004; Hirsch 2003; Massey, Goldring, and Durand 1994). Most communities are deterritorialized and situated at the intersection of experiences both in the U.S. and Mexico. The aim of this paper is to trace back through colonial history this social practice of moving, connecting, and sharing. In so doing I highlight a dimension of community that Wolf and others largely neglected: social relations and social networks. I tackle the question of whether our understanding of the long-term development of the community changes when *comadrazgo* (ritual kinship) and kinship are given equal weight in the analysis.

My analysis reveals that community edges were blurred long before industrialization and globalization led to new forms of social relationships. Epidemics and mortality shocks are crucial events that explain these early openings of the community boundaries. Recent research on the nature of epidemics suggests that their impact on social, economic, and religious organization has long been underestimated. Moreover, epidemics seem to elicit quite similar patterns of response across different spatial and temporal scales (Lindenbaum 2001; Slack 1992). Historians have shown that the Black Death of 1348/1349 not only led to new economic and demographic regimes but also changed the academic landscape of Europe by shifting the focus away from Bologna and Paris to universities emerging north of the Alps and east of the Rhine (e.g., Heidelberg, Prague) (Herlihy 1997:69). Anthropologists investigating HIV/AIDS and social transformations in different regions of sub-Saharan Africa observe that family organization, inheritance, and ritual practices are undergoing similar changes in response to the pandemic (Malungo 2001; Oleke, Blystad, and Rekdal 2005).

I present my argument in eight sections. After a brief introduction focusing on the Mesoamerican community model and the study of communities as networks, I review the basic characteristics of the three most fundamental social institutions in many Mesoamerican communities: the *cargo* system (a system of "burdens" or offices), *comadrazgo*, and kinship. The next section provides a brief ethnographical and historical introduction to Belén, the community in which the fieldwork was conducted. The following section lays down the historical and ethnographical data that describe the integration of the community from the late seventeenth century until 2001. Once these patterns are established I show that the two waves of opening up of the community go hand in hand with two demographic crises in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The results and

their consequences for our understanding of the community and processes of social change in general are discussed in the conclusion.

WOLF'S MODEL OF THE MESOAMERICAN COMMUNITY

Wolf defined the *closed corporate community* as a bounded social system with clear-cut limits in relation to both insiders and outsiders (Wolf 1955:456). The closed corporate community developed during the early colonial period. Wolf identifies a set of features that characterize the closed corporate community, including the fact that it is located on marginal land that is exploited by its members using traditional technology. These factors limit the productive capacity of the community. Thus the community is relatively poor. Land is a scarce resource and is allocated, and largely owned, by the community. The sale of land to outsiders is taboo. A civil-religious hierarchy (the cargo system) allocates positions and levels differences. Membership in the cargo system defines the social boundaries of the community. Although the general lack of resources forces the community to enter the outside market, the community actively denies any outside cultural alternatives that may threaten the corporate structure. This goes hand in hand with a strong tendency for marriage endogamy at the village level. The nuclear family is the primary unit of production and consumption. "Institutionalized envy" in the form of gossip, attacks of the evil eye, or witchcraft is used to punish innovative behavior (Wolf 1955:457–60).

Wolf contrasts the closed corporate community with the *open community*. He does not elaborate on the concept in equal detail. In open communities cash crop production often constitutes a large part of the economic activities, which are market-oriented. The community is heterogeneous and values the accumulation and display of wealth. Linkages to the outside are frequent and culturally valued because they are the main source of growth and development (Wolf 1955:462).

Wolf developed his concept of the community for Mesoamerica. Since then, Wolf and others have applied it on other continents as well (Rambo 1977; Skinner 1971; Wolf 1957). His seminal work was very influential in subsequent debate about the community. The various critiques of his work center around his interpretation of the cargo system as a leveling mechanism, his unilateral model of cultural development, his use of the adaptation logic at the group level, and his insufficient use of historical sources (Robichaux 2001; Wimmer 1995; Wolf 1986). I will restrict my discussion to the criticism that is of direct relevance to the argument to be developed here: the selection of institutions that constitute the community, and the consequences of that selection. Wolf interprets the community largely as an economic system.¹ Hunt (1976) was among the first to point out a central flaw in Wolf's analysis: his neglect of kinship. Ethnographic data from a Cuicatec community demonstrate that genealogical linkages play a dominant role in the ritual, territorial, and economic organization of the community. Territory only defines the boundaries of the system. The internal organization is to a large degree structured along kinship lines (Hunt 1976:98). In their profound ethnohistorical analysis Hill and Monaghan take the criticism a step further. They begin their argument with the provocative hypothesis that Wolf's economic theory

of the origin of the community was more a matter of faith than of fact (Hill and Monaghan 1987:xvi). His misunderstanding is based on the apparently incorrect assumption that the closed corporate community is a product of the colonial state. For example, data from the Mayan community of Sacapulas demonstrates that the closed community has pre-Spanish forebears. The prehispanic Mayan institution of *chinamitl* (literally “square made of canes,” referring both to a form of agriculture and to a patrilineal unit) shows many correlations to postconquest units of social organization. It was largely an endogamous group with common landownership and a closed corporation in terms of political and religious matters (Hill and Monaghan 1987:41). Hill and Monaghan show that these features continued to operate after the conquest and throughout the colonial period. The same may be said for the Aztec *calpulli* or residential neighborhood. Like the *chinamitl*, it was a unit that operated between the levels of the community and the family and that possessed or administered land and organized ritual activities (Berdan 1982; Carrasco 1970; Hill and Monaghan 1987:41). Thus, various authors point to the existence of social elements within the community and trace their preconquest roots. However, they do not tackle the question of the community’s outer boundaries.

Robinson (1981) and Greenow (1981) studied this aspect of community organization quantitatively. They were interested in understanding migration patterns in colonial Mexico. Detailed analysis of parish records shows an inconsistent picture: In the case of Nueva Galicia, migration rates among the Indian population were relatively low in the second half of the eighteenth century. In contrast, Robinson finds an astonishing degree of mobility among the communities in Yucatan. These data indicate the variability subsumed by community organization in central Mexico (Robinson 1981).

These advances in our knowledge of the evolution of the Mesoamerican community were made possible by going beyond a purely economic analysis, and by combining ethnographic and historical data.² In his brief discussion of the social aspects of the community Wolf only names two institutions that constitute the closed corporate community: the cargo system and marriage endogamy. He does not give any justification for these preferences, and only later does he seem to acknowledge a bias in his selection. Thirty years after the publication of his seminal articles he concluded:

It was still a history that relied primarily on Spanish sources—written from the top down, as it were. . . . This led to a disregard of territorial entities and kinship structures intermediate between household and community, as well as to disregard of connective networks among people in communities, networks other than those of the market . . . (Wolf 1986:327).

Although Wolf does not explicitly mention which social organizations he refers to as “territorial entities and kinship structures intermediate between household and community,” he must have had the *calpulli*, the *chinamitl*, or the barrio in mind. These social units have only recently been identified as major elements linking the precolonial and the majority of the colonial epoch (Carrasco 1970; Hill and Monaghan 1987; Mulhare 1996).³ The literature cited above shows how our view

of the community changed once these institutions were included in the analysis. In contrast, the “connective networks among people,” which Wolf identifies as a second part missing in the puzzle, have yet to be analyzed in relation to the community question. For many parts of Mesoamerica, compadrazgo is the most important social relationship beyond affinal and parental links (Bloch and Guggenheim 1981; Foster 1961; Gudeman 1975; Mintz and Wolf 1950). The compadrazgo system has long been recognized as an integral part of community organization (Nutini and Bell 1980; Schnegg 2006a; Selby 1976:32; White et al. 2002). Yet, no single study exists that systematically traces the links established historically through compadrazgo relations.

NETWORKS AND BOUNDARIES

The conceptualization of communities and social organization as social networks was born in urban sociology (Lundberg and Lawsing 1937). The community question set much of the agenda of sociology in the first half of the twentieth century (Bott 1957; Wellman 1979). Wellman (1979) recognized that the discussion of whether solidarity and community were “lost” or had been “saved” in urban environments could also be read as an argument about social networks and social relations. His analysis of the personal social networks of urban dwellers in Toronto demonstrated that although most people were embedded in well-functioning solidarity networks, these networks did not overlap and form a single community. Wellman’s approach bridged a lengthy ongoing debate. He did not conceptualize the community as primarily a territorially defined group but instead focused on social relationships, and the networks in which they are embedded (Wellman 1979; Wellman, Carrington, and Hall 1988). Subsequent to his pioneering work it is hard to imagine the study of urban life without the concept of networks and network analysis (Hannerz 1980; Schweizer, Schnegg, and Berzborn 1996). This is especially true in the context of migration (Massey and Espinosa 1997; Palloni et al. 2001).

Given these extremely valuable contributions in neighboring disciplines, it is surprising that the network concept did not enter the anthropological debate about rural communities. Schweizer, and Ziker and Schnegg, are among the few authors who have used network models to study ethnographic cases in a comparative manner (Schnegg 2006b; Schweizer 1997; Ziker and Schnegg 2005). For Mexico, Nutini and Bell (1980), Cohen (1999), and Monaghan (1995) have put social relations and exchange on the agenda of Mesoamerican community studies. Although these authors do not use network analysis explicitly, their focus on cooperation and exchange indicates a demand for concepts that can deal with social relations systematically.

THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF MESOAMERICAN COMMUNITIES

Kinship, compadrazgo, and the cargo system have been identified as the three building blocks of social organization in Mesoamerican communities (Selby 1976:32). The cargo system is a local hierarchy which incorporates both political

and religious offices. Cargos are held by community members, mostly men, for one year.⁴ Typical responsibilities of the religious cargos are the organization of religious celebrations for local saints (the offices are called *mayordomías*) and the administration of the church. Examples of political offices are the local governor (*agente municipal auxiliar*) and the local arbitrator or judge (*juez de paz*). Most cargos are honorary: the person who holds a cargo does not receive monetary payment. In fact, many cargos are very costly to the officeholder because they require extremely high expenditures. The cargo system is an office hierarchy because individual cargos differ in their culturally attached importance. Ideally they are assigned in a prescribed order. Young men begin with relatively insignificant cargos and attempt to work their way up the hierarchical ladder. The most important offices are typically held by community members who have reached 50 years of age. The cargo serves as a sign of the individual's, and to some extent also the family's, social prestige (Cancian 1965; Carrasco 1961; Chance 1990).

The cargo system has stimulated the development of a number of interpretations. Discussions center around the question of how resources are exchanged through the system, and the effects this exchange has on the social structure of the community. Nash (1958) and Wolf (1959) originally suggested that the cargo system acts to level internal economic differences and protects the community against the interferences of the colonial state and the church. Cancian was the first to demonstrate that in Zinacantán significant economic differences existed while the cargo system was flourishing. This stratification was so pronounced that economic ranks were inherited from one generation to the next (Cancian 1965, 1974, 1976).⁵ Many authors agree that the cargo system in Mesoamerican communities is changing. It is often suggested that with modernization, political integration into the nation-state, occupational diversification, and population growth the cargo system loses its significance and in some cases even disappears (Brandes 1988; Cancian 1967, 1992; Hinshaw 1975; Nutini and Isaac 1989 [1974]; Watanabe 1992). A closer look reveals at least two major tendencies: a lower degree of participation in the cargo system and the separation of the religious from the political branch.

The compadrazgo system of ritual kinship was one of the first Latin American institutions that caught the eye of anthropologists (Foster 1969). Sir Edward Tylor characterized it in 1861 as "curious, and quite novel to the Englishman of the present day." He went on to observe that a man who might betray his own father would never cheat on his *compadre* (Tylor 1861). A century later Foster made compadrazgo relationships—dyadic contracts—the basis for his analysis of social organization (Foster 1961, 1963). The Latin American compadrazgo system is a syncretic transformation of the European Catholic practice to appoint godparents as spiritual sponsors when an individual (usually an infant or child) is accepted as a member of the religious community.⁶ During the early colonial period these godparenting relationships transformed and became co-parenting relationships (the literal translation of the word *compadrazgo*) (Horstman and Kurtz 1979). At the end of this process, the relationship between the godparent and the child lost its importance, while the relationship between the godparents and the parents—the *compadres*—gained in significance.

The Latin American compadrazgo system differs significantly in a second respect from its European roots. The events for which spiritual sponsors (*compadres*) are required go far beyond the Catholic rituals of baptism and confirmation. They include all sacraments and important secular *rites de passage* of a couple's children. Examples of secular events are the third birthday, graduation from primary school, and a girl's fifteenth birthday (Nutini and Bell 1980; Ravicz 1967). Again, the couple that takes over the spiritual sponsorship of these events enters into a compadrazgo relationship with the parents of the child. A third type of compadrazgo that is very widespread in Latin America involves relationships that are formed when new possessions are inaugurated. Before a new asset, such as a house, a car, or even an oven, is used for the first time, the owner must invite a couple to "baptize" the new property. Usually, a priest is also invited to bless the item with holy water.

Compadrazgo relationships are publicly visible. The events that lead to a compadrazgo relationship, such as a baptism or a graduation, are celebrated in a fiesta. The size of the fiesta varies with the importance of the event: The inauguration of a car may only be celebrated by the *compadres* and their close families, whereas a girl's fifteenth birthday celebration may involve inviting up to a thousand guests.

The relationship between two *compadres* is marked by respect (Nutini and Bell 1980; Ravicz 1967:239). The terms *compadre/comadre* replace the kinship terms, or any other term, that people may have used in the past to address one another. *Compadres* are expected to greet each other when they meet, they are supposed to avoid any tension or conflict, and they are expected to help or assist each other socially and materially in times of need. Some studies indicate that compadrazgo relationships tend to be vertical, linking parents and godparents of unequal social and economic status (Ingham 1970; Van den Berghe and Van den Berghe 1966). Foster has argued that vertical links connect the community to the outside, including the parish center and commercial market places (Foster 1961). Compadrazgo relationships last for a lifetime and cannot be terminated. Moreover, they reach far beyond the dyad that links two families. They form a network of ties that provide the individuals with indirect access to a wide range of resources (Dávila 1971:400; Nutini 1978).

This brief review of the main characteristics of the compadrazgo system indicates the complexity and variability of the institution. I have dealt with some of these characteristics elsewhere (Schnegg 2005, 2006a). My primary focus in this context will be the historical dynamics of the institution, a dimension that has been largely neglected in the literature.

Kinship has long been neglected in the study of Mesoamerican communities (Nutini 1976; Robichaux 2003). More than 25 years ago Nutini identified three reasons for this disregard: (1) The kinship systems of many ethnic groups were quickly identified as a transformation of the Spanish bilateral system. This classification discouraged many anthropologists from studying it in more detail. (2) Most kinship models were developed for systems that are based on clearly stated rules. In the absence of such rules, scholars were not inclined to consider them. (3) The territorial unit was the primary focus of analysis, and little attention has been paid to the social aspects of community organization (Nutini 1976:6).

In this paper I will restrict my analysis of the kinship system to marriage and, more specifically, to the social relationships that are established through this event. Monaghan (1995) has shown convincingly that Mixtec marriages can be analyzed as a system of exchange between households. With the marriage, the bride usually becomes a member of the husband's household. The groom's side has to persuade her family to hand her over (*pedimiento*) before she can be taken in by the new house (*dejada de la novia*). She brings into her new home her ability to work (labor) and her fertility. Through marriage the families enter into a relationship. They address each other as *consuegro*. This means literally "co-parents-in-law." The relationships between the two families may be more problematic after the marriage of their children. The daughter often experiences psychological and physical violence in her parents-in-law's house, which may strain the relationship between the two families. Nevertheless, marriages form multiple durable relationships between families that are an important component of the social fabric that knits Mesoamerican communities together.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The ethnographic fieldwork was conducted over a period of 15 months between January 2000 and April 2001. This is not the first time that Belén was the focus of intensive ethnographic work. Hugo Nutini and Jean Forbes, as well as their collaborators Douglas White and Lilyan Brudner, have all collected qualitative and quantitative material on the compadrazgo system in Belén and surrounding communities (Forbes 1971; Nutini 1984; Nutini and Bell 1980; Nutini and Isaac 1977; Nutini and White 1977). Much of that work was carried out before 1980. The colleagues named above invited me to restudy some aspects of their work and were most generous in granting me permission to reanalyze the quantitative data collected in the 1970s (White et al. 2002). Their ethnographic data was updated in 2000/2001 with data collected by myself. A second type of data was collected from parish registers.

Historical demographers have used information about birth, death, and marriages from parish registers to reconstruct various parameters of the historical demographic regime (Malvido and Cuenya 1993). More than 25 years ago Nutini and Bell (1980:231) were the first Mesoamericanists to explore how this information can be used to study community integration. Unfortunately, Nutini and Bell restricted use of their highly innovative approach to a "preliminary interpretation" (1980:231) of the archival data. European social historians have, in the meantime, convincingly demonstrated that large quantities of individual-level data can be analyzed to study social organization from the perspective of the common people (Brudner and White 1997; Lipp and Krempel 2001; Padgett and Ansell 1993). Very few studies have systematically explored the extremely rich historical information these sources contain about the social organization of Latin American communities (Greenow 1981; Robinson 1981). Since these records include information about the people who marry or who become compadres through a baptism, for example, and where they were living, these data provide the means to reconstruct the complex historical network of linkages within and between the communities

surrounding Belén. Because of my reliance on church registers, the compadrazgo data analyzed here include only relationships established through baptism. In total, more than 5,800 compadrazgo entries document the period from 1680 to 1900. These data constitute the long-term historical basis for the analyses presented here. Unfortunately, after 1900 the parish registers do not include information on where the compadres resided. To analyze the more recent trends I use data collected ethnographically in 1975 and 2000/2001. The data collected by Nutini and his collaborators describe 2,859 compadrazgo relationships ($N = 142$). The data collected in 2000/2001 document 3,308 compadrazgo relationships ($N = 111$).

All archival records were transcribed from microfilms in the Archive of San Pablo Apetatitlán, Tlaxcala. These copies have been made in collaboration with the The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and are available in the state and national archives (and via the Internet at <http://www.inegi.gob.mx/>). Most of these records were not kept as lists but as short texts, ranging in length from half a page to two pages. Only in the twentieth century did priests begin to use forms. The texts contain any information the priest and the church considered significant, and for this reason they vary over the centuries. Before the data were entered I examined books from all time periods and noted the information they contained. I determined what entries they had in common and also included some information that was available only for shorter periods of time. These data were entered into a spreadsheet program by my assistant, Genearo Mendez Xolocotzi. He started with the contemporary records and worked backwards to familiarize himself with the information and the historical handwriting styles. Once he had finished transcribing a book I checked a random sample of records. This procedure showed the data entry to be extremely accurate and reliable.

For the analysis the locations in which the compadres and marriage partners lived had to be coded. However, the spelling of some places changed over the centuries. To identify homonyms and synonyms I started my analysis with a list of all contemporary places in Tlaxcala. This list of 109 localities was taken from the 2000 census. I developed a computer program to compare these names with the more than 20,000 entries in the records using an approximate string-matching approach developed in genetics. This program enabled me to identify more than 90% of all place names in the parish records. These places were geographically referenced and included in a Geographical Information System (GIS).⁷

ETHNOGRAPHIC SETTING AND THE HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

Santa María Belén Atzitzimitlán lies in the foothills of La Malinche, an impressive, 4,461-m-high volcano that dominates the landscape in southwest Tlaxcala (Figure 1). Tlaxcala is part of the Central Mexican Highland and, in terms of area, the smallest state in the Mexican Union. According to the latest national census, Belén has a population of about 2,300 (INEGI 2000). Its inhabitants speak Spanish as their first language. Belén has a comparatively good public infrastructure, including a primary school, a kindergarten, a post office, a library, and a number of small shops that sell food and alcohol. Most goods and services that cannot be purchased in Belén are available in Santa María Chiautempan and

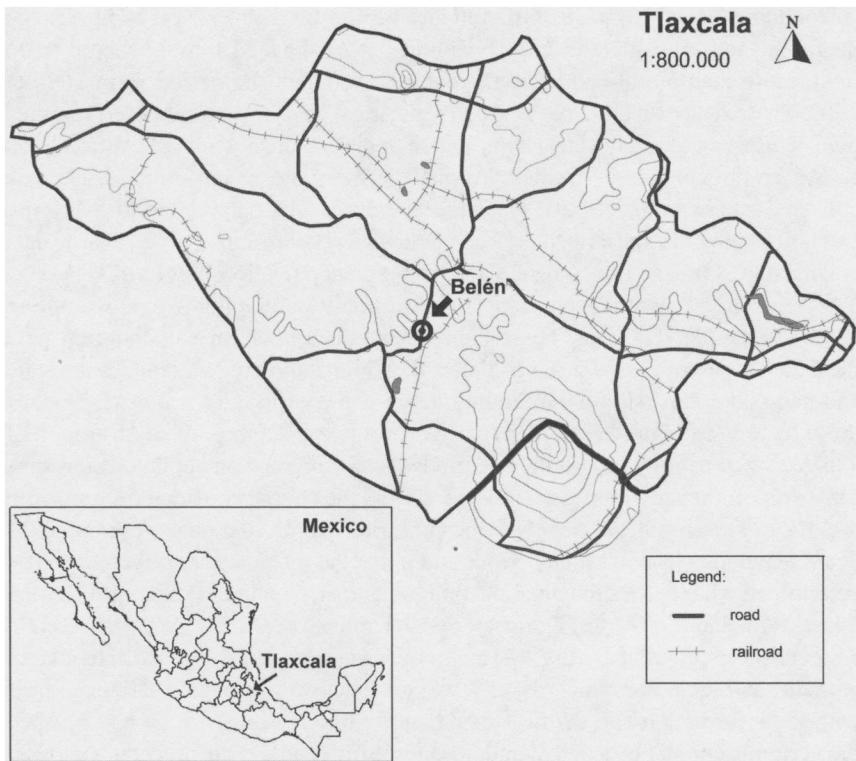


Figure 1. Location of Belén in central Tlaxcala.

Apizaco, commercial towns less than 10 km from Belén. Tlaxcala has a dense road network. Transport is provided relatively cheaply and easily by private taxis. Belén has a weekly market wherein merchants sell products such as meat, fish, fresh vegetables, and hardware, which are usually not produced in Belén.

Two-thirds of the people interviewed in Belén own land, and a large proportion of them continue to cultivate it. In 1976, agriculture and employment in factories were the most important modes of subsistence (24.4%). This picture has changed noticeably over the past quarter of a century. The number of people who earn their living primarily from farming has dropped significantly. In contrast, the textile industry seems to play a relatively consistent role. Its share in the labor market has dropped only slightly, from 20.0% to 18.9%. At the same time, the role of entrepreneurs and of employees in the service industries has gained importance. In the mid-1970s only 9.6% were employees or self-employed; this figure has risen dramatically to 36.9%. This tendency goes hand in hand with a steady rise in the level of education. In Belén, and many parts of rural Tlaxcala, this transformation is the result of a growing local entrepreneurship in the textile industry (Rothstein 1996).

The success of these business activities has encouraged more and more households to organize their work independently. Brassiere manufacturing know-

how spread rapidly through the community. Today, some of these entrepreneurs are so successful that they employ more than 30 workers who sew in two or three shifts and use the most modern technology. The products are sold at wholesale markets in Mexico City, Puebla, Chiapas, and Guatemala. Thus, Belén is now firmly attached to the global economy. Because of these transformations, the community has become extremely stratified. While some families have ten or more people living in a single-bedroom house, others reside in ten-bedroom villas with swimming pools and basketball courts. This brief description of the community shows that it is difficult to position Belén on the popular Indian–Mestizo continuum. While its economy and language would make a clear case for Belén being considered a mestizo community, the flourishing cargo system identifies it as an Indian community (see below). Self-identifications support this hybridity of identities. Some people from the village refer to themselves as “Mexicans,” others as “Beléños,” and still others as “Indians.”

Very few sources can shed light on Belén’s history before the beginning of the twentieth century. We have to broaden the scope of the analysis to the regional level in order to understand its long-term development. The colonial history of Tlaxcala differs in many respects from the histories of the other provinces in New Spain. When Hernán Cortés arrived in Mexico, the Tlaxcalans formed a small, autonomous empire that was surrounded by the Aztec rulers. This geopolitical separation was a tremendous burden on the economic development of the region (Gibson 1952; Lockhart 1992). Once the Tlaxcalans realized that they could not withstand Cortés and his army, they decided to collaborate and join him in his effort to conquer Tenochtitlán. In exchange for their military support, they were put under the direct rule of the Spanish crown, which granted Tlaxcala a number of privileges in the first colonial period. These privileges included local political autonomy and the guarantee that they could retain title to their land (Gibson 1952:85–86). However, in the absence of strong local support, many Tlaxcalans were not able to defend their land titles, and by the end of the sixteenth century a large proportion of the land in Tlaxcala had been bought by Spaniards (Martínez Baracs and Assadourian 1991:33–54; Trautmann 1981:127). Very little is known about the development of Tlaxcalan communities in the colonial epoch. What we do know is that two processes significantly influenced the development of the whole area: the textile industry and a dense road network.

Two of the most important colonial trade routes were the Camino Real de Tlaxcala and the Antiguo Camino Comercial (Salazar Monroy 1942). The Camino Real de Tlaxcala went from east to west and connected Tlaxcala with the large port town of Veracruz. The Antiguo Camino Comercial connected the subtropical Sierra Norte de Puebla with Tlaxcala and the City of Puebla and provided their inhabitants with fresh produce. One of the two major market towns along this road was San Pablo Apetatitlán, a small town only few kilometres from Belén.

The second lasting heritage from the colonial period is Tlaxcala’s textile industry. With the import of sheep and the processing of wool this craft became an important component of the local Tlaxcalan economy (Urquiola Permisan 1986). Around 1705 a series of small-scale enterprises employed 166 workers in the larger Tlaxcalan-Pueblan area (Heath Constable 1982:53–66; Urquiola Permisan

1986). The proclamation of the Estados Unidos de Mexico did not drastically alter the lives of the people in Tlaxcala. The role Tlaxcala played during the revolution is poorly understood (Buve 1994), but the impact of independence on the lives of common people in the hinterlands does not appear to have been significant. The replacement of the crown with the state did not really influence the local creole authorities, and only in a few cases were their land titles affected. The fact that the area was able to attract substantial foreign investments in the years after the revolution supports the thesis that the epoch was characterized by stability and continuity.

From 1834 onward, the Industrial Revolution gradually changed the lives of the people in the Tlaxcalan hinterlands. At this date, the first textile factory opened in Puebla. The Constancia Mexicana was located only a few kilometers from the state of Tlaxcala and recruited a significant part of its workforce in the neighboring state (Robichaux 1996:157). Puebla's rank as an industrial center of the time cannot be overestimated. Approximately 38,000 of the 112,000 spindles that were in use in the Mexican textile industry in 1844 were to be found in Puebla (Alamán 1845:24–25). During the following decades a cheap labor force, favorable local political conditions, and a quickly developing transportation infrastructure encouraged many entrepreneurs to extend their production from the centers (like the city of Puebla) to the rural periphery.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the level of integration of Belén into the labor market system steadily increased. Parallel to the developments in the labor market, the value system of the community began to change. "The picture of Belén in 1920 is quite different from that of 1900. It was no longer a withdrawn or isolated community, but was actively acquiring permanent and visible ties with the outside world, and was changing from a closed to an open community" (Nutini and Bell 1980:238). This interpretation is in line with Wolf's definition and argument. In light of the indicators (mode of production, cargo system, marriages, language, etc.), the situation prior to 1920 can be described as one of a closed corporate community. Two census lists from the nineteenth century, however, challenge parts of Nutini's interpretation.⁸ The first census of Belén, from 1870, indicates that 25% of the male population was able to read and write Spanish. While it is not clear what "read" and "write" mean in this context, this information suggests that the population was already exposed to Spanish influence. The census from 1889 supports this argument. More than 95% of the population was said to speak Spanish and Nahuatl. The idea that Belén had been exposed to the outside world before 1900 gains additional weight if we consider the occupations listed in the census. While 130 of the 134 adult males were peasants, the census also names one merchant, one teacher, and two water carriers. The teacher, Silverio Ilhuicatzin, was born in 1870 and was a son of Manuel, one of the few literate individuals listed in the 1870 census. The family name indicates that they were probably natives of Belén. The fact that Belén was largely bilingual at the end of the nineteenth century, and that a man was able to gain sufficient education to work as a teacher, indicates that boundaries of communities in the Central Highlands may have been less rigorously closed than the model of the closed corporate community implies, despite marriage endogamy and a vital cargo system.

BLURRED EDGES, OPEN BOUNDARIES

Relatively little is known about long-term developments of the cargo system in Belén and in other Tlaxcalan communities. Unfortunately, we have no empirical evidence on the development of the cargo system in Tlaxcala before the twentieth century. Yet, it seems plausible that the cargo system fostered integration and transformed economic into symbolic capital throughout the colonial period. Today, the people in Belén distinguish among three different kinds of cargos: church cargos, mayordomías in honor of the saints, and political cargos. The six church cargos are responsible for the administrative and religious duties of the church. Belén, like many other Mexican communities, does not have a resident priest. The six mayordomías organize and finance the fiestas held annually in honor of various saints. The third category is the political cargos, of which Belén has five. As in many parts of Mexico, some of these cargos are integrated into the larger political infrastructure, and membership, rights, and obligations are regulated by state legislation. The resources required to fulfill the duties of the various cargos differ significantly. The main requirements are economic capital and labor (time). The political and church cargos involve relatively little money but a great deal of time, whereas the expenses for the mayordomías can be quite substantial. This is especially true for the three principal mayordomos, who shoulder most of the financial burden. Even today almost all cargos are held by people who either were born in Belén or married into the community. Judging from the cargo system alone one would even today find strong support for Wolf's argument. The cargo system has rarely opened officeholding to outsiders and continues to be the most important religious and political institution in Belén.

Compadrazgo and marriages form networks of relationships that can open or close the community to its surroundings. Today, the people of Belén distinguish at least 17 different compadrazgo relationships. The number was higher in the 1970s, when Nutini reported 34 different types. Nowhere in Latin America has the compadrazgo system reached a comparable degree of complexity (Nutini and Bell 1980). The saliency of the ritual can be experienced every weekend in Belén, when music from the fiestas announces to the community and visitors alike that the formation of a new social tie is being celebrated. In Belén all compadrazgo relationships entail a wide range of obligations. However, the importance people attach to specific compadrazgo ties varies significantly. Relationships that are established at the inauguration of spiritual and profane objects are viewed as less important. In contrast, those established at baptisms and on Acostada del Niño Dios (the ritual of placing the image of Jesus in the church creche on December 24) create deep social ties of trust and respect. The obligations ascribed to compadrazgo relations range from social and moral support to far-reaching economic commitments.⁹ If one of the compadrazgo partners experiences an economic crisis, he or she will most likely visit his or her compadre/comadre and ask for assistance. Such pleas are linguistically highly ritualized, and both partners and their families will make numerous references to the relationship by addressing each other as compadres/comadres.

Compadrazgo relationships open access to the resources of one's partners.

Hence, having a compadrazgo from outside the community may be interpreted as an effective way to start or underpin economic transactions. Many communities in the Malinche area specialize in certain crafts or ritual services, such as the production of masks, weaving of blankets, and healing of spiritual possessions. Compadrazgo ties between families and communities are likely to have fostered such a regional niche specialization and guaranteed access to the products produced outside one's own community. Until recently, social and economic stratification was quite limited in Belén and the wider Tlaxcalan area. Between relatively equal partners compadrazgo relations guaranteed mutual access to the resources of one's ritual kin. With increasing levels of stratification the egalitarian ethos of the institution is vanishing and compadrazgo relations are transformed into patron-client relationships between unequal partners (Schnegg 2005, 2006a).

Here I focus my discussion on the historical dynamics of the compadrazgo relationship. The historical data described above include information on the place of residence of the compadres of a given baptism. Unfortunately, this category is only included in the parish registers until about 1900. For the twentieth century, data from the ethnographic surveys supplement this series. All data were coded into a dichotomous variable that indicates whether the relationship was established with someone from Belén or with someone from outside.

Figure 2 shows the proportion of relationships established outside the community as a result of compadrazgo relationships and marriages. In the case of compadrazgo relations the data points are the percentages of compadres who live outside Belén. For marriages, the data are the proportion of marriages in which one of the partners was born outside Belén. The graph covers the period from 1690 until 2000. Let us turn to compadrazgos first. Whereas the network was tightly closed until about 1730, it opens dramatically thereafter. After short periods of closure at the end of the eighteenth century, the social wall around the community finally collapses in the 1820s. The proportion of compadrazgo relationships with outsiders doubles, and reaches a peak of 84%. Thus, in the course of a century the pattern of integration has made a total U-turn. Whereas at the beginning of the eighteenth century only about 25% of the relations were with people from outside, at the beginning of the nineteenth century only 25% of the relations were within the community. These values drop again during the following decades and level off at about 80%. The two curves showing the results from the surveys in 1975 and 2000 correspond to this picture. Only in the most recent decades are there signs of a further shift. The proportion of ties within the community has risen again.

Table 1 gives the geographical distribution of compadrazgo relationships established through baptism in the twentieth century. This information is comparable to the data from the parish records. Previously I compared 17 different compadrazgo relationships (Schnegg 2005). That comparison reveals that baptism relationships are mostly with outsiders whereas communal compadrazgo relationships are very often with other people from Belén. Communities in the same parish or in neighboring parishes predominate. At the same time, a fifth of relationships established in the twentieth century involve individuals who live 50 km or more from Belén. These relationships are primarily with people in

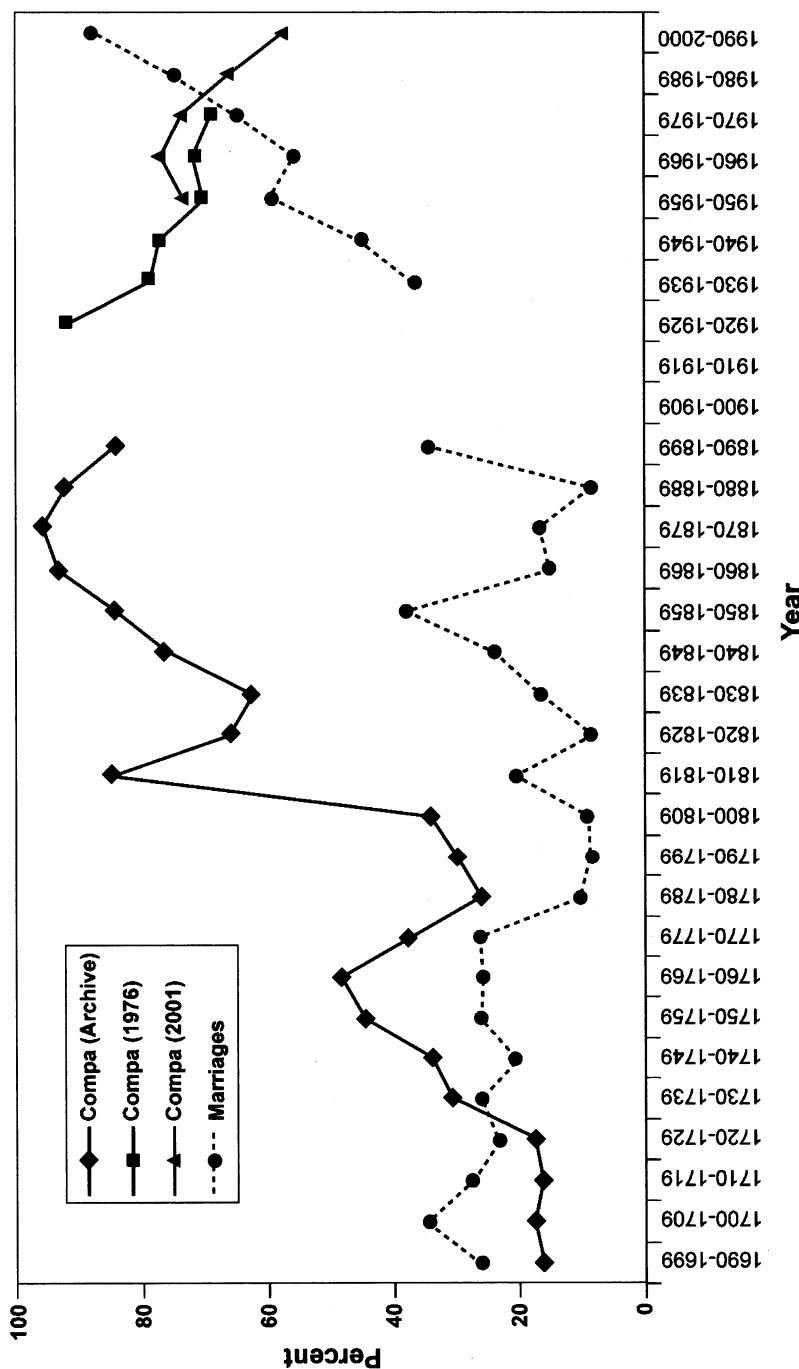


Figure 2. Percent of *compadrazgo* ("compa") and marriage links outside Belén, 1680–2001.

TABLE 1
Distances of twentieth-century *compadrazgos*
established through baptism

	Number	Percent	Cumulative Percent
in Belén	1,140	36.01	36.01
up to 5 km	745	23.53	59.54
up to 10 km	659	20.81	80.35
up to 50 km	202	6.38	86.73
more than 50 km	420	13.27	100.00
Total	3,166	100.00	

Mexico City, Puebla, or other big cities with whom the people of Belén maintain economic relationships as wage laborers or trade partners. It is evident that the integration of Belén into the labor market in the twentieth century marks the last stage of a process which led to this closed community taking on a more open stance. These findings support the overall importance of geographical space in shaping social ties. Similar results have been reported by Foster (1961:268) and Lomnitz (1977).

Given the available data, it is difficult to assess the precise cultural meaning and content of past compadrazgo relations. It is even harder to say whether the ideology of the compadrazgo system has changed along with the shift described above. However, we can refute some hypotheses. With the opening of the community, compadrazgo relations did not change their horizontal, egalitarian character to more vertical ties between different social strata. The new compadres are, as the parish records indicate, neither *hacienderos* nor descendants of the Spanish elite. The closest haciendas are 30+ km away along the boundaries of Tlaxcala. The people named in the parish records not only live in the neighboring villages but also share similar baptism names. The fact that no surnames are listed in the parish records further strengthens the assumption that they were considered Indios by the priest. Ethnographic observations support this argument. In the 1970s, egalitarianism was the dominant ideology behind compadrazgo choices. This only gradually changed during the last decades of the twentieth century with the rapidly increasing economic stratification in Belén (Schnegg 2006a).

Let us turn to marriages. Wolf and others have asserted that most Mesoamerican communities were largely endogamous for a long period of time. This is true for Belén as well. From 1690 until 1900 we find that only roughly 25% of marriages involved one partner born outside of Belén. The survey from 1975 and 2000/2001 reveals that this percentage has changed dramatically since the middle of the twentieth century. Today nearly all marriages in Belén are between couples in which either the bride or groom was born elsewhere. Marriages create links between families. Although endogamy rates were very high in Belén until the middle of the twentieth century, a small proportion of marriages has always been conducted with outsiders. Those marriages formed a network of alliances among the communities around Belén.

The roughly 20,000 compadrazgo and marriage events analyzed here provide a very detailed and empirically grounded picture of the social integration of Belén. It is clear that Belén had already opened up to the outside long before modernization or market-oriented production entered the local economy. The fact that Belenos had already established almost half of their most important social relationships with outsiders by the middle of the eighteenth century indicates how open the communication and the exchange between the communities must have been (Wolf 1955:459).

EPIDEMICS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Wolf has proposed mechanisms that account for such dynamic processes between the community and its surroundings. In an infrequently cited article from 1956 he argues that communities open or close in tandem with overall political and economic development. The shift in the compadrazgo pattern and the opening up of the community in the 1730s and 1820s might be explained with reference to the larger political situation. Certainly for the latter years such an explanation is plausible. In 1821 Mexico became independent, and the opening up of the community may well be attributed to a general liberalization of society. On the other hand, the effects of Mexican independence on the lives of common people in Tlaxcala are commonly assumed to have been insignificant (Nutini and Bell 1980:358). A second and perhaps more significant event falls in this time period: the opening of the first factories in Puebla that led to the rapid industrialization of the area.

Even though it is difficult to single out only one factor, another process may have had a more direct effect on the changes observed in the compadrazgo institution. These are demographic processes, or more precisely a mortality shock. Amith (2005) has recently demonstrated the lasting effects demography had on the developmental cycle of colonial Mexican communities. Our data indicate a similar picture for Belén.

Figure 3 shows the number of deaths and births per decade for the period covered by the parish registers. Whereas in most decades the number of reported deaths is below the number of births, in the years preceding the change in the compadrazgo system the ratio is significantly different. Between 1730 and 1739, 416 people died. That is more than four times the number in the preceding or following decades. In the year 1737 alone, 283 people were buried. The cause of this increase in mortality is quite well documented for Mexico: a disease known at the time as *matlazahuatl* (Cuenya 1999; Malvido 1993:68, 77; Molina del Villar 2001; Robichaux 2004). It is not clear whether *matlazahuatl* was the bubonic plague or typhus, but recent publications suggest it was most likely the plague. Death occurred within a week. The same correlation between mortality and a shift in the patterns of compadrazgo choice can be observed at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Again, significantly more people died during this period than in other decades. Here the cause is not as clear. Malvido (1993) suggests that *fiebre maligna* (malignant fever) and *viruela* (smallpox) raged in the region at this time.

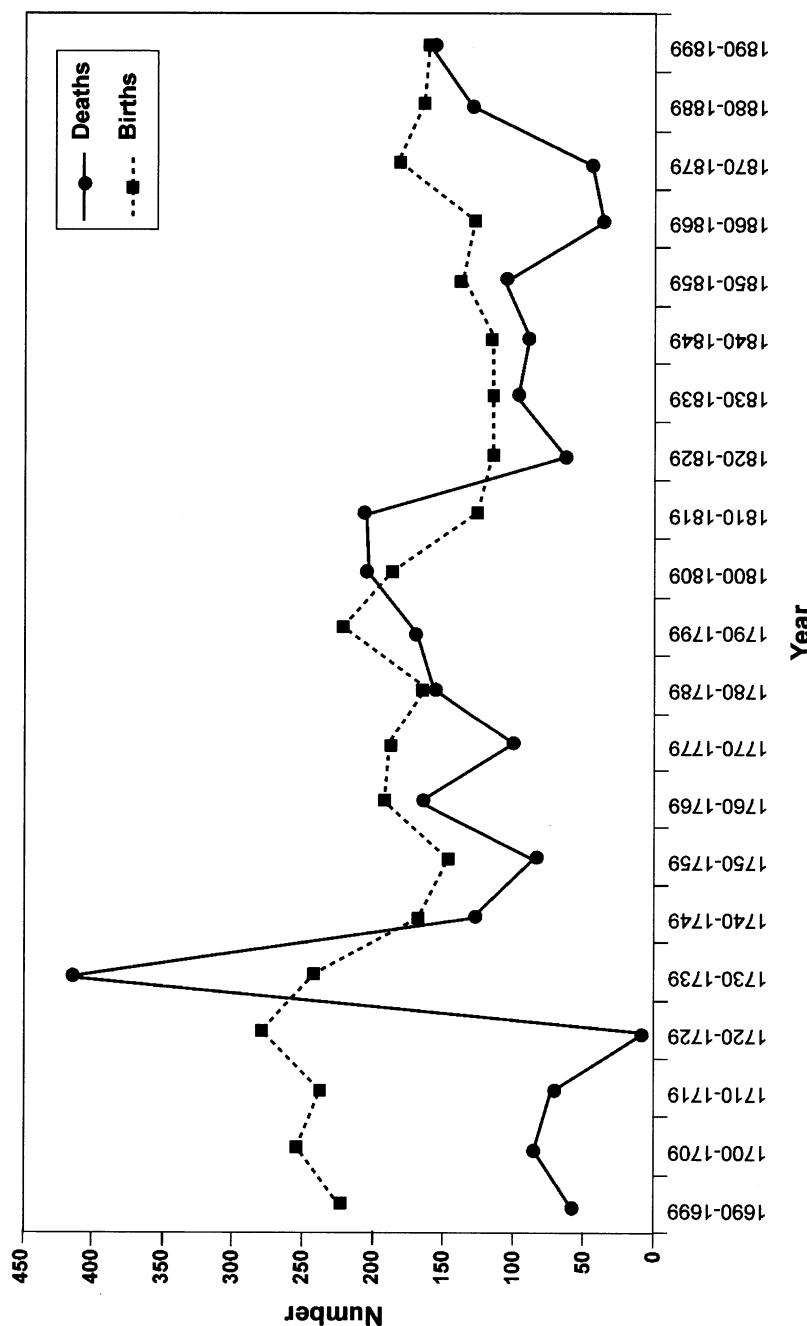


Figure 3. Total number of deaths and births, 1690-1900.

The two cases show a correlation between mortality patterns and changes in the social structure of rural communities. This link was previously unknown. But what is the explanation for the relationship? The available data do not permit us to answer this question conclusively, but they hint strongly at one scenario: The age distribution of those who died from *matlazahuatl* in 1737 is markedly skewed. The vast majority were adults: 64.3% of the recorded deaths were of individuals 15 years or older. This number even exceeds the levels reported by Morin for *matlazahuatl* (53%) and *fiebres misteriosas* (40%) (Morin 1973). Yet the rates are lower than those reported by Robichaux for the Tlaxcalan community, where 79% of those who died in 1737 ($N = 81$) were over 15 years of age (Robichaux 2004). These mortality rates reshaped the age structure of the community. In comparison to the period before the *matlazahuatl* epidemic, there were now more children and fewer adults. Unfortunately, we do not have census records for Belén from this time, and no further empirical data on the age distribution of the community are available. In fact, the only additional information is the marital status for Indios in the 1779 census.¹⁰ In that document, 36.4% are described as infants (*parbulos*). The remainder are classified as *casados/as* (married), *viudos/as* (widowed), or *solteros/as* (single). If all three of these groups are counted as adults, they represent 63.6% of the population. This would mean that the epidemic reversed the age distribution of the community. This shift must have had a lasting effect on the compadrazgo system. After the epidemic there were fewer *padrinos* (godfathers) available for a larger number of *ahijados* (godchildren). The shortage of adults who could serve as compadres urged Belenos to choose more and more compadres from outside the community.

Between 1810 and 1820 the community again opened up to outsiders when another severe epidemic struck the region. In 1813, 94 people died. Once again this is much more than the average reported for the years preceding and following. A look at the age distribution of these mortalities shows a similar picture to the *matlazahuatl* epidemic of 1737. More than half of those who died were classified as *adulta*. This rate (57.7%) is not as drastic as in 1737 but it is still significantly above the average. We can use the remaining years between 1700 and 1830 as a comparative baseline. In these years, excluding 1737 and 1813, only 40.3% of reported deaths were among the adult population. This comparison shows the magnitude of the demographic transformations caused by epidemics. In Belén these demographic crises led to changes in the compadrazgo institution and reorganization of social life on a larger scale.

Currently, few other historical sources are available to shed light on the processes that took place around 1737 and 1813. Further archival studies are needed to investigate whether such material exists. However, the lasting impact of a mortality shock can be illustrated through oral histories of an event that is not captured in the archives: the influenza epidemic of 1918/1919. This epidemic is inscribed into the collective memories and the social practices of the people of Belén. According to oral accounts, people started to die in Belén and the surrounding villages in huge numbers around the end of 1918. As is typical in times of crisis, the community turned to its village patron, the holy child Jesus (*Niño Dios*), but all their prayers and devotions could not stop the disease. The

people of Belén then asked for help from their neighbors in San Pablo Apetatitlán. The image of San Pablo was brought to Belén, and soon after the number of deaths started to decline. Ever since that time the image of San Pablo has been brought to Belén once a year with a glorious procession. This relatively recent incident shows the lasting impact of mortality shocks on both ideology and social organization. It is not difficult to imagine that comparable epidemic shocks had a catalytic effect in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well.

CONCLUSION

My analysis of parish registers has opened new avenues for the ethnohistorical study of social relationships and rapid social change. These data promise to be a vital source for the analysis of the development of the community in Latin America. The information is not aggregated, and it documents hundreds and potentially thousands of individual decisions made by common people. The data presented here only describe a single community. It is not clear whether the results hold true for other areas of Mesoamerica. Some characteristics distinguish Tlaxcala significantly from other regions in Mesoamerica. Tlaxcala has a relatively high population density and a good transport infrastructure which encourages contacts with neighboring communities. In addition, the heartland of Tlaxcala was surrounded in precolonial times by the Aztec empire and later, under Spanish rule, by *hacienderos* who owned most of the land in the periphery of the colonial state. This relative isolation may have fostered internal integration processes and linkages between the communities.

In some ways even today Belén is still a closed corporate community in Wolf's sense. The land is largely owned and cultivated by community members who were born in Belén. The cargo system is flourishing, and only in relatively few cases have people from the outside entered the local hierarchy (Schnegg 2005). At the same time the people in Belén speak Spanish and depend only to a small extent on subsistence agriculture. Based on the most common indicator, one can identify the shift from a closed to an open community as having occurred in the 1920s, as Nutini did, or a few decades earlier, as the census lists seem to indicate. Marriage endogamy also started to erode around the turn of the twentieth century.

However, Wolf's interpretation of the community neglects an important dimension: social relationships beyond marriage. I have demonstrated how social network analysis can be used to incorporate other social forms into the inquiry. For many Mesoamerican communities, compadrazgo relationships constitute a salient part of community life. No prior empirical study has systematically traced these relationships back into the past. When these relations are included in the analysis we find that the people of Belén had for almost two centuries chosen their most important social and ritual partners from outside the community, beginning in 1737. In social terms the edges of the community were blurred long before industrialization and globalization transformed the community and established new social relationships. A novel methodological approach enabled for the first time the interconnectivity of social lives to be traced through history. It reveals very clearly that communities were not as closed as Wolf and others have proposed.

Even if only a small fraction of communities had equally far reaching network ties, they could have served as hubs that connected large social geographies. Thus the opening of communities like Belén as early as the eighteenth century has far-reaching consequences for our understanding of the colonial past. Critical levels of interconnectivity existed long before modernization arrived on the scene, and they formed the basis for many social processes, including independence itself.

If communities opened as early as the middle of the eighteenth century, explanations other than industrialization are needed to account for the transformation. This article identified epidemics as the primary mover behind social changes. These epidemics were not limited to Belén or Tlaxcala. They caused a comparable magnitude of deaths all over Mexico. Further research must elaborate whether the same events stimulated similar processes of larger-scale regional integration in other parts of Mesoamerica as well. The available sources from Europe indicate that this may very well be likely. Similar epidemics seem to stimulate similar responses across a wide range of scales in time and space (Slack 1992). Historians attribute to the European Black Death of 1348/1349 comparable effects on social organization. According to Duby (1972), family relations in rural Europe significantly reorganized in the aftermath of the epidemic. Depopulation reduced pressure on the land, and some villages were completely abandoned. The estates of those who remained generally increased in size. In these more sparsely populated areas, social cohesion started to organize on a larger scale. Duby concludes:

[W]hile the demographic catastrophes and the concomitant migrations were leading to the disintegration of the family framework, it seems that the bonds of kinship grew tighter in the face of need. The large family units subject to the strict control of the eldest male again came into being, and the *affrèremen*s, fraternal joint-ownership associations increased in number, frequently grouping together men from different families. These compact groups were the only effective defense against the difficulties resulting from depopulation (Duby 1972:184).

We are only beginning to understand how epidemics shape social relationships. The contemporary world offers a tragic example in which these processes can be observed: the AIDS pandemic. The available ethnographic descriptions indicate that at least in the most heavily impacted sub-Saharan Africa the social responses to HIV/AIDS are homogeneous rather than diverse. In many countries new household compositions, including child-headed households, emerge. Ways of belonging extend beyond the domains of kinship and friendship and are built around new institutions and organizations, including Pentecostal and other churches as well as groups of people living with HIV/AIDS (Madhavan 2004). Similar changes in the ritual sphere and inheritance patterns can be observed across a range of different countries (Malungo 2001; Oleke, Blystad, and Rekdal 2005). Only by combining contemporary and historical evidence can we understand the relationship between epidemics and rapid social change.

NOTES

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1. He was aware of this and justified his focus with the argument that the economic domain was best understood in Mesoamerican ethnography (Wolf 1955:454). In retrospect, one can also recognize a materialistic focus that figures prominently in most of Wolf's work.

2. Chance (1996) has shown that many questions relating to Mesoamerica's past can only be solved if ethnological and historical methods and data are combined. While this was clearly Wolf's intent, he did not contribute to it after 1960, and very few others have done so since (Cancian 1992:2–5, Chance 1996:389).

3. Barrios are very common in the research area. They will not be included in this analysis because they involve only the internal organization of the community. Results of an analysis of the barrio system are published in Schnegg 2005.

4. In some communities cargos can also be taken by women (Chinas 1973; Iwanska 1966). Even where cargo ownership is restricted to men, many of the ceremonial and organizational obligations are performed as a couple. Some political cargos last longer than one year.

5. His findings were later confirmed by a number of authors (Chick 1981; DeWalt 1975; Smith 1977).

6. The historical genesis of the European background has been described by Lynch (1986).

7. I thank Iris Schnegg for building this GIS and for producing Figure 1.

8. I thank David Robichaux, who discovered the two census reports in the Archives of the State of Tlaxcala, and who provided me with copies for my analysis.

9. My argument focuses on the dyads between the *compadres/comadres*. This does not mean that the relationship between *padrino/padrina* and *ahijado/ahijada* lacks cultural significance. However, the people in Belén put much more weight on the former relationship, which entails a significantly wider range of obligations and meanings.

10. I would like to extend my thanks to Robert McCaa (University of Minnesota) for sharing this information with me. The census is archived as Arzobispado de Mexico, Censo de 1779, AGI Varios, 38.

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