Pluralism and Persistence in the Colonial Sierra Sur of Oaxaca, Mexico

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Bringing together ethnohistoric accounts and archaeological data in Postclassic (A.D. 800–1521) and early colonial (A.D. 1521–1650) Nejapa, this chapter explores the interactions and intersections between multiple, diverse groups of people in the Sierra Sur region of Nejapa, Oaxaca, Mexico. In Nejapa, migration, conquest, and interregional trade relied upon and created a complex, multiethnic landscape before, during, and after Spanish colonial efforts. Between 1450 and 1650, three different colonial regimes, the Zapotec, Aztec, and Spanish, moved through, conquered, and settled Nejapa, claiming it within their newly acquired territories. As such, Nejapa’s multiethnic residents were already well accustomed to making strategic choices about how to engage with foreign militaries, migrants, and merchants by the time the Spanish arrived. The archaeological evidence shows that people made various choices when confronted with colonial regimes. Some residents relocated to high mountain peaks and constructed fortified settlements to protect themselves, while others chose to seek out new opportunities for trade and exchange and claim political power, as they had always done. Various individuals used the Spanish legal system to try to solidify their social and economic standing in the newly configured political landscape, while indigenous peoples simultaneously continued to visit long-standing sacred sites in the mountains to meet their needs for spiritual and physical sustenance within exploitative colonial systems.

PLURALISM AND PERSISTENCE

At the time of the Spanish conquest, Nejapa was a diverse, multiethnic region that included Mixe, Chontal, and Zapotec language speakers. People also likely understood or spoke Nahua, given their long history
in facilitating interregional trade between the highlands and the coast. The three colonizing regimes that entered the Sierra Sur were equally pluralistic. Among the Spanish colonizers were indigenous allies from across highland Mexico, enslaved Africans, European-born and criollo colonial administrators, and Dominican clergy. The Zapotecs and Aztecs also conscripted large, multiethnic militaries from among their allies, who provided soldiers in exchange for promises of land and loot.

Internal dynamics and external processes work together to shape the impact and success of colonial programs (Silliman 2005; Stein 2005). What local populations bring to the table based on their own long-term histories, alongside the experiences of heterogeneous colonizing populations, produces unpredictable “novelty, diversity, and creativity” in resultant colonial realities (Funari and Senatore 2015:22; Senatore 2015; see also chapter 3). For these reasons, Claire Lyons and John Papadopoulos (2002:7–8) argue that colonial relations are best characterized as hybrid and ambiguous. In colonial spaces, people from distinct regions and cultures must adjust to new social, economic, and political inequalities. Those in power often make concerted efforts to mark and categorize people as a way to clarify roles and relationships in colonial hierarchies (Voss 2005, 2008). While hierarchies might have been rigid on paper, people living in frontiers and rural areas likely had more flexibility and opportunities to penetrate colonial power structures.

Archaeologists should be able to assess the impact, rigidity, and complexity of colonial experiences through the study of material remains. Since material culture often mitigates social differences in colonial systems, patterns in material culture serve as evidence of the variable strategies that people employ (González-Ruibal 2015:viii; Gosden 2004; Lyons and Papadopoulos 2002:44). For example, continuities in material culture might be evidence of resilience, resistance, and/or maintenance, whereas changes might signal conscious efforts to engage and manipulate colonial systems. Variability in material culture, however, need not always accompany transformations in identity, and continuities do not always mean that people resisted or remained unchanged.

In a place like Nejapa, where residents were always culturally plural, we should expect hybrid, ambiguous, and variable signatures in material culture before, during, and after Zapotec, Aztec, and Spanish conquests and colonialisms. Living along a heavily traveled trade route meant that
Nejapa residents were accustomed to interactions with outsiders. Openness and flexibility gave Nejapa residents choices in how they could position themselves and claim rights and privileges under colonial rule. In the sections that follow, I explore colonial relations in Nejapa between 1450 and 1650 to show how the social, political, and economic circumstances of Nejapa residents changed and how Nejapa residents made sense of their transforming world. In places like Nejapa, cultural pluralism had long been the tradition; in short, what was persistent through conquests and colonialisms was pluralism.

**CONQUESTS AND COLONIALISMS IN NEJAPA**

The region of Nejapa, a wide, lush valley nestled in the mountainous Sierra Sur of Oaxaca, lies at the midway point on a 2,500-year-old trade route between the highland Central Valleys of Oaxaca and the coastal Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Map 4.1). Migrants and merchants had long used Nejapa as an economic crossroads and point of resupply, and Nejapa’s diverse peoples, which included Mixe, Chontal, and Zapotec speakers, helped to facilitate this trade (King 2012).

Based on ethnohistoric accounts, sometime around 1450, a faction of the Zapotec ruling party headquartered in Zaachila in the Valley of Oaxaca led an army to the southern Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Burgoa 1989 [1674]; Oudijk 2008; Oudijk and Restall 2007; Wallrath 1967; Zeitlin 2005). Once in the isthmus, they conquered and displaced the multiethnic indigenous peoples who had been living there for centuries. The Dominican priest and historian Francisco de Burgoa wrote in 1674 that they did so by “fuego y sangre” (fire and blood) (1989 [1674]:339). The conquest may have been inspired by growing internal tensions over succession and souring relations with neighboring Mixtec polities in the Central Valleys of Oaxaca (Oudijk 2000, 2008; Sousa and Terraciano 2003; Wallrath 1967:1313; Zeitlin 2005). However, the Zapotec also likely chose the isthmus because it was an obligatory stop in interregional exchange between Central Mexico and the Pacific coast of Soconusco (Oudijk 2008; Zeitlin 2005). Gaining control in the isthmus meant controlling the trade of highly prized coastal luxury goods such as salt, chocolate, feathers, and jaguar skins (Gasco and Voorhies 1989; Oudijk 2008). They also likely anticipated the advance of the Aztec regime, which was set on controlling
Map 4.1  Map of Oaxaca, showing the location of regions, places, and archaeological sites mentioned in the text, including Nejapa. Map prepared by Alex Elvis Badillo and Stacie M. King.
the highland–coastal trade route. Further, the Zapotec might have taken advantage of a political vacuum in the southern isthmus (Montiel Ángeles et al. 2014); the opportunity was thus right for the Zapotec to make a strategic move.

Once conquered, the Zapotec population in the southern isthmus grew exponentially, with Zapotec settler colonists pushing out and subjugating local indigenous peoples from their headquarters in Tehuantepec, including Huave, Mixe, and Chontal speakers. Zapotec control of the southern isthmus was strong, and from their fortress at Guiengola, the Zapotechs fended off multiple Aztec conquest attempts in the late 1400s during the reign of Ahuitzotl (Burgoa 1989 [1674]:342–345; Durán 1994 [1581]:352–353, 374–379). Around 1520, after a shaky peace accord with the Aztecs, the isthmus Zapotec leaders quickly changed allegiance and established close ties with the Spanish (Chance 1981:16), helping them with their conquest designs in Guatemala and El Salvador (detailed in chapter 5). For several decades, until at least the 1550s, the Zapotec were able to maintain sovereignty in their relatively young political empire in Tehuantepec (Zeitlin 2005).

MULTIPLE MOUNTAIN FORTRESSES

According to Burgoa, the Zapotechs, in their conquest of the isthmus, built multiple fortresses across a wide area of land from Quiavicuzas in the north to Quiechapa in the south (see Map 4.1) and left behind Zapotec troops in each of them (1989 [1670]:242, 1989 [1674]:235–236). These strongholds, he contends, served multiple purposes. They (1) secured the trade route to the isthmus, (2) divided the Mixes (who lived north of the route) from the Chontales (who lived south of the route) so that they could not unite in opposition, (3) left behind troops in anticipation of an Aztec entrada, and (4) provided a place for Zapotec troops to convalesce and resupply.

Our Nejapa/Tavela Archaeological Project (PANT) survey team has documented several large archaeological sites and numerous smaller fortified sites throughout the mountains, on the highest peaks and associated hilltop extensions, that could be associated with such an incursion (Map 4.2). The high-elevation sites take advantage of natural cliff faces and have excellent views, providing strategic points from which to monitor movement through the region. Constructed features include
Map 4.2 Topographic map of the Nejapa/Tavela study region, showing the location of sites discussed in the text. Archaeological sites are marked with solid triangles. The circled, labeled sites are sites where we conducted excavations. Map prepared by Alex Elvis Badillo and Stacie M. King.
multicoursed stone defensive walls with hidden entrances, stones added to craggy bedrock outcrops that further restrict access, and multiple large stone walls running perpendicular to more exposed approaches. Ceramic artifacts from excavations and surface collections indicate that a majority of the construction associated with these mountaintop sites date to 1100 and thereafter.

While it is tempting to associate these sites with the above-mentioned 1450 Zapotec conquest, the archaeological evidence is equivocal (King et al. 2014; King et al. 2019). In general, the sites were built before 1450 according to long-standing local Nejapa construction methods, and the artifacts include ceramics made with local pastes and forms that are common across the entire Nejapa region. Locals, not Zapotec conquerors, likely built and occupied most of the sites (King et al. 2014). The shift to hilltop sites may have been in part a local response to increased insecurity and threat from the outside. It is also possible that Zapotecs hired (or conscripted) local residents to provide labor and goods to build garrisons/fortresses. If these sites were Zapotec fortresses, then the material culture and construction styles should look novel, indicating a clear break from earlier traditions. Our work shows that this is not the case (King et al. 2014).

Los Picachos, for example, is a mountain fortress built by local Nejapa residents. The site extends along a 2 km long stretch of ridgeline, containing over 75 residential terraces, and a ceremonial complex with a temple at the highest point (2,150 m above sea level) (King et al. 2012). The ceramic assemblage consists of fine gray ware serving vessels and coarse ware jars, which fit well in the Postclassic Nejapa sequence. While Los Picachos is farther away from the likely camino real connecting the highland Valley of Oaxaca and the isthmus, residents of Los Picachos enjoyed relatively easy access to widely circulating ceramic styles, including gray ware tripod bowls with serpent-head supports and Pachuca obsidian, objects heavily used by highland Postclassic Zapotecs. Ceramic pastes and construction styles, however, are local and continuous, and obsidian is relatively rare (Workinger and King 2017). The site also falls within the territory that early Spanish chroniclers described as being inhabited by Mixes in the sixteenth century (King 2011; King and Konwest 2019). Further, the spatial layout of the site, with contiguous terraces climbing up and over the top of the mountain along the ridgeline, is more similar to that of other mountain-dwelling people throughout the Sierra Sur,
including the Chontal-occupied zone of Zapotitlán (King and Zbor- over 2015). Although it might be tempting to identify Los Picachos as a Zapotec fortress, the preponderance of evidence indicates that it was not.

Cerro de la Muralla is a better candidate for being a Zapotec fortress (King et al. 2014). Here, the largest architectural complex, which locals call the palacio, consists of eight contiguous patios, with 33 rooms built around them. The whole construction sits on top of a large platform connected to a temple-patio-altar complex. The palace complex is built similarly to the Palace of Six Patios at the Zapotec site of Yagul, in the Central Valleys of Oaxaca (Bernal and Gamio 1974), and an exposed tomb jamb just outside the palace at Muralla suggests some potential affinity with highland Zapotec elite funerary practices. At Muralla, nearly all of the obsidian is from Pachuca (Workinger and King 2017), a source that was heavily quarried and distributed throughout Oaxaca via networks to which highland Zapotecs were closely linked (Levine et al. 2011; Parry 1990; Workinger and King 2017; Zeitlin 1982).

At Muralla, we found evidence of widespread use of plain tripod gray ware bowls with serpent-head supports, often associated with Late Postclassic (A.D. 1200–1521) Zapotec sites in highland Oaxaca. A massive 1 km long, 3 m high defensive wall (the muralla for which the site is named) encircles the elite civic-ceremonial core and some residential architecture downslope (King et al. 2012). However, different sections of the wall appear to have been built in different styles, suggesting that teams of people with different knowledge and practices contributed to its construction. Archaeological excavations inside the wall confirm a Late Postclassic occupation (A.D. 1261–1641, calibrated 2-sigma range AMS), but dated deposits from a residential complex outside the walls show that local Nejapa residents occupied the area before and during the Late Postclassic (King et al. 2019). Thus, it is unclear based on archaeological evidence alone that Zapotec conquerors and soldiers built and occupied the site in whole or in part, and there is incredible variation between these high-elevation fortified sites.

**VALLEY FLOOR DIVERSITY**

Colonial sources state that the native peoples who lived on the valley floor within what was to become the Spanish villa of Santiago Nexapa
(now Nejapa de Madero) in 1560 were Zapotec speakers who themselves had only recently forced out the Mixes, who had been living on the valley floor for centuries (Burgoa 1989 [1674]:235). Therefore, we might look to the valley floor instead to find evidence of the Zapotec conquest. David Peterson and Thomas MacDougall (1974:59) hypothesize that mountain fortresses were likely only necessary during the initial years of Zapotec conquest. As soon as locals were “pacified” and the route was secure, migrant conquerors would have likely abandoned the fortresses and settled in permanent homes nearer to valley floor agricultural lands, such as those in the Nejapa valley. Thus, Peterson and MacDougall argue that we should be able to see a successive and sequential abandonment of fortresses along the route and a possible movement to lower-elevation valleys, which would indicate the pace and timing of the conquest itself.

If Peterson and MacDougall’s hypothesis is correct, and the early Spanish chroniclers are correct in their ethnic identifiers, then the Zapotecs had already secured the route to the isthmus and relocated to the valley floor prior to the arrival of the Spanish.

However, even in the valley, archaeological signatures are enigmatic. The site of Colonia San Martín lies atop a small rise at the confluence of two rivers on the valley floor and appears to have been occupied by elites with extensive knowledge of Zapotec elite material culture (King 2010; King et al. 2019). Here, at least one large multiroomed adobe building was constructed and frequently renovated with layers of red-painted stuccoed floors and walls. In some areas, only the lower half of the walls was painted red, while the interior rooms were left their natural white. Residents seemed to have been concerned about signaling to outsiders their wealth and knowledge of foreign practices by investing in red-painted stucco on public corridors and exterior public facades of the building. Colonia San Martín is also the only site that we have yet located with a large number of polychrome ceramics mimicking Postclassic International Style ceramics documented throughout Late Postclassic Oaxaca and Puebla (especially Cholula) (Forde 2016; Lind 1987, 1994; Nicholson 1982; Nicholson and Quiñones Keber 1994) (Figure 4.1). Ceramic sourcing and stylistic comparisons show that these Postclassic Nejapa polychromes are local interpretations of this widely shared elite style. Likewise, the obsidian assemblage at Colonia San Martín includes material from a wider variety of sources than are present at Los Picachos.
Figure 4.1 A locally made polychrome Postclassic International Style ceramic vessel fragment from Colonia San Martín. The vessel is a fine gray ware conical bowl decorated with red, orange, and white paint on the interior and exterior. Figure prepared by Elizabeth Konwest, Juan Jarquín, and Stacie M. King.
and Muralla (Workinger and King 2017), which is perhaps an indication of access to a wider network of trade goods.

The architecture and artifact assemblage at Colonia San Martín, however, contrasts sharply with assemblages from other Late Postclassic sites in Nejapa. One of these is Greater La Amontonada, a similarly situated valley floor community 2 km farther downstream whose large population was divided into various neighborhoods, each with its own smaller neighborhood ceremonial center. Greater La Amontonada’s ceramic assemblage is more closely linked with wider Nejapa styles, demonstrating continuity through time with the Early Postclassic (A.D. 800–1200) in particular (Konwest 2017). One neighborhood at Greater La Amontonada, El Órgano, was involved in its own specialized craft industry of stone bead manufacture, which allowed residents to acquire rare exotic luxury goods, including polychrome ceramics, sculptures, and copper (King and Konwest 2019). Thus, the archaeological evidence across the valley floor is as varied as the evidence between fortified mountaintop sites. Despite proximity and contemporaneity, communities living on the valley floor had multiple ways of living and interacting with each other, and they experienced increased opportunities for interregional exchange with outsiders (King and Konwest 2019; Konwest 2017; Workinger and King 2017). Further, each community—and perhaps even each neighborhood—managed access to trade goods and elite wares independently. The picture that emerges from both the mountain and valley floor sites is one of pluralism, diversity, and decentralization rather than uniformity.

RITUAL PRACTICES IN A TRANSFORMING WORLD

The Dominicans were perhaps the most powerful agents of the Spanish conquest in Nejapa. After a few Spanish conquistadors entered Nejapa on early campaigns, in 1533 the Spanish tried to establish a Spanish villa on the valley floor, which quickly failed (Gerhard 1993:197). Instead, the Dominican order was the first to make a permanent entrance, setting up a local Nejapa doctrina (base) in 1553, which preceded the first successful permanent villa by seven years (Gerhard 1993:197). From Nejapa, the largely Portuguese- and Spanish-born Dominican clergy served rural communities across the Nejapa region, including Chontal, Mixe, and Zapotec speakers (Burgoa 1989 [1674]; Gerhard 1993; Paso y Troncoso...
Many of the earliest colonial documents from Nejapa pertain to the workings of the Dominican doctrina. They include complaints by clergy about having to travel to mountain villages, rulings to determine who was required to provide goods and labor to the church, and indigenous complaints about abuses and nonpayment for such labor. The Dominicans supported indigenous claims of mistreatment by secular colonial authorities, clearly demonstrating the complexity, vagaries, and tensions within the colonial system. Two Nejapa archaeological sites figure prominently in this era of conquest and colonialism: Majaltepec and Cerro del Convento.

Although now abandoned, Majaltepec was one of two cabeceras (head towns) within the territory of Nejapa mentioned in the Suma de visitas prepared between the 1530s and 1550s (Paso y Troncoso 1905b:165) and is recorded in the Relaciones geográficas of 1579 as having 182 tribute-paying citizens (Paso y Troncoso 1905a:29–44). Sixteenth-century documents refer to Majaltepec as a Mixe town that was too far away for the Spanish and Dominicans to easily control. In the early decades of Spanish colonial control, elites and traders from Majaltepec requested rights and privileges in Spanish courts, including rights to land, to keep animals, to carry arms, to receive fair wages, and to travel and trade independently with towns as far away as the Central Valleys of Oaxaca (King 2011). In the first decade of the seventeenth century, the Crown ordered a series of congregaciones around Majaltepec, which appear to have been largely unsuccessful in depopulating the townsite. Based on archival evidence, Majaltepec was inhabited until at least 1768, when residents were party to a series of formal complaints about repartimiento abuses by corrupt alcaldes mayores (Baskes 2000). After this, Majaltepec is no longer mentioned in formal records.

Yet the archaeological evidence from Majaltepec indicates that interactions between indigenous inhabitants and church officials were dynamic and intimate. Not surprisingly, excavations at the abandoned townsite of Majaltepec show that the church was the most formal building at the site, with multiple rooms and thick stuccoed adobe walls with multicoursed stone bases and a formal staired entrance (King and Konwest 2019; King et al. 2012). Additionally, the church had a plaza enclosed by stone walls in front of the building, which served as an unroofed public meeting space (King et al. 2019). Although the Dominicans complained
about the arduous journey to Majaltepec, the accommodations appear to have been maintained well and were intricately designed, far surpassing any other structure at the site in both size and formality.

In an adobe-walled residence about 200 m from the church, we uncovered a series of burials beneath the building’s earthen floor. In an excavation unit of only 3 square meters, we uncovered the remains of eight individuals, among them women, subadults, and children buried in a manner that would not likely have been condoned by the church: beneath a house floor with offerings (King and Higelin Ponce de León 2017; King and Konwest 2019). Burial offerings included fragments of a metal blade and hundreds of glass trade beads, which residents presumably obtained through their interactions with the Dominican officials (King and Konwest 2019). Glass beads are common in Spanish colonial period sites in the Americas more broadly and were widely used and distributed by religious authorities (including Dominicans) in their proselytization efforts. Beads often show up in early colonial period cemeteries in Spanish colonies, including in indigenous graves. The Majaltepec beads are unique in Mexico and are most similar to the assemblage excavated at St. Catherines Island in the southeastern United States (Georgia), with examples that were likely produced in Spain and Italy (Blair et al. 2009). According to Elliot Blair and colleagues’ (2009) typology, some of the diagnostic bead types in the Majaltepec collection date to between 1560 and 1630, providing a narrower date than radiocarbon dating does for this time frame. Based on these data, Elizabeth Konwest and I (King and Konwest 2019) argue that indigenous peoples in Nejapa selectively adopted and used introduced materials but did so within their own cultural logics, subtly subverting the imposed colonial social order.

Majaltepec was still occupied into the late 1700s despite multiple attempts to relocate residents, which shows that indigenous residents were relatively successful in maintaining some amount of independence and autonomy. If Majaltepec indeed housed Mixe language speakers throughout its history, then it seems that at least some Mixe speakers achieved distance from the Spanish colonial system while at the same time being part of it and manipulating it. As such, indigenous residents were able to leverage and strategically perform different identities when required to do so—as dutiful Catholics, as subservient or rebellious Indians, as Mixes, and as indigenous traders and entrepreneurs across wider
Oaxaca. The native community at Majaltepec was thus able to benefit from ambiguities in identity, and residents mobilized particular identities in different contexts as needed.

The site of Cerro del Convento demonstrates yet another kind of local indigenous response to religious conquest and colonialism. Cerro del Convento sits on a mesa top with a 360-degree view of the surrounding Nejapa valley. Located in modern San Juan Lajarcia, the site is positioned closest to what we believe was the primary mountain pass along the camino real between the highlands and the isthmus as one exits Nejapa toward the isthmus. Cerro del Convento has been identified in later sources as one of the Zapotec fortresses mentioned by Burgoa in 1674 (Gay 1982; Martínez Gracida 1910; Ramírez 1892). However, the archaeological data show that the site was not only used or may never have been used in the way that Burgoa described. Prehispanic architecture on the mesa top includes a rather simple ballcourt by local standards, a few stone foundations associated with humble buildings (presumably residences), and a temple built with stone and earthen fill. We excavated a Classic period hearth that dates to between 430 and 643 (calibrated 2-sigma range AMS) directly below the center of the Postclassic period ballcourt playing field (King et al. 2019). The positioning of a Postclassic ballcourt immediately on top of the earlier hearth likely means that this location was recognized and important for locals and thus was deserving of commemoration (King et al. 2017). The ceramic assemblage shows similarities with local Nejapa wares, including highly eroded, plain utilitarian serving bowls made with fine and coarse pastes (King et al. 2019; King et al. 2014). Residents used obsidian tools imported from a variety of sources from both highland Mexico and highland Guatemala, the two major source regions for obsidian on either end of the highland–coastal trade route, but in very small quantities (Workinger and King 2017).

The large cliffs that form the edge of the mesa also contain numerous rockshelters and caves, which people used periodically as far back as the Late Formative (500 B.C.–A.D. 100). We have found evidence that people modified the caves and rockshelters on the cliff face into storage areas for agricultural products during the Late Postclassic and early colonial periods (King et al. 2012; King et al. 2019). They did so by carving out the soft seams and constructing small contiguous rooms divided by stone and mud walls (King et al. 2017). People regularly visited Cerro del
Convento as part of ritual pilgrimages, leaving behind small campfires and offerings in front of the rockshelters at the base of the cliff. We have located ceramic incense burner fragments, an unfired ceramic plate (with leaf impressions), and tied fiber bundles in various intricate forms, all of which were likely placed as offerings. Based on the evidence of plant remains (over 120 different species in only 1 liter of sediment) in storage rooms built within the caves and the offerings, Shanti Morell-Hart and I (King and Morell-Hart 2019) have argued that one of the rooms at Convento was used as a seed bank to provide security during times of crisis. All of the species are native to Mexico, which means that the storage rooms most likely date to the Late Postclassic, even though the rooms yielded multiple calibrated radiocarbon dates ranging between A.D. 1027 and 1635.

Cerro del Convento was the target of Dominican vicario (vicar) Juan Ruiz’s campaign to extirpate idolatry in the late 1500s (Barabas and Bartolomé 1984:15–16; Burgoa 1989 [1674]:242–247; Gay 1982:365–366). Ruiz had heard about the ongoing idolatry at Cerro del Convento and decided to intervene directly by hiking up the mountain with native acolytes to visit the site. Ruiz had himself lowered by rope into the cave in the upper seam, and he removed a greenstone idol, ceramics, and other offerings. That night, he lit a bonfire on top of the mountain and burned all of the remains. He also destroyed the contents of a tomb on the mesa top. According to Burgoa, the deceased was a venerated Zapotec warrior who was buried with a feathered headdress and various ceramic vessels and other goods (1989 [1674]:246). Unfortunately, we have found no evidence of this tomb at the site, and the ethnic identifier that Burgoa applies remains uncorroborated and problematic. Further, Ruiz’s interventions apparently did not stop visits to the site. We located the remains of offerings and fragments of modern incense burners and braziers that date to after 1591 and are evidence of later visits.

Rather than a Zapotec fortress, Cerro del Convento appears to have been an important ritual pilgrimage site that served as a ceremonial space for ballgames and feasting, a sacred place for ritual petitions and offerings, and, later, a zone of refuge for various indigenous residents. During the early colonial period, penitents and pilgrims may have received physical sustenance in the form of seeds and foodstuffs, as well as spiritual strength and rejuvenation from their ongoing ritual visits (King et al.
The generic, poor quality of the ceramics, the small number of stone tools, and the expedient nature of the remaining offerings suggest that all sorts of people visited and used the site and did so occasionally, regularly, and at times clandestinely throughout its history. Here, conquest and colonialism did little to change the meaning of the site—it was and still is an important sacred place for a variety of peoples from various places across Nejapa.

**ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES AND CHANGE**

The Spanish conquest in Nejapa took many forms and impacted the region differently over time. At the time of the first Spanish entrada, Nejapa was apparently considered to be part of the isthmus Zapotec cacicazgo (kingdom) under the leadership of Cosijoeza II / Don Juan Cortés (Chance 1989) and was among the lands that were granted to Cortés within the domain of his mayorazgo (entailed estate) in 1528 (Gay 1982:225). This suggests that Zapotecs ceded land to the Spanish when they allied with them in the 1520s. Cortés proceeded to distribute the land throughout his mayorazgo in encomiendas, including parcels in Nejapa (Gerhard 1993:195). These encomiendas supplied cochineal, vanilla, cacao, cotton, indigo, and corn.

The conquistadors who led the first Spanish entradas into Nejapa include Pedro de Alvarado in 1522–1523 (Matthew 2007:106; Wallrath 1967:16), Diego de Figueroa and Gaspar Pacheco in 1526–1527 (Chance 1989:17), and Francisco Maldonado in 1533 (Gerhard 1993:195). The Spanish vecinos of Villa Alta attempted to establish a villa in Nejapa in 1533, but it soon failed (Gerhard 1993:196). In the 1540s, Cortés’s landholdings were greatly reduced, and the encomienda of Nejapa fell into the hands of property owners who lived in Antequera (later Oaxaca City) (Taylor 1972). In the Suma de visitas (Paso y Troncoso 1905b:165), Nejapa had three señorios (polities) divided into five estancias with over 200 vecinos, who gave tribute in the form of corn, beans, and chili. One of these, Majaltepec (Maxaltepeque), had 182 tributaries who were required to give gold and corn and later provide service in the mines. Soon after, in 1560, the Spanish “villa de Nexapa” was established with 16 subject communities, most of them Mixe, according to early colonial period documents (Gerhard 1993:197).
During the latter half of the sixteenth century, the economic landscape of Nejapa transformed. With the arrival of Spanish vecinos in Nejapa in 1560, sheep and goat ranches were established. The Dominicans ran a large sheep and goat ranch, from which the mendicant friars produced milk, cheese, and wool for their own consumption (Chance 1989:156). Due to labor requirements and church relocation policies, many indigenous people reluctantly moved to the valley floor, where most succumbed to epidemic disease between 1560 and 1580 (Paso y Troncoso 1905a:35). Fray Bernardo de Santamaría, vicar of the Dominican doctrina, wrote in the 1579 Relación de Nexapa that by then local populations had declined to the point that there were now deserted plains and fields across Nejapa where sugarcane and wheat haciendas could be established (Paso y Troncoso 1905a:38). This information likely encouraged more immigration and foreign investment.

Zapotecos in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Sierra Sur, and Sierra Norte were adept in using the Spanish court system as a method of securing their place in this newly reconfigured political and economic landscape (Gay 1982:190). At times, Zapotecos were able to acquire lands that were in dispute or had never been theirs in the first place (Barros van Hövell tot Westerflier 2007:25, 29–30; Oudijk 2008; Yannakakis 2007). Using this tactic, Zapotecos were able to expand their landholdings across the Nejapa region and in general fared much better than Mixes and Chontales, who often lacked both literacy and access. Between 1570 and 1600, the Zapotecos’ raw population numbers grew slightly in private encomiendas, while Mixe and Chontal populations sharply declined (Gerhard 1993:198). At the same time, especially in contested places where population had thinned, Crown relocation policies (e.g., reducciones, congregaciones, and mercedes) aided and abetted the land grab (Owensby 2008:22). At the turn of the sixteenth century, Indian elites in Nejapa were requesting their own estancias in an effort to compete in the new economy, and Zapotec elites in the greater isthmus became significant players in the courts and in the colonial market economy (Zeitlin 1989:54, 2015).

The colonial economic landscape was highly varied and complex and was always changing. Some colonial residents—clergy, Spanish, Zapotecos, and native elites especially—enjoyed privileged positions and requested access to land and special rights, but no position was permanent or guaranteed success. Some native communities were left alone, while
others filed formal complaints to manage their own economic affairs. Over the course of the early colonial period, some native communities and colonizers benefited from this system and were able to do quite well, while others had to work harder and struggled to turn a profit and survive.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

By delving into the details and complexity of multiethnic Nejapa during these centuries of colonialism, I demonstrate that pluralism was always present in Nejapa communities. People living in Nejapa, whether immigrant agents of settler colonialism or natives of the region, used diversity and multiplicity in ethnic, political, and social identities to their own benefit as needed. This created a highly diverse archaeological landscape. Neighboring communities had very different material assemblages and architectural styles, indicating that each community had independent access to merchants, stylistic ideas, and interregional networks of trade. People learned quickly how to move within various changing colonial political landscapes. Nejapa residents had long been accustomed to changing economic and political situations. Thus, when faced with multiple conquests and colonialisms, they knew how and when to engage, navigate, and withdraw. There is so much variation across Nejapa that even places that one would imagine were homogeneous, such as Zapotec fortresses, Mixe villages, and valley floor towns, produce varied and complex documentary and archaeological signatures.

Colonialism(s) placed some people in positions to take advantage of others, as is the case of native elite, religious authorities, and Spanish colonial administrators. Zapotecs, who themselves were likely relatively new settler colonists, used the Spanish legal system and their proximity to and alliance with the Dominican church to their advantage. Different valley floor communities in Nejapa were able to take advantage of the changing economic and political landscape. Residents of Late Postclassic Colonia San Martín, for example, were able to carve out a unique way of life in Nejapa using distinct styles of ceramics and architecture that linked them more broadly with Postclassic settlements outside of Nejapa. At the same time, residents of the El Órgano barrio in Greater La Amontonada had their own trade contacts and independent access to imported goods, supported by their export industry of locally made stone
beads. Indigenous peoples from across Nejapa continued to visit Cerro del Convento, which was a destination for ritual pilgrimages, despite Spanish attempts to shut it down. While Zapotec soldiers may have occupied and expanded construction at Cerro de la Muralla, local Nejapa native peoples lived there before and during its occupation, perhaps providing labor for later renovations. The artifact assemblage present at Muralla indicates that occupants had access to both local and interregional economic networks.

Conquests and colonialisms also left some people vulnerable, in the position of having to hide themselves, their religious practices, and/or important foodstuffs, as is made clear by the fortified site of Los Picachos, the burial practices at Majaltepec, and the caves at Cerro del Convento, respectively. Others suffered abuses or were forced to provide labor in mines and the church, for which they were grossly undercompensated. The indigenous residents of Majaltepec had frequent interactions with the local Dominican church and the Spanish legal system in spite of their rural location in the high mountains, and residents benefited economically from these relationships. Yet at the same time, they were also able to take advantage of the distance and lack of everyday oversight to use new technologies and materials in novel ways that Catholic doctrine prohibited. People living in fortified settlements in the mountains, such as Los Picachos, selectively engaged with or retreated from economic and political networks as needed, but always acted from a position that ensured they were in control of the terms of engagement. Ultimately, it was epidemic disease that caused the most profound changes in Nejapa. By 1623, native tributaries were reduced to 60 percent of what they had been sixty years earlier. This reduction in population placed even larger tracts of land in Spanish hands and encouraged the increased in-migration of enslaved Africans and Nahua-speaking indigenous populations from Central Mexico (Escalona Lüttig 2015:40-41).

At no point in time between 1450 and 1650 did a single, unifying identity emerge out of the centuries of colonialisms in Nejapa. Nejapa was persistently pluralistic and complex. Residents had likely always spoken more than one language and moved in various circles simultaneously in order to facilitate their economic and political pursuits. Long-standing pluralism ensured that people in Nejapa, both indigenous residents and settler colonists, had various identities and networks on which to draw,
which they mobilized strategically and opportunistically before, during, and after multiple conquests and colonialisms.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work would not have been possible without the generous funding provided by the National Science Foundation (Grant #BCS-1015392), National Geographic (Waitt Institute Grant #WI55-11), and Indiana University’s New Frontiers in the Arts and Humanities grant program and the Office of the Vice Provost for Research. Likewise, I would like to thank the Consejo de Arqueología of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia and the Centro INAH Oaxaca for their permission and administrative assistance. The intrepid members of the Proyecto Arqueológico Nejapa / Tavela research team, Eli Konwest, Andrew Workinger, Alex Elvis Badillo, Marijke Stoll, Ricardo Higelin Ponce de León, and Shanti Morell-Hart, each played key roles. I thank John Douglass and Christine Beaule for inviting me to participate in the SAA electronic symposium that helped us to find our way to Amerind. There, John, Christine, and Amerind CEO Christine Szuter facilitated an engaging and productive conversation that streamlined the text of this chapter and helped to bring the volume together. Most importantly, I would like to thank the residents and authorities of Nejapa de Madero, Santa Ana Tavela, San Juan Lajarcia, San Carlos Yautepec, and San Bartolo Yautepec for their generous permission and continued support and collaboration.

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