

## ENGENDERED IDENTITIES IN SAN MARTÍN TILCAJETE: A CASE STUDY

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This paper seeks to address the way in which female and male identities and activities resulting from these identities are differently constructed in a migrant- expelling and woodcraft producing community. Based on the results of seven years of research on motherhood drawing on social representations theory with a gender sensitive gaze, it describes the community setting and explores some main gender differences it presents, discussing some of its implications.

Gender identities are gestated and transformed through specific social representations at the local community level, with a clear and often conflicting global influence. The historically Zapotec- indigenous municipality of San Martín Tilcajete is located in the heart of Oaxaca, to the south- east of Mexico. Traditionally devoted to agriculture, modernization and urbanization have come accompanied by increasing presence of tourism, migration flows and the development of woodcarving production. These activities represent economic alternatives in a very particular setting of important economic needs and cultural transformations, where the local and the global are constantly being rearticulated in a way that has specific implications for men and women.

Given that migration has been cyclical and pendular, and is historically male- led, this transforming community setting has an important impact in the conception and practice of motherhood, limiting women's choice to migrate in favour of reproduction yet implying important costs associated with migration. Woodcraft production involves the family as a whole; with a strong gender differentiation that segregates men as carvers and women as painters and retailers. However, decisions, revenues and recognition are still in the hands of men. Nevertheless, gradually and even if unrecognised, women have come to assume political and administrative power as *de facto* household heads, and this implies an important future potential for transforming their role within their families and in the community.

Keywords: Social Representations Theory; migration; gender identities; multidisciplinary research; critical social science.

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Palabras clave: Teoría de Representaciones Sociales; migración; identidades de género; investigación multidisciplinaria; ciencias sociales críticas.

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## **1. Introduction**

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The paper shall unfold in five sections. Following this *Introduction* (1), comes a section which presents the area of study *Setting the scene: San Martin Tilcajete* (2), which leads to a discussion of *Woodcarving* (3) and *Migration and Motherhood* (4) in *San Martín Tilcajete*. Finally, a *Concluding Remark* (5) is presented.

## **2. Setting the scene: San Martin Tilcajete**

The state of Oaxaca -to the south of Mexico- with almost three and a half million inhabitants (INEGI National Census 2010), is one of the two poorest states with most indigenous presence in the country<sup>2</sup>. Administratively, the state is divided into seven regions. In the region of the Central Valleys, we find the City of Oaxaca, capital of the state and tourist hub hosting over a million national (84%) and foreign (16%) tourists per annum (Boletín Estadístico: Indicadores Turísticos, 2004)<sup>3</sup>. The municipality<sup>4</sup> of San Martín Tilcajete is located approximately 32 kilometres south –east of the capital city. This is the site of the ethnographic research that shall be presented. Allegedly, the locality was founded two centuries B.C., although the present day community is of Zapotec origin and dates back to the year 1600 (Reyes López, 2003: 4). Although censal data vary and migration is underrepresented, a realistic and rigorous estimation of the population based on fieldwork data and the medical centre census is two thousand community members, 55% women (Fernandez Jarquín and Serrano Oswald, 2004). The community extends for 26.79.km<sup>2</sup> comprising private, communal and ejido lands. Since 1981 it was recognised as an autonomous community within the district of Ocotlan. It is governed by a political system of “traditional uses and customs” rooted in a hierarchical system of communal duties and obligations, organised through male- headed family units<sup>5</sup>. The male-heads or ‘contributors’ must pay fixed annual and temporary quotas, provide unremunerated community service in yearly periods, with a rotating active and a passive term in office every twelve months, till citizens are 60 years old or they reach the highest possible rank and fulfil the hierarchical cycle.

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<sup>2</sup> Twenty eight out of the sixty four ethnolinguistic indigenous groups of Mexico converge in Oaxaca, its seven regions serve as an exquisite example of the diversity of the country as a whole (Barabas, Bartolome & Maldonado, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Valid data for 2004 are used because after the 2006 APPO Crisis estimates vary considerably. However, it is an undeniable fact that precisely due to the lack of security in the state of Oaxaca for the most part of the APPO crisis, tourism –the main source of income in the state- plummeted.

<sup>4</sup> The state of Oaxaca is noteworthy given that it is the only state on Mexico that has 570 municipalities, representing almost 25% of the total municipalities in the country as a whole (2,378 in total). Almost every town or community on Oaxaca is a municipality, most governed by a traditional socio- political system.

<sup>5</sup> Note: speaking of family units includes the weight of family ties and obligations within a community structure that literature on ‘household units’ often dismisses. This paper includes this dimension explicitly.

In a community where 98.5% of the population is Catholic and the Zapotec language has been lost three generations from now, the social and cultural organisation responds to a very active calendar of public and private feasts. The public festivity calendar commences with the celebration of the Day of the Dead in the last days of October and extends until Mother's Day festival in May 10<sup>th</sup>. During these six months, there are at least two grand celebrations per month—each of which extends several days and has an “octava” or a minor scale replay celebrated a week after the original party. Throughout the Central Valleys, the community is well known for the frequency and sumptuous nature of its festivities. Private feasts include baptisms, confirmations, “quinceañera” or XV years celebrations, weddings or fandangos, burials and birthdays. Parental ties are both *real* (blood and legal ties) as well as *ritual* (mutual obligation friendship and support for life between individuals and families), and most members of the community are somehow related. Everybody knows all the members of the community at least by name and reputation. Gossip and the constant vigilance of fellow community members ensure compliance with social canons. Breaches of the law or misconduct are handled by the municipal authorities; fines are usually paid for with cement bulks used for building public infrastructure. There is a community room designated as prison to handle minor offences, although domestic problems and violence are treated as private and are thus seldom denounced or castigated; when they are, cement bulks for public use hardly compensate or alter intra-family relational dynamics.

Traditionally, San Martín was reliant upon subsistence agriculture for domestic consumption, with surpluses sold at regional markets (Perez Vargas, 1991). Nowadays, following the fall in international agricultural prices, land erosion, the end of agricultural subsidies in Mexico, and facing competition from bigger scale technologically- equipped national and international farms, the community has turned to woodcraft production and migration as means of subsistence. The practice of agriculture remains commonplace given the importance that food sovereignty, growing one's own food and contact with nature still have for the collective mind, especially amongst the older generations. A risky activity given changing weather and rainfall patterns in a semi dry area, agriculture and farming are important to the point that in most cases they entail lost investments and are significantly subsidised by entire families working the land or hiring external labour. Resources to subsidise agriculture come from either migration or woodcraft production.

### **3. Woodcarving**

The state of Oaxaca has become one of the favourite destinations for either beach holidays in the Pacific coast or ethnic/cultural tourism. Ethnic/cultural tourism is based in the Central Valleys region, and it has been a catalyst for the development of an arts-crafts industry comprising ceramics, archaeological replicas, and black clay pottery (barro negro), fabric weavings and embroidery, jewellery, tin crafts, paintings and woodcrafts.

San Martin Tilcajete is one of the three main “alebrije” woodcraft producing communities in Mexico. The craft of woodcarving allegedly has its roots in the tradition of the ‘carnival’ feast, in carved masks used for ritual and in wooden toys for children. The carnival feast requires that male community members disguise themselves as monsters. In the past, manually skilled men would tailor carve their masks for the occasion. However, the craft trade in the state of Oaxaca was established given the encouragement of art dealers in the capital city, eager to invent a tradition (Hobsbawm, 1983) in order to satisfy tourist’s urge for folk art and consolidate the ambient of authenticity that has been characteristic to Oaxacan marketing since the archaeological excavations of Alfonso Caso in Monte Alban during the 60s. In San Martin, it was also an individual who introduced the initial commercial links and encouraged the locals to engage in this activity with an economic goal. Isidoro Cruz worked for the National Council for Arts’ Promotion (FONART) in Oaxaca from 1970- 5, thus he was able to give public demonstrations and training for his community and he got four families to take the challenge of woodcraft production on a full time basis. Other families dedicated to woodcarving on a part time basis, focusing in agriculture. Also, women embroidered blouses and wedding gowns from home. Since their maternal and caring duties demanded priority, their pioneer incursions in commerce did not consolidate into a merchant class. It was not until the mid eighties when the woodcarving boom turned most of the non-migrant community members into woodcraft production, including women, children and elders. There are two main types of woodcraft production: i) high quality, unique time and labour -intensive specialised pieces, and ii) average quality, pattern repetitive, quick made, small inexpensive pieces. This facilitated both the smooth incursion of amateurs into the trade who could make returns from average pieces without much investment or training, as well as the establishment and diffusion of reputations for fine artisans devoting to high quality production (for a detailed account, see Chibnik, 2003).

Resources flowing since the boom, the community has radically transformed. Private and public infrastructure have substantially ameliorated, mud brick, reed, board and plate houses have been replaced by cement constructions, electro domestic appliances are commonplace. In general, a subsistence agriculture poverty- stricken community has turned into lower- middle class consumerism. At public level, the secondary school and local health clinic were inaugurated in 1994, and the road connecting the federal highways with the community was paved in 1999. Public wells and further infrastructure continues to develop, although the traditional practice of providing free labour for building communal goods or *tequio* is less popular as the value of time is reappraised. Busy working, community members prefer to pay with money for their unmet communal labour. It is also important to emphasise that caution is necessary when presenting the transformations of life in the community over the past 20- 25 years. Although resources have increased and the quality of life is of an overall higher standard, competition has weakened social cohesion, hampering any attempts to organise in commercial associations or productive projects. The social nature of feasts and celebrations as well as extended family ties, have led to a division in terms of labour and socialization. Envy, lack or cooperation, exploitation, competition, piracy and public offence have characterised woodcarving. Paradoxically, higher incomes have meant that reciprocal exchanges are more defining, education standards higher and alternatives open, allowing for cohesion despite atomisation following carving and migration. This two faces permeate the community, enabling a common identity bridge and esteem to its members, over a deepening distance abyss that hinders definition and articulation of collective goals.

Despite intensive female labour, artisan households are male-led. As production chains, men are in control of most of the crafts' productive process (they decide how, when, where and the labour distribution to make pieces), however sales and commercialization of woodcarvings are in control of exogenous male regional, national and international retailers and intermediaries who sell woodcarvings for a price five to ten times higher than their original price as finished- goods when sold by San Martín artisans. In the actual socioeconomic 'glocale' setting, with interdependent multi-level networks of exchange, individuals have autonomy and choices, although they are limited and bound to specific contexts. Beyond the exclusive centre- periphery vision of dependency theory, this vision of interrelated multi- level exchange networks and webs, allows for deeper insights into socio- cultural and identity factors which mediate autonomy to

producers, consumers, suppliers and policy- makers. Nevertheless, men head the process of wood production, retailing and commerce inside and outside of the community.

Retaking the example of craft production at San Martín, it is not passivity or *anomie* which prevent community members to exercise greater control of sales, commercialization and high profits. It is crucial to address the internal context, to contrast the impossibility to articulate the household-productive community units economically with an excessive communal front in all other areas. With a national history of three hundred years of colonisation, two hundred years of consolidating elites, caudillo cosmetocracies characterised by rent- seeking and patronage instead of democratic participation under a single 'strong' party in power in Oaxaca until the last elections in 2010 (unlike the changes at national level that favoured a different party since the year 2000), in a poverty- stricken region that epitomises wealth disparities, San Martín has survived given its organization as a community (for data on Oaxaca as a whole see Barabas, Bartolome & Maldonado, 2004. For elaborations on communal resistance see Martínez Luna, 2003). When woodcarving was adopted as economic activity, uncertainty defined the trade. Artisans decided to devote to production whilst the 'boom' lasted, regardless of efficiency, competitiveness, profit maximization and dependence in retailers and intermediaries. It has been two decades, and the mode of capitalism remains precarious, bound to "uncertainty, dependency and inequity" (Chibnik, 2003: xv). This became clearest after the APPO crisis throughout 2006 when neither national or international tourists nor retailers were allowed or wanted to travel to Oaxaca, with the latent threat of another teachers' strike to take place anytime.

Lastly, woodcarving has been possible given unpaid family labour, especially of women and to a lesser extent children and elders. Typically, men carve wood and women prepare and paint the pieces, although most men paint and some women carve. Direct and regional sales are led by women, unless the commercial relations involve core clients, in which case men handle business transactions. Most pieces are signed by the male household leader, who forges an individual reputation and is always in control of sales' revenues –even if he temporarily migrates to the USA. In the production chain, time invested in carving and painting pieces is on average the same; however alongside wood crafts women must fulfil their care, domestic and social obligations. In a study conducted in San Martín in 1991, women were found to work on average at least 14 hours per week more than men (Pérez Vargas, 1991: 30-1). With the demise of

agriculture, migration, caring for children throughout the day and painting at night, today women work on average 20 to 25 hours extra per week when compared to their male counterparts. In a community where power and esteem have traditionally been monopolised by men, domestic chores and care work undertaken by women have been historically invisible. As modernization seeds, women's labour in the wood craft trade tends to be devalued. Nevertheless, the community boasts the best known paintress of Oaxacan wood carvings and wood angels, a woman named Maria Jiménez (Chibnik, 2003: 43). Furthermore, some of the most important workshops which sell collectors' pieces internationally have modified their name to now include women, for example the Workshop of "Jacobo and María Ángeles". Interestingly, with time María Ángeles has started to use her maiden name within the workshop: María Concepción Mendoza.

#### ***4. Migration and motherhood in San Martín Tilcajete***

Migration is a social fact in contemporary Mexico, permeating all social strata. After petrol, currently exporting labour is the second generator of foreign currency by a narrow margin. Traffic of migrants has become the second most lucrative business after drugs traffic and every day more Mexicans seek to escape poverty or further their career prospects through migration. However, migration scenarios are highly differentiated, there are various types of migration, and migratory status is defining. Overall, migration can be permanent or temporary (pendular/cyclical and itinerant); national (intra- state, inter-state) and international (Lewin and Guzmán, 2003: 192), with legal or illegal migratory status. International migration to the USA has become increasingly popular following the crises in the 90s, and most migrants enter the country illegally as "wetbacks". This entails high vulnerability as low- skill, highly demanding, poorly paid jobs come with no contract, social security or organisational rights. Furthermore, most migrants of recently urbanised poor areas have inadequate educational backgrounds, little or no command of English language, no experience in big urban cities, and poor upward mobility prospects. Also, there is a double discourse in a setting that on the one hand demands cheap migrant labour and at the same time increasingly criminalises migrants and migrant families for entering the country illegally. When NAFTA was negotiated, Mexico vetoed petrol and the USA vetoed migration from the agenda. Since and especially after the 2008 financial crisis, laws have toughened, feeding stereotypes and violence, which has led to the criminalization and systemic exclusion of migrants.

### ***Male migration***

In the community of San Martin Tilcajete, migration has been primordially male driven. The first period of migration dates back to the Bracero Programme (1944- 1964), when following WWII the US sought cheap Mexican labour through 'contracts', usually for short and specified periods of time. Few men were contracted and migrants usually returned to their communities after fulfilling their contracts. When the programme gained increasing appeal, the US closed its borders and terminated the scheme. Migration flows from then rural areas diminished, although some pioneers settled in the USA permanently since.

The second period of migration occurred between 1960- 1980s. It was characterised by national migrant flows, either at intra- state and inter- state level to neighbouring states as communications and transport improved, or they followed emerging job opportunities in the rapidly developing megalopolis- Mexico City- or in the agricultural producing states to the north of the country. Where opportunities were solid, migrants settled permanently in other places of Mexico.

The third and current facet of migration in San Martin has been international- led. In the 1970s international migration recommenced, substantially decreasing during the woodcraft boom (between 1986- 1990s) in San Martin. However, it soared following the '94 crisis and has remained constant till today, with an increase after the APPO crisis in 2006 and a sustained growth despite the international crisis in 2008. The community has established itself as a cohesive group in Sta. Cruz, California, although it has also spread to L.A., San Francisco, San Jose, Oakland, Chicago, Oregon and New York. Job prospects remain dim, concentrating on the following segments: agriculture, work in hotels, cleaning, car wash, personal and care services, and construction and building. Although some families of early migrants have moved permanently to the USA and settled there, migration typically is male- led representing a specific age range, it is cyclical - pendular, although women and members of all age groups also participate. Despite the perils of migration or perhaps exactly due to the importance of facing and overcoming them, typically it has become an almost inescapable rite of passage to adulthood for young male adults following the end of high school and before considering marriage. Once they have faced their first migrant period, men return to marry and after settling with their wives in their paternal parental home or having their wives pregnant, men resort to migration in order to save and build their own room or small house back in the community. For

men in the 16-50 age range, international migration remains a preferred economic alternative, although it alternates with periods of residence back in San Martín, working as carvers and in agriculture. Frequently, once they have some capital and as they grow older, migrant men return to the community to settle back with their original family, if they have children –particularly, though not exclusively males– they tend to take them abroad to live with them and work at some point.

### ***Female migration***

Since the second wave of migration in the 60s- 80s women have migrated alone, especially within the country as maids, returning to San Martín after a few years to marry or take care of the sick and elderly, or staying away and sending remittances to family members when single. Since the 90s, female migration has also been international to the USA, normally as companions to their husbands or fathers who have previously inserted themselves in networks there. Children are a deciding factor, as women tend to return to the community when they have children, unless a close female relative in San Martín stays in charge of care duties. There is a strong bond with the community of origin, and parents emphasise the importance of raising their children in San Martín, even if that means leaving them in the hands of relatives. However, the best choice tends to be mothers returning and raising their children whilst living with their husband's parents and siblings. This trend is congruent with national migration estimates, where 70.6% of international migrants are male, and only 29.4% female (INEGI, 2005: 40).

Campaigns promoting human rights for citizens in developing countries regarding migration, often voice the demand “the right not to migrate” or to migrate in acceptable conditions. Rather than the first wave of campaigns that aimed at improving relations and realities in migrant destinations -addressing the strains, humiliations and abuse endured by migrants, the recent wave advocates a radical transformation in the settings wherein migration seeds. Taking the analogy of the sea instead of just looking at waves, addressing the universe of stakeholders seen as agents involved in migration, it is important to vindicate women's rights specifically. Why do women in a community setting such as San Martín Tilcajete, cradle to mass migration, do not even have the “right to migrate”? This is not to justify poverty or underdevelopment; it just serves to pinpoint how women who are affected in their everyday lives by migration and must invisibly assume its costs directly and indirectly, do not even have the option to migrate given social and cultural cannons. Unless women leave the community accompanying husbands, parents, and

other family members to control them, community and family members will sanction a woman for migrating. Women may migrate nationally, usually as housemaids, given that their work is closely supervised and their earnings benefit others. However, if migration is a step towards independence, education, self-affirmation or liberty, sanctions can be as subtle as segregation and denial and escalate to overt marital, family and socio-cultural orphanage. In such a rigid social system, women who do not abide by socially sanctioned rules must leave their families and the community for good (there are three such cases reported).

Besides, although studies of female migration in Mexico are commonplace since the late 90s, studies of the costs assumed by women following migration in the community of origin are scarce and remain a challenge. Given the pattern of male-led migration in San Martín and women staying at home, they directly assume migration costs including extended daily work loads consisting of<sup>6</sup>: i) initial or intermittent economic and psychological *support of migrants*: payment of the trip to the USA, *sustenance of the household* until remittances are received or when they cease, *provision for migrant's family* or close-relations, financing migrants upon their return; ii) assuming migrant's *social obligations* without any modification to women's status (women must assume all social responsibilities for community service and obligations for migrants without gaining any visibility. Following women's work and after women have escalated the social hierarchy for men, men return to fulfil important political posts and get the social recognition); iii) taking *full responsibility for parenting* often without full parental decision-making control which is exercised by phone and enforced through the step-family; iv) taking responsibility for the *woodcarving business* often without decision-making control or access to profits; v) coping with *transformed relations in the community* and *increased vigilance* as women without a mainstream male support figure (whether it is a father, [great] grandfather, uncle, brother, a husband, relative-in-law, a son, godfather, or any other close relation to a male migrant), including neglect, harassment, abuse and thus external control exerted by all members of the community. Overall, it is coping with the economic, physical, emotional and social burdens of isolation or de facto abandonment that go hand in hand with migration. Ironically, it also offers a relief from dysfunctional relations, and although unilaterally, migration is also implemented as

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<sup>6</sup> Although making an analysis based in heterosexual conjugal relations is problematic, this is the predominant form of established families in the community, which is not to say that it is the sole form of sexuality. Male homosexual practices are commonplace although secret, and there is only one recent case of a union of two lesbian young women, who live as "friends" and are not seen as a family yet. They have no children so far. Regarding single mothers, as they tend to live with the extended family and be in tutelage of their fathers, they are not considered as separate family units by the local political system. Sometimes, they must fulfill certain specific obligations in the school committees, but they must not fulfill the whole cycle of community work as male household heads would have to.

intra- and inter- family conflict mediating strategy. With regards to this, it is important to deepen research in other factors, which associated with economic imperatives but not solely based on them, lead to migration (see Ariza, 2000; D' Aubeterre, 1998; Oehmichen, 2001; Martínez Medrano, 2003; Serrano Oswald, 2005).

### ***5. Brief Concluding Remark***

As discussed, San Martín Tilcajete presents an interesting and very particular case study in order to research migration and modernization, as it provides a community context with a traditional political system where the Zapotec world outlook has not remained unaltered and yet some of its core values are still defining of everyday life within the community and also abroad in the transnational migratory chain. Nevertheless, the continuing impact of migration, together with exposure to ethnic/cultural tourism and the commerce of woodcrafts appealing to consumers as folk arts have led to an opening to new “global” values and at the same time to a re-appropriation and re-valuing of an indigenous past that was formerly marginalised, with all the contradiction this implies.

Individuals, couples, families and communities are not passive in the face of societal processes of the magnitude and complexity of present transnational flows. As social agents and groups, they are continuously forging identities connecting the local and the global. As humans, we are born into a pre- established symbolic order, as we internalize and revise meaning, esteem, relations and practices seed, and we root a stable vision of the world in which both tradition and change are accommodated. This process is not neutral and gender is a fundamental dimension to be transversally explored as it has important and different implications to women and men.

Given the specific conditions of our époque, the late modern period increasingly becomes identified as the Age of Advanced Communications, with identity occupying a central place in the social sciences, as territorial referents surpass traditional notions embedded in the nation- state. Both migrants and people living in migrant expelling communities are agents of this transition, forging and acting within discursive social contexts, mediating conflict and adjusting representations inherent in change. Migration has become an intricate feature constitutive of everyday life in many regions, including small communities such as San Martín Tilcajete. It should not be seen solely or unilaterally from an economic perspective. In contemporary contexts of deepening globalization and contradictions, migration can be assessed in frequently

ignored dimensions such as means to building economic and social capital, an individual and ethno-social ritual passing, a conflict-mediating strategy for families, a grassroots development capital, and most importantly an alternative way of social, political and economic integration, with identity articulations that are culturally rooted *in the community of origin*, not abroad. This said, migrant-expelling contexts are spaces characterised by deep social inequalities and limited options for development, and the so-called “choice” of individuals, families and entire communities to resort to migration as temporary or permanent, main or complementary survival strategy is exactly that, a survival strategy or residual option linked to lack of other more promising endogenous viable alternatives as it implies high costs. These endogenous development alternatives, as well as the comprehensive regulation of migration processes in the late modern setting, call for public policies that range from the local and state level, to the binational, multilateral and global scale, and must be based on social justice for all.

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