

Miradas

Journal for the Arts and Culture of the Américas and the Iberian Peninsula

MIRADAS 06 (2022)

Special Issue: Bodies/Fashions in the Américas 2

eISSN: 2363-8087

<https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/miradas>

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Hosted by: University Library Heidelberg

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Receipt date: 28.07.2021

Acceptance date: 18.11.2021

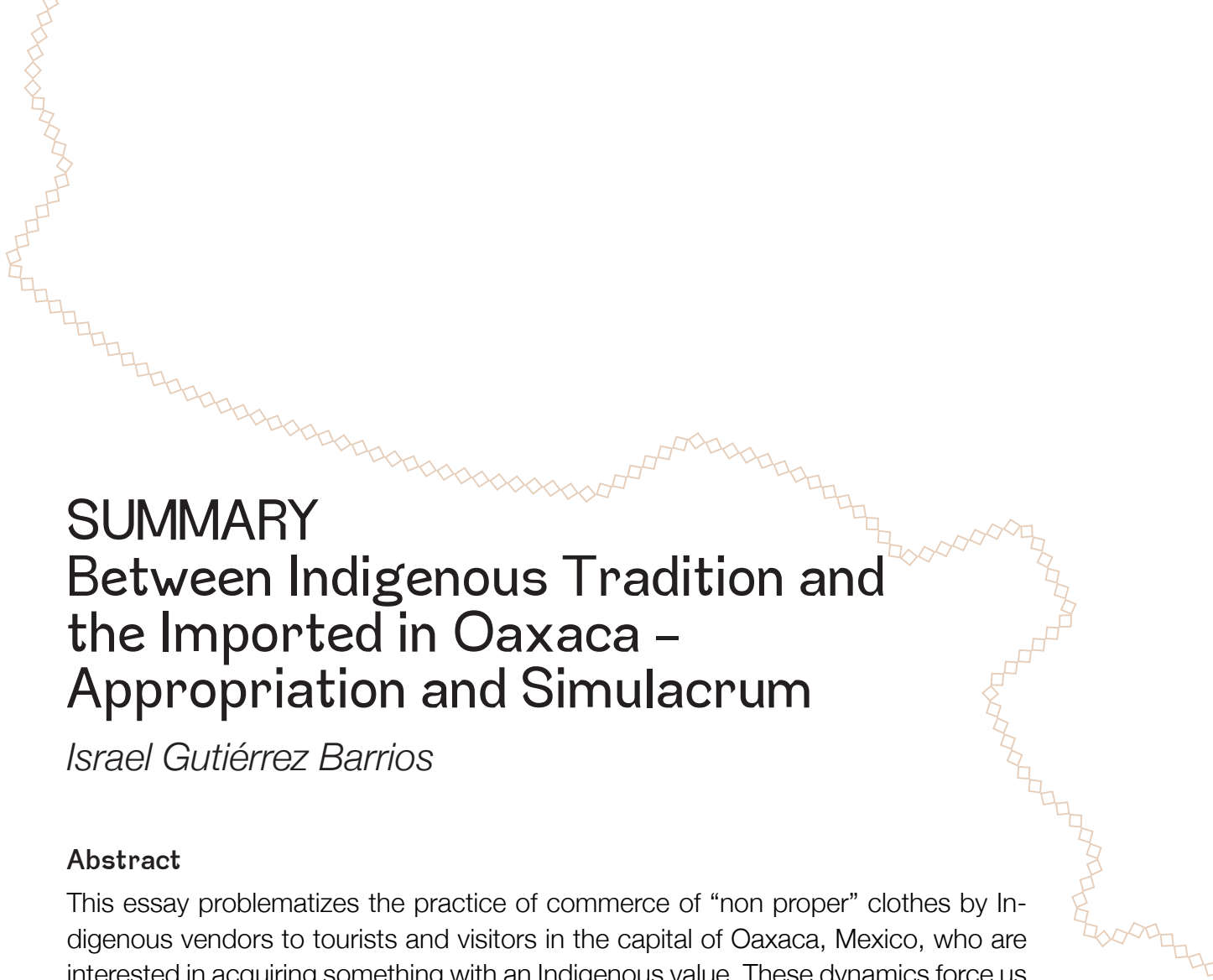
DOI: doi.org/10.11588/mira.2022.2.85792

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Citation:

Gutiérrez Barrios, Israel. "Between Indigenous Tradition and the Imported in Oaxaca – Appropriation and Simulacrum." Special issue *Bodies/Fashions in the Américas 2*, edited by Franziska Neff and Miriam Oesterreich. *MIRADAS – Journal for the Arts and Culture of the Américas and the Iberian Peninsula* 6 (2022): 31–47, DOI: doi.org/10.11588/mira.2022.2.85792



SUMMARY

Between Indigenous Tradition and the Imported in Oaxaca – Appropriation and Simulacrum

Israel Gutiérrez Barrios

Abstract

This essay problematizes the practice of commerce of “non proper” clothes by Indigenous vendors to tourists and visitors in the capital of Oaxaca, Mexico, who are interested in acquiring something with an Indigenous value. These dynamics force us to rethink the notions of originality and authenticity, as well as appropriation-expropriation of elements from other cultural traditions, although probably these had already been taken by other agents before, erasing their origin. However, the objective of this analysis is to discuss about the implications that the appropriation of exogenous products has into the self-determination of the traditional groups that offers them as their own. In order to produce an answer the different of commerce in Oaxaca City are exemplified and the idea of appropriation is explored, as well as other issues related with the image, clothing and appearance, that refer to the process of spectacularisation-commerce of the indigenous identity, said as singular even when inside the reality of Oaxaca, they’re multiple, put on the appearance of the indigenous woman. It is concluded by identifying the practice of appropriation where the goal is to have products to sold above all, while also distinguishing the possibility of a cultural enrichment and of favouring the process of empowerment, when their use goes beyond the frontier of outside-inside, introducing the “proper” into the world of the normal, everyday life.

Keywords: indigenous clothes • spectacularisation • cultural appropriation • cultural heritage • Oaxaca

'Ethnicity is in fashion' could be said in a naive way, however, what seems to be in global and daily vogue is the practice of appropriation and commodification of images of "exotic cultures" or of some of their elements. Identity signs are extracted from their context, reconfigured, and placed in shop windows without any data of origin, provenance, or authorship, eliminating their cultural value. An example of this is the high fashion system, which sometimes takes up symbols and designs of traditional groups, reinventing them and putting them into circulation in a market of ethnic taste. A dynamic that forces us to ask ourselves, what happens with the practices of appropriation-expropriation that go the other way? That is, what about wearing garments that come from outside the traditional cultural system? And how are the contents and the own and other people's meanings negotiated, which thanks to their similarities are taken and offered as part of the traditional collections and turned into products? The answer could be sought in another direction of how the network of commercial and cultural exchanges is articulated with the self-determination of the traditional group.

To explore this phenomenon of appropriation, the Oaxacan case in Mexico is reviewed, a state that due to its indigenous diversity and varied textile tradition (Rangel Flores 2020, Stresser-Péan 2012, Lechuga 2000, Klein 1997, Artes de México 1996, Johnson 1994, Drucker 1963), as well as its intense tourist dynamics allows us to appreciate both expropriation and appropriation.

What is sold, what is original and what is not? And what is said about what is foreign and what is own? These are the questions that guided the exploration that was conducted through observation and brief informal conversations. Relevant was that, above all, "what is foreign" is sold –what comes from outside the traditions–, the stylizations and interventions –modifications of the traditional–, having a general and slight opinion of the concept of "the original", and with a lax and undifferentiated valuation between what is own and what is foreign. Fieldwork in the city allowed us to identify the traditional textile trade, finding in it exogenous garments, but with an ethnic and indigenized style. The difference between the indigenous and the indigenized is that the former comes from the indigenous world, while the latter is presented as such without being it. The forms of commercialization were also identified, of which two were chosen to analyze since they had an evident presence of indigenous people with garments for sale other than their traditional clothing. The cases correspond to fixed positions of indigenous Triqui and the itinerant harvest of indigenous batsil winik 'otik (Tzotziles or "true men", an ethnic group of the Mayan diaspora, from Chamula, Chiapas who live in Oaxaca). The textile products offered that drew attention for the analysis of the Triqui case were dresses and blouses of industrial fabrics printed with geometric motifs that recall Zapotec frets from the archaeological site of

Mitla and with abstractions from the Piedra del Sol associated with the “Aztec culture” (fig. 1); In the case of the *batsil winik ‘otik*, they were the bags and purses that bear a resemblance to the embroidery from Zinacantán, Chiapas, but which come from beyond the seas, from Asia. The selection criteria were that the garments and/or accessories were made of cloth, intended for women and of external origin, the above, due to the relationships of an apparent cultural unit that can be established between the indigenous vendor and the exogenous ethnic merchandise, for buyers. It was through short interviews with vendors of stalls and street vendors, as well as the configuration of the state of art, that macro relationships were sought, confirming the importance of the question already referred to: how and to what extent is self-determination exercised in these cultural - and commercial - practices by indigenous women?

The cultural diversity of the state of Oaxaca is shown, although not in all its splendor, in its capital Oaxaca de Juárez, where there is the exchange between people from the eight regions of the state (Cañada, Costa, Istmo, Mixteca, Cuenca de Papaloapan, Sierra Sur, Sierra Norte, and Valles Centrales), showing its cultural richness identified in the complex imaginary of the indigenous. Their products, traditions, and appearances concerning the kitchen, crafts, and clothing are exchanged, without being reduced to pure forms and grammars, rather, adapting to maintain dialogues and exchanges that refer to expressions of distant cultural origins.

Oaxacan fashion circuits. To characterize the Oaxacan fashion circuit, the city of Oaxaca de Juárez was visited, identifying nine types of sale (*Mestizo peddler. Indigenous street vendors: Outdoor semi-fixed stalls: Stationary outdoor stalls, Fixed stalls in closed areas, Establishments of other businesses, Craft houses, Boutiques, Online*), defined according to the type of establishment, garments, and vendors, recognizing from the street vendors until the sales through the Internet. This panorama testifies to the wide range of establishments where the circulation of “indigenous textiles” becomes effective, revealing creative expressions of this productive-cultural branch. It also requires rethinking the meanings of “Oaxacan”, “Mexican”, “authentic”, “traditional”, “artisanal”, as well as “indigenous” itself. Concepts and evaluations that are difficult to grasp and perhaps even useless to have. On the other hand, it raises the question, what is one’s own and what is someone else’s? And likewise, at what moment does what is foreign become one’s own? Understand here appropriation as explained by Subercaseaux “The concept of “appropriation” rather than an idea of dependence and exogenous domination points to a fertility, to a creative process through which elements become “own” or “appropriate” strangers. “ (1988: 130) and Neüma “[...] The “social appropriation” would be assumed as a process through which marginal social groups of the capitalist economic system interact

with the cultural, economic, organizational and consumption proposal of that system through forms of adjudication of new meanings (2008: 71). Active reception and re-signification seem to be the keys to appropriation, going beyond the pure commercial sphere and leaving the quality of apparently being one's own only for otherness, for the buyer.

Triquis case and pashmina garments

Members of the Movimiento de Unificación y Lucha Triqui maintain just over 80 informal business premises in the Alameda de León in Oaxaca (tour on Google Maps). They buy their merchandise, which is produced either in Mexico City, Guatemala, or other maquiladora centers, sourcing mainly from large merchants, who come to nearby parking lots to leave them loads of merchandise purchased in bulk. As an example of textile merchandise, use the image shown (fig. 3), in the stall on the right there are 28 garments (fig. 4) – eleven are Guatemalan-style shirts, (1, 2, 7, 8, 14, 15, 16, 21, 22, 23 and 24); four Tehuano style blouses (25, 26, 27 and 28); two Tehuacán, Puebla style blouses (19 and 20); two Chiapas blouses (12 and 18); a Jalapa del Marqués blouse (17); two “Mexican” blouses, that is, generic ones that are offered throughout Mexico (10 and 11); a mitleño huipil blouse (4). This repertoire shows the diversity of origins and with this, the role of a merchant rather than an artisan of indigenous vendors is evidenced. Also exhibited are four garments made with shawls called pashminas (3, 5, 9, and 13), fundamental pieces for the present study due to their clear exogenous origin, originally coming from the Kashmir region. The Triqui vendors carry out simple interventions that allow the identification of intervention-appropriation processes. Through the analysis of the cut designs, two navel blouses with long open sleeves were identified that take up the huipil [Nahuatl: *hupilli*, blouse or dress], which is made from rectangular canvases made on a loom, depending on the desired width, the garment is done with one or more canvases vertically. The pashmina replaces the canvas and is folded, cut, and attached in the same way as the traditional garment.

Regarding the patterns present in the four pashmina garments, three types are identified: one with floral motifs and vegetable guides all cut into a chain of gradient color thread, with the application of some sequins and a unicolor background (fig. 5); another is with stripes along its length and formed by small embroidered geometric motifs and a single-colored background (fig. 6); another is printed with small and large geometric motifs obtained by the fabric of the canvas, allowing changes in color and textures both in ornaments and in the background (fig. 7). Although the techniques to obtain the designs (whether by embroidery added to the fabric or created from the structure) are used in the Oaxacan indigenous tradition, the motifs

and compositions are diametrically different and clearly derived from an industrial process. The vegetal and floral motifs of the pashminas studied intertwine creating compositions that recall lattices, mandalas, and fractal designs in a clearly Hindu style (Sardar, Dhruvajyoti and Kulkarni 2005). Designs that, according to the opinion of some vendors, will cease to circulate as they have been in the market for two years and with this, sales have been reduced due to the saturation of the market and for being “old fashioned”. This situation forces to renew the stamps offered in the city, by the suppliers who monopolize in commerce in Oaxaca, which is a single supplier, and that deals one-one, not collectively. (Personal conversation with Triquis vendors, July 2021, Personal conversation with Mitla’s producer and vendor, July 2021). In this situation and this sense, self-determination turns out to be a romantic idea, as fundamental decisions of what and how are not exercised, even when not re-signifying the product beyond showing it as “own” and being individually at the expense of the tendencies of the market and the decisions of other agents. It would be interesting to investigate how market trends are interpreted by producers and sellers and therefore how they influence decisions to renew or make modifications to their designs. At the moment it is only possible to point out that the manufacturing activities are not affected by maintaining the manufacture without apparent changes, continuing with the same models. The fabrics used (the support) and the models (the design) are perceived as two parallel circuits, in which they participate actively but separately, deciding to use and do what is most economically profitable: salable with a higher profit margin.

Although it is possible to argue that the largest number of products offered by the Triqui vendors in Alameda de León have an external origin, whether it be national or foreign, it was detected that their materials, designs, and iconographic motifs have artisanal references that are automatically associated with ethnicity and even more with the local indigenous, thanks to the presence and accompaniment of the vendors who display their indigenous appearance. In Oaxaca what is valued is “the indigenous”, therefore, what is essentially for sale is the multiple indigenous identities, including its faces. Thus, the transformation of traditional garments in their processes, appearances, uses, and meanings due to tourism seems to indicate the profound phenomenon called commodification of ethnic identity (Femenías 2005: 111), which upsets almost every traditional practice and institution.

Under the idea of what is proper, relevant are the observations about the use, by not having identified any vendor or companion wearing any of the four items in question or other similar ones; to receive a “no” with a smile to the express question about the proper use of their merchandise, making it clear that these products are not for themselves; and forceful disqualification about a product made by them, but for buyers valued as a “pirate huipil” (personal conversation with Triqui saleswomen,

July 2021), a gesture that speaks of their agency power. Regarding the prints and the weaving of the cloth, the vendors do refer to the resemblance of the exogenous motifs with the Zapotec fretwork and the Aztec calendar, but they do not establish further relationships, a strategy that makes use of “directed naivety”, to leave in ambiguity the foreign condition of the product (materials, motifs, and designs).

An intrinsic problem in the transformation of cultural expressions, appropriation-expropriation processes, is that once, the elements used were traditional at a specific point in global geography. Shakyawar, Raja, Kumar, Pareek, and Wani exemplify this for the pashminas.

Recently, in order to check the sale of fake plain pashmina and Kani shawls, Government of India has awarded the GI [Geographical Indication] patent recognizing handmade shawls of Kashmir origin. Under the GI of goods, Kashmiri handmade pashmina shawls now can use their own logos (Rahid 2008). The patent came after an agreement among Kashmir Handmade Pashmina Promotion Trust, Wild Life Trust of India and Craft Development Institute, Srinagar (2013: 212).

How far to ignore these dynamics that generate impacts in the places of origin, in specific communities made up of similar to the Triqui or other indigenous people. When asked about this situation, the automatic reaction of the saleswomen was to smile and try to hide by turning their heads and then answering “it’s wrong” (Personal conversation with saleswomen Batsil winik ‘otiks). But, it is not a question of making value judgments or “holding” responsibility, but rather of understanding that it is a global phenomenon where conditions for the survival of specific social sectors are at stake.

Batsil winik ‘otik and “Asian” bags

In the itinerant mode, the batsil winik ‘otik vendors carry handbags and up to fifty rebozos (fig. 8), these being the same pashminas that the Triquis offer, but with a dozen different patterns, surely chosen to be according to the appearance and own attire, recreated for otherness. The closest resemblance of Asian bags is with the Zinacantán embroidery (fig. 9), although a very free relationship can also be established with the “Chiapaneco style” of large flowers with many petals, perhaps this somewhat forced similarity has made Chiapas indigenous women become the almost exclusive group for the sale of this product in Oaxaca, situation that may present not only use of the indigenous image, even exploitation and human trafficking, as it was revealed in the case of the rescue of the 56 indigenous minors who “are brought to Oaxaca with deception, under the promise of a better life.” (Maya Alonso 2019). There are rumors of the relationship between the permanence of the municipi-

pal head of street commerce in Oaxaca for three administrations and the increase in vendors of indigenous origin from Chiapas (Personal conversation with tour operator Alejandro L. August 21, 2021), strategy that would have its explanation in the cheap and docile labor force by ignoring the city and in many cases the low command of the Spanish language and in its indigenous appearance that it represents: exoticism, poverty and awakens feelings of help-solidarity. Considering the five theories about the functions of clothing proposed by Schwarz, which indicate that clothing originally responds to shelter from the environment, to protection against supernatural forces, to the notion of modesty, to the provocation of attraction, or the manifestation of status and social position (1976). The last is the one that seems to fit the case of the “Chiapas bag”, although in a somewhat bizarre way, since what is carried is not to show an ethnicity as a form of belonging, role, or hierarchy, but to transfer ethnicity to someone else’s garment.

The bags and purses made of black synthetic canvas, serve as a background for the industrial embroidery of shiny and synthetic threads. The iconographic repertoire corresponds to plant and zoomorphic motifs: peonies, pheasants, peacocks, elephants, butterflies, and some small flowers and birds that I have not been able to identify (fig. 10). At the buyer’s request, the sellers describe these elements as part of their tradition, resignifying the peonies as sunflowers, the pheasant as a true hummingbird, quetzal, or rooster. Even the blue elephants and other beings do not suppose a cultural contradiction, both because of the bestiary of animals and fantastic beings legitimized by the alebrijes - carved wooden figures, richly painted with dots, grids, and geometric patterns, a tradition born in 1936 in Mexico City and originally made in cardboard or papier-mâché (Vergara 2021) -, as for the Oaxacan indigenous reality of migration, which makes distant elements so close. In this sense, authors such as Amodio think:

The problems of appropriation become when the limit of the value of a symbol or cultural marker is transgressed, which is defined by” the cultural horizon shared by local and regional groups, [...] beyond them it will only find its transformation and ignorance; that is, its negation as [symbol or marker] produced by a specific culture (1998: 287 cfr. Mora Silva 2018: 93).

Thus, along with the process of appropriation of images, another opposite survives, which implies the cancellation of ways of doing-thinking, which saw the birth of the original material expression. In this case, for example, it is ignored that the peony in China is considered the king of flowers with the meanings of happiness, prosperity, luck, and good fortune (Moreno Coll 2016: 57); that the pheasant is a solar animal with the attributes of fire and represents yang –the energy of masculine principle– and it was believed that it was a serpent (Eberhard 1983: 287); that possibly what

is observed in some bags is the representation of the *Fènghuáng*, a male-female mythological bird that is queen over all birds (Coore 2019), or that perhaps it is the vermilion bird equivalent to the western phoenix; that the peacock is a symbol of well-being and high status; that the elephant symbolizes serenity and peace; and that the butterfly in a general way represents summer, beauty, romance, dreams, while the white one refers to autumn, death, mourning, the spiritual world and therefore longevity and immortality (Welch 2008: 143, 147, 274, 167, 181, 504).

As it can be seen, it is very noticeable that the coincidences between the expressions of the two cultures in comparison are minimal, they hardly coincide because they are large, colorful flowers with leafy corollas, confirming Mora Silva's sentence "constant combinations degrade the certainty regarding what is expressed" (2018: 106), even more so when the origin is exogenous. In this dissolution process, no one seems to have exclusive responsibility, nor manufacturers, suppliers, merchants, or buyers, only the market system itself.

Final Comment

It seems that a detailed study of a long-range diachronic type is necessary to follow up on the life of the garments chosen within the groups studied. However, the regular change of the fabrics and their designs, as well as the non-use of the garments, is the best proof of the insignificance and the ephemerality that they are for these groups. Objects that in the hands of the indigenous merchants are always located as mere merchandise, that is, with a use and exchange value, in the sense proposed by Kopytoff. The merchandise seeks above all to fulfill its economic function, for which it must be "common" and thus be appreciated - have a price - thereby achieving monetary equivalence to make commercial exchange effective (1991: 94). According to this author, culture would be in charge of providing certain expressions with "singularity" to free them from commodification and would even be capable of "re-singularizing" them, making them invaluable and removing them from that circuit. However, what underlies these processes of commodification, which makes them almost unchangeable, is the global context governed by appearance, where simulacrum and spectacle based on the ocularcentric experience transform, dilute and hide identities and reality in its totality (Baudrillard 1978; Debord 1967; Brea 2007).

The spectacle is that the indigenous weavers, embroiderers, artisans, now do not produce, but represent doing it and being it, recreating and inventing that world with the help of the performative image of each day composed mainly of bodies and their clothing. In this representation the unity between objects and cultural tradition is not reestablished, despite performative-discursive attempts, such as "yes, my mother and I embroidered it, it is a hummingbird, but we forgot to trim the beak", "we do it

in the town”, of which they could not say the name. As Debord points out, the performance is shown at the same time as reality itself, where the simulacrum is what exists, and for this reason to questions about the origin, the meaning, the process of the garments, “are you going to buy?” is received as a response. In addition, this representation implies the game of the stereotypical, partial and racist image that refers to an ignorant indigenous person, which exempts him from providing answers. But, likewise, all the identified sales establishments are represented making the show the way through which people appreciate, experience, and share the cultural expression of clothing, thereby leaving out any possibility of deep and critical dialogue that recognizes the complexity of doing, dressing, selling the “traditional”. In a word, hiding the real thing.

Regarding self-determination, if it implies one’s authority and control over resources and decisions that affect one’s life, considering that for indigenous peoples it would also mean “that the individual cannot be reduced to the personal sphere, since part of their identity is derived from its relationship with the community ”(Wissener 2011 and Xanthaki 2014 cfr Manchuca Pérez 2016: 171), it would seem that the cases studied here are far from increasing it, due to the individual logic and practices with which they conduct themselves -at less at this time. This fact does not imply that at the levels of agency and empowerment, that is, in the capacity to act and control processes, they remain mere spectators, since they, although marginally, do make decisions and participate in commercial relations. An opportunity for self-determination regarding the individual and the group is to modify the practice of “appropriation for otherness” towards an appropriation committed to their merchandise, re-singularizing them through the knowledge and recognition of exogenous cultural meanings and the active resignification that inscribes them as invaluable objects, that is, with a deep value in the complex of collective daily life; without resorting only to the superficial appearance that maintains them as a pure image that tourism seeks and Oaxaca offers as the first merchandise.



Fig. 1. Similarities of designs between fabrics with the north exterior panel of Edificio de las Columnas (ca. 935, Mitla, Oaxaca) and with Piedra del Sol (1250-1519, National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City). Photos: Israel Gutiérrez Barrios, September 2018 and Wikimedia Commons, Anagoria, December 2013.



Fig. 2. Triqui vendor in Alameda de León, Oaxaca de Juárez. Photo: Israel Gutiérrez Barrios, July 2021.



Fig. 3. Triquis semi-fixed stalls in Alameda de León, Oaxaca de Juárez. Photography: Adrián Gaytán, March 2021.

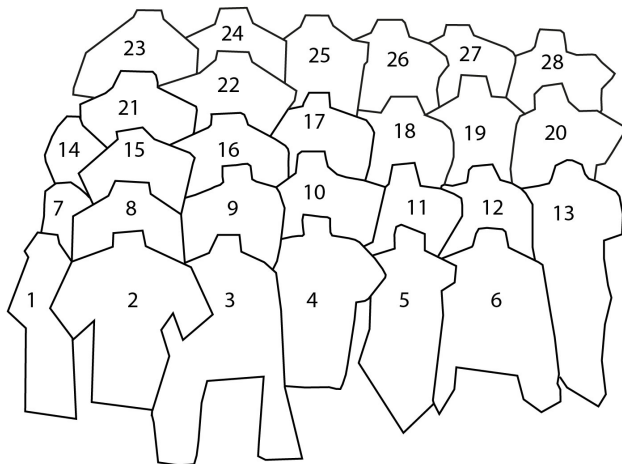


Fig. 4. Identification of clothing.

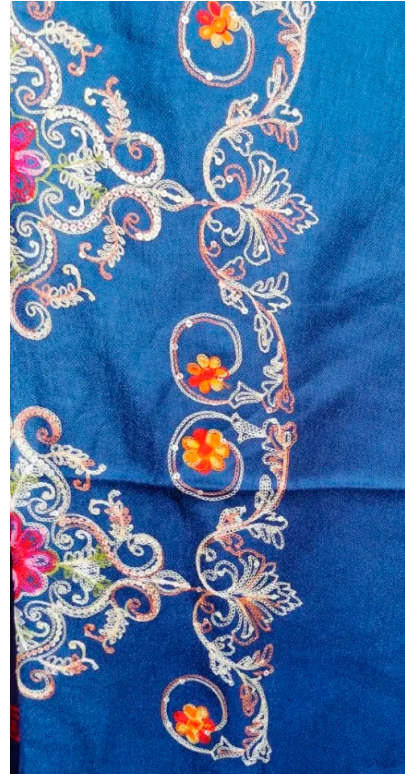


Fig. 5. Pashmina with *cadena* embroidery and sequin. Photo: Bidameun Korean Cosmetics. <https://cosmeticsbidameun.mercadoshops.com.mx>



Fig. 6. Blouse with a border of geometric motifs in Alameda de León, Oaxaca de Juárez. Photo: Israel Gutiérrez Barrios, August 2021.



Fig. 8. *Batsil winik 'otik* vendors in the Zócalo of Oaxaca de Juárez. Photo: Adrián Gaytán, March 2021.



Fig. 10. Examples of bags. Photos: Israel Gutiérrez Barrios, July 2021.

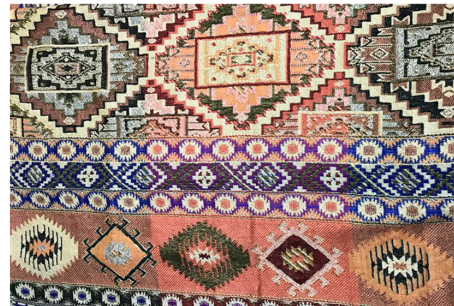


Fig. 7. Details of geometric motifs of the fabric structure. Photos: Israel Gutiérrez Barrios, July 2021.



Fig. 9. Details of embroidery from Zinacantán, Chiapas. Photo: Courtesy NGO Impacto. <http://impacto.org.mx/>

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Interviews

Personal conversations with Triqui vendors, in Calle del Punto, Barrio del Peñasco, Oaxaca, January 23, March 15 and July 01, 2021.

Personal conversation with *batsil winik* 'otiks vendors, in Plaza de la Danza and Zócalo of Oaxaca, January 6, February 15, 2021.

Personal conversation with producer and vendor from Mitla, in the Zócalo of Oaxaca, July 01, 2021.

Personal conversation with tour operator Alejandro L., in Huayapan, Oaxaca, August 21, 2021.

Personal conversation with a typical clothing producer from Mitla, Oaxaca, August 12, 2021.