

Indigenous Embroidery in the Construction of Ethnic Identity: The Case of *Huichol* Women

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The article discusses the embroidery and the backstrap loom weavings of the indigenous *Huichol* women of the Sierra Madre Occidental (Jalisco, Mexico). It proposes that contact with tourism has played an important role in the themes, materials, and the forms of production of this genre of handicrafts. The main interest is in the impact contact with tourism has on clothing, accessories, spiritual and secular objects, embroidery and weavings produced by the *Huichol* for themselves and for an external market. Through these objects, the embroidery and weaving produced by the indigenous peoples in Mexico can be considered elements in the construction of their ethnic identity in dialogue with the hegemonic use of the same embroidery.

The author asks the following questions: a) How is embroidery used by Mexican public policy name who is an indigenous individual or group? b) What other tourism discourses on ethnicity is embroidery linked to as an ethnic name or label? c) How does embroidery (from the point of view of the indigenous people) enter into dialogue with, or distance itself from, the national discourse to name themselves? The corpus analyzed has two sections: The illustrations and photographs published in school textbooks and tourism magazines, and the embroidery and weaving in bags *Huichol* women make for their own use and for sale.

I begin with a quote from a *Huichol*¹ needlewoman: “These decorations are what the gods sent us so that they can recognize us. Through the designs they know where we belong... Thus we cannot escape from them. I dream about the gods even when I am not sleeping in my own home, I still dream about them. That’s what these designs are actually for, but the artisans sell them as if they were part of our handicrafts” (Corona, 2007, p. 11).

This reference reveals that the gods, dreams, identity and commerce, are all woven into the profession of the needlewoman embroiderer. However, the indigenous peoples do not only embroider to be recognized by their gods or the rest of society. They also embroider to adorn themselves, to distinguish themselves from other communities, to express their generational differences, to communicate stories and feelings, or simply to make a living. Embroidery is an integral part of their bags and garments, their votive objects, and other articles used daily in the home.

On the other hand, in much of mainstream Mexico, indigenous embroidery publicly substitutes for the indigenous identity. Like a synecdoche or rhetoric device for suppression, attention is drawn to the embroidery, which may even be presented alone totally replacing an

¹ I will be speaking of the Huicholes (they call themselves Wixárika or Wixaritári in the plural form) who, with a population of 45,000 that speak their own language, are one of the 64 indigenous groups of Mexico. They live in the Sierra Madre Occidental in the northern part of the state of Jalisco, in Nayarit and Durango. They have maintained their own pre-Christian religion and many pre-Hispanic cultural practices. The indigenous speaking population of Mexico is 10% of the 100 million inhabitants.

actual indigenous person. Their embroidery is the detail that political discourse has selected for use in publicity, tourism, official government functions, the press, and even at the Ministry of Public Education, to say “indigenous.” Perhaps it is a euphemism that was contrived to fill a void.

My research in this area is how the embroidery and weaving produced by the indigenous peoples in Mexico can be considered elements in the construction of their ethnic identity. I am especially interested in the impact contact with tourism has on the clothing, accessories, and spiritual and secular objects embroidered and woven by the *Huicholes* for themselves and for an external market, which I will call “tourism,” as it is for the national and international outsider consumer.

My analysis here aims first to denaturalize the concept of an indigenous identity, both biologically and culturally, putting it instead into a historical and discursive context. In the process, I particularly want to observe how indigenous embroidery and weaving are employed as determining components of identity when referring to a third party, or oneself, as “indigenous.” This is my starting point for posing the following questions:

- 1) How is embroidery used by Mexican public policy to name who is an indigenous individual or group?
- 2) What other tourism discourses on ethnicity is embroidery linked to as an ethnic name or label?
- 3) How does embroidery (from the point of view of the indigenous people) enter into dialogue with, or distance itself from, the national discourse to name themselves?

This article is based on the analysis of two corpora:

1. The historical corpus of set textbooks (obligatory for all Mexican school children) issued for basic education between 1921 and 2002². This first corpus comprised the illustrations and photos of indigenous people and their embroidery appearing in these textbooks. As the analysis reveals not only how the indigenous peoples are referred to, but also how Mexico itself is described, one can observe how ethnic groups have served as an axis around which to construct the idea of the Mexican nation. The second group of publications consisted of all the in-flight magazines published in 2007 by Mexico’s two biggest airlines, Mexicana and AeroMexico. It also covered the images on billboards, in beauty competitions, soap operas, and tourist exhibitions.

2. My second corpus was the embroidery and weaving on bags the *Huichol* people make for their own use and for sale. This body of material evidences changes and transformations in production, and how those changes have been influenced by commerce, the advent of formal education, and the prevailing discourse on ethnicity generally. I studied a collection of 35 bags produced between 1970 and the present day.

In studying the images of indigenous people in set textbooks, official tourist material and the press, I was searching for the iconic name, or label these publications apply to the

² Out of the 624 books encountered, only 190 had at least one pictorial allusion to any indigenous people. A total of 575 illustrations and photos featuring indigenous people were furnished in these.

indigenous peoples. In the embroidery made by the *Huicholes* for sale and personal use, I was searching for their own ethnic identity marker.

I complement the discursive analysis with bibliographical information on *Huichol* ethnography, art, and culture, and with the information recorded in 10 years of work in San Miguel Huaixtita and San Andrés Cohamiata, both *Huichol* communities (Corona, 2002, 2007).

Key Concepts

Ethnic identity can be analyzed from different theoretical perspectives: from the naturalization of collective identities (Geertz, 1973); Marxist traditions that relate ethnicity and class or social subject and social conscience (Balibar, 1995); ideological production in relation to subjectivities processes (Hall & Du Gay, 1996); or as political strategies (Zizek, 1992), among others.

Grounded on a cultural-discursive reflection³, I assume the ethnic identity is always the provisional outcome of a process that takes place between the members of the ethnic group and the hegemonic discourses which give name to the national subjects. The indigenous create their own “name” in dialogue with the name by which the society knows them by (Rancière, 1995; Scott, 1995). Against the correct name of hegemonic relations, the indigenous negotiate their own name, in practical circumstances. It would be a mistake to think that the identity of the indigenous peoples is a complete and homogenous one because it would ignore the power relations that inhere in their existence.

Public policy defines individuals, and this notion allots each person his or her place in the hierarchical social order. It is clear, therefore, that giving a name to ethnic differences is a political act with a consequent political impact, because ascribing a name or label to others, together with the social value the name implies, will also determine that person’s participation in the public arena.

In Mexico, on the occasion of the “*meeting of the two worlds*” when the Spanish conquerors began ascribing the name “Indians” to all local people who were not Spaniards, they actually created an artificial subject without any cultural specificity or political presence. Being lumped together under the generic “Indian,” which is a social conglomerate devoid of shared culture and traditions, is different from describing oneself as *Rarámuri*, *Yoreme*, *Hñahñú* or any of the other 200 names (with different languages and culture) that existed at the time of the Spanish Conquest. And in their embroidery and weaving, we witness a similar phenomenon where images are used to determine or “name correctly” those whom the policy deems the “genuine Indian.”

Through the historic course of the Mexican Nation all of those who are not *Mestizos* have been called Indians. *Mestizo* is a complex concept in at least three uses: a) It can be

³ Based mainly on the theories proposed by Bajtín (2003). This author provides a lens to understand the dialogic relations in any text. This means that the iconic texts I analyze contain the presence of other discourses and are supported by them. In this sense, the corpus shows an interpretation of the cultural code constructed within the cultural context. In other words, what we can observe in the embroidery and its photographic representations are shared iconic ethnic identities.

derogative like in half blood vs. purity. b) It can serve political interests as in México, where *Mestizo* conceals the existing national diversity and the indigenous population, to homogenize the project of a Nation⁴. A social formation acquires its definition as a nation when it converts an individual subject into a national subject. In other words, a national community—Mexican in our case—is constituted when the individual subject is projected within a common narrative of “nation” that, despite having been fabricated in the recent past, appears to inherit a “natural” past dating from time immemorial. In Mexico, the indigenous peoples—more than 10 million—have an ambivalent presence within this narration of nation. In their role as ancestors of the “cosmic race,”⁵ their mythical origin is valued and even glorified; yet as modern-day Mexican citizens or native nations, they have become invisible. c) My use here of “*Mestizo*” is limited to the indigenous sense, meaning everyone who is not indigenous: Mexicans, Germans, Norwegians, French, etc. I do not discuss problems associated with the derogative sense sometimes implied; nor the ideological use in Mexico that hides the imposition of a homogeneous social, economic, and political system.

Therefore, embroidery and weaving are “names” or labels used to classify the indigenous peoples and to name themselves. The practice dates from colonial times when an edict from the conqueror assigned native dress and colors according to race or caste, distinguishing the indigenous peoples by ethnic group, and defining their place in society. In those days, the indigenous peoples followed the code on pain of death. Today the indigenous peoples have taken back the “name” imposed on them, investing it with a new signification and putting it to their own use as a political and commercial strategy.

Public policy is thereby doing a wrong to Mexico’s 64 indigenous tribes, all of whom are uniquely different from one another and different from the western world. Some of these tribes embroider and some do not. Each of the 64 tribes has its own language; each has its own political and historical knowledge. The indigenous peoples, to construct their own identity, have had to negotiate, redefine and reintroduce their own version of what indigenous identity is.

Embroidery in Cultural Research

Indigenous communities are privileged places for the analysis of cultural diversity. The concept of indigenous culture, and in my case, indigenous embroidery as a cultural production, can be found in at least three categories: a) When it characterizes a process of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development; b) When it indicates a given way of life of a people; and c) When it describes the products and practices of intellectual and artistic activity.

⁴ Benedict Anderson questions the origin and expansion of nationalisms. He shows that nations are not a product of pre-constructed conditions like language, race or religion. The existence of nations has been imagined (Anderson, 1983). But Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” cannot be transposed directly to colonial situations (Chatterjee, 2008). In our case, we will find different imagined communities: the hegemonic project and the innumerable fragments imagined by resistance to the first. The indigenous ethnic identity is not an exception to the hegemonic nation, but as I show in this place, it is more complex, diverse and differentiated from the universal idea of a homogenous nation.

⁵ Metaphor created by Vasconcelos, first Secretary of Education in the post-revolutionary period, who defined “*Mestizo*,” to imply the descendants “of a race forged out of the treasure of all the foregoing races, the final race, the cosmic race” (Vasconcelos, 1983).

Culture as Intellectual, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Development

The concept of culture is considered here a synonym of civilization. It refers to human groups regarding their progresses and accumulations. Classic expressions of this idea of culture are the reports of travelers in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th (Lumholtz, 1902). The modern projects for social development owe a lot to this concept of culture. Some diagnosis and evaluations about marginalization and poverty, with Western culture standards as their canon, consider the indigenous' goals and aspirations as backward. They accuse the indigenous peoples of being an obstacle against democracy and national integration.

Culture as a Given Way of Life of a People

In this sense culture is the complex whole that includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, laws, customs, and other abilities and habits acquired by the members of a socialized group. This concept of culture results in inventories that describe the various aspects of the life of a people (Furst, 1980; Negrín, 1977).

Culture as Products and Practices

This use of the concept deals with culture as an investigation of the style of the past. Iconic productions, textiles, legends, songs, rituals, etc., are described and compared, with the intention of finding the socializing values (Blum Schevill, 1986; Marks Greenfield, 2004).

These kinds of researches try to find the authentic indigenous being; it is a main concern for them that the indigenous remain unaltered and do not change or incorporate foreign contents to their cultures.

Because of this, the indigenous peoples, and the *Huichol* in particular, are studied in their traditions, in their singularity, and in the purity of their identity. Embroidery is related to their own culture. Nevertheless, the *Huichol* are modern while remaining indigenous. This statement, that may seem paradoxical at first sight, is not so: the contemporary *Huichol* don't consider themselves to be the guardians of an ancient culture, nor do they think that their culture is threatened, endangered, or that it is necessary for them to preserve it or to guard it against modernity. The Market and the State are the institutions that lead towards modernity; the communities that are called traditional make more and more use of them, transforming their festivities and rituals according to the rules of show business, and profiting from the goods that the state and political parties give to them with paternalistic purposes. I also distance myself from the concept of resistance because with this concept we can only observe the indigenous in their resistance movements but they can't be imagined in everyday survival strategies and agencies.

Weaving and Embroidery in Official Textbooks, Tourist Literature, and the Press

The first image of the modern-day indigenous person did not make an appearance in officially approved Mexican textbooks until 1979. Before then, the indigenous peoples were always depicted as references illustrating a mythical national past, be it Mayan or Aztec. Even

though photography is a 19th century invention, photographs were used in children's text books as a technique to suggest antiquity, their content being limited to archaeological ruins dating from pre-Hispanic times or to ancient clay or stone relics.

Post-revolutionary governments continuing the colonization process, but in a more populist form, went to great lengths to ensure neither extreme got the upper hand. However, recent PAN⁶ governments have returned more overtly to the original project of the Spanish Crown with no concession to populism. They are certain that the global market will gradually make indigenous peoples obsolete by enticing them into the glitzy realm of private property and individualism. This is amply illustrated in a Ministry of Public Education poster, taken in 2006, for distribution to all schools in the country. In this portrait of the Mexican nation, the "*Mestizo*" has become more fair-skinned and conventional, while the indigenous person has vanished altogether, being reduced to nothing more than the embroidery on the blouse the woman in the foreground is wearing. The difference between the 1921 post-revolution portrait of the "*Mestizo*" condition (where the embroidery constituted a political project promoting national integration) and this 2006 photograph illustrates an inexorable process of colonization and annihilation of the indigenous identity.

Embroidered garments also identify the indigenous person, and on many occasions, may even replace him or her. Textbooks have a long tradition of showing indigenous embroidery as an ethnic marker. Since 1922, embroidery has been presented also as the most significant feature of indigeneity in a "*Mestizo*." In order to acknowledge the indigenous background of the new Mexican race, the indigenous people appear in textbooks as the mythical ancestors wearing garments decorated with some imagined embroidery. However, when this feature came to be recognized as a differentiating factor in ethnic specificity that the official line sought to erase, the embroidery of the indigenous peoples disappeared from the textbooks. Indigenous people were converted into "peasants" whose homogeneity required a uniform type of dress deliberately to conceal their indigeneity, and thus the embroidery had to go. It was replaced by a straw hat, white shirt and trousers to denote the Mexican countryside, which by decree was to be viewed as "*Mestizo*." Contemporary indigenous people do not appear again until 1979, and once again they are signalled by their embroidered clothing.

Defining the indigenous people from the view expressed in the narration of the Mexican nation means indicating the pre-modernity of the tools they used in production, and indulging the tourist's romantic nostalgia for ancestral tradition. In textbooks, indigenous handicraft skills and tools are condensed into the backstrap loom.

These same images recur in other publications: for example in the magazine *Escala*⁷, whose association of the indigenous person with traditional weaving seeks to appeal to the tourist. An equivalent photograph of a *Huichol* woman at her loom also appears in *National*

⁶ *Partido de Acción Nacional*, with a definite conservative ideology, has been the Party in power in Mexico since 2000.

⁷ The *Aeroméxico* in-flight magazine.



Figure 1. Photograph of the 1921 cover of the periodical, *El Maestro: Revista de Cultural Nacional* [The Teacher: Magazine of National Culture].

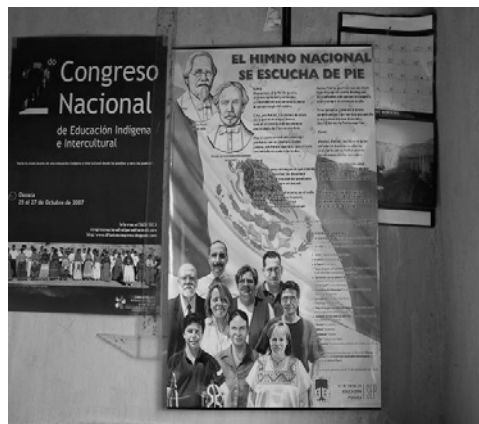


Figure 2. Photograph of the poster: “The National Anthem is heard standing up,” edited for all public primary schools in Mexico (2006).

Geographic. Both photographs, taken with such different motives, coincide in subject and aesthetic composition. The backstrap loom frequently makes an appearance at today's indigenous handicraft fairs wherever weaving is on display; there are usually small unfinished pieces for sale to illustrate the complexity of the manufacturing process. In situations overtly aimed at tourists, a woman will actually be present working the loom, guaranteeing thereby that the weaving on sale is handmade, one-of-a-kind, and authentic.

The rest of the corpus illustrates the same synthesis: indigenous means their embroidery, or rather the updated version of it that is produced for the global market in high scale boutiques. One unexpected recent development is the appearance of indigenous people in recruiting students for universities. The Iberoamericana University and the Tecnológico de Monterrey, two extremely expensive private universities, have added social service as a complement to their academic programme, and both universities use embroidery in their advertisements to denote the indigenous population, thereby establishing a hierarchy as regards the student population the universities hope to recruit.

Weaving and Embroidery from the Wixaritari Themselves

In the *Huichol* community of San Miguel Huaixtita, few women today even know how to use a loom. They will tell you they have so many things to do at the same time that they cannot afford to remain fixed in one spot for prolonged periods of time. Instead of weaving, therefore, today's women embroider their bags, because embroidery can be put down and taken up at will. Straps for the bags are then specially commissioned from workers making only that component in the process of manufacturing bags for sale. Some older women still weave bags entirely on the loom, but these are specially made to order or for sale to outsiders.

At San Miguel Huaixtita's Tatutsi Maxakwaxi secondary school a weaving workshop is provided, and some children and mothers do indeed sign up. However, as the teacher explained, students can only be taught to weave bracelets, not bags, because the two-hour session would only be enough to fix the weft and warp threads, leaving no time for actual weaving—the school simply does not have enough space for a loom to remain assembled between classes. It seems today's schools do not adapt very easily to the expected ancestral techniques of Mexico's indigenous peoples.

Other things have changed in the production of weaving. The influence of exposure to life outside the community that comes with going to school, plus the demands of commerce, are clearly detected in the materials, decorative themes, and the linear and symmetrical structure.

In most cases, whether the bags are for sale or personal consumption, natural fibres (wool and cotton) have been replaced by synthetic yarns that come in a wider range of colors, are harder wearing and easier to handle. Few indigenous people now carry a woollen or cotton bag; indeed, most woollen bags produced today are directed to the tourist who actively seeks out "all things natural." A counter-current can be observed in teachers at Tatutsi Maxakwaxi who have taken to carrying woollen bags with ancient designs on them. They feel a duty to promote an awareness of their people's heritage, and hope by their example to renew interest among *Huichol* children who would otherwise opt automatically for the synthetic, brightly embroidered bags.

The motifs on the bags may be any of the range of ancient designs that sell better to city buyers who are looking for antiquity and authenticity. In the Sierra, bags carried by the *Huichol* men and women themselves are mainly inspired by the printed examples of western themes introduced into the community by travelling vendors. The colors on bags supplied by these salesmen are eye-catching, vibrant, and whatever happens to be in vogue at the time.

Symmetry is another aspect that has changed; today's bags are more symmetrical than those made in the past. Ancient bags often feature a collection of individual designs, suggesting the bag was also a sampler. They had a different obverse and reverse, and the motifs on the two faces of the bag were different too. Juan Negrín, a researcher of *Huichol* culture, says that this phenomenon is the result of their nature-related cosmogony which is anything but symmetrical. Everardo, a *Huichol* teacher, sees it as an advantage to the purchaser who is thus actually acquiring two bags in one. What emerges from both explanations is a positive interpretation of the irregularity.

By contrast, in the '70s when the National Institute for the Indigenous Peoples (INI) sought to boost sales of *Huichol* handicrafts to the tourist industry, we learn they chose bags and embroidery with no contradiction or uneven variations in the motifs or overall design. The "sampler bags" were just not commercially viable, and handicrafts produced these days for the tourist demonstrate a clear preference for symmetry as well as colourful adaptations of the very oldest designs.

For the *Huichol* people, embroidery is an ethnic marker they use to differentiate between individual *Huichol* communities, between generations in their own community, and to distinguish themselves from the tourist and the *Mestizo* Mexicans. The embroidery on garments they make for themselves has changed over time, and individual innovations are allowed.

As in the case of woven bags, embroidered bags made for home use are changing rapidly too. New designs and colors are appearing all the time. They are seen as "passing fashions" imposed by young girls who embroider their bags with the designs purchased from the visiting "contraband" salesmen. When one young girl creates a design that appeals to others, she will sometimes sell her composition, and the going rate is currently 100 pesos. To the older generation, these modern bags are no longer genuinely *Huichol*; thus the generation gap is visible even in the taste for bags.

Globalization has made an impact on constantly changing identities and the embroidery of *Huichol* bags. At an indigenous market for tourists in San Cristóbal de las Casas⁸, I found a bag made in China. The young *Tzeltal* girl tried to pass it off as an "original from here," guessing that my tastes were tourist. Back in the Sierra, as it would never occur to *Huichol* people to question or discuss authenticity and tradition, they readily identify the embroidered motif as their own, and even acknowledge the commercial skills of the Chinese and the bag's attractiveness, despite the minimum of actual embroidery work involved. Their only worry is that their own bags (involving much more embroidery) are priced at 500 pesos, whilst the Chinese bags sell for 40 pesos.

⁸ State of Chiapas, in southern Mexico.

Conclusions

Social roles and hierarchies are attributed to collective groups by the mere name they are given. But it is also through action that an indigenous identity discourse is forged; a discourse, in this case, with which the Indians would like to “name” themselves. My proposal here is that ethnic identity is neither granted exclusively from the outside, nor only constructed from the own point of view, but instead it is formed in the confrontation between hegemonic practices and the self-emancipation and subordination processes. It is for this reason that the indigenous ethnic identities are changeable and dynamic, and are actualized and negotiated in different moments.

The indigenous create their own “name” in dialogue with the name with which the society knows them by. Against the “correct name” of hegemonic relations, the indigenous negotiate their own name, the “incorrect” one, in practical circumstances. Ethnicity, then, is not static; it modifies itself, adjusts, adapts and gives new meanings to the indigenous being.

Indigenous embroidery is an example that “*Mestizo*” is present everywhere, and that it is not the corruption of the standard, but a challenge to the practices that label and impoverish the different identities. The recognition of “*Mestizo*” as a central concept brings about a fundamental consequence: one of our main goals should be the mutual acknowledgment in the public sphere, but an acknowledgement that is guided by the name each one chooses, and not by the one that is imposed upon us.

The dynamism of the indigenous identity, expressed in ways of adaptation to specific historical moments, can be a source of motivation, reflection, and example to the political crisis of modern societies.

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