

muxe

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Abstract:

Muxe [tercer género] es un término muy específico, que debe interpretarse dentro de la cultura **indígena zapoteca** de **origen prehispánico** en la zona del istmo de Tehuantepec, en la región costera del estado de **Oaxaca**, al sur de México y se refiere a un grupo de personas que están **fuera del mecanismo binario de género**. En este contexto muxes, a quienes originalmente se les había atribuido una **identidad de género masculina**, asumen en cambio una **identidad femenina**, muy amenudo también en la ropa que usan, y siempre en el nombre. Lo que puede sorprender es el **clima de aceptación general** del que pueden gozar en el territorio de esta región, que contrasta con la **actitud tradicionalmente machista** de la sociedad mexicana. Muy a menudo, de hecho, va mucho más allá de la simple aceptación social y de hecho muchas **familias** consideran una **auténtica fortuna** tener dentro de sí una figura de este tipo, que habitualmente se encuadra también a través de acciones de cuidado, superando la **tradicional subdivisión de género en el trabajo**.

Muxe [third gender] is a term used in the **Zapotec community** of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, in the Mexican state of **Oaxaca**. It is a word that refers to people who **do not identify** with the **binary gender system** and, although by **birth assigned to the male gender**, they **identify instead with a female identity** often realized through the use of traditional woman clothing. An attitude of social acceptance prevails in the indigenous community to which they belong.

Etymology:

It is thought that the word **muxe** may derive from the Spanish word **mujer**, meaning 'woman', and devolved **from a pronunciation** of the letter 'x' that would have sounded very similar to 'sh' [pronunciation similar to the word 'ship' in English] at the time of **colonization of the Oaxaca region** (Mexico). It is used both as a **noun** (the muxes) and as an **adjective** (the muxe culture).

Cultural specificity:

Together with **Chapas**, **Oaxaca** is one of the two Mexican regions with the highest percentage of **indigenous population**. Within such a context, the **Zapotec community** has seen, in particular in the last two decades, a **growing re-evaluation** of its **cultural and linguistic autonomy**. Several traditions report that the **muxe culture** is a significant part of the **pre-colonial civilization**. It should be though emphasized that, in general, these **alternative gender figures** refer to people who were originally ascribed a **male identity**, whose **feminization** corresponds, in a patriarchal culture, to a **reduction in social role**. Among the figures that in **different cultures** of the world refer to a 'third sex,' **muxe** can be considered similar to the Neapolitan term 'femminiello,' on which many studies have been conducted (e.g., Vesce, 2017).

Cultural specificity can be better drawn only after placing this term within a much more **widespread phenomenon** that finds space within a general re-discussion of the gender binary system of definition. Indeed, beyond the rigid schema that provides for **only one sexual orientation** (the heterosexual one) and **only two gender identities** (the male and the female), during the 20th century especially, phenomena of **rediscussion of such stereotypes** have been taking place. Such processes have led to the emergence of **alternative symbolic figurations** that have mostly taken on the name of **transsexuality** or **transgenderism**, but have also allowed the emergence of phenomena such as that of **intersexuality**, which had been previously totally **silenced** by **mainstream medicine** and its **normative**

system.

When these paths of **identity rediscussion** developed in Europe, studies were presented by European researchers such as **Karl Heinrich Ulrichs** [1825-1895], (1864-1879/1994), and **Magnus Hirschfeld** [1868-1935], (1910/1991; 1920/2000) that used the definition of 'third sex' in different ways. Yet, it was not until the late 20th century that the term '**queer**' appeared in this field, challenging and subverting the more traditional mechanisms of definition precisely because it **theorizes** and **practices** a **crossing of identity boundaries** of both **sexual orientation** and **gender identity**.

It should be though emphasized that terms such as '**muxe**' (Mexican), '**bardash**' (Native American), '**hijra**', '**chakka**' (Indian), or the Neapolitan '**femminiello**' refer to **independent phenomena** that often **predate** these paths of **identity research**, and express a **relocation of figures** that manifest an ability to represent a sort of subculture that is engendered by society to which it belongs and at the same time distances itself from it.

It important to notice that, in general, all these **figurations** are **constructed** on the basis of an original attribution of **masculine gender identity** against which a **distancing** takes place, in some ways critical but often resulting in the **assumption of a stereotypical feminine character**.



Conversely, beyond a great many cases of male cross-dressing by some women, there do not appear, at least in such clear-cut terms, parallel phenomena of **collective identity construction** expressing a **gender crossing** in the **opposite direction**, from **female to male**. These cases of cross-dressing performed by women are mostly enacted **individually rather than collectively** in order to gain **greater freedom** of movement **within patriarchal societies**, and often correspond to a **relational/sexual orientation** towards other **women**.

In the case of **muxe**, the **abandonment of an original male gender identity** is a **social and collective stance** which entails the loss of a series of **privileges** related to the **patriarchal character** of society resulting in a **placement of social inferiority**.

In **Mexico**, where the numerical consistency of muxe has been ranked by some studies at around **6 % of the population** of the communities in which the phenomenon manifests, the muxes **do not seem to know a dimension of marginalization** such as that which often characterizes transgender people in other contexts.

In general, an attitude of **full recognition** of their presence prevails in the community they belong to. According to some testimonies (e.g., Olita 2018; *The Guardian*, 2017), **families** even consider it a **real fortune** to have a muxe member in their midst, due to the ability that characterizes this subjectivity to **combine stereotypical masculine elements** (e.g., greater physical strength) with **characteristics considered purely feminine**, such as greater sensitivity.

A parental figure may for example think that s/he has had a privileged lot in a muxe child who mostly **does not make**

it to marry, and will thus will remain by her/his side when s/he needs to receive more **care** at an **older age**.

More generally, muxes may have the ability to **overcome the gender stereotypes** present in the **traditional division of labor** and thus take on both hard labor (e.g., in agricultural or animal husbandry activities) and domestic tasks normally entrusted to women.

Therefore, a **general attitude of acceptance prevails**, which the muxe accounts credit to a **pre-Christian indigenous culture** prior to colonization. However, it cannot be ruled out that, within the **overall Mexican context** that exhibits many traits of **homotransfobia** and **machismo**, some discriminatory attitudes are still present.

These contradictory phenomena thus **combine cultural elements from Spanish colonization** and elements originating from **indigenous civilizations**, with the result that, for which concerns **traditionalist view of gender identities**, **contemporary Mexico** combines **elements of resistance** and **homologation**.

Let's consider, for example, the traditionalist view of **women's place** in society. On the one hand, the **machismo** characteristic of **patriarchal societies** is culturally very present, and manifests itself also through a **massive phenomenon of feminicides** that perhaps has no equal in any other country of the world, and that in areas close to the region of Oaxaca has produced in recent times a **great many murders** even of **transgender women**. On the other hand, the **mystique of the value of motherhood** moves beyond the socially accepted rules and accept maternity also outside marriage.



(Photo: Gabriel Plata) <https://www.iadb.org/es/mejorandovidas/muxes-el-tercer-sexo-de-mexico>

Neither **machos** nor **mothers**, figures such as the **muxes** **do not conform** to these traditionalist view of gender identity. Though for the most part muxes live a rather traditional life in the **family of origin**, there is a very recent emerging desire to vindicate both the possibility of **creating one's own family** and of a **collective reinforcement of muxe subjectivity** and **spaces for public expression** through manifestations (Islas, 2005; Avgeropoulos, 2007; Olita, 2018).

Problematization:

A reality such as **muxe** suggests manifold **insights**. Indeed, the enhancement of gender paths of identity subjectivity that refer to specific contexts **raises strong questions** even for the **LGBTQ+ movement** itself.

There is no doubt that the **increased visibility** that the emergence of these issues has made possible has allowed these identity paths to be more widely known - this is for example true for subjectivities such as 'hijra' in India.

However, from an **anticolonialist perspective**, it must be kept in mind that these very specific paths pose the problem of the extent to which the **Western cultural system** has tended to **repress** freer pre-existing expressions. And even now, when these identity paths are becoming more visible, it should be considered whether they do not run the risk of **being homologated - and ri-appropriated** - through and within a **Western gaze** and a Western perspective. An example would be the Pride marches, which indeed offer collective visibility and create a wider sense of community, but they are not part of the local cultural traditions.

Moreover, it might be interesting to delve into the **reasons** why these phenomena occur (almost) exclusively from **subjects** who carry an originally **male gender attribution**. While it is true that the **critique of patriarchy** makes urgent and necessary a questioning of the **traditional figuration of the role occupied by men**, it also evident that, once again, it is precisely '**males**' who, however **far from heteronormativity**, overwhelmingly **occupy the scene**.

In their originality, these paths certainly contribute to a dimension in which a **critique** of a **binary system** is enacted. The so-called 'third sex' radically questions a systemic, typically Western mode, in which there are no alternatives between two stereotypical models.

However, one can also ask whether **distancing from the originally ascribed male gender identity** to embrace a **female identity** does not result in **reproducing preconstituted stereotypes** of the opposite gender, thus running the risk of **reinforcing the binary system**. Conversely, the **queer** logic affirms the full **freedom** of the subject to **cross sexual and affective identities** and orientations, without for that reason having to entrench oneself in a new form of self-recognition.

Communication strategies:

The use of the term **muje** has long been characteristic of **home communities**, indicating a cultural specificity that cannot be homologated to other forms of expression that, in the Mexican context, refer to **sexual orientation** or **gender identity** that **do not conform** to **prevailing social norms**.

Interestingly, however, some **muje witnesses** (Islas, 2005; Avgeropoulos, 2007; Olita, 2018) precisely in relation to their own **self-definition**, point out how, in both national and international contexts, they recognize themselves in terms that are used to represent identity paths to which they feel akin – e.g., homosexual.

The term is **not** generally **considered offensive** since it is used **within the community culture** for a figure who is generally **respected**, and in a more general context to denote a specific path known to scholars or activists in the Mexican LGBTQ+ movement.

Indeed, in recent decades there has been a growing attention to this reality both in the **national context** of Mexico, as well as in others. In several documentaries (Islas, 2005; Avgeropoulos, 2007; Olita, 2018), there is evidence of an **annual muje celebration** that has many **characteristics** that resemble that of the **Prides** present in Mexico as well as internationally, but with the **proud assertion** of the **muje specificity**.



Subversion:

The presence of the **muxe** is reported mainly within **subaltern classes**, but in the last decades there is a new emerging **cultural representation** of them through figures who have achieved a certain **public and political visibility**, together with the representations of muxes in visual productions, either as documentaries or as film protagonists.

One of the most prominent **political figures** is **Amaranta Gomez Regalado**, who wanted to give a **public political dimension** to the expression of **muxe subjectivity** by standing as a congressional candidate for the **México Posible** party in the 2003 Oaxaca state elections.

Regalado's broad political platform also included calls for the **decriminalization of marijuana** and **abortion**, for which there is legislation characterized by **huge disparities** between states due to Mexico's federal structure, with some cases of **heavy judicial repression**.

Performer Lukas Avendaño brought **muxe representation** into the **arts**. His recent work includes **queer-themed postmodernist works** that offer an alternative to Mexican nationalist representations, and in particular to that of Zapotec and Tehuana women.



(Photo: Mario Patiño)



(Photo: Mario Patiño)

<https://siwarmayu.com/lukas-avendano-reflections-from-muxeidad/>

<https://www.quepasaoaxaca.com/lukas-avendano-un-caso-exitoso-del-fracaso/>

Avendaño embodies the **complex identity of muxe and homosexual male** in the Tehuantepec area where he was born. His **crossdressing performance** interweaves ritual dances with passages and actions that engage audience members in autobiographical storylines in order to **challenge** the widely held view of a **gay-friendly indigenous culture**, and point toward the existence of lives that negotiate pain and loneliness through the pride of self-affirmation.

A **subjectivity** in some ways similar to that of **muxe** is that defined as '**sbiza'ah**.' It is present within other **Zapotec communities** in the Oaxaca region. This is one of the regions where the presence of **indigenous people is most prominent**, and is also currently finding **recognition** through a series of regulations that tend to the **preservation of**

their cultural tradition and a certain autonomy capable of retaining certain characteristics of the tradition of indigenous communities.

Discussion:

- In your opinion, what does 'third gender' indicates?
- Do the muxes coincide with the image of transsexuality that you have?
- What are muxes called in the context in which you live?
- Which aspects did you find most interesting in the description given of the muxe identity?
- How would you consider the terms 'colonial' and anti-colonial' in relation to the description of the muxes provided in this entry?

References/Further Readings:

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Films/documentaries:

- *Muxes auténticas intrépidas y buscadoras de peligro* [Muxes: authentic, daring and looking for troubles]. (2005). MEX. Directed by Alejandra Islas.
- *Muxes de Juchitan* [Muxes of Juchitan]. (2007). MEX. Directed by Yorgos Avgeropoulos.
- *Muxes* (2018) MEX. Directed by Ivan Olita.

Links:

<https://www.99.media/it/muxes-una-storia-di-integrazione-dalle-radici-antiche/>

Muxes. Mexico's third gender. *The Guardian* (2017): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iiek6JxYJLs>

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