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 genera**l 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 Tehuatepec, 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 i**ndigenous 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 Hirschfield** [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 orginal 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 perfomed 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; Avgeropoulus, 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 idenity** 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 **muxe** 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 **muxe witnesses** (Islas, 2005; Avgeropoulus, 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; Avgeropoulus, 2007; Olita, 2018), there is evidence of an **annual muxe 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 **muxe 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)
https://www.quepasaoaxaca.com/lukas-avendano-un-caso-exitoso-del-fracaso/



(Photo: Mario Patiño)
https://siwarmayu.com/lukas-avendano-reflections-from-muxeidad/

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 Avgeropoulus.
- *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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