

THE AESTHETICS OF OPPRESSION



Traditional Arts of Women in Mexico

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What do we mean by the traditional arts of women? All too often we are talking about activities that are not considered art either by the women who perform the tasks or by the societies in which they live. Some peoples do not conceptualize transforming mere cultural¹ activities into the domain of art. When the category does exist, women rarely emerge as the great artists. Coming from a society where art is recognized, valued and produced almost entirely by men, it is not surprising that

American feminists are interested in looking at the relationship women have to art in other cultures, to see if the comparison sheds additional light on the American condition. Before entering into such a discussion with material from Mexico, however, we should provide a more specific context for the cross-cultural analysis by reviewing some issues concerning art in the United States.

Our society has a hierarchical view of art, making rigorous distinctions be-

tween the so-called fine arts and the traditional or folk. The nature of fine arts is individualistic, that of the folk, collective. The fine arts represent the work of specialists, recognized personalities who dedicate themselves almost exclusively to their art. Even when they supplement their incomes with additional jobs, the culture sees them as artists first. The folk arts, on the contrary, are the work of nonspecialists, unknown people who are, perhaps, farmers, fishermen, miners, individuals who make modest livings in "old-fashioned" ways and happen to produce folk art on the side. What is more, according to cultural definitions, folk artists do not create so much as carry on timeless traditions. They are living vestiges of the past and the more obscure they are, the more authentic they appear.

In a culture where progress, specialization and rugged individualism are valued, why have we created and maintained such a static category as the traditional arts? We could argue that the anonymity and timelessness imposed on folk art permit those who practice the fine arts to borrow freely from traditional motifs. Who would accuse a Bartók of plagiarism just because he used Hungarian peasant melodies? Less cynically, but troubling all the same, we might suggest that the alienation of our lives in modern America has awakened in many a yearning for simpler times and forms. Yet in order to have the "folk," a group of people must preserve for us the ways of the past—in the hills of Appalachia, in the African bush or in mud huts in Mexico.

Feminists today are well acquainted with the cultural strategy that keeps folk artists in the obscurity of their grass-roots authenticity, for women have been erased in similar ways. Like the folk artist, woman is *by definition* a nonspecialist and a carrier of traditions. She is first and foremost a wife-mother whose social and economic duties prevent her from having the time to specialize. Then, even if class privilege gives her the option to refuse her sex's destiny, she still has to fight the culture's traditional view that her creative powers are limited by her biology.

Our culture has so successfully confined the arts to the male sphere that it has developed sex-specific vocabularies to distinguish work done by men (specialized) from that done by women (generalized). Thus, although tasks traditionally assigned to women usually fall outside the arts entirely, a number of skills become lesser arts when per-

formed by male specialists. Women, for example, do sewing and cooking. Men are couturiérs or chefs. Careful to mark the status relationships, we borrow terms from the lofty French to describe the specialized work of a man, leaving the lower-class Anglo-Saxon to identify the chores that fragment a woman's day. Of course there are female couturiéres and chefs, and the numbers are undoubtedly growing as women today succeed in becoming professionals in these and other fields. Yet recent changes do not negate the long cultural history of the sexes in American society in which men (at least of certain classes) have been encouraged to specialize, while women (despite their class) have almost always been less rigorously trained, at best educated to dabble in a few areas, but by and large inadequately prepared for anything other than, perhaps, wifing and mothering.

While feminist artists continue their struggle to change cultural definitions and thereby gain entry into the male-dominated world of the fine arts, some are also trying to open the Academy to work usually associated with the "inferior" crafts or simply with the domain of women's work. In the process, they have been collecting the nearly forgotten traditions of women in rural America and abroad, creating a specifically female folk culture by bringing to light previously unrecognized skills of unknown women who never had the chance to specialize. Given feminist consciousness, we can hope that those who produce the recently recognized art will emerge from obscurity as individuals, instead of being reduced to the collective anonymity so characteristically the fate of traditional artists. Still, lingering questions must be raised, for it is not entirely clear that we see what our interest in folk art may mean for those women who happen to be carrying on our timeless, authentic female culture.

Other political movements have heralded the art of the folk while fighting to end their oppression—i.e., the Narodniki in czarist Russia, intellectuals in the Mexican and Irish revolutions, leaders of Black and Native American Power movements—and it might be useful to analyze their histories carefully. As a start, let us look at postrevolutionary Mexico, where we shall see how the enthusiasm expressed by urban political leaders for traditional culture has been a mixed blessing, particularly for those who have been living the impoverished reality which seems to preserve folk art the best. Specifically we

shall see how Indian women from Hueyapan, a highland village in the state of Morelos, have been encouraged to maintain their so-called Indian culture—in essence their lower socioeconomic status—by a nation whose "revolutionary" ideals call for the preservation of Mexico's indigenous heritage.

◆◆◆◆◆ A Mexican Indian Example

Looking at the traditional culture of Hueyapan is like looking into a reservoir of oppression. It is a mixture of cultural hand-me-downs from the ruling class, combined with a few vestiges from pre-Hispanic times that have managed to survive over 400 years of Spanish/Hispanic occupation. We find, for example, under the rubric of indigenous culture, sixteenth-century Spanish colonial dress, medieval miracle plays, and renaissance double-reeded instruments played only to celebrate Catholic fiesta days. As for those customs which are truly of pre-Hispanic origin, they have been transformed almost beyond recognition to conform to the dictates of Hispanic cultural rules. What is more, these modified indigenous forms frequently exist only because they have become part of the dominant culture as well.

After the Revolution of 1910–1920, the Mexican government began actively to preserve and reinforce so-called indigenous customs. For ideological purposes, political leaders wanted to glorify the country's unique heritage, partly Spanish, partly Indian. Artists painted, choreographed and wrote about Indians, while philosophers philosophized about them. Archeologists, sculptors and architects labored to restore and celebrate pre-Hispanic culture. Folk arts began to flourish. So successful was this cultural renaissance that by the 1950s tourists were flocking to Mexico to visit museums and pre-Hispanic ruins, to purchase inexpensive traditional art objects and to travel into the interior to see how the Indians lived in their natural habitats.

In the eyes of many Hueyapeños, this glorification of Mexico's "roots" can do little more than reinforce their oppression. Living in a community where the socioeconomic realities of their traditional culture prohibit them from enjoying the conveniences of modern Mexico, they claim that the only viable future for the villagers lies in losing their Indian identity. Many of the young people, particularly women, are not waiting for changes to take place in Hueyapan and have migrated instead to Mexico City and Cuernavaca.

vaca. As far as they are concerned, it is better to work long hours as maids in comfortable homes, or live in the urban slums, than to remain in Hueyapan and continue their tedious—albeit “folkloric”—Indian existence.

That more women than men want to leave Hueyapan is directly related to the distribution of so-called traditional culture in the village. In a society where to be traditional or indigenous still brings both low social status and hard work, the world of Hueyapan women is decidedly more Indian than that of its men. What is true here simply supports what anthropologists writing about modernization have found elsewhere: almost always men assimilate more quickly in Third World countries, for capitalist and socialist systems integrate them more rapidly into urban and rural work forces. Women who do not become maids in the cities are often isolated at home where they provide unpaid labor by taking care of their husbands and reproducing new workers, remaining, as a result, more “conservative” culturally. Even in places where men no longer practice traditional customs, women often continue to do so, speaking the local language among themselves, dressing in the old way and continuing to work with little help from labor-saving technology.² As any Hueyapan woman will explain, women who stay in the village are the last to change.

The Mexican government has further contributed to the division between the modernizing man and the traditional woman by its interest in promoting indigenous culture. On the one hand, it has provided more training and technology to change the nature of men's work than women's. On the other hand, it has encouraged women more than men to develop their traditional skills. In Hueyapan, for instance, where weaving still exists, government programs have tried to interest local women in making shawls, ponchos and scarves for the tourist trade. What is more, when government representatives come to the village on official visits—an event that happens several times a year—they appreciate it if the Hueyapeños welcome them with an ethnic reception. Thus, in the name of paying homage to Mexico's indigenous heritage, young girls are dressed up in the so-called Indian costume³ native to the area and receive the honored guests with flowers and little speeches in Nahuatl.⁴ Furthermore, women prepare a *mole* meal, the traditional fiesta dish, for these government representatives.

To move to a more specific analysis, we could look at almost any one of the so-called indigenous traditions found in Hueyapan today to illustrate in concrete terms how the villagers' culture reflects their long history of being dominated by a non-Indian society. Although industrialization has hardly brought liberation, it is still a fact that the poorest rural communities throughout Mexico are generally the most “Indian.” What is more, as these villages begin to change, traditional culture holds on the longest among the most oppressed inhabitants, particularly the women, who for social, economic and cultural reasons remain more isolated from the influences of modernization. Given that Mexico is interested in both industrializing the country and preserving its so-called indigenous heritage, we could suggest that one resolution of the problem has been to “develop” one sex and sustain the past with the other. Drawing on traditional Hispanic definitions of sex roles and status differentiations between men and women, the choice was easily made. For purposes of this discussion, then, let us turn to traditional cooking to see what the preservation of this “folk art” has meant in the daily lives of Hueyapan women.

The Art of Cooking

In a recent article entitled “The Magic of Mexican Food North of the Border,” Craig Claiborne whimsically begins:

For some confounding reason known only to a few Aztec gods, the authentic flavors of the Mexican kitchen, like certain fine wines and some exotic plants, do not travel well. They transport poorly through some curious dilution of tastes, some diminution of savor, some evanescence of essences [New York Times, September 21, 1977].

Could Claiborne have written this if he had tasted Mexican food prepared in an indigenous peasant village? His calling forth of mystery, humor and romance inadequately describes what one experiences in today's closest equivalent to an Aztec kitchen. There, it is true, the ingredients are very fresh and the food has that special aroma of the open hearth, but it also has been ground first, for tedious hours, on special volcanic stones (*metates*) that are generations old, and cooked in earthenware pots seasoned by years of use. There is no secret why Mexican food does not travel; it cannot even be re-created properly in Mexico City, much less New York. What we lack are the necessary “rustic” working condi-

tions and equipment.

While members of the privileged classes, particularly from abroad, have come to appreciate Mexican cooking as one of the world's great cuisines, for Hueyapeños it remains one of the endless chores that women must attend to in the course of a day's work. As far as many villagers are concerned, the food they eat and the process involved in its preparation are merely additional indications of their inferior status. If they had the means, therefore, they would stop eating like Indians and would eat as they think the rich do, buying food in tin cans and cellophane packages which they—or preferably a maid—would heat quickly over a gas stove. Although most Hueyapeños recognize that certain foods, tortillas for example, taste better when prepared at home, the labor entailed is enormous, encouraging the women, more than the men, to seek ways of simplifying the work.

In almost every home in Hueyapan, the basic daily diet consists of tortillas and boiled beans served with *chile* peppers, sometimes in a sauce, sometimes just off the vine.⁵ At every meal, even among the poorest, one is sure to have these staple foods and then, depending on the family's income, the productivity of the barnyard, fields and orchards, other dishes may be added. At breakfast and supper—the latter being a very light meal with perhaps only one tortilla wrapped around a few beans—weak and highly sweetened coffee or herbal tea is served, substituted on rare occasions by hot chocolate. Coffee, like chocolate, is expensive and must be purchased, while most of the teas are grown locally. Sweet rolls (*pan dulce*) baked in the village and bought at nearby stores are also frequently served at breakfast or dinner, particularly to children.

If the family can afford it, women usually prepare additional dishes for the main meal at midday. Lunch specialties may be nothing more elaborate than one of several kinds of *chile* sauces, beans prepared with the flavorful *ayocote* flower or fried in a bit of lard. But on market day, a piece of beef or pork may also be added (one kilo for about 14 people), boiled with seasonings and served in its broth. Beef may be cooked in a beef *mole* soup instead. When meat is unavailable or too expensive, noodle soup, prepared with pork fat, or pork rind fried in a soupy, green *chile* sauce provide substitutes. Although chickens and turkeys are fiesta foods only, eggs fried in pork fat and a *chile* sauce may also appear, perhaps once a week, in the diet of families

who raise laying hens or have enough money to purchase eggs at the store (four or five eggs would serve 14 people). Another popular dish, when they are in season, is stewed prickly pear cactus shoots (*nopalitos*). Finally, after fiestas, the leftover *mole* sauce (see below) is used to make *enchiladas* and *chilaquiles*.

Women prepare the most elaborate meals on fiesta days. Traditionally Hueyapeños celebrate at least ten village-wide Catholic fiestas as well as the individual saint days of members of the family. Since the Mexican Revolution, about five national holidays have been added. All celebrations, be they religious or secular, village-wide or family, are feted by serving a traditional menu. Although Hueyapeños share responsibilities by sponsoring one fiesta or another in a given year, at which time they have open house, most families who can manage to—and most sacrifice so that they can—still celebrate at home as well, at least for the most important fiestas. Relatives, *compadres* and *comadres* (individuals with whom the family has a formal ritual relationship blessed by the Church), and political friends, visit one another at these times, eating the same traditional dishes at each home.

For birthdays and other family-based holidays, there is a special breakfast of *atole* and meat *tamales* as well as the elaborate midday meal. Meat *tamales* take hours to prepare and must be made the night before by a team of women—usually the mother-in-law, the wife, perhaps a teenage daughter still living at home and a *comadre* or two (in particular widows with no family left in the village who have time to help on such occasions). Since the work goes on late into the night, only to begin again before dawn the next day, the invited assistants do not bother to go home, but wrap themselves up in blankets they bring along with them and curl up on straw mats placed on the dirt floor in the kitchen. Thus, by the time the male family members and a few guests—mostly men as well—are enjoying a *tamale-atole* breakfast, the women have long been at work, some looking after the hot *atole* corn meal drink and others attending to the main meal of the day, butchering turkeys or chickens, cooking the soup, the rice, the *mole colorado*,⁶ the bean and plain *tamales*, the boiled beans and the countless tortillas.

Fiestas, it is true, give women the chance to cook, eat and drink together, certainly providing some relief from their normal routines. Still, the work is

exhausting and may go on for several days, rarely letting up enough for women to have a chance to leave the kitchen and enjoy the dancing or other party activities. What is more, once the holiday is over, women, particularly mothers with young children, are faced once again with their strenuous daily schedules.

Mexican cooking is difficult and time-consuming under traditional conditions mainly because almost every ingredient must be ground finely by hand—from the corn used in tortillas *tamales* and *atole*, to every spice and vegetable added to a *mole* or *chile* sauce. The work is back-breaking, even for women used to it, and must be performed kneeling before the large grinding stone (*metate*), a kitchen utensil known pre-Hispanically throughout America.

Since the 1950s Hueyapan has actually had a number of corn mills, eliminating the need to grind corn by hand. According to the women, however, many men initially objected to the mills. Not only did they complain about the cost (two cents a bucket), but they did not like the texture of mill-ground tortillas. Corn ground on the *metates* simply tasted better. Another innovation which met with a mixed reaction was the tortilla press, used to shape tortillas that traditionally are fashioned between a woman's hands into paper-thin disks.

Despite the new improvements, the work of "throwing" tortillas remains endless, for a family of 14 eats well over 50 at one meal and expects them fresh and hot off the griddle at least twice a day. What women really need to simplify their work is a tortilla factory, where hot tortillas can be purchased before each meal. While many non-Indian communities surrounding the village have such *tortillerías*, there is no talk as yet of introducing one into Hueyapan.

Given the argument developed so far we can now conclude with a few recipes, letting the descriptions of the preparations and the ingredients speak for themselves. No attempt will be made here to help the reader reproduce these dishes in a modern kitchen, nor will proportions be systematically provided. Traditional Mexican cooking, at least in Hueyapan, has been a matter of availability of resources: what has been harvested, what the family can afford to buy, how many people must be fed with a small fixed budget. One chicken, for example, can easily serve 20 people. When the soup gets low, one just adds more water and another leaf of pepper-

mint. There are no exact amounts of this's and that's and it would therefore be an arbitrary exercise to suggest that there were.

What can be discussed is the labor involved in preparing a particular dish and whether the ingredients are grown locally or must be purchased. Furthermore we can note the origins of the ingredients at the time of conquest to aid us in identifying the influences Hispanic tastes have had on so-called indigenous food.

It will become immediately evident that fiesta food, more than the basic staples, shows considerable Iberian/Old World influence. This is hardly surprising when we remember that all aspects of the Indians' ritual life became the solemn responsibility of the Catholic missionaries who settled in indigenous towns during the early colonial period, converting the people and transforming their culture. Hueyapan was conquered in 1524, only three years after the Aztec Empire fell. By the 1530s Augustinian missionaries had come to the area and by 1561 the Dominicans had already built a church, monastery and several chapels in the pueblo (Martinez-Marin, 1968, p. 64ff).