

Otavalan Women Weavers: Rethinking Gendered Labor and Crafts in Ecuador

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Introduction

This research focuses on the gendered labor of craft production and distribution of Otavaleños, an indigenous group in the Andes Mountains of Ecuador, famous for textiles. Typically, women are described as secondary workers who do not weave¹; I argue that women’s labor, especially in craft production, has been invisibilized locally and in the literature because they do not typically weave on floor looms but are involved in other craft production. According to my preliminary fieldwork, women are generally responsible for selling textiles in the market, since sales are considered to be social interactions. Production is associated with heritage-making and the performance of ethnicity, and as such, it is tied to indigeneity, while selling goods is associated with capitalism and connotations of corruption.² Thus, women’s labor and the value of their market knowledge are of interest, as selling has the potential to eclipse production in importance due to the prevalence and cheapness of the recent influx of imported goods that are increasingly sold alongside locally produced goods.

This research investigates how global pressures and the push to commodify ethnicity encourage female craft production, and how that transforms gender relations, as well as the consequences of those changes. Textiles have always been important for Andean cultures,³ and changes in the gendered labor of textile production could be an important reflection of larger cultural changes.

Research Questions

In this doctoral dissertation project, I ask: What kind of work do women do, and which forms of labor are rendered visible/invisible to different parties (especially regarding gendered labor in craft production)? Is knowing how to produce and/or distribute crafts part of being a good woman or a good man (or a bad woman or man)? What strategies are used for the intergenerational transmission of craft production as well as market knowledge, and in what ways are these strategies changing now that many Otavalans are producing fewer handicrafts and selling more imported goods?

Methods

- Participant observation: snowball sampling; experiential knowledge
- Ethnographic interviews: unstructured & semi-structured
- Family histories: chart familial relationships and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge; long-term knowledge
- Archival research and photovoice to be implemented in future research

Initial Findings

Preliminary dissertation fieldwork findings presented in this poster examines women’s labor and the value of their market knowledge.

- Modern gendered labor in textile production
 - Result of obrajes, or “textile sweatshops,” in which indigenous people were forced to serve labor quotas for the Spanish crown^{4,5}
- Women’s labor and the value of their market knowledge
 - Craft production essential to being a “good Otavalan woman”: several female vendors have learned craft production skills at the encouragement of their family members since initial comments in 2014 preliminary research
 - Female craft production within the Plaza de Ponchos market: important for maintaining craft production knowledge, passing the time, and performing ethnicity in the hopes of making sales
 - Vending as social transactions
- Authenticity of the market and “loss” of heritage
 - Influx of cheap, imported goods sold alongside locally produced goods → vendors distinguish which items they made (pride) vs. purchased (ambiguous – cite tourists’ demands for small, cheap souvenirs but often obscure origin of items, instead mentioning local wholesalers)
 - “Nuestro trabajo es nestra vida” – “Our work is our life”: New private workshop/store/museums specializing in knowledge transmission of “authentic” crafts (also for sale)
- Local mestizo reactions: adapting to globalization or embarrassing loss of culture (vending over craft production)?



Worried that younger generations have forgotten the “old ways” of textile production, some Otavaleños have established combination workshop/store/museums (such as Peguche Wasi, pictured here) as sites to learn/practices older production methods, funded by selling items and experiences to tourists.



- Transmission of knowledge
 - Same gender within families
 - Younger generation desires non-craft related occupations
 - Many “old ways” forgotten – reference a few older community members
 - Workshop/museums – effective for teaching community members?

Discussion

The Plaza de Ponchos market is in transition from being viewed by vendors and consumers as an artisan market to an outdoor market where crafts and mass-produced items are sold side by side. Vendors are adapting to consumer demands for small, cheap goods by diversifying their products (crafts + imported goods) to suit broader tastes and are currently developing new marketing strategies. These strategies are viewed by many mestizos and some indigenous as a loss of artisan identity. Women are primary actors in this transition and are changing the view of women as craft producers. Parents and children have aspirations for children to find other occupations, but they are still expected to help with craft production and distribution.



A combination of locally-produced goods and cheap, imported goods are sold in the Plaza de Ponchos market. Crafts that can be produced in the marketplace, such as these crocheted Aya Huma masks are important for the enactment of identity as “good Otavalan women,” especially as the authenticity of the marketplace as an artisan market is called into question.

Future Research

Dissertation research was divided into two phases (Phase I: July-October 2017; Phase II: June 2018-May 2019). During Phase II of fieldwork, I will obtain an affiliation with FLACSO and access archived obraje records, which may help delineate who fulfilled work quotas and what tasks were performed. I will also use photovoice, which asks community members to take photos and allows for greater collaboration between participants and researchers.⁶ I will ask Otavaleños to take photos of craft production and use these as visual aids to discuss the ways in which these tasks are gendered and why, allowing for increased engagement.

Select References

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|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Colloredo-Mansfeld 1999 | 5. Meisch 2002 |
| 2. Shlossberg 2015 | 6. Wang and Burris 1997 |
| 3. Arnold and Dransart 2014 | (See handout for full references) |
| 4. Phelan 1967 | |

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