

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Crafting Culture: Artisan Cooperatives in Oaxaca, Mexico

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by

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Table of Contents

Signature Page.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Figures.....	v
List of Acronyms.....	vi
Abstract.....	vii
Introduction.....	1
1 To Market, To Market: The Trajectories of Oaxacan <i>Artesanías</i>	10
2 Setting the Scene: The Historical and Economic Context.....	30
3 The Oaxacan Experience.....	57
4 What (and How) Do <i>Artesanías</i> “Mean”?.....	88
Reference List.....	106

List of Figures

Figure 2.1: Central Valleys of Oaxaca.....	35
Figure 3.1: Oaxaca City Center.....	58

List of Acronyms

AMO (Apoyo a la Mujer Oaxaqueña)
APPO (Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca)
ARIPO (Artesanías e Industrias Populares del Estado de Oaxaca)
BANFOCO (Banco de Fomento Cooperativo)
CDI (Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas)
CONACULTA (Consejo Nacional para la cultura y las Artes)
EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional)
FONART (Fondo Nacional para el Fomento de las Artesanías)
INI (Instituto Nacional Indigenista)
MARO (Mujeres Artesanas de las Regiones de Oaxaca)
NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement)
PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional)
SEP (Secretaría de Educación Pública)
SNTE (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación)

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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As the cultural tourism industry expands in Mexico, the implications for Oaxacan artisans and their crafts are far-reaching. The economic crises of the 1980s and early 1990s led to a renewed push by the government to promote tourism and a state-sponsored idea of *mexicanidad*, which has resulted in the increased commercialization of crafts. This project focuses on *artesanías* within the framework of cultural tourism in order to examine the ways in which *lo mexicano* is packaged for tourist consumption, and how participation in an increasingly globalized market shapes artisans' perceptions of their crafts. The impact of neoliberal economic policies on craft production and the turn to cooperative organization has been studied in depth (Cohen 1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2000; Stephen 1991, 2005a, 2005b); this paper will expand on the existing literature by going beyond economic processes of production and consumption to consider the impact of cooperative production on the symbolic meaning(s) of the *artesanías*, for both those who produce them and those who acquire them. Using in-depth ethnographic interviews, this project investigates how *artesanías*

reflect *mexicanidad*, and conversely, how *mexicanidad* is shaped by the insertion of *artesanías* into the global market.

Introduction

An eminently traditional form of expression, folk art is often conceived of as unchanging and static. Nothing is farther from the truth. Though it changes in ways distinct from those of elite art, it is in constant transformation, a result both of artists perfecting their techniques and of adaptation to market demands. (Bartra 2000, 53)

The southern Mexican state of Oaxaca is widely known for the *artesanías* produced in the region. Among these are the wool rugs of Teotitlán and Santa Ana del Valle, the black pottery of San Bartolo Coyotepec, the colorful glazed ceramics of Santa María Atzompa, the *alebrijes* (painted wooden carvings) of San Martín Tilcajete and San Antonio Arrazola, and the textiles of Mitla, woven on back-strap looms. Each year the capital city and its surrounding villages are flooded with “culture-seeking” tourists. Cultural tourism is one of the many facets of globalization, and represents a situation in which a community or a nation’s cultural assets are the building blocks of the industry (McKercher 2002). As the market for cultural tourism expands in Mexico, the implications for Oaxacan artisans and their crafts are far-reaching.

Beginning in the 1980s, neoliberal restructuring produced a staggering rise in economic inequality across Latin America. This is evident in Oaxaca City and the villages of the Central Valleys, where there is a concentration of wealth in the hands of a few established artisan families (Stephen 2005a, 2005b). Often headed by artisans considered to be *grandes maestros* in their respective arts, these merchant families are among those who have benefited from cultural programs introduced in the late 1980s at both the federal and the state level. These programs were designed to foster the production and circulation of *artesanías*, as well as to promote the recognition of

exceptional artisans. These artisans are the recipients of prestigious awards from cultural agencies such as Fondo Nacional para el Fomento de las Artesanías (National Fund for the Promotion of *Artesanías*, FONART). Several have had the opportunity to travel to promote their work at exhibits worldwide, particularly in Europe and in North America (Hernandez Díaz 2005). More often than not, these same merchant families have benefited from business partnerships with North American importers and art collectors. Because many of them rely on pieceworkers¹ they are able to produce more than the bare minimum needed for subsistence, which is the reality for a large majority of artisans (Cohen 1998, 1999b; Stephen 2005a).

While neoliberalism is typically characterized by deregulation, privatization, and the state's withdrawal from many areas of social provision (Harvey 2005), the cultural policies that emerged with the creation of Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (National Council for Culture and Arts, CONACULTA) under President Carlos Salinas de Gortari in 1988 present a curious anomaly. Despite withdrawing funding from many social arenas, the federal government continued to invest heavily in the tourism industry, and with it, in the promotion of regional festivals, culinary arts, and *artesanías*. The tradition of incorporating elements of "indigenous culture" into the tourism trade has a long history in Mexico, dating back to efforts to bolster nationalist sentiment in the period following the Mexican Revolution by incorporating these symbols of indigeneity into an "all-inclusive" Mexican identity. Despite the economic crisis in the early 1990s, the state saw no reason to withdraw funding from

¹ Pieceworkers are weavers who receive supplies and design specifications from a patron. In his 1998 study of Santa Ana del Valle, Cohen found that 35% of weavers identified themselves as contract weavers and pieceworkers.

the extremely profitable cultural tourism industry, and in fact sought to further develop tourism at the federal and state levels.

This emphasis on a longstanding state-sponsored idea of *mexicanidad* has resulted in the increased commercialization of crafts. Markets and upscale boutiques selling *artesanías* continue to offer tourists endless opportunities to take a “piece of Oaxaca” away with them. However, in addition to these mainstream retail spaces, a number of urban outlets run by cooperative artisan organizations have emerged in the historic center of the city since the 1990s (Stephen 2005b). These outlets allow artisans to sell their crafts directly to consumers, effectively bypassing networks of intermediaries. Additionally, coop stores present an alternative consumption space for tourists, for whom direct interactions with artisan producers serve as markers of the authenticity of the *artesanías* they purchase.

This study focuses on *artesanías* within the framework of cultural tourism. The purpose here is to examine the ways in which symbols of *lo mexicano* are packaged for tourist consumption, and how participation in an increasingly globalized market shapes artisans’ perceptions of their crafts. The impact of neoliberal economic policies on craft production and the turn to cooperative organization has been studied in depth (Cohen 1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2000; Cook 2004; Nash 1993; Stephen 1991, 2005a, 2005b). This paper expands on the existing literature by going beyond the study of economic processes of production and consumption to consider the impact of cooperative production on the cultural meaning of *artesanías*, for both those who produce them and those who acquire them. By examining the physical spaces of cooperative retail outlets, the nature of interactions between artisans and consumers,

and a variety of the *artesanías* themselves, this research explores the multiplicity of cultural meanings embodied by *artesanías*, and the ways in which these meanings are shaped by the insertion of these crafts into the global market. Within this market *artesanías* are circulated far beyond their places of origin. This move from regional to global circulation has important consequences for the meanings inscribed in *artesanías*, as these meanings change depending upon the cultural context in which the *artesanías* are placed. Though the official discourse that governs *lo mexicano* persists, the retreat of the state from the space of the cooperative has left artisans with more control over the production and presentation of their *artesanías*. Artisan cooperatives grant their members greater autonomy from the government, and with this autonomy comes the opportunity to assert agency over both economic and symbolic meanings of the *artesanías* they produce.

An important body of literature on Oaxacan *artesanías* has emerged since the 1990s, encompassing several distinct but interrelated themes: the networks of production and distribution of *artesanías* and the ways in which interactions between artisans and consumers shape *artesanía* production (Hernández Díaz 2001, 2005); the historical importance of Oaxacan weavings and the ways in which involvement in a globalized economy shapes ethnic identity and gender roles (Stephen 2005b); the insertion of *artesanías* into the international market by intermediaries, collectors, and tourists, and the shift in meaning that occurs when *artesanías* migrate across borders (Chibnik 2003; Wood 2008); and finally, the economic importance of *artesanías* and the formation of artisan cooperatives in the 1980s and 1990s (Cohen 1998, 1999a, 1999b; Stephen 1991, 2005a, 2005b). As Hernández Díaz (2001) points out, to speak

of *artesanías* is to speak of social and cultural relationships or networks; it is impossible, and indeed, it would be imprudent, to consider *artesanías* independently of the artisans who produce them, or of the people who acquire them.

My initial interest in Oaxacan *artesanías* arose in the spring of 2005, when I first traveled to Oaxaca City, the state capital. At that time I visited several of the city's markets and *artesanía* stores, including two retail outlets run by cooperative artisan organizations. The first was a store belonging to the Mujeres Artesanas de las Regiones de Oaxaca A.C. (Regional Association of Oaxacan Craftswomen, MARO), a group of women "involved in all stages of production from the purchase of raw materials to the selling of their own products" (Mujeres Artesanas de las Regiones de Oaxaca A.C.). A second store called the Casa de las Artesanías de Oaxaca (House of Oaxacan *Artesanías*) was run by the Maestros Oaxaqueños del Artes Popular S.C. (Oaxacan Masters of Popular Art), an organization made up of both male and female artisans. These artisan cooperatives would eventually become the foundation upon which this project was built.

Based on the number of *artesanía* stores and vendors in public areas, the importance of *artesanías* to the Oaxacan economy is evident: *artesanías* are commodities that artisans produce and sell in order to sustain themselves and their families. In addition to their status as economic commodities, however, *artesanías* are also cultural commodities, in that they convey cultural information about the site in which they are produced and sold. The meanings that *artesanías* embody are multifaceted, and they shift when these cultural commodities are situated in different contexts. *Artesanías* mean something different to the artisans who produce them and

to the tourists, museum curators, and collectors who buy them. The meanings ascribed to these *artesanías* are also shaped by the interaction between artisan and consumer.

There are many artisan cooperatives scattered throughout the state of Oaxaca, but my interest lay specifically in cooperatives with retail outlets in the city center. When did these organizations emerge, and how do they function? To what degree have artisan members been successful within these organizations, and what challenges do they face? To address these questions, I conducted ethnographic field research at each of the three cooperatives that have urban retail outlets: Casa de las Artesanías, Mujeres Artesanas de las Regiones de Oaxaca (MARO), and Culturas Oaxaqueñas. During a six-week period spent in Oaxaca City and select outlying villages, I conducted a total of sixteen in-depth formal interviews. Respondents were all adults ranging from 20 to roughly 60 years of age. I participant-observed at each of the three coops in the city, visiting most interviewees on a regular basis. I also made trips to villages in the Valles (including Teotitlán and Santa Ana del Valle, Arrazola, Santa María Atzompa and San Bartolo Coyotepec) to conduct interviews and to observe the production process of rugs, *alebrijes*, and various types of ceramics. The information obtained in these interviews is complemented by the results of many hours spent conversing in marketplaces and in the homes of artisans who invited me to their villages, and observing transactions between tourists and artisans in various public spaces.

Formal interviews were semi-structured and questions were designed to elicit personal narratives regarding each artisan's experience of cooperative organization, as well as perceived benefits and drawbacks to working with such organizations.

Additionally, interview questions focused on artisan experiences with buyers within the sphere of the cooperative store, as well as on the increasing commercialization of Oaxacan *artesanías*. Questions eliciting detailed descriptions of each artisan's particular craft allowed for reflections on the connection all artisans felt to their work, as well as offering insight into the very personal aesthetic considerations and techniques associated with each individual artisan.

The official state discourse regarding what constitutes *lo mexicano* is at the core of the cultural tourism industry, and is directly related to the authentication of Oaxacan *artesanías* by agents other than artisans. Chapter 1 is an examination of four interrelated concepts that frame the study of Oaxacan *artesanías*: *artesanía* itself, authenticity, globalization, and cultural tourism. The interplay of these concepts brings to light issues of authority and agency, both of which are central to the question of who is empowered to determine the economic and symbolic meanings of *artesanías*. The first chapter also introduces García Canclini's (1982) concept of "trajectories" and Appadurai's (1986) theory of the "social histories of things" in order to establish a theoretical framework through which the relationship between cultural context and meaning may be elucidated.

Chapter 2 situates *artesanías* within the historical framework of the development of the cultural tourism industry in twentieth century Mexico. Three broad periods can be distinguished: the period of the post-revolutionary nation-building project (1920s-30s), followed by a period of industrialization and a corresponding boom in tourism sponsored by the federal government (1950s-70s), and finally, the period in which neoliberal economic policies were implemented and the state

withdrew from many social arenas (1980s-present). Tracing the development of the policies and practice surrounding cultural tourism allows for an examination of the ways in which the official discourse of *lo mexicano* has permeated the spheres of *artesanía* production and circulation. Moreover, it creates an opening for the discussion of the ways in which artisans have responded to this official discourse, and the means through which they have begun to transform it. The second chapter also reviews the ways in which Oaxacan *artesanías* have been interpreted and depicted by popular and scholarly literature alike.

The third chapter provides a history of artisan cooperatives in Mexico. It looks at the shift from the state-funded coop model of the 1950s to 1970s to the coop organized and funded by artisans beginning in the 1980s. It then examines the emergence of three artisan cooperatives in Oaxaca City: Casa de las Artesanías, Mujeres Artesanas de las Regiones de Oaxaca A.C. (Regional Association of Craftswomen of Oaxaca, MARO), and Culturas Oaxaqueñas A.C. It investigates the objectives, organizational structure, and physical spaces of these organizations in order to shed light on the ways in which artisan members have gained a greater sense of autonomy from the state with regards to the production and circulation of their work. It also examines the successes these cooperatives have had, and addresses the challenges they face.

Chapter 4 uses the case study of cooperatives in Oaxaca City to illustrate Canclini's (1982) theory of trajectories and Appadurai's (1986) social histories of things. Building on Canclini's concept of the urban destinations of Mexican *artesanías*, it argues that through organizing and funding cooperatives, artisans create

new spaces removed from direct government mediation. This relative autonomy from the state gives artisans greater agency. The chapter demonstrates this argument through the analysis of political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions of Oaxacan cooperatives. As a whole, this study demonstrates the shift from a state-imposed discourse of *lo mexicano* in which artisans were merely actors, to a discourse shaped by the artisans themselves. Although the discourse remains largely unchanged, this transfer of agency is critical. Greater control over the production and commercialization of their crafts through cooperative organizations has allowed artisans to define the economic and symbolic meanings of Oaxacan *artesanías*.

1

To Market, To Market: The Trajectories of Oaxacan *Artesanías*

“Es algo que es como una herencia. Lo que nos han dejado nuestros más ancestros, y que ha venido pasando de generación en generación.”

“It’s something like an inheritance. It’s what our ancestors have left us, and it’s something that has been passed down from generation to generation.” – Asunción Hernández Lazo

“Pues mira, las artesanías... es como una placa de identificación. Es como las artesanías son nuestras raíces, es nuestra cultura, es lo que somos nosotros.”

*“Well, look—artesanías... they’re like an identification plate. It’s like artesanías are our roots, they’re our culture, they’re what we are.”
– Graciela García García*

The study of *artesanías* involves a consideration of both cultural and economic factors. Four central concepts frame this project: *artesanía*, authenticity, globalization, and cultural tourism. This chapter examines the nature of these four concepts and the complex relationships that exist between them. The authentication of Oaxacan *artesanías* is an integral component of the official state discourse regarding what constitutes *lo mexicano*, and informs the manner in which *artesanías* are promoted to the public through the channels of the cultural tourism industry. As Oaxacan *artesanías* travel to increasingly distant locations through tourist purchases and international sales, the economic and symbolic meanings inscribed in these *artesanías* undergo significant changes. Through an examination of García Canclini’s (1982)

understanding of the “trajectories” of Mexican *artesanías* in conjunction with Appadurai’s (1986) concept of the “social histories of things,” this chapter establishes a theoretical framework within which to situate a discussion of the circuits through which Oaxacan *artesanías* circulate, and the impact of the cultural contexts in which they are placed on the meanings they embody.

The first and perhaps most evident term is *artesanía* itself. What is included in the category, and why this label? Art historians and anthropologists alike have referred to “folk art,” “tourist and ethnic arts,” and “handicrafts,” terms that are problematic due to their implication of a hierarchy that pits artists against artisans, and so-called “high” forms of culture against “low” forms (Phillips and Steiner 1999). *Artesanía* is not entirely neutral, but is preferable because it represents fewer negative connotations than the alternative terms. Tied up in the discussion of such hierarchies is the notion of authenticity, a second concept that has played a central role in the study of *artesanías*. *Artesanías* have frequently been viewed as indicators of “authentic” cultures and ways of life. More important than the factors involved in conferring the label of authenticity on an object is the question of the locus of selection and the issues inherent in the decision.

The exchange of *artesanías* between communities in the central valleys of Oaxaca is nothing new; the tendency of a village to specialize in a particular type of *artesanía* has promoted inter-village exchange for centuries. However, at a rapidly increasing rate *artesanías* are making their way not only from the villages to the capital city of Oaxaca to be placed in museums and sold in markets, but are being distributed throughout Mexico and beyond its borders. Those involved in and

impacted by this migration of goods are artisans, intermediaries, retailers, museum curators, and tourists; in short, the increasingly intricate web of social, cultural and economic networks we have come to refer to vaguely as “globalization” is a third concept requiring careful review.

Cultural tourism is one of the many manifestations of globalization, and as such emerges as a fourth and final concept requiring examination in the study of Oaxacan *artesanías*. According to McKercher (2002) cultural tourism should be considered a subsection of general tourism, due to its specific reliance on a community or a nation’s cultural assets in the form of rituals, dance, and other art forms. Two significant observations about cultural tourism as it pertains to Oaxaca are worthy of mention. The insertion of Oaxacan *artesanías* into the global market through this form of tourism has had a direct and lasting impact on the multiplicity of meanings attributed to them, by both producers and consumers.

Oaxacan artisans are directly influenced by the conditions of the cultural tourism industry. An eruption of violence in 2006 that resulted from the encounter between police, backed up by the military, and teachers on strike along with their supporters, has had lingering effects on Oaxaca’s tourism industry. Leading to a near collapse of the industry, this precarious socio-political issue has been devastating to artisans who depend on the sale of *artesanías* for their livelihood. The impact of this event and the uncertainty of the industry’s future cannot be ignored in contemporary analysis of Oaxacan *artesanías*. The impacts of the events of 2006, commonly referred to in Oaxaca as “el conflicto,” will be explored in more depth in the following chapter

in order to elucidate the extent to which the market for *artesanías* is dependant upon forces that are outside the artisan's sphere of control and influence.

Artesanías

In the central valleys of the southern state of Oaxaca, a wide range of *artesanías* is produced and sold. Some of the most commonly circulated goods include ceramics, weavings, embroidered textiles, *alebrijes*, hammocks, leatherwork, and *hojalata* (brightly painted tin objects). Despite the fact that these vary greatly in materials and in form, these distinct types of *artesanías* are generally grouped together by the state's dominant cultural institutions and by leaders of the tourism industry within a common term, such as "tourist" or "ethnic arts." These terms vary depending on the context in which they are being used. Literature and pamphlets directed toward tourists will tend to refer to "folk art" or "handicrafts," and emphasize the fact that these products are hand-made using traditional methods and that each piece is unique.

When faced with the question of how to refer to goods produced in the region, scholars of Oaxaca take a number of different approaches. Some avoid an all-encompassing term altogether, as Lynn Stephen (1991, 2005a, 2005b) does in her research on the weavers of Teotitlán del Valle, referring instead simply to "textiles." Others choose terms like "goods" and "folk crafts" indicating the commodity status of *artesanías*, as Jeffrey Cohen (1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2000) does in his work on weavers of Santa Ana del Valle; this is a reflection of the economic focus of his research. Michael Chibnik (2000, 2003) and William Wood (2008) adopt similar positions in their work on *alebrijes* and textiles respectively, choosing to discuss "ethnic and tourist crafts," "ethnic art," and "indigenous Mexican craft items." Quite clearly, no

term has emerged that has been deemed completely satisfactory by specialists or by the tourism industry.

The major problem with these terms is their connotation of a rigid distinction between what qualifies as “high” or “academic” art, and what represents “low” or “popular” culture. “Folk,” “tourist,” and “ethnic” art all conjure up images of rural conditions of production, humble indigenous artisans, and naïve or primitive works, thus promoting a degree of exoticism or idealization designed to appeal to the tourist or consumer. While it is true that a great deal of artisans still work in rural areas using traditional methods of production, it is not true of all artisans, many of whom have moved to urban areas and have diversified their respective crafts. The case of *alebrijes* exemplifies this trend. As Chibnik (2003) notes, *alebrijes* are often depicted in tourist literature as traditional Zapotec crafts, while they are in fact a relatively recent invention (created within the last thirty years). Many *alebrije* carvers live and work either in neighborhoods just on the outskirts of the city, such as Xoxocotlán, or live and have their workshops in the city proper. By maintaining the distinction between high and low art, terms like “folk” or “ethnic” art also reduce the aesthetic and formal innovations of many artisans to quaint representations of daily scenes from a “simpler life,” which does not do justice to the highly creative and complex work being produced by some especially gifted artisans.

The distinction in the Spanish language between *arte* and *artesanía* does exist, and must be recognized. As in English, a line is drawn between *arte*, that which is sanctioned by the Academy and which is evaluated based on its aesthetic qualities, and *artesanía*, that which is produced by craftsmen or women. The artist produces works

to be contemplated, while the artisan produces utilitarian products. The artist and the artisan generally represent two distinct social classes. Attempts have been made to narrow this gap through the creation of federal and state grants and competitions enabling artisans to exhibit their work at both the national and international level, which are theoretically open to all artisans. Nevertheless, it became apparent through conversations with artisans and with the director of the Instituto Oaxaqueño de Artesanías (Oaxacan Institute of *Artesanías*, IOA) that these grants and competitions are accessible to those who can afford to take the time away from production in order to exhibit their work. A relatively small class of Oaxacan potters, weavers and carvers is able to travel to renowned museums worldwide, and the aesthetic value of their work is increasingly recognized and valued (in some cases over what was previously considered to be only utilitarian function). This is not to say that the categories of *arte* and *artesanía* have collapsed into one, nor that the distinction between high and low art does not persist; however, the use of *artesanía* rather than any English counterparts encompasses best what Oaxacan artisans produce while minimizing hierarchical distinctions. The preference of this term by Oaxacan artisans and the appearance of the term in the names of the cooperatives studied here further justify its use in this project.

Authenticity

Artesanías have played a central role in the Oaxacan economy, particularly since the mid-twentieth century when tourist travel to the region began to increase due to transportation improvements. During the course of a meal in the *zócalo*, a tourist is likely to be approached by a handful of individuals selling a variety of trinkets, painted bookmarks, and *rebozos* (woven shawls). Many of these are items bought in bulk from

other states, but among them there will certainly be items produced locally, particularly the textiles. The promotion of *artesanías* as a tourist attraction by the state is evident as one wanders into the main tourist information center, where state officials have hand picked “exceptional” pieces to display and sell. There are at least three major markets in the historic center of the city, two of which are devoted entirely to the sale of *artesanías*. In addition to these markets, there are a number of high-end boutiques, selling the work of renowned artisans, as well as smaller shops and cooperative stores where artisans group together to share the cost of renting and running a commercial space. Heading north on Macedonio Alcalá, one of the city’s principal pedestrian walkways, the meandering tourist is met with signs on every third door advertising organized tours to nearby villages. These tours are heavily promoted as a way of meeting the artisans, seeing where they live, and observing the production process firsthand.

Evaluation of Oaxacan *artesanías* is often based on a perceived degree of authenticity. While consumers of *artesanías* look for souvenirs to remind them of their time in the region, this extends beyond the standard postcards and kitschy t-shirts; for the most part, tourists look for “typical” or “traditional” products that are handmade and have a “rustic feel.” Imperfections in the form of a stray strand of wool or a smudged brush stroke are valued, because for the consumer, they constitute proof that the item was painstakingly crafted by hand. Thus, *artesanías* are more than simple souvenirs; regardless of their origin, as long as they *appear* to be authentic, they become symbols of a way of a life far removed from that of the visitor and consumer. Judging by the types of purchases tourists make, the quest for authenticity seems to be

driven by a desire to see and to possess tokens of a lifestyle different from their own, where assembly lines and synthetic materials are nonexistent. In this context the criteria that must be met for *artesanías* to be deemed authentic are problematic: they often go hand in hand with stereotypes of idealized indigenous non-industrialized society, and rarely conform to the reality of the conditions in which they are produced and the artisans who produce them.

The purpose here is not to evaluate the relative degrees of authenticity of Oaxacan *artesanías*, but rather, to consider what is at stake in this act of evaluation. Who is it that decides what makes a given piece authentic, and what are the implications of this decision? It seems that the decision belongs to the consumer: if a piece satisfies a given set of criteria, it will fulfill a specific need. However, tourists are not the only people making these value judgments. Store owners, museum curators, and cultural institutions each have their own set of criteria, which may be similar to those of tourists, but which often include additional factors related to the destination or eventual function of the piece. Additionally, artisans themselves have their own ideas about what constitutes authenticity. Mass-produced copies of designs or styles are deemed inauthentic by not only because of their conditions of production, but also their aesthetic qualities. This is significant because it emphasizes that the perception of authenticity is important not only for the consumer, but also for the producer and the intermediary. Authenticity is not a quality inherent in the object, but rather, a subjective value judgment made by an external agent.

Globalization

Globalization is an increasingly important way of conceptualizing and understanding contemporary social, cultural, and economic relationships, not only among experts but also in society at large. It tends to be used loosely to refer to any phenomenon involving an exchange of goods or information made possible primarily by advances in communication or in transportation technologies. These exchanges, occurring across national boundaries, are greatly accelerated within globalization. While these are certainly integral components of globalization, this general definition is problematic for at least two reasons. The first problem lies in its lack of specificity; what exactly do we mean by globalization, and how does it operate? The second problem is one of usage. Globalization is often characterized as a faceless force that operates on the world without our explicit knowledge or consent. As a process, it is not limited to major cities in industrialized countries. Though it might be more perceptible in heavily trafficked areas, globalization touches even remote parts of the world. The artisan from a small, isolated village in the Sierra of Oaxaca who travels once every two or three months to the capital city to check on her inventory at the cooperative retail outlet is impacted by the global market. Websites created by the children of entrepreneurial artisans transmit images and ensure the authenticity of Oaxacan *artesanías* to buyers worldwide.

Broadly, globalization can be defined as the development of an increasingly integrated world economy, characterized by free trade, the exploitation of foreign labor forces, and the eventual, inflated market price of that labor's goods. However, globalization encapsulates more than strictly economic factors; as people, goods and

capital move around the world at an increasingly rapid rate, so do the ideas that are embodied in them. Globalization is often presented in terms of a “flow” analogy, which essentially describes a situation in which social and cultural transactions occur seamlessly within transnational networks. Taking the example of exchanges between the United States and Mexico, the theory proposes that the flow of goods and ideas should not be considered unidirectional, but rather as a site where competition is created and dynamic exchanges occur in which changes can be observed on both the sending and the receiving ends. The exchanges that occur between producers and consumers of *artesanías* in some ways exemplify this concept of flow. The purchase of an *alebrije*, for instance, is often more than just a commercial transaction, in which money is exchanged for a good. It is also an exchange of social and cultural knowledge. The artisan offers a technical explanation of the carving and painting process, enriching the tourist’s understanding of the item. The tourist’s contribution to the exchange is subtler, coming in the form of the choices he makes. The artisan keeps a careful record of what shapes, styles and colors are selling, and modifies his production accordingly. The artisans I spoke with were highly conscious of changes in consumer tastes, and their work often reflects these shifts in preference.

As Pratt (2005) cautions, however, the flow metaphor is extremely problematic. “Flow,” she writes, “exemplifies the official, legitimating language of globalization. It is not a value neutral term (contrast ‘drain’) used, detached from any ethical dimension” (278). She argues that the flow metaphor is intended to neutralize and to equalize different *kinds* of movement, as well as to obscure crucial distinctions between people and events at both sending and receiving ends. The idea of “flow” is

also intended to naturalize processes of globalization, and to obscure the significant role of governments, business elites, and international financial institutions within the process. These decisions of these powerful actors guide the process of “flow” and the exchanges it generates, opening up new opportunities for some while limiting opportunities for others.

Within the flow metaphor the artisan and the tourist are seen to be contributing to an exchange that benefits them both equally. To assume that this is the case, however, can be misleading. The tourist is engaging in a leisure activity, and presumably has an income that allows him or her not only leisure time, but also travel, while the artisan relies on the sale to purchase materials or to provide for a family. While these may be exaggerations, they exemplify one of the unfulfilled promises of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA): social and economic inequality has not disappeared with globalization, but rather, has increased dramatically (Harris and Nef 2008).

Cultural Tourism

As early as the late 1920s, Oaxacan culture became a source of inspiration for English novelist and poet D.H. Lawrence, as well as several foreign photographers, including Edward Weston of the United States, Italian-born Tina Modotti and Frenchman Henri Cartier-Bresson. On several occasions, Weston, Modotti and Cartier-Bresson all photographed artisans at work and their *artesanías*. Interest in the region and its inhabitants continued to grow throughout the mid to late twentieth century as travel became more affordable and access to the capital city more direct through the construction of highways under President Miguel Alemán (1946-1952),

and eventually, an airport. By the early 1960s, visitors were no longer just writers or artists; growing numbers of wandering students, young couples and families visited the region year round. Cultural tourism is perhaps the most tangible manifestation of globalization in Oaxaca. As defined above, cultural tourism describes a situation in which cultural attractions form the basis of the tourism industry. Cultural tourism was recognized as a distinct form of tourism in the 1970s, when it emerged as a niche activity marketed towards “better educated, more affluent tourists” (McKercher 2002, 1). Due to its increasing popularity in the 1990s, it has more recently been recognized as a high profile, mass-market activity, rather than as an “alternative” activity reserved for elite travelers.

The growth of cultural tourism has resulted in an increased commercialization of crafts, and a corresponding increase in revenue for some artisans. In recent decades inequality among artisans has increased, as those who have the means to travel to the capital to sell their crafts have an advantage over those who do not. Further, the presence of middlemen profiting from purchasing crafts inexpensively in rural areas and selling them at inflated prices in Oaxaca City results in little economic advantage for artisans. The emergence of cooperatives can be directly linked to this increasing social stratification; cooperatives allow artisans to sell their wares directly to consumers, resulting in greater economic returns and frequently more visibility and recognition for artisans (Stephen 2005a).

The potential of artisan cooperatives has been recognized at both the local and the national level, and there are more than fifty institutions and official agencies promoting popular art in Mexico (Kaplan 1993). This illustrates the economic

importance of *artesanías*, as well as the recognition of a market for “authentic” indicators of indigenous culture. This raises questions about the elements being isolated and portrayed as part of Mexican national identity, and why. The government has a clear interest in maintaining “traditional” appearances in order to satisfy tourist expectations, despite the fact that over-simplified categories may not be entirely representative of contemporary realities.

Theoretical Framework

In his introduction to *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Arjun Appadurai (1986) asserts that the meanings of things “are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories” (5). Through an examination and critique of the Marxian understanding of the commodity and how it has been traditionally applied by scholars, he proposes an expanded and perhaps more contemporary understanding of the commodity. Appadurai’s broader perspective takes into account not only a commodity’s use value or exchange value in economic terms, but also incorporates a consideration of the various circuits through which commodities move, the dynamic points of contact between producers and consumers, and how these exchanges produce knowledge and shape meaning.

Beginning with Georg Simmel’s proposition that value is not “an inherent property of objects, but is a judgment made about them by subjects,” Appadurai summarizes one of the most basic tenets of economics: “economic exchange creates value” (3). When they are exchanged, commodities embody this value. In Simmel’s terms, these transactions consist not only in “exchanging *values* but in the *exchange* of values” (4). According to Simmel, it follows that value can be measured for both

parties involved in the exchange. Appadurai's main critique of this argument is that not only is it impossible to quantify value in such a way, but it is also, to a certain extent, irrelevant. Economic value is but one aspect of the commodity, and according to Appadurai, not necessarily the most compelling one. In order to understand "things," we have to examine the social and political factors shaping the transactions within which they occur. To this end, he considers the following central concepts in the development of his argument: the "spirit of the commodity," "paths and diversions," "desire and demand," "knowledge and commodities," and "politics of knowledge."

The Marxian understanding of the commodity is that it is a product intended for exchange that arises within economic conditions of capitalism. With capitalist conditions of production comes commodity fetishism, a state in which value is believed to be inherent in the commodity. The labor involved in producing the commodity is disregarded, as are the social relations of production and consumption. While this seems to preclude any societies where capitalism has not penetrated, Appadurai (1986) argues that Marx's understanding of use value and exchange value, as well as the lengthy distinctions made between product and commodity, in fact leaves the door open for the existence of commodities in any number of societies, at least in a primitive form (9). Appadurai thus settles on an initial definition of the commodity, "any thing intended for exchange," by combining elements of Simmel and Marx's arguments. He then goes on to propose that we can proceed from this question of defining the commodity, to a far more interesting one: "what sort of an exchange is commodity exchange" (9)? This is one of the central questions that inform

Appadurai's inquiry, because it keeps the commodity at the forefront of the discussion and it brings in the social and political conditions of exchange, which are central to understanding the way in which the path taken by a commodity shapes its meaning.

Appadurai proposes that we examine the "commodity situation" of "things," thereby "breaking significantly with the production-dominated Marxian view of the commodity and focusing on its *total* trajectory from production, through exchange/distribution, to consumption" (13). The "commodity situation" is broken down into three parts: the "commodity phase" of a thing, the "commodity candidacy" of any thing, and the "commodity context" in which a thing might be placed. The third category is of most interest to this project, and "commodity context" is defined as "the variety of *social* arenas, within or between *cultural* units, that help link the commodity candidacy of a thing to the commodity phase of its career" (15). Essentially, it is this context, informed by social and cultural factors, that forms the basis for the commoditization of things.

Appadurai makes an important distinction between the "cultural biography" and the "social history" of things (34). The cultural biography of things, a concept attributed to Kopytoff (1986), relates to the specific events in the "life" of a thing; in sum, the points at which it changes hands, and the contexts in which it is used. The social history of things is a much broader category, which in a sense compiles these biographies into a larger story that is generally true of a class of things. In relation to this project, it means the difference between two scenarios. In the first, we follow an *alebrije* from the workshop where it is produced, through its point of sale in the city center (observing all the while the interaction between the vendor and the consumer),

and finally, on to its final destination on an office desktop somewhere in the United States. These are the factors that make up its cultural biography. The second scenario involves a much broader set of questions and observations, and is the sum of multiple cultural biographies: what are the circuits that *artesanías* move through, how do they migrate, and what happens when they do?

Néstor García Canclini's influential work on popular culture in Mexico (1981, 1982) laid the groundwork for further study of the forms that the creation and consumption of popular culture have taken in recent years. In Appadurai's terms, García Canclini examines the "trajectories of things" by following *artesanías* from the villages where they are produced to the city markets and shops where they are sold. In doing so, he explores the processes of decontextualization, refunctionalization, and resemanticization that *artesanías* undergo as they change hands. This type of mapping effectively demonstrates the malleability of the meanings of crafts in transit. By focusing on the urban spaces in which *artesanías* are sold, Canclini highlights the commercialization of *artesanías*, and demonstrates the intricacy of the relationship between economic and cultural patterns; these patterns are not easily separated, but it is essential to consider them as complex and complementary rather than oppositional forces.

Canclini (1982) defines culture as "a particular type of production, whose objective is to understand, reproduce, and transform the social structure and to struggle for hegemony" (1). Rather than analyzing "culture" as such, however, he seeks to examine the "inequalities and conflicts between cultural systems" (2). For Canclini, popular cultures must be "defined in opposition to the dominant culture, as a

product of inequality and conflict” (2). The distinction between dominant and subordinate cultures is essential in order to understand the ways in which subordinate cultures respond to the economic conditions of capitalism imposed by the dominant culture. Canclini’s emphasis on culture as a transformative process within the class struggle points to the importance of considering not only the economic aspect of cultural objects, but also their social significance.

Canclini argues that the commoditization of popular cultures under capitalism led outsiders to idealize “the artisan’s way of life.” For tourists, *artesanías* become the symbols of a “return to nature;” through “their rejection of a mechanized society and their ability to ‘escape’ through the purchase of unique, handmade articles” (40), tourists hope to capture the essence of a non-industrial society. Canclini tends to equate the dominant culture with what is “modern,” and subordinate cultures with “the traditional.” It is important to recognize the extent to which these categories intersect, and the degree to which these intersections inform the meaning(s) of contemporary Oaxacan *artesanías*.

Appadurai (1986) holds that the “social histories” of things provide a framework in which to examine the shifting meanings of commodities. In much the same way, Canclini proposes that we consider *artesanías* in conjunction with the social conditions that shape their meanings. To this end, he isolates three social and cultural stages that *artesanías* go through. In the first, *artesanías* embody “use value” in the communities where they are produced. In the second, they embody a “commercial exchange value,” and in the third, an “aesthetic value” for the people who purchase them. While in theory these are useful stages to consider, they must be

modified somewhat to account for contemporary conditions of production and distribution. The most problematic stage is the first, in which *artesanías* are assumed to have a use value for the community that produces them. This may be true of certain more functional types of *artesanías*, such as ceramic pots or embroidered clothing, but there are new *artesanía* forms that defy this convention. *Alebrijes*, for instance, represent a thoroughly contemporary *artesanía* form that serves no functional purpose; these painted carvings were created to be put on display, and are marketed as such. Similarly, while the woven rugs of the Central Valleys would once have served to satisfy local needs, merchants now hire pieceworkers to fill large orders to be shipped to the United States. In a sense, the near disappearance of “use value” is an indication of how deeply the capitalist market has penetrated into villages where *artesanías* are produced, and the impact this has had on the production process.

Expanding on these “stages of meaning,” Canclini goes on to examine changes in production, circulation, and consumption, arguing that “the reformulation of the position of crafts in diverse spaces enables us to trace the strategy of *decontextualization* and *restructuring of meaning* that the hegemonic culture carries out in relation to subordinate ones” (70). He “follows” *artesanías* from the villages where they are produced to four possible destinations: the crafts shop, the boutique, the museum, and the urban household. He contends that there are codes inherent in each of these urban spaces, related to questions of positioning and of framing, which shape the meaning of *artesanías* within them. “Each context,” he writes, “determines the way in which crafts will be looked at, the deciphering codes” (83).

The urban spaces that Canclini describes are governed by codes that reinforce the hegemonic power of the dominant culture. In the case of the museum, for example, *artesanías* are selected and displayed on the basis of the way that they fit into a national discourse, as established by the state's dominant cultural institutions. Within these spaces, with few exceptions, the symbolic value of *artesanías* is determined by collectors, curators, tourists, and intermediaries. In the spaces that Canclini examines, artisans are not generally directly involved in the presentation, display, or sale of their own work; this is left mostly to intermediaries. An important questions remains: what happens when artisans take control of the commercialization of their work?

Drawing on Bourdieu's study of taste structures, Canclini claims that the persistence of a hegemonic class depends on its ability to restructure "objective relations and their internalization by subjects" (76) in such a way that a correlation is established between "groups and goods." Conversely, "the power of the popular sectors to effect changes will depend on their capacity to subvert this order and to introduce—in both spheres of production and consumption—demands that represent their true interests and are therefore dysfunctional and that intensify the system's contradictions and thwart its restoration" (77).

This challenge to the dominant culture is exemplified by artisan cooperatives that began to emerge Oaxaca City in the late 1980s. Unlike the cooperatives of the 1960s and 70s that were organized and funded by the state, often with little attention paid to the wants and needs of the communities in which they were set up, the cooperatives currently operating in the capital are run by artisans themselves. Within this "new" cooperative model, the artisan regains agency. It is artisans, not

intermediaries, who decide what they will sell, for how much, and how they will market their products. This does not mean that they are immune to the external forces of the market, but it does place them in a unique position to evaluate consumer tastes and to alter their production and presentation accordingly, on their own terms.

This study examines the “social histories” of *artesanías* produced by members of three artisan cooperatives with urban retail outlets. These histories begin in some cases in villages in the Central Valleys, and in others, in workshops in Oaxaca City. They culminate in the cooperative stores where artisans sell their work. It is at the point of sale that the issues of authenticity so thoroughly embedded in the cultural tourism industry become most apparent. Situating contemporary artisan cooperative production and distribution within the context of the historical development of the cultural tourism industry elucidates the way in which the government’s official discourse regarding what constitutes *lo mexicano* has shaped contemporary meanings of Oaxacan *artesanías*, as well as who is authorized to make decisions over the authenticity of these crafts.

2

Setting the Scene: The Historical and Economic Context

“Oaxaca vive, y la economía se mueve pues básicamente en el turismo, entonces no hay por donde jalar, como decimos nosotros.”

“Oaxaca lives on, and the economy basically relies on, tourism—so there’s no room to maneuver, as we say.” – Alfredo Segura Marcos

“Además [las artesanías] forman parte del atractivo que tiene Oaxaca para los visitantes, ¿no? Yo no puedo imaginar a un visitante que venga a Oaxaca y que no busque al menos conocer las artesanías. ¡Al menos!”

“Furthermore, artesanías are part of what draws people to Oaxaca, no? I can’t imagine a tourist coming to Oaxaca and not at least wanting to see artesanías. At the very least!” – Edgardo Villanueva

“Mexico—so near, so modern and yet so foreign” (Zolov 2001, 248); so proclaimed a series of advertisements created by the Mexican Tourist Council in the mid-1960s. Slogans of this type signaled the government’s desire to represent Mexico as a safe and comfortable travel destination with the amenities of home, while promoting the exoticism of the landscape and its inhabitants. Such depictions of Mexico were representative of an official nationalist discourse that had dictated what constituted *lo mexicano* since the early 1930s. This discourse, created and reinforced by the dominant cultural institutions of the state over the course of the twentieth century, has had important implications for Mexican artisans and the *artesanías* they produce by perpetuating a popular stereotype of “humble Indians” creating “authentic crafts.”

The following chapter examines the emergence of this discourse as part of the post-revolutionary nation-building project, and traces its evolution through the major periods of development of the cultural tourism industry in the 1950s and 60s. It highlights the state's economic and symbolic appropriation of *artesanías* as symbols of *lo mexicano* through the platform of cultural tourism, and the impact of these actions on artisans. Next, it examines the impact of neoliberal restructuring on the government's cultural policies and cultural institutions beginning in the 1980s. While the value of the "authenticity" of *artesanías* and artisans remained central to the official discourse, rising economic inequality and dwindling state support for *artesanía* production and commercialization have drastically impacted the lives of Oaxacan artisans. Finally, it moves to a discussion of the major literature, both popular and scholarly, that informs the study of Oaxacan *artesanías*. This establishes the framework through which to discuss contemporary *artesanía* production, and to begin to explore the significance of the emergence of *artesanía* cooperatives.

Two initial tasks are necessary before beginning to analyze the function and the significance of artisan cooperatives in Oaxaca. The first is to situate contemporary *artesanía* production within a historical framework, paying particular attention to the levels of incorporation of indigenous people and their crafts into the post-revolutionary nation-building project. The nationalist discourse that emerged in the 1930s was central to the government's project of fostering *artesanía* production as symbols of *lo mexicano* at both the federal and state level. The promotion of *artesanías* led to the creation of a number of cultural agencies (government organizations whose goal is to foster and promote *artesanía* production). Further, it is

important to consider how indigenous people and *artesanías* have been portrayed in advertising and tourist literature in order to examine how cultural tourism as an industry has perpetuated longstanding stereotypes about “authentic” crafts produced by “authentic Indians.”

The historical context is also the framework within which to examine how Oaxacan *artesanías* have been imagined, interpreted, and studied. A significant body of literature exists on *artesanías*, with a heavy focus on woven textiles and, to a lesser extent, *alebrijes*. These projects examine economic aspects of production and consumption (Cohen 1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2000; Cook 1993; Cook and Binford 1999), gender roles and social relations among producers (Stephen 2005a, 2005b), and the consequences of the movement of *artesanías* through the increasingly complex networks of the global market (Chibnik 2003; Wood 2008). The economic factors that underscore the majority of these projects, whether explicitly in Cohen’s study of the market for weavings from Santa Ana del Valle or more subtly in Wood’s study of textiles in the context of globalization, are important, but are not the only relevant factors; equal consideration must be given to what kind of *artesanías* are being produced, by whom and for whom, and what cultural implications this might have. This project attempts to bridge this gap by looking at *artesanías* not only as commodities that hold economic value for artisans and for those who acquire them, but also as art objects that embody cultural meaning.

“Oaxaca: tu México!” (Oaxaca, Your Mexico)²

Oaxaca is a state located in the southern part of Mexico on the Pacific coast, bordered by Guerrero, Puebla, Veracruz and Chiapas. Historically Oaxaca has been one of Mexico’s poorest states, and also has one of the highest concentrations of indigenous people. As of 2005 the state counted 1,091,502 speakers of an indigenous language, representing 31.1% of Oaxaca’s population.³ The two largest indigenous groups are the Zapotec and the Mixtec. The state recognizes an additional fourteen formally registered indigenous groups. The Sierra Juárez and the Sierra Madre del Sur mountain ranges converge in Oaxaca, resulting in a mountainous terrain and a temperate central valley, where the capital city is located. The state is divided into 570 municipalities (*municipios*), which are grouped into eight regions. This project will focus on cooperative *artesanía* production in and surrounding the capital city, in the region called the Central Valleys.

Located in the center of the state, the Central Valleys are made up of three river valleys extending from Oaxaca City: ETLA to the northwest, Tlacolula to the east, and Zimatlán-Ocotlán to the south. Hence there are essentially three main arms radiating away from the capital around which most villages are centered. Some of these have been made more accessible by the construction of major roadways in the mid-twentieth century, but others are still fairly remote. Public transportation is

² “Oaxaca: tu México” is the current slogan in use by the Secretaría de Turismo del Estado de Oaxaca (Oaxacan Department of Tourism).

³ This group includes speakers of an indigenous language over the age of four. Among speakers of an indigenous language, 14.3% percent do not speak Spanish. This data is taken from the most recent national *conteo* conducted in 2005 by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI).

available to villages within close proximity of Oaxaca city (such as Teotitlán del Valle and Ocotlán), but not to those further from the capital (such as Mitla), which are accessible only by *colectivo* (taxis or vans that take small groups to their destination for a small fee). Transportation thus affects the number of tourists who visit the villages; some will arrive on their own via *colectivo*, but most will visit the villages only with an organized bus tour. The most visited villages tend to be those that are closest to the city.

Most of the villages in the Central Valleys specialize in one particular type of *artesanía* (see Figure 2.1), and are well known in the capital city for those products (among the most famous are the rugs of Teotitlán and Santa Ana del Valle, the black pottery of San Bartolo Coyotepec, and the *alebrijes* of San Martín Tilcajete and Arrazola). While regional markets such as the Sunday market in Tlacolula have traditionally been the location for the exchange of *artesanías*, the increase in tourism to Oaxaca City over the course of the twentieth century has meant that more artisans have sought opportunities to display and earn income from their products in the capital. This includes direct sale at city markets, contract work for state-sponsored retail outlets, piecework for merchant families, and sale to intermediaries.

Alongside states like Michoacán and Guerrero, Oaxaca has a very long history of *artesanía* production. While certain types of *artesanías* can be traced back to the pre-Hispanic era, such as the black pottery of San Bartolo and the textiles of Mitla (those woven on a back-strap loom with cotton threads), others were products of the encounter between the Spanish and the indigenous inhabitants of the region. Among there are the *serapes* (wool weavings) of Teotitlán and Santa Ana del Valle that were

The Post-revolutionary Project

In the decades following the Mexican Revolution, the federal government undertook an expansive nation-building project with the goal of creating and consolidating nationalist sentiment. The all-encompassing discourse of *mexicanidad* emerged in the 1920s, which was an attempt to unify the nation by establishing symbols of “Mexican-ness” common to all citizens. Intricately connected to this discourse was the project of *indigenismo*, which was part of a national platform to “incorporate” indigenous Mexicans into the nation. The founding of the Secretaría de Educación Pública (Department of Public Education, SEP) in 1921 was an integral element in the promotion of indigenous culture as part of the national imaginary. The first Secretary of Public Education and an important intellectual, José Vasconcelos, introduced the idea of the *raza cósmica* (cosmic race), which proposed that exclusive categories of race would eventually give way to the acceptance of *mestizaje* as a positive and empowering phenomenon (Lewis 2006).

Vasconcelos made important contributions to the arts as well as to education by paving the way for the government sponsored mural program. This attempt to incorporate indigenous life and customs into art and literature, evident in the murals of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaró Siqueiros, as well as in the works of *indigenista* authors, was a key part of the nation-building project. In contemporary scholarship, however, it has been increasingly viewed as an appropriation or cooptation of indigenous culture. Markers of “Indian-ness” in the form of dress or ritual are frequently fictionalized or idealized, resulting in the

propagation of stereotypes of the “humble Indian” and the non-industrialized society in which he lives.

In its redefinition of national identity and the symbols associated with it, the discourse of *mexicanidad* played a central role in shaping the cultural tourism industry. In contemporary tourist literature, the state continues to emphasize a link between indigeneity and *artesanía* production, which becomes more problematic as the complexity of identity categories is increasingly recognized. All indigenous people are not artisans, nor are all artisans indigenous. Contemporary studies in cultural tourism focused on the role that official institutions such as museums have played in establishing and promoting ideas of national identity in the twentieth century, often by conflating “artisan” and “indigenous” into a single category (Kaplan 1990; Little 2004; Nash 1993). Kaplan asserts that the visual and artistic cues encountered in Mexican museums were central to the post-revolutionary nation-building project, and argues that the dominant ideology of the elite ruling classes was reinforced through the display of *artesanías* as symbols representing the nation’s past and present.

García Canclini (1982) suggests that this is the way in which the dominant class maintains hegemony over marginalized sectors of society. By deciding which *artesanías* were to represent the nation, official institutions were effectively charged with choosing which elements of indigenous “traditions” would be promoted, and which would be ignored. With respect to the power of the dominant class, however, Canclini is careful to emphasize the transformative nature of the processes of production carried out by artisans, as Stephen (2005b) does with respect to the weavers of Teotitlán. Both agree that there is a pressure to conform to an official

identity conflating indigeneity and *artesanía* production that is imposed on artisans from above, but that “marginalized sectors absorb and rework material conditions, ideology and culture imposed on them by dominant classes” (Stephen 2005a, 22). This recognizes to a degree the agency of artisans, which is important to consider in order to avoid the overly simplified idea that marginalized sectors of society are absolutely powerless before the dominant class.

Development of the Cultural Tourism Industry

The First Inter-American Indianist Congress, which met in Mexico in 1940, was an important step in the development of government programs to support *artesanía* production and artisans nationwide. The federal government began to express an interest in *artes populares indígenas* (popular indigenous arts), and saw in them great potential for development in the tourism sector. The programs that were created “not only attempted to create new markets for crafts but also helped the state create ethnic identities for its Indians” (Stephen 2005b, 127), which fit in with attempts on the part of the state to encourage indigenous people to maintain those aspects of their cultures, specifically their crafts and their rituals, that could most easily be packaged for tourist consumption. This development plan appeared to integrate indigenous ways of life into a national culture, but did so only on a superficial level, and was contradictory in that the goal of cultural preservation seemed more motivated by turning a profit through tourism than by improving living conditions for, or providing compensation to, the indigenous groups in question.

Beginning in the mid-1940s and lasting through the 1950s, the Mexican nation underwent an important period of industrialization. During the Second World War the

industrial sector was bolstered by Mexican production for the market in the United States. Following the end of the war this trend continued, and commercial capital began to make its way into the state of Oaxaca. This was greatly facilitated by the completion of the Pan-American Highway in 1948, which connected Oaxaca to Mexico City through the state of Puebla (Wood 2008, 68). From Oaxaca City the highway extended to Juchitán de Zaragoza in the southern part of the state. The development of this highway made access to the capital city much easier, and marked an important phase of integration of the state into the national economy. Thanks to the relative ease with which people could now travel to the region, art collectors and tourists began to flock to Oaxaca City, and to a certain extent to the surrounding villages, seeking direct access to regional *artesanías*.

While the presidency of Miguel Alemán (1946-1952) is well remembered for rapid development in the area of transportation through the construction of roads and railways, the central ideas of “modernity and progress” were also manifested in the development of the tourism sector. One of Alemán’s big projects was the transformation of the coastal city of Acapulco in Guerrero from a small port city to a booming tourist destination (Sackett 2002). In many ways, the development of Acapulco stands as a symbol of the expansion of the tourism industry at the national level. The promotion of the city as modern and glamorous, while still maintaining “traditional” elements of Mexican culture, can be seen as a continuation of the post-revolutionary nation-building project. The result of the industrialization of Mexico was an economic boom that was to last well into the 1970s, and was tied to the increase in “domestic manufacturing and consumption” (Joseph and Henderson 2002,

500). Consumer culture was on the rise in Mexico as it was in the United States, and the idea of vacationing on the sunny beaches south of the border was gaining in popularity among middle and upper class Americans. The government was eager to take advantage of the opportunity to sell symbols of *mexicanidad*, in the form of cultural shows and *artesanías*, to both national and international tourists. In order to keep up with an increasing demand for *artesanías*, however, the federal government would have to take an active role in development projects providing aid to artisans.

The creation of the first government-funded agencies designed to help artisans both with production techniques and access to local markets in the 1950s was an important step in the development of the cultural tourism industry. The importance of *artesanías* at both the national and state level can be gauged by examining a number of agencies founded at various stages of the nation-building enterprise with the purpose of promoting *artesanías*, either through purchase and display, or through the provision of financial support in the form of grants and subsidized loans. Stephen (2005b) writes:

Through a battery of state-linked institutions—schools, cultural missions, newspapers, development projects, local systems of government—the PRI made “Indian” an identity to which all Mexicans could lay claim as they sought to build a nationalist consciousness to support continued domination of the political system. Promoting Indianness as part of Mexican national identity was a political strategy for incorporating indigenous communities into the political system and also provided a national racial distinction to separate Mexico from its dominant northern neighbor. (23)

Stephen clearly shows that the strategy of the federal government in promoting Indianness as a question of national identity was in part to encourage a sense of autonomy from the United States at a time when influence from the North was increasing in

Mexico. It should be stressed that the government policies emerging in the 1950s of encouraging indigenous ethnic groups to “maintain and reproduce certain outwardly picturesque characteristics—in particular, dress, ritual, and crafts—which make them identifiable as Indians to tourists” is a trend that has continued, through the economic crises of the 1980s and 1990s, and up to the present (Stephen 2005b, 127). In some ways it became increasingly important for those stereotypes to be perpetuated; sustaining them the federal government to maintain symbols of *mexicanidad*, even in the face of a declining peso and significant changes in economic policy.

Jeffrey Cohen (1998) identifies an important period of cycles in “global circulation, tastes and international tourism” (5) that developed in conjunction with Mexican tourism in the 1960s and 70s. These cycles were marked not only by an influx of travelers to the region, but with them, increased points of contact between tourists and Oaxacan artisans. The effects of these increasingly common exchanges between producers and consumers of *artesanías* continue to play an important role in determining aesthetic features of contemporary *artesanías*, a phenomenon that will be discussed further in the following chapter.

The 1980s and 1990s

Between 1976 and 1980 tourism (including national and international tourism) in Mexico grew by an annual average of 11 percent, while foreign tourism grew by an annual average of 18 percent (Stephen 2005b, 164). Though the Mexican economy appeared to be growing throughout the decade of the 1970s, foreign debt was climbing and the peso was increasingly overvalued. By the beginning of the 1980s, massive debt, rising inflation, and falling oil prices threw the nation into the worst recession

since the 1930s (Cohen 1999b). The government was forced to devalue the peso three times in 1982, a measure which depressed real wages, thereby drastically impacting all sectors of society.

Despite the stagnant nature of the economy in the 1980s, the tourism industry continued to expand. American and European tourists, primarily, were able to take advantage of the weak peso, and continued to visit Mexico's coastal resorts and cultural centers such as Oaxaca. Many of these travelers were art collectors or dealers, who began to take advantage of the devaluation of the peso by visiting the villages where particular *artesanías* were produced in order to buy directly from the artisans, thus cutting out the added cost of the intermediary. While a cheaper peso allowed collectors and dealers to purchase *artesanías* at a lower price, currency changes also led to increased competition in the villages as several artisan families vied for exclusive partnerships with foreign buyers. Gradually this situation led to an increase in social stratification, as those families with a relative degree of economic stability, some knowledge of English, and of the foreign market, were best able to take advantage of these opportunities, while others were often forced into piecework or contract work for these same wealthy families. This situation is indicative of the rise in economic inequality that accompanied neoliberal reforms beginning in the 1980s. While a handful of artisans benefited from the possibilities opened up by free trade and deregulation through partnerships with foreign *artesanía* importers, many more were left working harder than ever to make ends meet.

Despite the economic downturn, or perhaps because of it, the federal government continued to develop projects and agencies to promote *artesanía*

production and sale to tourists. Fondo Nacional para el Fomento de las Artesanías (National Fund for the Development of Arts and Crafts, FONART) was founded in 1974 and continues to operate today. As a federal agency, its mandate involved promoting *artesanías* at a national level. The agency's mission statement clearly reflects a continuation of nationalist rhetoric, relying heavily on the ideas of "traditional" culture, while also emphasizing the increasing importance of exposure and commercialization:

Apoyar a los artesanos y las artesanas de México para contribuir a la mejora de sus niveles de vida y preservar los valores de su cultura tradicional, vinculando la creatividad del artesano con el consumidor final, mediante programas de apoyo y efectivas estrategias de comercialización que aseguren el posicionamiento de productos artesanales de calidad en los mercados nacionales e internacionales.

To support the artisans of Mexico in order to contribute to improving their quality of life and to preserve the values of their traditional culture, linking the artisan's creativity to the consumer, by way of supportive programs and effective commercialization strategies that ensure the positioning of quality artisanal products in the national and international markets.
(FONART 2008)

FONART operates by extending credit to artisan organization, hosting national *artesanía* competitions, and running a series of stores around the country in which they feature *artesanías* from all over Mexico. These stores are a major part of their program, and have been the source of some controversy, for two main reasons. While they do provide artisans with an opportunity to exhibit their work in outlets in Mexico City and other urban centers, allowing for more exposure and thus a greater chance for sale, profits from sales are returned to the artisans only after the cost of maintaining the programs has been deducted (Stephen 2005b, 166). This often results in very little,

if any, profit for the artisan. Secondly, agencies such as FONART prefer to work either with organizations of artisans or with artisans who already have established reputations. This results in a similar pattern to that which is seen when foreign dealers and collectors negotiate export agreements with established families; those artisans with the means tend to be those who continue to profit. It therefore becomes increasingly difficult for small-scale *artesanía* producers to compete with larger-scale producers who have both the right connections and knowledge of the global market through exposure to international trade agreements with exporters.

A second federal agency concerned broadly with culture and the arts was created in 1988. Formerly an entity within the SEP, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (National Council on Culture and the Arts, CONACULTA) became a separate agency with the expressed mandate of cultural organization and promotion of the arts:

El Estado debe alentar las expresiones culturales de las distintas regiones y grupos sociales del país, así como promover la más amplia difusión de los bienes artísticos y culturales entre los diversos sectores de la población mexicana, además de preservar y enriquecer el patrimonio histórico y cultural de la Nación.

The State must encourage the cultural expressions of the distinct regions and social groups that make up the nation, as well as promote the circulation of cultural and artistic products across the various sectors of the Mexican populace, while preserving and enriching the Nation's historical and cultural heritage.
(CONACULTA 2008)

The rhetoric employed here by CONACULTA is very much in line with that of FONART, with the heavy emphasis placed on the promotion and preservation of cultural products. However, a subtle shift in discourse can be discerned beginning in

the 1980s. While the focus is still very much on traditional symbols of *lo mexicano*, when compared to the post-revolutionary project and the discourse of the tourism industry through the middle of the century, there is no longer as explicit a connection made between *artesanías* and indigenous groups. This link is still very much implied through images linking *artesanía* production and remote indigenous villages, but it is evident that the state realizes that these categories are no longer as cut and dry as they were considered to be for much of the twentieth century.

Under President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) the Mexican economy seemed to revive. Salinas' presidency initiated the turn to neoliberal economic policies, which are generally marked by privatization, deregulation, and free trade, all of which continue to impact Mexican artisans significantly. The inclusion of Mexico in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which took effect on January 1 of 1994, marked an important step in the development of the export market for *artesanías*. Shortly after Salinas left office in December of that year, however, the peso underwent a rapid devaluation, plunging Mexico into another recession. As Lynn Stephen (2005b) notes, a significant increase in the number of cooperative organizations operating in Oaxaca began in the 1980s and continued through the 1990s. She argues that the emergence of these coops can be directly linked to the economic crises of the period coupled with the shift to a neoliberal economic agenda. She asserts that within the neoliberal economic model wealth is concentrated amongst upper class merchant families, leading to an increase in social stratification. Cooperative organizations emerged as a strategy for artisans to cope with this

stratification and to attempt to regain control over the production of their crafts. This trend will be examined in more depth in the chapter to follow.

“Turismo, no hay.”

In 2006, the Oaxaca tourism industry and artisan communities were deeply and adversely affected by the eruption of violence that occurred as a result of the 2006 teacher’s strike in the capital city. On June 14, Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz ordered that the striking teachers of Section 22 of the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (SNTE) be evicted from the *zócalo*, where they had been gathered for twenty-three days, demanding higher wages, salary rezonification, and increased educational resources. Violence erupted between protesters and police when, with support from the Policía Federal Preventiva, 3,500 Oaxacan municipal police attempted to dislodge the strikers from the city center. A few days after the initial confrontation, the teachers and their supporters regrouped in the city center, and began erecting barricades to keep the police out of the area. In response to what many Oaxacans now commonly refer to as “el conflicto,” the Asociación Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca, APPO) was formed to take on the cause of the teachers and to call for the resignation of Governor Ruiz. The conflict was drawn out over a period of several months, in which the city center was virtually inaccessible. Photographs and video footage of violent encounters between protesters and police were broadcast in the national and international news, slowing the tourism industry on which the state largely depends to a near halt.

The impact of “el conflicto” on Oaxacan artisans has been considerable. Except for those who have established relationships with importers in the United

States or Europe and thus do not have to rely on sale to intermediaries, most artisans depend on either *acaparadores* (intermediaries who purchase *artesanías* and resell them somewhere else) or else on direct sale to tourists. The rapid decrease in the number of visitors to the region led to a major decline in demand, meaning that the volume of *artesanías* being produced remained the same, but that there were far fewer tourists there to make purchases.

According to the Oaxacan Secretary of Tourism, the total number of tourists (both from within Mexico and from abroad) who visited Oaxaca City in 2005 was 1,125,581, which dropped in 2006 to 766,595. The situation improved only slightly in 2007, with a total number of 811,584 (Secretaría de Turismo de Oaxaca 2008). The artisans who are suffering the most are primarily those who do not have the means to travel to the city on a regular basis, where much of the selling takes place. These artisans cannot afford the cost of renting a market space during government sponsored exhibition periods in the *zócalo*. In the summer of 2008, I spoke with artisans about their perceptions of “el conflicto.” When asked about how it had impacted them personally, the overwhelming response was that “Turismo, no hay, y sin turismo, no hay venta” (There’s no tourism, and with no tourism, there are no sales). While the number of tourists went up by approximately 100,000 in 2008, it will likely be another two or three years before the tourism industry returns to what it was prior to “el conflicto.”

Contemporary Interpretations

As demonstrated through the examination of *artesanías* as symbols of *lo mexicano*, first during the post-revolutionary nation-building project, and later during

the development of the cultural tourism industry, the historical importance of *artesanías* in Mexico (particularly in the twentieth century) is undeniable. Faced with unprecedented challenges in the wake of the rise of the neoliberal economic model in the 1980s, some artisans grouped together to form cooperatives in an attempt to regain control over the production and distribution of their work. However, as outlined in the introduction to this chapter, before discussing the rise of artisan cooperatives and examining what impact they have had on the cultural meanings attributed to and articulated by Oaxacan *artesanías*, it is essential to take a critical look at the existing body of literature on *artesanías* in the region. Examining this literature, which ranges from glossy publications directed at tourists and collectors to scholarly works, will provide the framework in which to situate the discussion of the economic and symbolic meanings of *artesanías* produced and sold by artisan cooperatives. How have *artesanías* been imagined, interpreted and studied?

Since the early 1990s, a number of coffee-table books on the topic of Oaxacan *artesanías* have emerged (Barbash 1993; Rothstein 2002; Wasserspring 2000). Featuring large, glossy and colorful photographs of both artisans and their work, these publications become fixtures in the homes of travelers who want to remember their time spent in Oaxaca and are prized by art collectors and dealers alike. Such books certainly have great value for the artisans themselves, as they provide publicity for those families who make it into the publications. Nevertheless, as Eli Bartra (2003) points out, these compilations “tend to feature excellent photography, but they lack serious commentary on the artists and the meaning of what they produce, a problem

endemic to most books on Latin American folk art⁴ (5). In a sense, they can be considered catalogues of what the tourist could expect to encounter upon arriving to the region.

Michael Chibnik (2003) notes that when he first visited woodcarvers in Arrazola, San Martín, and La Unión to conduct preliminary research for his book on *alebrijes*, most of the artisans he spoke with assumed he was a tourist or a wholesaler, and when they found out he was a writer, assumed that he would be publishing a glossy catalogue-style book as American journalist Shep Barbash (1993) had done in the early 1990s. This is certainly consistent with my experience with some of the better-known artisans I met during my period of field research; several were quick to pull out a copy of one of the publications listed above (among others) to show me pictures of themselves, of family members, and of their work. Being featured in this type of book is a source of great pride, and rightly so. Nevertheless, to return to Bartra's critique, while these publications do an excellent job of capturing images and cataloguing *artesanías*, they contribute little to the ongoing dialogue about the experiences of artisans and the meanings that are embodied in their *artesanías* as they travel from workshops, through points of sale, and on to their eventual destinations in museums, galleries, and urban households.

Because the majority of Oaxacan *artesanías* are produced in order to be sold, it is natural that they have been studied as commodities, with the intention of using them

⁴ In the original Spanish, Bartra specifies her preference of the term *arte popular*, translated here as folk art, over the range of possibilities including *arte primitivo* (primitive art), *curiosidades* (curiosities), *arte turístico*, *tradicional*, *étnico* or *decorativo* (tourist, traditional, ethnic, or decorative arts), among others.

as a lens through which an examination of economic networks in artisan villages is made possible. Scott Cook (1993) was one of the first to do this, and has published a number of articles and books in which he looks at “the development and functioning of commodity economy” (59) in Oaxaca. He presents a comparative study of seven types of *artesanía* production by examining four factors: social demand, marketing modes, production forms, and patterns of value distribution (62). He concludes that the unevenness in the distribution of value of Oaxacan *artesanías* is a direct result of a differentiated demand for certain types of *artesanías* that in turn leads to a differentiation of supply. Cook’s work is valuable in that it situates *artesanías* within the context of the global market and notes the impact that cultural tourism has on regional *artesanía* production, but as he himself recognizes, his work lacks a consideration of “sources of consumer motivations, attitudes, and tastes” (77). Moreover, by looking at *artesanías* as commodities and focusing primarily on their movement within the market, he overlooks the important social and cultural significance of *artesanías*. *Artesanías* are not produced purely for economic reasons, though this is certainly an important factor; they are art objects, and consideration must be given to the artistic process and the importance of aesthetic qualities.

Jeffrey Cohen (1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2000) has conducted extensive fieldwork on weavers in Santa Ana del Valle, a village to the east of the capital city. Like its neighboring village of Teotitlán, Santa Ana is known for its wool *tapetes* (rugs), produced on foot-treadle floor looms. As an economic anthropologist, Cohen focuses primarily on the economic aspect of rug production, looking at competition between Santa Ana and Teotitlán, and at how questions of knowledge of and access to the

global market have affected the differential economic success of Santañeros and Teoticos. As with Cook's work, Cohen's research is illuminating in its consideration of economic factors of *artesanía* production, particularly in its discussion of the impact of foreign tourism on the *tapete* market, and of the importance of relationships with foreign wholesalers in determining economic success for artisans. Once again, however, the almost exclusive focus on economic factors excludes any consideration of the social functions and cultural significance of *artesanías* (in this case, *tapetes*). Cohen refers to *tapetes* as "folk crafts" or "goods," a clear indication that he is focusing on their economic value, and not necessarily their importance as pieces of art.

A second approach to the study of Oaxacan *artesanías*, best represented by the work of Lynn Stephen (1991, 2005a, 2005b), has been to study changes in traditional gender roles and social networks in relation to *artesanía* production. Stephen conducted extensive research in the 1980s and 1990s in Teotitlán del Valle, focusing primarily on the impact of the rise of neoliberal economic policies on women weavers. Noting a rise in the number of cooperative artisan organizations, she argues that faced with cultural and economic policies that simultaneously promoted *artesanías* while making access to the market more difficult, many artisans saw cooperative production as a way of regaining control over the production and sale of their work. She also examines the impact of increasing outward migration to other parts of Mexico and to the United States on women's roles in the community, asserting that as a result of being left as the head of household as their male family members migrated, in many cases women have taken a more active role in the decision-making process with regards to the production and marketing of their *tapetes*. In her discussion of *tapetes*

Stephens avoids the problematic issue of labeling *artesanías* as commodities or art objects altogether, referring throughout her work simply to “weavings” or “textiles.”

Stephen’s interpretation of the impact of neoliberal economic restructuring on *tapete* production is invaluable, as it clearly points to the contradiction inherent in the cultural policies that accompanied Salinas’ economic reforms. In theory, *artesanías* are promoted on a national and state level as strongly as during the period of development of the tourism industry, if not more so. Though the national government withdrew economic support from many social programs, they continued to finance CONACULTA and FONART, which are both important sources of credits and loans to the artisan community. What is apparent in Stephen’s argument, however, is that over the past twenty years inequality has greatly increased among the general population, as well as specifically within artisan communities. This is the point at which the rise of cooperatives becomes extremely significant, as it represents an attempt on the part of artisans to regain control over a part of the market and of the *artesanías* they produce, a point that will be examined more closely in the chapter to follow.

Recent research has begun to examine the movement of *artesanías* within the global market in order to elucidate the shifting meanings of *artesanías* as they are placed in different contexts and locations. Michael Chibnik (2003) examines *alebrije* production in the villages of San Martín Tilcajete, Arrazola, San Pedro Taviche and La Unión Tejalapan, looking at the history and evolution of woodcarving, as well as the ways that *alebrijes* have been marketed and represented. In order to demonstrate the commoditization of *alebrijes*, he follows them from the sites where they are produced

to the places where they are consumed, much like García Canclini did in his research on *artesanías* in the early 1980s. While Chibnik pays some attention to the export industry, he is primarily concerned with sales to international tourists in Oaxaca City. He argues that *alebrijes* are “in some ways archetypal examples of a commoditized craft” due to the fact that they were invented much more recently than many types of *artesanía* (such as weavings or ceramics), and that their success has been a result of “transportation and communication improvements linking Oaxaca, Mexico City, and the United States” (6).

Chibnik’s focus on the movement of *alebrijes* not only within Mexico but also across international borders is significant because it highlights the importance of the cultural tourism industry in contemporary *artesanía* production. Artisans are increasingly putting together large orders to be exported, which directly impacts what they produce. Interactions between artisans and purchasers of *artesanías* become sites of social, cultural, and economic exchange. As Pratt (2005) cautions, this exchange is not always equal, but whether positive or negative, it is important to recognize a mutual influence. In his discussion of *alebrijes* Chibnik refers to “folk art,” and “ethnic” or “tourist crafts.” This reflects the emphasis he places on importance of the interaction between producers and consumers in the construction of meaning of *artesanías*.

William Wood (2008) takes a similar approach to Chibnik in tracing the movement of Teotico weavings, but rather than following them from the site of production to the site of consumption, he begins by examining the ultimate destinations of the weavings in the United States and works his way backwards to the

source. Through this approach, Wood seeks to emphasize that the meaning of Oaxacan textiles is not just produced when and where the rug is woven, but rather, that complex layers of meaning are created and attributed to textiles at various points in their journeys. He asserts that weavers “create not only the material items but an entire assemblage of ideas, images, and associations that shape their meaning for producers and consumers alike” (4). This argument is significant because unlike the literature that suggests that consumers (be they tourists, collectors, or museum curators) play the primary role in determining the meaning of *artesanías*, Wood recognizes the active role that artisans play in weaving meaning into their textiles.

Wood calls his ethnography a “tour of globalization through the medium of Zapotec textiles (and weavers)” (11). Citing the work of Jonathan Friedman and Richard Wilk on globalization and identity, Wood argues that it is “our very conceptualization of space as either local or global, our use of this dichotomy, that has been the problem” (12). He proposes that it is necessary to do away with the binary opposition between the local and the global, and instead focus on the spaces in which the local and the global intersect. This intersection takes into account the practices of weavers, tourists, and cultural institutions that are all engaged in the “authentication” of Oaxacan *artesanías*.

The existing body of literature demonstrates a variety of approaches to the study of Oaxacan *artesanías*. *Artesanías* are produced to be sold, and as many interviewees told me, if they were no longer able to sell their work they would most likely stop producing it. For this reason, Cook and Cohen’s studies of *artesanías* as economic commodities are important. On their own, however, these studies do not

present a complete picture. Interviewees also expressed sentimental attachment to their work, describing in great detail the creative process they undertake when they weave, carve, sculpt, or paint. These aesthetic decisions are indicators that *artesanías* are more than economic commodities: they are pieces of art. Aesthetic factors are thus integral to the meanings that *artesanías* articulate.

Artesanías are not created in a vacuum. They are created by artisans, and are circulated through innumerable social and cultural networks. They provide a point of entry to the lives of those who make them, and those who purchase, display, and appreciate them. Stephen's work emphasizes the social aspects of *artesanía* production, while Chibnik and Wood's studies highlight the importance of considering *artesanías* in different social and cultural contexts. Scholarly studies of Oaxacan *artesanías* as commodities with important economic and social dimensions, coupled with popular representations of these same *artesanías* as markers of "Mexican-ness," provide a framework within which to situate contemporary *artesanía* production and distribution by artisan cooperatives.

The persistence of the dominant discourse regarding what constitutes *lo mexicano* throughout the development of the cultural tourism industry has shaped *artesanía* production and commercialization in Oaxaca. While the emphasis on the value of the "authenticity" of *artesanías* has endured, significant changes to the government's cultural policies and development programs for artisans have been made as a result of neoliberal restructuring. The state continues to present stereotypical images of quaint artisans and "traditional" *artesanías* to national and international tourists, but has simultaneously made access to its programs and financial assistance

exceedingly difficult for most artisans. Rising economic inequality and frustration with the state's lack of support have led to the creation of artisan cooperatives since the 1980s, as artisans seek out ways to manage the production and distribution of their work independently of the state. The formation and development of these cooperatives represents a significant departure from traditional modes of circulation because within these spaces artisans, rather than intermediaries, are in control.

3

The Oaxacan Experience

“Y entonces, yo me di cuenta que la tarea era del artesano. Que quiere, como quiere las cosas, cuales son las reglas con las cuales va a trabajar, con quienes va a trabajar. Me di cuenta que obviamente nos correspondía a nosotros hacer ese papel.”

“And so I realized that it was the artisan’s duty. What he wants, how he wants things to be, what the rules are that he is going to follow, with whom he’s going to work. I realized that obviously it was up to us to assume that role.” – Edgardo Villanueva, first president of Casa de las Artesanías

Oaxacan *artesanías* are sold on street corners, in local markets, in chic boutiques, and in museum stores. This speaks clearly to social hierarchies and access to economic resources within artisan communities. Artisans with international business contacts or access to government funding through organizations such as FONART have a much higher success rate, and a corresponding social status. Since the 1980s the number of artisans who participate in cooperative production has increased dramatically, and a number of cooperative commercial outlets have opened in Oaxaca City, showcasing the work of artisans from all over the state. This chapter traces the historical development of the cooperative model in Mexico, beginning with cooperatives operated by the government between the 1950s and 1970s, followed by an examination of the shift to cooperatives organized and funded by artisans beginning in the 1980s. Three such cooperatives are examined: Casa de las Artesanías, Mujeres Artesanas de las Regiones de Oaxaca A.C., and Culturas Oaxaqueñas A.C. Because these cooperatives are not controlled by intermediaries or government officials, artisan

members have more power over the production and presentation of their work. This leads to a greater sense of autonomy from the state's dominant discourse of *mexicanidad*, and an increase in artisan agency.

According to Baruc Alavez Mendoza, director of the Instituto Oaxaqueño de las Artesanías (Oaxacan Institute of *Artesanías*, IOA), there are 164 stores dedicated to the sale of *artesanías* in Oaxaca City. This number includes markets and retail outlets that operate year round. It does not take into account the number of artisans who participate in seasonal exhibition sales, nor does it factor in those artisans who travel to the *centro histórico* daily from villages in the Central Valleys or from the outskirts of the city to sell *rebozos* (shawls), straw *petates* (woven mats) and baskets, *alebrijes*, or rugs in the *zócalo* and on the streets surrounding it. The number of vendors of *artesanías*, be they artisans or intermediaries, is a testament to the importance of *artesanía* sales to the local economy.

The number of *artesanía* stores cited by Alavez Mendoza includes a wide range of retail outlets. Among these are upscale boutiques such as La Mano Mágica, which is located on the Alcalá, a pedestrian route highly frequented by tourists (see Figure 3.1). Mary Jane Gagnier and her husband Arnulfo Mendoza, a renowned weaver from Teotitlán del Valle, run the store. The Mendozas are selective about what they display and sell, and the well-crafted and innovative pieces sold in their store are carefully arranged. While in many *artesanía* shops a potential buyer might be overwhelmed by the sheer number of pieces on display, this is not the case in La Mano Mágica, which is much more like a gallery space than like a market stall. Teresita, located just off the Alcalá on Murguía a few blocks north of the *zócalo*, is a much

smaller shop that sells only *alebrijes*. Víctor Vásquez has run the store since the early 1990s. He has prospered by selling directly to tourists and by serving as an intermediary for importers throughout the United States (Chibnik 2003, 188). His pieces are of a high quality in terms of both the carving and the painting, and despite the drop in tourism that began in 2006, he has managed to keep his business moving.



Figure 3.1: Oaxaca City Center (Modified from Chibnik 2003, 185)

La Mano Mágica and Teresita represent two categories of *artesanía* retailers in Oaxaca City. The owners of these types of stores (be they upscale boutiques or small businesses) often either have the start-up capital themselves to go into business, or else they benefit from access to private loans or credit. In many cases, they have working relationships with importers from the United States, Canada, and Europe, which provide them with additional income to supplement their on-site sales. This disparate access to financial resources points to socioeconomic divisions amongst Oaxacan artisans. Some artisans, namely those who have established reputations and international contacts, have prospered under free trade and changes to the market under neoliberalism. Others, however, have suffered due to a lack of financial resources. Through the creation of the Instituto Oaxaqueño de las Artesanías the state has tried to create a support base for artisans in need of financial assistance through micro-credit programs. As with private loans, however, the process of obtaining such assistance through the state is time-consuming, and is further complicated by the mistrust artisans feel for most governmental programs (Cohen 2000, 138).

Other popular destinations for tourists looking to buy *artesanías* are the various markets scattered throughout the *centro histórico*: the Mercado de Artesanías, the Mercado Benito Juárez, the Mercado de Abastos, and the small outdoor market that is set up daily on the Plazuela Labastida. Market vendors are usually intermediaries, or *acaparadores*, who purchase pieces directly from artisans outside the city and then sell them for a profit in marketplaces. Occasionally artisans will rent market stalls themselves; however, this is only a possibility if the family can both afford the rent, and afford to have someone take time away from production work to

oversee sales at the market. If an artisan family has the economic means it is not uncommon to find members of the same family selling in different retail locations. On one early morning visit to the Mercado de Abastos, I ran into Alfredo Segura Marcos, a hammock maker and a founding member of the Casa de las Artesanías, one of the three cooperatives where I conducted my field research. He introduced me to his mother, also a hammock maker, and explained that the family rents a stall in the market where his mother sells hammocks made by various members of their family. Alfredo and his wife focus their energy on their participation in the cooperative, but they pool their profits from the Casa with what his mother earns at the market and divide this money among members of the family.

In addition to boutiques catering to an upscale clientele, small businesses, and a handful of markets, there are two stores operating year round in the *centro histórico* of Oaxaca that are run by cooperative organizations: Casa de las Artesanías, and Mujeres Artesanas de las Regiones de Oaxaca A.C. A third cooperative, Culturas Oaxaqueñas A.C., sends representatives to the city to set up temporary exhibits and sales four times a year, since the members do not have the collective means to pay rent for a longer period of time. These cooperatives are representative of a trend identified by Stephen (2005a, 2005b) that suggests that when faced with a lack of development opportunities and support from the state, artisans view cooperative organization as a way of taking control of the production and distribution of their work.

A significant body of literature on artisan cooperatives in Mexico, particularly in Oaxaca and in Chiapas, has emerged since the 1990s. While the majority of this research focuses specifically on women's cooperatives, some attention has also been

given to coops that involve both male and female artisans. The existing literature documents the rise of cooperatives in the 1980s and 90s, emphasizing a link between the rise of neoliberal economic policies, reduced accessibility to government development programs, and efforts made by artisans to regain control over the production, marketing, and distribution of their work. The literature can be divided broadly into two categories. The first consists of research that focuses primarily on the economic aspects of cooperative production (Bartra 2003; Y. Castro Apreza 2000; Cohen 1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2000), while the second consists of research that emphasizes the impact of the formation of cooperatives on traditional gender roles, and the resulting changes in social networks (Eber and Rosenbaum 1993; Eber 2000; I. Castro Apreza 2003; Nash 1993). These categories are by no means mutually exclusive, and much of the literature on women's cooperatives deals with such interrelated issues as the development of leadership skills among women artisans participating in cooperative organizations (Stephen 2005b). Issues that have not been addressed in depth include the impact of cooperative production and circulation on types of *artesanías* produced, and the ways in which cooperatives create a space for artisans to express their own understanding of *lo mexicano* through artistic production and circulation that is not mediated by official institutions.

For the purposes of this study, the literature documenting the development of cooperatives in Chiapas (the southernmost Mexican state) proves useful, particularly when considering the political, social and economic challenges that cooperative organizations currently face. While there are considerable differences between the political and economic climates of Oaxaca and Chiapas, both states experienced

periods of state control over the *artesanía* market in the 1950s and 60s when the government organized and ran artisan cooperatives. Following the relative failure of state-run cooperatives, artisans in both states began to organize and control their own coops beginning in the 1980s. Significant parallels between the history of cooperatives in Oaxaca and Chiapas shed light on the ways in which the government has sought to shape *artesanía* production to accommodate the official discourse of “authenticity” and *mexicanidad*.

The sale of *artesanías* as a way of generating income in Chiapas is relatively new when compared to the *artesanía* market in Oaxaca; as Nash (1993a) points out, “[the] case studies from Oaxaca and the central plateau indicate a more advanced process of commercialization of crafts than in Chiapas where market exchange for textiles is relatively recent” (16). Like Oaxaca, Chiapas has a large indigenous population, and is among the poorest states in Mexico (Kovic and Eber 2000, 2). Additionally, both states have experienced periods of civil unrest since the early 1990s as social movements have arisen and come into direct conflict with governments at the state level. In Chiapas this culminated in the brief occupation of San Cristobal de las Casas in January of 1994 by the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN). In Oaxaca the most recent activity has been on the part of the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (APPO), a group that took up the cause of public school teachers during a strike in 2006 and is now pressing for social, economic and political reforms. These social and political upheavals drastically impacted tourism to Oaxaca and Chiapas both, which adversely affected artisans as the market for their work was greatly reduced.

The cooperative model is not a new concept. During the major period of development of the cultural tourism industry in the 1950s and 60s the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (National Indigenist Institute, INI)⁵ organized cooperatives in Chiapas and Oaxaca, primarily in indigenous villages. As Eber and Kovic (2003) point out, while not explicitly political in nature, state-funded cooperatives in Chiapas were controlled by representatives of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI), the political party that ruled Mexico for 71 years (6). In fact, Y. Castro Apreza (2000) asserts without hesitation that J'pas Joloviletik, a women's cooperative in San Cristóbal de las Casas,

was an important political resource for the INI and governor. The women of this cooperative, dressed in their traditional clothing, 'adorned' all the gubernatorial visits to the communities and townships. For many years, the women were required to attend such visits, to wear their best clothes and to walk arm-in-arm with the INI official or state governor. (214)

Following the EZLN uprising in 1994, the INI drew "boundaries" for J'pas Joloviletik and began to "get rid of all of the 'progressive' personnel" (211). Such politically motivated intervention only served to deepen mistrust in government institutions, and would eventually contribute to the deterioration of many state-funded cooperative organizations in Chiapas.

In Oaxaca, state-funded cooperatives in the 1960s and 70s were only moderately successful. In 1963 the Banco de Fomento de Cooperativas (Cooperative Development Bank, BANFOCO) organized a cooperative in Teotitlán del Valle as

⁵ In 2003 the Instituto Nacional Indigenista, created in 1948, was replaced by the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples, CDI).

part of a larger effort to sponsor cooperatives throughout the Central Valleys; it lasted only two years. Stephen (2005b) speculates that this is due to the fact that the community was not actively involved in the creation of the cooperative, rather, BANFOCO officials identified the village as a “good site for the program and proceeded to begin it with a few local men” (165). This failure to take into account the wants and needs of the community likely contributed to the decline of the organization. Such situations were endemic in state-organized and funded cooperatives of the era. Poorly masked political agendas, disregard for the opinions of cooperative members, and a lack of attention on the part of the state to the internal organization of the coops ultimately led to an increasing distrust of government programs amongst artisans in the Central Valleys, and the subsequent deterioration of cooperatives operated by the state.

In the wake of the decline of its cooperatives, the government has been present in the *artesanía* sector in other ways, both in instituting development programs and in creating exhibition spaces. The Instituto Oaxaqueño de las Artesanías (IOA) is the official agency at the state level responsible for supporting and promoting *artesanía* production. The Institute offers a number of services to Oaxacan artisans, including assistance in obtaining credit, technical training, commercialization through competitions and exhibits, exportation, and sales through its on-site gallery space. The Institute works closely with FONART at the national level to sponsor *artesanía* competitions within Oaxaca, and to coordinate the participation of Oaxacan artisans in national exhibitions and competitions.

The IOA was formed on November 29, 2004, and designated to legally replace the former agency with the same mandate, known as Artesanías e Industrias Populares del Estado de Oaxaca (ARIPO). ARIPO had been in operation since 1981, and had undergone various transformations in policy and in programs in its lifetime.

Hernandez Díaz (2005) notes that ARIPO's priorities tended to shift with each new administration, along with its policies toward artisans (243). According to Baruc Alavez Mendoza, who had held the position as director of the IOA for one year at the time he was interviewed for this study, the state's decision to replace ARIPO was motivated by a change in objectives:

Hace tres años y medio se constituye como instituto con la intención de ampliar más su cobertura. De ir más a otros temas que son inherentes a la vida de los que son artesanos. Entonces, hace tres años y medio de que es el Instituto Oaxaqueño de las Artesanías.

Three years ago the institute was re-established with the intention of increasing its scope, to focus on other matters central to the lives of artisans. So it's been three and a half years since it became the Institute of Oaxacan *Artesanías*.

The director went on to explain that one of the organization's principal tasks is to encourage artisans to organize themselves into groups, because it is very difficult to obtain any sort of private funding as an individual artisan. The Institute has implemented a small-scale micro-credit program with some success, but its primary task remains assisting artisan groups to apply for private loans or credit. The Institute also invests heavily in an "artisan credential" program, which is essentially a way of ensuring that artisans are legally registered and recognized by the state for census purposes.

The government has taken great care to dissociate the image of the IOA from that of its predecessor. The “shifting policies” of ARIPO that Hernandez Díaz (2005) describes took a toll on the reputation of the organization, leading to an increasing sense of frustration among Oaxacan artisans. One such policy change occurred approximately ten years ago, and was made in regards to a seasonal exhibition and sale in the *centro histórico*. According to several interview respondents, until the late 1990s the state sponsored an annual exhibit in the portals of the City Hall, adjacent to the *zócalo*. When the government began charging artisans a sizeable fee to rent a stall in these exhibits, many could no longer afford to participate. A founding member of Casa de las Artesanías, Manuela Villanueva Vásquez from Santa María Atzompa explained how this policy change contributed to the formation of the cooperative:

Esa Casa de Artesanías empezó porque antes nos daban, hace como diez años más o menos, nos daban un espacio todas las temporadas altas. Y, es de, de repente empezaron que ya no nos iban a dar espacio, porque nos iban a quitar de allá... Y entonces hay un compañero que dice, ¿porqué no nos unimos y hacemos una casa nosotros? Buscamos y así empezamos, hacíamos juntas y ahí estamos, vamos a cumplir ocho años el 31 de agosto.

The Casa de las Artesanías started because about ten years ago they [the government] used to give us a space during the high season. And all of a sudden they said they weren't going to give us that space, that they were going to get us out of there... And so a friend says, “Why don't we get together and make a space ourselves?” We searched, and that's how we started, we had meetings, and there we are now, we'll celebrate eight years on August 31st.

Stephen (2005a) notes another significant policy change regarding the exhibit that occurred in 2003, when government officials decided to “clean up” the city center by moving the event to the outskirts of the city. The artisans who agreed and participated reported miserable sales; it was, in Stephen's words, “an economic disaster” (265).

The negative impacts resulting from these policy changes cast a shadow over ARIPO, as the body responsible for dealing with any issue pertaining to artisans and *artesanía* sales within the state of Oaxaca.

Despite the state's efforts to create a new face for the IOA, many interview respondents believed the Institute to be the same organization, albeit with a different name, but representing the same frustrating bureaucracy. Alfredo told me that:

Hay una dependencia oficial de gobierno que se encarga de, entre comillas yo le digo, "apoyar a los artesanos," que se llama el Instituto, ahora le llaman Instituto Oaxaqueño de las Artesanías, anteriormente se llamaba ARIPO. Ese instituto pues básicamente se sirve para conseguirle o promocionarle un trabajo a un funcionario, porque de hecho esa dependencia nunca ha servido para apoyar a un artesano. Nunca.

There's an official government agency in charge of "supporting artisans"—supposedly. It's called the Institute, now they call it the Institute of Oaxacan *Artesanías*, it used to be called ARIPO. I say that the Institute basically exists to give a job or a promotion to a government employee, because in reality that agency has never served to support an artisan. Never.

While Alfredo's claim is extreme, he represents the voices of many artisans who feel that the state has let them down. This disillusionment with the government and with its cultural agencies was a recurring theme in many interviews conducted with members of cooperatives in Oaxaca City, and can be considered a motivating factor in the formation of the three organizations examined here: Casa de las Artesanías, Mujeres Artesanas de las Regiones de Oaxaca A.C., and Culturas Oaxaqueñas A.C.

Casa de las Artesanías

Three blocks north of the *zócalo*, Casa de las Artesanías sits on the corner of Matamoros and García Vigil. Formally inaugurated on August 31, 2001, this store is

Oaxaca City's newest artisan cooperative retail outlet. The store belongs to and is run by the Maestros Oaxaqueños del Arte Popular S.C., a group that represents artisans from all seven regions of the state of Oaxaca. The organization officially brings together *artesanías* made by six ethnic groups: Mixes, Zapotecos, Chatinos, Mazatecos, Mixtecos, and Amuzgos. It represents twenty-seven indigenous communities, twenty-one artisanal styles, seventy family workshops, and ten smaller artisan organizations. In order to sell *artesanías* in this space, an artisan must be an official *socio* (a registered member). The organization currently represents approximately seventy-five artisans.

The official objectives of the organization are prominently displayed over the cash register near the entrance to the store:

Esta organización tiene como objetivos, mejorar y elevar el nivel y calidad de vida de sus socios, así como la calidad, el volumen, el diseño, los sistemas y sus técnicas de producción... La Casa de las Artesanías de Oaxaca es el espacio digno para coincidencia de los artistas populares, así como el mejor escaparate para mostrar su obra: Tienda, Museo, Centro Cultural, Talleres, Espacios para capacitarse, Puntos de encuentro.

The objectives of this organization are to raise and improve the quality of life of its members, as well as to improve the quality, volume, design, systems and production techniques of their work... Casa de las Artesanías de Oaxaca provides a space for artisans to come together, and is also the best place to showcase their work. It is a store, a museum, a cultural center, a workshop, a space to learn, and a meeting place.

These objectives indicate clear economic concerns: the organization collectively seeks to improve each member's quality of life by providing a space in which to sell his or her *artesanías*, thus contributing to a steady income and financial security. In addition to economic concerns, however, the organization's objectives also point to questions

of aesthetics. Casa de las Artesanías is unique among urban coop stores because of its on-site workshops, where artisans teach their techniques to one another, and occasionally to members of the public. This is seen as an opportunity to exchange artistic ideas, and to generate innovation of design. In order to become a member of the organization, an artisan must be willing to share his or her technical knowledge and artistic sensibilities by teaching and learning from other artisan members. Finally, the wide range of goals that the cooperative seeks to fulfill, as stated in the last two lines of their objectives, underscores the multiplicity of significations of *artesanías* by situating them as economic commodities, showpieces, and cultural objects that inspire education and unite artisans.

Like many buildings dating from the Spanish colonial era, the one that houses Casa de las Artesanías is set up around a central patio. A roof now covers the space over the patio that would at one point have been open. The organization takes advantage of this central patio space to set up temporary exhibits that showcase particular *artesanías*. These exhibits are changed every few weeks, and are often designed around a theme that coincides with a holiday or a special event going on in the city, such as the Guelaguetza⁶ in July or the *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead)

⁶ The Guelaguetza, known locally as Lunes del Cerro (Mondays of the Hill), is a two-week festival celebrating the art, music, and dance of Oaxaca. The festival is heavily promoted by the government at both the state and federal levels. Though it has traditionally been a major tourist attraction, it was cancelled in 2006 due to political turbulence following the teacher's strike in May of that year that continued to plague the city through the summer months. Tourism remained slow in 2007 and the Guelaguetza returned to a greatly reduced audience. By July of 2008 the situation had improved further, and though the artisans I interviewed all referred to the difficulties they faced as a result of "el conflicto," the majority seemed optimistic about the future.

in November. Around the central patio there are nine inter-connected rooms. Seven doorways bear the names of Oaxacan indigenous groups: Huave, Chinanteco, Chatino, Mixe, Mazateco, Mixteco and Zapoteco. Each room features a particular type of *artesanía*: ceramics, *alebrijes*, *hojalata*, linens, clothing, leather goods, and rugs. Silver jewelry and other trinkets are displayed in cases around the central patio.

This type of display is in part consistent with a sales situation described by García Canclini (1982), in which *artesanías* are grouped together by type rather than by origin, thus obscuring both the source and the maker. In the scenario described by Canclini, these arrangements are typically put together by intermediaries who may have little to no knowledge about the origins of *artesanías*. This results from a “globalization of culture” (64), a situation in which objects traveling great distances come to stand as generic markers of a given culture as a whole. In retail practice, this generally manifests itself through a process of homogenization in which “*artesanía*” is equated with “Mexican-ness.” In such situations, knowledge about regional variations in product and style is often lost.

Though Casa de las Artesanías groups *artesanías* together by type rather than by origin, there are a few important distinctions to be made from the situation described above. First, members are encouraged to identify their pieces with their family name, a practice that is surprisingly uncommon in many marketplaces. This instills a sense of individual authorship that is linked more to the production of individual art pieces than to mass production. Secondly, the store is run based on a system referred to as a *tequio* (collective work). Depending on their proximity to Oaxaca City, each member is required to spend one day a week to keep watch over the

merchandise and to answer patrons' questions. This opportunity for interaction between the producers and consumers of *artesanías* is an important site of cultural exchange that, because of the independent nature of the organization, is not mediated by the state.

Decisions about the placement of *artesanías* within the store are made by the General Assembly, which includes all members of the cooperative. This decision-making power is linked to the greater sense of autonomy that the cooperative offers its members. The decisions they make about what *artesanías* to sell and how they wish to display them is part of a process of deciding what image they will project to the public. Because they continue to work with symbols that are part of dominant discourse of the state, their freedom to choose is not absolute. However, within the cooperative artisans have significantly greater autonomy than when the government was more directly involved in the presentation and circulation of *artesanías*.

Alfredo Segura Marcos is a hammock maker from San Pablo Yaganiza, a village in the northern Sierra. As a founding member of the Casa de las Artesanías and a former member of the organization's Board of Directors, he has been active in the evolution of the organization and its objectives since 2001. According to him, the fact that artisans are always present in the store is crucial to the organization's ability to meet its goal of establishing a dialogue between artisans and the public:

La finalidad de venir a cubrir las guardias es primero, de poder establecer un vínculo, una relación de comunicación con las personas que vienen a Casa de las Artesanías. Porque lo más cómodo pudiera ser, es contratar a un personal que se dedique a la venta, y nosotros en el taller. Pero finalmente, la visión que tiene la organización es que las personas que visiten la casa conozcan, que sepan, quien es el productor, es de, que puedan comunicarse con el productor y decir bueno, como lo

trabajan, cual es la técnica que aplican, conocer es de, a lo mejor la filosofía que tiene cada uno de los artesanos, no?

The idea behind coming in to watch over the store is first and foremost to create a link, a means of communicating with the people who visit Casa de las Artesanías. It would be much easier to hire salespeople to take care of the store, and for us to stay in the workshops. But ultimately, the vision of this organization is that the people who visit the Casa learn, that they get to know who the producer is—that they are able to talk to the artisan and ask how they create their pieces, what techniques they use. To get to know, possibly, the personal philosophy of each artisan, you see?

Aside from the importance placed on interaction between artisans and visitors to the store, the organization depends on the *tequio* system to sustain itself financially. The Casa de las Artesanías has never received external funds in the form of grants or subsidies from either government agencies or private creditors. This financial independence is directly related to greater autonomy for cooperative members, because they are responsible to each other rather than to a creditor, managerial team, or government official.

In order to maintain the economic self-sufficiency of the Casa, the *tequio* system of collective work requires members to contribute to the cost of keeping the organization running. Aside from spending one day at the store each week each artisan must be willing to help keep extra costs down by doing the cleaning of the building themselves and preparing meals for the members at the store that day. There is no official system of collecting regular dues, but members contribute financially by paying a percentage of each sale they make to the organization, in what is essentially a form of internal taxation. This is fairly typical of cooperative organizations formed in the 1980s and 1990s, and has both advantages and drawbacks. On the one hand, it

means that the financial contribution of an artisan who has less merchandise on display or who is selling less of his production is less than that of an artisan who sells several expensive pieces in one week. On the other hand, this model has been criticized because it means that artisans who are able to sell more essentially pay to keep the entire organization afloat.

Aside from a professional accountant, artisan members hold all positions within the organization. The Board of Directors and the President are elected by the General Assembly every two years; these terms are non-renewable. Many members commented that they preferred this system because it ensured that they, as members, were in control of the decision-making process. There is a considerable emphasis placed on member equality and accountability within the organization. The rotation of leadership positions ensures that no one artisan or small group of artisans dominates the governing Assembly. Artisans on duty are held responsible for any theft that might occur in the store under their supervision, and are required to collectively make up the cost of any stolen merchandise. These rights and responsibilities are characteristic of the cooperative as a model, and reflect both advantages and disadvantages of the space of the cooperative.

Mujeres Artesanas de las Regiones de Oaxaca, A.C.

Located on Avenida 5 de mayo, Mujeres Artesanas de las Regiones de Oaxaca (MARO) celebrated its sixteenth anniversary in September of 2008. As such, it is one of the longest running artisan cooperatives in Oaxaca City. The organization represents women artisans from each of the seven regions of the state. MARO is headed by María Aurora Martínez Ríos, known affectionately around the store as

“Doña Mari.” She is the eldest of fourteen siblings, and learned *talabartería* (leather work) from her parents, both artisans. While Doña Mari continues to produce *huaraches* (sandals) to be sold at MARO, she spends most of her time overseeing the operation of the store.

In the early 1990s, the state government initiated a program called Apoyo a la Mujer Oaxaqueña (Support for Oaxacan Women, AMO). In the initial stages of the development of MARO, the women who made up the organization benefited from the support of this program. With financial assistance from AMO and the help of a lawyer they went through the steps to become a legally incorporated *asociación civil* (non-profit organization). Additionally, the state provided them with a space to exhibit and sell their *artesanías* on the corner of García Vigil and Independencia, adjacent to the *zócalo*.

When the state appointed a new Secretary of Tourism in 1992, things changed for MARO. Under the new Secretary, the space formerly occupied by MARO became the central Tourism Office, and MARO was relocated to its present location on Avenida 5 de Mayo. The new location was a two-story former *vecindad* (apartment building) made up of seven one-room units, of which MARO had access to six. Doña Mari recalls the early days in the new location:

Cuando nosotras llegamos a este lugar, no había ni alma. Ni alma pasaba en la calle. La casa estaba fea, y nada más nos dieron estas seis aulas... Salimos de allá un 13 de septiembre, y llegamos acá un 14, 15 de septiembre. Fuimos llorando, porque ahí era el corazón, no? Y aquí no pasaba ni alma.

When we arrived here, there was no one around. Not a single person would pass by in the street. The house was ugly, and they only gave us these six rooms... We left there [the location by the *zócalo*] on

September 13th, and arrived here on the 15th or 16th. We were sad to leave there, because it was the heart of the city, and around here it was deserted.

Doña Mari's concerns about the distance of the store from the city center were justified. With so many outlets selling *artesanías* in Oaxaca, location is key and advertising is a challenge, especially for an organization with limited funds. The majority of shoppers are passersby, especially in the early stages of the development of a store. The organization took on the challenge of publicizing its new location by preparing a small brochure that included a description of the cooperative, a map, and a newly designed logo. The logo features a woman weaving, wearing a *huipil* (traditional dress woven by hand) and *huaraches*. She is surrounded by *artesanías*: a black clay pot, a wool rug, woven curtains, and an *alebrije*, among others. As Doña Mari explained, the logo represents the cooperative by incorporating into one image all of the *artesanías* made by its members. In 1992, MARO printed and distributed 200 brochures to tourists and hotels; by 2007, they were distributing over 50,000 brochures a year.

Assistance from the government did not last. Members of MARO acknowledge AMO's role in helping to launch the organization, but they also recall empty promises.

Doña Mari recounted,

Nos habían prometido el turismo, darnos publicidad, y jamás nos la dieron. Todo lo que nos prometieron, nunca. Yo iba con el arquitecto [Secretaría del Turismo], y el arquitecto me decía delante de ellos [el gobierno del estado], "Le van a hacer esto, y esto, y esto," pero pues aquí los funcionarios, ya sabes, oyen pero no actúan.

They promised us tourism, promised to advertise for us, but they never did. Nothing that they promised ever happened. I would go in with the architect [the Secretary of Tourism] and he would say in front of them

[the State Government], “They’re going to do this, that, and the other thing for you.” But you know how it is; the government officials here listen but don’t act.

It is probable that as a new program, AMO was completely overwhelmed by the number of groups seeking financial and organizational support. Nevertheless, the mismanagement of situations such as the one described above certainly contributed to negative perceptions of the government, and discouraged artisans from working with them. These negative perceptions persist, and were common among interview respondents from MARO, Casa de las Artesanías, and Culturas Oaxaqueñas.

MARO has grown tremendously since it first opened in 1992. In physical terms, the organization now has access to the entire building. In terms of organization and internal structure, MARO has developed a unique business plan among urban cooperative retail outlets. There are very few women officially incorporated into the organization, but each of these women manages a team of many artisans. These teams have no responsibilities within the cooperative, other than to pay a small percentage of their sales to the organization to cover maintenance costs. They visit the store once or twice every month to check on their inventory, and to collect payment if they have made any sales.

Rosa Elena García López, a resident of Santa María Atzompa, sells her multi-colored glazed ceramics both at MARO and from her home. She told me that her involvement with MARO began when Doña Mari visited her at home and suggested that she bring some pieces into the store. When asked how this business arrangement had impacted Rosa, she replied that she had benefited financially: “Es una ayuda, pues. Cuando no hay ventas acá y ahí [en MARO] sí se vende, pues—tenemos dinero

por otro lado” (Well, it helps us out. When no one is buying here, but they are buying there [at MARO], it brings in money from somewhere else). This is a common pattern among women artisans who work with MARO. Irma Claudia García Blanco, also from Santa María, affirmed that her sales had improved somewhat since she began working with Doña Mari, but that the drop in tourism following “el conflicto” in 2006 had hit her sales hard: “Pues sí, ha subido un poquito, porque en tiempos que hay ventas, pues sí. Pero ahorita como bajó un poco—mucho—la venta, de que no ha habido ventas estamos resintiéndolo más” (Well, yes, it [business] has improved slightly, in times when business [in Oaxaca] is good. But now that sales have dropped a bit—a lot—because sales have dropped, we are affected by it more).

Instead of having artisans at the store to represent the organization and to answer questions for visitors, Doña Mari hires students (some from the university and some from local high schools) to work in the store and pays them a small salary to help them with their educational expenses. An employee looks after the cash register in the morning, and Doña Mari is there every afternoon until the store closes. In the summer of 2008, MARO was in the process of computerizing its inventory and sales system, a first among the urban cooperative stores where I conducted my research. Doña Mari’s son, a graduate of the Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez, has set up a web page with photos of available *artesanías*. This webpage is connected to Doña Mari’s vision for the future: entering the export business. She told me,

Debemos de exportar, pero hay una cosa: MARO nació. Empezó a gatear, a aderezarse, y empieza hacer sus primeraditos pasos. Le falta correr todavía. Que es el correr? La exportación. Pero hablar de “la exportación,” son palabras mayores. Porque tienes que tener un buen estoc de mercancía, de material prima... Para exportar no te piden una

pieza, te piden miles, miles de piezas. Como es manual, no puedes. Tendrás que tener algo almacenado, y decir, “Ahora sí.”

We should export, but there’s one thing: MARO was born. It began to stand up, to crawl, and now it’s taking its first little steps. It has yet to run. What does it mean to run? The ability to export. But to talk of “exportation,” those are big words. Because first you must have a good stock of merchandise, of materials. When you export they [importers] don’t ask you for one piece, they ask for thousands and thousands. Because it [the work] is done by hand, you just can’t. You have to have something in storage, to be able to say “Yes, now is the time.”

Doña Mari’s dream of entering the export business is a common one among Oaxacan artisans. The ability to export means that an artisan has assembled a large enough inventory to meet a foreign importer’s needs, the difficulty of which Doña Mari emphasized. Exporting generally results in an increase in income for artisan producers because *artesanías* may be sold for three or four times the price abroad. The reality remains, however, that very few small-scale artisans succeed in the export business, because most lack the capacity to produce on a larger scale, and do not have the English skills or international contacts that facilitate business relationships with foreign importers.

For the time being, MARO will likely remain in the business of local sales through its store in Oaxaca City. When tourism dropped so drastically in 2006, the cooperative had enough collective savings to maintain itself. However, Doña Mari worries that with those savings gone, and the tourism industry currently so volatile due to political tensions between the APPO and government officials, MARO may face another financial challenge before it has had time to recuperate from the previous one. Still, she is extremely proud of MARO’s accomplishments and her role within the

organization, and continues to make plans for growth and development of the cooperative.

Culturas Oaxaqueñas, A.C.

In a doorway facing the *artesanía* market on Plazuela Labastida hangs a canvas sign that reads “Artesanías Oaxaqueñas/Oaxacan Handicrafts” in blue and red painted letters. Inside the doorway sits Antolina Mendez Gutiérrez, at a table displaying *alebrijes*. Antolina calls herself “la de las ideas” (the one with the ideas) and is the primary organizer of the temporary exhibits and sales run by Culturas Oaxaqueñas A.C., a women’s cooperative. Culturas Oaxaqueñas represents women artisans from all over the state, but most see each other only four times a year, when the members of the organization meet for general assemblies. These assemblies are opportunities for the women to decide how their temporary exhibits will be set up, who will represent the group at the exhibit, and to take a general inventory of all of the *artesanías* that will be sent to the capital city.

Unlike Casa de las Artesanías and MARO, Culturas Oaxaqueñas does not have a permanent store in the city because the organization lacks the funds to pay rent year-round. Instead, the coop rents the central patio and entrance of a small library on Calle Abasolo, just off of Labastida. The organization sends representatives to Oaxaca City four times a year, for periods of up to three or four weeks around major holidays: the Guelaguetza in summer, the *Día de los Muertos* in fall, the Christmas season in winter, and Holy Week in spring. The length of their stay is dependant upon sales. If business is good and the group can continue to make a profit, they will extend their rental agreement by a week or two. If not, the representatives might not stay more than two

weeks; such was the case in most of 2006 and 2007, in the aftermath of “el conflicto.” Tourism dropped so drastically that sales were few and far between, and the organization struggled to stay afloat.

Much like Casa de las Artesanías and MARO, Culturas Oaxaqueñas was formed by a group of artisans who were tired of relying on piecework or on sale to intermediaries, and frustrated from being underpaid for their efforts. According to Antolina, the women artisans who made up the group hoped that forming a cooperative would allow them to sell directly to tourists, bypassing intermediaries and thus increasing their profits. Isabel and Catalina Mendoza Martínez are sisters from Teotitlán del Valle who accompany Antolina to the exhibit each day. They come from a family of weavers, and have been working with Culturas Oaxaqueñas for a number of years. They told me that in Teotitlán, the wealthiest merchant families live on the main road leading to the village from the highway. These are the workshops where most visitors to the village stop to make purchases. Catalina recounted that her family had worked for years as pieceworkers for these merchant families:

Los que tienen otro negocio más grande aquí en el pueblo, los que viven por la carretera, iban a pedirnos trabajo. Y traían hilo, como no tenemos hilo, ellos nos daban el material. E ya nosotros lo hacíamos, lo trabajábamos pues. Y de eso daban, pero era muy bajo, muy poco. Poquito lo que nos daban y no alcanzaba para nada.

Those who run a big business here in the village, the ones who live by the highway, they used to come to ask us to work for them. They would bring wool, because we have no wool. They would provide us with the materials. And then we would do it, we would do the work. They paid us for it, but it was not much, only a little. They paid us very little, and it wasn't enough for anything.

The situation Catalina described is consistent with the findings of research conducted by Cohen (1998, 1999b) and Stephen (2005a, 2005b) that suggests that piecework allows families of weavers to subsist on a very basic level, but provides very little opportunity for economic growth. Patrons provide pieceworkers with materials and specific design orders, and they often pay very little for finished work. Still, for many families, piecework is one of the few options they have to support themselves, particularly those who do not own looms or do not have the means to buy materials.

One of the major obstacles in forming a cooperative is the process of attaining legal status as a non-profit organization. It is necessary for artisans to be legally incorporated as a group in order to apply for bank loans or credit. This process is very time-consuming, and can be quite costly because the group must have legal documents drawn up and signed by a notary and then filed with the appropriate government agency. Antolina told me that the founding members of Culturas Oaxaqueñas pooled their resources to cover these costs. Eventually the group was able to incorporate itself as an *asociación civil sin fines lucrativos* (non-profit association). With this status the group was finally able to apply for a loan to purchase materials, which are now bought collectively and distributed as needed among the members of the organization.

Culturas Oaxaqueñas depends on contributions from members to sustain itself, like Casa de las Artesanías and MARO. A percentage of each sale goes toward maintaining the organization, including the cost of renting the exhibit space and paying a small commission to the members who represent the cooperative during seasonal exhibits. Prior to setting up the exhibit, a description of each *artesanía* is recorded in order to keep track of what pieces belong to which artisan. Over the course

of the exhibit, Antolina keeps meticulous records of what is sold, and to whom money is due. By keeping track of total sales made, she is able to calculate how much each member owes for maintenance costs.

Where Casa de las Artesanías and MARO have strict policies about their prices being non-negotiable, this is not the case at Culturas Oaxaqueñas. As the smallest and least profitable cooperative, it is likely that this is due primarily to the need to sell as much merchandise as possible in relatively short exhibit and sales periods. As the four-week period that I spent visiting the organization drew to a close I observed a notable increase in Antolina's willingness to negotiate with customers. Where the first two cooperatives have been able to save some money to put toward small expansion projects, this has not been the case with Culturas Oaxaqueñas. When sales are good, members of this organization make more than they would by selling their work to intermediaries, but as a whole profits are not high enough so as to allow the organization to grow in any substantial way.

Culturas Oaxaqueñas has been operating for approximately fifteen years. According to Antolina, the major challenge they currently face is commercialization. The display signs, she told me, needed updating, and the cooperative was in desperate need of publicity. With so many *artesanía* stores in Oaxaca City, a store is only as successful as the publicity it can afford. "Lo que hace falta es publicidad," she told me; "Es que no sabemos" (What we are missing is publicity; we just don't know how). Isabel and Catalina had put up a few small posters in the streets surrounding the exhibit space, but most customers stumbled across the cooperative's store by chance. As Antolina told me, commercialization was a problem of financial resources, but also

one of communication and organization. The general assemblies before seasonal exhibits are the only times all members of the organization are brought together. When they do meet they often face language barriers, as many members come from indigenous villages where Spanish is rarely spoken. There are sometimes disagreements about the way the exhibits should be run. Though Antolina has assumed the role of organizer, there are no official leadership positions within the cooperative, elected or otherwise. With so much general assembly time dedicated to organizing and taking an inventory of merchandise, there is little time to discuss advertising strategies, in addition to which there is little money to put them into action.

Despite the challenges that the cooperative has faced with the drop in tourism to Oaxaca in recent years and a lack of development opportunities, Antolina is hopeful about the future of the organization. She told me that what *Culturas Oaxaqueñas* needs in order to flourish is economic support to be able to expand and to develop a more aggressive marketing plan. In the meantime she plans to continue with seasonal sales, and hopes that the number of visitors to Oaxaca will continue to increase to the levels seen prior to “el conflicto.”

The Cooperative Model: Benefits and Challenges

The benefits of the cooperative model are well documented. Stephen (2005b) notes that many women involved in cooperative production learn new decision-making and leadership skills. Eber and Rosenbaum (1993) suggest that the cooperative model allows artisans to develop more direct links to markets. Additionally, according to I. Castro Apreza (2003), cooperative organizations provide artisans with necessary training in marketing, accounting, and the commercialization of *artesanías*. Finally,

artisans who are involved in cooperative production often experience some increase in income, because they are able to bypass the intermediary and sell directly to the consumer.

Interviewees spoke about their experiences with cooperative production in very positive terms. They stated that their membership had given them a greater sense of control over their work, because they no longer had to rely on sales to intermediaries. Additionally, the majority of those artisans who had previously earned minimal incomes while employed as pieceworkers now enjoy working as independent artisans. This relative independence impacted artisans not only in economic terms, but in creative or aesthetic terms as well. The “tastes” of the market notwithstanding, independent artisans experienced more freedom in the creative process. Pieceworkers are provided with materials and designs to fill specific orders, while independent artisans are freer to explore a range of creative options. These options are informed by “los gustos del turismo” (the tourist’s taste), but it is up to each artisan to evaluate these tastes and to respond accordingly, shaping their own work with fewer external constraints, whether from a patron, an intermediary, or a government official. The cooperative as a model opens a space for artisans to interact in a more direct way with those who acquire their *artesanías*, thus shaping their production according to the demands of the market.

Nevertheless, the cooperative model is not without disadvantages. As Cohen (1998) points out, cooperatives are not all-inclusive, and they often marginalize poorer members of a community. On a smaller scale, they may construct the same type of problematic social hierarchy that places merchant families with knowledge of the

market and contacts with importers above other artisans. This is important to recognize when considering the marketing strategies of the three cooperatives in Oaxaca City. As Antolina told me, tourists “recognize the meaning of ‘cooperative.’” These cooperatives rely heavily on the association tourists make between “cooperative” as a model and notions of equality and teamwork. While the organizations do embody these principles, it is nevertheless important to recognize that they may also engage in exclusionary practices.

Cooperative organizations face a number of challenges. Without external funding, they must be self-sufficient. If tourism slows, as it did in 2006 and 2007, it can be extremely difficult for these organizations to maintain themselves. Additionally, cooperative stores must compete both with private stores operating on bigger budgets, and with vendors in the street who can sell their *artesanías* for a lower price because they do not have the added maintenance expenses of renting a commercial location. Finally, disagreements regarding display or marketing practices sometimes arise between members, which can be divisive and may threaten the integrity of the organization. Some interviewees reported cases of theft, and indicated that they believed they might have been internal. This indicates that the image of cooperation and mutual trust that is central to the marketing strategies of these organizations might not be entirely accurate.

While these issues are problematic, they are not insuperable. Artisan cooperatives have a long history in Mexico, with varying degrees of success. The most recent revival of the cooperative model beginning in the 1980s marks a significant shift away from earlier state-run cooperatives, in that within the “new” cooperative

model, artisans control the production and circulation of their work. Artisans makes decisions about what they will sell, and how. In doing so, they take the official discourse regarding what constitutes *lo mexicano* and begin to transform it. While this does not mean that cooperative members are immune to the influence of the official discourse, cooperatives do offer artisans the means with which to reclaim the economic meaning of their *artesanías*, and in doing so, to begin to take control over the symbolic meanings these *artesanías* articulate.

4

What (and How) Do *Artesanías* “Mean”?

“La artesanía se puede definir en una sola palabra: cultura... Artesanía es cultura, no es otra cosa. Que es parte de la economía, sí—pero es cultura. Que es parte de nuestra identidad, sí—pero es cultura. Que es parte de mi futuro, sí—pero es mi cultura.”

“Artesanías can be defined in a single word: culture... Artesanías are culture, nothing else. Yes, they are part of the economy—but they’re also culture. Yes, they are part of our identity—but they’re also culture. Yes, they are part of my future—but they’re also my culture.”
— Edgardo Villanueva

Meaning is not absolute, nor is it objective. “Meaning” is an elusive concept that is best brought to light through an examination of the social and cultural processes through which it is generated. The multifaceted meanings that Oaxacan *artesanías* embody are heavily dependent upon the context in which the *artesanías* are situated. Examining the “social histories” of *artesanías* by tracing their trajectories from the places where they are produced to the points where they are displayed or sold illuminates the range of meanings that *artesanías* articulate, both for those who produce them and those who acquire them.

Canclini (1982) proposes four possible destinations for Mexican *artesanías* that are produced within a capitalist market: the crafts shop, the boutique, the museum, and the urban household. The following chapter considers the artisan cooperative retail outlet within this framework. It demonstrates that although the cooperative store shares some of the characteristics of Canclini’s “destinations,” it represents an alternative space because artisans have direct control over the presentation of their

work without the mediation of the state. Artisans who are members of cooperatives are still subject to market forces and to an ongoing official discourse about what constitutes *lo mexicano*. However, the control that artisans exercise within the space of the cooperative store allows them to make decisions about how they both reproduce and transform this discourse. The chapter then examines political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions of Oaxacan artisan cooperatives in order to determine the ways in which the cooperative store as a model allows artisans to exercise agency over the commercialization of *artesanías*, and thus, over the meaning(s) ascribed to these *artesanías*.

Urban “Destinations” of Oaxacan *Artesanías*

The first destination that Canclini proposes is the crafts shop, which he defines as a space in which “the practical and ceremonial uses [of *artesanías*] are mostly ignored as articles are removed from their context—the household or the *fiesta*—and displayed by themselves, without any explanations that would enable someone to guess their primary meaning” (77). In the crafts shop different types of *artesanías* are grouped together within the same display. This creates confusion over their origins, which Canclini argues is further complicated by the fact that salespeople are intermediaries who generally know very little about the *artesanías* and the artisans who make them.

Like the crafts shop, the cooperative store sells a wide range of *artesanías*. However, the salespeople in the coop store are artisans who produce the *artesanías* being sold. They are able to provide visitors with details about the places where the *artesanías* are produced (whether in a village or in an urban workshop), and can

highlight the variations in techniques employed by different artisans. Artisans sign the *artesanías* they sell in the coop store, a practice that is uncommon in marketplaces and on the street. This relatively simple act is significant because it signals that these pieces are not mass-produced, and that individual artisans create them in specific cultural contexts.

According to Canclini, in the boutique *artesanías* “are displayed to be seen, as in a museum, but, while the latter rules out their private appropriation, boutiques show and arrange them in order to encourage us to buy them” (79). The boutique and the museum showcase the aesthetic qualities of *artesanías* through placement and presentation, stripping them of their “use value.” Collectors, merchants, and curators highlight the “authenticity” of the *artesanías* they display or sell, framing them within the dominant discourse that dictates what constitutes *lo mexicano*. Elaborated over several decades of the twentieth century by the cultural apparatuses of the state (such as CONACULTA and FONART), this discourse is thoroughly embedded in the cultural tourism industry.

The boutique and the museum distance *artesanías* from those who produce them, as well as from those who view them. “In a museum,” Canclini writes, “crafts cannot be touched; a boutique offers something that is also to be looked at rather than used, something that shows that it belongs to the person who buys it but that bears the sense of remoteness characteristic of the decorative, as if it was not meant to be part of life” (79). In the cooperative store, the artificial distance created in the boutique and the museum between artisan, *artesanía*, and visitor is greatly reduced. Displays in the coop store are tactile; visitors are invited to pick items up, to feel them, to inspect

them carefully, and to ask questions about them to the artisan producers. This involvement of the visitor does not negate the fact that the cooperative store exists to make sales, as does the boutique. It does, however, demonstrate a different marketing strategy, which capitalizes on the sensorial experience of the visitor and on the value of the exchange of information between producer and consumer.

Canclini asserts that the crafts shop, the boutique, and the museum are all governed by a set of “deciphering codes” that determine the way in which *artesanías* are perceived. These codes dictate what is “authentically Mexican” according to the dominant ideology of the state. They present *artesanías* as symbols of “Mexican-ness” by reinforcing stereotypes of indigenous artisans and romanticizing “traditional” artisan production. By appropriating the economic and symbolic meaning of *artesanías*, the state maintains hegemonic power over subordinate artisan classes.

The artisan cooperative presents an alternative model of production and distribution for Oaxacan artisans. By working within the framework of cultural tourism established by the state, the cooperative offers artisans an opportunity to formulate “a strategy for gradual control over spaces and mechanisms of circulation” (84). This is a first step in regaining control over the economic meaning of *artesanías*, and beginning to transform their symbolic meaning. The economic independence of the cooperative from the cultural institutions of the state is crucial, as it ensures that it is artisans, not intermediaries, who control the commercialization of their work. This freedom from the mediation of the state allows artisans to assert agency over the range of meanings that their work articulates.

In order to elucidate the ways in which the cooperative as a model allows artisans to engage with the state's discourse of *mexicanidad*, it is useful to return to Appadurai's (1986) understanding of commodities. He holds that the "social histories of things" transcend the "cultural biographies" of individual commodities. "It is the social history of things," he asserts, "over large periods of time and at large social levels, that constrains the form, meaning, and structure of more short-term, specific, and intimate trajectories" (36). It is essential to consider the individual trajectories of Oaxacan *artesanías* in conjunction with one another in order to examine the complex networks that make up their "social histories." Examining the political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions that make up these histories will offer further insight into what motivates artisans to join cooperatives, the perceived benefits of their participation, and the ways that cooperatives open up spaces for artisans to contest the dominant cultural discourse of the state.

Political Dimensions

As discussed in the previous chapter, many Oaxacan artisans have become increasingly frustrated with government programs that they believe to be unreliable, and cultural policies that seem to be in a constant state of flux. The vagaries of official programs and policies have instilled an ongoing distrust of the government and of its programs among artisans. Interviewees expressed particular dissatisfaction with the state government, and the belief that state exhibits and competitions served to put artisans and their work on display, but that the government had very little interest in working to improve the social and economic problems that artisans face. Edgardo, for example, asserted in strong language that:

Nunca estuve de acuerdo con las políticas gubernamentales, como tratan al artesano. Siempre nos han tratado con mucho, eh, con menosprecio. Al artesano lo han visto como alguien a quien explotar y alguien que les permita montar una exposición para que un funcionario lo visite y lo vea bonito, pero no tienen mayor interés que el asunto estético. Que el artesano vaya, ponga una exposición, porque va a venir el gobernador, el presidente de la república, y quieren que hayan cosas bonitas.”

I have never agreed with government policies, with the way they treat artisans. They've always treated us with a lot of contempt. They've seen the artisan as someone they can exploit, and as someone who allows them to put together an exhibit so that a government official can visit and find it “pretty,” but they aren't interested in anything more than appearances. They want the artisan to go and put on a show, because the Governor or the President of the Republic is visiting, and they want to see pretty things.

Edgardo's somewhat cynical perception of the government and its motives is representative of the opinion of the majority of interviewees. Most respondents implied that the state had let them down by failing to create accessible programs and by prioritizing the economic interests of the state, without passing these benefits along to the artisans who form the foundation of the cultural tourism industry.

In addition to a general sense of distrust in the government's motives, interviewees expressed the belief that government officials working for the cultural agencies of the state frequently take advantage of their positions of power to extend opportunities to certain artisans and not others. Asunción Hernández Lazo, a young weaver from Teotitlán, worked with a cooperative called Mujeres Que Tejen (Women Who Weave) before joining the Casa de las Artesanías. She told me that years ago, the women of Mujeres que Tejen participated in exhibits sponsored by ARIPO. Once new government officials filled positions within ARIPO, however, the ties between the cooperative and the state agency were severed. Asunción recounted,

Allá en ARIPO ... las personas encargadas que estaban en ese entonces, ahorita ya no tienen cargos allá. Ahorita hay mucha gente, incluso una persona de aquí mismo del pueblo está allá en el ARIPO, como creo que subdirector o algo así. Pues entonces esta persona solo manda a esas exposiciones a gente que a ella le convenga. Por ejemplo a familiares, a primos, no sé. Sí, manda a gente que ella quiere pues. Entonces por eso es que ya no estamos participando también con ellos.

At ARIPO ... the people who were in charge at that time [when the cooperative was founded], they no longer work there. Now there are a lot of people, including one from right here in the village who is working at ARIPO, I think as the assistant director or something like that. And so that person alone decides who goes to the exhibits depending on what suits her. For example, family members, cousins, I don't know. Yes, she sends whomever she wants. And so that's why we are no longer working with them.

Asunción's story is significant because it demonstrates a common belief that government officials regularly engage in favoritism by restricting access to programs to their friends and families. Whether or not this is actually the case, the fact that the perception exists is further proof of the lack of faith that artisans have in the government.

The prevailing perceptions of the government among artisans have led many to abandon any attempt to work within the state's network of exhibits, competitions, and micro-credit programs. In the case of the members of the Casa de las Artesanías, MARO, and Culturas Oaxaqueñas, this widespread feeling of distrust motivated them to organize themselves in order to pursue their own economic, social, and cultural goals. The formation of cooperatives is thus an important political move for artisans, as it signifies a break from a system that marginalizes them, and demonstrates a desire to satisfy their own needs through an alternative model of distribution.

Economic Dimensions

One of the defining characteristics of the three cooperatives in Oaxaca City is their self-sufficiency. This financial independence is contingent upon members' willingness to contribute to the organization by paying a small percentage of each of their sales to maintenance costs. Cirilo Ríos Cruz is a wood carver who makes *alebrijes* in a workshop in the city, and is a member of the Casa de las Artesanías. He told me,

Aquí no tenemos ningún apoyo del gobierno, para nada... Vamos saliendo delante pues, de nuestros propios esfuerzos, no tenemos apoyo de nadie. Sí, a veces tenemos que desembolsar algún recurso para renta, o equis cosa que se nos ofrece, pero es de nuestros propios esfuerzos, pues no tenemos apoyo de nadie.

Here we don't have any support from the government, not at all... We're moving ahead, well, based on our own hard work—we don't have support from anyone. Yes, sometimes we have to contribute some money for the rent, or for whatever else the cooperative needs, but it's based on our own efforts, because we have no support from anyone.

Members of cooperatives recognize that without their collective contributions, their organizations would not be sustainable. Interviewees indicated that they were prepared to contribute to the operational cost of the cooperatives as long as their participation in the organization continued to benefit them personally and economically. For many Oaxacan artisans, it is a challenge to find a steady location to sell their work. Cooperatives offer artisans a space in which to display their work on a regular basis, thus relieving some of the tension associated with seeking out a market. Additionally, the stability of working consistently in the same location generally contributes to an increase in income.

With no access to government micro-credit programs or to private loans, cooperatives must maintain a balance that both sustains the organization and provides its members with economic benefits. The ability of each organization to maintain itself with no external funding is a source of great pride among members. When asked about the accessibility of state funding, Edgardo replied,

Ni lo vamos a tener, ni lo queremos. Porque el día en que nosotros empecemos a estirar la mano para que nos regalen, ese día habremos estado aceptando que no fuimos capaces de resolver nuestras propias necesidades, y sí somos capaces. En ese tipo de organización hemos demostrado varias cosas: que los indígenas somos capaces, somos inteligentes, somos trabajadores, somos capaces de organizarnos, somos capaces de diseñar nuestras políticas, somos capaces de trabajar en equipo, de festejar juntos, de emborracharnos juntos, de todo.

We're not going to get it, nor do we want it. Because the day that we begin asking for a handout, on that day we will have accepted that we weren't able to meet our own needs, and we *are* capable of that. In this type of organization we've demonstrated many things: that indigenous people are capable, we are intelligent, we are hardworking, we are capable of organizing ourselves, we are capable of designing our own politics, we are capable of working as a team, of celebrating together, of getting drunk together—of everything.

Though each of the three cooperatives has experienced differing levels of economic success, members of all three have experienced some increase in income. With the exception of MARO, which received some government support in its early stages, each cooperative has maintained financial independence throughout its existence. This fact has empowered artisans by making them realize that they are not only capable of controlling the production and commercialization of their work without the support of the state, but that in fact, they might have more economic success in doing so.

A third factor at work in the economic dimensions of the cooperative model deserves particular attention. Many interviewees believed that their membership in a

cooperative had allowed them not only to put a price on a given piece because of the cost of materials or labor, but also to base prices on the perceived “worth” of the piece. Cirilo told me,

No nos valoriza nadie... Muchos [artesanos] van a otras tiendas y lo primero es, “Si quieres te doy tanto, si quieres—si no, déjalo, por ahí a ver quién te lo paga,” y sabemos que ese trabajo nos cuesta, sabemos el valor que le damos a nuestro trabajo, pero nunca nadie nos va valorizar. Entonces lo que hicimos es unirnos pues, y así diciendo, decir “Mi trabajo sé que vale tanto, y le pongo precio porque lo vale pues.” Nos ha costado, sabemos que lo hacemos nosotros, sabemos del tiempo, el trabajo que le invertimos.

Nobody appreciates us. Many artisans go to other stores, and the first thing they hear is, “If you want, I’ll give you this much—if not, forget it, we’ll see what you’ll get for it somewhere else.” We know how much work is involved, we know the value that we place in our work, but nobody is every going to appreciate us. So what we did was to get together, to be able to say, “I know that my work is worth ‘this much,’ and I’ll charge the price that it’s worth.” It’s been hard, we know that we make it ourselves, we know of the time it takes, of all the hard work we put into it.

The concept of “worth” in this case reflects the material or economic value of the *artesanía*, but according to Cirilo, it also encompasses something more. He explained that in determining what a piece is worth, he first has to decide how “good” it is. This implies a set of “deciphering codes” determined by the artisan. In establishing the aesthetic codes according to which they would like their work to be evaluated, cooperative members begin to assert a degree of agency over the symbolic meaning of their work.

Social Dimensions

Aside from their political and economic functions, cooperatives also have important social functions. First, cooperatives provide artisans with an opportunity to

work toward a common goal, which is the advancement of the organization. Alfredo stressed the importance of this goal by stating about the Casa de las Artesanías,

De hecho yo la considero como una de, a lo mejor, única en su tipo, en la estructura de la organización como se viene trabajando, porque es una organización no con un fin lucrativo, sino que es una organización con un beneficio social. Obviamente donde se busca que todos los socios salgan ganando, y que no se busque un beneficio para fines personales, no? Entonces es un beneficio colectivo, un trabajo social, básicamente.

As a matter of fact I consider this organization to be, perhaps, unique in its own right, in the structure of the organization and how it works, because it's not an organization based on economic profits, but rather, on the social benefits it provides. Obviously within it we want all artisans to benefit, and that no one person pursue purely personal benefits. So it's a shared benefit, basically a social project.

The notion of collective benefit is thoroughly embedded in the model of the cooperative organization. While the majority of interviewees expressed faith in the collective benefit of the cooperative, it is important to note that the *idea* of collective benefit is also central to the marketing strategies of all three organizations. Through interacting with tourists and visitors, artisans have learned that the concept of “cooperative” is almost universally recognized, as are the values of teamwork and trust that accompany it. Therefore, the concept of “collective benefit” is a real social objective, while at the same time the marketing of this concept seeks to fulfill an economic objective.

The social function of the cooperative is also entwined with the political dimension. Interviewees explained that because cooperatives are organized and run by artisans, members are not subject to the constraints that might be imposed upon them by intermediaries in the case of piecework, or by representatives of the state in the

case of working with the IOA. Cristina Antonio Herrera, a carver from Arrazola, explained how the formation of the cooperative led to freedom from the agendas of external parties. She said,

Empezamos a decir entre varios compañeros ... “¿Porqué no nos unimos y empezamos a rentar una tienda, un local, para poder vender nuestro producto mejor?” Porque el gobierno nos decía, “Lleven su producto,” pero no tenía la pagada hasta el mes. Acá no, porque la organización trabaja, no es políticos, ni religiosos, no tenemos partidos, nada. Entonces sí, nuestra organización es nada más simplemente para mejorar nuestra, es de, economía más que nada, ¿no? Y dar a conocer directamente la artesanía al turismo.

We started to say among friends, “Why don’t we get together and start to rent a place, a store, to be able to sell our work better?” Because the government would tell us, “Bring your work,” but they wouldn’t pay us for over a month. Here that’s not the case, because the organization works, it’s not politicians, it’s not religious people, it’s not political parties, nothing like that. So yes, our organization exists more than anything to improve our economic situation, you see? And to allow tourists to get to know the *artesanías* directly.

Because the cooperative operates independently of the state and of other private agencies, artisans have more input into how the organization is run. Additionally, they do not have designs imposed upon them by merchants seeking to fill specific orders for sale or export, but are relatively freer to innovate. They must still work within the market system to satisfy the demands of tourists and visitors, but they benefit from direct exchanges with those purchasing *artesanías*, and can thus make their own informed decisions about modifications to their work.

Cultural Dimensions

A fourth and final dimension of the artisan cooperative encompasses the cultural function that the cooperative fulfills. The cultural dimension is the point at

which political, economic, and social dimensions converge. It is this dimension that links design innovation to artisans' perceptions of the global market, and their place in it. It is here within this dimension that economic, social, and cultural exchanges between artisans and tourists coalesce.

Cooperative members benefit from direct interaction with visitors.

Interviewees recognized that the evolution of their techniques and artistic styles was heavily influenced by the preferences of buyers that they observed. Graciela García García is a second-generation artisan who makes sandals. Unlike her parents, who have continued to craft more traditional leather *huaraches*, she has varied her materials by incorporating canvas and embroidery into her designs, and adding details such as ties that wrap around the ankles. When asked where *artesanía* designs came from, she responded,

De nosotras mismas. Fíjate que los diseños nacen por una necesidad de encontrar mercado. O sea tu te ves obligado a buscar un mercado, porque cada día el mercado es más reducido. No por la competencia de la misma calidad de producto, sino por la competencia desde ahí que tenemos de otros países.

From within ourselves. You see, designs emerge because of a need to find a market. In other words, you find yourself needing to find a niche, because every day the market is more reduced. Not because of competition from products of similar quality, but rather because of competition from other countries.

Graciela went on to discuss the increasing difficulty of selling leather *huaraches* to fellow Oaxacans, when plastic sandals from China cost a quarter of the price. She then explained that rather than fighting the onslaught of less expensive foreign products, she had chosen to focus her efforts on capturing a piece of the tourist market, by

designing shoes she thought would appeal to visitors to Oaxaca. As our interview drew to a close, Graciela added, “Vamos cambiando con la necesidad de vender, la necesidad de seguir adelante, digo. Conservar parte de nuestra cultura. Porque es parte de nuestra cultura” (We make changes due to the need to sell, the need to move forward, I mean. Preserving part of our culture. Because it *is* part of our culture).

Creative innovation is thus something that emerges to a certain degree out of economic necessity. Manuela Villanueva Vásquez, a ceramist from Santa María Atzompa, confirmed this. She explained that she had always worked with clay, but that the evolution of her designs had been the result of a need to augment her sales. When her seven children were young and her husband fell ill, she found herself making changes to her designs, eventually creating small scale boxes, crucifixes, and jewelry with ornate embellishments. “La joyería en miniatura es algo nuevo,” she said (The miniature jewelry is something new). “Para mejorar nuestras ventas, empezamos a trabajar el barro rojo, con el bordado. No tan pequeño, pero ya poco a poco con el paso del tiempo se ha ido mejorando” (In order to improve our sales, we began working with the reddish clay, adding embellishments. Not quite so small at first, but little by little as time passes our work improves).

For Alfredo, design innovations satisfy the need to respond to the demands of the market, as well as to satisfy his own creative needs. He told me,

Ciertamente tenemos que ir estableciendo nuevas técnicas, nuevos diseños. Yo le decía a mi esposa, “Si nosotros comemos diario lo mismo, pues nos vamos a hartar, ¿no? No vamos a querer comer lo mismo siempre.” Entonces yo creo que si nosotros hacemos toda la vida un mismo producto, la gente que me compra una vez, y viene el segundo año a lo mejor no me lo compra, porque dice “Ya te compré una pieza.” Entonces lo que tengo que hacer es innovar, cambiar, y

hacer algo diferente para que la persona, el turista que viene a comprar algo decide “Mira, aquí tiene este nuevo producto.” Entonces nos ha enseñado que debemos de ir cambiando también nuevos productos, nuevos diseños incluso, porque son también circunstancias del mercado, pues así lo pide también.

Certainly we need to establish new techniques, new designs. I was saying to my wife, “If we eat the same thing every day, we’ll get sick of it, right? We don’t want to always eat the same thing.” So I think if we make the same product over the course of our lifetime, people who bought from me once and come back a second year probably won’t buy from me again, because they say, “I already bought a piece from you.” So what I have to do is innovate, change, and make something different so that the person, the tourist who comes to buy something says, “Look here, he’s got this new product.” So this has taught us that we should make changes and new products, even new designs, because those are the conditions of the market, and that’s what it demands.

For Graciela, Manuela, and Alfredo, direct exposure to the preferences of buyers and to changes in the *artesanía* market has influenced their creative innovation.

Interviewees indicated that gradual changes to their production techniques and designs were due to both personal and tourist preferences. The knowledge that artisans gain from working directly with people who buy *artesanías* is facilitated through the space of the cooperative.

Economic and Symbolic Meanings of *Artesanías*

Aside from the economic importance that Oaxaca artisans place on *artesanías* as the source of their livelihood, *artesanías* have profound personal meanings that vary among artisans. Interviewees described the creative process in great detail, emphasizing the importance being in a certain frame of mind before beginning to work. As Rosa told me, if one attempts to work with clay while agitated, “el barro no se deja trabajar” (the clay will not allow itself to be worked with). This indicates a

strong connection between artisans and their media, and demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the artistic process.

Interviewees also expressed feelings of intense satisfaction and relaxation that resulted from the creative process. This satisfaction often manifests itself in a personal attachment to a particular piece. Cristina told me,

Para nosotros un alebrije es como si fuera una parte de nuestra vida, que nosotros al hacer una figura pues también le damos algo de vida a esa pieza... Entonces a veces nosotros también como nos encariñamos con las piezas y tiene realmente algo de vida, ¿no? Esa figura, y pues nosotros sentimos que la queremos, aparte de que es nuestro trabajo, aparte de que por medio de la artesanía pues también sobrevivimos... Para nosotros “nace” una pieza.”

For us an *alebrije*, it's like it's a part of our life, as if by making a figure we also give some sort of life to that piece... So sometimes we also become fond of our pieces, and they really come to life, you see? That piece, well, we care for it, besides the fact that it's our work, besides the fact that it's through our work of *artesanía* that we survive... For us, a piece is “born.”

This type of attachment is indicative of a meaning that goes beyond economic value for artisans. It demonstrates a personal investment in the *artesanía* as object and also in the process of creating it. That artisans feel this kind of connection to their work is significant, as it indicates that they are not merely producing *artesanías* for the market, but that they are also satisfying personal and creative needs.

The new cooperative model that emerged in the 1980s has gradually created openings for artisans to experiment with their techniques and designs because of the relative stability that members experience. Much of the pressure associated with finding a retail location is relieved because artisans can rely on a regular space for the commercialization of their *artesanías*. The economic self-sufficiency of cooperatives

frees artisans somewhat from having to conform to design specifications imposed by intermediaries or collectors, and the regular contact that artisans have with visitors to cooperatives allows them to evaluate for themselves what the demands of the market are. Members are not immune to the state's official discourse of what constitutes *lo mexicano*, but within the space of the cooperative artisans are relatively freer to decide how they wish to represent themselves, thus beginning to reappropriate the meanings inscribed in their *artesanías*.

Just as *artesanías* embody a plethora of meanings for the people who acquire them, be they tourists, collectors, intermediaries, or curators, *artesanías* evoke multiple meanings for the artisans who produce them. For Oaxacan artisans, *artesanías* symbolize economic exchanges that provide them with the means to sustain themselves. In Canclini's terms, cooperative organizations allow artisans to wrest power of the "economic meaning" of *artesanías* away from the state, by giving them direct access to the tourist market. Within the cooperative artisans are accountable to each other and to themselves, rather than to intermediaries or representatives of the state. Members do not take their responsibilities within the cooperatives lightly, which contributes to the stability of the organizations. The collective sense of accountability and responsibility is also a force that unites members and provides them with a strong network of economic and social support. That these organizations were able to continue to operate despite the drop in tourism in 2006 and 2007 is a testament to the resilience of their members.

Gaining control of the economic meaning of their work allows artisans to work toward transforming the "symbolic meaning" of *artesanías*. The long history of

symbolic meanings imposed upon *artesanías* by the state through the channels of the cultural tourism industry is beginning to be transformed within the space of the cooperative. The relative autonomy that artisans experience within the cooperative from the mediation of external agents creates the possibility for them to choose which elements of the state's dominant discourse governing *artesanía* production and circulation they wish to reproduce. It is this autonomy that allows cooperative members to exercise more agency over the economic meanings of their *artesanías*, and thus, to begin to reclaim the symbolic meanings that Oaxacan *artesanías* embody.

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