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**Performing Shifting Identities: Mayan
Embroidery, Migration and Tourism in the
Eastern Yucatán**

PhD Thesis

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*Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy*

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Abstract

Based on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between October 2013 and December 2014 in the Mayan community of Xocén, Eastern Yucatán, this thesis explores the intersection of gender, culture and globalization processes as reflected in embroidery production and trade in this area of the Mexican Republic. Taking gender as a central axis of identity and agency and as a structuring feature of social processes, I specifically discuss the impact of tourism and development programs on embroidery's related practices and, most importantly, on gender identities.

Drawing from the experiences of twenty-five Mayan women associated with a state-funded cooperative, I explore direct and indirect impacts of paid work in women's lives and status, situating their productive experiences within particular configurations of kinship and community. In order to illuminate the relation between female involvement in embroidery production, men's migration, and household, I assess the extent to which the incorporation in cooperative is associated with particular demographic and social patterns, and how these patterns shape the outcomes of women's participation in the labour force. Integral to this analysis is the exploration of the attitudes of women towards their jobs as embroiderers and cooperative members, considerations of the dimension of gender embodied in embroidery production and trade, and the degree to which the very nature of this activity contributes to continuity or change in prevailing gender ideologies.

My aim is to understand whether or not the participation in cooperative is facilitating the emergence of a (new) labour identity for Mayan women, and whether this process is engendering any form of empowerment (economic, psychological and/or social) for the embroiderers.

The film *Cuéntame* accompanies this dissertation.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction



Figure 1: Map of the Yucatán peninsula. Source: Google Maps

PART I – Backdrop

1.1 Introducing the research: aims and objectives

The Yucatán peninsula, comprised of the states of Yucatán, Campeche and Quintana Roo, is located in the South-East of Mexico and separates the Caribbean Sea from the Gulf of Mexico. Its indigenous population is constituted of Yucatecan Mayas, who inhabit predominantly, but not exclusively, the rural areas of the state. With a population of 1.4 million in 2015, the Mayas constitute 65.4 per cent of the overall

population of the peninsula (INEGI 2015). Since this figure only accounts for Yucatec Maya speakers aged five and up who self-identity as Maya, the actual number of Mayans is higher.

In the 1980s, the Yucatán went through a severe economic crisis that brought about deep socio-cultural changes. In the era of transnationalisation, even the most isolated and traditional Mayan villages have had to deal with the growing penetration of “cultural modernity”, conveyed by the diffusion of mass media, the massive implementation of a linguistic and cultural policy of “castellanisation”, national and international tourism, and the increasing territorial mobility of Mayans. The economic, social and cultural processes that have affected the Yucatán in the last thirty years have not only blurred the boundaries between the city and the countryside but also fragmented the ethnic identity, making it virtually impossible to clearly define the contemporary Maya. The Yucatán, which was historically the first port for the Spanish conquerors who crossed the Atlantic to arrive in Mexico, due to its proximity to international cult tourist destinations such as Cancún and Playa del Carmen, has emerged again at the centre of movement of people, cultures, and economic and symbolic capitals, which are projecting new identity models on indigenous communities.

Yucatecan Mayan people started to experience these processes in 1982, with the crisis of traditional economies linked to the cultivation of henequen (a type of agave known as Yucatán’s “green gold”), corn and citrus, and reduced government support for small farmers, which forced many indigenous peasants to relocate as workers in the American *maquiladoras* (assembly plants) or, alternatively, to migrate to urban areas of the region (Baños Ramírez 1996).

Maquiladoras were installed in Yucatán since 1984, when the *Plan de Desarrollo Integral Reordenación Henequenera y de Yucatán* (Henequén Development Program of Yucatán) was launched, but spread widely only from 1994, when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) entered into force. From this date, the *maquiladora* industry in Mexico became the main source of foreign investment for its government, far surpassing the foreign currency brought into the country by tourism and petroleum combined (Kopinak 1996). For rural communities, the social costs of *maquiladoras* were high. Instead of absorbing those peasants that lost their jobs into employment, as hoped by the Mexican government, *maquiladora* plants preferred to hire mostly young women who had never worked outside of their home. Women, indeed, were considered

a more “docile” human capital and much cheaper in wages than their male counterparts (Iglesias Prieto 1997). The integration of women into the labour force through factory work, together with the economic pluriactivity of indigenous communities, has contributed to the transformation of the gendered division of labour in rural households. As *maquiladora* workers, women apparently gained much autonomy and respect. Yet, their increased social and economic importance has corresponded to the socio-economic decentralisation of the male figure, which has been related to increasing in alcoholism and domestic violence.

The alternative to *maquiladoras* was to exit the crisis via migration. For the indigenous migrants of the Yucatán peninsula, Cancún and the so-called *Riviera Maya*, cult destination for international tourism, is the principal landfall. Here, Maya people make up more than one third of the city’s population (Castellanos 2010). These migrants, many of whom arrive in Cancún in their late teens, work underpaid in hotels, private homes, and construction. Their minimum-wage salaries help support their families in the countryside while their ancestral history and cultural practices become key tourist attractions. For many migrants the process of adaptation to the new conditions of life in the city is often slow and difficult. Language problems (many Mayans speak a poor Spanish and some do not speak it at all), structural racism and discrimination prevent their full integration into Hispanicised urban society. At the same time, especially for short-term migrants, the return home produces identity bewilderment whilst imposing a comparison on rural communities with the external cultural models brought by migrants.

As a response to the economic crisis that forced many men to leave agricultural work and embrace Mexican neoliberal development projects as wagedworkers in the tourist industry, Mayan women were pushed to engage in new economic activities in order to supplement their family income. In line with the traditional division of labour, the repertoire of activities women were socially allowed to perform was based on a specific cultural definition of gender and gender roles, instrumental to the perpetuation of the nuclear family as the primary and independent unit of social organisation.

As Robert Redfield (1942, 1950), Mary Elmendorf (1976) and Alfonso Villa Rojas (1992) have documented, before the rural crisis and the explosion of tourism, Mayan societies rotated around subsistence agriculture and were productively organised on a specific division of labour where men, as breadwinners, mostly worked in the cornfield, while women stayed at home taking care of children and kitchen chores. In spite of the

economic shift to a wage-based economy and changes produced by migration, the rural household continued to emphasise this division of labour. Many parents did not want their daughters to migrate to work in the tourist sector because of the stigma associated with women who choose to work outside of the home. Thus, instead of experimenting with new job opportunities in the tourist cities as their male counterparts were doing, in the initial stages of the development of tourism, women found their sources of income through working as domestic servants in private homes, in petty trade, and in vegetable, livestock, and handicraft production.

Handicrafts, in particular, constituted a significant alternative to other forms of production income; indeed, not only could this activity be performed at home, but it also had the advantage of generating non-perishable products that were not spoiled if they were not promptly sold. Among handicrafts, embroidery stands out, because in nearly every house of the Yucatán countryside there are women who are skilled in embroidery techniques. Apart from being a marker of female identity and a socially assigned gendered task, in Mayan households embroidery production was a long-standing and well-established livelihood strategy. However, with the increment of national and international tourists, women were confronted with new production patterns and notions of labour that led to refashion traditional identities and roles.

The integration of Mayan women into the global market through embroidery production was coordinated by a number of governmental and non-governmental programs that were launched from the 1970s in Yucatán as well as in other places in Mexico and Latin America. These programs were designed to compensate for the decline of the agricultural sector – considered a male domain – with the aim of organising rural Latin American women around handicraft production units linked to credit programs. At the same time, these programs responded to increased flows of tourists towards the so-called Third World countries, and the resulting increase in demand for handmade clothing.

In Mexico, a number of institutions have played a central role in trying to integrate rural women into the tourist market without withdrawing them from their traditional occupations. Breaking with the assimilationist practices that had previously characterised its interventions, during the 1990s the *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* (INI)¹ started a heavy promotion of traditional subsistence activities. The indigenous

¹ The *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* (INI) was a scientific and political body with an advisory

population became object of state-driven programs and initiatives aimed at supporting handicraft producers and strengthening the importance of the national cultural heritage. Capacity building, organisations of awards and exhibitions, as well as the provision of micro-credit and other types of financial support, led to the reactivation of Mexican handicraft production. The indigenous cultural expressions that had often been diminished and disregarded in the past suddenly became an attractive commodity for the national and international tourism market. As a result, traditional indigenous crafts, in particular embroidery, were repackaged as souvenirs for tourist consumption, and women became the invisible workforce behind the state's endeavour to penetrate the global market. This situation has intensified in the last thirty years, when rural women started to group in cooperatives to get access to governmental funding and a new figure, the cooperative member (*la socia*), emerged.

Although tourism and governmental and non-governmental programs have pushed many women into embroidery and handicrafts, it is difficult to find any record of their existence. Hidden by the homeworking system, embroidery production remains an invisible occupation, submerged in a series of gender-biased assumptions that set a limiting framework for women's professional and personal development. Indeed, in the patriarchal Mayan society, only men, as breadwinners, are recognised as "workers". Women, culturally bounded to their roles as mothers and homemakers, hardly gain this status. In this dominant discourse, when a woman works, she works "to help her husband".

Notwithstanding, thanks to their economic activity as *socias*, some women became secondary or even the primary financial breadwinners. This newly acquired power, however, generates conflicts within households and antagonism between genders. Often, husbands and other family members resent women's earning power and the time they dedicate to their work in cooperatives, as these activities push women out of their homes into the public sphere. In some cases, Mayan women's participation in embroidery production and their association with state-led cooperatives triggered a change in how embroiderers were perceived by community members. By working in a cooperative with public money and taking part in local or national handicraft festivals,

nature that played a prominent role in the development of official Hispanicisation through educational policies. Created in 1948 to undertake research and improve, at least theoretically, the living conditions of the Mexican indigenous population, the INI was replaced in 2003 by the *Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas* (CDI), as a result of indigenous demands stemming from the Zapatista uprising.

these women make visible their economic role and occupy a public space that falls outside the male control. Doing so, they push the boundaries between the “masculine” and the “feminine” (Heritier 1996) as traditionally conceived in Mayan families and communities, implying a shift in gender roles and a new self-perception for women.

Based on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between October 2013 and December 2014 in the Mayan community of Xocén, Eastern Yucatán, this thesis explores the intersection of gender, culture and globalisation processes as reflected in embroidery production and trade in this area of the Mexican Republic. Taking gender as a central axis of identity and agency, and as a structuring feature of social processes, I specifically discuss the impact of tourism and development programs on embroidery’s related practices and, most importantly, on gender identities.

Drawing from the experiences of twenty-five Mayan women associated with a state-funded cooperative, I explore direct and indirect impacts of paid work in women’s lives and status, situating their productive experiences within particular configurations of kinship and community. In order to illuminate the relation between female involvement in embroidery production, men’s migration and household, I assess the extent to which the incorporation in a cooperative is associated with particular demographic and social patterns, and how these patterns shape the outcomes of women’s participation in the labour force. Integral to this analysis is the exploration of the attitudes of women towards their jobs as embroiderers and cooperative members, considerations of the dimension of gender embodied in embroidery production and trade, and the degree to which the very nature of this activity contributes to continuity or change in prevailing gender ideologies. My aim is to understand whether or not the participation in cooperatives is facilitating the emergence of a (new) labour identity for Mayan women, and whether this process is engendering any form of empowerment (economic, psychological and/or social) for the embroiderers.

Women’s work and economic activities are crucial elements in the investigation of the relationships between the sexual division of labour and the overall process of economic and social change. The participation of women in the labour force is generally viewed as a measure of wellbeing and economic status, as paid work is a necessary condition to affirm women’s autonomy from men. By earning an income, indeed, women can enhance their bargaining power within the household.

Focusing on the ways in which processes of economic development impinge on the status of women, studies of women and development in Latin America have accurately described the differential gender impact. However, the exploration of these issues has produced different answers, which vary according to the paradigms that inform the empirical research. Susan Tiano (1986, 1987) classified three competing theses: integration, marginalisation and exploitation. The integration thesis holds that women's incorporation in the labour market as a result of development processes promotes their economic autonomy from men. The marginalisation thesis contends that economic development relegates women to the margins of production and power. Finally, the exploitation thesis claims that women are incorporated in the modern economy because they represent cheap labour. As Marxist feminists (see Mies 1998, and Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen and Werlhof 1988) have argued, when women enter the labour force, they are exploited or "super-exploited": a first time, through the direct extraction of surplus value in commodity production, and a second time through the indirect appropriation of value from domestic labour, mediated through the family.

Keeping in mind this analytical spectrum, this thesis ultimately asks: does the increasing visibility of women in the global economy represent a positive change? Does access to income increase women's autonomy, decision-making and bargaining power within the household? Finally, does women's financial autonomy have the power to challenge traditional patriarchal authority, eventually leading to more egalitarian family structures? These are not simple questions to answer, since, as we will see, there are contradictory factors at work. One way of posing these questions, is asking, as Elson and Pearson (1981) have suggested, whether gender is being "decomposed" or broken down as a result of global changes, of which tourism and governmental programs for Mayan women appear to be simultaneously cause and effect. Given women's primary responsibility in reproductive activities and their concentration in household work, any evaluation needs to take this sphere into consideration. Thus, household and family relations constitute the primary level of analysis in this work. The material proposed raises a number of issues relating to household structure, gender ideals and the importance of kinship in shaping the lives of women, shedding light on the relations between cultural orientations, individual aspirations, social context and economic possibilities.

Along with the above-mentioned questions, this thesis addresses a different set of methodological and ethical issues revolving around the use of filmmaking as an ethnographic tool of inquiry. One of my tasks during fieldwork was to discover how visual methods, in the broad field of anthropology, could be used to explore, describe, analyse, and interpret reality. Collaboration, reflexivity, multivocality and reciprocity, within a combination of performative and more traditional ethnographic research methods, shaped the visual dimension of my work, offering a working model of how other cultural realities can be relationally investigated and represented.

Cuéntame, the film that accompanies this dissertation, is one of the several visual outcomes that emerged from my fieldwork. Although the film is an integral part of my research, it cannot be straightforwardly defined as an “audiovisual counterpart” of the written dissertation. The film, indeed, does not tell the stories of the embroiderers who feature in this thesis. As my research progressed, and the relationship of trust with my respondents grew stronger, delicate issues emerged concerning the private lives of the embroiderers, making the need for anonymity and confidentiality particularly pressing. If, when writing or speaking, anthropologists can give pseudonyms to research participants and alter details of times, events, and locations to prevent their identification, this option is less open when working with images. Individuals portrayed in a picture or a film can be recognised by those who know them, especially in small communities such as the one in which I conducted my fieldwork. The issues raised by my research participants relates to questions of sexuality, procreation, family, and marital relationships, pointing to the expansion of alcoholism and domestic violence in Mayan households. These questions needed to be singled out and discussed, as they have a profound impact on women’s labour choices and experiences as cooperative members. However, they could not be addressed in a film that would have returned to Xocén and would have been watched by the villagers, with the accompanying risk of serious repercussions for my respondents.

While, in this written thesis, women’s names and personal details are fictionalised in order to enable an open discussion of the above-mentioned issues, the film forcibly keeps the embroiderers out of the visual narrative, exploring instead the physical and social spaces in which women’s lives “happen”. This does not mean, however, that women are not portrayed in the film. If the members of the cooperatives I worked with are absent, the “act of embroidering” remains audible and visible, and other women, whose stories are not reported in the thesis in their more intimate aspects, are present as

workers, mothers, and gesture makers. As a result, the written and visual ethnographies perform two different but complementary tasks: while the written text develops an analytical argument that would have hardly been articulable through images, the film places value on feelings and empirical descriptions, recreating a realm of existence that is inherently embodied and relational and is therefore difficult to convey through written communication.

The film trusts the body and the senses in the exploration of lived experience, focusing on the articulate, provisional, creative, playful and imaginative expressions of ordinary people caught in the challenge of making a life. In this sense, the film is intended as a phenomenological and poetic device that goes beyond the explanations of encyclopaedic or voice-over commentaries to register the transient fragments of everyday life. *Cuéntame* is not intended to capture a univocal reality, provide an analysis of an entire society, or “teach” facts about Mayan culture; rather, it focuses on particular individuals with their specific lives by offering images of faces and places, and sounds of voices, gestures and habitual behaviours that resist verbal translation and, certainly, are not within reach of academic language.

I believe that the ethnographic film cannot do, and does not have to do, the work of the written ethnography, nor substitute it with a shift towards a cinematographic paradigm, but rather helps to give ethnography a “human face”. *Cuéntame* shows precisely the “humanity” of those people who give life and meaning to the ethnographic encounter. For linguistic conventions, we call them “informants”, “respondents”, or “research participants”, but these are reductive and objectifying labels. “Research participants” are not fictional characters. They do not live in the bi-dimensionality of written narratives but are tri-dimensional people grounded in tri-dimensional spaces. They perform social roles and identities whose complexities are embodied and, as such, exist beyond a merely analytical understanding. The film tries to open up a phenomenological window into the tri-dimensionality and corporeality of lived experiences that appear flattened within the pages of ethnographic accounts. Through this window, the viewer is invited to *feel* the “other”, plunging into an intimate space in which exercising emotion rather than thinking, empathy rather than the critical reason. *Cuéntame* aims to evoke feelings of commonality, reminding the viewer that, despite irrefutable power imbalances, we are all human beings, an existential condition that the anthropologist, the research participant, and the viewer share in the anthropopoietic triangle of the production, reproduction and reception of anthropological knowledge.

Within a wider visual methodology that emphasises process over product, *Cuéntame* serves as a linchpin to discuss the practical, aesthetic and ethical implications of using “the visual” as a heuristic tool for ethnographic analysis and as an experimental means of knowing a cultural reality. As a “way of seeing” that prioritises the phenomenological aspects of culture and the relational nature of cultural representation, the film challenges the primacy of textual and verbal exposition, re-contextualising the role of embodiment in contemporary anthropology. Doing it so, it invites reflection on the role and the potential contribution of ethnographic filmmaking and participatory visual methods to mainstream anthropology.

These themes are articulated in the thesis through seven chapters. The remainder of this introduction is divided in three parts. In Part II, I present the broader theoretical framework that informs this dissertation. While the thematic literature is contextually presented in each chapter, here I discuss the main sources and key concepts that have inspired the major theoretical insights of this study. My project crosses several disciplinary terrains, drawing from economics and politics, visual anthropology, cultural, gender, performance and film studies. While I directly relate my work to the Gender and Development studies literature to frame and analyse the issue of embroiderers’ labour in rural and capitalist markets, I extensively draw upon cultural phenomenology, visual and performance studies to explore the “shifting” nature of Mayan culture and identities under the action of global forces. In Part III I introduce the Mayan community of Xocén, my field site, providing information about its cultural, political, religious and economic system. Finally, in Part IV I focus on issues of access to the field site, giving an overview of the ethnographic methodologies that I implemented to collect data.

Chapter 2 discusses the methodology and practice, both ethnographic and filmic, that informed my research and gave rise to *Cuéntame*. This includes a reflexive account of the difficulties and possibilities encountered, both as a fieldworker and as a filmmaker, as well as the practical, aesthetic and ethical issues that were raised in the time spent in the community. Understanding the film as a performative, sensorial, experiential and self-contained medium, I discuss its poetics and its contributions to anthropological knowledge in relation to ethnographic writing. Focusing on the *process* of ethnographic engagement in the village, I describe how I used ethnographic filmmaking, within a wider framework of “shared anthropology” (Rouch 1973), to negotiate access to the

community; get involved in private/public events; gain new informants; elicit ethnographic information; and offer “pay back” to research participants. Acknowledging the materiality and social agency of images (Edwards 2002), I show how the camera (as device) and the film (both as a creative process and as a tangible product) enabled a regime of reciprocity, producing and reproducing a social circuit that, in some cases, created a “community” and a sense of identity around the event recorded.

Chapter 3 sets out the historical context of tourism development and Mayan labour migration. Paying special attention to the gendered division of labour, I trace the patterns of internal migration in the Yucatán peninsula through different historical moments and economic changes: the Agrarian Reform in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution; the rise and fall of the *henequén* (agave) and *chicle* (chewing gum) industries during the 1940s and 1950s; the *maquiladora* economy during the 1960s; the oil production boom and the economic crisis during the 1980s; and the development of tourism from the 1970s onwards. Through the analysis of tourism development in Quintana Roo and migration patterns in Xocén, I examine how the *Riviera Maya* has shaped the political economy of the region, and how indigenous communities have been called to engage with a new, challenging vision of “modernity” brought by tourism.

Chapter 4 delves into the Mayan construction of gender and gender roles. The literature and the ethnographic material presented elucidate the symbolic basis of the sexual division of labour in Mayan households, and the definition of womanhood that both reproduces this division and is reproduced by that. Questions of sexuality, procreation, family, marital relationships, as well as the expansion of alcoholism and domestic violence, are discussed as factors that impinge profoundly on women’s labour choices. The analysis of these issues sheds light on the “gendered morality” and the domestic ideologies that shape Mayan women’s identities, suggesting that the condition of women and their bargaining power within the household and the community change according to the different stages of their life-cycle.

Chapter 5 discusses the cultural and symbolic meanings of the Mayan embroidery in this area of the Yucatán. Through notions of embodiment, gesture and *habitus*, I conceptualise embroidery as a peculiar form of incorporated, situated and tacit knowledge, and as cultural performance – “el *gesto de bordar*”, or the “act of embroidering” – through which women express their gender identities. Drawing on dress studies literature, I discuss the *hipil*, the traditional Mayan female dress, as both an

essential signifier of ethnicity and as a constantly negotiated intercultural object. My aim is to elucidate how embroidery, both as a practice and as a material product, enacts and reproduces culture, becoming a living “archive” (Taylor 2003) of gender and social knowledge beyond language and discourse.

Chapter 6 focuses on the re-signification of the “*gesto de bordar*” and the *hipil* within the tourist context, and on the impact of tourism on embroidery production and Mayan women’s identities. The analysis takes into consideration four specific aspects: the multiple identities and the different labour, social and economic statuses of women who embroider for both the rural and the tourist trade; the institutional and non-institutional pathways through which Mayan embroiderers enter the handicraft market; the intrinsic characteristics of this market; and the changes in the production system following the explosion of tourism. Through participant observation and interviews conducted at the *Zací* Craft Centre of Valladolid, a local handicraft market where Mayan embroiderers sell traditional clothing to national and international tourists, I discuss the convergence/clash of local customs and traditions with the aesthetic tastes and the cultural capitals of foreign visitors, focusing on issues of authenticity and fashion in the commercialisation of the *hipil* and other Mayan clothing. I argue that the commodification and re-signification of the Mayan embroidery (*Maya Chuy*) for the tourist trade, far from giving visibility to the *hipil* as a symbol of Mayan identity and to the embroiderers as “ethnic active subjects” within globalisation, is updating and reviving the colonial praxis of segregation that has historically orientated the national political agenda towards the indigenous population. Drawing on Bonfil Batalla’s (1987a) “theory of cultural control”, I show how, within a particular articulation of the dialectic visibility/invisibility of the “Indian” and a peculiar construction of “the Maya” as an “archaeological Other”, travel agencies and governmental and non-governmental institutions have “alienated” and “appropriated” the *hipil* to serve neoliberal economic goals.

Chapter 7 presents the core data that emerged from my fieldwork. Here, I introduce my case study: *Chuuy Hipilo’ob*, a female cooperative of embroiderers based in Xocén and funded by the state. Drawing on Rowland’s (1997) categorisation of power, I discuss the genesis of the group, its obstacles and outcomes, in order to assess whether the cooperative experience has “empowered” its members and has created for them a (new) labour identity. As a counterpart to the experiences of *Chuuy Hipilo’ob*’s

members, I introduce *Meyaj Noko'ob*², another group of embroiderers funded by a private credit institution and that is made up of some former members of *Chuuy Hipilo'ob*. I analyse the differences between the two groups, focusing on the nature and the modes of women's labour, the levels of their internal organisation, and the income that embroidery generates. Finally, I explore the contradictions arising when women perform a public identity, manage human and financial resources, organise themselves around production, and create solidarity networks for the purpose of circulating their products in the market and securing an income. The chapter provides data concerning credit facilities, rates of production, incomes and hours of work. This data is combined with and interpreted in the light of personal aspects of women's biographies, their attitudes and feelings toward work, family, sexuality and procreation.

I argue that tourism and government support programs directed towards rural women, in the specific case analysed in this study, far from empowering women, have generated meagre profits and reproduced the traditional gendered division of labour, creating a class fragmentation among cooperative members and reinforcing patriarchal dichotomies. Challenging the "income generation" paradigm that informs and sustains government and municipal programs, as well as much of development-oriented literature, this study emphasises that individual choices cannot be attributed exclusively to economic opportunities, but that concepts of selfhood, gender identity and the symbolic value of female sexuality play a fundamental role in hindering or favouring the processes of women's economic, social and psychological emancipation.

PART II – Theoretical compass

1.2 Development hurts women (?): women labour in Third World countries

In the 1980s, when debt crisis, economic restructuring and neoliberal policies spread in developing countries, it was clear that state policies and the global economy were intrinsically tied (Benería, 1989; Reclift 1985). Manufacturing industries moved their labour-intensive production from First to Third World countries, creating a new "international division of labour" (Fröebel, Krey and Heinrichs 1980; Nash 1983).

Governments and international organisations facilitated this restructuring of manufacturing, implementing structural adjustment and balance-of-payment

² The two cooperatives are named fictitiously to guarantee the anonymity of the research participants.

stabilisation, proposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as the only realistic solutions to overcome the global economic crisis and enable countries with larger debt to repay the credit. Deregulation of production and labour markets was the first step towards the implementation of stabilisation programs. In Mexico, cuts in government budget, currency devaluation and restrictive monetary policies were an integral part of this strategy. While welfare programs and food subsidies were eliminated, the devaluation of the peso brought inflation and steep increases in prices, especially for imported items.

Under pressure from the World Bank, the Mexican government encouraged export-oriented industrialisation as a way of earning foreign currency and repaying its debts. This strategy had disastrous effects on the population: over 2.3 million workers lost their jobs during the first eight months of the structural adjustment programs (Labreque 1998: 241). In the decade between 1982 and 1992, the number of Mexican families living in extreme poverty increased from 18.4 million to nearly 57 million (Moguel 1997: 275 after Labreque 1998), that is, more than half of the overall population. Between 1992 and 1994, the number of poor families rose from 2.1 to 3.1 million, mostly concentrated in rural areas (Labreque 1998: 242). Hit hard by restructuring, the majority of *campesinos* (peasants) were no longer able to fulfil their basic needs through agricultural labour. Therefore, income generated by women and youth became essential for survival.

Neoliberal policies affected the dynamics of women's employment in many ways. Firstly, these policies were based on the assumption that the household would absorb the costs of adjustments and that women's unpaid labour would supply services and goods (food, child and eldercare) no longer provided by the state or not affordable otherwise. Secondly, the declining household economy pushed a great number of women to enter the labour force, a "feminisation of labour" that appeared more accentuated precisely in countries that deregulated their labour market and pursued export-oriented industrialisation (Standing 1989). Since the formal sector became increasingly more difficult to join, women resorted to informal labour. Homeworking became the perfect solution for both firms in search of flexibility and for women eager to take on any job that would allow them to fulfil their domestic chores. As a result, small firms and middlepersons started to employ a large number of women. In the Mexican garment industry, for instance, cost-cutting and increased flexibility led firms to subcontract homeworkers in rural or economically depressed areas (Arias 1992).

Most of these homeworkers produced for export. However, the role they played in the global export industry and the extent to which they were included in the new international division of labour remained unclear (Prügl 1996).

A number of studies have shed light on the economic transformations that took place in the context of neoliberal reforms in Latin America, analysing women's work as embedded in larger economic and political structures. As Fernandez-Kelly (1983) has shown for *maquiladoras*, Benería and Roldán (1987) for industrial homework and subcontracting, and Wilson (1991) for workshop-based industry, in Mexico, women play a key role in globalising the markets of non-Western states. Nevertheless, they are placed "on the lower rungs of production, conceived as a hierarchy of integrative processes from informal to formal settings, from home-based workshops to transnational industries" (Labreque 1998: 234). Besides, women's insertion in the labour market has been accompanied by a resurgence of patriarchy and conservative tendencies (Ong 1991: 293), which increasingly target women and put their behaviour under scrutiny.

As stressed by Nash (1985) and Deere and Leal de León (1987), the integration of Mexican women into the labour market took place from an essentialist definition of gender, based on the assumption that women are, naturally and intrinsically, more reliable and hard-working than men. Women workers are assumed to facilitate labour control and malleability for their willingness to follow orders, their greater discipline, and other characteristics that fall under the stereotype of docility. *Maquiladoras* provide clear evidence of this essentialisation. Managers' justifications for targeting women for employment rely on myths about female "natural" traits (Tiano 1990), which reflect the prevailing representation of the typical Mexican woman as a "submissive" and tradition-bound worker, who will only be suited to the positions of least prestige and power in the workplace (Fernández-Kelly 1983). Although factory work can pay more than other jobs available to women, patriarchal relations remain unaltered: women perform the same tasks as they do in the private sphere and the informal sector but in a new location (Wright 1997). Activities such as sewing, lacemaking and embroidery, learned from female relatives and handed down through generations, and the manual dexterity acquired from repeating these tasks, are useful when performing minute assembly operations. These skills, however, are not classified as such, but as natural feminine traits (the old nimble fingers argument). As Sylvia Chant (1991) has stressed,

far from accurate depiction of Mexican women, justifications for women's employment based on perceived docility, passivity and manual dexterity reproduce oppressive dichotomies and are ultimately recognition of women's exploitability.

From the 1970s, concerns about women's fate in the context of the global debt crisis and structural adjustment policies opened up a debate among feminist scholars and development practitioners. "Development hurts women" was the slogan that feminists adopted to catalyse the international attention on women's working conditions both in developed and developing countries. This slogan intended to denounce the male-oriented biases in development policies and the invisibility to which international agencies had relegated women. Indeed, following the praxis of discriminatory colonial policies, development programs targeted men to promote cash crops, ignoring women's contribution to men's farming. As a corrective to this praxis, advocates and practitioners in official agencies pushed to integrate women into development projects as economic subjects, moving away from welfare-oriented projects that considered women exclusively in their role as mothers and homemakers.

A number of scholars began to document the repertoire of activities women performed for subsistence and their important contribution to the household economy. The effort of such advocates gave rise to the so-called Women in Development movement (WID) (see Boserup 1970), legitimised by three UN conferences held between 1975 and 1984. These encounters created a broad awareness of biases in development planning and explicitly addressed women's economic role in development (see Moser 1993).

WID researchers started to show that poor women in Africa, Asia and Latin America engage in a wide variety of unpaid and "invisible" work – in markets, fields, cities and at home – that is not counted in censuses and ignored in development planning (Benería 1993). Poor women not only engage in multiple economic activities in order to contribute to the household economy, but they also typically work much longer than men, producing both for subsistence and for cash income. They raise livestock, process food for consumption and sale, embroider clothing, weave hammocks, shawls and carpets, assemble goods for subcontractors and manufacture crafts. Most of these activities are performed at home.

Recognising the centrality of women's work in rural households, in their effort to eradicate poverty, develop rural economies and stop rural-urban migration, development

agencies and some governments have propelled microenterprise development as a tool of supporting women's unregulated activities. In rural areas, governmental and non-governmental programs provide credit and training for handicraft production and improve technologies for livestock raising, setting up cooperatives to procure raw materials and market products. Although these programs have helped rural households to stabilise their income, many observers have questioned their benefits for women. Such projects, indeed, operate on the assumption that women's time is otiose and thus needs to be "filled" with productive activities. However, as is the case with handicraft production, these activities require long hours of work, generate little profit and reproduce a division of labour in which women remain relegated at the bottom of the work ladder (Dhamija 1989).

In urban areas, WID researchers have documented women's work in the so-called informal sector (Portes and Castells 1989). Early studies focused on small enterprises but neglected the casual work of women, which accounts for a huge proportion of unregulated activities. In the context of the economic crisis and the stabilisation policies of the 1980s, in Latin America and Africa, declining family incomes and fewer jobs available in offices and factories have forced more women into home-based, unregulated employment. Studies have shown a disproportionate share of the self-employed in manufacturing, assembly work (Strassmann 1987), and in street food production and sales (Tinker 1987).

Development agencies have found a way of supporting women's informal labour through microenterprise development, by providing training and credit with the purpose of transforming women's survival activities into fully-fledged businesses. In many cases, these programs rely on "solidarity groups" to collectively guarantee the loans (Otero 1989). These programs, however, succeed in stabilising the incomes of the beneficiaries but fail in creating new employment.

Despite its contributions in raising awareness about women's working conditions across the globe, WID planners and scholars have been criticised for ignoring the fact that women's work is embedded in power relationships and crossed by variables such as class, gender and ethnicity. Benería and Sen (1981) observed that the emphasis on "women" obscures gender relationships and the role of reproduction and the sexual division of labour, where women are subordinated to men. They made the case for a gender-centred approach that would take into consideration power relationships in the

global political economy. Following this strand, “Women in Development” was renamed “Gender and Development” (GAD). This approach, greatly informed by feminist theories, focused on a set of issues, ranging from the division of labour in the household to domestic ideologies and the cultural construction of gender. In this frame, women’s subordination was seen as a result of a particular division of labour where women are responsible for reproduction and the maintenance of the household. Since reproductive activities are performed at home, homeworking appeared as a viable option for women, allowing them to earn some income without neglecting their roles as housewives and caregivers.

A number of studies have documented how the division of labour and the changing demand on women’s work in the household determined the ways in which women inserted themselves into the labour market. In their study of women homeworkers in Mexico City, Benería and Roldán (1987) reported that 80 per cent of women interrupted their work outside the home when they got married or when they gave birth to a child, and re-entered the labour force shortly after giving birth due to economic pressures. In order to combine the need for an earning with domestic chores and childcare, these women opted for working at home. In his study of Guadalajara outworkers, Roberts (1989) has shown that young married women from poor households were more likely to resort to homeworking than work outside the home after they had just got married. While during the early stage of the household cycle women were occupied in raising children, as they grew older, they tended to seek work outside the home, contributing to the household income in times of constraints. When their children eventually started earning a living, these women went back to work at home, as their husbands often turned to self-employment.

These studies have shown that the choices households make in allocating their labour power reflect deeply rooted gender ideologies that relegate women to the private sphere and men to the public sphere. Domestic ideologies based on gender “specificities” dictate decisions about who should go out to work and what jobs or economic activities are open to men and women. These ideologies are not biologically determined but are always culturally and historically specific. The different constructions of homeworkers are equally bounded to cultural contexts. In industrialised or urban settings, homeworkers are constructed as housewives, and homework is a practice that allows women to earn a living without neglecting child bearing and domestic responsibilities. Statistics in Europe, Australia and North America, as well as in Asian and Latin

American cities indicate that the “housewifised” homeworkers (Mies 1982) are more likely to be married with children than other women workers.

In rural areas, women’s homeworking has long provided extra cash to income earned through agricultural work. More recently, it has supplemented male labour in the tourist sector, as is the case of the Mayan Yucatán. Its inherent flexibility makes homeworking adaptable to changing labour needs during the farming cycle and/or seasonal migration. As shown by Nash (1993) in her study of potters in Chiapas, this flexibility leads to a generalised perception of homeworkers as housewives who engage in productive activities only to “while away the idle hours”. Homeworking is seen as a female task within a traditional division of labour; as a result, girls learn how to perform domestic chores at an early age to be socialised with their gender role. Given the classification of homework as a gendered task, time-consuming activities such as food processing, weaving, and clothing and craft making are viewed as “entertainment” performed in leisure time rather than proper work.

As we have seen, the GAD approach looks at women’s home-based and subcontracted work as embedded in a capitalist system of production. Here, women are exploited and paid less on the assumption that their labour constitutes a female household task. In this vein, several studies started to describe government efforts to promote rural household production. In the case of Mexico and Latin America, rural production is often organised in putting-out systems, where middlepersons subcontract the workers, providing raw materials and paying by piece for the finished product. Independent producers are often in debt to traders and are dependent on them for marketing their products. This is the case of Yucatán, where urban traders supply threads and fabric to local producers for making embroidered clothing and hammocks (Littlefield 1979). The same occurs in Chiapas (Eber and Rosenbaum 1992, Nash 1983), Oaxaca (Stephen 1993) and in Ecuador (Gladhart and Gladhart 1981), where rural women make pottery and knit sweaters for the national tourist market and for export. Similar patterns are found in Asia and the Middle East: women’s batik work in Indonesia (Joseph 1988), cotton and wicker ware in Thailand (Roongruangse, Premchit and Sriboonchitta 1987), handloom weaving and rattan making furniture in the Philippines (Aguilar and Miralao 1988), and carpet weaving in Turkey are all home-based and subcontracted (Berik 1987).

Along with reducing unemployment, stopping the rural exodus and preserving traditional arts and crafts to turn them into national heritage, one of the underlying reasons for governments' interest in propelling women's production projects in developing countries was the elimination of intermediaries and the increase in export earnings. However, by providing raw material, purchasing crafts from cooperatives and marketing their products, governments often establish a sort of institutional putting-out system. Many agencies buy from middlepersons and may subcontract work to independent workers. Traders, intermediaries and ultimately governments, hold the keys to national and international markets; they exploit women by extracting surplus value from their labour and paying less than what is needed for subsistence.

As we have seen, GAD scholars have dealt with a variety of issues, ranging from homeworking and industrial work to the impact of institutional programs on women's lives. In most of these studies, an exploration of household structures and domestic ideologies lie at the core of the inquiry. Gender analysis, which has been used as a conceptual framework, allows for the incorporation of microeconomic phenomena, such as household dynamics, into a macroeconomic framework, which considers concepts such as gender, race, ethnicity and class as key aspects of economic development. In studies such as Benería and Roldán's *The Crossroads of Class and Gender* (1987) and Wilson's *Sweaters: Gender Class and Workshop-Based Industry in Mexico* (1991), the division of labour in the household is used as a fundamental unit of analysis to elucidate issues concerning the construction of worker's identities and the effects of gender on the structure of the household. These works have been of paramount importance to the development of the central argument of this thesis.

My analysis of Mayan women's work in embroidery production within the context of governmental programs and tourist development approaches the issue of the integration of women in the labour market from the perspective of female situation in the household. By linking the household processes to societal processes of gender formation and by identifying the mechanisms involved in the creation and maintenance of gender hierarchies and ideologies in the sexual division of labour, my study aims to make a distinctive contribution to the above-mentioned scholarships.

1.3 Understanding “shifting” identities: the performance paradigm

While the literature on women/gender and development constitutes the necessary starting point for my analysis, it is important to recognise that part of its theories appears out-dated in the context of current global economic trends and modes of production. Discussions about women’s agency, status, power, autonomy, and empowerment often present the relation between the local and the global in a hyper-linear and non-dialogical fashion, obscuring the dynamic, relational, and adaptive nature of cultural transactions and identities in increasingly hybrid socioeconomic contexts. The very notion of empowerment, which is a central tenet of feminist theories on development and also an important linchpin for my analysis, has been widely questioned (see Chapter 7) and it seems to have worn out its heuristic force: “of all the buzzwords that have entered the development lexicon in the past 30 years” – Batliwala contends – “*empowerment* is probably the most widely used and abused” (2007: 557). The concept, I believe, needs to be revitalised and repositioned within a more dynamic framework that takes into account the complex – and often contradictory – layers of meaning that are produced in local societies in the context of globalisation, as well as the fluid – and, again, often contradictory – ways in which women’s agency is negotiated within such a context.

As the title of this thesis alludes, I am interested in capturing the “shifting” nature of identities caught in the middle of rapid economic and socio-cultural changes: the “shifting” nature of women’s identity as they move through the life-cycle, the “shifting” nature of men’s lives as they commute between the tourist coast and the village, the “shifting” statuses of traditional embroiderers as they become commodities-making artisans, the “shifting” nature of ethnicity as it turns into exhibit for tourist consumption. To make sense of the semantic fluidity of Mayan identities within international globalism, I complement the rather passé development angle with a performative approach to gender, ethnicity and labour. Given the importance of the re-signification of indigenous culture and identities in the region, through crafts, rituals, dances and other performances, and the creation of the tourist-oriented “Maya World” (a term coined as a marketing strategy to stimulate the commoditisation of all aspects of Mayaness for an expanding mass market), I consider this performative dimension extremely relevant in this context.

Within the dynamics of tourism, that is not news, cultures are reduced to performance. For the Mexican government, tourism was part of a post-revolutionary

nationalist cultural project intended to unify a fractured nation and modernise the nation-state. This project involved creating a national identity rooted in Mexico's pre-Columbian and colonial past folk and culture. To showcase its national treasures, the state funded the excavation of archaeological zones and their conversion into open-air museums of Mexico's past. In the Yucatán peninsula, the presence of numerous archaeological sites, along with that of beautiful colonial cities and "typical" indigenous villages transformed the region into a site for heritage tourism and into an integral component of the nation-state's tourism plan.

In Yucatán, the state endorses ethnicity as exhibit and performance as a strategy to handle both the heterogeneity within its boundaries and the homogenising threat of popular culture and consumer goods deriving from the West. The Mayan intellectual Jacinto Arias has argued that the ultimate challenge to "Indianness" in the region is its new status as a commodity and exhibit for tourist consumption. In his view, the "gobbling up of Indian products is a symbolic act that reflects the real intention of swallowing the Indian people" (1992: 28), a phenomenon that he calls "indiophagy". The "tourist gaze", as sociologist John Urry (1990) has stressed, is powerful; the quest for an "exotic, authentic, uncontaminated Other" is central to its representational economies. However, the tourist gaze is not exercised exclusively by tourists; aggressively promoted marketing strategies of local governments, tour operators, and popular media all contribute to the production of the tourist gaze. In response to tourist expectations and desires (and often to cultural and racial stereotypes), indigenous people reflect back the tourist gaze in the hope of gaining a financial benefit; they "perform tourism", providing the desired exotic tableaux of ethnic authenticity. Doing it so, they are trapped in a conundrum: as long as their cultural performances for tourists stem from and conflate in their real lives, indigenous people are constantly called to negotiate the terms of their identities with a "staged" reality made up for visitors. Individual choices of ethnic labels, however, are very much constrained, arising from a complex process of symbolic construction that involves not just the ethnic group, but also the tourist industry and the state. While this latter markets indigenous heritage as central tourist attraction, indigenous people often remain in a subordinate position, at the edge of decision-making processes. Notwithstanding, they continue to "perform" and "sell" their culture to tourists.

By its nature, tourism and the tourist gaze both elicit and illuminate new processes of cultural construction. Here, a performative trope can be useful not only to understand

how culture and ethnicity are reduced to performance within tourism, but also how the construction of specific forms of Otherness for the tourism industry affects local culture and identities. Notions of performance and performativity, however, are also relevant to other discussions that are addressed in this thesis. With its ability to theorise the body in relation to social discourse, performance theory provides a critical analytical tool to navigate the slippage not only between performativity and ethnic performance, but also between discursivity and material embodiment. It is precisely through the lens of performance that I look at the cultural, economic, and symbolic meanings of the Mayan embroidery. Framing the discussion within wider perspectives of phenomenology and embodiment (see Chapter 5), I employ the notion of performance to consider embroidery as a form of situated learning and as an incorporated, habituated and tacit “way of knowing”. Conceptualisation of embroidery in terms of performative “act”, *el gesto de bordar*, not only picks up imaginatively the performative dimension of Mayan embroiderers’ labour in capitalist modes of production, but also reveals how notions of power and knowledge are entangled in these very modes. Shedding light on the ways in which cultural and economic meanings are *inscribed on* the body, the performance paradigm allows forces and ideologies – internal and external, local and global – that transform the embroidering body to be singled out in a gendered, racialised repository of social praxis (see Chapter 5).

Finally, while performance can be used as a trope to theorise the instability of identity formation and highlight the relationship between body, power and knowledge, it can also be employed as a self-reflexive tool for discussing the ethics and the methodologies that inform anthropological practice. Just as much as the “act of embroidering”, the “act of fieldworking” (and filmmaking) is entangled in questions of power and knowledge. The differential power relations between the researcher and the researched call for the adoption of an ethical stance. Conceiving anthropology as a performance, a “synchronic” (Marcus and Fischer 1986: 96) practice that is a mode of doing, acting and creating (see Fabian 1986), can help reveal the constructed, unfolding and relational nature of anthropological knowledge, inviting reflection on the legitimacy of anthropological research methods (especially the visual ones) as adequate ways of knowing “the Other”.

It is therefore through the lens of performance that I look at Mayan identities and culture, and reflexively at the “acts” of filming and fieldworking.

Studies of tourism and ethnicity reinforce what is probably the central theoretical tenet in the ethnicity literature in recent years: that “ethnic identity is not something fixed and bequeathed from the past, but rather is something symbolically constructed, constantly reinvented, and often contested” (Wood 1997: 18). The poststructuralist critique of and within anthropology suggests that culture is something the ethnographer writes, not something that enjoys ontological status *per se*. Following the insight of Clifford Geertz, in the 1980s, culture tended to be viewed as a “text” to be interpreted: “a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate” (Geertz 1973: 89). In the field of theatre semiotics and in recent work in cultural anthropology this cultural text has come to be viewed more dynamically as a “performative text” whose meaning may never be fully interpretable. In recognition of the fluidity of the exchanges that take place in an increasingly globalised world, culture is seen as processual, dynamic, active, mutable and “performed” rather than “borne”.

A fluid understanding of culture as performance allows for a rethinking of identity as constructed and relational, instead of ontologically given and essential. Identity, as Trinh T. Minh-ha has observed, is invented and contingent, not autonomous: “‘I’ is therefore not a unified subject, a fixed identity, or that solid mass covered with layers of superficialities one has gradually to peel off before one can see its true face. ‘I’ is, itself, *infinite layers*” (Trinh 1989: 94). Here, the notion of person shifts from that of an autonomous, static self to a polysemic site of articulation for multiple and overlapping identities and voices. Identity, James Clifford writes, is a provisional, “conjunctural construction [...] an ongoing process, politically contested and historically unfinished” (Clifford 1988: 9). Understood as mixed, relational, and inventive, identity is more like an evolving performance than a premise, a postulate, or an original principle. Yet, what do we mean, exactly, by “performance”?

Richard Schechner (2002), father of the interdisciplinary field of “performance studies”, posited that a performance is any behaviour that is “twice-behaved” or “restored”. For him, performances are constructed through a multi-stage process: they are prepared and rehearsed, and then “framed, presented, highlighted or displayed” in a heightened fashion. Any performance is the result of processes of learning and transmission that have preceded and may succeed it. Hence, a performance is the second (third or fourth...) presentation of a practiced act. These practiced acts constitute what Schechner defines as a “repertoire”. While much of the

historiographical reconstruction is done through the “archive” – books, photographs, historical ruins, archaeological material, and everything having a tangible consistency – , the focus of performance studies is on the “repertoire”, that is, the set of “embodied practices” that, being ephemeral and intangible, tend to disappear.

Schechner’s distinction between “archive” and “repertoire” grounds its roots in the reflections of his colleague Diana Taylor. In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Taylor argues that one of the main aims of performance studies is precisely to take seriously into consideration “the repertoire of embodied practices as an important system of knowing and transmitting knowledge” (Taylor 2003: 26). Taylor reveals how the repertoire of embodied memory conveyed in gestures, body movements, songs, spoken words, dances, and other performances offers alternative perspectives to those derived from the written archive, and is particularly useful to a reconsideration of historical processes of transnational contact. Drawing from the theatrical jargon, Taylor proposes the term “scenario” as an epistemological paradigm that, acknowledging the importance of both the archive and the repertoire, can help understand social structures and behaviours better than a “narrative” paradigm.

Taylor and Schechner’s focus on the “repertoire” is particularly relevant for my analysis of embroidery practices and meanings. Embroidery, both as an object and as a practice, can be considered precisely as a “repertoire” of embodied practices. These practices are transmitted from generation to generation through sensorial, bodily apprenticeship that, by its very nature, cannot be “archived” or conveyed through propositional forms of knowledge (see Chapter 5).

While the term “performance” recalls immediately the performing arts, such as dance, music and theatre, performance studies scholars have disentangled it from this exclusive association, arguing that a theatrical dimension underpins all human activities. Any action, behaviour, or event can be studied as a performance, since even the most seemingly mundane or spontaneous aspects of everyday life reveal a “performative” dimension that makes them *like* a performance. “Performance” – Schechner explains – “must be constructed as a “broad spectrum” or “continuum” of human actions ranging from ritual, play, sports, popular entertainments, the performing arts (theatre, dance, music), and everyday life performances to the enactment of social, professional, gender, race, and class roles, and on to healing (from shamanism to surgery), the media, and the internet” (2006: 2). In short, whatever is being studied is

regarded as practices, events, and behaviours, not just as “objects” or “things”. “This quality of ‘liveness’” – Schechner says – “is at the heart of performance studies” (*Ibidem* 2006: 2).

The antecedents to performance studies have embraced questions addressed in ancient times. In Renaissance Europe, the idea that the world was a great theatre (*theatrum mundi*) was well expressed by William Shakespeare: “All the world’s a stage | And all the men and women merely players; | They have their exits and their entrances; | And one man in his time plays many parts” (*As You Like It*). While in the *theatrum mundi*, everyday life was theatrical, theatre offered, conversely, a representation of how life was lived.

The fascination towards the notion of *theatrum mundi* made a comeback after the World War II, entering the field of social science. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Erving Goffman argues that the rehearsal process so typical of rituals and theatre also structures our everyday actions. In the “dramaturgy of everyday life” each of us plays a socially assigned role in front of an audience of family, friends, colleagues and acquaintances. While in the “front stage” of life we enact our socially expected self, it is in the private space of the “back stage” where we are free to reveal and express our real selves. For Goffman, behaviours and selves are constantly constructed through acts which are learned, revised and repeated over time; daily life, like theatre, is choreographed.

Victor Turner, who can be considered, along with Schechner, the father of performance studies, was one of the first to capture the theatrical essence of human life. Maintaining that performance is the central constituent of the fabric of social life, Turner sought to humanise the study of culture as performance by conceiving of individuals as *homines performans*:

«If man is a sapient animal, a tool-making animal, a self-making animal, a symbol-using animal, he is, no less, a performing animal, *Homo performans*, not in the sense, perhaps that a circus animal may be a performing animal, but in the sense that a man is a self-performing animal – his performances are, in a way, reflexive, in performing he reveals himself to himself (Turner 1986: 81)».

In his studies of the rituals of Ndembu people of northwest Zambia, Turner (1967) noted that coming of age ceremonies, exorcism rites, or warfare contained a theatrical

component which enabled the actors to achieve a change in status, manage critical situations and generate a decisive transformation. Much like a theatre performance, such rites tended to occur in a “liminal” space of heightened intensity separate from routine and ordinary life. Since these ritual acts exhibited many of the same means of expression employed on a theatre stage, Turner termed them “social dramas”.

Other theorists went a step further in employing the term “performance” beyond theatre and rituals. The American philosopher and linguist John Austin (1962) postulated that certain kinds of speech, too, are performances. Promises, bets, and namings, for example, are “performative utterances” that do not just convey fixed meanings, but are akin to actions – they *do* something, and in this doing they *enact* a new reality. The concept suggests that, at least with reference to some cultural realities, *doing* pre-exists *being*, and that *being*, moreover, is something only observable in the *doing*. By putting aside once and for all the notion of an “essential” self inside the body, performativity crosses the boundaries of the “intrinsically artistic and theatrical” and pervades the fabric of the social, political and material world; it is an inalienable part of what constitutes power and knowledge.

Austin’s insights led Judith Butler to articulate in the late 1980s and 1990s another kind of performance: the making of gender. Drawing on the work of Foucault (1977), who argued that power relations permeate social life and are coextensive to acts of resistance, Butler (1993) posits that identity is not an essence or an abstract category, but a performance regulated by social institutions. Building on de Beauvoir’s (1949) idea that “one is not born, but rather *becomes*, a woman”, Butler suggests that women play “scripted roles” already operative in their society: their behaviours are learned, practiced and transmitted according to predetermined conventions. For Butler, the coherence of the categories of sex, gender and sexuality is culturally constructed through the repetition of stylised acts in time. These stylised bodily acts, in their repetition, establish the appearance of an essential, ontological “core” gender. Yet, gender is “real” only insofar as it is performed: it is the very act of performing gender that constitutes who we are, while identity itself is an illusion retroactively created by our performances.

Butler’s focus on performance has been widely influential because it enables moving beyond analyses of legal definition or status to consider the political and social discursive forces that construct and normalise social behaviour. Although its primary mode of signification is through its very absence, Butler explains, power is inscribed *on*

the body: “Law is not literally internalized, but incorporated, with the consequences that bodies are produced which signify that law on and through the body” (1990: 134). The “embodiment of power and knowledge” is central to performance studies. “Because it is public” – Conquergood states – “performance is a site of struggle where competing interests intersect, and different viewpoints and voices get articulated” (Conquergood 1989: 84). Far from being static, abstract and incorporeal, these viewpoints and voices are always *embodied*. As Holling and Calafell (2007: 61) point out: “The body, within narrative and cultural performances, is of great importance as it functions as a site where politics and power are written on and through”.

In my research, the conceptualisation of gender as a performance and the understanding of the body as a “site of struggle” provide empirical insights into the constructed nature of women’s identities and roles in Mayan culture. Focusing on the ways in which power and knowledge are *inscribed on* female bodies, the performance paradigm can deconstruct the biological determinism that, through the power of myth and symbol, limits women’s operational field by postulating the “naturalness” of sexual differentiations. Concomitantly, the performance lens can shed light on the ways in which the domestic ideologies deriving from this model are *embodied*, naturalised and reproduced by women.

Considering the heuristic paradigm of performance transferable to economic transactions, this research extends the concept of performativity from the cultural domain to the economic sphere, in order to shed light on the relation structure/agency within indigenous participation to capitalistic economy. Michel Callon (1998a, 1998b) has been the first to argue for the study of performative aspects of economics, that is, the extent to which economic science plays an important role not only in describing markets and economies, but also in “framing” them. According to Callon and those economic sociologists who in the last ten years have studied the performative capacities of economic knowledge (MacKenzie 2003, 2004, 2006; MacKenzie, Muniesa and Siu 2007), to claim that economics is performative is to posit that economics *does* things, rather than simply *describing* an abstract, external reality not affected by economics. At a most general level, the term “performative” postulates that phenomena only exist in the “doing” and that they have to continuously “performed” to exist at all (Callon 1998a). The essence of performativity, consequently, is to intervene in the reality rather than reflect it.

An emphasis on performativity does not entail a positive or negative evaluation of the “effects” of the aspect of economics in question. Economics “work” in the sense that “the market participants involved see themselves as applying economics, view their uses of economics as having effects, and evaluate those effects as desirable” (Mackenzie, Muniesa and Siu 2007: 5). Indeed, a common feature of most performative programs of economics is that they share an identical choice, “that of producing individual human agencies capable of calculating their interests in one way or another” (Callon 2005: 45). Hence, while economic analysis postulates only the importance of interests and resources, through a performative approach we can see how people are creating, maintaining and transforming social relations. In this respect, I find particularly fruitful Callon’s notion of “embeddedness” (1998b), which states that economic relations between individuals or firms take place within existing social relations and are thus structured by these relations, as well as by the greater social structures in which those relations are embedded. In other words, economic acts and transactions occur against, incorporate and also re-perform a geographically and culturally specific complex of social histories, institutional rules, arrangements, and connections.

Clinging to these premises, a performative approach to economics enables, in this research, an informed critique of the “income generation” paradigm that underpins government programmes and development theories. Focusing exclusively on interest and resources, this paradigm neglects to account for the power relations in which women’s economic choices are, precisely, “embedded”.

Just as the notion of performance in theatre implies acting a role, so too here the term allows for recognition of the lived experiences and the selves as “enacted”, shifting, multiple, and continually unfolding rather than fixed and authentic. These ideas are relevant to every part of my thesis, including my film and ethnographic practice.

The relation between film and performance is tautological. The film does not need to be treated *as* a performance: it *is* a performance, theatrically acted and constructed. The world is not simply presented through film, but is re-presented, distorted and transformed; within its fictional space, culture and identities are re-thought and re-invented. The film, as Vivian Sobchakh (1992: 162) has argued, is “embodied”: it is a sensuous object, but also a sensual, sensing and sense-making subject. The filmmaker

and camera's own movements through the landscape – and later the editing process – are performative gestures that create and disrupt meanings. While the lens of the camera focuses on chosen portions of reality, circumscribing the “stage” where life is enacted, the editing cuts, overwrites, and reassembles these portions, reinventing places, spaces, objects, and faces. Yet, the film goes beyond its own performance. If we maintain that all reality is constructed, the film is a performance within the performances of its subjects: a *meta-performance*, I would argue, in which the multiple, constructed layers of life get eventually all out in the open.

“Made up” and creative just as much as the film, ethnography, too, is a performance. Ethnographic writing is the persuasive storytelling of the lives, encounters, circumstances and memories that the ethnographer has witnessed and experienced. Geertz is rather blunt about the rhetorical nature of ethnography:

«The capacity to persuade readers [...] that what they are reading is an authentic account by someone personally acquainted with how life proceeds in some place, at some time, among some group, is the basis upon which anything else ethnography seeks to do [...] finally rests. The textual connection of the Being Here and the Being There sides of anthropology, the imaginative construction of a common ground between the Written At and the Written About [...] is the *fons et origo* of whatever power and anthropology has to convince anyone of anything – not theory, not method, not even the aura of the professional chair, consequential as these last may be» (1988: 143-144).

Like ethnographic writing, fieldwork and participant observation are similarly based on artifice and, as such, they require the suspension of disbelief by all parties involved in the encounter. Yet, the ethnographer herself can be viewed as a performer. Straddling two worlds, she navigates a limen. This state of “in-betweenness” is well captured by Schechner; transferring the double negation “not not” that locates the process of theatrical characterisation of the actor to the ethnographic practice, he writes:

«[...] what role does the fieldworker play? He is not a performer and not not a performer, not a spectator and not not a spectator. He is between two roles just as he is in between two cultures. In the field he represents – whether he wants to or not – his culture of origin; and back home he represents the culture he has studied. The fieldworker is always in a “not... not not” situation. And like a performer going

through workshops-rehearsals the fieldworker goes through the three-phase performance process isomorphic with the ritual process:

1. The stripping away of his ethnocentrism. [...]
2. The revelation [...] of what is “new” in the culture he temporarily inhabits. [...]
3. The difficult task of using his field notes (or raw footage and sound tapes) to make an acceptable “product” – monograph, film, lectures, whatever: the way he edits and translates what he found into items understood by the world he returns to. In brief he must make an acceptable performance out of all workshop-rehearsal material [...] some effort to make writing speak in the voice of the “away culture”. [...]

Fieldworkers now not only watch but learn, participate, and initiate actions. Directors have been, and fieldworkers are becoming, specialists in restored behaviour» (1985: 108-109).

Acknowledging the performativity of ethnography means privileging participatory, intimate, dynamic, precarious, embodied experiences grounded in contingency and ideology. Within performance studies, scholar David Conquergood writes:

«[...] performance-centered research takes as both its subject matter and method the experiencing body situated in time, place, and history. The performance paradigm insists on face-to-face encounters instead of abstractions and reductions. It situates ethnographers within the delicately negotiated and fragile “face-work” that is part of the intricate and nuanced dramaturgy of everyday life» (Conquergood 2013: 92).

The performance lens keeps fieldwork dialogically alive, an “intimate conversation”, as folklorist Henry Glassie has written, with other people and cultures: “Ethnography is interaction, collaboration. What it demands is not hypotheses, which may unnaturally close study down, obscuring the integrity of the other, but the ability to converse intimately” (Glassie 1982: 14). A performative approach to fieldwork allows for an ethical stance towards ethnographic methods as well as performance praxis: “Dialogical performance is a way of finding the moral center as much as it is an indicator that one is ethically grounded” (Conquergood 2013: 77) [...] “Instead of speaking about them one speaks to and with them” (1985: 9-10).

With its focus on the “experiencing body situated in time, place, and history”, the performance paradigm can help the ethnographer recognise the limitations of literacy

and critique the textualist bias of Western civilisation. Experiential performance resists, exceeds and overwhelms the constraints of writing, unmasking the tension and contradiction between the “Being There” of performed experience and the “Being Here” of the written text. Anthropologist Michael Jackson (1989) writes:

«The idea that “there is nothing outside the text” may be congenial to someone whose life is confined to academe, but it sounds absurd in the village worlds where anthropologists carry out their work, where people negotiate meaning in face-to-face interactions, not as individual minds but as embodied social beings. In other words, textualism tends to ignore the flux of human relationships, the ways meanings are created “intertextually”, embodied in gestures as well in words, and connected to political, moral, and aesthetic interest» (Jackson 1989: 184).

This very idea of ethnography as an embodied, dialogical performance or, as Conquergood suggests, as a “co-performative witnessing” (2002: 149) where researcher and researched “co-act” in the meaning-making process, is at the core of my visual and ethnographic practice. It informs the ethics of my work and shapes my understanding of ethnography and ethnographic filmmaking as “scenarios of discovery”, to borrow from Taylor, where an embodied, participatory and “shared anthropology” (Rouch 2003 [1973]: 45) can eventually take place (see Chapter 2).

PART III – The fieldsite

1.4 Introducing Xocén, the village at the “centre of the world”



Figure 2: Xocén. Source: Google maps

The community of Xocén has a population of 2,407 inhabitants, of whom 1,179 are men and 1,228 are women (INEGI 2010), distributed in 504 households (INEGI 2015). Xocén is located twelve kilometres southeast of the colonial city of Valladolid, and is one of its thirty-six commissaries. Located two and a half hours by bus east of Mérida (the state capital) and two hours from the busy city of Cancún, Valladolid is both one of the most important tourist spots of the Yucatán Peninsula and a major market place for villages within a radius of sixty kilometres. Known as the “Capital of the Mayan East”, for its cultural riches and its strong Mayan influence, in 2012 Valladolid was promoted to the rank of *pueblo mágico*, a national program directed to foster tourism in areas considered of particular cultural and/or environmental interest.

Despite the close proximity to Valladolid, Xocén is not reachable by bus; collective taxis leave every day from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. from a car station located in the *calle 40* in Downtown Valladolid, and carry Xoceneses back and forth at a fixed fare of 10 Mexican pesos.

At first glance, Xocén is similar to other Maya *pueblos*³; however, it is known in the whole Yucatán peninsula for being an “extra-ordinary” place. What sets Xocén apart from other Mayan communities is its residents’ conviction that the village is situated at the centre of the world. Xocenenses locate this centre two kilometres southeast of the village and refer to it as *U Chumuuk Lu’um*, or the “centre of the world”. Here, a chapel houses the *Santísima Cruz Yuum Balam Tun*, the Blessed Stone Cross, interpreted by villagers as a communicating object that anchors the Maya’s world where the rain gods and mountain spirits converge. Referred to as *el Patrón*, the patron, the Blessed Stone Cross is regarded as the “true divinity of the Mayas” (Fernández 1982: 82), being a sister cross to the famous Talking Cross that surfaced during the beginning of the Caste War (1847-1901) and whose followers led the Maya rebellion against the Mexicans (Terán Contreras and Rasmussen 2005: 161).

The Caste War of Yucatán (*Guerra de Castas*) was the most important of numerous rural uprisings that unsettled Mexico during the 19th century and one of the most destructive native revolts in the North American continent. It was bloody to such an extent that the non-indigenous population of Yucatán risked disappearing (Reed 1964; Rugeley 2010). The conflict began with the revolt of Mayan people against the *Yucatecos*, who were the Creoles (*Criollos*) of Spanish descent in economic and political control. A lengthy war resulted between the *Yucateco* forces in the northwest of the Yucatán and the independent Mayas in the southeast. It officially ended in 1901 with the occupation of the Maya capital of Chan Santa Cruz by the Mexican army. However, skirmishes with villages that refused to acknowledge Mexican control continued for over a decade. General Salvador Alvarado officially declared the war over for the final time in September 1915. Sent by the revolutionary government of Mexico City to restore order in Yucatán, Alvarado implemented a number of reforms that addressed Maya grievances, effectively freeing the Indians from 350 years of slavery. Despite the rebels agreeing to recognise the Mexican government, skirmishes continued until 1933.

Although the Caste War has been portrayed as a war of liberation against the population of European descent⁴, it was not triggered exclusively by the resentment

³ *El pueblo* can refer to a town or a village, but also to a local or national community. Xocenenses use this term to refer to their village and to a sense of local community.

⁴ In the hegemonic discourse, the Caste War was depicted as stubborn resistance of the Indians against civilisation (Gabbert 1997). After the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917), President Cárdenas interpreted it as a legitimate struggle of the “Maya race” for its existence (Bustillo

towards the colonists. Recent works have pointed to the economic motivations of the conflict, which would be rooted in the defence of Maya communal lands against the expansion of the private ownership following the boom of sugarcane, cotton and henequen production, indenture servitude, and excessive taxation (Moseley and Depar 2008: 24). Whatever the motivations that triggered the uprising, the tragic outcome of the Caste War is still part of the discourses of and on contemporary Mayas. In southeast Yucatán, this conflict, more than the Mexican Revolution, profoundly shaped Mayas' social and political memory. Still today, people speak of the pre-conflict period when they worked in *peonage* in *haciendas*, as the “epoch of slavery”⁵. The continued repression by the *Yucateco* troops that attacked the rebels' settlements and destroyed their lands was a critical factor in the development of an ethnic consciousness. The common fight against the government provided an important basis for ideological identification for the inhabitants of different villages and the followers of different leaders (Gabbert 2000: 13).

Regarded in the Yucatán peninsula as a “traditional”, “fierce” and somehow “secluded” community, Xocén was one of the first *pueblos* involved in the uprising. The village, indeed, belonged to the Church of the neighbouring community of Chichimilá, where the execution of the Maya rebels' leader Manuel Antonio Ay by the *dzules* on the 25th of June 1847 led to the outbreak of the Caste War. What establishes the closest relationship between Xocén and the Caste War, however, is precisely the fact that the Talking Cross that led the Maya rebels in the military uprising first emerged in *U Chumuuk Lu'um*. According to Xocenenses, the Cross was brought here, along with its two sisters, by God in person at the beginning of time. Out of the three Crosses, the Talking Cross was considered the most powerful. However, albeit regarded by peasants as miraculous, it was deemed malevolent (Terán Contreras and Rasmussen 2005: 51) and was eventually removed from *Chumuuk Lu'um* and hidden in a cave. It disappeared for a long time before resurfacing in late 1850 in the community of Chan Santa Cruz (Small Holy Cross)⁶. The miraculous apparition of the Cross in the trunk of a mahogany tree was believed to be a way in which God communicated with

Carrillo 1957: 111). Today, the Caste War is seen as a symbol of Indian resistance to the suppression of the Spanish-speaking descendants of the conquerors. Mexican anthropologist Miguel Bartolomé (1988), for instance, defines it as a “war of ethnic liberation” of “the Maya”, whom he considers to be an ethnic group with a millenarian history.

⁵ Indigenous notion of “slavery” refers to different historical contexts: the Spanish conquest, the Caste War and the *indigenista* reforms during the Mexican Revolution (see Eiss 2004).

⁶ Located in present Felipe Carrillo Puerto, the spring is today a small park, or “sanctuary”.

the rebels, dictating that the war against the foreign oppressors should continue (Bricker 1981: 187).

The Talking Cross addressed people in both speech and writing through its mouthpiece, Juan de la Cruz (John of the Cross), a sacristan who became the prophet and charismatic leader of the rebels. According to Bricker (1981: 106) and Reed (1997: 500), Juan de la Cruz was originally from Xocén. It is no coincidence that the “Proclamation of Juan de la Cruz” that ratified the constitution of the “State of the Cross”⁷ on the 15th of October 1850 was first read to people precisely in Xocén. The Mayan state was named Chan Santa Cruz and its capital Noh Kah Balam Nah Chan Santa Cruz (now named Felipe Carrillo Puerto in Quintana Roo) was founded near a sacred *cenote* (sinkhole). Chan Santa Cruz became the religious and political centre of the Maya resistance. The followers of the Cross were called “*Cruzo’ob*”, or children of the Talking Cross, and the revolt became infused with religious meaning.

After the Caste War, the *Cruzo’ob* retreated into the jungle of what is now the state of Quintana Roo and continued to worship the Talking Cross, remaining hostile to the Mexican government well into the 20th century. The political and social changes resulting from the Mexican Revolution as well as new economic factors, such as the entry of the Wrigley Company’s chewing gum (*chicle*) hunters into the region (Reed 2001; Redclift 2004), eventually reduced the hostility.

Although the Talking Cross was removed from the shrine at Chan Santa Cruz in 1926 by the *Cruzo’ob* who were fleeing the advancing *Yucateco* army and taken to the village of Xcacal Guardia (about fifty kilometres northwest of Chan Santa Cruz), Xocenenses believe that it is currently located in Tulum, and that sooner or later it will come back to Xocén.

Along with the *axis mundi* and its cross idol, Xocén is identified with a holy book that disappeared from the village a long time ago. For the Mayas, this book would be the “testament” that God left in *Chumuuk Lu’um*, along with the three Holy Crosses. Local recompilations of oral narratives (Aban May 1982; May Dzib and Noh Dzib Noh 1999) say that the “testament” contained the story of the genesis of the world and a prophecy about its end. It explained “how the world will be over, when the maize will grow, and how to do things for humans and animals to survive [...] And it talks about

⁷ The State of the Cross encompassed all of the southern and central areas of the Mexican state of Quintana Roo. From the late 1850s through 1893, the United Kingdom recognised the Maya free state as an independent nation and sponsored the peace treaty between the Yucatecos and *Cruzo’ob*.

what is going to happen in the time to come” (Aban May 1982: 13, my translation). Villagers describe the book as a living being: every year it revealed a new page on its own and was capable of bleeding when someone wanted to read its pages in advance. They also say that all inventions are prognosticated in the Holy Book: television, airplane, train, computer, bicycle, radio, and all the discoveries to come had already been predicted in the “testament”.

A long time ago, the book was lent to the village of Chichimilá and has never come back to Xocén. Its current location is unknown. While some residents believe that the Holy Book is in Mérida or in Mexico City, most of them think that it has been smuggled into the United States, which would explain why “*gringos* invent all these things”. However, Xocenenses believe that sooner or later the “testament” will come back to the village. Recalling the book’s prophecy, they also say that when the apocalypse will approach, the drought comes and everything will be burnt, all people will converge in Xocén, the last place on earth where there will be water to reproduce life.

The sentiment of being the “elects of God” inhabiting the *axis mundi* and the identification with the rebels that fought against the whites in the Caste War, has profoundly shaped the identity of Xocén and its residents, contributing to its reputation as “*pueblo sagrado*” (“holy village”).

1.4.1 Identity and ethnicity

People from Xocén define themselves, in order of importance, as “Mayas”, “Xocenenses” and “Yucatecos”. While the latter categorisations refer to a geographical identification, the term Maya calls ethnicity⁸ into question and is indeed a more intricate one. Historians and anthropologists point out that “Maya” is not a stable, homogenous ethnic identity, but rather has been constituted over time by state policies, ethnohistory, racial hierarchies and the global economy⁹. Drawing on colonial texts, Gabbert (2004) questions the existence of clear-cut ethnic boundaries between the Indians and the descendants of the Spanish conquerors, as well as of a conscious ethnic

⁸ Building on the definitions of Eriksen (1993), Levine (1999), Hervik (2003) and Gabbert (2000), here I understand ethnicity as a phenomenon of social differentiation in which actors use cultural or phenotypical markers or symbols to distinguish themselves from others. It is a method of classifying people into categories which include individuals of both sexes and all age groups using (socially constructed) origin as its primary reference.

⁹ See Thomson (1974), Rugeley (1996), Castañeda (2004), Watanabe and Fisher (2004), Eiss (2004), Castillo Cocom (2004), Gabbert (2004) and Restall (2004).

grouping among the Maya. In a similar vein, Restall (2004) observes that “Maya” was not used by the indigenous people of Yucatán as a term of self-identification during colonial times. Rather, it was the concept of “race” imposed by the Spanish conquerors, the Caste War and the ethnic policies undertaken by the Mexican nation-state in the 20th century that consolidated a process of “Maya ethnogenesis”. Initially imposed by Spanish conquerors, this ethnic identification has been perpetrated by intellectuals and the international media. Some rural and urban Yucatecans adopted this term as a conscious form of self-identification following the internationalisation of the indigenous movement in the 1960s. However, most present-day Mayan people use self-referents based on dress, class and linguistic markers rather than ethnicity (Gabbert 2004).

As Hervik (2003) and Castañeda (2004) have observed, in many rural areas of the Yucatán, people only reluctantly call themselves “Mayas”, as from their point of view the “true” Mayas are those who built the pyramids and fought in the Caste War. However, as I have explained in the previous section, Xocenenses establish a close connection between themselves and the Caste War’s rebels and, consequently, do not hesitate to self-ascribe to the ethnic category of “Maya”. Contextually, they employ the term “*los antiguos*” to refer to their ancestors, the pre-Hispanic Mayas. The identity of *mayero* (someone who speaks Maya) is also widely adopted by Xocenenses to differentiate themselves from other ethnic groups and linguistic speakers. However, *mayero* also hinges on particular social and class positions, being often used to refer to a migrant of Maya descent who may or may not speak Yucatec Maya, but who was raised in the countryside in the traditional Mayan way.

More than “Maya”, the term that best reflects Xocen residents’ self-identification is “*masewual*”, or autochthonous, a term derived from the Nahuatl word *macehualli* (Hervik 2003: 55). Before the Conquest the word meant poor people, plebeians, eligible for paying tribute but not for political office (Roys 1967: 188). In the colonial period, the term came to be related to a legally defined status category, whereby the primary social identification of *masewal’ob* had been the community (*kah*) and the patronym group (*ch’ibal*) (Farriss 1984: 156). Today, *masewual* designates a person who speaks Maya, lives off the land, descends from the Maya rebels who fought for autonomy

during the Caste War, and worship God through the Crosses (Hervik 2003: 46)¹⁰. The term is also used to denote types of food or practices associated with country living. “*Indio*” (Indian) as a synonym of *masewal* is rarely used in Xocén; the term is either an invective or refers to the loin clothed Indians of Quintana Roo of the past.

“*Masewual*” is generally opposed to “*dzul*”, meaning “white” or “stranger”, which refers to people not of Mayan origins. This category comprises those “individuals who are either disliked, envied, rich, economically capable, admired, or technocrats, having in common an unfamiliarity with local ways of living. They may be politicians, doctors, missionaries, businessmen, buyers at the market, or engineers” (Hervik 2004: 27). Whereas *dzul* points to a set of Western cultural values and elements, it is less derogatory than “*huacho*”. This term is used in Xocén to identify mainland Mexicans, particularly in response to their unwanted interference in local affairs. “*Huacho*” is generally used to aggravate politicians, anthropologists, reporters, missionaries, agronomists and engineers who come to Xocén with a patronising attitude to teach the *masewales* how to live, build their houses and cultivate the soil.

Another category used to denote non-Mayan people is “*gringo*”. The term is applicable to any tourist with pale skin, blonde hair, indefinable dress, odd in behaviour and big in stature. Although “*gringo*” is widely employed in Mexico and Latin America as an invective against the arrogant (mostly North-American) “intruders”, in Xocén the term is just descriptive and has no pejorative inflection. Tourists might also be called “*güeros*” (whitey) with reference to their skin colour and blond hair, or simply “*turistas*”. *Güeros*, however, also denote fair-skinned and/or light haired *masewales*. Being associated with European origins and wealthy status, the *güeros*’ aesthetic features are highly appreciated, sought after, and consequently envied. Light skinned girls are believed to have higher chances to make “good marriages”, while European looking boys would find better opportunities in the job market.

¹⁰ Despite this emphasis on blood, Gabbert (2000) stresses how the membership to this group is determined by shared way of life independent from descent. This would be demonstrated by the fact that the descendants of Chinese contract labourers who had fled from Belize, Black lumbermen, and Ladino prisoners were all assimilated into the group. Villa Rojas already stressed in the 1940s the overriding role the shared way of life played in determining membership in the in-group: «In classifying people as *mazehual*, the natives do not take into account differences in surname, as between Spanish and Maya. Thus, the descendants of whites who had lived in Quintana Roo for three generations as members of the native group and who therefore show no difference in custom, language, or costume, are considered as *mazehuals*; and this despite the fact that in some cases there is not only the difference of surname but an obvious difference in physical type» (Villa Rojas 1945: 35).

While the word *masewual* has no gendered inflections, Mayan women use the term “*mestizas*” for self-identification. *Mestiza* is a Mayan woman who wears the *hipil*, the traditional Mayan dress (see Chapters 5 and 6), and lives in rural areas of the Yucatán. *Mestizas* express their ethnic identity “by having a common language, Maya, as a mother tongue, a common dress pattern, occupation (agriculture), past oriented identity, and ritual practices” (Hervik, 2003: 52). Whereas in the conventional Latin American usage the term “*mestizo*” refers to people of mixed Indian and Spanish descent, the Mayas of Yucatán employ the term in a unique way to refer to a Mayan person from southern Yucatán and north-eastern Campeche.

The historical explanation of why the Yucatecan Mayans began calling themselves “*mestizos*” has to be found in the Caste War, which had a crucial impact on the social structure and categorisation of the Mayas¹¹. The specific use of this designation

¹¹ In the first decades of the 16th century, after the Conquest, the term *mestizo* (in conventional sense) denoted the biological outcome of the union between a Spaniard and an Indian. In the colonial structure of society three major sectors of population existed: whites, *mestizos* and Indians. The whites (*Españoles*) consisted of two competing groups: the *peninsulares*, who were born in Spain, and the *criollos* who were also Spanish but born in New Spain. The *criollos* were considered inferior by the *peninsulares* and filled secondary roles in the colonial administration. However, united, *Criollos* and *peninsulares* formed a white front against the Indians and the *mestizos* (Bastarrachea Manzano and Hansen 1984: 44-45). The Maya Indians called *ts'uules* all white people and used the word *k'as ts'uul* (half white) to categorise *mestizos* (including *pardos* – black – and *mulatos* – offspring of a black-white relation). These latter were soldiers, artisans or cowboys (*vaqueros*) that worked for the whites as cultural, economic, religious and political brokers to the Maya Indians. They aspired to, but never achieved, *ts'ul* status.

Over the course of the colonial period, the *mestizo* category gradually lost its relevance, as the racial criteria for dividing the population began to fade. The Catholic Church leading the Yucatecan society established new social and cultural criteria to categorise the population, whereby language, clothes, surnames and occupation replaced blood as markers of identity. Now, only individuals of Spanish descent could wear European clothes, while *mestizos* and Maya Indians had to wear distinct dress imposed upon them by the Catholic Friars in order to protect white visibility and superior status. *Mestizos* and Indians spoke Maya as a first language and were illiterate; both dressed traditionally although Maya Indians used materials of inferior quality for their clothes, shorter dresses and less jewellery. The *hipil* was the imposed dress for Indian women.

Another difference was that, unlike the Indians, *mestizos* had the right to attend mass and be educated in the doctrine. They could live anywhere and sit on city councils, whereas Indians had to live in the *barrios* where they could form their own government. Finally, the *mestizos* had Spanish surnames as opposed to the Indians).

Historically, the colonial period ended in 1821, when Mexico won its independence from Spain. Although Yucatán became annexed to the new United States of Mexico, the colonial structure of society remained unaltered for the successive decades. The *peninsulares* and the *criollos* merged into a regional elite of *criollos* and continued to fill the main economic, political and social roles. While some of the Mayas who worked for the Spanish in the *haciendas* fled to the forests of what today is Quintana Roo, many were forced to remain on the plantations, bound by debt peonage (see Bastarrachea Manzano and Hansen 1986).

grounds its roots in the fracture between the “rebel” Maya and the “peaceful” Maya in the aftermath of the war. While “*indio*” and “rebel” have become synonymous terms after the conflict, the Mayas who did not join the rebellion were given the title of “*hidalgo*” and classified as “*mestizos*”. Quintal (2005) maintains that the transference of the term *mestizo* to the indigenous population became generalised in the 1850s. This transference was probably triggered by the fact that, while the *mestizos* were abandoning the traditional dress, the Indians, especially women, continued to wear it. The gendered inflection that connotes the usage of the term *mestizo* in Yucatán and its association with the *hipil* derives from these historical circumstances. To avoid textual confusion, from here onwards I shall use quotation marks to distinguish the Yucatecan *mestizo* from the *mestizo* in the conventional Mexican and Latin American use of the term.

In everyday common usage, as well as in part of the regional anthropological literature, the term “*mestiza*” is often presented in opposition to “*catrina*”, a term that connotes non-Mayan women who live in the cities and wear Western-style clothes. According to Hansen (1980), in the latter part of the 19th century the term “*catrín*”, a Spanish word meaning “over-elegant”, was used interchangeably with the term “*gente de vestido*”. This term referred to all individuals who wore Western-style clothes, as opposed to the *mestizos* (or *masewuales*) who wore the distinct Yucatec Maya clothes, spoke Maya and constituted a socially inferior class. Opposing Hansen, Peter Hervik (2003: 49) contends that *catrín* and *gente de vestido* are different and that *catrín* forms a subcategory of *mestizo*. Drawing on colonial texts and on the actual usage of the term in the Western Yucatán’s town of Oxkutzcab, where he conducted his fieldwork in the 1990s, Hervik maintains that *catrinas* are “*mestizas*” who wear Western-style attires, and that “*mestizas*” see them as “individuals who have taken an unfortunate step away from Maya culture” (Hervik, 2003: 51), having exchanged the traditional subsistence economy for an urban lifestyle. In Xocén, however, the term *catrina* does not refer to Maya women who would have denied their identification with Mayan heritage and have dismissed the *hipil*. Although the word is antiquated and rarely used in ordinary conversation, when I asked Xocenenses to explain what a *catrina* is, everyone agreed on its meaning. The term simply ascribes non-indigenous women who reside in urban areas. A Mayan woman who exhibits appreciation towards Western fashion and/or

urban ways of life may be “*acatrinada*” or “*agringada*”, but she is neither a *catrina* nor a *gringa*: she continues to be Maya.

Hervik’s attention towards the historical formation of Yucatán’s ethno-social categories is intended to deconstruct the biological paradigm that informs much of the anthropological literature on Maya, which would portray indigenous and non-indigenous people as bearers of different cultural codes. For him, this dycotomical categorisation must be abandoned, as it “ignores diversity within each group, it separates Maya culture as a separate and persisting entity and uses the pre-Hispanic era as a yardstick for measuring social change and authenticity” (2003: 42). I agree with Hervik that ethnic and social boundaries cannot be conceived of in binary terms and that an emphasis on separation does not pay justice to the heterogeneity of Mayan people’s self-identification – especially in the blurred boundaries of the global world. In Yucatán, ethnicity has an adaptive nature and the profusion of labels, either imposed or chosen, reflect different aspects of the multiple, fluid and shifting identities that indigenous peoples of Yucatán deploy – and strategically use – in their social interactions.

Castañeda (2004) has argued that, unlike other regions with Maya population such as Guatemala or Chiapas, ethnicity in Yucatán does not play a determinant role in polarising social groups. The lack of a term such as “*ladino*”, used in Guatemala to refer to Hispanicised people, shows the difficulty of labelling the non-Maya population in Yucatán. I acknowledge the fact that in other rural areas of the state the differentiation between *catrinas* and “*mestizas*” does not denote two different ethno social groups. However, the usage, meaning, and scope of these categories in Xocén support the argument that the *mestizo* group constitutes a single social ethnic category, suggesting that a polarisation does exist in people’s perceptions. Therefore, leaving aside the debate about the ideological adequacy of specific ethnic categories and relying exclusively on Xocenenses’ discursive practices, I maintain this terminological differentiation throughout the thesis.

1.4.2 Language

Despite a secular minorisation and marginalisation, indigenous people in Mexico represent a significant part of the national population. According to the latest national census (INEGI 2015), in Mexico there were 7,173,534 speakers of indigenous languages, accounting for 6.5 per cent of a total population of 119,530,753. With

1,544,968 (23.4 per cent) and 786,113 (11.6 per cent) speakers respectively, Nahuatl and Yucatec Maya (*Maaya T'aaan*) are the most spoken indigenous languages in Mexico.

Despite these figures, indigenous language loss is widespread. While the overall increase in absolute numbers of indigenous languages' speakers highlighted in the census is explained with the high rates of demographic growth in Mexico (Feliciano 2010), a longitudinal look at INEGI figures shows evidence of language shift: decreasing numbers of monolingual speakers, shrinking percentages of speakers in relative terms, and increasing rates of bilingualism.

According to Bracamonte and Lizama (2008), in Yucatán, sociocultural stigmatisation and economic subordination of the Maya population are the main causes of language shift to Spanish, which has become the only expected language in public domains and the preferred language for intergenerational transmission. In spite of the massive implementation of a linguistic and cultural policy of “castellanisation”¹² in Mexican rural communities from the 1940s up to present, Maya is still spoken in all the 106 municipalities of the Yucatán (Güémez Pineda 2008).

Detailed ethnographic work has shed light on microprocesses of language retention and loss that are taking place in the region. According to Bracamonte and Lizama (2008), the most isolated, impoverished and marginalised rural areas correspond to higher levels of indigenous language retention. In these areas, the extended family plays a key role in the vitality of the Yucatec Maya (Canché et al. 2010). However, ongoing macro socioeconomic transformations are contributing to the dissolution of this model and, consequently, to language loss. Migration and the incorporation of women in the labour market, more than other factors, are accelerating the transition from the extended type of family to the nuclear one, dramatically reconfiguring gender relations and Maya households (Castellanos 2007). In the traditional family, however, Maya still retains its sociocultural functions, which derives in part from the presence of a monolingual older generation (Canché et al. 2010).

¹² The “Cultural Missions”, promoted in 1923 and 1938 by the *Secretaría de Educación Pública*, to support Vasconcelos' “rural education” programs, were the first attempt to increase the interdependency of rural communities with the urban Mexican economy through the production of marketable goods (including tourist souvenirs). The central goal of these missions was to reduce monolingualism in indigenous communities and improve literacy in Spanish (see Beltrán and Arciniega 1973).

Most municipalities pinpointed by INEGI (2015) as having the highest percentage of Maya speakers in Yucatán are located precisely around the city of Valladolid and in the southeast area of the state that borders with Quintana Roo. This region, where the *Cruzo'ob* withdrew after the Caste War, is considered the most traditional Mayan area and the heartland of the Maya language. Xocén is comprised within this area. Here, the extended type of family is still dominant, notwithstanding high rates of migration; as a result, the Yucatec Maya continues to be spoken as a first language. Even though most adults and all youths can speak fair to fluent Spanish, the language of the Mexican elite is used only with visitors or with teachers in the classroom. Although amongst Mayan people the practice of acquiring Spanish surnames to raise one's socio-economic status and get easier access to job opportunities is widespread, all families in Xocén proudly maintain their Mayan surnames.

1.4.3 Occupations and village economy

The state of Yucatán is divided into three economic zones: *zona henequenera* (the henequen zone), *zona ganadera* (livestock zone), and *zona maizera* (the maize zone). Xocén, together with all the commissaries pertaining to Valladolid, is included in the maize zone. Xocenenses have depended for generations on farm income; although nowadays most of them take seasonal jobs in the tourist industry, agriculture remains the main economic activity for people in the village. Most residents, including short-term migrants, own small plots of land for cultivation, the so-called *milpa*¹³. Maize constitutes the main staple crop, mostly eaten as *tortillas*, and is grown along with squash, beans, sweet potatoes (*camote*), chili peppers and various herbs. The *milpa* is cultivated with the slash-and-burn method of farming (*tumba, roza y quema*), which involves the rotation of several plots of land in a planting cycle.

Two types of land ownership are found in Xocén. One is private and the other is communal ownership, the so-called *ejido*. The *ejido* was created in 1917 to regulate the use of property, the division of large estates and the distribution of land to deprived indigenous communities¹⁴. A large number of families in Xocén do their *milpa* within

¹³ *Milpa* is the Nahuatl word for "field". The term is commonly used in Mexico to refer to the maize field. Among Yucatec Maya speakers, "to make *milpa*" refers to the cultivation of corn.

¹⁴ An *ejido* is a "unit of land that the federal government expropriated from a private owner, and then granted to a specific group of individuals to be held and worked in common" (Climo 1978: 192). The Agrarian Reform Ministry, via Mexican Presidential declarations, created the *ejidos* as a means of providing land to the poor farmers of Mexico (*peones/campesinos*). As a

the *ejido* system, while others rent the land for cultivation from those who have larger parcels. *Milpas* are generally located in the forest that surrounds the village, at an average distance that ranges from three to ten kilometres. People make long trips to their *milpas*, walking or riding a tricycle, which is used to carry the essential working tools and the daily harvest.

The agricultural cycle is adjusted to climate patterns. The Yucatán peninsula has a subtropical climate. Summers are hot and humid with temperatures reaching 40 degrees; while winter days are also hot with 30 degrees as the average temperature, evenings can be chilly. The rainy season begins in May and is characterised by short downpours in the early afternoon and high levels of humidity during the rest of the day. The dry season begins in October, with temperatures gradually falling until December. Following this climate pattern, the trees and bush are cut in January after the rains and left on the ground to dry. Burning occurs in April, when the bush is completely dry. While the maize is planted in May, after the first rainfall, the weeding season occurs between June and July. Finally, the harvest takes place in October.

Apart from farming, Xocenenses engage in other economic activities, like keeping bees and raising cattle. Some residents have found steady employment in Valladolid or other adjacent cities, mostly as maids, cooks, watchmen, bilingual state promoters, and school teachers. A few families engage in small commercial activities. The village has twenty small stores where people typically buy food staples such as oil, salt, sugar and biscuits. Along with food, two bigger stores sell various items, ranging from bottled drinks and purified water to cheap jewellery, sandals, threads for sewing *hipil*, medicinal herbs and aspirin. The village counts also two mills, one bakery, two *tortillerias*, five butcher shops, and three *cantinas* (bars), where returning migrants get together at the weekends.

Other families engage in petty trade selling honey, backyard animals and vegetables in the streets of Valladolid. Ten families own taxis and carry passengers back and forth to Valladolid. Some taxi-drivers engage in longer trips carrying migrants to their workplaces in Tulum, Playa del Carmen and Cancún. Women sew *hipiles* and other

community communal farm, the *ejido* consists of a defined governing body (“*Comisariado*”), land parcels (“*parcelas*”) and members (“*ejidatarios*”). The land is divided into two sections: one section, where the community services and residences are situated, is held by all the members in common, whereas the other section is made up of individual parcels, which are identified as being held individually by each member of the community (see Climo 1978).

embroideries, weave hammocks and manufacture small souvenirs such as dream catchers to sell to tourists. As we will see in Chapter 3, as few people manage to last the year without buying corn and no cash crops are grown in the *milpa*, the adult men – and increasingly the adolescents – are forced to look for seasonal work in the city. Today, most men commute to the sparkling stretch of coastline called the *Riviera Maya* to work as manual labourers, construction workers, busboys, cleaners, or cooks in the burgeoning tourist industry.

1.4.5 Housing and facilities

As in most communities of the Eastern Yucatán, people in Xocén live in two types of houses: the traditional thatched roof hut (*paja* or *nah* in Maya) and the *mamposteria* house, a rectangular shaped masonry building with a floor of cement or tile and a roof of stucco. The basic house, of whatever material, is typically a single room. Although recently *mamposteria* houses have become more common in the village thanks to migrants' remittances and public housing programs, masonry buildings remain symbols of wealth and are typically the first items in which Xocenenses with surplus money invest. However, the majority of people live in the traditional *paja*, an oval-shape room with no windows, made of wooden stakes and thatched with *juano* palms. Regardless of the owner's wealth, all kitchen shacks are made of sticks and mud.

Both the *paja* and the *mamposteria* houses have two doors: the front door facing the path and the back door leading to a kitchen shack adjacent to the main house. When there is not a separate kitchen, the single-roomed main house provides the family's living, cooking, eating, and sleeping facilities. If a family has one or two married sons or an elderly parent living with them, it is common to find two or more houses in a *solar* (compound). From six to ten people usually live in a household.

A typical *paja* has a small table with a couple of stools, one or two chairs, few rolled-up hammocks hung on the wall, a television and a stereo system. The kitchen has a three-stone hearth, low benches, pots, pans, a couple of big plastic water containers, a *metate* (concave stone slab for grinding spices) and a *comal* (an iron griddle) where *tortillas* are baked. Just outside the kitchen there is a wooden dugout tub used for washing dishes and clothes, generally thatch-roofed for protection from sun and rain.

A typical Mayan backyard houses a chicken coop; all families own hens for egg provision and breed some turkeys and one or two pigs for sale. Mango, avocado, lime, sweet-and-sour orange trees are generally grown in Mayan gardens; *chaya*, a large

perennial shrub eaten with eggs or in *tamales*, and *jicara*, a gourd plant used to make round bowls for drinking *atole* (a drink made of grounded corn) are also common in Mayan backyards¹⁵.

An increasing number of houses have modern plumbing and latrines with a flush toilet; however, some families host their bathing space in the kitchen and use a fenced area of the *solar* for elimination. Electricity and piped water were introduced in Xocén respectively in 1982 and 1983 (Terán and Rasmussen 2015: 99-100). Whereas electricity is installed in most of the households, many residents cannot pay for water service and must use one of the thirteen public wells located in different spots of the village.

Unlike other communities in the area, Xocén's residents have several facilities available to them, including a health clinic, a library, and two Internet cafes. The government-sponsored health clinic (*Centro de Salud*) was built in 1990 under the steam of the governor at the time, Manzanilla Schaffer. Two doctors, one man and one woman, serve on rotation at the clinic. Although this structure provides free health care and medicines for community members, families deem the quality of doctors and the care provided to be poor. They prefer to travel to Valladolid and pay for a private consultancy (*doctor particular*); alternatively, they refer to the traditional health specialists. Xocén has five traditional healers, known as *h'menes*, who also officiate Mayan rituals and ceremonies, and one midwife (*partera*). Since the majority of women nowadays prefer to give birth in hospital, the activity of a midwife is limited to performing *sobada*, a pre- or post-partum massage that is intended to put in place the womb (*matriz*) or the *tipte*, which is the central organ in Mayan ethno-anatomy¹⁶.

Villagers' health service utilisation is not limited to one type of treatment at a time. A person with an acute ailment goes to the clinic or to a doctor in Valladolid for an injection to alleviate the symptoms, but refers to the *h-men* to be cured. The *h-men* is believed to identify the eziology of a disease and restore the internal equilibrium by using herbs and performing appropriate rituals. Curers are classified as good or

¹⁵ See Kintz (1990) for a more detailed description of the Mayan *solares* and the role of "kitchen gardens" in the economic system of Mayans.

¹⁶ *Tipte* is an organ located just beneath the navel that is believed to regulate most of the internal functions of the body. Cramps, vomiting, menstrual problems, indigestion, and diarrhoea are believed to result from the displacement of *tipte*. One gets *tipte* sickness when evil winds (see below) accumulate on the navel and displace the *tipte*. When this happens, *sobada* is used to put the *tipte* back in place.

dangerous: while the *h-menes* and the midwives are believed to be good, the *brujo* or *hechicero* (sorcerer) are classified as dangerous.

In Xocén, sorcery plays a significant part in the explanation of sickness or misfortune. Certain illness symptoms are believed to be related to the evil wind (*mal viento*), actual movements of air caused by malevolent supernatural beings (*choko yoól*), generally associated with *cenotes*, wells, and caves (Redfield 1934). Other sources of illness are *mal de ojo* (evil eye) and the already mentioned *hechiceria* (sorcery) and dislocation of *tipte*. The *h-men* is considered the only figure who can deal with these occurrences.

The Victor Flores Olea library houses hundreds of books, many of which are about Maya culture, and has a computer that is free to use for residents. Although there is no access to the Internet, the library and the computer room provide residents with the opportunity to practice typing and offer students a place to complete their homework. Recently, two cyber cafes have opened in the village. Seven computers are currently available in each centre. Students frequent these places to complete their homework or to check their Facebook pages – a very popular social network among Yucatecan youngsters. The cyber cafe charges 7 pesos per hour; youths go there in the afternoon after school and generally spend from one to two hours. It is safe to say that nowadays any youth in Xocén who has completed the *secundaria* has some working knowledge of the Internet and social networking, and has access to a television and a cheap smartphone, which is primarily used to send texts through WhatsApp. As the network coverage is limited to few spots in the village, youths typically gather in the places where the signal is stronger to be able to use their phones.



Figure 3: Municipal administration building, Xocén

1.4.6 Political organisation

Xocenenses acknowledge two forms of political organisation. The formal organisation abides by the state's institutional model and is thus constituted by the *ejidal* Commissariat, elected by the villagers, and the municipal Commissariat, designated by the mayor of Valladolid. Each commissariat belongs to the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), the dominant political party of Mexico and the only party represented in Xocén. Although the formal organisation is a heritage of the Mexican Revolution, the informal organisation, known as “soldiers’ system” (*sistema de soldados*), grounds its roots in the colonial times (Reed 1964). This system is not credited by the state but is recognised both at a local and municipal level.

The soldier system is held up by the so-called “*soldados*”, men residents aged between 18 and 60 bundled in fifteen different “companies”, each of which is led by a “sergeant”. The main tasks of a soldier are watching over the village and performing social utility chores, such as clearing the streets, putting out a fire, settling a fight between drunkards, ensuring public order during social gatherings and events etc. In substance, the soldier system protects and takes care of security; unless there is a serious issue, the regular Yucatán State policemen do not enter the village. This service is compulsory in Xocén and is the *sine qua non* for acquiring the right to work the *ejido* land. Migrants who work outside the community go back to the village when it is their

turn to perform the service or pay someone else to carry out their assigned chores. The appointed soldiers who do not turn up on their service's day are fined.

Albeit different, these systems work as a unified whole and are, in their turn, closely related to the village's religious organisation. The civilian authorities, indeed, play a fundamental role in the most important religious festivities and ceremonies. Within this tripartite government system, the "elders' board" (*el comité de los ancianos*), currently constituted by sixteen senior men, occupies a prominent position. The board's members get together in regular assemblies, open to the participation of all residents. Following an ideal principle of participatory democracy, the assembly in itself represents the highest authority in Xocén and has the power to choose the institutional and traditional community leaders. However, despite the emphasis on participation of all residents in community management and decision-making, women rarely take part in assemblies, make little contribution to the *cargo* system¹⁷ and do not take on any political role with authority (see Chapter 3).

1.4.7 Family networks

For Mayans, the family is both the most important social institution and the more efficient productive unit. The nuclear family provides food, protection, education and healthcare. Both elders and youngsters agree that "If you don't have a family you're screwed".

¹⁷ The *cargo* system, or *sistema de mayordomía*, refers to a collection of secular and religious positions held by men or households in rural indigenous communities throughout central and southern Mexico and Central America. These offices, or *cargos*, become the unpaid responsibility of men who are active in civic life, and represents a source of individual prestige. Office holders typically execute most of the tasks of local governments and churches for a term of one year and assume greater responsibilities as they grow in stature in the community. Such progression requires substantial financial resources, but eventually an individual who holds a requisite number of posts in service to his community retires and joins a group of elders instrumental in community decision-making, including appointing people to *cargos*. The *cargo* system in Xocén exhibits the appropriate elements found in typical *cargo* systems, which, according to Korsbaek (2009: 41-3), are: a number of clearly defined roles, rotation of the members of the community, hierarchical order of the *cargos*, identifying with all or almost all of the members, no remuneration for services-but compensation in the form of prestige, and two separate hierarchies, political and religious.

Individuals who hold a *cargo* are generally obligated to incur the costs of feasting during the *fiestas* that honour particular saints. In Xocén, for example, the so-called *interesado* (*kuch kabal*), or deputy, takes responsibility to organise the *gremio* feasts (*fiestas de gremio*) that are celebrated in honour of the village's saints (see Terán and Contreras 2005: 184-189). The elders' board chooses the *interesados* on a rota, in order to involve as many people as possible in the *cargo* system. However, it is worth noting that social participation is restricted to men. No woman in Xocén has ever entered the *cargo* system as *interesada*.

Within a family, each individual maintains a series of relationships with the other family members and plays various roles within the kinship network. In Maya culture, deference to authority from younger to older constitutes an important principle governing social relationships. In Xocén, this social hierarchy is interestingly reflected in the linguistic designation of family members. While older brothers and sisters are called respectively *suk'un* and *kiik*, grandfathers and grandmothers are referred to as *nojoch yum* and *nojoch na'*. The designations “uncle” (*tío*) and “aunt” (*tía*) do not refer exclusively to kin but are attributed to any middle-aged individual. Regardless of kinship relations, all elders are similarly referred to as grandfather (*abuelo* or *nojoch yum* in Maya) and grandmother (*abuela* or *nojoch na'*). According to Terán Contreras and Rasmussen, these designations “reflect the strength of community relations, as it is a way of manifesting that Xocén, ultimately, is like a great family” (Terán Contreras and Rasmussen 2005: 255, my translation).

A typical household in Xocén consists of a husband and wife, their unmarried children, one or two married sons, their wives and children, and a widowed grandparent. Family members who live in the same *solar* share a single kitchen even when they sleep in separate households. When a son gets married and brings his wife to his parents' home, he shares with his father the role of breadwinner and the resulting economic responsibilities. Whereas personal items are purchased independently, food, medicine and more expensive items such as televisions, stereos, refrigerators and sewing machines are bought in common. When older sons purchase their own houses, the share of economic responsibility decreases. However, as parents grow older, each son takes a greater share of responsibility for them.

Typically, a son remains in the house of his parents during the first two or three years of marriage. Unlike in the past, when girls used to marry at 12-13 years old and boys at 17-18, today, both for men and women the conventional age of marriage is from 18 onwards. Following the traditional patrilocal system, the bride lives with the husband's family; however, if her parents do not have any sons, the groom goes to live in his father-in-law's house. Marriage in Xocén is generally endogamous, although residents frequently marry people from nearby communities, particularly Xuilub, San Silverio, Yalché and Kanxoc. Descent is bilateral: both women and men bear a patronym and a matronym.

Compadrazgo, or fictive kinship, is a fundamental institution in Xocén. Described by Foster (1961) as the most sacred of human ties in the Latin American peasant

communities, fictive kinship provides to Xocenenses an important network of security and solidarity. Villagers can acquire *compadres* on different occasions. The *hetz'mek*, the traditional baptismal ceremony, requires the parents to choose a *compadre* (*he'kul* in Maya) or a *commadre* (*xma he'kul*) as godparent to their children. First Communion and marriage are also occasions in which a boy or a girl obtains ritual parents. The *padrino-ahijado* bond establishes a lifelong mutual relationship: whereas the child is supposed to show obedience to his godparents in any circumstances, the godparents are expected to provide their godchildren with moral counsel and, when necessary, economic support. Although for some people, the fictive kinship follows the instrumental criterion of the social and economic status of the sponsor, in Xocén the solidarity of blood kin is more emphasised. *Compadres* are mostly chosen amidst family members and rarely outside the village.

1.4.8 Schools and Education

Within the community, there are three schools: a preschool, a primary school (*escuela primaria*) and a secondary school (*escuela secundaria*). The Antonio Mediz Bolio preschool was founded in 1981 but the present building was constructed in 1990 (Terán Contreras and Rasmussen 2005). Prior to this date, teachers taught classes in the centre of the community at the Municipal Administration building (*Comisaría Municipal*) and in a designated house in Xocén. Generally, children attend the preschool at four years old; however, many parents do not enrol their children because they consider that their homes offer better protection than a school. For the children who do attend preschool, classes cover material that will assist them with their integration into the *escuela primaria*.

The first school in Xocén was created in 1901 by the teacher Severo Chazareto, who was one of the butlers on the hacienda of Dzantunch'en (Terán Contreras and Rasmussen 2005: 105). In 1946, responsibility for education was transferred to the *Sistema de Educación Indígena*, which founded the "Manuel Alcalá Martín" *escuela primaria* in the centre of Xocén. While in the past the school building only had one classroom and an office for the director, today it has expanded to twelve classrooms. Children attend the school for six years, following a curriculum that supports bilingual education in Maya and Spanish. Students who continue their education attend the *Secundaria Técnica 69*, founded in 1992 and located on the right side of the main road when entering Xocén. Although the curriculum supports bilingual education and

employs bilingual teachers, a stronger emphasis is placed on Spanish. Children attend the school for three years. The accessibility of these schools lends itself to the large amount of children in the community receiving a formal education, which is a critical component to attaining a good wage position in the contemporary economy.

While the young population in Xocén is literate and perfectly bilingual, a large number of adult men and women over 30 years old have never been to school. According to the last census conducted by the INEGI (2015), the number of people aged over 15 years old who did not finish the primary school amounted to 45.21 per cent of the overall population, with a 22.99 per cent illiteracy rate. As a matter of fact, most adults I met in Xocén did not know how to read and write, and depended on their children to mediate with government officials. Although the INEGI does not provide statistics about differences in alphabetisation between genders, illiteracy and monolingualism are especially diffused among women. Employment in town, which is generally not taken by women, has facilitated the acquisition of language skills only among men.

1.4.9 Religious system

Xocén's residents consider themselves Roman Catholic and acknowledge two churches. One church is the already mentioned Chapel of the Blessed Stone Cross, considered the most sacred place in Xocén and its environs. Worshipped as a deity, the Sacred Stone Cross is regarded for its divine ancestry, miraculous healing powers, its ability to communicate with people, and its prophetic quality that serves as a means of direct communication with God. Due to these elements, the cult of the Talking Cross (*Culto a la Cruz Parlante*) is the core and the base of the religious, cultural and social life of the population. Many Mayans from surrounding communities acknowledge the importance of the Holy Cross and make pilgrimages to Xocén to worship it. All the ceremonies that take place in *U Chumuuk Lu'um* revolve around agriculture; however, the Blessed Stone Cross is frequently consulted by the residents for healing diseases and for resolving personal issues.

The second church is located in the centre of Xocén and it is referred to as the Church of Jesus and Mary, after the names of the two village's patron saints: Santo Cristo de la Transfiguración and Virgen María de la Asunción. Every year, the community holds a weeklong event commemorating each saint. The festival, held at the end of July or at the beginning of August, hosts a *gremio* (a ceremony sponsored by

various guild members) and the *vaquería*, which includes *corridos* (bullfights) and *Jaranas* (the traditional Mayan folk dances)¹⁸.

Some attendees refer to the church as Church of the Itzás. The Itzás were a Maya group of élite lineages that dominated the eastern part of the Yucatán peninsula in the post-Classic and colonial periods (see Edmonson 1982). This name may suggest that, instead of being built by the Spanish, the church is either of Maya origin or that it was built on an older Maya sacred site (Terán Contreras and Rasmussen 2005: 239-241).

¹⁸ The *Jarana*, a quick-stepping dance local to the region, is one of the strong indicators of cultural identity in Yucatán and part of the bundle of attributes that make up the “*mestiza*” prototype. In Mayan villages, the *Jarana* is always presented at *fiestas* for local saints, where it precedes the more encompassing dance (*baile*) to popular, Latin or Western pop music. Its steps are difficult to trace, both in the present and to an origin. Some claim they are pre-Hispanic in arrangement; others, that they mix ancient footwork and songs with Spanish rhythms and musical instruments. According to Redfield, the *Jarana* originated in the colonial era, evolving from the Spanish *Jota* dance (Redfield 1941: 274). Today, the *Jaranas* are danced to a changing repertoire of songs composed specifically for the purpose, performed by a *Jarana* ensemble of two clarinets (or sometimes saxophones), two trumpets, two trombones, kettle drums and *guiro* (a grooved rhythm instrument whose sounds are achieved by a scraping or rasping motion). They are featured at festivities and public performances throughout the peninsula, in the countryside as in the cities. A version of the *Jarana* animates the famous bottle dances, a virtuosic entertainment popular among tourists and, increasingly, at urban middle class social events. They constitute the highlight of the *Vaquería*, where they are often danced in competitions.



Figure 4: Downtown church, Xocén.

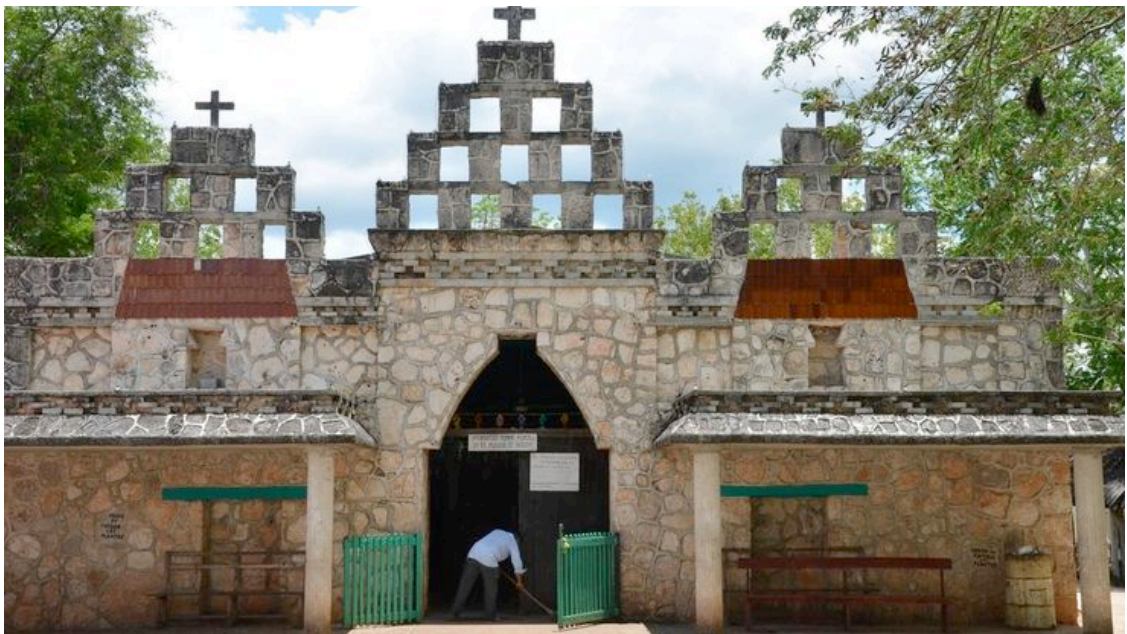


Figure 5: Santísima Cruz Tun (*Chuumuk Lu'um*), Xocén

Catholic ceremonies comprehend novenas, masses, rosaries and processions. The Catholic priest who officiates mass every Friday and Sunday in the Downtown Church comes from the nearby community of Chichimilá. Women are the main participants in Catholic ceremonies; however, attendance at the mass has a purely ritualistic nature as the liturgy is held in Spanish, not in Maya. Most of the attendees recite the prayers by heart but have no understanding of their meaning.

Men's participation in church is generally limited to the yearly *feria*. However, men make up the majority of participants of the Evangelical faith. The Pentecostals use two small *mamposteria* houses that they call "temples". Unlike the Catholic priest, the Evangelical preachers are bilingual and communicate the scripture to the followers in Maya. As a result, in the last few years the Pentecostal Church has gained in popularity among Xocén's residents. However, the village's elite opposes the "evangelical sects", considering them disruptive for both the village ritual traditions and its material and spiritual harmony.

Apart from Catholic religious practices, most villagers believe in and perform Mayan ceremonies and rituals. Despite the fact that Spanish domination has spelled the end of most of the traditional Mayan ceremonies and divinatory rituals, peculiar elements of the pre-Colombian religion have survived. Although some syncretism may be found between Catholic and Mayan traditions¹⁹, the transmission of elements has been strictly unilateral: the Maya ritual has absorbed certain Catholic elements, not the other way around²⁰.

Along with Catholic Saints, Xocenenses acknowledge a pantheon of pre-Hispanic gods and supernatural entities. These creatures include the Rain Gods (*Cháako'ob*), the Guardians of *Milpa* (*Sepo Kajo'ob*), Water (*Ko'olebil Kana Yabei Noj Sayab*) and Animals (*Metan Lu'um*), as well as the Lord of Bees (*Yuum Kab*) and Forest (*Yuum K'aax*). Protagonists of both oral and written popular accounts are the *Aluxes*, mischievous fairies who protect the *milpa* and materialise in form of stones or mud, and the popular *Xtabay*, a female demon who lives in *Ceibas*, the sacred tree of Maya cosmology, and has the power to metamorphose in a beautiful woman to seduce and

¹⁹ As an example of this syncretism, when the *h'men* (the traditional medicine-men) or the *rezadores* (the preachers) chant in Maya, they invoke both Catholic saints and Mayan Gods.

²⁰ As a result of Franciscan conversion from the 16th century, Mayan rituals and ceremonies were translated into Catholic doxa. Propitiatory festivals were explained through the Catholic language of "promises" (*promesas*) to the saints and started to follow the official church calendar (Dapuez 2013: 7).

kill drunken men. Alongside the malevolent *Xtabay*, a number of supernatural entities are also associated with evil. Apart from Satan, known as *Kizin*, among the most fearsome demons there are the *Wayes*, wizards who metamorphose in animals (see Terán and Rasmussen 2005: 159-173).

Robert Redfield (1934) has suggested that Mayan rituals have survived until the present time because of the contribution they make to the economic life of Mayan peasants. Mayan religious ceremonies and traditions, indeed, respond to the needs of a specific eco-system and are concerned almost exclusively with activities relating to land and crops. The rain ceremony, known as *Cha'Cháac*, and the harvest thanksgiving ritual, called *U Hanly Kool*, are still performed by villagers respectively in May and September. Besides these rituals, the big devotion of Xocenenses is reflected in dozens of public and private religious ceremonies and events that take place throughout the year in the village, confirming the reputation of Xocén as a *pueblo sagrado* (holy village).

1.4.10 The theatre



Figure 6: Open-air theatre of Xocén

On the southern outskirts of Xocén, in an abandoned school lot, there is a large open-air theatre managed by a theatre group called *Laboratorio de Teatro Campesino e Indígena* (Farmerwork and Indigenous Theatre Laboratory). María Alicia Martínez Medrano, director of the group, founded this theatre in August 1989. Here, every afternoon from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m., five indigenous teachers deliver free theatre classes and teach the *Jarana*, the traditional Yucatecan folk dance, to some thirty children and youths aged between 5 and 25. Seven young people from Xocén assist them and are paid a weekly salary for the job they perform. Apart from in Xocén, theatre classes are also delivered in seven other Mayan communities of the Eastern Yucatán and the Western Quintana Roo. These are Tekom, Ticuch, Nohsuytún, Yalchén, San Silverio, Dzitnup and Xuilub. In total, almost three hundred children participate in the theatre. The teachers come from the states of Yucatán, Tabasco and Sinaloa; since 1989, they have been living in Xocén, the headquarter of the Yucatecan *Laboratorio*, travelling every day to the other communities to deliver the classes.

Over the years, the *Laboratorio de Teatro Campesino e Indígena* has staged several plays before rural and urban audiences, mostly constituted by villagers, national and international theatre practitioners, local politicians and officials, as well as foreign tourists. During my fieldwork, every Tuesday and Thursday from April to September, the *Laboratorio* presented the plays *Usted es mi gallo, compadre*, written by Martínez Medrano, and *Guillermo y el Nahual*, by Mexican playwright Emilio Carballido.



Figure 7: *Usted es mi gallo, compadre*.

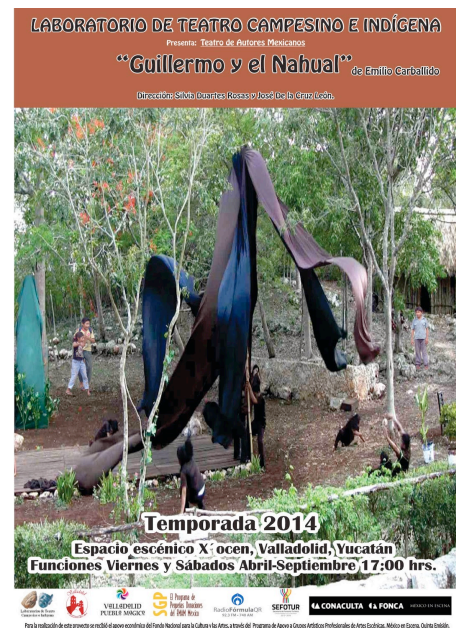


Figure 8: *Guillermo y el Nahuat*

From January to March, the *Laboratorio* staged *Momentos Sagrados Mayas*, (Sacred Maya Moments) a seventy-minute play including 280 participants of all ages, dressed in traditional Mayan clothes, performing the dances, ceremonies, and rituals of the Mayan tradition. While *Usted es mi gallo, compadre* and *Guillermo y el Nahuatl* addressed a local audience and were offered free of charge, *Momentos Sagrados Mayas* primarily targeted tourists coming to Valladolid from the resorts of the *Riviera Maya*. Visitors were charged 150 pesos (6.5 pounds) to attend the event, while locals entered for free.

**Si visita Yucatán no se pierda el espectáculo más cautivador...
If you visit Yucatán don't miss the most charming show...**

-LABORATORIO DE TEATRO CAMPESINO E INDÍGENA-
PRESENTA:



*"Teatro para quienes aman la naturaleza,
arte y cultura de pueblos del mundo"*

**"MOMENTOS
SAGRADOS MAYAS"**
de María Alicia Martínez Medrano

Domingos, Duración: 80 min (consulte fechas).
Espacio escénico X'oc'en, Valladolid, Yucatán
Informes y reservaciones: teatroesp@prodigy.net.mx
Tel: (999) 924.44.65

Ubicación de X'oc'en:
Oriente del Estado de Yucatán
a 12 kilómetros de Valladolid,
carretera Valladolid - Carrillo Puerto.

Horario:
Verano 17:00
Invierno 16:00



X'oc'en













Figure 9: *Momentos Sagrados Mayas*.

In the same way in which Xocén is not an ordinary village, the *Laboratorio* is not an ordinary theatre. Originated in the Mexican state of Tabasco in 1983, the *Laboratorio de Teatro Campesino e Indígena* is a network of social theatres spread across several states of the country. The director is a non-indigenous playwright born in the Mexican state of Sonora, who has been working since the 1970s with indigenous peasants in the poorest and most isolated Mexican communities. With more than forty years of continuous and dedicated work, the group has participated in the so-called “Maya Renaissance” (Laughlin 1994), a general movement of revival of indigenous cultural activities centred on the idea of “recapturing” ethnic identity (see Frishmann 1991, 1994, 2001, 2007 and Underiner 2004).

From its very beginnings, the *Laboratorio* has functioned as a site for both training and performance. Students follow a three-year program consisting of more than twenty courses of study, including acting, voice, diction, memorisation, text analysis, playwriting, dance, pantomime, stage makeup, production, music, theatre history, and the study of indigenous Mexican cultures. Training its students in the Stanislavski’s system, Meyerhold’s biomechanics and Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, in the first four years of its existence, the *Laboratorio* graduated 2,227 students. Since then that number has grown to more than 19,000 nationwide across five generations of alumni,

some of whom have gone on to lead other *Laboratorios* in urban and rural settings throughout Mexico.

From the outset, the *Laboratorio* has used the art of theatre to pursue educational goals: in many cases, before learning to read, interpret and stage a play, the indigenous students of the *Laboratorio* have learned Spanish, the language spoken by the Mexican elite and the essential vehicle for economic integration into national society, and received a basic education, despite the difficulty of accessing school, especially in the case of women.

The group avoids didactic works on social issues. Instead, it has staged the works of authors such as Shakespeare, García Lorca, and Aristophanes, in addition to works from Mexican playwrights like Elena Garro, Emilio Carballido, and Sergio Magaña. More recently, it has staged pieces they have developed themselves based on indigenous traditions, like *Momentos Sagrados Mayas*. Valorising a mix of European and indigenous traditions, Martínez Medrano, her assistant Delia Rendón and the teachers of the *Laboratorio* have developed a peculiar form of “transcultural theatre”, where European texts are adapted to local histories. This is the case with *Romeo and Juliet*, where the setting was transferred from 17th century Verona to the Yucatán henequen plantations of the early 20th century.

The work of the *Laboratorio* has not escaped the attention of international theatre practitioners like Joseph Papp, producer of the New York based Latino Festival in the 1980s, and Eugenio Barba, prominent theatre director and founder of the Odin theatre in Denmark. While the group has been whole-heartedly praised by the international audience, in Mexico its reputation has been controversial. The “interculturality” of its work is perhaps the reason for much of the controversy that has surrounded its history. In the 1980s, when the group’s staging of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and García Lorca’s *Blood weddings* have appeared on stages as far away as New York and Madrid, Martínez Medrano was accused by other Mexican theatre directors, journalists and political authorities of “transculturalising” her rural performers, bringing them away from their “true” work, which would be tilling the fields. As Tamara Underiner (2004) has noted in her interesting book on contemporary Mayan theatre, although directed against cultural imperialism, this criticism masks a prevalent desire among many non-indigenous Mexicans to preserve an image of the indigenous peoples as rooted in the rural past rather than to see them as fully participating members of a geopolitical present.

The staging of *Momentos Sagrados Mayas* has levied different, but equally spirited critiques. Sponsored by the Yucatán State Department of Tourism and put on stage since 2003 every year, the performance is presented in the official promotional publication of the Mexican Tourism Board as an “inside glimpse into the authentic lives of Mayan people” and advertised in its playbill as “theatre for those who love the nature, art and culture of peoples of the world” (see figure 9). Despite the focus on the tourist experience, for Martínez Medrano *Momentos Sagrados Mayas* is an attempt to increase the cultural visibility of contemporary Mayans and re-value local cultures against the threats of neoliberal homogenisation. Again, while tourists who have attended the show have received the performance enthusiastically, some practitioners of the Yucatán grassroots theatre (*teatro comunitario*) have accused Martínez Medrano of aestheticising, essentialising and folklorising Mayan identity and culture for tourist consumption. This is not the place to discuss the ideological underpinnings of this dispute; however, it is easy to trace it back to the age-old question of heritage commodification within the context of cultural tourism. Although these criticisms may be valid in many different settings (and in fact they underlie my analysis of Mayan embroidery production for the tourist trade), for this one event the tourist context provided a significant site for the revitalisation of local culture and tradition, as well as new occasions for self-expression among the communities.

Between 2010 and 2014 I attended the show 25 times and repeatedly interviewed its participants and their families. As far as I could ascertain, *Momentos Sagrados Mayas* has proved to be beneficial on multiple fronts for the communities involved in the event. On a financial level, *Momentos Sagrados Mayas* has made a significant contribution to the local economy. Firstly, all actors on stage receive a compensation: while adults are paid a salary, children, who legally cannot work and consequently be paid, are given a shopping bag packed with food for the same value of adults’ salary. A “gratification”, Delia Rendón told me, meant to encourage the children to attend the theatre classes offered by the *Laboratorio*’s teachers in the seven communities that participate in the event.

Secondly, with the earnings deriving from 14 years of continuous staging of *Momentos Sagrados Mayas*, the *Laboratorio* has not only financed its educational work but also allocated part of the revenues to community growth. In Xocén, for example, the group has contributed to the paving of the roads, the construction of the library, and refurbishment of the Catholic Church and the Santísima Cruz Tun Chapel. For the

staging of *Momentos Sagrados Mayas*, the *Laboratorio* commissioned local embroiderers to manufacture the stage costumes, in particular the *hipiles*. As I broadly explain in Chapter 5, albeit beautiful, the *hipil* is expensive. Among the youngest generation, the more “modern”, “urban” and cheaper Western style attires are supplanting it. Following the compliments received from tourists after the show, many young girls have begun to wear the *hipil*, not just in the village but also in the cities, where this attire is often avoided by young Mayan women for being a marker of a widely discriminated ethnic identity.

Last but not least, the event represents for its participants an important occasion for self-expression, psychological development, and personal growth. All the actors I interviewed said that presenting their cultural traditions in front of foreigners boosted their self-esteem and cultural pride. It is worth stressing here that in the evolution of the Yucatecan Maya culture, structural racism and oppression have been determining factors. In a social context where a Mayan surname is perceived by many as a fault-seal to be removed at the civil registry, the lack of self-esteem, so widespread among Mayan youths, is not a personal block but the by-product of structural violence. Consequently, the acquisition of self-esteem and cultural pride is an extremely important achievement for Mayan youths and a central goal of the *Laboratorio*'s work.

Despite its well-rounded action of support for community economic growth and cultural preservation, the feelings of Xocenenses towards the theatre are conflicting. While the teachers of the *Laboratorio* are perfectly integrated into the community and highly respected; while children love to go to theatre to learn the *Jarana*, socialise and have fun with their coetaneous; while youngsters affirm gaining self-esteem and cultural pride when they “hit” the stage, the theatrical work is considered by many an “unseemly” activity, especially for young unmarried women. Some parents are reluctant to allow their daughters to participate in theatre activities, as this takes them away from their domestic duties and exposes them to the “dangers” of a “promiscuous” environment, indiscriminately frequented by women and men. Thus, although the theatre provides an important space for socialisation, self-expression and education, gender ideologies circumscribe its potential, preventing full participation within the community.

PART IV – Access to field

1.5 Establishing a network in Xocén: positionality of the researcher and research methods

My first trip to Yucatán occurred between October 2010 and April 2011 when, as a member of the Italian Ethnological Mission in Mexico directed by Professor Alessandro Lupo at Sapienza, University of Rome, I landed in Mérida with a vague idea of researching Mayan theatre. Still uncertain about the direction to take, at the *Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán* in Mérida, Professors Gabriela Vargas-Cetina and Miguel Güémez Pineda, director of the *Centro de Investigaciones Regionales Dr. Hideyo Noguchi*, recommended moving to Valladolid and visiting Xocén. Here, a well-known theatre group was putting on stage a play based on traditional Mayan ceremonies that I was warmly recommended to see. The play in question was *Momentos Sagrados Mayas* and the group was the *Laboratorio de Teatro Campesino e Indígena*. I did not know, at the time, that the *Laboratorio* would have become the subject of my MA thesis, as well as my main gatekeeper in Xocén during my successive research trip. From my earlier days in Yucatán to my second fieldwork, María Alicia Martínez Medrano, Delia Rendón, the teachers and the actors of the *Laboratorio* all helped me build my network in the village and introduced me to its social and cultural life. Many of the actors, and latterly their families, became central research participants.

Having analysed *Momentos Sagrados Mayas* in the context of the educational work carried out by *Laboratorio* in Mayan communities and ascertained the benefits that this “performance for tourists” is bringing to its indigenous participants, I became increasingly interested in the wider impact of tourism on indigenous lives and identities. With a scholarship provided by the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I went back to Xocén between October 2013 and December 2014 as a Goldsmiths PhD student. This time I focused on the issue of women’s work in embroidery production for the tourist trade and on men’s labour migration to the *Riviera Maya*, as in my earlier fieldwork these themes emerged as key agents of cultural, social and economic change.

As soon as I arrived in Yucatán, since there were no rentable houses in Xocén, I established residence in Valladolid. Here, I took the opportunity to enrol in a nine-month course of Yucatec Maya, taught by *maestro* Norberto May and held three times per week at the *Casa de la Cultura*. Thanks to these classes, I acquired a basic knowledge of the Yucatec Maya. However, my language skills remained too limited to allow me to collect data in Maya. Even though my clumsy attempts to speak in Maya

were always appreciated by my interlocutors, Spanish was the language that I chose to use to gather the ethnographic material. I am aware that different kinds of data might have emerged if I had been able to carry out my fieldwork in Maya. However, I believe that this limitation did not hinder the scope of my research. Given that the majority of Xocenenses are bilingual, Spanish was an entirely sufficient vehicle of communication and interaction with people. When this was not the case (for example with elders and some adult women), I could always rely on the mediation and translation of some family members. Besides, the fact that Spanish is not my mother language created a more neutral and relaxed terrain of interaction²¹.

From Valladolid, I travelled daily to Xocén by collective taxi. The taxi station, located near the city's central square in *calle 40*, was itself an important site for data collection. Collective taxis carry up to four people and only depart when this number is reached. During the waiting time, which typically spanned from 10 to 50 minutes, I would engage in conversation with Xocenenses who were waiting like me. Most of the time, a quick chat ended up with an invitation to visit their homes.

In the village, as I said, I already had some friends and acquaintances connected to the theatre. Three expanded families, in particular, became important practical and emotional benchmarks during my whole fieldwork: they fed me, advised me, assisted me with my work, and nursed me when I was sick. However, as Xocén is small and my presence noticeable, my social network expanded quickly. Villagers – mostly children and adolescents – frequently approached me in the streets just out of curiosity,

²¹ On this matter, it is worth opening a parenthesis. The majority of monolinguals in Xocén can roughly understand Spanish, even though they cannot speak it. People that did not go to school and that learned Spanish by themselves, mostly interacting with non-indigenous people in a work environment, do not speak it correctly. As a result, they are often teased when they interact with the non-indigenous population in Valladolid or in other cities. Youths who learned Spanish at school and are therefore completely bilingual, in spite of their language command often develop speech disorders, such as stuttering, when talking in Spanish to non-Mayan people. These dynamics have contributed to the stereotypical construction of the Mayas as shy, unassertive, and unconfident people. However, I believe that in a context where Maya identity is perceived as a “negative identity” (Bartolomé 1992: 315), the lack of self-esteem, as a by-product of “structural violence” (Farmer 2004), cannot be reduced to shyness or to a personal emotional block. Rather, this is a social, culturally interpreted fact, consequence of the uncomfortable relationship between the subject and the social order. And stuttering, which is the most visible and widespread symptom of this discomfort, is not just a disease that affects the physical body, but is a form of “embodiment of inequality” (Fassin 2000), an embodied metaphor of social inequality. Given that many Mayans do not feel confident in communicating in Spanish with native speakers for the reasons underlined above, the fact that the Spanish was not my mother tongue worked in my favour, eventually balancing out my limited command of the Maya language.

sometimes attracted by my filming equipment, in particular by the tripod of my camera, sometimes pushed by the desire to practice their limited English. Few words exchanged in the street, a genuine smile or a witty joke were sufficient to break the ice and get dragged into new houses. Similarly, the plays put on stage by the *Laboratorio* in the open-air theatre every Tuesday and Thursday, and the Sunday's staging of *Momentos Sagrados Maya*, were standing dates for socialising with locals and also for chatting with tourists.

My gender facilitated the entrance into Mayan women's lives, which marked my initiation in the ritual of learning female chores. This allowed me to become more deeply involved in the everyday life of the village and, concomitantly, to practice the language skills that I was acquiring at the *Casa de la Cultura*. This was also my introduction to a culture in which female activity revolves around the domestic domain. In women's houses, I practiced the art of making and baking *tortillas*, preparing *tamales*, embroidering handkerchiefs and weaving hammocks. Playing with children took a significant part of my time (and my energies), but was always fun and fulfilling.

Watching *telenovelas* was an unavoidable ritual that spelled out the pace of my afternoons in Xocén. In spite of my initial lack of interest in this activity, following the intricate plots of Mexican soap operas and paying attention to people's comments and reactions proved to be a worthwhile experience, which eventually enriched my cultural understanding, especially regarding local conceptions of love, friendship and family. Towards the end of my fieldwork, Televisa, the Mexican world's biggest Spanish-language broadcaster, was programming a *telenovela* called "*Muchacha italiana viene a casarse*", "Italian girl comes to get married". The story is that of an orphaned Italian woman who moves to Mexico and accepts a marriage proposal from her late father's deceptive, but rich friend. Being Italian myself, I became the target of jokes in the village. "If you came here to learn about Mayan culture" – a friend said – "the best way is by marrying a Mayan boy". One day, at a baptism party, I was approached by an 18-year-old boy and invited to dance. In Xocén, this is how a boy expresses his interest in a girl. Given the difference in age, I light-heartedly accepted his invitation. When the music stopped, amid the sniggers of the onlookers, the mother of the boy drew near to me and murmured into my ear: "You said that London has terrible weather and that rents are expensive. Marry my boy and come to live with me. Xocén is sunny, and you would live in my house rent-free. I promise you, I will be a lovely mother-in-law!"

Yucatecans are well known for their charming sense of humour; Xocenenses are no exceptions, and I had to adapt fast to survive their jokes.

While watching *telenovelas*, women usually sew; as a result, I also started to sew. Revealing that my grandmother was a seamstress and that, nonetheless, I was incapable of sewing, led some of my friends to take my apprenticeship very seriously. Every day, I had to progress a bit with the work I was assigned. When I finally managed to finish my first cross-stitched kerchief, my teacher enthusiastically commented: “Well done Claudia, your grandma would be proud of you”.

Offering and accepting food is a sign of friendship and respect in Mayan culture. I ate everything that I was offered: bean soups, *tamales*, *chachacua*, *chokolomo*, *cochinita pibil*, *relleno negro* and *chicharrón*, always accompanied by the ever-present Coca-Cola: “*lo traditional de aquí*”, as Xocenenses say without perceiving any contradiction. As in my own culture, in Xocén, sharing food has the power to cement relationships. Despite the lack of resources, even in the poorest household I was offered the best food available, which most of the time included meat. As a long-time vegetarian, this was probably the hardest challenge of my fieldwork. In a spirit of reciprocity, however, I often took the initiative to cook vegetarian pasta for my friends, a “luxury” food they had often heard about from relatives working in the Italian restaurants of Playa del Carmen and that they were very curious to taste.

Although I spent most of my time with women and kids, my relationship with the men who live in the village and with those who commute between Xocén and the *Riviera* was always cordial and respectful. In particular, the taxi drivers who carried me every day from Valladolid to Xocén were invaluable sources of information. Not only were they happy to share their working experiences in the *Riviera Maya* but, as my research progressed and new themes emerged, they also helped me identify “interviewable” people and introduced me to them.

Over 14 months of fieldwork, I conducted interviews and informal conversations, gathered economic data as well as gossip, popular narratives and oral tradition, researched archives, solicited personal narratives and engaged in participant observation. I immersed myself in the everyday life of the village, participating in private events such as baptisms, marriages and 15-year-old parties²², and public events

²² The tradition of the *quinceañera* is one of the most important in Mexican culture. When a girl turns 15 a big celebration is held to mark her passage to womanhood, thanking God for his blessings, and introducing a young woman to the community.

such as rituals, religious and political celebrations. Visual methodologies were central to my ethnographic practice. Film-making, in particular, was fundamental for getting access to the community, building rapport, collecting data and “paying back” the research participants. In many cases, it was precisely through my “video-making services” that I established myself as a trustable individual in the community, both in private and public contexts (see Chapter 2).

Participants whose narratives form the backbone of this thesis can be roughly divided into two groups: men migrants who work in the tourist cities of Quintana Roo and travel back to the village at the weekend, and the members of the two embroidery cooperatives that I discuss in this thesis. While the greatest part of my research took place in Xocén, I also conducted participant observation and interviews with tourists at the *Zací* Craft Centre in Valladolid, where Xocén’s embroiderers sell their crafts in a small indoor shop. Officials and journalists in Valladolid were also interviewed.

As I said, the majority of my interviews were conducted in Spanish; however, in the case of only Maya speakers, I relied on bilingual family members for immediate translation. In a second stage, the interviews were transcribed and, when necessary, translated into Spanish by my precious assistant Victor, an 18 years old young high school student whose sensibility, perspicacity and maturity do not match his chronological age. The importance of Victor in my work went beyond his role as transcriber and translator. On more than one occasion, he offered his point of view as an insider on issues emerging through the interviews. His acute comments allowed room for alternative interpretations, enriching my cultural understanding and highlighting important strands for the research.

I have conducted a total of 63 in-depth, open-ended interviews and visited around 40 households in Xocén. All the interviews were recorded and most of them filmed with the permission of the interviewees. Albeit often considered an intrusive method of research, video recording, within a wider participatory visual practice, has proven to be an invaluable tool for data collection and analysis. As I further discuss in Chapter 2, the camera worked as a “can-opener” (Collier and Collier 1986), helping to establish rapport with research participants, and revealed what Calas and Mead (1953) referred to as the “intangibles” of social life. Such “intangibles” may be better represented through the observation of facial expressions, body gestures, nuanced glances, tones of voice, pauses in speech, silences, and innuendos that usually escape the written ethnography.

Being a prominent mechanism for learning in Maya culture (Gaskins 2000, 2006), observation was often more important than explicit language use as an ethnographic method. In the case of men migrants, observation was impossible due to them being “on the move” between Xocén and the *Riviera*. Consequently, I had to rely on verbal narratives in order to learn about migration patterns and labour in the *Riviera*. On the other hand, in the case of women embroiderers, prolonged observation and sensorial immersion proved to be the best methods for gathering information and acquiring cultural knowledge. As I anticipated above in relation to the *gesto de bordar* and as I will further discuss in Chapter 5, the embodied dimension of the embroiderers’ practice cannot be linguistically conveyed, understood, or translated. This peculiar corporeal quality of embroidery automatically calls not for just a theoretical, but for a practical phenomenological stance. Performing embroidery in first person through apprenticeship helped me a great deal in understanding at least the alphabet of the complex bodily grammar that Mayan embroiderers speak wordlessly.

Since the practice of fieldwork requires observation to be participant, the “act” of observing does not take place “through the keyholes”, but is always performed out into the open. In such a visible, relational setting, the process of data collection often becomes bilateral. In my case, villagers observed me and interviewed me just as much as I observed and interviewed them. My country, Italy, and the country where I live, England, were regular topics of conversation. “Do you have corn, *cenotes*, and hurricanes in Italy? How is the weather there? Do Italians eat *tortillas*? What jobs do they do? What do they plant in their fields?” And on a more personal level: “Don’t you miss your family? How could your fiancé allow you to leave him for such a long time?” As an engaged but still unmarried woman in her early 30s, I was regularly asked why I did not get married yet and did not have children despite being in a long-term relationship. Answering these questions, I safely related to my personal experiences, but I also tried to position myself within a wider cultural and socio-economic context, discussing differences and similarities between my culture and the Mayan culture. In these exchanges, I always found curious and sympathetic interlocutors. Allowing – or sometimes explicitly asking – people to “interview” me indirectly revealed their cultural values and priorities. Often, apparently silly questions indicated important strands for the research.

Pictures and videos were essential allies in satisfying people’s curiosity. Sometimes it was difficult to explain how far Italy, or England, were from Xocén, as

the majority of women had never left the village, except for occasional trips to Valladolid. Some of them believed that Sicily, my hometown, was somewhere in northern Mexico, at the border with the United States. The Vatican, however, served as a reference point that, every time I mentioned it, set people in a positive mood. When my partner came to visit me from London, he brought a photo book of Rome on my request. Along with a folding world map, I carried this book in my bag for most of my fieldwork to show people where my country was and what the Vatican looked like.

My smartphone's photo gallery was packed with pictures of my family, my partner, my house, the Sicilian countryside with its citrus groves, the Mediterranean Sea and the volcano Etna, the baroque churches, as well as the streets, the parks and the skyscrapers of London. Some friends compared my hometown in Sicily to Xocén and London to Cancún, expressing sympathy towards the "emotional struggles of a country girl who lives in a big city". In the field, oftentimes and in a variety of situations, the roles of the anthropologist and the informants were abruptly and ironically reversed.

Whereas initiating a conversation with women and creating a bond was most of the time an easy and enjoyable enterprise, with adult and elder men it was not equally straightforward. However, as time went on, I discovered more commonalities with them than what I had initially thought. At the end of the day, what my friends said was true: I was a country girl. Having grown up in rural Sicily in the 1980s, raised by a grandfather who was a builder and a grandmother who was a seamstress, I could certainly relate to the reality of people whose life I was trying to understand. My familiarity with plants and crop vegetables was itself a cultural "bridge" with men peasants. My colourful descriptions of Sicilian trees and plants enthused people to such a level that I had to request my parents to take pictures of all the trees and vegetables grown in their garden to show to my friends in Xocén. When I left the village to go back to London, I was given some seeds of my favourite plants, flowers and fruits that are grown in Mayan backyards and *milpas*. They are now planted in my parents' garden in Sicily. Also, I was asked to bring back for them, when I would return to Mexico, the seeds of the Sicilian cherry tomatoes and the blood oranges. I still have to fulfil my promise, as unfortunately I have not had the chance to go back to Yucatán so far.

During my stay in Mexico I did not miss the opportunity to travel far and wide around the Yucatán peninsula. Besides the *Riviera Maya*, that most men in Xocén know, I visited the archaeological sites of Chichén Itzá, Cobá, Ek Balam, Mayapán and Uxmal, wandered around the streets of the colonial cities of Mérida, Izamal and

Campeche, swam in the lake Bacalar, enjoyed the sunset in the fishing villages of the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, and bird watched in the Wildlife Refuges of Celestún and Rio Lagartos. These wonderful places are close to Xocén and yet unknown by most of the villagers. Sharing with them my travel accounts, duly illustrated by pictures and videos, helped in the difficult task of “giving back”, at least emotionally, to those who shared their time, their food, their intimate thoughts, their desires and fears with a stranger, who nonetheless was treated like family.

A last consideration must be made before closing this Introduction. I am aware that throughout the thesis, the voices of men are overshadowed by the experiences of women. My work raises sensitive gender issues, such as the position of women within patriarchal structures and the expansion of domestic violence in Mayan households. My focus on women's experiences might lead to over-simplistic assumptions about gender relations. Certainly, it is not my intention to depict men as perpetrators and women as victims, as the reality is much more nuanced. Mayan men, as women, have been hard hit by restructuring; traditional notions of masculinity are being slowly – and painfully – reformulated, and the expansion of alcoholism, which is the primary trigger of domestic abuse, is a clear sign of men's difficulty to cope with the challenges of structural adjustments, economic pressures, and the new modes of labour brought by modernity. These issues deserve attention and urge anthropological inquiry, but they are beyond the scope of this work and, on a different but equally important level, are hindered by the biological limitation of me being a woman researcher. Men remain behind the scenes of my work, of course, because they are absent as migrant workers. Yet – I want to reiterate – also because my own gender worked to limit and circumscribe my operational field. Just as I can safely affirm that, in a culture in which gender identities and roles are not set in stone but are certainly not fluid, a man researcher could not have entered the world of Mayan women, I have to accept that, as a woman, I would not have been able to gain access to Mayan men's universe. Perhaps an enthusiastic male anthropologist will engage in the task of giving voice to the intimate thoughts of Mayan men and account for *their* everyday struggles as “liminal”, “shifting” individuals – no longer peasants but not yet workers – in a fast-changing environment and in a culture that, in equal measure, embraces and rejects modernity and globalisation. This might be an important avenue for future research, especially considering the scarcity of anthropological contributions on this matter.

CHAPTER 2

Ethnographic Filmmaking as a Collaborative Performance: a Discussion on Ethics, Methods and Aesthetics

2.1 Film as a “scenario of discovery” and “co-performative witnessing”

The word “Xocén” (to be read as Shokén) comes from the Mayan verb “*xooc*”, which means “to tell”. In Spanish, this is translated as “*contar*”, a verb which bears the double meaning of “counting” and “telling”. Andrés May Dzib, a Xocén resident and author of a book about his village (1999), translates Xocén as “*cuéntame*”, “tell me”, where *xooc* means “to tell” and “*en*” is the termination of the word “*ten*”, meaning “me”. However, he points out that Xocenenses pronounce the word as “Xo’cén” rather than “Xocén”, which would shift the tense from the imperative “tell me” to the past perfect “I was told” (see Terán Contreras and Rasmussen 2005: 37).

Some Yucatecan intellectuals have suggested more literary translations for the name of the village. For Pánfilo Novelo Martín, distinguished politician and linguist, Xocén may be translated as “*Soy alguien, tómate en cuenta, no me olvides*”, “I am somebody, take me into account, do not forget me”. This interpretation inspired the *Laboratorio de Teatro Campesino e Indígena*, which was introduced to the village precisely by Novelo, to create a homonymous theatre play about Xocén and its traditions. However, for the anthropologists Silvia Terán Contreras and Christian Rasmussen, who have conducted extensive fieldwork in the community, the literary translation proposed by Novelo is inadequate for it suggests the image of a submissive *pueblo*, an image that would collide with the pugnacity of Xocenenses (2005: 110). The eminent Mayan poet Feliciano Sánchez Chan, on his turn, told me that “Xocén” might be translated as “*cuenta con migo*”, “count on me”.

Albeit fascinating, these hypotheses do not echo the versions the pragmatic Xocenenses offer. The story that I was told in the village is narrated at the beginning of the film by *don* Vicente Noh Ku, a Xocén resident and close friend: “At the time of the Conquest, a Spanish soldier entered a Mayan house, where a man, cowered in a corner,

was counting the lice on the head of his wife. Unable to speak Maya, the soldier addressed the peasant in Spanish, asking the name of the village he had accidentally stumbled upon. Assuming that the soldier wanted to know what the man was doing, the peasant replied in Maya: 'I'm counting the lice on the head of my wife'. 'Xocén' was the only word that the soldier could pick out and assumed that this was the name of the village". While the translations proposed by Novelo and Sánchez Chan draw attention to "internal" features of Mayan culture, such as the value of cultural memory and solidarity, *don Vicente's* reading points to a different scenario: the colonial encounter, with its corollary of misunderstanding and, subsequently, oppression.

Cuéntame, the film that accompanies this dissertation, embraces this hermeneutical spectrum in its totality. From its very title, it acknowledges the multiplicity of possible versions, interpretations and perspectives, revealing the constructedness, partiality, and provisionality of anthropological knowledge, as well as its ambivalence and ambiguities. Historically, anthropology has been part of the colonial encounter depicted by *don Vicente*. The discipline emerged precisely from the colonial expansion of Europe, providing the colonial power with "scientific" tools for knowing the colonised Other to better dominate him. Colonialism shaped the relationships between anthropologists and the people they studied, and structured the conceptual and methodological framework of the discipline. As Lewis (1973: 584) has argued, the very role of the "objective observer" and the resultant professional exploitation of subject matter can be interpreted as an academic manifestation of colonialism. Although anthropology has long reformulated its identity in terms of an anti-colonial discipline and self-critically confronted with the ethical issues intrinsic to the profession, the power imbalances that mark the ethnographic postcolonial encounter continuously slam in the face of anthropologists the "original sin" of their discipline.

While acknowledging the ambiguities of the anthropological venture, *Cuéntame* wants to celebrate its "transparencies". These rest, I believe, in the inherently performative nature of fieldwork and in its resultant potential for mutuality. Ethnography, as folklorist Henry Glassie has written, is "interaction and collaboration" (1982: 14). It is how we learn about another culture by "being There", in deep engagement with people about whom we are learning. This intense interaction is achieved through a methodology of both observing and participating which goes under the label of participant observation. As participant observers, we partake in the cultural experience at the same time as we are observing it. More profoundly, we are co-

performers in an “intimate involvement and engagement of ‘co-activity’ or ‘co-performance’ with historically situated, named, ‘unique individuals’” (Johnson 2013: 9).

Combining questions of anthropological knowledge with humanist ethics, *Cuéntame* wants to foreground the relational character of ethnography, working as a trope for the “co-performativity” of fieldwork. The “acts” of fieldworking and filmmaking, indeed, are social practices of participation and performance. They not only produce works, but actually do work in the communities involved. During fieldwork, lives change, friendships are built, and networks of discussion and analysis emerge. In the time I spent in the community, “*cuéntame*” was the word that Xocenenses and myself have repeated the most to each other to mutually solicit narratives and activate this network. “Tell me” was the exhortation that initiated or cemented a relationship, opening up two cultural universes for reciprocal understanding. *Cuéntame*, therefore, pays a literal homage to Xocén but also to the fieldwork practice, understood as a “scenario of discovery” (Taylor 2003: 53-78) and “co-performative witnessing” (Conquergood 2002: 149).

Of course, the performative “acts” of fieldworking and filmmaking are entangled in questions of power and knowledge. The differential power relationships between the researcher coming from the First World and the postcolonial subject urges the transcendence of binary dichotomies of self and other, calling for the adoption of an ethical stance, especially when knowledge is created through visual representations.

Issues of ethics have been widely discussed by ethnographic film practitioners (Ruby 1991; Asch 1992; Minh-ha 1993) and theorists of the documentary form (Nichols 2001; Corner 2005; Ruby 2005; Pryluck 2005;), for it might be said that the question of a methodologically grounded ethnographic film is largely the problem of an ethically centred research. In *Visual Methods in Social Research* Marcus Banks asks:

«What right do we have to film, photograph or videotape those we work with? The question is not novel, nor is it confined solely to visual representations: what right do we have to make – and subsequently publish or disseminate through lectures, dissertations and so forth – *any* representations of others? If the answer to this question is “none” then all social research should cease [...] The question is not so much whether social researchers have the right in the abstract, but how and under

what conditions do they negotiate that right with those who are represented?»
(2001: 129-130).

For its focus on a “bottom-up” approach, collaboration has been proclaimed an ethical solution for the power imbalances of anthropological representation and as a universal panacea for the problems besetting conventional practice (Chambers 1992). In ethnographic filmmaking, a participatory method assumes that researcher and informant are consciously working together to produce visual images and specific types of knowledge through technological procedures and discussions. These discussions should involve explaining to research participants in detail the purposes of the research, the images that it is anticipated will be taken, the process of consent for obtaining and using specific images and the plans for dissemination. In most cases, a participatory approach to film implies relinquishing some authority, making explicit the constructed nature of visual representations, and including authoritative voices of those being represented. However, participatory methods (not just in ethnographic filmmaking) are not free from ambiguities and have been criticised as “soft”, patronising, biased, unreliable and impressionistic (Hammersley 1992; Cornwall and Jewkes 1995; Bruges and Smiths 2009). Participation itself, as stressed by Haywark *et al.* (2014), is a moving target, as it can signify different things to different people in different settings. For some authors, collaborative projects with indigenous subjects represent attempts to overcome the so-called “representational crisis” by pretending that indigenous people have been “given a voice”, whereas in fact they are contracted into “ventriloquist” projects, which are entirely scientist-led, designed and managed (Fine 1992, 1998).

“Shared anthropology”, a method introduced by the filmmaker/anthropologist Jean Rouch²³, is as part of the attempt to “give voice to the voiceless” (Britzman 1989) who, under colonial domination, have been objectified, interpreted and (mis) represented. Self-reflexivity of the filmmaker/anthropologist, effective feedback on the edited materials by the filmed subjects, and their active and creative involvement in the filmmaking process were the essential ingredients of Rouch’s shared anthropology. “This type of participatory research” – Rouch wrote – “as idealistic as it may seem,

²³ Anthropologist and filmmaker Jean Rouch (1917-2004) was a pioneering figure of ethnographic cinema. Over the course of a fifty-year career, the Frenchman completed over one hundred films, both documentary and fiction, exerting an influence far beyond academia. His innovative use of unscripted improvisations had a profound impact on the French New Wave, while his documentary work launched the genre of *Cinema-Vérité*.

appears to me to be the only morally and scientifically feasible anthropological attitude today” (1973: 44).

In the 1970s, anthropologist and filmmaker David MacDougall also wrote about the idea of “participatory cinema”, lately redefined as “*intertextual* cinema”, as one of collaboration and joint authorship between filmmakers and their subjects (1998 [1973]: 138). He initially proposed the idea of “filmmakers putting themselves at the disposal of the subjects and, with them, inventing the film” (1998 [1973]: 136) and reviewed this to suggest the possibility of “multiple authorship” as a way to “address conflicting views of reality in a world in which observers and observed are less clearly separated and in which reciprocal observation and exchange increasingly matter” (1998 [1973]: 138). The ideas of Rouch and MacDougall have been extremely influential in subsequent ethnographic filmmaking practice (Pink 2007) and this influence is also apparent in *Cuéntame*.

The idea of making a collaborative film with the Xocenenses was born with this thesis. Questions of “multiple authorship” and “shared anthropology” were very much at the centre of my thoughts when planning the research. Inspired by Rouch’s “ethnofictional” films, my initial idea was to make an ethnographic documentary based on reflexivity and on improvised cinema and acting, creating it in collaboration with research participants. As my research progressed, however, I realised that, while most people were happy to be represented in a film, they were less interested in taking active part in its creation, as this would have involved a different level of commitment. To make a film, time, training and resources are necessary. While, quite obviously, I could not provide people with time and resources, a training in audio-visual techniques was not seen as desirable by research participants with more urgent needs and any access to computers and recording devices. Also, a training program would have overwhelmed the temporal and academic constraints of my research, a research that is not primarily concerned with applied ethnographic filmmaking but with women’s empowerment in embroidery production. In my work, the film is an (important) means to an end but not the end in itself. Film practice is used as a collaborative research method and as an instrument of discovery and exploration within ethnographic research.

Over the course of my fieldwork, film practice revealed its huge heuristic potential but also its practical and ethical limitations. Indeed, although filmmaking is inherently a collaborative process, collaboration is not always straightforward. An important collaborative element that is missing in the film is participants’ feedback. *Cuéntame* has

been edited in London and not yet screened in Xocén. Since I left the village, I did not have the time, opportunity or resources to return to Yucatán and share my research findings with those who took part in the project. Responses to the work need to be registered, as they will certainly suggest further insights, comprising new forms of encounter, but a feedback on the edited materials is missing for now. Moreover, *Cuéntame* is not a jointly authored film. Although I went some way to democratising the representational process, including the authoritative voices of those being represented, the film was ultimately shaped through my own subjectivity.

Despite these problems, I still consider *Cuéntame* as a collaborative film, being the result of a co-performative ethnographic practice emerging from long-term and intense engagement with people in the community. This engagement produced different visual outputs, of which *Cuéntame* is but one. The performative actions surrounding the production of the film activated a virtuous circle where one film begot other films. These films were technically made by myself but requested by research participants; they bear the print of my aesthetic sensibility but were created according to my friends' desires and priorities. They touch on topics that are not immediately relevant to the issues addressed in this thesis but that my research participants considered important. The films were completed and delivered while I was in the field, allowing a tangible "give back" to the whole community, not only to those who more actively participated in the research. These films were produced as a form of "exchange" between the research participants and myself; these images are not incorporated in *Cuéntame* because they have been "donated" to people in the community and now belong to them.

The production of these films was not directly instrumental to my research but helped to activate a "salutary dialogue" (Ginsburg 2011: 237) with research participants and shape my film practice in terms of an ethnographic research method in itself. As I discuss in the next section, the camera (as device) and the film (both as a creative process and as a tangible product) enabled a regime of reciprocity, producing and reproducing a social circuit that, in some cases, created a "community" and a sense of identity around the event recorded.

2.2 Visual economies and regimes of reciprocity

Despite making frequent use of audiovisual recording devices in their fieldwork and research, anthropologists rarely take into account the materiality of images. The identity

of film as a medium and its phenomenological status are, from the outset, assumed as a given, whereas its material properties are seen as peripheral to content issues. While films and pictures can be regarded as depictive devices, they are also physical and “socially salient” objects (Edwards and Hart 2004: 162). This materiality exists in dialogue with the images themselves and is integral to their meanings and uses. Elizabeth Edwards (2002; 2004; 2005; 2011; 2012; 2014) has engaged extensively with issues concerning the materiality of images. While her observations specifically refer to photographs, they are also relevant to films and videos. Photographs, Edwards explains,

«... are both images and physical objects which exist in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience. They have ‘volume, opacity, tactility and a physical presence in the world’ (Batchen 1997:2) enmeshed with subjective, embodied and sensuous interactions with them» (Edwards 2004: 67).

For Edwards, images have “social agency”: they are not just representations of things, people or events, but also objects that create, produce and reproduce a social circuit. The agency of images is closely related to social biography: “an object cannot be fully understood at any single point in its existence but rather should be understood as belonging in a continuing process of meaning, production, exchange and usage. As such, objects are enmeshed in, and active in social relations, not merely passive entities in these processes” (2004: 68).

The material turn in anthropology has stressed the centrality of social meanings and values in relation to material objects. Gell (1998) has argued that objects are “social actors” that construct and influence the field of social action in ways which would not have occurred if they did not exist in specific formats or if they did not exist at all. In the field of visual anthropology, Banks and Murphy (1977: 14) maintain that there is a common methodology and theoretical framework between material culture and visual recording, both being concerned with material visual phenomena and social action.

Moving beyond representational issues, on her work on the visual economies of the Andean image world, anthropologist Deborah Poole (1997) pointed at the “exchange value” of images, where value is not restricted to image value but it is integrally related to the power of such images accumulated as objects (Poole 1997: 11-12). Images, Poole explains, are performative: they are produced and distributed, circulated and consumed within a given set of social relations. Therefore, it is important to give equal weight to

representational content and to the use value and material forms through which groups of images are exchanged, accumulated and thus given social value.

Materiality mediates other aspects of a visual economy which allows not only to think about ethnographic films as defined by content, but also to understand the social and material mechanism through which they become ethnographic. Acknowledging the physicality of film, allows the performative, phenomenological and experiential qualities of images to be taken into consideration. Drawing on the notion of visual economy, in this section, I discuss how the camera and the video, in their material agency, can work as a “can-opener” (Collier and Collier 1986) for fieldworkers, producing and reproducing a social circuit and, through it, a regime of reciprocity between researcher and research participants.

As I explained in the Introduction, Xocén has a reputation in the whole Yucatán peninsula for being a fierce, traditional and conservative village. Ancient traditions are kept alive and very much protected from the curious, often indiscreet, gaze of outsiders. The prohibition to take pictures in the village, especially in its holy sites, is rather explicit. At the very entrance of the Santísima Cruz Tun Chapel, a billboard admonishes the visitor not to take pictures in the community. In the past, this prohibition proved to be troublesome for various researchers who engaged in participant observation in the community and attempted to document visually its rituals and sacred ceremonies.

Although the magical-religious life of the village was not one of my research topics, my project being centred on the use of visual tools, clarifying my position with the local authorities and formally obtaining the permission for filming in the community was of critical importance. While a transparent discussion with participants about the research’s dissemination plans should be always seen as an ethical priority for the researcher, given some problematic antecedents with other anthropologists, this prescription for me was particularly binding. The process of obtaining the consent for filming, however, was smoother than what I initially expected, as the occasions for filming in the community somehow came in over the transom and quickly multiplied over the course of fieldwork.

Given the potentially intrusive nature of the camera as a recording device, it was critical to proceed cautiously, gradually familiarising people with my presence and then with the camera. For the initial five months of fieldwork, I used the camera exclusively in the theatre for recording the performances of the actors of the *Laboratorio*. I produced videos with the twofold purpose of building a visual archive for the group and

for helping the teachers in identifying and correcting the students' mistakes. One day, while I was filming in the theatre, Teresa, the mother of one of the young actors of the *Laboratorio*, approached me. She invited me to the baptism of her daughter, shyly asking if I would bring my camera and make a video of the event.

For Xocenenses, as for many of us, pictures and videos are "*recuerdos*", memories of the most important moments (and people) of their lives. Pictures elicit feelings of affection and have the symbolic power to connect people to past events and identities. In Xocén, pictures are jealously saved in family photo-albums or, as is the case for deceased family members, hang on the wooden walls of the *palapas*, exposed to humidity and mold but always available for a quick, affectionate glance.

While images have a use value for Xocenenses, they also have an exchange value. Unlike in the past, with the current diffusion of smartphones with integrated cameras, pictures and videos have multiplied in the village, and people's personal visual documentation has grown. However, technological advancements in this field are also a novelty in Mayan villages. Here, to be considered "valuable", pictures and videos still need to be "captured" in a tangible support, capable of guarantying a long-term existence of their *recuerdos*. DVDs, DVD players, and printed pictures can be found everywhere in Xocén, even in the poorest houses. These objects and devices are the custodians of villagers' personal memories.

For important celebrations like marriages and 15-years-old parties, when people traditionally spend large sums of money, a videographer is hired to record the event. However, photo- and video-making services, generally provided by professional photographers in Valladolid, are expensive, and few people can afford them without running into debt. These types of videos have a market price, a price that, more often than not, is prohibitive to Xocenenses. By inviting me to the baptism, Teresa was quite obviously requesting a service similar to what professional photographers in Valladolid provide. After I delivered the video, word spread that I could offer this type of services for free; as a result, a series of similar "invitations" happened in quick succession. After few months, I had made videos of several baptisms and marriages, 15-years-old and graduation parties, school opening and closing ceremonies.

This activity was time-consuming but it proved to be an effective and transparent "research method". It allowed the emergence of interesting data and made "public" my ethnographic performance. The events I was invited to film were important arenas for mutual observation. While I could observe the performance of people from a privileged

position, they could observe my ethnographic/filming performances likewise. Watching the videos I had made with participants, and gathering their comments, was a reflexive practice that allowed me to gain a greater understanding not only of the events recorded, but also of local visual aesthetics and uses of videos. This helped me to integrate my own filmmaking practice into the role I had been assigned.

On some occasions, I have been asked to film religious events. This was the case for the traditional annual festival, the most important public religious event in the community. During the festival, villagers perform rituals and ceremonies to honour the patron saints and secure their protection, as well as the *Cabeza del Cochino*, the “Pig’s Head”, a traditional dance meant to ask for rain and crops. Every year, an *interesado* (see Chapter 1) takes on responsibility for organising the festival and paying for tribute to one of the saints. He purchases drinks, food and fireworks, and hires the bullfighters for the *corrida*, the *Jarana* ensemble, and a DJ for the dances held at night.

That year, *don* Eusebio, the *interesado*, decided to record all the ceremonies of the weeklong *feria* and, by word of mouth (“I was told that you make nice videos...”), identified me as a suitable person for performing this job. Therefore, in the month of July, a couple of weeks before the *feria*, I was invited to *don* Eusebio’s house and commissioned with the production of a video that would portray the sacred ceremonies, the rituals and the dances performed during the festival. As Eusebio explained, the video was meant to keep a record of local traditions, which he, and most of the villagers, felt were “threatened” by modernity.

Once the video was done after one week of intense filming and two weeks of editing, I condensed the footage in a one-hour video and distributed several copies to Eusebio and the other organisers. The video soon started to circulate in the village, passing from hand to hand. People began to recognise me and approach me in the street, asking for a copy of the film and, as an exchange, volunteering for being interviewed, or inviting me to film their lives, in their house or in their *milpas*, as they wanted to be represented in a film “*bonito*” such as the one of the *feria*.

Filming the *feria* in the role of the official videographer allowed me to understand and document this important event from a privileged position. It offered an invaluable opportunity for expanding my social network while also “giving back” to research participants. It was my new identity as a videographer, more than the one of the anthropologist, that facilitated my acceptance in the community, eventually consolidating my reputation as a trustable individual. If as an anthropologist I was

“useless” to the community, as a videographer, I could pragmatically provide a concrete and appreciated service.

As Edwards said, images have “social agency”: in their materiality, they create, produce, and reproduce a social circuit. This circuit was constructed alongside a process of image “repurposing” (Edwards 2012: 226), that is, the material translation of the video from one purpose to another. For me, the video was instrumental to creating a regime of mutuality with research participants and to collect data otherwise difficult to access. For villagers, it served as a record of their disappearing traditions, a “site of memory” (Nora 1984), a tangible trace of their immaterial heritage to leave behind for future generations. If images, as Edwards suggests, cannot be understood outside the social conditions of the material existence of their social function, in this case their function was creating a community, a transgenerational “we” and a sense of identity around the event recorded.

In the next section I go back to *Cuéntame*, discussing film poetics in relation to ethnographic writing.

2.3 Enactivism and hapticity: a phenomenological approach to filmmaking

“There is mounting interest today in visual anthropology, even if no one knows quite what it is. Its very name is an act of faith, like a suit of clothes bought a little too large in the hope that someone will grow into it”. This is how anthropologist and filmmaker David MacDougall (1998: 61) defined the uncertain status of visual anthropology within academia. Since Paul Hockings’ collection *Principles of Visual Anthropology* (1975), which constitutes the first systematic exploration of the range of practices associated with ethnographic filmmaking and visual anthropology, a growing number of books on visual culture and methods have been published. Despite several attempts of formalisation and a burgeoning interest in ethnographic filmmaking and visual methods in the last decade, the definition and boundaries of the field remain blurred.

As a matter of fact, visual anthropology represents an under-recognised area in the discipline of anthropology, occupying a marginal position within academia. The use of film and visual media has remained limited among mainstream anthropologists (Henley 2000), often being neglected or discouraged within anthropology departments. In a famous article entitled *Visual Anthropology in a Discipline of Words*, Margaret Mead wrote:

«... more words have been used, spoken and written, disputing the value of, refusing funds for, and rejecting these projects than ever went into the efforts themselves. Department after department and research project after research project fail to include filming and insist on continuing the hopelessly inadequate note-taking of an earlier age [...] anthropologists not only have failed to support their instrumental potentialities but have continued to use questionnaires to ask mothers how they discipline their babies, words to describe how a pot is made, and a tangle of ratings to describe vocal productions. To add insult to injury, in many cases they have disallowed, hindered, and even sabotaged the efforts of their fellow research workers to use the new methods. I think that we must squarely face the fact that we, as a discipline, have only ourselves to blame for our gross and dreadful negligence. Much of this negligence has resulted in losses that can never be regained (Mead 2003 [1975]: 4-6).

According to Grimshaw (2001: 3), the marginalisation of ethnographic film is a by-product of academic “iconophobia”, explained by Taylor (1996: 67) in terms of a guild defensiveness stemming from the “fear that films will somehow destroy or discredit their anthropological makers and viewers”. As a result, the contribution of film to the development of social theory has been downsized, and film practice even regarded as a hindrance to the academic profession (Hockings 2003).

For Faye Ginsburg (1998), the lack of recognition of the potential of visual media to convey anthropological ideas lies in the fact that images are often interpreted as “transparent” research documents subordinated to writing, which is viewed as the only serious medium of production and transmission of academic knowledge. Despite the extensive use of visual tools in wide areas of academic anthropology ranging from ethnomusicology to anthropology of art, material culture and performance (Banks and Morphy 1997: 6), films and pictures have been employed mainly as recording devices, tools for teaching or to illustrate some points in monographs. As such, they have been relegated to an ancillary position of support to existing anthropological ideas (Ruby 1975; Ginsburg 1998; Asch 1992). While ethnography continues to be interpreted as a logocentric activity (Taylor 1996), the value of film’s epistemologies is diminished. As a result, the “true” anthropologists are considered being those who write, while image-making is declassified to the rank of entertainment for the researcher.

The questions raised by the use of visual media within anthropology are very much linked to the postmodern critique of ethnographic writing (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fisher 1986; Clifford 1988). As Geertz (1988) suggested, anthropology is an interpretative science consisting in the writing of texts, or even a form of documentary art with a strong literary dimension. Although it has long been recognised that any ethnographic text is a “crafted job” (Firth 1989: 48), the “constructedness” of the ethnographic film has been regarded as impressionistic and unreliable, and thus epistemologically inferior to the “craftedness” of written ethnographies (MacDougall 1992: 91).

As MacDougall (1997) has stressed, the problem with visual anthropology is that it poses a serious epistemological challenge to traditional textual-based forms of anthropological inquiry. Images, indeed, are not equivalent of written ethnographies for they offer a “way of seeing and knowing” that is specific to the visual as a mode of expression (Barbash 2001). Despite their limitations in communicating abstractions in the same way as writing, the power of ethnographic films rests in their ability to recreate the “realm of interpersonal relations” (MacDougall 2006: 50) and lived experiences perceptually, a quality that is often unavailable in written texts. MacDougall writes: “The possibility of grasping a complex social event simultaneously through its various dimensions of gesture, facial expression, speech, body movement, and physical surroundings is something that a text can approach only with great difficulty” (*Ididem* 2006: 50).

In recent years, an increasing number of studies have focused on film as a method of exploring the role of emotion in the constitution of culture and of forms of knowledge that draw from the senses (see Taussig 1992; Devereaux and Hillman 1995; Marks 2000; Grimshaw 2001; Barbash 2001; Pink 2006 and 2009; MacDougall 2006; Schneider and Wright 2006, 2010). As MacDougall (1988) and Pink (2009) have stressed, films make possible the representation of the multi-sensory relationships and interactions between knowing bodies, functioning as a source of knowledge that confronts the limits of academic writing not only in rendering sensory experience but also in researching it. Filmed ethnography foregrounds the phenomenological aspects of culture, re-contextualising the role of the body in contemporary anthropology.

In my work, the relationship between writing and filming is shaped by and articulated according not only to different analytical and representational needs but also to ethical issues. As I anticipated in the Introduction, although *Cuéntame* is an integral

part of my research, it cannot be straightforwardly defined as an “audiovisual counterpart” of the written dissertation. The film, indeed, does not tell the stories of the embroiderers who feature in this thesis. As my research progressed, and the relationship of trust with my respondents grew stronger, delicate issues emerged concerning the private lives of the embroiderers, making the need for anonymity and confidentiality particularly pressing. The issues raised by my research participants relate to questions of sexuality, procreation, family, and marital relationships, pointing to the expansion of alcoholism and domestic violence in Mayan households. These questions needed to be singled out and discussed, as they have a profound impact on women’s labour choices and experiences as cooperative members. However, they could not be addressed in a film that would have returned to Xocén and would have been watched by the villagers, with the accompanying risk of serious repercussions for my respondents.

While, in this written thesis, women’s names and personal details are fictionalised in order to enable an open discussion of the above-mentioned issues, the film forcibly keeps the embroiderers out of the visual narrative, exploring instead the physical and social spaces in which women’s lives “happen”. This does not mean, however, that women are not portrayed in the film. If the members of the cooperatives I worked with are absent, the “act of embroidering”, as other cultural gestures, remains audible and visible, and other women, whose stories are not reported in the thesis in their more intimate aspects, are present as workers, mothers, and gesture makers. As a result, the written and visual ethnographies perform two different but complementary tasks: while the written text develops an analytical argument that would have hardly been articulable through images, the film places value on feelings and empirical descriptions, recreating a realm of existence that is inherently embodied and relational and is therefore difficult to convey through written communication. The film is intended as a phenomenological and poetic device that goes beyond the explanations of encyclopaedic or voice-over commentaries to register the relational and corporeal quality of experience. By doing so, it embraces an enactive paradigm.

The notion of “enaction” was first proposed by neuroscientists Francisco Varela, Edward Thomson and Eleanor Rosch (1991) as an alternative to cognitivism to overcome the Cartesian dualism subject/object. Enactivism maintains that cognition arises through a dynamic interaction between an organism and its environment, claiming that it is our capacity to act and interact with the world that selectively creates the environment. These ideas were transferred to the field of ethnographic filmmaking

by Francesco Marano, who spoke about “enactive poetics” (2007: 182-196) to describe those “radically empirical” (Jackson 1996) modes of representation –Rouch’s films being the most striking examples (Stoller 1992) – that move beyond observation and documentation to foreground the interaction between the researcher and the “researched” in the field. Emphasising the communality of subject and object, enactive films are expression of the interaction between knowing bodies and being-in-the-world as a continuum of body-mind and environment.

Merleau-Ponty and his phenomenology of perception (1945) are the philosophical underpinnings of this approach. For the French philosopher, it is precisely through experiential “being-in-the-world” that a specific environment is known and understood. The particular relation between body, vision and movement is central to this understanding. Experience embodied in vision and movement creates the world and the being-in-the-world through the body:

«My movement is not a decision made by the mind [...] It is the natural sequel to, and maturation of, vision. I say of a thing that it is moved; but my body moves itself; my movement is self-moved. It is not ignorance of self, blind to itself; it radiates from a self [...] Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is one of them. It is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or prolongation of itself; they are incrustated in its flesh, they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the very stuff of the body» (1964: 3).

Influenced by Merleau-Ponty and by biological theories of perception, Tim Ingold (2005) put forward the idea of humans as existing in a continuum with the physical world, foregrounding the role of the body as a *trait d’union* between systems of ecological and social relations. The challenge, for Ingold, is to understand the interplay between these two dynamic and continuously unfolding systems. Just as people come to know and understand their environment through lived experience, so it follows, for Ingold, that to understand these experiences the researcher needs to put on the spot her own bodily engagement with the reality observed.

Marrying this cognitive paradigm, *Cuéntame* is expressive of a theoretical angle that acknowledges the film as a performative²⁴ and experimental means of exploring and knowing a social reality. The film is the arena where the ethnographic encounter takes place, the occasion for experiencing and knowing the self and the other. *Cuéntame* is enactive to the extent to which it makes the subject-object relationship the focus of representation, opening up an area of inquiry in the full complexity of the ethnographic encounter. The whole process of filmmaking is understood as a means of conveying the fieldwork experience. As such, it tries to recreate the very atmosphere of fieldwork, the activities the anthropologist performs and the situations she encounters when she is engaged in participant observation. *Cuéntame* is, therefore, a film about research and the assemblage of impressions and conversations that come up in the process of acquiring anthropological knowledge, a knowledge that is always understood as fragmented, provisional and co-performed.

The film is not intended to capture a univocal reality, provide an analysis of an entire society or “teach” facts about Mayan culture; rather, it focuses on particular individuals with their specific lives by offering images of faces and places, and sounds of voices, gestures and habitual behaviours that resist verbal translation and certainly, are not within reach of academic language. Images of gestures and habitual behaviour are able to convey somatic traces and residues of physicality that evades linguistics (Marks 2000: 71). For MacDougall, an advocate of a phenomenological approach to ethnographic filmmaking, the enactive

«...is neither image nor word, but gesture – experience recalled, one might say, in the muscles. We imagine an action through the feel of it – for example, the sense of moving a hand in a familiar motion, such as stirring coffee. One might call this the

²⁴ Drawing on Marks (2000), Russell (1999) and Nichols (1994), I understand “performativity” as an alternative means of transmitting knowledge and evoking experience. In *Experimental Ethnography*, Catherine Russell (1999) employs the terms “performative” and “experimental” with reference to documentary film as frameworks for discussing the politics of representation, criticising concepts of authenticity, and exploring the relationships between experience and interpretation. She considers reflexivity and fictionalisation, which are part of the performative, as decentring strategies to address and unmask issues of sexism, racism, and imperialism inherent to many forms of cultural representation. On a similar vein, Nichols (1994) argues that, deviating from anthropological representations anchored to “realism”, performativity in film places the viewer rather than the “historical world” as the primary referent in cinematic communication. In so doing, it creates an open-ended, polyphonic film in which the audience is free to define the meanings and messages of the film.

kinaesthetic dimension of thought, familiar to ourselves but only observable in others when it is translated into actual physical movement» (MacDougall 1994: 265).

In the attempt to reveal the “kinaesthetic dimension of thought”, the film trusts the body and the senses in the exploration of lived experience, focusing on the articulate, provisional, creative, playful and imaginative expressions of ordinary people caught in the challenge of making a life. In so doing, it engages with the question of the “situatedness” of culture: its insights are relevant to understanding relationships that exist in time and place, rather than in disembodied social contexts. These relationships are evoked in a series of micro-narratives of the quotidian, fragments of social situations whose pace mimics the sensory cognisance of social experience. Insights and questions emerging from a series of interconnected events, however, are not resolved but, rather, initiated. By means of an incomplete and sketchy narrative, where presentation and interpretation are constantly in tension, the film does not offer the viewers a conclusion but just glimpses into possible outcomes. In line with the idea of the provisionality and constructedness of knowledge, *Cuéntame* is not an ended product, but rather a “picture of process” (Glassie 1982).

At the centre of this process rests the attempt to grasp the “humanity” of those people who give life and meaning to the ethnographic encounter and whose singularities are, more often than not, erased in scientific discourse. For linguistic conventions, we call them “informants”, “respondents”, or “research participants”, but these are reductive and objectifying labels. “Research participants” are not fictional characters. They do not live in the “scientific” bi-dimensionality of written narratives but are tri-dimensional people grounded in tri-dimensional spaces. They perform social roles and identities whose complexities are embodied and, as such, exist beyond a merely analytical understanding. The film, then, tries to open up a phenomenological window into the tri-dimensionality of lived experiences that result flattened within the pages of ethnographic accounts. Through this window, the viewer is invited to *feel* the “other”, plunging into an intimate space in which exercising emotion rather than thinking, empathy rather than critical reasoning. This attitude is revealed in the texture of the visual, which seeks to lend the viewer a corporeal and psychological engagement with the spaces and the people portrayed, thus reaffirming the centrality of the body as a site for the expression of deep emotions.

In an attempt to convey the materiality of cultural environments and evoke the multi-sensory perceptions of experiencing bodies, the camera draws near to other's experiences and moves through spaces and places, closely scrutinising sensual qualities of bodies and the environment to trigger an embodied and active response in the viewer. Several commentators have observed that film is capable of inducing physical reactions in an audience. While MacDougall wrote that an "involuntary mimicry" (2006: 23) is activated when we see other bodies performing actions, Taussig employed the notion of "tactile knowing" to describe the mimetic ability of film to produce a "merging of the object of perception with the body of the perceiver (1994: 208). This inherent quality of the film is particularly suitable to render the quintessential nature of knowledge in Mayan culture, which, as in the case of embroidering and other feminine gestures, is learned and transmitted precisely through observation and imitation (see Chapter 5).

In the field of film theory, Taussig's notion of "tactile knowing" has been explored through the concept of haptic visuality, an idea that greatly inspired my approach to filming. In *The Skin of the Film* (1998) and later in *Touch: Sensuous Theory And Multisensory Media* (2002), feminist film theorist Laura Marks conceived of "haptic visuality" as a combination of kinaesthetic, tactile, and proprioceptive qualities that allows the eyes to function as "organs of touch", capable of "caressing" the image on the surface and sensing its material qualities (2002: 162). She argues that haptic images are synesthetic, as they extend beyond sight to incorporate taste and smell. For Marks, haptic visuality is distinguished from optical visuality, which

«... sees things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space: in other words, how we usually conceive of vision. Optical visuality depends on a separation between the viewing subject and the object. Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture. It is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze (2002: 162)».

By pushing the viewer back to the surface of the image through a caressing *glance* attentive to details, the haptic breaks down the distance between the viewer and the screen, enabling an embodied perception, "the viewer responding to the video as

another body, and to the skin as another skin” (*Idibem*: 4). Rather than requiring a narrative structure to make sense, haptic images are immanent and affective. They are interesting not so much for the content they have but for what they *do*, that is, for the kind of embodiment they encourage. Haptic and optical visualities, however, are not oppositional, but rather form a dialectical process for the gaze oscillates between one and the other. By losing distance with the screen, hapticity temporarily dissolves the viewers’ subjectivity, allowing them to lose control over images and then go back to the optical, that is, to a “mastering” understanding of the objects within the frame.

The use of a haptic gaze in *Cuéntame* to depict bodies and places is intended as an exploration on the politics of image-making but also as a feminist visual strategy. The insistence on portraying feminine gestures, such as cooking, making *tortillas*, embroidering, weaving and even gossiping – which, as shown in a micronarrative of the film, is performed through innuendos and specific bodily codes – is intended to bring the viewer inside the “texture” of a performance of gender, to walk the physical route where gender norms come into matter. I am influenced here by Judith Butler, for whom it is precisely through a stylised repetition of acts transmitted through generation and reinforced over time that certain definitions of gender materialise. Although for Butler these performed gestures are coercive and oppressive, she recognises that they have a potential for disruption. The quasi-ritualised reiteration of social rules is indeed like an “act of quotation” that never reproduces the “original text” faithfully. In this very gap, for Butler, lies an alteration that enables individuals to break the social normativity (1993: 122-124).

This active potential of performance to disrupt meanings and create new knowledge has been discussed by Laura Marks and Jennifer Barker in relation to film. Rather than trivially describing tactility as a feminine form of perception, Marks sees the haptic as a “feminist visual *strategy*” (2002: 7, emphasis original), with the political potential of eluding cinematic conventions and generating new meanings. Moving from the haptic towards issues of the gendered nature of spectatorship and filmmaking, Marks suggests interesting antagonistic relations between postcolonialism/sexism and mastery-resistant haptic images. In its ability to shift the attention to the surface of an image, the haptic “decomposes” the body and reconfigures it as contingent, provisional and fragmented. In so doing, it takes away female sexuality from the deep objectifying and mastering (male) gaze, achieving a representation on its own terms (*Ibidem*: 6). While Marks focuses on the “invitation of a small, caressing gaze” as an alternative way of looking,

film scholar Jennifer Barker (2009) points to filming techniques such as camera movements and close-ups as disruptive modes of “visceral engagement” (2009: 120-144).

In my visual exploration, I employ some of the forms of tactility suggested by Marks and Barker, such as camera movements but also static shots, embodied camerawork and tight close-ups. Constantly oscillating between closeness and farness, surface and depth, haptic and optical, these techniques, coupled with an intimate use of sounds and voices, are a means of exploring the sensual qualities of the events recorded, evoking a rhythmical resonance with the movements of others. Similarly, my insistence on close-ups and extreme close-ups is intended to bring the viewer closer, both physically and emotionally, to the experiences being conveyed, prompting new embodied readings. At the very beginning of the film, the face of *don* Vicente depicted at close range is a statement of intent, a clear declaration of hapticity. For the whole film, the camera roams across faces, zooms into limbs, lingers on facial expressions and hands that perform gendered and cultural gestures. The use of a shallow gaze and aesthetic variations such as long-exposure, pixel density, and graininess, rush up the viewer to the surface by making the image less discernible, sometimes even difficult to grasp. These visual strategies aim to dissolve the boundaries between filmmaker, film and subject, suggesting a desire to partake and merge with the experiences of others. The “mimetic longings” (MacDougall 2006: 27) of the filmmaker, for Marks, reflects the “erotic” capacities of filmmaking and looking. She writes:

«What is erotic? The ability to oscillate between near and far is erotic. In sex, what is erotic is the ability to move between control and relinquishing, between being giver and receiver. It’s the ability to have your sense of self, your self-control, taken away and restored – and to do the same for another person [...] A lover’s promise is to take the beloved to that point where he or she has no distance from the body – and then to let the beloved come back, into possession of language and personhood» (2000: xvi).

This desire to be “absorbed” in the experience of others generates a sort of “synchrony” (MacDougall 2006: 27) between filmmaker and the world, or a “*ciné-transe*”, to borrow from Rouch (1973), through which experience is embodied and intensified. Understanding the film as an embodied practice in this context is a means,

for me, to explore the ecstatic and transformative potential of filmmaking and film viewing. For Marks, the pre-reflective encounter with a haptic space of unfamiliar images and sounds provides an opportunity for transformation: a transformation in cognition, emotion and the senses, and ideally, one that prompts our cultural understanding.

Trusting the film's potential for transformation, *Cuéntame* draws the viewer emotionally close to the subjects, evoking feelings of acquaintanceship, respect, and communion. In so doing, it wants to remind the audience that, despite irrefutable power imbalances, we are all human beings, an existential condition that the anthropologist, the research participant and the viewer share in the anthropopoietic triangle of the production, reproduction and reception of anthropological knowledge.

CHAPTER 3

One Hundred Years of Maya Migration, Forty Years of Tourism: Indigenous Labour in the *Riviera Maya*

Between 1940 and 1990, rural-urban migration in Mexico increased dramatically as a result of a number of factors: the establishment of the Bracero Program²⁵ in 1942 and its cancellation in 1964; the industrialisation of the 1960s; the tourism boom in the 1970s; and the inflation following the 1982 debt crisis (Arizpe 1975, 1980, 1981, 1985; Fernández-Kelly 1983; Collier 1999; Lomnitz 1977; Grindle 1986). As people fled from rural areas towards the cities, wage work became essential to supplement subsistence farming. In Yucatán, migrant workers were mainly split into two groups: while people from north and southwest Yucatán primarily migrated to the United States (*al Norte*), the south-easterners, coming from a more physically isolated region, looked for job opportunities in the neighbouring state of Quintana Roo (Adler 2004; Cornelius, Fitzgerald and Lewin Fisher 2007). Being the youngest of all the Mexican states, Quintana Roo, with its Caribbean cities, is the first destination for mass tourism in Latin America. Here, the majority of the population was born outside of the state (Castellanos 2010). As the Mexican government aimed to divert internal migration towards emerging tourist areas (Wilson 2008), the construction of resorts and hotels along the Caribbean coast, and primarily in the city of Cancún, generated a significant migratory wave from the rural areas of the country.

In this chapter, I trace the history of tourism development and out-migration in the Yucatán peninsula, examining how these phenomena have shaped the political economy of the region and how indigenous people were called to engage with the new, challenging vision of modernity brought by tourism.

²⁵ The Bracero Program, established by executive order in August 1942, was an agreement between the U.S. and the Mexican governments, which permitted Mexican citizens to take temporary agricultural work in the U.S. The managed migration, an unprecedented and radical solution to America's labour needs, was prompted by the enormous manpower shortage created by World War II. Over the program's 22-year lifespan, more than 4.5 million Mexican citizens were legally hired for work in the United States, primarily in Texas and California (see Calavita 1992).

3.1 The “invention” of Cancún and the development of tourism in the Yucatán peninsula

Along with petroleum and transnational remittances, tourism constitutes one of the largest sources of income and foreign currency in Mexico. By the 1990s, the country ranked first in arrivals in Latin America, attracting almost 40 per cent of all international travellers to the region (Clancy 2001: 130). Also, Mexico ranked first in international receipts among all third world countries (World Tourism Organization 1994). Between 1970 and 1991, arrivals in the country tripled, growing at an average annual rate of 5 per cent; as a result, foreign exchange earnings from tourism rocketed from 415 million to 3.8 billion dollars (Clancy 2001: 131). In 2002, Mexico received 20.6 million international tourists (Brenner 2005) who injected over 8 billion US dollars into the state's coffers (Bray, Murphy and Cornejo 2006). With the exception of agriculture, today, more Mexicans work in the tourist industry than in any other sector.

The explosion of mass tourism in Mexico began in the 1940s when the country entered a new phase of economic growth following World War II. During this period, president Miguel Alemán Valdés (1946-1952) was firmly committed to economic growth through the modernisation of industry and the development of infrastructure. To pursue his goals, he implemented a number of protectionist policies meant to replace foreign imports with domestic production, which effectively stimulated the manufacturing industry.

While traditional subsistence agriculture was only partially transformed by Alemán's plans, the development of infrastructure to support industrial modernisation inflated the size of middle-class workers, who were anxious to embrace the American way of life, including its demand for leisure activities such as tourism. However, in this period, the United States was the primary source of tourists to Mexico. North Americans typically journeyed to Mexico City, the Pacific coast below Tijuana, where gambling and prostitution were the typical activities offered to visitors, and the beach resort of Acapulco (Clancy 2001). Set along the astonishing Pacific coast in the state of Guerrero, during the World War II, Acapulco was considered by the growing Mexican middle class as a safe holiday destination. In the mid-60s, the city was the only tourist resort in the country that could meet international standards (Hiernaux-Nicolas 1999).

Although Alemán's development plans were initially successful, in 1964, the country began to run into economic hardship: trade declined, inflation and budget deficit increased, and the cancellation of the Bracero Program propelled a massive migration from the countryside to the city, contributing to the fall of revenues generated by Mexican consumer goods. *Maquiladoras* (assembly plants) and tourism were seen as a viable solution to such problems. The development of the country's peripheral regions, traditionally rural and poor, through tourism and assembly plants, was indeed expected to increase product export and capture additional foreign exchange (Dachary and Burne 1998; Clancy 2001).

Although Acapulco was the only modern resort in the country, the lack of infrastructure, unregulated urban growth, and the accompanying increased poverty pushed a group of development-oriented technocrats within the Mexican government to consider new options. The state of Quintana Roo, and in particular the city of Cancún, a long and narrow spit of land dividing the Caribbean Sea from the Nichupté Lagoon, was selected as a new resort project. Regarded as inhospitable by the Spanish conquerors, historically this region has been a magnet for refugees: first, for indigenous people fleeing colonial control and, subsequently, for the Mayan rebels of the Caste War.

In 1902, when the national government took notice of the area, president Porfirio Díaz officially declared Quintana Roo a Mexican territory, naming it after the politician Andrés Quintana Roo. Shifted back into Yucatán's jurisdiction in 1915, Quintana Roo separated again in 1931. Eventually declared a state in 1974, the area remained sparsely populated for a long time. While the region counted 50,169 people in the 1960s (Pi-Sunyer, Thomas and Daltabuit 1999), today it has a population of around 1.5 million (INEGI 2015), half of whom are concentrated in Cancún.

Once a sacred place for the Mayas and a pilgrimage site for centuries, Kan Kun ("nest of vipers" in Yucatec Maya) was transformed from a small fishing village of 200 people in the 1960s (Re Cruz 2008) into an exclusive tourist emporium with more than two hundred hotels and a cruise ship terminal just a decade after. From the first state-led phase of resort development, in its first year of operation (1975), Cancún received 100,000 visitors, 75 per cent of whom were nationals and 25 per cent foreigners (Evans 2004: 320). Between 1975 and 1984, arrivals grew at an annual rate of 38 per cent, representing one-tenth of Mexico's foreign tourists. By 1989, Cancún had become the most popular destination in Mexico, dislodging Mexico City and breaking the

monopoly of Acapulco as the elective resort city for international tourists (Clancy 2001).

The construction of Cancún was financed through a \$21.5 million loan provided by the Inter-American Development Bank in 1972 (Baklanoff 2008: 12). Transportation routes were improved through the expansion of the highway system and Quintana Roo was declared a free-trade zone.²⁶ The federal government created the *Fondo de Infraestructura Turística* (National Trust Fund for Tourism Infrastructure)²⁷, later known as *Fondo Nacional de Fomento Turístico* (FONATUR) (Clancy 2001), which heavily supported investments in local infrastructures, financing the construction, expansion and administration of various hotel chains. Concomitantly, the Mexican government changed immigration policies in order to promote tourism and created dedicated ministries and consultative commissions (Berger 2006).

The development of the resort-city of Cancún followed a similar path to the export-processing zones in northern Mexico, granting the manufacture of export goods and services without payment of duty. Free trade zones and Quintana Roo's development were both considered projects able to modernise the country through the development of technology and infrastructure, and stimulate the growth of specific industry sectors and related job markets (Tancer 1975). Additionally, Cancún's strategic position and its proximity to indigenous communities granted the tourist industry access to cheap labour and indigenous bodies for display and tourist consumption (Castellanos 2010).

The initial design of Cancún defined two main zones: a tourist area on the beachfront (*zona hotelera*), which was reserved for hotel structures, and an urban service zone in the city centre, where service and administrative workers lived. This spatial layout reflected a model of strict segregation. As some commentators have noted (Hiernaux Nicolas 1999; Castellanos 2010; Torres 2002), at least until the mid-80s, Cancún was a paradigm of Fordist tourist resort and a quintessential expression of Taylorist principles of efficiencies: here, labour and leisure, workers and tourists were carefully divided. Tourists, however, were not only separated from workers but also from the broader environment, which was restricted to the sand and sea of the beachfront hotels. The design of deluxe resorts targeted upper-class foreigners and was

²⁶ Created to attract foreign investment, free-trade zones offer subsidies and reduces tariffs and regulations to international corporations.

²⁷ The National Trust Fund for Tourism Infrastructure was an agency created in 1969 and administered by Mexico's central bank (Bank of Mexico) to oversee the planning of tourist poles and secure private investment.

meant to fulfil their desire for privacy and tranquillity. All hotels were constructed following a “sanitised” model of “non-place”, as Hiernaux-Nicolas has suggested, borrowing from Augé (1995), “meaning a place without history, identity or any possibility of being appropriated by social groups” (Hiernaux-Nicolas 1999: 131).



Figure 10: Cancún's *zona hotelera*. Source: Google images.

In the decade between 1984 and 1994, Quintana Roo was regarded as being among the fastest developing areas in Mexico. In 1984, around 6,000 rooms, whose vast majority fell in the luxury category, were available in Cancún (Hiernaux Nicolas 1999: 133). Ten years later, the city accounted for 20 per cent of international tourism in Mexico, becoming the largest hotel resort and the main source of foreign exchange in the country. However, after the 1982 debt crisis that prostrated Mexico's economy, a shift in tourists' preferences promoted a change in the traditional Cancún model of the “three esses” (sun, sea and sand), pushing the government to include in vacation packages complementary activities such as shopping, fine dining, Maya culture shows and visits to the ancient Maya ruins of Chichén Itzá, Cobá, Tulum and Uxmal. Cultural assets such as colonial cities and the “Maya Route” (Clancy 2001), which had previously been ignored, started to be promoted as tourist attractions. In addition, while big shopping malls were being promptly erected in the *zona hotelera*, becoming attractions in their own right, water sports such as windsurfing, scuba diving and deep-sea fishing were added to the repertoire of beach activities.

Tired of being segregated in a “bubble resort”, however, some tourists started to move away from the beachfront to explore the city centre. As a result, lower-level hotels and restaurants were built outside of the *zona hotelera* to receive new groups of visitors. At the same time, some North Americans and Europeans began to venture south of Cancún to the more pristine spots of Quintana Roo. This gradual escape from the bubble resort eventually resulted in the expansion of the so-called *Riviera Maya*, 135 km of stunning coastline and uncontaminated jungle extending from Cancún to Tulum. Known as an important commercial and religious centre during the Maya Post-Classic period (1000-1500 A.D.), this area has been gradually “toursified” (Hiernaux Nicolas 1999: 138) through the creation of government-sponsored hotels, all-inclusive resorts and “environment-friendly” theme parks. New tourist centres such as Isla Mujeres, Cozumel, Playa del Carmen, Tulum and Puerto Morelos soon became popular among North American honeymooners, spring breakers, and families, also attracting a great number of European travellers who decided to settle in the area and develop their businesses.



Figure 11: The *Riviera Maya*. Source: Mexmap.com

Given its peripheral location, migrant labour has served the expansion of the *Riviera Maya*. Mayan workers coming from the villages of the peninsula were mainly recruited as builders, carpenters and bricklayers for the construction of private villas, resorts and condominiums across the *Riviera*. Before heading there, however, these unskilled workers migrated to Mérida, where they were employed in low-paid jobs invariably in tourism services. In the capital city, they were able to learn Spanish as well as some English words; they also began to wear Western clothing and embrace a new lifestyle. With a repertoire of new skills, these migrant workers travelled to the *Riviera*, “the final destination and the mythic site of a new life” (Hiernaux-Nicolas,

1999: 136). Today, fifteen kilometres from Cancún, the straggling settlement of the 1970s has grown to 300,000 people, 40 per cent of whom are living without sewerage or piped water, earning an average salary of \$10 per day (Evans 2004: 322). As Castellanos (2010) has noted, workers in tourist areas experience the same problems of *maquiladoras*' workers (Fernández-Kelly 1983; Ong 1987; Iglesias Prieto 1997; Salzinger 2003; Lugo 2008): low wages, repetitive tasks, control over workers' sexuality, limited job promotion, lack of economic security and reliance on racialised bodies. In this sense, the *Riviera Maya* and Cancún's thirty-year history of development provides an interesting example of the limitations and challenges of the adoption of tourism as a central pillar of growth development.

3.2 Mayan migration throughout the 20th century: from the Agrarian Reform to tourism development

In this section, I will give a history of Mayan migration in relation to economic change within the Yucatán peninsula, paying particular attention to how it has impinged on the traditional sexual division of labour within Mayan communities throughout the 20th century.

Internal and circular migration²⁸ among Mayan communities in the Yucatán peninsula has been documented since the early 1900s. Robert Redfield (1934, 1950) reported the migratory experiences of Mayan groups from the village of Chan Kom, where he conducted his fieldwork. Following a pattern of circular migration, the first residents of this community initially migrated from Ebtún, a village located forty-eight kilometres north of Chan Kom, in order to find a richer soil where they could grow *milpa*. Although farmers who moved there to work their land would periodically return to their homes in Ebtún, in due time, they settled in newly built houses in Chan Kom. As families followed them, the village grew in size. Steadily, Chan Kom gained autonomy and was officially recognised as a *pueblo* by the Mexican government. Through the request of official land surveys, the new-born village started to register the

²⁸ Migration occurs in various patterns. In this analysis, I will consider three main ones: internal migration, step-migration and circular migration. Individuals who travel for long time within their own country, often for work and mostly between rural and urban areas, are referred to as an "internal migrants". Step-migration occurs when people from different generations move at different times, forming connections and establishing networks in the new location. Finally, circular migration takes place when people temporarily and repetitively move from home to host areas. This is often the case for agricultural work (see Lewellen 2007).

land as a communal property. At the same time, in order to be legally recognised as a *pueblo*, it filed a formal petition to attain the status of *ejido* in 1923 (Redfield 1950). By becoming an *ejido*, Chan Kom was transformed from a temporary shelter for farmers into a federally recognised village.

Between 1920 and 1924, the newly elected president Alvaro Obregón addressed the longstanding issue of land-tenure inequality and promoted the modernisation and the economic development of the rural areas of the country through the implementation of education and agrarian reforms (Perramond 2008). With the Law of January 6, 1915 and article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, known as *Law of the Ejidos*, Obregón distributed 95 per cent of the overall communal land to deprived labourers (*peones*) in rural communities. The individual members of the *ejidos*, the so-called *ejidatarios*, held usufruct rights to the land, which allowed them to farm and keep the harvest of their allotted parcels for themselves. The remaining 5 per cent of land was farmed collectively (Climo 1978 and Perramond 2008). The usufruct right for the assigned allotment could be passed down to an heir but could not be sold, rented or mortgaged; furthermore, the land could not be left unproductive for more than two consecutive years.²⁹ When Chan Kom achieved formal *pueblo* status in 1926, more peasants started to settle in the village, attracted by the opportunity of improving their quality of life in a place where everyone could own their private houses with its respective allotted farmland (Elmendorf 1976).

Traditionally, Mayas have been subsistence farmers, growing food for self-consumption with not much surplus trade. Men, being typically the caretakers of their *milpas*, have travelled long distances to reach their lands. On average, those who owned land in their communities walked about nine kilometres to reach their *milpas* (Redfield 1950). Other men, however, had to travel much longer distances, following a pattern of circular migration, as in the case of Chan Kom and Ebtún. Although at times women would accompany their husbands to help with harvesting and weeding the crops, they would typically stay at home, taking care of children and kitchen chores. Their household tasks comprised of transforming the corn into edible food, sewing clothing and raising livestock to supplement the *milpa* production. The complementarity and interdependence of gender roles (Elmendorf 1976) determined a pattern of step-

²⁹ For analyses of the strategic components of the Agrarian Reform see Schryer 1980; Fallaw 2001; Craib 2004 and Dwyer 2008.

migration, as the whole family would follow the head of the household when an opportunity to move into a more prosperous community arose.

During the 1930s and 1940s, increased step migration stimulated the emergence of new communities. However, the availability of land decreased concomitantly to the growth in population (Faust and Bilsborrow 2000). As a result, some peasants were forced to move to more distant lands. Over time, these new temporary shelters obtained the status of legally recognised *pueblos*. President Lázaro Cárdenas sped up the process by implementing an agrarian reform through which he redistributed 45 million acres of land (Dwyer 2002). In Yucatán, two hundred *ejidos* were created through the reform and land was provided to more than 50,000 farmers (Peña Chapa *et al.* 2000).

Depending on economic and ecological factors, each *pueblo* could choose how to best use their acquired *ejidal* land. In areas where weather patterns were unpredictable and the quality of the soil was poor, farmers tended to harvest henequen (known as the “green gold” of the Yucatán), a type of agave from which a fibre used to make ropes and cables is obtained. This was the case for north-western Yucatán, where henequen cultivation was a booming agricultural industry up until the 1970s (Climo 1978; Faust and Bilsborrow 2000).³⁰ In other areas, such as southern and eastern Yucatán, subsistence agriculture centred on *milpa* cultivation as the preferred choice for *ejidatarios*.

Other activities, such as *chicle* (the raw material from which chewing gum is made), extraction and archaeological digging also proved to be good options to supplement agricultural production. At that time, the *chicle* industry was a multimillion-dollar business, providing higher incomes to harvesters than subsistence farming (Beteta 1999).³¹ With new funding provided for archaeological research by

³⁰ The emergence and development of the henequen industry in the late 19th century, was the most important socio-economic phenomenon in Yucatán up to the 1970s. It was related to the expansion of world shipping and the increasing demand of that produce from the U.S. From this business, however, only a handful of landowners (*hacendados*) would profit. This oligarchy of thirty to forty families, the so-called *casta divina*, maintained its position at the top of the social, economic and political ladder of Yucatán through their abusive labour practices on landless peasants (see Moseley and Delpar 2008: 28). Henequen plantations were concentrated around the city of Mérida, which had been first the base of the Spanish and then *criollo* elites since colonial times. The decline of the henequen industry had already started in the late 1930s, when Cárdenas visited Yucatán to supervise land reforms, but it lingered for the subsequent decades until its downfall in the 1980s.

³¹ It is worth noting that in the period between 1901 and the 1930s, before the boom of the *chicle* industry, revenues from selling *chicle* helped to finance and support the Mayan rebels during the Caste War.

national and international institutions, many peasants were employed to work in archaeological digs (Juárez 2002). Both as *chicle* collectors and diggers, Mayans had to follow a pattern of circular migration to be able to provide an income for their families without neglecting their *milpas*. Although women continued to remain in their communities to fulfil their assigned gendered tasks, as cash became increasingly important for household maintenance, they were pushed to join the informal economy of their villages by selling fruits and plants (Kintz 1998).

After Cárdenas's Agrarian Reform, in the 1950s and 1960s the distribution of *ejidal* land decreased, as this could not keep up with the increment in population. As the Mexican government shifted its focus, investments in *ejidos* became minimal. In addition, in some areas, the government started to rent portions of communal land to private owners, which pushed Mayan families to find other survival strategies. Men increasingly started to work for private owners, thus establishing new patterns of migration. While many moved from southern to northern Yucatán to work seasonally in henequen plantations (Climo 1978 and Castellanos 2010), others worked for agribusiness owners, who typically exported crop harvested from rented land (Kray 2007).

In the second half of the 20th century, the henequen industry declined due to competition from synthetic fibres. As a result, the Mexican government shifted its focus to the industrialisation of urban areas with the aim of supporting the development of the tourist industry. Tourism stimulated patterns of circular migration both in southern and northern Yucatán. As new tourist centres emerged, men from nearby villages increasingly supplemented their poor harvests with other sources of income, such as construction and wage work. With Cancún being selected as a top economic priority by president José López Portillo in 1969, the initiation of the construction of the city as a leading economic centre propelled a massive internal migration to the area. The fact that women were refrained from taking jobs outside of their homes helped men migrants to maintain connection with their communities and extended kin networks.³² On the other hand, it created additional economic challenges for Mayan families since, with their wives in the village, migrants had to pay not only for rent and transportation but also for food and domestic service (Re Cruz 1998). As a result, women were called

³² Extended-kin networks are considered extremely important in Mayan culture as they allow consanguineal, affinal and, at times, fictive kin to exchange resources, money and social support amongst their kin in times of need (Castellanos 2010).

to make a more substantial contribution to the household economy. To make ends meet, many of them started to sell traditional embroideries.

In the 1980s, the oil industry boom further increased rural-urban migration. In 1976, PEMEX (*Petroleos Mexicanos*) consolidated its presence in the state of Campeche, drilling two exploratory wells that confirmed attractive quantities of oil and gas in the Gulf (see Peña Chapa *et al.* 2000 and Grayson 1947). Immediately after, PEMEX announced a program of works aimed at expanding the drilling zones. By the end of the decade, Campeche became the area with the highest number of oil rigs in the whole Mexican territory. In spite of the increase in oil and gas extraction, the overall impact of the oil industry on Yucatán's economy was negligible. The decline of oil prices, indeed, triggered a severe economic crisis, which was further aggravated by the withdrawal of subsidies for small farmers (Kray 2007). Because peasants could no longer sell at guaranteed prices, the cost of basic commodities increased dramatically.

As the government continued to focus on tourism, migration trends steadily increased during the 1980s. Given the aggravated situation, many migrants decided to work in wage labour permanently. Unable to deal with the economic challenge of sustaining two households, families started to step-migrate to avoid paying for domestic services in the host community (Re Cruz 1998). With many families reunited in the tourist centres of the *Riviera*, opportunities for additional income arose. Women could now take jobs as cleaners or chambermaids in the numerous hotels and resorts of the *Riviera* (Castellanos 2007, 2010). In cases where men did not want their wives to take on wage labour, women could still contribute to the household economy by selling processed backyard products or *hipiles* and traditional clothes directly to tourists (Kintz 1998 and Kray 2007).

The tourist economy, which in the 1970s and 1980 had primarily revolved around construction work, changed dramatically during the 1990s, when the demand for jobs such as caretaking and housekeeping increased. The market shifted from hiring men to women, a fact that inflated the number of Mayan women migrating towards tourist areas to take jobs in hotels and resorts. Concomitantly, the access to cheap labour was an incentive for *maquiladoras* owners to install their factories in Yucatán. Mayan women were preferred to men as *maquila*-workers for being a more “docile” human capital and much cheaper in wages than their male counterpart (Iglesias Prieto 1997). This increase in demand for women's labour gave the impression that traditional gender roles were gradually rebalancing. However, male jobs still offered a higher, albeit

limited, social mobility. As stewards or kitchen hands, indeed, men could be promoted to positions of higher responsibilities (Castellanos 2010). Additionally, work in *maquiladoras* or tourist services did not offer women the same opportunities as men, who continued to earn higher wages than women. Nonetheless, the integration of women into the labour force through factory and tourist work, together with the economic pluriactivity of indigenous communities, has contributed to the transformation of the sexual division of labour in rural households. As workers, women apparently gained much autonomy and respect. Yet, their increased social and economic importance has corresponded to the socio-economic decentralisation of the male figure, which in turn has led to a substantial increase in alcoholism and domestic violence within Mayan communities (see Chapter 4).

3.3 Paths of seasonal migration in Xocén

Like the majority of Yucatecan Mayan villages, Xocén counts an impressive number of temporary migrants. Until recently, the village economy was based primarily on the farming of *milpa*, with corn as the primary food staple, along with squash, melons, black beans, and other fruits and vegetables. In Xocén, most of the farmers cultivate around two hectares of land, which is enough to produce the required corn to feed one family until the next harvest. However, such amount of land is not sufficient to produce a surplus that could be sold for profit. To be able to sell corn, a family would need at least four hectares of land, as well as extra hands for helping with the additional farming. Because of the low price of corn, however, profits are minimal even for the farmers who manage to cultivate more land.

In response to economic pressures, women are pushed to contribute to the household economy, primarily raising livestock and sewing *hipiles* for both the rural and the tourist market. Through these activities, however, they make a limited contribution to family income: as we will see in Chapter 6, the manufacture of *hipiles* for sale generates at most 150 pesos per month, which is not sufficient for paying for electricity, for buying food, clothes, school supplies for children and for covering medical, travel and other household expenses. Thus, migration and wage labour have become increasingly central to family survival.

In Xocén, some men have been following patterns of circular migration since before the establishment of Quintana Roo's tourist centres. While some peasants sought

richer soil in the countryside around the city of Tizimín, others worked as wage labourers in archaeological sites and henequen plantations. Still others found part-time jobs in bigger cities, such as Valladolid and Mérida. However, when hotels and resorts started to be built along the Caribbean coast in the 1970s, cities such as Cancún, Playa del Carmen and Tulum became more attractive destinations for employment. Although Mérida and Cancún are both two hours bus ride away from Valladolid, Xocenenses prefer looking for jobs in Cancún and the *Riviera Maya*, as Quintana Roo's tourist cities offer better opportunities and higher wages than those available in the already saturated capital, Mérida.

Migration in Xocén took place in four main waves. The first wave occurred in the 1970s and was marked out by married men aged between 20 and 40, who had a primary school education. Although migration was seasonal at that time, it was nonetheless socially sanctioned for its potential to alter the internal dynamics of the village, eventually threatening its integrity. As a result, men who chose to leave the *milpa* and migrate to Cancún were stigmatised. As elders told me, “what the *milpa* gives you must be considered sufficient for subsistence”.

The second migratory wave occurred in the decade between the 1980s and 1990s and differed from the first in terms of its demographic shift. Most migrants were aged between 16 and 21; they were unmarried and had a good level of education, graduating from junior high school or other professional schools in Valladolid. With a lower level of education than their male counterparts, few women migrated in this period. Men migrants were not interested in subsistence farming and wanted to occupy waged positions in the service industry, as this was considered “easy labour” when compared to farm work. Rather than participating in short-term migration, these youths permanently settled in the *Riviera*, finding work as waiters, busboys and bartenders in restaurants and hotels, and earning the minimum wage salary of 2,600 Mexican pesos (100 pounds) per month. These types of jobs allowed for a degree of occupational and social mobility. As migrants earned job seniority, they started to obtain long-term contracts that facilitated their entrance into the hotel industry for better positions. Beginning to work as chefs, receptionists and accountants, some of them became financially successful, reaching an income of about 20,000 pesos per month. These migrants bought the land on which they built their homes and started to help new migrants settling in tourist cities by providing them with housing, resources and access to employment.

The third wave of migrants took place in the 1990s. These men were educated at the secondary school in Xocén. Because of the decline of the construction industry, however, life in Cancún appeared more difficult than during the previous decade. Overdevelopment and increased competition, along with the promotion of all-inclusive tour packages and the reliance on “spring breakers”, ended up sending tourists south of Cancún, to the more pristine and exotic spots of the *Riviera Maya*. The fundamental lack of social mobility in the saturated Cancún frustrated many experienced workers who, following the tourists’ paths, eventually headed south to Tulum. Here, construction workers found employment in the building sites of new luxury hotels and eco-resorts.

During the late 1990s and the early 2000s, migrants earned an average salary of around 1,800 pesos per month. Including tips, they could significantly boost their income from 1,500 to 3,500/4,000 pesos. Female migrants in this period were working mostly in private houses as chambermaids or domestic servants, earning an average salary of 4,000 pesos per month. These wages, however, did not have the same purchasing power as before. Especially in Cancún, rampant development brought a steady increment in prices. If in the early 1990s a small room cost 600 pesos a month, in the 2000s the price for the same room had doubled, forcing the migrants to reduce living expenses by sharing accommodation with other migrants.

The fourth wave of migration has taken place in the last fifteen years. Nowadays, Xocenenses migrate at a younger age than before. As a result of previous migration waves, many families have extended kin in the *Riviera*. Children as young as 10 or 11 spend their summer vacations with their relatives, learning skills by working in construction or in the service industry. The income they earn through this summer “apprenticeship” is partially used to cover school fees; the rest is given towards family expenses. Because of the emphasis on education as a fundamental means of escalating the socio-economic ladder, youths usually do not settle in tourist areas before completing post-secondary education. Even with high school diplomas, however, Mayan migrants continue to enter the job market from the bottom of the labour ladder, a fact that is pushing some youths to pursue a university degree. The rate of university students, however, is still low. At the time of my fieldwork, less than 20 Xocenenses had graduated or were actively undertaking a university degree.

Nowadays, one out of two households in Xocén include migrants to tourist areas. Commuters usually leave their homes early on Monday morning, when special taxis

collect passengers sharing the same destination in the *Riviera Maya*. Most of the men are employed in tourist services and share small apartments throughout the week. On Saturday, they travel back home and tend to arrive early in the afternoon to have enough time to spend with their families. Sunday is usually dedicated to working the *milpa*, although some commuters prefer to pay other *milperos* to work their assigned plot of *ejido* land. Other migrants follow slightly different patterns, as some hotels prefer their employees to have an entire week off every three weeks of work.

Migration trends in Xocén, as in most Mayan communities, are dependent on the seasonality of tourism industry. The busiest tourist months in the *Riviera* occur between December and April, with business slowing down progressively afterwards. In the low season, hotels and resorts tend to reduce short-term staff in order to decrease expenses, and usually require laid-off employees to come back when the season picks up again in December. Therefore, from September to November, Xocenenses return to their homes to work their *milpas*. As low tourism season occurs at the same time as the harvest, the village has enough food to sustain the returning migrants.

The booming growth of the tourism sector has not deterred Xocenenses from considering agricultural work as one of their most important tasks. Returning to farm the *milpa* on specific corn cycle dates (for cleaning the fields, burning, seeding, and harvesting) or entrusting someone to do so in one's absence, happens in the context of a renewal of expectancies. These dates are not only marked by the corn cycle but also by important religious festivities. Against the neoliberal promise of infinite opportunities for economic development outside the village, religious festivals foreground ritual thriving as a requirement for regeneration in times of decay (as expressed in the lost Holy Book).

Migration of the Mayan workforce towards Quintana Roo raises a number of concerns. Compared to previous employment options in henequen plantations, work in the *Riviera* takes Xocenenses away from their lands for long periods of time and places them in an environment that contrasts sharply with their culture. Although villagers find the Caribbean cities of Quintana Roo "very pretty", they typically complain about the high cost of living, the unhealthy lifestyle, and the prejudices against Mayan workers. While life in Xocén is considered as being calm and safe, tourist cities in the *Riviera*, especially Cancún, are viewed as dangerous, anonymous and alienating. The steady diffusion of alcoholism in the village, for instance, is interpreted as a bad habit acquired by men in the *Riviera* (see Chapter 4). Urban life seems to be particularly challenging

for women, who single out the lack of independence and security, as well as the constant need for cash, as major problems. Feelings towards the tourist cities, however, are conflicting. On the one hand, the *Riviera* is depicted by villagers as a society “apart”, ruled by money and victim of stress, where the “naïve” Xocenenses risk falling pray to physical violence and alcoholism. On the other, the opportunities it offers are seen as fundamental for transitioning into a new, modern and more “civilised” sociocultural order.

By working in the tourist cities, migrants are exposed to economic rules and tourist experiences that are mostly centred on a consumerist ideology. Some commentators have highlighted how the increasing availability of cash and the rapid diffusion of consumer goods brought back by migrants from the *Riviera* are creating a social stratification in Mayan villages (Balam, Ocho and Sonda 2002; Heusinkveld 2008). While migrant families can now afford to buy a wide array of products, ranging from furniture to electronics, families relying exclusively on *milpa* production for survival struggle to feed their children. This gap leads to a growing inequality that could potentially erode the sense of community and increase the pressure to work in the tourist cities of Quintana Roo.

Villagers are aware of these risks. They are concerned that if too many young men abandon the *milpa* to become wageworkers, Xocén will not be able to produce its own food, thus losing its autonomy and self-sufficiency. In recent years, few governmental projects have promoted the use of communal land to diversify crop production; market competition, however, has hindered the success of these projects (Baños Ramírez 1996). Xocenenses fear that, if the village is no longer self-sufficient, the traditional tie to the land and the magical-religious life connected to it, as well as gender roles and family structure, will disintegrate, producing a permanent shift away from the *milpa* and the agricultural cycle, that is, from the very heart of their cosmovision.

3.4 Change and continuity, ethnicity and inequality, and the challenges of modernity

In Latin America, the neoliberal and assimilation policies promoted by the governments have resulted in the displacement and the economic and political marginalisation of indigenous people. Far from erasing them, however, these phenomena have created new forms of self-identification for indigenous communities, as well as new

relationships with the state and the global economy (de la Cadena and Starn 2007; Hernández Castillo 2001; Little 2004; Nash 2001). The very nature of these relationships and the broader debate on the impact of modernity, globalisation, and neoliberalism on local cultures remain a central concern for indigenous communities.

In Mexico, recent studies have focused on the alleged “disappearance” of indigenous cultural practices in urban contexts. In *Mayas migrantes en Cancún*, Ligia Sierra Sosa (2008) examined the strategies of cultural continuity employed by migrants in the *Riviera*. The Maya language, the traditional clothing and the performance of ancient rituals are key to these strategies. Although Spanish and English are the most used languages in Cancún, Sierra Sosa explains, migrants keep speaking in Maya. In particular, places like fruit and vegetable markets in the *Riviera* represent urban enclaves of indigenous language’s persistence. Similarly, women’s traditional dress, the *hipil*, continues to be produced and worn by Mayan women. Important rituals like the *hetz’mek* (the traditional Maya baptism) and the *cha’ chaak* (an ancient ritual performed once a year in May to procure rain) are still regularly performed both in the countryside and in the city.



Figure 12: Maya woman selling fruit at a Cancún market.

Adriana Rosales Mendoza (2009) provides examples of cultural continuity related to cultural memory and gender identity among Mayan women in Cancún. Rosales notes that, while on the one hand the fact that Mayans keep speaking the Maya language, wearing traditional clothes and performing traditional rituals helps to preserve their cultural memory, on the other, it further exposes them to prejudices and discrimination. To avoid this, some young Maya women who live in the cities choose to adopt Spanish as a first language and wear modern clothes. According to Rosales's informants, in Western attire, women consider themselves as being more attractive and desirable to men. Miniskirts, shorts and t-shirts guarantee better chances to enter the "competition for marriage" with other women, including foreigners. Although more Mayan women in the cities are opting to wear modern clothes and speak Spanish, for Rosales, they still nurture a profound respect and nostalgia for their hometown. These feelings are expressed through an instrumental use of traditional legends and beliefs, employed to make sense of gender expectations and new conceptions of beauty, fashion and love in the city.

Alicia Re Cruz (1996) has shown how by cultivating an “urban *milpa*”, Mayan migrants in the cities continue to identify themselves as Maya. Re Cruz divides the community of Chan Kom, where she conducted her fieldwork, in two socio-political groups. On the one side there are “the Ancients” (*los Antiguos*), who live in the village working the *milpa* as their ancestors did. On the other side there are “the Migrants” (*los Migrantes*), who, according to the Ancients, have abandoned agricultural work, but claim, nonetheless, to work an “urban *milpa*” in the city. Re Cruz suggests that this conflict epitomises the ideological dispute around the meaning of being Maya and the alleged authenticity of the term. By transferring the *milpa* to the urban environment, migrants oppose the stigma imposed on them by the Ancients, while also trying to reach a psychological balance in response to the social expectations and changes occurring in their lives.

Another interesting way to decipher change and make sense of the ongoing transformation of the Maya world is through oral tradition and prophecies. A cyclic interpretation of time and history can explain a wide range of issues such as scarcity of food, poverty, and diseases. Evidently, language, clothes, rituals, *milpa*, oral tradition and prophecies persist in urban contexts. They are not the same as in the countryside but are adapted and strategically used to make sense of the urban environment.

Against the thesis that Maya culture tends to disappear in the city, the aforementioned scholarships have highlighted the existence of pockets of cultural persistence and new forms of ethnicity among indigenous migrants in the *Riviera*. As stressed by Gabbert (2004) and Hervik (1999), the urban environment seems to encourage the formation of ethnic self-awareness. But how does ethnicity inform the lives and the work conditions of thousands of Yucatecan Maya migrants in the cities and of their families in the countryside? To answer this question, we should explore two interrelated issues: on the one hand, the ethnification of the labour force, that is, the ethnicity-class intersection; on the other, the appropriation of the natural, cultural and regional resources by the tourist sector.

Although Mayans are capable of reproducing and adapting their culture to the urban environment, they are still subject to discrimination. Dolores París (2003) has shown that 37 per cent of Yucatecan migrants in Cancún who inhabit the outskirts of the city (*Regiones*) are subject to labour discrimination, occupying the least desirable and remunerative job positions in the market. At the same time, they are victims of institutional discrimination, that is, a different treatment in all spheres of social life. In

contrast to Yucatán where, according to Gabbert (2001), there is no open discrimination in daily interactions but rather a more subtle and disguised “structural violence”, in tourist cities racial stereotypes are expressed more bluntly. While the use of pejorative terms such as “*mayaitas*”, “*indio*” or “*naco*” are common when referring to Mayan migrants, indigenous people are also frequently described by other Mexicans as short (*chaparritos*), ugly (*feos*) and big-headed (*cabezones*). Not surprisingly, as a by-product of “symbolic violence”, Mayans themselves use these derogatory attributes for self-description.

Sierra Sosa (2008) argues that labour insertion and segmentation of migrants must be understood against the backdrop of socialisation dynamics in migrants’ hometowns. Agricultural knowledge, Maya language, poor alphabetisation and ethnic stigma bolster the stereotype of the “destitute indigene”, which prevents Mayans from entering the tourist economy in sectors other than construction and hotel services. In these sectors, job allocation in the cities reproduces the traditional sexual division of labour that characterises the countryside: this means construction work for men and domestic service for women. The culture reproduced by migrants in the urban context is a key factor in the process of labour segregation. Correspondingly, in a sort of vicious circle, the fact that Mayans tend to remain at the bottom of the labour ladder reinforces stigma and stereotypes. As Reygadas (2008) observes, this ethnicisation of the labour force, with its corollary of segregation, is one of the key mechanisms of persistent inequality in Latin America.

Migration and tourism development have other negative implications for Mayas. The development of major tourist projects like the multinational “Mayan World” (*Mundo Maya*) entails a commodification of natural and cultural resources, with serious ecological and social consequences. As stressed by Castañeda (1996), tourism and archaeology in Yucatán have generated a “museum of Mayan culture”, a paradisiac and mysterious world designedly made to satiate tourists’ hunger for exoticism. Yet, this enchanting *Mundo Maya* is far away from contemporary Mayas’ everyday lives. The Maya culture displayed for tourist consumption is a combination of images and representations of the pre-Columbian indigenous culture, with its architectural masterpieces (today archaeological sites), its exuberant natural landscapes and its astronomical knowledge, all surrounded by an inscrutable aura of mystery that titillates the imagination of visitors. In this scenario, Mayans are called to produce and reproduce a commoditised landscape, expressly created to fulfil tourists’ expectations

and desires (Brown 1999). In the same vein, Marín observes that the characteristics that make Cancún an alluring place both for tourists and for Mayan migrants pertain to two mutually exclusive categories: beaches, hotels, bars, restaurants, airports and malls which are attractive to tourists are not accessible to Mayans in the same way as Mayans' work behind the spotlights of this exotic and luxury scenario does not appeal to tourists.



Figure 13: The Kukulkán pyramid at the archaeological site of Chichén Itzá.

Tourism has also led to an intensification of ecological degradation, which began in the 1930s. While for a good portion of the 20th century *ejidos* were sufficient for local people's subsistence, demographic increment and migration have contributed to

soil degradation, a fact that was already highlighted by Villa Rojas at the beginning of the 1960s. Besides, speculative overbuilding during the 1980s and the development of artificial beaches and rivers across the Mayan coast have put at risk faunal and floral biodiversity as well as coastal forest resources.

Certainly, tourism is a driving force for economic development; this development, however, is utterly unequal. Although Mexico occupies the eighth place among the countries that receive the most international tourists, earning a yearly income of 12 million dollars (Marín 2010), revenues are not equally distributed. The presence of a labour market and the creation of job opportunities derived by tourism cannot justify persistent contradictions: Quintana Roo is one of the richest states in Mexico but has the fourth highest level of malnutrition (Juárez 2002).

As Reygadas (2008) has stressed, tourism in itself does not generate inequality – or, at least, not just that. Instead, it has improved the living conditions of many Mayan families in the countryside. The fact remains that, in the last thirty years, inequality has increased in Quintana Roo in concomitance with tourism entrepreneurs' appropriation and exploitation of the natural and cultural resources of the region. Today as in the past, Mayas are constructing majestic buildings; yet, they are not ceremonial temples but tourist complexes from which indigenous people are strategically excluded. Exclusion and inequality, however, cannot be understood in static terms, as these are not unalterable essences but historical constructions. Although the category of “indigenous” in the Yucatán peninsula has been historically marginalised, Mayan people are heterogeneous: while some seek for integration into the hegemonic society, often concealing or denying their cultural and ethnic affiliation, others celebrate their ethnic identity as unique and different, reclaiming visibility and rights. As I explained in Chapter 1, “Mayan identity” is an ongoing construction, constituted over time by state policies, ethno-policies, racial hierarchies, and the global economy. Certainly, migration and tourism are generating and reproducing inequalities, which, at this point, are disfavoured indigenous people. Yet, to be able to define these phenomena we should understand the processes, mechanisms, actions and interactions that generate the asymmetry. In other words, we have to understand “modernity”.

Modernity has been criticised for being teleological, evolutionary and unidirectional (Ferguson 1999; Brenner 1998; Hodgson 2001), and for ignoring the peculiarities of local histories and individualities (Napolitano 2002; Bonfil Batalla 1989). As many scholars have pointed out, minorities in postcolonial nations do not

experience modernity in the same way. Historically, Mayan communities have engaged with and resisted neoliberal reforms and modernisation projects (Collier 1999; Saldaña-Portillo 2003). Rather than sharing similar worldviews, they have foregrounded their own understanding of modernity (Bonfil Batalla 1989). Academics who studied Mayan communities before the Zapatista Rebellion were not particularly interested in understanding Mayans' relation with modernity and globalisation, but rather focused on salvage ethnographies of closed-corporate communities (Watanabe and Fisher 2004). More recently, a number of studies started to make these connections. June Nash (2001) suggested that Mayans in Chiapas used to their advantage the concept of human rights to oppose neoliberal reforms and get access to denied resources. She also pointed out that against modernity's emphasis on free markets and individuality, Mayans are led by a cultural logic revolving around principles of cooperation, autonomy and moral obligations. This is a logic that evidently clashes with the neoliberal one.

As a by-product of modernity, tourism and the state-led development of the *Riviera Maya*, with its corollary of migration and social stratification, have produced a clash of values, creating conflicts over the very definition of progress and tradition. However, it is exactly through such an active engagement with modernity that indigenous communities can refashion their identities while maintaining, concomitantly, their sense of indigeneity.

CHAPTER 4

Being a Woman in Xocén: Sexual Differentiations, Symbolic Orders and Gender Inequalities



Figure 14: Daily life: women making *tortillas*.

4.1 “*Soy madre y ama de casa, esto es mi trabajo*”: entering the world of Xocén’s women

On Saturday mornings, Xocén wakes up³³ very early. Many men who work in the *Riviera* go back to the village to spend their days off from work with their families.

³³ Embracing the argument in support of a “vivid writing style” for ethnographic writing (see, for example, Malinowski 2003 [1922] and Geertz 1973), in this excerpt, as well as in others throughout the thesis, I chose to use the present tense as a literary device intended to render the liveliness and corporeal dimension of the ethnographic encounter within the fieldwork experience. This vividness is often captured in the ethnographer’s diary but it usually gets lost in the more distanced and rationalised writing up stage. Although the use of the ethnographic

Women are busier than usual preparing food and getting all the housework done before their husbands, fathers and brothers get home. In some houses, women prepare the traditional *chachacua*, a steamed patted corn dough (*masa*), spiced with *achiote* (the red seed of the annatto tree) and filled with small pieces of chicken and pork and a few slices of tomato and boiled eggs. “*Chachacua* are made for special occasions”, research participant Marta explains, “we usually prepare them for the *Hanal Pixán* (The Day of the Dead) or for *novenas*, but sometimes husbands and fathers ask to eat them when they are back in the village during the weekend. In Cancún they cannot find this type of food and thus crave it”.

The *chachacua* is traditionally cooked “*pibil*”: the *pib* (literally “hole in the ground”) is a cooking method that has been used for centuries in Yucatán. Due to the strength required to make the *pib*, the time-consuming preparation of the *chachacua* is one of the few occasions when men make a contribution to food processing, which in Mayan culture is considered a female task. While women are busy folding and rolling the *masa*, men dig a hole in the ground of their gardens, fill it with wood and light a fire in it. Then, they place stones on top of the firewood to help conduct heat while cooking. Once the stones heat up, the *chachacua*, individually wrapped in banana leaves, are placed on top of the stones and covered with palm leaves. The cooking time spans from twenty to thirty minutes but the whole process requires around nine hours of continuous work. On the Day of the Dead, women wake up at 4 a.m. to get the *chachacua* ready for lunch. “Preparing the *pib* is the task of men”, Marta explains, “thus, when men are in Cancún, instead of baking the *chachacua* in the *pib* we cook them in a pan. It’s not the same taste but it makes them happy”.

Today, Marta got out of her hammock at 5.30. Her husband Pedro, who works as a machine tool operator at the Coca-Cola factory in Cancún with other family members, will take a second-class bus after work and will arrive in Xocén around 11 p.m. On the weekends, Marta usually prepares *chachacua* or other food he likes. This time, though,

present in anthropological writings has been criticised as a vague and temporal representation that would reflect the ahistorical pretend of anthropology (on these issues see Stocking 1983 and Crapanzano 1986), for me it is a logical corollary of the peculiar nature of the discipline. As I explained in the Introduction, my point of departure is a view of anthropology as a performance, a “synchronic” (Marcus and Fischer 1986: 96) practice that is a mode of doing, acting and creating (see Fabian 1986). If the ethnographic present may evoke the performativity of fieldwork and the vividness of life experience better than the past tense, it still remains a narrative device that cannot reproduce reality. I agree with Hastrup (2009: 53) that “In language we can encircle the lived reality, but it remains a shadow in our text. Life is not text, and is not reducible to one”.

Pedro will find nothing special other than bean soup and *tortillas*. Hector, the couple's youngest son, was sick the whole week and Marta had to take him to the doctor and buy the medicines the doctor prescribed. She spent all the money that Pedro gave her the week before, so that nothing was left to buy the meat for making *chachacua*.

29 years old, Marta got married with Pedro when she was 18. The couple have two sons, Hector, nine years old, and Alberto, four years old. "*Soy madre y ama de casa, esto es mi trabajo*", "I'm a mother and a housewife, this is my job" – Marta says – "My time revolves around my children and my domestic chores". Every day, as soon as she wakes up, Marta prepares *nixtamal*³⁴, rinsing the corn that she has left to soak overnight and getting it ready to be taken to the mill. When Hector and Alberto wake up around 6, she begins to make the breakfast: hot cocoa and *pan frances* (a store-bought white bread) for them, and instant coffee and some *atole* (a hot gruel made from corn dough) for herself. Every day, after breakfast, Marta washes the dishes, folds the hammocks and hangs them on the walls. Then, she sweeps the floor, fills her water containers from the well and feeds her chickens and turkeys in the backyard. When the house is straightened up, Marta starts to prepare the lunch, putting a pot of water and black beans to boil on the cooking fire. While the beans are slowly cooking, she goes to the mill to get the *nixtamal* ground. Back home, she washes her *hipiles* and the clothes of her sons until noon. When she is done, it is time to make *tortillas*. She sits on a stool around a small wooden table, places a small amount of *masa* on a thin piece of plastic and begins to pat it with the palm of her hand with a rotatory movement that confers a round shape to the *tortilla*. Each pancake is cooked on the *comal* (iron griddle) for a few minutes, turned over, and then removed from the griddle and put over hot coals from the hearth. As soon as the *tortilla* starts puffing, Marta removes it from the coals and pats it again on the table. When the air is out, she puts the *tortillas* into a *jicara* and covers them with a clean cloth to keep them warm. While Hector and Alberto eat the bean soup grabbing one *tortilla* after the other, Marta continues patting. When the *masa* is finished and her sons have eaten everything, she can finally have lunch.

When I arrive at Marta's home around 2 p.m., she is in the kitchen weaving a hammock. It is rainy season and small plastic containers are placed throughout the house to collect water seeping from the thatched roof. For the second year running, Marta is attending a public workshop on weaving techniques with twenty other women

³⁴ *Nixtamal* is the corn that has been partially cooked with lye. When ground, it makes a dough that can be shaped into *tortillas*.

from Xocén. The workshop is funded by the government and held every Tuesday afternoon under the arches of the Municipal Building. Each participant has received free threads to weave three hammocks, which they are free to keep for household consumption or sell. The government, however, does not provide personal frame looms to the participants, which means that the progression of the work, for the majority of the women, is bound to the space and time of the workshop. “The loom costs 200 pesos” – Marta explains – “it is expensive, but it is an essential tool if we want to work at home and make the most from what we learn at the workshop. Many women just cannot afford to buy one. I bought mine splitting the expense with my three sisters, who also attend the workshop. We aim to keep two hammocks for the household and sell the third to make some money as a way to contribute to family expenses”.

Before starting to weave hammocks, Marta was an independent embroiderer who worked from home sewing blouses for the owner of a shop based in Temozón. She refers to him as “*el señor*”, “the sir”, because despite a longstanding working relationship she has never known his name:

«The sir used to pay me 30 pesos per blouse. I was fast and efficient at that time; I could sew one blouse per week, which made me earn almost 150 pesos per month. Then, as soon as Alberto was born, I started to feel sad and listless. I could not find the energy for sewing; I barely could get out of my hammock in the morning. I was alone without my husband, with the double burden of being a mother and a father at the same time. The doctor told me that I was depressed and that my diet lacked vitamins. He prescribed some supplements that I could not buy. I had to take care of my children first, because as I was sick, they also were sick. After one year, slowly, I started to recover».

Before marriage, when she was an adolescent, Marta used to work as a teacher assistant in the theatre, giving *Jarana* classes to the children. She was paid 500 pesos every month, “a lot of money for a young girl”, Marta says. Throughout the years, with her savings, she managed to buy a small piece of land where Eugenio, her father, built a *paja*. Thanks to this house, when she got married, rather than moving into the residence of her parents-in-laws in San Martiniano, the small village in Quintana Roo where her husband is originally from, Marta managed to convince Pedro to move to Xocén. Marta’s uncle, who at that time was employed at the Coca-Cola factory in Cancún, took

Pedro to the plant and found him a job as a cleaner. After eleven years, he was promoted to the role of machine operator.

Unlike other men who work seasonally in the *Riviera* and keep making *milpa* in their home communities, Pedro does not perform any agricultural work. Coming from Quintana Roo, he does not have the right to work the *ejido* land in the state of Yucatán. As a result, his family relies exclusively on his wage work to buy corn, wood for cooking and other staples. Working eight hours per day, every day from Monday to Saturday, Pedro earns a weekly salary of 1800 pesos (net). When I interviewed him, he listed the expenses that he has to handle during the week. Since the factory provides the employees with free accommodation in a dormitory, Pedro spends only for food and transportation: 150 pesos per week to eat in the factory's canteen and 202 pesos to travel to Xocén every weekend. Marta does not know exactly how much Pedro earns; every week, he gives her 200 pesos to meet all family expenses. When I ask how she manages to survive with this meagre allowance, she states: “*Estiro el dinero toda la semana para sacar a mis chamacos*”, “I stretch the money the whole week to set my children ahead. It is not enough, though and I need to make my contribution. I sell all sorts of items: turkeys, some eggs, sandwiches, blouses, and hammocks... anything that can help my family to move forward”.

In the context of the Mexican economic crisis in the 1980s, poor families were able to survive the economic shock by drawing on the combined contribution of family members. Women played a central role in alleviating financial pressures on poor households (Chant 1991; Benería and Feldman 1992). In addition to their unpaid domestic labour and child-caring responsibilities, they took on low-paid income-generating activities and performed, as Marta, the magical work of “stretching” the scarce resources available to their families.

Like Marta, in Xocén the majority of women sew clothing, weave hammocks and process food for sale in order to contribute to the household economy. These activities are carried out at home, as this allows women to produce an income without neglecting their roles as mothers and homemakers. Roles and responsibilities, in Mayan culture, are assigned according to a particular definition of gender. Questions of sexuality, procreation, family, gender and marital relationships, which are discussed in the following sections, are central to the understanding of Mayan women's status within the

family and the broader society. These questions profoundly shape women's everyday choices, impinging on their incorporation in the labour market.

Issues of subjectivities always raise ethical and emotional problems. Being a woman myself, I found it easier to explore these topics with women. Explanations and insights sometimes emerged in the formalised space of the interview; most of the times, however, data materialised in the strictest of confidence within informal conversations with friends, so blurring the boundaries between life and fieldwork. Clearly, the statements of my research participants and friends and the accounts of their experiences are not representative of all Mayan women and men. However, these experiences, which I deal with in an exploratory way, elucidate the domestic ideologies that shape Mayan women's identities, suggesting that the condition of women and their bargaining power within the household and the wider community change according to the different stages of their life-cycle.

4.2 “*El hombre es el que manda*”: the symbolic and factual construction of sexual differentiation and roles

“*El hombre es el que manda*”, the man is the one who rules. I have heard women in Xocén recite this sort of mantra innumerable times. In front of a visitor, these words will be pronounced with the irresistible sense of humour Yucatecan people are well known for. The jeering facial cues and tone of voice will lead the visitor to complete the sentence with a sharp statement that would sound like: “...This is what we let men believe”. Yet, behind their public performances, in conversation with sisters and mothers or in front of my camera, these women would eventually allow the humour to dissipate and express another continuation for the story: “...If he tells me ‘stay’, I stay; if he tells me ‘sit’, I sit. If he tells me ‘no’, it is no”.

In Mayan culture, the man is the *nohoč màac*, the head of the household; it is his duty to support the family through his agricultural or off-farm work. This idea has legitimised the male prominence in Maya society “from time immemorial” (Nadal 2010: 142), and is still operating in the present even when men's work is not the principal source of income in the household. This “immemorial order” finds expression more clearly in symbolic representations than in people's everyday lives; nonetheless, this symbolism manages to shape gender relationships and roles in very tangible and pragmatic ways.

Today as in the past, Yucatecan Mayas consider corn to be the axis of their symbolic system of representation. The sacredness of corn is expressed in the *Popol Vuh* and the *Chilam Balam de Chumayel*³⁵, where it is stated that men were made out of corn during creation (“*El hombre es hecho de maíz*”). From this identification of men with corn, we enter the realm of sexual differentiations. In Mayan symbolism, “hot”, “bright”, “dry” and “strong” are characteristics associated with men, whereas “cold”, “dark”, “humid” and “weak” are quintessentially feminine attributes (Nadal 2010: 143). This dichotomy, so deeply rooted in the Mesoamerican system of representation (Fagetti 1998), also embraces and gives shape to sexuality: men are so “hot” that their desires cannot be contained, while women, being “colder” and “weaker”, can and must be restrained.

The duality of strong/weak also operates at a social level, creating a specific sexual division of labour. The fact that men are stronger than women is seen as empirical evidence that legitimises man’s role as head of the family (Nadal 2010: 143): only men have the strength to perform the strenuous agricultural work in the sacred cornfield. Putting them in contact with the Lords of Nature³⁶ and giving access to esoteric knowledge, the making of the *milpa* assigns to men a central role in Mayan communities’ political and religious organisation. According to Nadal (2010: 145), it is precisely from the symbolic centrality of *milpa* work that gender inequalities originate.

Some researchers have argued that there is no such a thing as an overestimation of men’s work in Eastern Yucatán’s Mayan societies. In her classic study of Mayan women of Chan Kom, Mary Elmendorf (1976) suggests that a gendered division of labour fosters a system of interdependence between genders, in which men and women respect each other’s roles and work to complement one another. Alternatively, Lourdes Rejón Patrón (1998) explains that this interdependence is contingent on a gendered division of labour: as long as women continue working in specific gendered occupations they are respected; or if they go beyond these boundaries, they are stigmatised and isolated.

Addressing the issue of power distribution among genders within the symbolism of corn, Elmendorf (1979) posits that Mayan women’s access to power and knowledge is equitable to men. Women, indeed, participate in the corn economy transforming the

³⁵ The *Popol Vuh* and the *Chilam Balam de Chumayel* are corpuses of mytho-historical narratives from which the Mayan cosmo-vision originates.

³⁶ See “Religious system” in the Introduction.

sacred plant into *tortillas* or *atole*³⁷ and making it edible. Challenging this assumption, Marie-José Nadal contends that, as the transformation of corn is performed at home and not in the *milpa*, it does not give women access to esoteric knowledge. Therefore, Nadal continues, gender construction in Mayan culture is based on the exclusion of women from the set of socially valued practices (Nadal 2010: 145).

Stressing the complex blend of positive and negative evaluations and experiences that characterise Mayan women's lives and relationships with men, Susan Kellogg writes:

«Women's labor is highly valued because Maya cultural beliefs stress the importance of work, and men's and women's work is seen as fundamentally complementary, as each sex depends so much on the work of the other [...] But that complementarity is powerfully undercut by a number of factors, including greater overall male activity in the public realm, patterns of sexuality and violence, and differences in the overall health and nutrition of Maya women and men» (Kellogg 2005: 118-119).

As a matter of fact, in Xocén men hold all the institutional, political and religious offices; yet, it is possible to highlight some level of gender complementarity. While healers and shamans, known as *h'meno'ob*, are exclusively men, female practitioners, whether traditional *parteras* (midwives), *yerbateras* (herbalists) or modern nurses, are common in Xocén and highly respected. In particular, midwives are treated as esteemed figures; the community accords them deference, especially by the children they have delivered.

As for the religious practices, private and public ceremonies like the Mayan marriage, the *Hetz'Mek* (the Mayan baptism), the *Hanal Pixán* (the Day of the Dead), the *Loj Ka* (the village's clearing ceremony), the *U Hanli Kool* (the ritual harvest thanksgiving) and *novenas* (advents), among others, are mostly led by male specialists (again the *h'meno'ob* or the *rezadores*, the prayer makers). An important ritual such as the *Ch'a Cháak*, performed every year in May or June to request rain from the God Cháak, is prohibited to women.

³⁷ The *atole* is a traditional thick hot beverage prepared with corn flour and consumed daily or on ritual occasions.

If the worship of the rain and maize gods is in the hands of men, the Catholic rituals are in the charge of women. However, this “benefit” has not been allowed to women by the community; rather, it has been imposed by the Church (Terán and Rasmussen 2005: 322). In more general terms, we can say that while men lead public or community rituals, women have a central role, albeit not exclusive, in the domestic ones. Women mostly prepare foods for *fiestas* and share extensively in the preparations and rituals connected to the community cargos (see Introduction).

At a cultural level, a sanctioned role with authority that is assigned to women is that of preserving local forms of ethnic identity. Producing and wearing traditional embroideries is one of the ways in which women act as keepers of cultural knowledge. Another way they play this role is by overseeing community moral codes by policing the sexuality of younger women, whether they are family members or not. In both cases, gossip (*el chisme*) acts as the elected discipline tool of young female bodies. As a matter of fact, in Eastern Yucatán’s Mayan societies control over women comes less from men’s authority and more from surveillance by middle-aged women, who enforce a moral code that discourages young women from acting outside the set of socially prescribed gender norms.

As for political roles, women have less access to political positions and less influence on decision-making processes in the community. No woman sits at the elders’ board, the governing council, currently constituted by sixteen senior men. Women do not appear among the ranks of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the dominant political party of Mexico and the only party represented in Xocén. In general, rates of female voting are very low due to the high percentage of illiteracy among women aged over 40.

Typically, a hundred or two hundred people appear for a community assembly. About 80 to 90 per cent of these are male. Men monopolise the speaking roles at community meetings, but they frequently inform and consult female household members about community issues. When health happens to be the topic to discuss, more women show up and may make up close to a majority. Health, indeed, is a major concern for women in Xocén; because of their sedentary lifestyle and nutritional deficits, they tend to get sick very often. Most women suffer from high blood pressure, diabetes, infected gall bladders, and seizures, all of which require medical treatment. Although the village has a government-sponsored health clinic (*Centro de Salud*) that provides free health care for the community members, families rarely frequent this

centre, as they deem the quality of doctors and the care provided to be poor. They prefer to travel to Valladolid and pay for a private consultancy (*doctor particular*), which increases family expenses.

Sexual health is a particularly serious subject. Unless she is sterile – a very unfortunate circumstance that constitutes legitimate ground for divorce³⁸ – a married woman in Xocén begins having children very early, often between the ages of 15 and 20, and is either pregnant or lactating throughout most of her reproductive life. Fecundity has a high cultural value for the Mayas; in Xocén, families with many kids are regarded as happy families. Children represent security for the parent's old age – childless couples are thought to have higher probabilities of becoming beggars in old age – and can make a significant contribution to family collective labour. Since children are born by “God's will”, as Xocenenses say, people do not plan to have a certain number of kids. While having several children – especially males – is a source of pride and honour for men, pregnancy is a major source of stress for women. Besides the physical stress – pregnant women assume the normal workload to the last day of their pregnancy –, pregnancy induces anxiety, as it is regarded as an unpredictable and dangerous state (Beyene 1989: 88). While access to abortion remains minimal due to the influence of the Catholic Church and Protestant denominations, contraception is slowly getting accepted in the community, especially among young married women. The use of contraceptive methods, however, is not the exclusive choice of a woman but must be negotiated with the husband and, sometimes, with other members of her extended family. In general, even when women are ready to accept family planning programs, men are reluctant. Because they are increasingly working outside the village, husbands feel that they will lose control over the sexual activity of their wives if the women are on a birth control program.

Apart from high rates of maternal mortality, adolescent pregnancy and breastfeeding often lead to deficiencies in phosphorous and calcium, hypertension and anaemia, which, combined, can leave women with serious long-term health problems. Malnutrition exacerbates those conditions related to reproduction that are endured by women. Relationships between traditional practitioners and doctors representing national medical institutions are also troubled, notwithstanding the great emphasis that

³⁸ In the case where a woman proves to be sterile, her husband either abandons her or finds another woman who can bear children for him. The incapacity to have children is always assumed to be the woman's fault, and generally traced to sorcery or infant womb.

the government puts on collaboration between traditional and “official” medicine, and the financial resources it invests in providing *parteras* with high levels of training around hygiene for reducing mortality. Psychological or psychiatric issues are also common among women in Xocén. During my fieldwork, I collected a significant number of personal narratives on post-partum depression, which most women are not able to recognise and adequately address due to the lack of both personal knowledge on the subject and psychological counselling services in Xocén.

Within the domestic group, men hold the decision-making power about the management and allocation of financial resources, children’s education and, as I said, the reproductive health of their wives. Women, instead, decide about questions that do not necessarily fall within the male sphere of interest, such as the purchase of shoes and clothes for children or school stationery supplies. Although the physical absence of men due to seasonal migration and the changing economic patterns have allowed women more room for manoeuvre, their decisional power remains very limited. Even when women actively contribute to the household economy, any money they earn is turned over to their families and spent immediately on necessities, as determined by husbands, older brothers, and fathers. Not only is it the case that women devote their earnings to family needs, but they are also expected to do so. Where women earn their own income or where their husbands give them an “allowance”, this money is generally invested on routine necessities such as food, transport, children’s education and healthcare. On the other hand, men are more likely to spend their money on “extras” such as durable and luxury consumption goods (television, stereo system, DVD player), or in “men-specific” activities such as drinking³⁹.

By and large, the percentage of earnings withheld by men is difficult to work out since many wives do not have any idea of their husbands’ income, especially when it comes to knowledge of gratuities, bonuses and overtime payments. However, when women go out to work, this is sometimes construed by men as grounds for retaining even more of their income for personal use. Although in Maya culture a man who neglects his role of *nohoč màac* is considered “*una pestilencia*”, a “pestilence”, in

³⁹ Male-female differences over expenditure in low-income Mexican households have been analysed in a number of studies (Chant 1984, 1991; González de la Rocha 1988; Roldán 1988). In particular, in their study of female outworkers in Mexico City, Benería and Roldán (1987) observe that whereas women donate virtually all their income to household necessities, men retain about one-quarter of their wages for “pocket money”. According to the authors, female-male differences over expenditure turns the idea of the harmonious household on its head.

reality, a great number of men who work in the *Riviera*, or elsewhere outside the community, do not send remittances home and, in more and more cases, abandon their families.

4.3 From sexual differentiation to gender inequalities: *machismo*, domestic violence, *la “buena mujer”* and *los “trabajos sutiles”*

Notions of gender and gender roles in Mexico are intrinsically caught up in the interrelated notions of *machismo* and *marianismo*, which have been widely discussed in the literature on Latin American societies⁴⁰. The term *machismo* derives from the Spanish word *macho*, which means “male” or “manly” and is characterised by the hyper-virile, aggressive and dominant behaviour expected of males in Latin societies. A *macho* embodies courage, physical strength, self-confidence, heightened sexual power and bold advances towards women. Based on this cultural construction of masculinity, in Latin America the *macho* has been popularised in literature, legends, or movies. Rolando Andrade (1992) has identified four archetypes of *machismo* in Mexican scholarly and popular literature: the Conqueror *macho*, the Playboy *macho*, the Masked *macho*, and the Authentic *macho*. The Conqueror *macho*, characterised by exaggerated sexual potency and extreme bravery in facing dangerous situations, exemplifies the negative sides of the archetype. Epitomised by the figure of the *pistolero*, or gunslinger, the Conqueror *macho* demands power and acts outside the law. The Playboy *macho* is the sexually aggressive man. Based on the idea of man’s biological, social, and intellectual superiority over women, the Playboy *macho* is allowed to pursue adultery and sexually and physically abuse women. The Masked *macho*, the less common archetype of *machismo*, defines a man who uses a mask of deceit to hide his real interests, desires and concerns. Like the legendary Pancho Villa, a Masked *macho* often fights for the oppressed. Finally, the Authentic *macho* embodies the image of a man who is a responsible husband and father. Clinging to ideals of strength, dignity, honour, respect, and protection of the family, the Authentic *macho* is seen as a more balanced individual. This type, however, is not popularised in literature, legends, or movies.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Swartzbaugh 1969; Stevens 1973; Browner and Lewin 1982; Rodriguez Sehk 1985; Palma 1990; Ehlers 1991; Andrade 1992; Melhuus 1992, 1996; Montecino 1993; Gutmann 1996, 2003.

Marianismo is the female counterpart to *machismo*. The term, coined by political scientist Evelyn P. Stevens (1973), refers to the Marian devotion and is characterised by selflessness, saintliness and submissiveness. Modelled on the image of the Virgin Mary (or Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico⁴¹), the ideal of femininity that underpins *marianismo* is that of a virtuous, modest woman, who accepts her role as mother unreservedly and is subordinate and faithful to her husband. Within the *machismo/marianismo* ideological spectrum, women are identified with spiritual and moral purity as they dedicate their lives to their children and maintain the stronghold of humility, self-denial and honour in the face of the self-gratifying, pleasure-seeking men. While the woman who upholds this moral ideal is considered a “*buena mujer*”, or good woman, and venerated as a likeness of the Virgin Mary, the woman who acts out of self-interest is labelled as a “*mala mujer*”, or bad woman.

The cultural constructions of male and female according to notions of *machismo* and *marianismo* are woven into a “gendered morality” (Melhuus 1992: 118) that profoundly shapes not only the relation of husband and wife but also, and perhaps more importantly, the notions of fatherhood and motherhood. In essence, *marianismo* maintains that women’s moral superiority and self-sacrifice make the ideal mother; consequently, in *marianistas/machistas* societies, it is through her identity as mother that a woman acquires cultural prestige (O’Reilly 2010). If motherhood is regarded as a highly respected and valued role, this prestige has not come without a price. Le Vine writes:

«Women were now regarded as spiritually superior to men, but the price they paid for this increment in status was confinement to the home, where they were “placated” for the loss of any role in the public sphere with the exclusive charge of children [...] They accept the social domination, physical abuse, and economic support of men, secure in the conviction that their capacity for enduring male-inflicted indignities and, ultimately, for forgiving the perpetrator, lends them semidivine status in their children’s eyes» (1993:89).

⁴¹ The Virgin of Guadalupe became the key symbol of Mexican identity in the mid-17th century. Our Lady of Guadalupe was further proclaimed by the church as patroness of Mexico in 1754 and in 1900 proclaimed the patroness of the Americas.

As feminist scholars have widely discussed⁴², motherhood, like sexuality, plays a critical role in women's subordination to men. Nancy Chodorow points out: "Women's mothering is a central and defining feature of the social organisation of gender and is implicated in the construction and reproduction of male dominance itself" (Chodorow 1978: 8). Constructed by patriarchy and reinforced by nationalist ideology and its maternal symbolism, in Latin America the dominant pattern of motherhood created on the basis of *marianismo* ideology is actively backed by the Catholic Church through the promulgation of a "family-centric" societal model. In the last decades, this model has also been promoted by neoliberal discourse based on the public/private divide as the separated spheres of female and male activities (Hryciuk 2010).

These representations are found in many regions of Latin America, including Mexico. The anthropologists Silvia Terán Contreras and Christian Rasmussen, who have conducted extensive fieldwork in Xocén, argue, however, that *machismo* in the Eastern Yucatán is not a critical factor in the definition of gender roles as it is in other States of the Mexican Republic (Terán and Rasmussen 1991). In line with Elmendorf, these authors posit that the division of roles in Xocén is equal and instrumental to the perpetuation of the Mayan family, conceived as a strategic and sympathetic "survival unit" (Terán, Rasmussen 2005: 324). Challenging Western feminist approaches which push towards the "extreme individualisation of women" by exposing their bond to the reproductive, domestic and familiar sphere, Terán contends that in Mexico – where, unlike in First World countries, there would be no Welfare State – it is exactly this bond, and the "solidarity" of the nuclear family, that enabled rural populations to overcome the crises that historically have affected the country (Terán 2010: 210).

The claims of these authors, I believe, are contradicted by the social, cultural and economic changes that have affected the rural Yucatán in the last thirty years. Since Mayan peasants have become wage workers in the secondary or tertiary sector and the integration of women into the formal economy has appeared as a generalised fact, the traditional notion of family built on gender and labour "specialisations" has changed significantly, raising questions about the nature of women's relationships in the family and the notion – and the price – of solidarity.

Although the complementarity of Mayan men and women's work is certainly acknowledged in Xocén, the gendered division of labour and roles based on biological

⁴² See, for example, Badinter (1981), von Werlhof, Bennholdt Thomsen and Mies (1988), Mies (1986), Bock and Thane (1991) and Fineman (1995).

determinism establishes an asymmetric structure in gender relationships. This asymmetry is aggravated when women enter the labour market as paid workers and bear the burden of the double shift while trying to fulfil both their productive and reproductive duties. This situation generates considerable levels of tension and antagonism between genders. Exacerbated by male absence due to labour migration and perceived threats to male honour, this tension manifests itself in the sphere of sexuality. Women's lack of knowledge about menstruation and sexuality prior to the commencement of sexual relations or marriage, together with their young ages at marriage and parental tendencies to disregard daughters' feelings about prospective husbands, may be connected to the brittle marital relations, with conflict and separation (not divorce) relatively common, albeit socially discouraged.

Domestic abuse is also a by-product of these tensions. According to Terán and Rasmussen, domestic violence in Xocén is an "exception" whose cause is attributable to men's alcohol consumption (2005: 324). In effect, physical abuse of women is not accepted in the community. The elders' board harshly punishes men who are found beating their wives, segregating them in the community's jail. Nonetheless, the high recurrence of narratives of domestic abuse in the interviews I have conducted in Xocén makes it impossible to classify these circumstances as "exceptions". Rather, domestic violence perpetrated by men on women appears as a plague, whereas the exception is constituted by women who denounce their violent fathers, husbands or brothers to the authorities, as this act leads to gossip and discredits the whole family – first and foremost, the woman concerned. Teresa, 25 years old and unmarried, is one of the few college-educated women in Xocén. When asked to elaborate on the issue of domestic abuse she said:

«... I often ask myself: "where did this violence come from?" In my opinion, the hardest type of violence is the physical one, because it leaves you with no voice. A psychological violence does exist too, but from my point of view, physical violence is the one that actually shuts you off... Because if you are married to a man that doesn't respect you, you know that you have to shut up. If you speak, you know that you will get beaten when you get home, so that it is better to be quiet. For me, the physical violence is the hardest one because one hides it. And when you hide it, you become accomplice... and violence will continue. How many women live in this situation and say nothing about it? They know that, if they got hit yesterday, by

speaking today they would get beaten twice as hard... For a lot of women, violence is a tough experience, something difficult to overcome. Most women have decided to live with it as something normal and ordinary».

Albeit socially sanctioned, domestic violence is interpreted by women as a “normal” aspect of masculine domination (Bourdieu 1986), to such an extent that “putting up with a drunk” (*aguantar el borracho*) is described as an essential virtue of the “good Mayan woman”. On the other hand, what is certainly true is that domestic violence is almost invariably triggered by alcohol abuse. Cristina, a 55-year-old research participant, tackles the issue in these terms:

«A lot of things are changing nowadays, but the only thing that remains the same are men who arrive drunk at home and insult you. This thing has not changed because men are strong...they all have a strong personality...».

The gendered duality of strength/weakness (see MacCormark and Strathern 1980) leads Cristina to naturalise drunken behaviour. According to Feliciano Sánchez Chan, director of the Regional Unit of Popular and Indigenous Cultures (*Unidad Regional de Culturas Populares e Indígenas*) in Mérida and eminent Maya poet, in the past, alcohol consumption was allowed exclusively within the sanctioned time-space of traditional religious ceremonies. Its recent diffusion, instead, is linked to the influence of the lifestyle found in larger, more tourist-oriented cities, changes in economic patterns, and the availability of both cash and alcoholic beverages in rural communities. Sánchez Chan explains:

«In the past, there was already a certain level of alcoholism in Mayan communities as well as in the cities. Probably it was the access to cash and the changes in the social construction of alcohol consumption that facilitated the proliferation of alcoholism. In the past, fermented drinks were associated with religious practices in Mayan communities, although a part of alcohol consumption was merely social. When the domestic production of these beverages was forbidden in the communities, a big state monopoly started and, consequently, alcohol consumption changed. When the economically productive population started to travel to the cities and get paid a weekly salary, it also started to get easy access to the commercialisation of alcoholic beverages. The more cash started to circulate within

the communities, the easier it became to buy alcohol. This triggered, I believe, the proliferation of alcoholism, which causes not only physical violence against women, but also against children, turning into other forms of violence, like not contributing to family expenses, not fulfilling children's basic needs, and so on».⁴³

Sánchez Chan's thesis is corroborated by some scholars who have also linked the rise in alcohol consumption to changes in work patterns (Faust and Bilsborrow 2000; Gaskins 2003) and to the drinking lifestyle associated with life in tourist cities and other urban environments (Re Cruz 1996; Adler 2005; Dietler 2006). According to Gaskin (2003), the transition from *milpa* work to wage labour and the change in lifestyle has brought new challenges, such as longer hours at work and a greater amount of time spent away from the community. This situation would have led to high levels of psychological stress that might explain increased alcohol consumption. In Xocén, a significant number of men I have interviewed associated alcohol abuse with the fast pace of life in the tourist cities as well as with urban violence. Antonio, a 25-year-old cleaner in a Tulum hotel, explains:

«In regards to negative experiences in the *Riviera*, I haven't had any. Yet, I have seen many kids going to the *Riviera* and coming back to the village already very addicted to alcohol and drugs. This is one of the disadvantages of going there, because there is a lot of... how can I say it... life is very fast there. Cancún and Playa are the main places where this is happening nowadays. I have heard many stories... Two years ago, I think, a kid from Valladolid was killed in Cancún. Apparently, he was just spending the afternoon in a park when he was assaulted and stabbed. It is sad when these things happen, because people go there just to make some money and bring it back to the family».

If for many adult men alcohol consumption represents a coping strategy against the challenges of urban life, for the youngest it is more a way of affirming independence from the family and symbolically marking the passage to a new social and economic status. Ismael, 20 years old and assistant cleaner in a Playa del Carmen hotel, explains:

⁴³ Personal interview, Mérida 05/12/2014.

«When you live in the city, you suddenly feel free... You no longer live with your parents and depend on them; they are no longer in the position of scolding you. You earn your money and then you spend it. Consequently, you start drinking... and when you return to the village... well... what can your parents tell you? In the same way that you drink in Playa or Tulum, you drink when you are back in Xocén... And this is when alcohol starts to become a real problem because you are already addicted to it».

While migrants drink to alleviate stress and affirm their economic self-sufficiency, they also typically use alcohol as a social bonding mechanism with other male migrants. This mechanism becomes visible during the weekends, when some returning migrants get together in the main square with cases of beers or crowd into the local *cantinas*. Daniel, a young Xocense who works as a busboy in Tulum, explains:

«I drink because everybody drinks... It's a male thing. If you don't drink while in the company of other men who are drinking you will be teased and subject to peer pressure by your friends to drink with them. This is why we all drink, even those who don't like alcohol».

As a stress-reliever or social bonding mechanism between men migrants, alcohol consumption in Xocén seems to have blatantly replaced the *milpa* work as a quintessential performance of masculinity. If in a shifting economy, men are forced to refashion their gender identities by fabricating new markers of manhood, women appear enmeshed in more static self-perceptions, locked into traditional models of femininity and definitions of gender. Deeply rooted in biological determinism, these definitions craft a particular prototype of Mayan woman, who is primarily assigned to a reproductive destiny and to a specific universe of “feminine practices”. These practices mostly take place in the home, that is, the private space *par excellence*.

The set of domestic occupations a woman is assigned to abruptly materialise in her life when she gets married. Lupita, one of the few divorced women in Xocén, explains:

«In Xocén there is this idea that a woman doesn't have to leave her home, doesn't have to study, doesn't have to work because it's her husband's responsibility to maintain her. The day that a woman gets married, everything has ended; a woman

gets married to have children, attend her husband and stay in the home cleaning and making *tortillas*. Nothing else. A woman exists to serve these purposes».

Although used and abused, the classic dichotomy private/public⁴⁴ proposed in various gender studies (Elshtain 1981; Siltanen and Stanworth 1984; Hochschild 1989; Boling 1996; Boyd 1997; Greer 1999) can offer a valid framework to interpret the cultural categories that establish the contours of Mayan women's agency. A core notion that consigns women to the realm of the "private" is that of "sacredness". Lidia, 39 years old and unmarried, explains:

«For us, the Mayas, women are sacred [...] we should then define what the price of being sacred is. Being sacred means being locked in a box. The other side of the coin is that being sacred is a privilege, because if someone touches you, rapes you, he is brutally punished; indeed, you are sacred because you're a virgin... From here comes the idea that a woman must be shut in the home, locked in her "subtle tasks" that are sweeping, cooking, washing and ironing... Occupations that don't require any strength [...] Sacredness implies an ideal of woman that is quiet, submissive and irresolute. A sacred woman won't take any decision, won't do anything more than what is considered okay for her to do. This is being an ideal, prototypical Mayan woman...»

According to Lidia, women's "sacredness" is inherently tied to the notion of virginity⁴⁵, which in Mayan culture is considered key to a woman's progress towards

⁴⁴ The distinction of private/public, with the relegation of women to the former, has been used in feminist studies as a key concept to explain women's subordination and to tackle hierarchies and inequalities. In anthropology, this distinction has been used to unmask the constructed nature of gender definitions and relationships, and to expose their tie to power relations and inequalities. This framework, however, has been recently criticised for being an ethnocentric construct and for proposing a too rigid dichotomy (Goddard 2000), imbued, as other dichotomies such as nature/culture, with the implications of negative values (Jay 1981). Recognising the cultural and historical variability of this theoretical device, I use "private" and "public" as fluid and dialectically related concepts, whose boundaries are constantly negotiated and re-defined by the agents.

⁴⁵ The notion of virginity has been conceptualised in some studies as a tool for constructing hierarchies and/or for accessing particular resources (see Yalman 1967; Schneider 1971; Martinez-Alier 1972; Blok 1981). In "The Virgin and the State", Sherry Ortner (1978) associates the growing concern with women's chastity and the subsequent control over their sexuality with the rise of the State and the process of political centralisation. By connecting the intimate sphere of women's sexuality to political discourses, Ortner suggests that gender ideologies pertain not only to the realm of the "private" but are also (strategically) produced by and reproduced in the public domain [see also Goddard (1996 and 2000)].

marriage. While men are not expected to be chaste before marriage, or faithful once they marry, a woman who has had (or is suspected to have had) premarital sexual relationships, either with her fiancée or with other men, is typically labelled as a “*mujer fácil*” (easy lady). If rumours spread that a woman is sexually “impure”, her chances of marriage are drastically reduced. In Xocén, the social construct of honour and shame⁴⁶, pivotal in creating the normative consensus regarding what it means to be a man and a woman, lies at the core of virginity control. Shame is indeed a “feminine quality”, and it is the duty of any woman to protect her chastity and avoid actions that would stain the honour of her family.

The notion of virginity, associated with purity and shame, is explained by Xocenenses as having a biological underpinning. In the dominant discourse, women’s bodies are naturally more open than men’s⁴⁷. The traits of openness and permeability make young women vulnerable to the attacks of the *mal viento*, the evil wind (see Introduction), and to impurity and sexual violations. From this anatomical vulnerability comes the notion of sacredness, inherently associated with the quasi-divine figure of the “Woman of the House”, to be opposed, as Nanneke Redclift writes, to the disquieting “Woman of the Street”:

«The woman of the house, located within an appropriately socialised fertility, is sacred, while the woman of the street is likely to be dangerously open to the forces of evil, which are pictured as both acquisitive and hyper-sexual» (Redclift 2003: 490).

To protect her sacredness from the threat of bewitchment and violation, the “Woman of the House” remains, precisely, in the house, where she performs an “irresolute” identity and a range of “gender-safe activities”, what Lidia calls “*los trabajos sutiles*”, the “subtle tasks”. Despite the classic studies’ stress on equity and complementarity in gender relations, for Lidia the cage of the “subtle work” stems from a *machista* “ideology” that prioritises men’s education and professional development over women, and generates oppression on the latter:

⁴⁶ On virginity, honour and shame, see Jane Schneider, “Of vigilance and virgins: honor, shame and access to resources” (1971), Gideon Kressel, “Shame and gender” (1992) and Julian Pitt-Rivers, “Honor and social status” (1965).

⁴⁷ On the open/closed opposition in the symbolic order, see Renée Hirschon, “Open body/closed space: the transformation of female sexuality” (1978).

«When it comes to education, priority is given to men, because they will be the family breadwinners [...] People are capable of selling absolutely everything to allow their sons to study, but they don't make the same effort for women because they think: "she will get married, she will be maintained by her husband". Well, I feel that this is unfair. Women should have the same right to development, because men and women are the same, we are all human beings. This is what I recently told my grandmother when she said that men are better than women [...] From my standpoint this view generates oppression. When men say: "you're a woman, I can abuse you, I can punch you, I can do whatever I want because you're below me" it is because someone made them believe that. This is simply an ideology; spaces, unfortunately, are also ideologies [...] The spaces that we, as women, have available for expressing our potential and developing our skills get closed as a result of this ideology. This happens in the very moment when men think, believe, or dream that they are superior to women».

Certainly, in Xocén no man in his right mind would dare to claim publicly that women are inferior; nevertheless, *la costumbre* (the custom) – a sort of Bourdesian *doxa*⁴⁸ invoked by Xocenenses every time they are asked to explain the reason for a certain individual or collective behaviour – prescribes a normative order where women are subordinated to men. In spite of their conviction that *machismo* is not a relevant cultural feature in the Eastern Yucatán, in their ethnography of Xocén, Terán and Rasmussen cannot avoid acknowledging: "A woman is always at the orders of a man: a daughter of her father, a wife of her husband, a sister of her brother" (Terán and Rasmussen 2005: 322, my translation). Not surprisingly, the internalisation of the categories of the patriarchal dominance (Bourdieu 1986) leads many women, as is the case with Lidia's grandmother, to affirm with great conviction that men are better than women.

Lidia, Municipal Commissioner of a thirty-family Mayan village and National Counsellor at the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Population

⁴⁸ For Pierre Bourdieu (1972) the term *doxa* denotes the set of unquestioned beliefs that are embodied in actions and feeling but seldom formulated in words, accepted as beyond the possibility of contestation and resistant to modification, as in the case of social-gender relations within a patriarchal system. Doxa happens when we "forget the limits" that have given rise to unequal divisions in society; it is "an adherence to relations of order which, because they structure inseparably both the real world and the thought world, are accepted as self-evident" (Bourdieu 1984: 471).

(CDI), has challenged these norms. With her father and older brother staring at her, she is not afraid to tell me:

«It is so difficult for a woman to find the courage to say: “I will be a candidate to cover this position”. In fact, she will be immediately warned: “You are a good-for-nothing, you are a woman, a blabbermouth, indecisive, a weak woman [...] It is very nice when men tell you that nowadays women have all the doors open, that we can work, develop our potential, do whatever we want; sadly, the reality is different. The reality is that we did not get to that point where people recognise us as workers, as fighters, in any field we want to stay».

In front of my camera, Lidia proudly defended her choice to remain single. Off camera, when her father and brother left, she confessed that, albeit proud of her professional achievements, her family keeps pushing her to find a “good guy” and get married. Her mother, Adriana, who is 72 years old, got married by arrangement between her family and the groom’s family when she was 14. Her fascinating way with words and her uncommon charisma did not spare her domestic abuse. “My mom is my lighting guide, she is my inspiration” – Lidia says – “She couldn’t fight for herself, but she did it for me”. Indeed, unlike her two brothers who managed to finish the *secundaria* (secondary school), Lidia was not allowed to go further than primary school. Supported by her mother who wished a different life for her daughter, Lidia went back to school when she was 20 and successfully obtained a high school degree. Her desire for improvement, “*superarse*”, first brought her among the ranks of the Yucatecan indigenous movement through participation in the collective “*Fuerza Indígena de Yucatán*”, then to the municipal presidency of her village and, finally, to be elected as one of the 120 National Counsellors of the CDI – of whom, Lidia admonishes, just twenty are women. These public/political roles have allowed her to travel throughout the Mexican Republic, meet people of different social and ethnic backgrounds, and expand her horizons and her self-awareness. Lidia’s experiences, however, are light years away from the everyday lives of other Mayan women. Hard-fighting, Lidia has pushed the boundaries of feminine freedom as traditionally conceived in Mayan culture, yet she has become “man-like” in the eyes of other women. The life course of these women, many of whom have never learned Spanish or travelled farther than Valladolid, keeps twisting quietly through the routes of Tradition.

4.4 Essentialising gender: the prototypical life course of a Mayan woman

As Judith Butler (1993) suggests, gender is not an essence or a fact, but a cultural construction that is made possible through a set of stylised acts of repetition that constitute a performance of gender. Through repeating the activities of the gendered division of labour, Mayan girls learn to perform gender in a particular way. Whereas a boy is taught how to weed the *milpa*, collect firewood, hunt and take care of animals, a girl learns how to efficiently pull water from the well, wash clothes, make the *nixtamal* and care for younger siblings. So, while the decline of *milpa* work and the overall “de-professionalisation” (Baños 2001: 194) of the Mayan peasant due to migration and wage labour may have spelled the end of these aspects of young men’s gendered apprenticeship, women continue to be trained in their traditional gendered occupations.

In the course of the time spent in Xocén, I solicited – and I have been solicited to listen to – the life story narratives of several women. Notwithstanding substantial differences in their fibre and personality, as well as in the socio-economic composition of their households, specific events and circumstances insistently recur in their oral narratives. Focusing on these commonalities, in the following vignette I attempt to sketch the prototypical life cycle of a woman in Xocén.

The life course of a Mayan woman proceeds through different stages that are spelled out by specific rites of passage. Both for men and women, the first of these rituals is the *Hetz’Mek*, the Mayan baptism, which is performed to awaken symbolically the mental faculties of the child and make him/her a valuable member of the community⁴⁹. This ritual represents the formal acknowledgement of the different sex roles and takes place four months after birth for boys and three months after birth for girls. The numbers three and four symbolise the sexual “specialisation” in the social division of labour. Four are in fact the corners of the *milpa* where a boy will go to work, and three are the stones of the hearth where a girl will cook the *tortillas*. The number four not only anticipates the familiarity of a boy with the agricultural work, but it also binds him to a wider symbolic context. In fact, in Mayan mythology, the number four corresponds to

⁴⁹ In Yucatec Maya the term *hetz’mek* means “carrying a child on the hip”. This ritual is intended to introduce the child to the adult world. After the *hetz’mek*, every child will be “carried across the hip”, that is, he/she will accompany family members in routine activities, a girl inside the home and a boy in the *milpa*. By observing his/her parents and older siblings, by imitating them and following their pieces of advice, the child will learn how to be a “good man” or a “good woman” [See Villa Rojas (1978: 412-414) and Villa Rojas and Redfield (1934: 188-190)].

the cardinal points that define the cosmological horizon of Mayans. At each of these four points are located a *Ceiba*, the tree of life, bearing the world, connecting the underworld, the skies, and the terrestrial realm. These sacred trees are associated with four basic colours (red, white, black and yellow). The *cháaco'ob*, or the rain gods, are also four, as are the territorial boundaries of the community: four holy crosses indicate these points and prevent the entry of the dangerous *yumtzil*, or guardians of the *milpa*, and of the rain spirits that appear from the forest to scare the villagers. Excluded from the agricultural rituals and the male scope, women are associated with number three, which indicates not only the hearthstone but also the domestic utensils a woman will use throughout her life: the stool and the table where the corn dough for *tortillas* is worked, the hand mill, etc. In addition, number three has a special importance in the context of Catholic festivities, identifying the Holy Trinity and the three miraculous crosses, which define women's scope within the liturgical space (see Marion 1994: 24-31).

Right after the Christian baptism, which takes place in the church, the *Hetz'Mek* is officiated in the home by the *h'men* in the presence of the parents and the godparent. The godparent – a man for a boy and a woman for a girl – is chosen to teach the child the social and gender roles acknowledged in the community. During the ritual, the godparent holds the baby on his/her hip and carries him/her nine consecutive times counter-clockwise around the house altar, then nine times clockwise. Finally, the godparent puts the baby's hand on all the tools he/she is supposed to use during adult life. Whereas a boy will be given a machete and a shotgun, a girl is given *tortillas*, thread, needles and kitchen utensils in order to acquire the essential skills to be a woman. Since both boys and girls now go to school, all children are given a pencil and a notebook so that they become literate and are able to *prosperar*, thrive and be successful.

By the age of seven or eight, the sex roles become more sharply differentiated. When a girl turns eight, she begins to participate in women's daily activities: she will go to the corn mill with her mother to take the *nixtamal* and learn the techniques for making nice and perfectly round *tortillas*. By the age of ten or eleven, a girl is already a big help to her mother: she has a major role in preparing meals for the family and looking after her younger siblings. Immersed in these occupations, she will not have much time to play with her peers as the boys of her age do. At home, she will be raised to be shy, docile and soft-spoken; even when she will grow up, she will never engage in conversation

with men outside her family. By the age of twelve or thirteen, a Mayan girl is capable of producing embroideries or hammocks for sale to supplement the household income. While in the morning she goes to school, her afternoons are split between homework and housework. At this point in her life, a Mayan girl has already learnt how to perform her gender within the private spaces of the house.

When a girl turns fifteen, she officially enters adulthood: now she is a woman, that is, she is ready to accomplish her social and biological fate, which is getting married and having children. To facilitate this social and biological accomplishment, parents will protect the reputation of their daughter as a morally upstanding woman. To this purpose, they will retire her from school to avoid the risk that she will “flirt” or elope with boys, thus endangering the honour of the family and jeopardising her chances of marriage.

The transition of a girl into womanhood is celebrated in a majestic event, the 15-year-old birthday party, that is, “*la fiesta de la ilusión, del sueño*” (the dream party). This event can be considered as a fully-fledged rite of passage for young Mayan women: on that night, *la quinzañera* will present her new self to the community. Mayan parents will put a lot of effort into the preparation of the event; some of them will get into debt to gift their daughters with an unforgettable night. Wrapped in a princess evening gown and adorned with elegant jewellery and makeup, the girl will dance her first waltz with a group of young boys, the *chambelanes*, who accompany the birthday girl when she enters the party. From this point in time, the young Mayan girl begins to perform her gender publicly.

Crossing the symbolic threshold of the 15-year-old means that a Mayan girl is ready to get married. To attract the attention of the opposite sex, she will learn how to refine her skills in some aspects of the gendered division of labour. Embroidering beautiful *hipiles* will be one of her favourite activities, as the ability to sew skilfully is an attribute that some men look for in their wives-to-be. The yearly community’s feria provides girls with the opportunity for meeting a potential husband. In the backyard of the municipal building when the marching band is playing, a boy will ask a girl to dance a *Jarana*. If she accepts, the boy will regularly turn up at the girl’s house to court her, under the strict surveillance of her parents. After one or two years of courtship, escorted by his parents, on one of these visits, the boy will officially ask for her hand. If her parents

give their consent, the girl is engaged⁵⁰. She will marry for love, to escape the strict control of her family or for the *ilusión del vestido* (the dream of the wedding dress) she has long dreamt of, watching her favourite *telenovela*. A few months before the wedding, her fiancée will give her gold earrings, a necklace and a bracelet. The wedding gold will be the cornerstone of her autonomy, the only thing the girl will own and over which she will have absolute discretion. She will keep her gold jealously or sell it to overcome a financial crisis, buy small delights like clothing, perfumes and makeup, or spend on recreational activities.

After the wedding, following a patrilocal residence system⁵¹, the girl leaves her parental home and moves to her husband's family house, under the same *solar* where all the family members live. A father's responsibility for his daughter's maintenance is now passed over to her husband. The young man is likely to work in some hotel of the *Riviera*, travelling to Xocén every weekend to see his wife and bringing some money home. Trained by her mother-in-law, during the week the girl learns how to play the role of the wife. She will spend her time in the home, making *tortillas*, washing clothes, chatting with her sisters-in-law, watching *telenovelas*, sewing *hipiles* and weaving hammocks; or she will cross the street to sell cosmetics and perfumes to the neighbours. From time to time, she will go to visit her parents. Religious ceremonies, *ferias* and other community events will punctuate the pace of her life outside the home.

⁵⁰ Unlike the marriages of the early 1990s (Redfield 1950; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934/1990), today marriages are not arranged but agreed between families, usually with the consent of the couple.

⁵¹ In the first half of the 20th century, most brides and grooms were in their young teens, with the bride often younger than the groom. It was common for young husbands-to-be or husbands to provide up to a year of service to the bride's father, labour that entailed a period of matrilineal residence (Rosado Rosado 2001). Young men seldom moved to their wives' families' residence permanently, most often when the wife's family had no surviving sons. While marriages where the bride and groom form their own household right away (a neolocal postmarital residence pattern) became more common in the second half of the 20th century and the age of marriage began to rise, marriages in Xocén retain a patrilocal quality (Terán and Rasmussen 2005). Sons remain tied to their fathers by the latter's power to distribute land and other resources, although parental control over marriage has apparently been declining. Parents, however, continue to influence spousal choice, but young men and women are not wholly without say, and elopements or love matches are common. Even when marriages take place in the more traditional form, where the groom's parents take the lead in arranging it, if a young bride or her family becomes dissatisfied, separation or divorce may occur. Nonetheless, divorce is socially stigmatised in Xocén as it can seriously undermine the honour of a family and the unity of a community. Also, while gossip only partially touches men, a separated or divorced woman is always considered "*una mujer acabada*" (in a dead end). The patrilineal and patrilocal patterns of kinship and household structure that characterised Xocén and other Maya communities mean that men have greater access to property and power.

One day, the young woman will get pregnant. If her husband has saved enough money to buy a piece of land and build a *nah* (thatched-roof home), she will leave her in-laws' house and move to a new residence. Now, she will have an entire life to perform the “subtle tasks” associated with her gender. Sometimes she will feel proud to embody so conscientiously the ideal-typical Mayan woman; other times, she will experience a sneaky feeling of oppression, loneliness or sadness, that would manifest in various – yet never diagnosed – forms of depression, or in constant tension with her husband.

After many years and some pregnancies, her reproductive life will come to an end. At menopause, no longer a sexual threat to the community and a potential source of shame for her family, relieved by the anxieties of unwanted pregnancies, the Mayan woman enjoys a freer stage of her life⁵². Now, her path to a higher social status is through her sons and grandsons. Once her children are married, her daughters-in-law and her unmarried daughters are under her control. With these new resources, the Mayan woman has less to do in the house, and her occupations will revolve around taking care of her grandchildren and attending mass. The community will also assign her a new role: overseeing the moral code by policing the sexuality of younger women. After lengthily being oppressed by social control, the middle-aged woman will eventually walk in the shoes of the oppressor.

The vignette I have sketched above depicts an extremely simplified life course of a Mayan woman based on the life story narratives I have collected in Xocén. This is an essentialisation, inherently limited and yet good to situate Mayan women's subjectivities in a definable hermeneutical framework, and think the relation between structure and women's agency in contemporary Mayan culture. This essentialisation, of

⁵² Menopause is not a personally or culturally elaborated stage in the life of Mayan women. In general, Mayan women are concerned with pregnancy and childbirth but not with menopause. The end of fertility is conceived as a natural event and it presents neither a life crisis nor psychological distress. In this regard, Yewoubdar Bayene observed in her fieldwork among peasant women of Chichimilá that “Mayan village women do not exhibit behavioural changes at menopause nor present physiological complaints particularly associated with this stage of life to medical or health practitioners [...] none of the Mayan women reported hot flashes; the only physiological change that they recognise is the cessation of menstruation” (Bayene 1989:118; 123). Although among Mayan women menopause is not associated with positive (or negative) changes in the household roles, it does shift the space and times of feminine freedom. At this stage, Mayan women feel free of taboo and restrictions and claim to feel happier than when they were younger. This change in their social status has a determinant impact on the perceived biology of ageing.

course, does not account for every woman in Xocén. As in the case of Lidia, some women walk outside the prescribed spaces of feminine freedom. Increasingly, more girls complete higher education and find a job in the city; others do not get married or, as in the case of Lupita, they get married and divorce; still others leave their families and venture into the tourist cities to find new lives and job opportunities as their brothers and fathers do. However, these women are still the exception, not the norm. The story I told above describes, indeed, the norm, the prototypical life course of a Mayan woman as *la costumbre* prescribes. Again, this is not the story of all Mayan women, though it is certainly the shared narrative of many of the embroiderers who will appear in the next chapters. Their work at a local level and their integration into the global market must be read and interpreted within this cultural context and in the light of the ideological determinants that I have highlighted above.

Moving from the Mayan construction of gender and gender norms, in the next two chapters I will discuss the cultural and economic value of embroidery for Mayan women of Eastern Yucatán, focusing on the role of tourism in the processes of re-signification and fragmentation of the identities of women embroiderers who enter the labour market as producers of tourist commodities.

CHAPTER 5

El Gesto de Bordar and the Hipil



Figure 15: Embroidering at the sewing machine.

5.1 Performances of culture and labour: the “act of embroidering” and its meanings

In the sun-drenched Yucatecan afternoons, walking the dusty streets of Xocén is a daily ritual I can hardly renounce. After lunch, children do their homework and elders take a *siesta* on their swinging hammocks. As I lurk through the open doors of the thatch roof *palapas*, silhouettes of women threading their sewing machines loom in the dimness. The paced noise of the Singer’s pedal is the soundtrack of my journey into Mayan lives.

It is a sultry, late spring Tuesday when I go to take the first of a series of embroidery classes with Zaira, a 34 years old professional embroiderer who sell *hipiles* at the *Zací* Crafts Centre in Valladolid, a local handicraft market mostly frequented by tourists. I met Zaira through her husband Alfredo, a taxi driver who brings Xocenenses back and forth to Valladolid during the week and workers to Cancún and Playa del Carmen on the weekends. One day, in his taxi, I was talking with him about the Mayan embroidery and

he insisted that I had to meet his wife, because “she is one of the best embroiderers in Xocén”. The day after he brought me to his house to meet Zaira. When she heard that my grandmother was a seamstress and that nonetheless I was not able to sew, she decided that I had to learn, because this practice was “in my blood” as part of a family tradition and I had to honour it. Hence, she offered to teach me.

My appointment with Zaira is at 10 a.m. I leave from Valladolid at 9.30 with Sergio, another taxi-driver who brings me to Xocén almost every morning. In the taxi I tell Sergio that I am going to Zaira’s house to start embroidery classes with her. Intrigued, he casts me a scanning glance and asks me if the outfit I am wearing is the traditional Italian women’s dress: “*como el hipil de aquí*”. I say no, albeit his question has some logic to it; since I arrived in Yucatán, indeed, I have been wearing the few clothes I brought with me like a uniform. I tell Sergio that some Italians used to wear regional dresses in the past, but that modern clothes replaced them in the last fifty years. “So it already happened in Italy what is going on here with the *hipil*” – he points out – “the *hipil* is getting dismissed because the new generation doesn’t like it”.

It is late April, the rainy season is coming and the tropical heat hits hard. The collective taxis that connect Valladolid to the neighbouring villages can carry a maximum of four people. Children, however, are not included in the count. Squashed like a sardine between two women and their three kids in the rear seat of the taxi, I can hardly breathe. The girl who sits on my right is wearing a purple polyester tank top and is sweating wildly over my shoulder. I just thank myself for not having put any synthetic clothes in my luggage when it was time to leave London for the Yucatán.

The choice of clothes to bring with me was actually an issue I thought carefully about before starting my fieldwork. Clothes had to satisfy particular needs and meet certain requirements. I needed something cool and airy to survive to the inclemency of the tropical weather; something comfortable to carry my filming equipment and freely perform my work; something sober, to face the scrutinising gaze of the Xocenenses and embody an image of *buena mujer*; something practical to play with children during my long babysitting hours; something versatile, to glibly jump from a social situation to another. Also, I needed something “personal”, to reveal through clothing bits and pieces of my identity. Regardless to the multiplicity of identities I had to perform (the anthropologist, the videographer, *la muchacha italiana*, the embroiderer’s pupil, the theatre *aficionada*...), I was primarily driven by the will and necessity to meet people. As an anthropologist, I wanted to stand out as an outsider to trigger the curiosity of the

villagers and be potentially approached by them (I got to know many research participants precisely in this way). Being my Mediterranean phenotype similar to most of the Yucatecans (I am tan-skinned, brown-haired and dark-eyed), I had to rely on clothing and body styling to be easily and immediately spotted in the village.

In the *Language of clothes*, Alison Lurie (1992) discusses the ways in which people communicate and miscommunicate through dress. People may seek to convey aspects of their identity through wearing certain clothes, but they cannot guarantee that their message will be understood in the way they intend. Three years before, at the time of my first fieldwork in Xocén, the effectiveness of this communication was at times jeopardised by some wrong choices I had made regarding clothing and body styling. Overly concerned with sobriety, I had tended to oversimplify my appearance, making it minimalist and austere to avoid offending Xocenenses' sensibilities, except realising that people in the village expected me to wear shorts and makeup, "as every *gringa* does". The image of a reassuring femininity I wanted to convey ended up not to be always perceived as such. Having capitalised on that feedback, this time I was ready to bring my aesthetic choices towards a different direction.

Fieldwork is important for cultural anthropologists not just because it is the primary source of our data but also because it is an essential aspect of the anthropological education. It is a *rite of passage* that transforms student of anthropology into professional anthropologists. To borrow from Stocking (1983: 70), fieldwork is "the essential ritual of the tribe of anthropologists". It is one thing to read ethnographies about other ways of life, but it is something different to live among and interact with individuals from another cultural tradition on a daily basis for a year or longer. Living as social minorities, anthropologists depend on the goodwill of people whose norms and values they do not totally understand nor necessarily accept. Under these conditions, as participant observers we have to adjust our behaviour to fit the norms of the people we are studying. This modification is a necessary part of learning about a community; however, it does not concern exclusively moral behaviours. If for the anthropologist entering the fieldwork is a rite of passage, this very passage is often marked by an aesthetical modification of the fieldworker. Hence, well before leaving for the Yucatán, I preventively "adjusted" my appearance to the fieldwork challenges. I cut my long, messy hair to make it manageable in the hot weather, but maintaining a length that could still convey a sense of "healthy" femininity. Besides sick people, indeed, no woman in Xocén wears a short haircut. I packed several long cotton skirts, linen tank

tops and a light shawl to cover my shoulders when needed. I selected brightly coloured clothes and accessories, as Xocenenses like, excluding the colour white which, being a defining feature of the *hipil*, would have prevented me from performing my otherness. While impossible for me enduring makeup in 40-Celsius degrees, I nonetheless made sure to slip some mascara in my backpack. With a reformulated appearance, I was ready to start my fieldwork.

When I arrive at Zaira's house she is working at her sewing machine, strategically located on the doorstep of her kitchen to receive the sunlight. I spot her silhouettes from the courtyard and call her name, but the noise of the sewing machine covers my voice. I head to the doorstep and, as soon as I enter the house, she jumps off the stool. "I'm sorry, I was concentrated and I didn't realise you were coming", she said. Like other women in Xocén, Zaira is not much of a talker. However, *tête-à-tête* and within the reassuring walls of her house she is very loquacious. She anticipates all my questions and I let her thoughts flow without interruption. Unlike other women in Xocén, Zaira speaks a good Spanish, a language that she learned while working in *Riviera Maya* with her husband Alfredo. Originally from the community of San Silverio, after she got married at the early age of 17 years, she refused to move with her parents-in-law and insisted on joining Alfredo in Cancún, where at that time he was working as a gardener in a big ranch. After their first daughter was born, the couple set back in Xocén and sporadically went to Tulum and Playa del Carmen to take on seasonal work, leaving the child with Alfredo's mother. In *Riviera*, Zaira worked as a cleaner in the house of a famous European fashion entrepreneur and as a cook for middle-class Yucatecan families. Eventually back in Xocén when the third of her four daughters was born, Zaira found employment in the Valladolid-based Chinese *maquiladora* "Jordache", attaching labels on t-shirts. When the factory shut down in 2011, she resorted to embroidery production and joined a state-funded cooperative of eleven women who sell clothing to tourists. "My family and the family of my husband, especially my mother-in-law" – Zaira explains – "did not want me to go to the *Riviera* with Alfredo, because life is dangerous there, particularly for women. They wanted me to stay at home and take care of the house, but I wished to be with my husband and I managed to convince him to bring me with him... I was able to work in the *Riviera* only because I never worked by myself. My husband was always with me. He was employed as a gardener in the same houses where I worked, and as a laundry assistant in the *maquiladora* [...] Working at

“Jordache” was not bad... I enjoyed it because I’m a hard worker, but I like embroidery better because it is something I can do at home without neglecting my children”.

I am thrilled to start my apprenticeship and, since Zaira is in a good talking mode, I ask her to explain to me what exactly I have to do to start embroidering. “There is nothing to say” – she admonishes me – “You just need to observe me attentively, memorise my gestures and, when it is your turn, repeat them carefully. It is all about observation and practice. When you learn the gestures and get used to repetition, everything becomes clear”. So this was my lesson number one: “embroidery is not something you talk about; it is something you do”.

I present this vignette by way of introduction to the following discussion of the *Maya Chuuy*, the Mayan embroidery, as a form of incorporated knowledge and as an embodied agent of culture, gender, and labour. In the Eastern Yucatán embroidery production constitutes a significant part of Mayan women’s work and a source of income for their families. However, it is also an important activity that produces and reproduces cultural knowledge. This knowledge, as Zaira points out above, cannot be converted into written, spoken or signed “prescriptions”, but it is rather created, performed and transmitted through bodily praxis. “Inscribed” in the bodies of its practitioners and entangled in a web of cultural and symbolic meanings, “*el gesto de bordar*”, or the “act of embroidering”, and the *hipil*, the traditional Mayan female dress, are central to performing identity. Within the perspective of embodiment, notions of gesture, *habitus*, and tacit knowledge can be useful to understand how embroidery, both as a practice and as an object, enacts and reproduces culture, illuminating the ways in which the embroidering body and the *hipil* become bearers of knowledge and embodied “archives” (Taylor 2003) of gendered ideologies and social praxis beyond language and discourse.

5.1.1 “Gestures of transfer”: embodiment, tacit knowledge and cultural memory in the act of embroidering

In the *Encyclopaedia of Social Theory* (Harrington *et al.* 2006) the term embodiment refers “to the cultural meaning attributed to the body, the ways in which these are inscribed on and through individual bodies” (Potts 2006: 164). Weiss and Haber elaborate further on this definition, using the term embodiment to denote “a shift from

viewing the body as a non-gendered, prediscursive phenomenon that plays a central role in perception, cognition, action, and nature to a way of living or inhabiting the world through one's acculturated body" (Weiss and Haber 1999: xiii). Such a unitary conception of embodiment contests the Cartesian body/mind duality from which the subject-object distinction and the separation between propositional and practical knowledge derive. The paradigm of embodiment as a methodological orientation in anthropology emerges as a critique of this very dichotomy and of the consequent "intellectualistic tendencies to assimilate bodily experience to conceptual and verbal formulations" (Jackson 1983: 327).

Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) is at the roots of the non-dualistic paradigm of embodiment. While the mind is, for the French philosopher, not limited to the body but immanent in the world, the body is an existential modality: not something one has, but something one is. Never denying the existence of mental phenomena, Merleau-Ponty insisted that thought and perception as such only occur against a background of perceptual activity that we always already understand in bodily terms, by engaging in it. In other words, perception and reflection are simultaneous, which means that at any point we perceive we are also in perception, thus breaking down the subject/object division. The situatedness of our bodies in perception is not an object of inference, judgment, or conscious awareness. It is instead the spontaneous, precognitive background of intentionality: "our body is not the object of 'I think': it is an ensemble of lived meanings that finds its equilibrium" (Merleau-Ponty 1962 [1945]: 153). Perceptual experience incorporates the body movements and takes them into account in opening us onto the external world. That is, perception is always informed by what Merleau-Ponty calls a "body schema", which consists neither of a mental attitude nor of a mere physiological state but rather of a set of integrated skills, or "habits". These habits are not accessible to reflection in pure consciousness but manifest themselves in the perceptual body.

Drawing heavily on Merleau-Ponty's idea of the body as the "fabric" of the perceptible world, Thomas Csordas, one of the leading scholars in the theoretical discussion of embodiment in anthropology (Csordas 1994, 1997, 1992), argued for the necessity to understand the body as the "existential ground of culture": not as an object that is "good to think" but as a subject that is "necessary to be". The paradigm of embodiment suggests not that cultures have the same structure as bodily experience, but

that embodied experience is the starting point for analysing human participation in a cultural world.

Expanding on Merleau-Ponty's notion of "body schema", anthropologist Michael Jackson argued for a rediscovery of "the original sense of the word culture as denoting modes of practical activity" (Jackson 1983: 327). Interested in how knowledge is embodied and how human experience is grounded in the body's movements through space, Jackson explored the "patterns of bodily praxis" (*Ibid*: 327), proposing that embodied knowledge is something that starts at the level of the body, before making its way to the conscious mind.

While the challenges raised by Csordas and Jackson have been taken up by the whole sensory turn, especially in the field of medical anthropology⁵³, recent contributions have relied on the latest developments in cognitive sciences and the anthropology of skills⁵⁴ to account for an embodied knowledge. An important idea brought up by this literature is that most forms of knowledge are situated, that is, they adhere in social locations and are contextually embedded. This "embeddedness", to recall Callon (see Introduction), breaks down the essentialist distinction between procedural and propositional knowledge. As Harris observes, "in the enactment of what we know, the two kinds are merged and are both activities and convey meaning" (Harris 2007: 3).

As a situated bodily knowledge, embroidery evokes various aspects of the phenomenon of embodiment and entails both conceptual and practical connections with gesture, body techniques, *habitus* and tacit knowledge. Not only these notions constitute basic ideas for the perspective of embodiment, but they are also an important conceptual impetus for its theoretical development.

As Zaira reminds us above, embroidery is primarily made of bodily gestures. Vilém Flusser defines a gesture in terms of "a movement of the body or of a tool attached to the body for which there is no satisfactory causal explanation" (Flusser 2014: 3). A gesture is a symbolic expression of a particular form of consciousness, that is, a particular relationship between the world and the one who gestures. "Gesture", Imberty says, "is characterized by the temporal profile of the movement that supports it. But gesture cannot be reduced to this movement and, moreover, all movement is not gesture. Gesture has to be defined as a more or less complex intentional movement,

⁵³ See, for example, Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, Kaufman 1988 and Kleinman and Kleinman 1991.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Gibson and Ingold 1993, Ingold 2000: Part III and Grasseni 2009.

oriented towards a determined goal that gives it its sense, whether individual, social or historical” (Imberty 2005: 90 my translation). The gesture, Imberty tells us here, is a bearer of meaning and a form of language. Corporeal, pre-verbal, and silent, the gesture requires a shared code in order to be understood, retained, and finally applied by putting into practice the message it carries.

The notion of gesture is preceded by the *habitus* (from the verb *habere*, to have), being, more precisely, its manifestation. With Aristotle, *habitus* (*hexis* in Greek) refers to the state of possessing an acquired disposition to engage in certain modes of activity. In the context of Aristotelian ethics, for instance, the capacity to regularly engage in virtuous action was understood as the primary exemplification of *habitus*.

Applied to ethical reasoning in further specifying the nature and content of the moral virtues by Thomas Aquinas, the notion of *habitus* was revived in the 20th century and recruited for understanding the practical embodied basis of action by the French sociologist Marcel Mauss. After discussing the differences among societies about body techniques such as walking, running, digging and swimming, in its pioneering essay *The Techniques of the Body* (1973 [1936]) Mauss introduces the notion of the social nature of *habitus*. Without ever defining the term with precision, he gathered under this label the totality of learned habits, bodily skills, tastes, styles, and other non-discursive knowledge that might be said to “go without saying” for a specific group.

Expanding on the idea of the existence of a “taken for granted” bodily knowledge, French sociologist/anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu went on to systematise the idea of *habitus* for a more general understanding of the nature of social action. In *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu notes how the *habitus* “designates [...] a habitual state (especially of the body) and, in particular, a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination” (Bourdieu 1977: 214). This set of dispositions is internalised as “practical intuition” and implies a bodily, reflexive “know how” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Once carried, individuals are “caught up in it, bound up with it [...] like a garment or a familiar habitat [...] at home in the world because the world is also in him [sic], in the form of habitus” (Bourdieu 2000: 143). The “naturalness” of feeling at home, however, for Bourdieu is not natural at all: it is culturally constructed. In Bourdieusian theory, the *habitus* mediates between the binaries of structure and agency, the structures of society that bind us and our own experiences and actions within the boundaries of these structures, acting both as a “structured structure and a structuring structure” (Bourdieu 1979: 191).

For Bourdieu, *habitus* is acquired unconsciously through lived experience within the social world, taking on the properties of the “conditions of existence” in which it is formed in a “durable way”, so that “[...] the *habitus* is reflected in the whole way that one carries oneself in the world, the way that one walks, speaks, acts, eats” (Thompson 1984: 102). The *habitus* demonstrates therefore how the social world exists in the body: it is memory inscribed in the body, recreated unconsciously through gestures that are absorbed through exposure to one’s environment. As a product of adaptation to conditions, the *habitus* predisposes the person to recreate the very same conditions under which its constitutive system of skills and dispositions can be most probably put to use. In this sense, the *habitus* is heavily weighted towards the past and guides choices in a way that leads to the preservation and the reinforcement of already acquired capacities.

In the rural Yucatán, sewing is the key gesture of an embodied *habitus*. “*El gesto de bordar*” (Duarte Duarte and Wammack Weber 2010), the act of embroidering, used here to define embroidery as a complex, multifaceted socio-cultural activity rather than a merely economic one, is at the very heart of gender and cultural definitions. As Nadal has argued (2001), this activity is so crucial that it sustains the definition of Mayan womanhood in the same manner that the *milpa* defines the Mayan man. For Mayan women, this habituated form of practice is indeed a socially assigned, gendered task. Sewing plays its role naturally in the idea of the gendered division of labour, being an activity that women are expected to perform alongside other activities that they carry out in their household.

Just as making *tortillas*, embroidering is a feminine gesture; as such, no strength is needed to perform it. Yet, unlike other feminine gestures, embroidery does not fit in the category of the “subtle work” (see Chapter 4). Through embroidery, Mayan women produce and reproduce cultural agency: they embody and express feelings of belonging to a place, a space and to a universe of values; at the same time, they affirm their individuality and uniqueness, display their creativity and manifest their *gustos*, their tastes (I return to these points below). Not only do women see embroidery as one among other types of cultural knowledge and practices within their command, it is a field in which they see themselves as the true authorities and practitioners.

Irreducible to manual work, but based on bodily skills and abilities, embroidery is better seen as a culture of doing, a gendered knowledge field based on practice. Much of

this practice is situated, habituated and taken for granted; it is inseparable from women's sense of the everyday. "I did not receive special instruction in needlework" – Zaira explains – "I just learned it from my mother when I was little and practised it when I grew up". In order to embroider, one must first learn how to execute the stitches, a learning originally acquired within a tradition in which knowledge is transmitted from person to person, not through language but by observation, imitation, and practice. As a skilful performance that evades linguistics, *el gesto de bordar* can be thus defined as a form of "tacit knowledge" (Polanyi 1958)⁵⁵.

As opposed to propositional, encoded and formulaic knowledge, tacit knowledge is experiential and subjective, pre-logical and practical; it takes form through action, becoming visible and detectable through visual expression. It can be seen as a way to grasp the world in order to understand it. For Polanyi, tacit knowledge is knowledge that the actor knows she has but which she cannot, nonetheless, describe in terms other than its own skilful performance:

⁵⁵ Although the term "tacit knowledge" was introduced and popularised by Michael Polanyi (1958, 1966) in the mid-20th century, the idea of a separation between different forms of knowledge is much older. While Greek philosophers such as Plato and the Neoplatonists already held that propositional knowledge was complemented by practical skills and experience, Aristotle's distinction between practical (*phronêsis*), theoretical (*epistêmê, nous, sophia*), and productive (*technê*) virtues can be understood as a first systematic classification of explicit and tacit forms of knowledge. Nonetheless, in the history of Western philosophy knowledge has mostly been conceived as propositional, since only this form of knowledge can be methodologically codified. This rationalist tradition was challenged by pragmatism, which stressed that our experience of the world must not be reduced to its cognitive aspects. Gilbert Ryle, for example, effectively distinguished between "knowing how" and "knowing that" (1945/1946), anticipating John Dewey's idea that our being-in-the-world is grounded in pre-reflexive forms of "primary experience" that underlie "secondary experiences" such as thinking. Several important philosophical currents of the 20th century have dealt systematically with the problem of tacit knowledge. While Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and Heidegger's fundamental ontology hold that non-explicit forms of knowledge are the privileged mode of our being-in-the-world, Mannheim (1964) highlights that knowledge is acquired in an "a-theoretical" social space. In the last decades, the discourse on tacit knowledge has become more interdisciplinary and heterogeneous. The sociological debate on tacit knowledge has been inspired by Bourdieu's "theory of practice" (1977). Drawing on the notion of *habitus*, Wacquant proposes a "sociology of flesh and blood" that acknowledges the entanglement of "body, mind, activity and world". In anthropology, Geertz (1983, 1992) introduced the concept of "local knowledge" to criticise the search for a universal knowledge about all societies. In performance studies Diana Taylor (1992) has introduced the terms "archive" and "repertoire" to differentiate between "supposedly enduring materials" and "embodied practice/knowledge", arguing for taking the latter seriously as a form of valid knowledge. In psychology, Arthur Reber (1989, 1993) proposed a theory of "implicit learning" that takes into account the problem of unconscious cognition and explains how learning processes produce tacit knowledge.

«The aim of a skilful performance is achieved by the observance of a set of rules which are not known as such to the person following them [...] Rules of art can be useful, but they do not determine the practice of an art; they are maxims which can serve as a guide to the art only if they can be integrated into the practical knowledge of the art. They cannot replace this knowledge (2002 [1958]: 49-50)».

While representations and rules are relevant for the craftsman, they are not what learning is all about. As Ingold argues echoing Polanyi, the novice becomes skilled not through the acquisition of representations and rules, “but at the point where he or she is able to dispense with them” (Ingold 1993: 462). Polanyi’s explanation of tacit knowledge, as the kind of knowledge that cannot be fully articulated, is commonly used by the embroiderers to account for their difficulty in explaining what skills they have employed in making, how they have worked their materials and, on a more symbolic level, the feelings that embroidery generates in the maker. Zaira explains:

«Ever since I learned to embroider as a teenager, I would collect the best patterns and turn them over in my hands over and over again. In my mind I know that they are beautiful, but I cannot express in words why they are beautiful».

But if this knowledge cannot be put into words, how, exactly, it is going to get from mind to mind? In the Eastern Yucatán embroidery is concretely transmitted through practice and direct teaching from mother to daughter, from aunt to niece, from elder to younger sister, from women to women. Here, apprenticeship acts as a primary mode of what Ingold defines as a process of “enskilment” (Ingold 2000: 416), the practical understanding “in which learning is inseparable from doing, and in which both are embedded in the context of a practical engagement in the world” (*Ibid*: 416). It is precisely through this learning by doing that aesthetic sensibilities and skills are acquired, developed or transformed.

The senses play a central role in the “enskilment” process. As an embodied, sensual practice, sewing requires looking, perusing, touching, even sniffing. The appreciation of embroidery creates its own sensorial calling for the understanding of the visual aspects of needlework, the intricacies of the designs, the difficulty of the stitches, the virtuosity of the colour scheme, the reference to particular patterns. Sitting at their sewing machine with their mothers, Mayan girls learn the visual aspects of embroidery,

develop their aesthetic taste and acquire the “techniques of the body” (Mauss 1934) that are necessary to perform needlework. This learning takes place through the imitation of physical gestures; though, since gestures are subliminal, it is important that the process of acquisition be unconscious: “By watching the master and emulating his efforts in the presence of his example” – Polanyi explains – “the apprentice unconsciously picks up the rules of the art [...] These hidden rules can be assimilated only by a person who surrenders himself to that extent uncritically to the imitation of another” (Polanyi 2002 [1958]: 53). Consequent upon this is an anthropological idea about generational relations: “A society which wants to preserve a fund of personal knowledge must submit to tradition” (*Ibid*: 53). In line with Polanyi’s assumptions, in the rural Yucatán the endless repetition of gestures performed by the embroidering body is ultimately meant to preservation.

Reiterated daily with, or in front of other family members, in its ritualistic nature *el gesto de bordar* is a “performance of culture” (Singer 1972; Goffman 1959), an intergenerational bonding practice through which older women transmit to younger generations the ancient tradition of the *Maya Chuy*, the Mayan embroidery, as an important component of Maya culture. “When we teach our daughters how to embroider” – research participant Ana says – “we do things as our ancestors did. Doing it this way, we preserve our cultural memory”. For most of the embroiderers, preserving the tradition is a personal commitment and, more profoundly, a cultural duty.

Some years ago, women would copy the patterns for *hipiles* from *dechados*, linen strips beautifully embroidered in a catalogue of different styles, patterns, and stitches. These linen strips were crafted by successive generations of women who would inherit them from their mothers while adding to the sample. Zaira explains:

«I have a *dechado* that dates back to the era of my great-grandmother. When other women see it, they want to know where I got it. These drawings are rare because they are ancient. Simply, people don’t know them... In my work, I am committed to preserving these old patterns and hues because they have a great deal of meaning, and I want to preserve the spirit of the embroidery».

Preserving the spirit of the embroidery often equates to keeping alive the memory of the maker, whereby both personal and collective cultural memories get entangled in the act of embroidering. Zaira continues:

«I learned needlework from my mother, who in turn was taught by my grandmother. In many years of practice as a professional embroiderer, I honed my technical skills and acquired the knowledge of new techniques. I also developed my taste that may be different from the taste of my mother or my sisters. Although I enjoy executing a variety of stitches, my favourites are those that I've learned from my grandmother. She is passed away, but when I embroider the way she taught me I feel that she is alive. Her spirit lives in my embroideries, and her memory is alive».

Memory, as Diana Taylor writes, is a cultural practice, “an act of imagination and interconnection” (Taylor 2003: 82). In cultural systems in which writing does not act as the privileged system of memory, the body becomes the space and the medium of the transmission of memory and cultural identity. If for Richard Schechner the performance is a “restored behaviour” (Schechner 1984: 287), “twice-behaved” by a performer who interprets the past from a diachronic perspective, for Taylor the performance is an “act of transfer” of embodied knowledge and practices that are essential to the survival of a group (Taylor 2003: 29). Therefore, as an embodied way of transmitting knowledge, embroidery can be defined as a “gesture of transfer” of social knowledge and memory, which takes place in a “performative space” constructed through embodiment rather than through the rationality of discourse.

5.1.2 “No es familia si no hay una bordadora”: the emotional and symbolic substratum of the act of embroidering

In the Eastern Yucatán embroidering is used as a channel for expressing a broad range of emotions and relations: relations between women and men, issues of womanhood, fertility, child rearing, and family. At their sewing machines, the extension of the body over which the “gesture of transfer” is repeated, women perform their gender: the mother’s love towards her children, the wife’s loyalty towards her husband, the housewife’s industriousness to family, the embroiderer’s proficient skills and allegiance to the community.

The association of embroidery and womanhood in Maya culture is longstanding. In the Maya lowlands late classic period, a royal female's identity was entangled with her prowess as a weaver, an aspect that had implications far beyond weaving textiles to clothe the royal family (McAnany 2008: 234). While the importance of finely woven *mantas* in Mexica tribute, trade and alliance-building is well known (Anawalt 1981: 27-32), in the Maya lowlands textiles were exchanged among the elites on the occasion of births, funerals, betrothals and religious holidays, lubricating the political economy of the palace (McCafferty and McCafferty 1999: 113). Responsible for the quality of these important cultural items, royal women were tied to needlework beyond the temporal boundaries of their lives, as demonstrated by the archaeological finding of weaving bones and brocade picks placed in their tombs as burial items.

In early colonial Yucatán, Spaniards commented positively on the quality of cotton *mantas* woven by elite females (Morley 1941: 155), who, according to the 16th century Franciscan friar Bishop Diego de Landa, worked in groups, strapped to looms in shaded courtyard spaces (Tozzer 1941: 127). Several depictions of royal women wearing elaborately embroidered dresses – Lady Xooc of Yaxchilán, considered one of the most prominent women in Maya civilisation, being the most famous image – indicate that the technical skills and artistry of weaving among royal women existed at a level of virtue that reinforces the idea that weaving and female identity were tightly intertwined.



Figure 16: Lady Xoc of Yaxchilán.

In the contemporary rural Yucatán, as I have shown, producing embroideries is considered as a “natural”, “taken for granted” female task. At a more symbolic level, the entanglement of needlework and womanhood interestingly emerges in the ways in which people locate needlework within the canonical womanly virtues, pointing out its efficacy in character-building. Research participant Carla explains:

«Embroiderers are good women because they are accustomed to working in silence. A good woman is a silent woman (*mujer callada*)... Blabbermouths ruin their families. They are unproductive, fidgeted, and restless; they don't obey their husbands and always have a say on things that don't fall within their sphere of competence. If these women spent more time at the sewing machine, they would learn the discipline of silence and would avoid embarrassing themselves and their families».

By transforming unacceptable womanly behaviour, such as loquaciousness and sloth, into the desirable feminine qualities of silence, stillness, and productiveness, sewing is counted as an essential practice in the making of *la buena mujer Maya* (see Chapter 4). Yet, embroidering is also associated with other aspects of female identities, in particular with notions of motherhood and family. Professional seamstresses in Xocén like to recall that Mayan embroidery has deep mythical foundations associated with Ixchel, the Mayan goddess of the moon, fertility, and weaving, who taught the first woman how to weave on the backstrap loom at the beginning of time.⁵⁶ Hence, at the core of the definition of Mayan womanhood, embroidering becomes part of the very essence to be a mother, that is, the emotional axis of the Mayan family. As Gloria, one of the oldest professional embroiderers in Xocén, unwearingly pointed out: “*No es familia si no hay una bordadora*”, “It is not a family if it does not have an embroiderer”.

The intimate connection of embroidering and family recurs in the explicit idioms of fertility, birth, and progeny of Xocén embroiderers’ oral narratives, where the emotional intimacy with the embroidery is presented as a relationship of childbearing. Ana, Gloria’s niece and professional embroiderer herself, tells me:

«Embroidery is like giving birth. It’s a long process, tiring and satisfactory at the same time. Before starting embroidery, I have a clue of what I want to achieve, but I cannot be sure of what the result will be. I incubate the idea and try to visualise it. When I finally begin the work, it takes a long time to see the finished product... Making a *hipil* takes at least six months while finishing a *terno* can take up to one year... The process is so long that I even dream about it. I dream of myself progressing with the work, especially those days where I am so busy with the housework that I don’t have the time to sew [...] When I was pregnant with my first son I started to make a *hipil* for myself, and I managed to complete it just a few weeks before my son was born. For me, it was like giving birth twice... Like when one searches in the face of her son her own physical features, I attentively scrutinised the work to see if it “resembled” me. As a mother passes her soul to a son, an embroiderer passes her soul to her embroideries... Sometimes I manage to do it, and sometimes I don’t. However, for me, the most beautiful *hipil* is the one that “resembles” me».

⁵⁶ The technique of *xoc-bichuy*, or cross-stitching, is attributed to this Mayan deity, as is the rainbow colour scheme that characterises the *hipil* (Rejón Patrón 2003: 221).

In Ana's words, *el gesto de bordar* is described as the endowing of life, the creative act through which women give life to something sensual and alive. These living objects are invoked as progeny, and therefore treated as having their own life cycle: they are "conceived", "incubated" and "brought into being". Finally, once they are "born", they can be "recognised" or not as the embroiderer's legitimate offspring. A discriminant function in this act of "recognition" is the final destination that the embroidery needs to reach. Ana puts it in these terms:

«If I get a commission to make a *hipil* to sell to someone else, I don't get attached to it because I know that it won't stay with me... The whole making process is more detached and sacrificing. In the end, although I gave birth to it, I don't recognise the embroidery as a son because, quite simply, I didn't pass my soul to it».

As I will discuss more clearly in the next chapter, the embroiderer develops a different relationship with its creations depending on whether the embroidery is made for household consumption or is sold to a stranger. In other words, while making embroidery is positively seen as a generative act for the non-professional embroiderer, when it becomes work it turns into a "sacrifice" that transforms the act of endowing of life, to maintain Ana's analogy, in a sort of surrogate motherhood.

Along with fertility and childbearing, female socialisation is also expressed through *el gesto de bordar*. In Xocén, needlework is either a solitary activity or a shared, social practice among women. As a gendered communal activity enjoyed between female relatives, friends, and neighbours, embroidery connotes female bonding. "*Bordar juntas*", embroidering together, is for many women among the most memorable moments of a shared girlhood:

«What a fantastic time it was when, as young single women, my sister, my cousin, my neighbours and myself would sit in the courtyard of my parents' house and spend the afternoons sewing together... We would all copy the same drawing to see who was the best at reproducing it. The competition was a funny game... It was not serious. When we got married the game was over. We started to make a living out of embroidery, and the competition became real. Suddenly we were too busy at home and couldn't meet each other to sew together as we used to do [...] I don't feel alone because I have my children now, but I no longer have friends, I have only

my family... I would like to go back in time in that courtyard to experience again the playfulness that you feel when you do things you like with people you like».

If, when performed socially, *el gesto de bordar* brings about feelings of enjoyment and playfulness – or nostalgia, when the gaze is weighted towards the past –, when practised alone it can acquire a meditative, almost spiritual quality. To carry out the meticulous work of embroidery requires patience, concentration, and diligence. It requires bodily and visual discipline: holding the embroidery loop or sitting for long hours at the sewing machine, and looking closely at the evolving design as the fingers perform fine stitching on the surface, it is an activity that entails constant repetition. Through the analogy of silence, repeated practice, discipline, and concentration, embroidery acquires spiritual meanings that recall its strong association with religious devotion in women's lives. Research participant Elisa tells me:

«At night, when everybody is sleeping and everything around is silent, I like to grab my embroidery loop and work one or two hours before crashing on my hammock. While I pinch the fabric with the needle, I repeat quietly, like whispering, the rosary. By doing it so, I remain concentrated... For me embroidering is a mental rest... I disconnect from all the problems I have at home and connect with God... God inspires my work and embroidering makes my mind serene».

Needlework is a practice that is typically performed within particular timeframes. Married women with children like Elisa prefer to embroider early in the morning before the other family members wake up, or late at night after finishing the housework, when they are by themselves in a quiet environment, undisturbed by the hustle and bustle of the everyday activities. However, women typically resort to needlework when they are tired or when convalescent. These are occasions when a woman would be by herself and embroidery is also considered a cathartic, almost expiatory activity. Being so tightly entangled with female identity, in some particular cases, needlework acquires the power to reconnects women to a femininity that a disease has “taken away”. Jovana, 29 years old, explains:

«I have a scar on my belly... I show you... Can you see it? It's big... It was left by a surgery that I had two years ago. My ovaries were removed because of cancer [...] When the doctor told me that I had cancer I was surprised; I didn't even know

what this was, nor I had heard of any woman who had it. My mother believes that this cancer came to me with an “evil wind”, as a punishment for my behaviour... that my ovaries got sick because I didn’t want to be like the other women [...] There was this guy, my neighbour, he was obsessed with me... He always wanted to talk to me, but I didn’t want. One day he went to speak to my parents to ask for my hand. My parents wanted me to marry him because I was already 25 and didn’t have a husband yet. I didn’t want though, so I left the house and I went to work to Playa with my cousin to get rid of him. I went back to Xocén when I started to feel sick. But it was too late, as the cancer had already spread... It’s true that I didn’t want to be like the other women, but now I just can’t... I will never get married and have children [...] For two weeks after the surgery I felt so bad that I couldn’t move from the hammock. So I took the embroidery loop and the needle and I started to embroider. I wasn’t interested in needlework before, but then I liked it. I felt that by embroidering I could still be a woman... This was the only thing that stopped me from going mad».

In the region, the work of an embroiderer depends largely on owning a sewing machine. Those who do not have one at their disposal must request a loan from a family member or a friend, whereby the sewing machine acquires an enormous value not only as an instrument of labour but also as a reference to family history. Research participant Aracely explains:

«When I got married my father gave me the sewing machine that belonged to my grandmother and that was also used by my mother. My mum died while giving birth to me. I have a picture of her, actually the only picture I have of her, where she is standing to the side of my grandma’s sewing machine. The photographer, my father says, asked my mom where she wanted him to take the picture. She stated that she wanted to be portrayed beside the sewing machine. She was very proud of her work as an embroiderer, exactly as I am today... I cannot get rid of this sewing machine because it is the only thing that connects me to my mother».

Entangled on a web of domestic uses and cultural memories, the sewing machine is the tangible trace of the materiality of the embroiderers’ gendered memory of work. But the sewing machine also materialises the relationships between women and men. At a symbolic level, embroidering expresses the binary opposition of feminine/masculine through its use of thread and fabric (feminine) and a needle (masculine). By taking the

needle into female hands, a symbolism is enacted that alludes to the wielding of masculine elements by feminine power and through an array of signs that are uniquely feminine. Purchased by men as a household item but “appropriated” by women, the sewing machine acts as a catalyst for a performance of agency. Research participant Gregoria explains:

«After marriage, I moved to my in-laws’ house. There was just one sewing machine there and I had to share it with my mother- and sister-in-law, as well as with the wife of my husband’s brother, because we all lived under the same *solar*. This was not a problem to me though, because my husband had a good job in Cancún as an accountant and I didn’t need to work to supplement his salary. When our second child was born and we moved to our own house, I asked him to buy a new sewing machine to make my *hipiles* [...] One day he left me and did not come back home, so I was stranded with my four children and no money. Someone told me that he had another family in Cancún... I went back to my parent’s house, but taking care of me was no longer my father’s responsibility and, anyway, they were too poor to look after me... So I went back to my house. There was nothing there but the sewing machine. This is how I started to sell *hipiles* [...] If I didn’t have this sewing machine my children would have starved».

As I explain in more detail in the following chapters, besides its cultural and symbolic meanings, embroidery constitutes an important part of Mayan women’s work; it is an activity that serves both as a source of income and pride. Embroiderers, in fact, make items with both the greatest cultural value within Maya communities, and the greatest monetary value to outsiders, non-indigenous people and tourists alike. According to Lambeck (2013), the value of objects cannot be disarticulated from the value of human activities, and in fact, in the case of Mayan embroiderers, sewing allows the circulation of both ethical and economic value. If, following Marx, we understand value as a function of labour in its twofold Aristotelic dimension of *poiesis* and *praxis* – making and doing –, *el gesto de bordar* can be framed not only as a “performance of culture”, but also as a “performance of labour”, in which the relations between economic and ethical value are embodied and made visible through the “gesture”. The role of embroiderers as agents of both *poiesis* and *praxis* is recognised in Xocén to such a level that “Recovering the Lost Sight of the Embroiderer” and “Thanking the Goddess of Embroidery for the Completed Work” feature, along with the more male-centred

“Blessing the Hunter’s Rifle”, among the most officiated ceremonies in Xocén’s houses.

Embroidery is at once object and practice, utilitarian and virtuosic, unique and reproducible. Its products recreate a sense of place and an aesthetic, intended as a way to frame and represent both the domestic and the community sphere through a set of gestures, spatial relations, and habits. As a carrier of habits and memories, *el gesto de bordar* keeps both habits and memories alive. As a practice, it ensures a cultural continuity. As an object, as I explain the next section, it stabilises identity and registers belonging.

5.2 The *hipil*

5.2.1 *On antipodal ends (?): catrinas and mestizas*

If the *gesto de bordar* can be considered as an embodied agent of culture, gender and labour, the *hipil*, the traditional Maya feminine dress⁵⁷ and principal material outcome of the act of embroidering, can be similarly conceptualised as a marker of ethnicity. In fact, both the *hipil*, meant for daily usage, and the *terno*, for ceremonial wear and special occasions, serve as emblems of Mayan identity (Ruiz Ávila 2012; Rejón Patrón 2003).

The link between identity and clothing is a long established theme in dress studies. Sociological and anthropological traditions regard clothing as a form of material culture, a situated body practice and part of the lived experience of people’s lives (Entwistle 2000 a, b; Guy et al. 2001; Hansen 2004; Weber and Mitchell 2004; Kuchler and Miller 2005). Clothing and body styling are seen as markers of the boundaries of the group, a means of stabilising identity and registering belonging (Lurie 1981, Polhemus 1994, Evans 1997). Rooted in *habitus*, clothes tell stories of situated subjectivities, expressing identities and values contextualised by time, place, space, and specific events; revealing gender, social class, health, politics, religion, age, ethnicity, and cultural and sexual affiliation (Lurie 1981). The proximity of clothes to our bodies gives them a potential for symbolic elaboration: “Dress” – Wilson states – “links the

⁵⁷ Although in some studies the *hipil* is referred to as Mayan women “costume” (see for example Kintz 1990), I avoid this term on the assumption that to use it would be, as Tarlo stresses (1996: 1-2), to contribute to the analytical separation of clothes from the people who wear them. I use therefore the word “dress” as a reminder of the significance of clothes as people wear them, not as they are displayed in museums and catalogues.

biological body to the social being, and public to private. This makes it uneasy territory, since it forces us to recognize that the human body is more than a biological entity. It is an organism in culture, a cultural artefact even, and its own boundaries are unclear [...] Dress is the boundary between the self and the not self” (Wilson 1987: 2-3).

In the Eastern Yucatán, the use of the *hipil* as a symbolic boundary of the “self” (Maya) and the “not self” (non-Maya) is the by-product of a historical process. Of course, as its meanings are historically and culturally situated, the traditional Mayan female dress can stop at any time to act as a signifier of ethnicity without necessarily dissolving Mayan identity. Until now, however, the *hipil* has been central to mark the separation between two different cultural universes: the indigenous rural world – locally called “*mestizo*” – and the non-indigenous, Hispanicised urban society – referred to as “*catrín*”.⁵⁸ This separation is expressed not only in ways of life but also in dress and language, whereby any woman who wears a *hipil* or *terno* is known as a “*mestiza*”, while those who wear Western style attires are termed *catrinas*.

⁵⁸ For terminological explanations see the Introduction.



Figure 17: The traditional *hipil* worn by three generations of Mayan women (and by the “Mayanized” researcher on the right hand side) on the occasion of the festival held in Xocén in honour of the Virgin of the Assumption.

Peter Hervik (1999: 23) has argued that local, national and foreign anthropologists have often misrepresented the *catrín/mestizo* differentiation, writing and speaking about the Mayas and their culture as separated from the rest of society (see Introduction).⁵⁹ Today, the cumbersome processes of deruralisation and tertiarisation that took place in Yucatán since the 1980s have fragmented the ethnic identity and blurred the boundaries between city and countryside, making it increasingly harder to draw a clear demarcation line between “Maya” and “non-Maya”. These two worlds coexist and are more increasingly overlapping within the dynamics of globalisation. However, it remains the case that in peoples’ everyday practices they are perceived and thus constructed as antipodal.

⁵⁹ Hervik refers in particular to the approaches taken by Thompson (1974) and Holmes (1978).

The “separation argument” has been central to the work of Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, one of the early critics of *Indigenismo*⁶⁰ in Mexico. In its famous book *México Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization*, Bonfil argues (1987-1989) that the indigenous rural communities, as well as vast sectors of the poor urban population, constitute the “deep Mexico”. The “*México profundo*”, still rooted in the Mesoamerican civilisation, has been dominated, since the Conquest, by an “Imaginary Mexico”, imposed by the West and based on the denial of the cultural reality lived by most Mexicans. In the light of the ongoing overlap produced by the forces of globalisation, the separation between *México profundo* and *México imaginario* may appear Manichean (Lomnitz-Adler 2010). It nevertheless remains the case that the indigenous and non-indigenous worlds are treated, in the dominant discourse, as non-communicating and isolated entities. The allegedly “modern”, “democratic” and “plural” Mexico, indeed, continues to follow the colonial pattern of segregation (Stavenhagen 1970), using the rhetoric of *mestizaje*⁶¹ as its political praxis (Gruzinski

⁶⁰ *Indigenismo* is a 20th century Latin-American nationalist political ideology meant to construct the role of indigenous populations in the nation-state. Its importance as a central aspect of Latin American thought, however, dates back to the very beginnings of European attempts to subdue the American natives. Its origins are inextricably bound together with debates on the question of how conquered indigenous peoples should be treated. 16th-century Spanish historian, social reformer and Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas presented the earliest articulate defence of indigenous rights from a European perspective and is essentially the founder of the *indigenista* thought in the Americas.

Rooted in the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), in Mexico, modern *Indigenismo* sought to address deeply rooted problems of indigenous and peasant peoples such as land issues, underdevelopment, and exploitation, profoundly shaping the indigenous-state relations since its incorporation into the Constitution in 1917. While the perspectives and methods of *indigenistas* evolved over time, the defining features of Mexican *Indigenismo* remained the same: the implementation by non-indigenous actors, the celebration of indigenous culture as a part of the nation’s history, and the attempt to integrate indigenous populations under the authority of the nation-state. This ideology was implemented through a number of policies, institutions, governmental programs, and through artistic expression. Official Mexican *indigenista* policy entered its most radical phase under the government of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), whose political praxis had a strong integrationist theme. Cárdenas was indeed a strong nationalist, and his explicit goal was the “de-Indianisation” of the indigenous masses in order to incorporate them into the mainstream Mexican culture.

Although generally viewed as beneficial for creating a platform to discussing indigenous issues, *Indigenismo* operated under colonial paradigms of racial hierarchy and contributed to solidifying some stereotypes of Indigenous people even while trying to break down others. As Les Field has observed, although *Indigenismo* “has characterized anti-hegemonic intellectual currents”, it also “may have played a more significant role in serving as a means for political and economic elites to appropriate indigenous cultures for nation-building ideologies that end up maintaining the subaltern status of indigenous peoples” (Les Field 1994: 243).

⁶¹ The notion of *mestizaje* is rooted in the Conquest, when it was used to describe social categories resulting from intermarriages between natives and Spaniards. In the 20th century, the concept came to suggest the blending of bloodlines and cultural values (see Gruzinski 1999).

1999) and ethnicity as one axis around which cultural, economic and politic distinctions are organised (Lomnitz-Adler 2001). As anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán (1967) has observed, in the relationship between nation building and ethnic pluralism, the presence of the natives continues to be denied or at most recognized as a simulacrum or “sign” of a glorious but dead past. *Visible* as a residue or “survival” of the past in national museums, monuments, and murals, indigenous people remain *invisible* as subjects of the geopolitical present. Although the Caste War has liberated the peninsular Mayans from European colonisation, for many of them the neo-colonial situation continues: the most remote communities are also the poorest; economic opportunities are still unevenly distributed according to ethnicity; and many Mayans serve as the exploited underclass in an exploitative tourist industry, producing handicrafts for sale, working as guides at the archaeological sites, and performing with folkloric dance troupes in and near the various resorts on the peninsula. With few exceptions, the Maya population plays a minor role in all-important domain and is subject to discrimination and marginalisation, a “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu 1998) that is often internalised and reproduced in rural areas. Although it is true that ethnic and social boundaries cannot be simply conceived of in terms of binary oppositions, the unequal power structures and relations that in Yucatán mark the interactions and the exchanges between indigenous and non-indigenous people cannot be ignored.

If, as Jane Schneider suggests, “cloth is relevant to power” (Schneider 1997: 426), the dressed body and the everyday practices associated with it can provide a unique vantage point from which critically observe and interrogate these relationships. In the

The idea of *mestizaje* as a potentially positive construct emerged only in the 19th century, when nationalist writers began to look at the pre-Hispanic past not only to incorporate the indigenous heritage to the modern idea of Mexico as a unified nation-state but also to value that previously ignored element (see Lomnitz-Adler 1992). Nonetheless, after independence from Spain was achieved in 1821, Mexico remained feudal in its social divisions: wealthy *hacienda* owners and power broker of European descent acquired the best land, in which both indigenous and *mestizos* worked as *peones* (forced labourers). This system led to native uprising and, finally, to the Mexican Revolution. In the aftermath of the Revolution, the secretary of the Ministry of Public Education (SEP) José Vasconcelos promoted an official idea of *mestizaje*. In his book “*La Raza Cosmica*” (1925), Vasconcelos envisioned a new “cosmic race” of mixed people (*los mestizos*) who would represent the next stage in Darwinian evolution. This idea was translated into official policies and supported by a new attention to the indigenous past in increased funding for archaeological digs and museums. This construct of *mestizaje* was fiercely criticised in the 1970s and the 1980s: indeed, consigning the indigenous people to museums, this notion tended to erase their cultural specificity in the very moment of celebrating it (Bonfil Batalla 1989).

next section, we will see how the distinction (and the negotiations) between “the Maya” and “the non-Maya” has been historically reflected through the *hipil*.

5.2.2 *Maya, mestizo or Spanish? The hipil as an intercultural object*

Known as *wuipil* in many parts of Mexico, the word *huipil* derives from the Nahuatl word *uipilli*, which means dress. The term *hipil*, commonly used in Yucatán, derives from the same word, which in Yucatec Maya loses its *w* to prevent cacophony in combination with the second person singular, that is to say, *u-ipil*, which means “your *hipil*”, where the *h* is soundless.

In pre-Hispanic Maya society, the *hipil* already existed and its use was restricted to certain social classes. Upon the arrival of the Europeans, ordinary Maya women wore a minimalist attire, described by Diego de Landa as: “one garment like a long wide sack, opened on both sides, and drawn in as far as the hips, where they fastened it together with the same width as before” (Landa 1941: 126-127). While many poor women did not bother to hide their breasts, wealthy ladies wore a black *hipil* and skirt, finely decorated with feathers and cotton threads dyed with roots, barks and various resins (Hernández Fajardo 1977). This custom prevailed up to the early years of the Colonial Era, when the European norm imposed the use of the *hipil* to cover the naked breast of the natives (Hernández Fajardo, 1977). At that time, the *hipil* worn by the Indians was a simple, white-linen rectangular sack, with few geometric coloured patterns around the neck and the lower hem. This model derived from the attire worn by the *mestizas* (non-Indian women)⁶², called *terno*, although the latter lacked the simplicity of the Indians’ dress, boasting elegant ornaments, intricate patterns, vivid colours and precious materials like silk. A white embroidered headdress (called *booch’* in Yucatec Maya), a rosary of gold filigree further adorned with doubloons (*escudos*) and another of red coral, golden earrings and rings on all fingers complemented the *mestizas’* attire (Hernández Fajardo 1977).

The distinction between the Indians’ and *mestizas’* dress remained marked until the beginning of the 19th century, when it slowly began to dissolve. The conquering Spaniards, indeed, generalised the use of the *hipil* throughout Mayan female society as a

⁶² To avoid textual confusion I shall use quotation marks to distinguish the Yucatecan *mestizo* (used since the 1850s) from the *mestizo* in the conventional Mexican and Latin American use of the term.

means to end prior social structures, thus homogenising hierarchical differences in order to dominate with greater efficiency (Ruiz Ávila 2012). To protect white visibility and superior status, the Catholic Church leading the Yucatecan society established new social and cultural criteria to categorise the population, whereby language, clothes, surnames and occupation replaced blood as markers of identity. In this context, the *hipil* came to play a role of primary importance in the system of intra-ethnic differentiation (Hervik 1999). At this point, only individuals of Spanish descent could wear European clothes, while *mestizos* and Maya Indians had to wear a distinct dress that, on its turn, came to be adapted to the tastes of the Spaniards. To this end, the Conceptionist nuns established workshops to teach the Indians embroidery and other crafts, also with the aim of “rescuing” local artistic practices while diverting them from idolatrous uses (Duarte Duarte, Wammack Weber 2010: 107).⁶³

During the early 19th century, the differences between the garments worn by the indigenous and the non-indigenous population began to be increasingly marked. Attire accentuated the distinction between the dominators and the dominated. The flight of the Maya rebels to what today is known as Quintana Roo after the Caste War, and the consequent rejection among the Creoles and the *mestizos*’ society of those symbol representing Indian traditions, contributed to this phenomenon. For many years the *hipil* disappeared from the urban areas, especially where wealthy people lived, being worn only by indigenous women, who began to be called “*mestizas*”. It was not until the second half of the 19th century that the *hipil* worn by the white or Indian women of Mérida became an identity symbol for the State of Yucatán (Millet Camara and Quintal 1994).

Although elite women would already use the *hipil* and the *terno* in the domestic milieu as a garment for relaxation, they began to wear it in public events – mostly carnivals and feasts – only after the Caste War, when the white and *mestizo* people united against the central power (Millet and Quintal 1994). This social pact led to the

⁶³ This does not mean, however, that the Mayas acquired their embroidery abilities from the Spaniards. The 16th century Spanish historian, social reformer and Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas, wrote that the first Mayas encountered by the conquering Spaniards at the beginning of 1500 would travel through the Gulf of Mexico by big canoes, carrying a wide varieties of trade goods: pottery, copper bells and axes, wooden swords with obsidian blades, cacao and cotton clothing. In addition to using colourful feathers for embellishing their clothes, the peninsular Mayas collected them for paying tribute to the Aztecs. The Spaniards coerced the Mayas to continue the feather trade with the Aztecs and forced them to manufacture cotton clothing for export to other parts of the Colony.

appropriation of the *hipil* and the *terno* as symbols of the new regional identity of Yucatán from which the Mayas, main protagonists of the Caste War, were intentionally left aside. The tradition of the use of the *hipil* and the *terno* by middle-class, urban Yucatecan women continues today in parties, carnivals and social/political events, as either spaces of encounter, mediation, and suspension of borders, or as reproduction of social boundaries.

Although the *hipil* is an essential signifier of Mayan identity, it has been subjected to constant transformations. The adaptation of the traditional Mayan female dress to different aesthetic tastes began in the last third of the 16th century, when Chinese embroideries began to arrive in Mexico through the Manila Galleon trade route. Also known as the China Ships in the New Spain, the Manila Galleons were Spanish trading ships that, from 1565 to 1815, made round-trip voyages from the port of Acapulco to Manila, stopping by Veracruz and Seville. Among the goods carried by the ships, the Manila Shawls, beautiful embroidered silk shawls that came from China through the port of Manila, appeared to have had a strong influence on the designs of the Yucatecan *hipil*. While these vibrantly coloured shawls did not meet the sobriety of European fashion and were thus rejected by the wealthy women of Spain, in Mexico they were well received and integrated into the traditional dress of the women of the Viceroyalty of New Spain. To meet the local demand and encourage the elaboration of new patterns and designs for export to Spain as well to other parts of Mexico, Guatemala and Peru, the Spaniards set up embroidery workshops in Oaxaca, Puebla and Yucatán. Here, under the direction of the Conceptionist nuns, indigenous women copied the floral patterns of the Chinese shawls and amalgamated them into their traditional *hipiles* (Duarte Duarte and Wammack Weber 2010:107).



Figure 18: Similarities between a Manila shawl (in the upper left), the Zapotec *huipil* from Oaxaca (in the upper right) and the Yucatecan *terno* (above).

Despite being traded for centuries, the Manila Shawls gained acceptance in Seville only at the end of the 19th century (see Aguilar 1999), precisely when the use of the *terno* was legitimised in Yucatán among all social classes. The popularity of the *terno* and the Manila Shawls was linked to the promotion of the traditional dances on both sides of the Atlantic: the *Jarana* in Yucatán and the flamenco in Andalusia, where the Manila shawl is still worn today for festive occasions. In spite of the major differences between the Yucatecan *terno*, the Oaxacan and Pueblan *hipiles*, and the Manila shawls, the similarity of the floral patterns shows the blend of different traditions and aesthetic tastes, a merging propelled by the role of Mexico as a bridge between China and Spain in the maritime trade.

The influence of the global forces on local embroidery and taste was not eliminated with Independence, but is still operating today. The style and significance of *hipil* have evolved over time, as its creators have adapted traditional indigenous designs to reflect emerging modern fashion. In the 1970s, for instance, the *hipil* became tighter and shorter as a result of the explosion in the popularity of the Western mini-skirt (Rejón Patrón 1995). Characterised by a narrower design and by the use of unconventional tones, the “mini-*hipil*” proved successful among younger “*mestizas*”, as well as among the poorer *catrinas* and foreign visitors within the rising tourists market. Similarly, the sandals imported from China since the 1980s became fashionable in the region in combination with the *hipil* to the extent that they are now produced in Yucatán.

Capitalism increased consumption and the changing meanings of national symbols influenced fashion trends in the case of Yucatán. The evolving designs of the *hipil* reflect a history of cultural negotiations between local and global traditions as well as indigenous and Western modernity. In this respect, it is important to understand that the making of the so-called “traditional clothing” is a creative process in which women are constantly innovating, integrating or adapting new design elements and materials despite the popularity of the basic ones.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ See Jane Schneider (1986) for seminal work on this matter.

5.2.3 “Como una segunda piel”: *the contemporary hipil*

The *hipil* worn by today’s Mayan women consists of a square, sleeveless cloth of white cotton fabric decorated with embroidered flowers, hued in brilliant and contrasting colours. This attire is complemented by the *justán* (or *piik* in Yucatec Maya)⁶⁵, a long, straight waist-slip, which is worn under the *hipil* and is also embroidered and lace-trimmed, a red and black shawl (*rebozo de Santa María*), gold jewellery and sandals. As for the hairstyle, “*mestizas*” comb their hair straight back off the face without parting it, rolling it into a bun called “*tuch*” which is held in place with an ornamental comb and a long bow.

The *terno* is a more elegant variant of the *hipil*, boasting an edge of brightly coloured flounces and embroidered details, usually in silk, around the neck and the body and lower hem of the skirts. The term “*terno*” comes from the fact that these dresses consist of three pieces. The first one, known as “*jubón*”, is a wide, flat, richly embroidered square flounce attached to the neckline of the second piece, which is the *hipil*. The *justán* constitutes the third part. A *terno* is also complemented by the *rebozo*, whose colour is chosen to match that of the *terno*’s embroideries. Apart from its decorative uses, the Santa María *rebozo*, which was brought from Puebla in the Porfirio Díaz era, has several practical purposes: it protects from the rain and the wind; it can serve as a hammock for a travelling baby, or it may be used to wrap and carry heavy objects.

⁶⁵ Maya speakers translate *piik* into Spanish by the term *justán*. However, most non-Mayan Spanish speakers will use *fustán* (the phoneme [f] does not exist in Maya), which means “white underskirt”. The name seems to have arisen from a particular kind of cotton called fustian in English (see Hervik 1999: 56).



Figure 19: Two different styles of handmade *justán*.

While the cultural value of the *hipil* is evident in the way it is used to dress statues of the local saints and, in particular, the *Santísima Cruz Tun* (see Introduction), for “*mestizas*” wearing a *hipil* denotes wealth, as this attire is more expensive than industrially made clothes. Mayan women can identify the value of a *hipil* by its age (old or new), the quality of the cloth (coarse cotton cloth or poplin), the design (the numbers of embroidered petals or branches), the manufacturing technique (hand or machine-made) and the use of colours (hues, tints, tones and shades). These characteristics establish different usages of the garment. Thus, a *hipil* can be “*de diario*” (for staying in the home and performing domestic chores) and “*de salir*” (for going to the market, the doctor, the park, the town centre, the church, a funeral or for travelling); or “*para las tardes*” (for the afternoon, generally after bathing) and “*para dormir*” (for sleeping). Also, particularly elaborated *hipiles* or *ternos* are made “*para ceremonias*” (for ceremonies and special occasions like baptisms, marriages, processions and *fiestas*). The *hipiles* “*de diario*” (everyday *hipiles*) are by far the least expensive and are known as “*hipiles de chen tira*” (*chen* means “only” in Maya). This type of garment is not embroidered and is simply made by ironing a printed floral strip onto the hemline and

the neckline of the garment. These strips are sold by the metre and are approximately six centimetres wide.

Typically, a Mayan woman owns one *terno* and from three to six *hipiles*, whose manufacture is carefully planned and designed according to the function the garment is intended for. Regardless of the multiplicity of its functions and decorative uses, the choice of fabrics and materials in the elaboration of a *hipil* is always guided by criteria of comfort and practicality. These are shaped, in their turns, by wider notions of gender identity and roles. The *hipil*, of course, needs to be cool in order to provide some relief against the Yucatán's subtropical weather, it must be washable, and the embroidery must not run. But, most importantly, it must allow women to perform their roles as *madres* and *amas de casa* comfortably. Research participant Agustina explains:

«In a *hipil* I can execute almost any movement with little regard for composure. I can wash clothes and draw water from the well by tying the *hipil* to the waist using the skirt; I can breastfeed with ease in any situation; I can sleep in my hammock with my daughter and tie her to my chest with a *rebozo* to make sure that she doesn't fall; I can sit on the stool when I make *tortillas* and remain covered [...] In a *hipil* a woman can perform all the household activities».



Figure 20: Young women wearing the *terno* for a procession.

Mayan craftswomen are skilled in a wide range of techniques, which constitute the very essence of the garment, as they condense a hybrid knowledge born of the Mayan tradition and the input of colonial Europe. In fact, many of the techniques we find today have European origins, having first been acquired by “*mestiza*” servants in Spanish homes and later transmitted to the population at large (Rejón Patrón 2003). Examples of these ancient techniques are a kind of handmade openwork known as *xmanikté*, a solid stitch known as *chuy-ká* and the cross-stitch, known as *punto cruz* in Spanish or *xoc-bichuy* in Maya. This technique consists of stretching fabric over a framework between two wooden hoops and over square- and loose-weave cloth called *canevá*, forming rows of diagonal, equal-sized stitches. The *xoc-bichuy* is also known as “counted-thread” (*hilo contado*) embroidery, since threads are counted and embroidered one-by-one to maintain quality and balance. Among the most popular machine-made stitches there are the satin stitch (*matizado*), the filling-stitch (*calado*), the shadow-stitch (*sombreado*), the renaissance-stitch (*renacimiento*), the lattice-stitch (*rejilla*) and the hemstitch

(*but'bilchuuy*). These techniques are usually passed from mother to daughters within households.

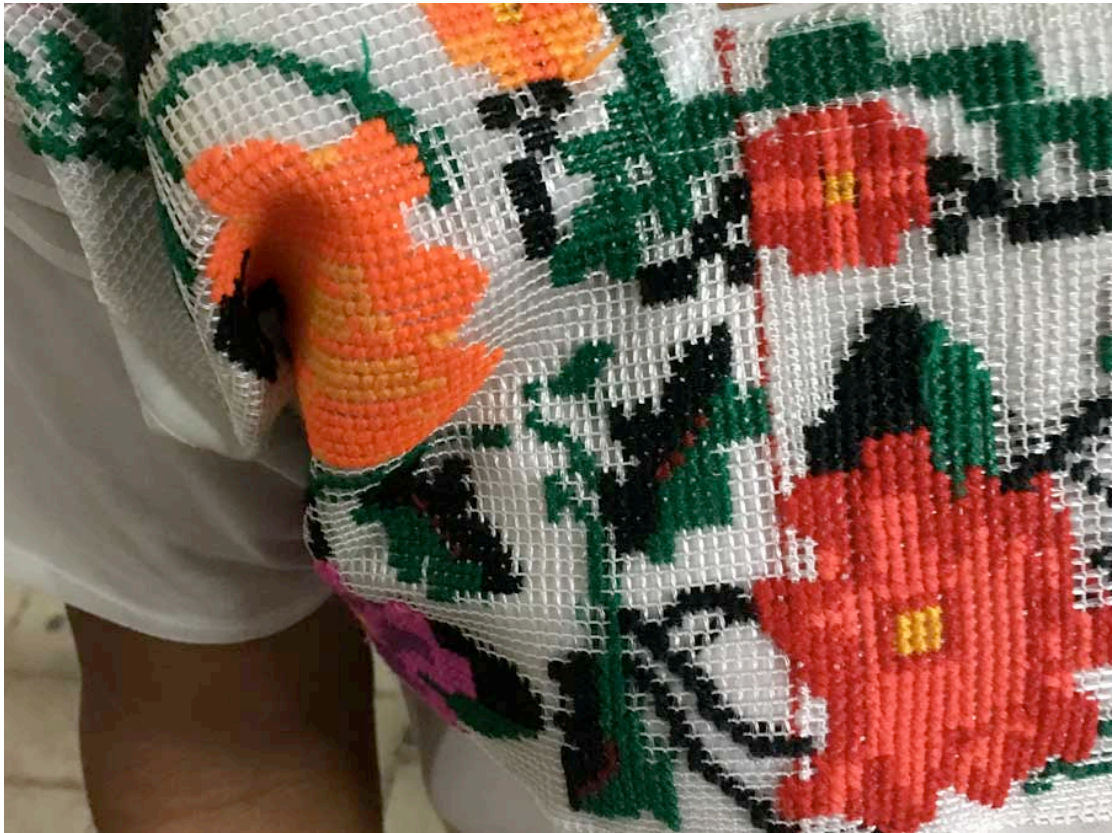


Figure 21: *Hipil* made with the *xoc-bichuy* technique.

Typically, certain styles predominate in particular regions of the peninsula. Whereas in the south of Yucatán hand-made *hipiles* with solid-stitch embroidery appear to be more popular, in the Eastern Yucatán and in Xocén machine-embroidered *hipiles*, particularly the *renacimiento* and the *rejilla* styles, prevail. In the north of the region, less elaborate, machine-made *hipiles*, typically shadow-stitched, are the preferred choice of the “*mestizas*”. However, anywhere around the peninsula some techniques such as the open stitching and the hemstitching are slowly disappearing due to the complexity of the work and to the lack of market value.



Figure 22: *Hipil* embroidered in *renacimiento* style.



Figure 23: *Hipil* embroidered in *rejilla* style.

Hand or machine-embroidered, the *hipil* is a form of art. Each piece is a patchwork of narratives impregnated with the taste and the personality of its creator(s). The big petal, multi-coloured flowers and the recurring, harmonious geometries that constitute its patterns encode a word of cosmological meanings. They are expression of the embroiderer's creativity and reveal her aesthetic interpretation of the relation between nature and the human subject (Ruiz Ávila 2012).

Although amongst the youngest generation of Mayan women the cheaper and more “fashionable” Western-style clothes have almost entirely replaced the *hipil*, the traditional Mayan dress continues to be considered the ideal image of beauty among “*mestizas*”. In Xocén, the *hipil* is the preferred everyday attire for adult women, and it is worn by women of all ages in special events like religious ceremonies and traditional

ferias. In particular, on occasion of the festivals held in honour of the Santísima Cruz Tun on the 3rd of May, and of the Virgen de la Asunción and the Santo Cristo de la Transfiguración in August, when people from other Mayan communities come to Xocén to enjoy the *Vaquería*⁶⁶, women wear their finest *hipiles* to dance the *Jarana*. This dance, also known as “Dance of the *Mestiza*”, is the social occasion for couples to meet. In the past, when women did not attend school with men, the *Jarana* represented one of the few courting opportunities. Although nowadays children of both sexes go to school, in Xocén the *Vaquería* is still viewed as the ultimate occasion in which women and men get together and initiate a romance. Being an image of ideal beauty, the *hipil* plays a central role in the courtship game that is performed during the *Vaquería*. In order to look more “*apetecibles*”, attractive, in the eyes of suitors, young unmarried women carefully choose the design of their *hipiles*, preparing or commissioning the garment to a professional embroiderer many weeks before the feast.

As Rejón Patrón (2003) has observed, although the wide range of embroidery techniques, patterns and colours allows for different styles, for “*mestizas*” the traditional Mayan dress is not a matter of fashion as it is for *catrinas* or for tourists. Rather, the *hipil* is a question of self-image: it forms part of a search for beauty that reflects both feelings of belonging to a territorial space and features of Mayan womanhood associated with other dimensions of Mayan ethnic identity. Although over time the traditional Mayan dress has been adapted to modern fashion designs, its basic model is changeless; the more does the *hipil* remain changeless, the strongest is the embroiderer’s connection to Mayan cultural values and her social role as bearer of tradition. In this sense, the *hipil* is not just a garment: it is a “second skin” that cannot be taken off without transforming the embroiderer’s self-image and generating discomfort, or even pain. “Would you feel naked if you had to dismiss your *hipil* for wearing a skirt and a shirt?” – I asked Jacinta, a 35 years old embroiderer who sells *hipiles* with Zaira at the *Zaci* Crafts Centre in Valladolid. “No” – she answered – “I’d rather feel pain. The *hipil* is a second skin for me. How would you feel if your skin was stripped off?” In the case of Jacinta, this feeling of pain emerges as a consequence of a perceived disloyal behaviour towards the family and the social group:

⁶⁶ *Vaquerías* are traditional feasts and celebrations of music and dance unique to Yucatán. The traditional *Vaquería* Feast is influenced by the traditions of both the indigenous Maya and the Spanish and is usually held in honour of the patron saint of a village. The *fiesta* typically lasts for several days and includes traditional food and ceremonies, music, dancing, bullfights and fireworks.

«When I was a teenager I asked my parents to buy a pair of shorts and a t-shirt for me. Some of my classmates used to wear this style of clothes and I wanted to see how I looked like in that outfit. However, I soon felt disloyal about it... My parents wanted to please me but their disappointment was evident, and I soon felt a sense of betrayal... I felt that I had betrayed my family, my tradition, and myself».

As Schneider and Weiner (1989), Lurie (1992) and Tarlo (1996), among others, have observed, clothes are not merely defining, but they are also consciously used to present, communicate, reveal and conceal. While clothes are frequently perceived as expressions or even extensions of the people who wear them (Wilson 1987), a change of clothes, as Jacinta's words suggest, may be regarded as a desertion of the former self. Dress, as Entwistle (2014) has stressed, is an intersubjective and social phenomenon that links individual identity and social belonging. As a "visual metaphor of identity" (Davis 1992: 25) and symbolic marker of membership, the dressed body becomes for women like Jacinta the symbolic arena in which relations of affiliation, affection and loyalty to the family and the social group can be expressed and made visible through the dress.

As with the act of embroidering, the *hipil* has a twofold economic and cultural significance: it is both an object of cultural identity and a commodity. As Quintal Morales (2004) has argued, when the *hipil* exits the rural context and enters the global market it becomes a "metaphor" signifying a combination of deeply-embedded traditional meanings and newly-acquired importance as a prominent product in the international craft market. According to the definition provided by UNESCO, handicrafts can be "utilitarian, aesthetic, artistic, creative, culturally attached, decorative, functional, traditional, religiously and socially symbolic and significant"⁶⁷. As a handicraft, the *hipil* condenses all these functions and characteristics.

In the following chapter, we will see what happens to the symbolic and cultural capital attached to the *hipil* when it is turned into a commodity within the tourist trade.

⁶⁷ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation/Information Technology Community (UNESCO/ITC) International Symposium on "Crafts and the International Market: Trade and Customs Codification", Manila, Philippines, October 1997.

CHAPTER 6

Hipiles for Gringas (?): Embroidery Production and the Tourist Trade in the Area of Valladolid

While in the previous chapter I analysed the cultural values of the “*gesto de bordar*” for Mayan women in the rural context, here I specifically focus on the transformation of this act into an activity directed to the tourist market. I aim to assess the impact of tourism on embroidery production and trade and the actual benefits that it brings to Mayan women who actively participate in the tourist trade.

The analysis takes into consideration four specific aspects: the multiple identities and the different labour, social and economic statuses of women who embroider for both the rural and the tourist trade; the institutional and non-institutional pathways through which Mayan embroiderers enter the handicraft market; the intrinsic characteristics of this market; and the changes in the production system following the explosion of tourism. Through participant observation and interviews conducted at the *Zací* Craft Centre of Valladolid, a local handicraft market where Mayan embroiderers sell traditional clothing to national and international tourists, I discuss the convergence/clash of local customs and traditions with the aesthetic tastes and the cultural capitals of foreign visitors, focusing on issues of authenticity and fashion in the commercialisation of the *hipil* and other Mayan clothing. I argue that the commodification and re-signification of the *Maya Chuuy* for the tourist trade, far from giving visibility to the *hipil* as a symbol of Mayan identity and to Mayan embroiderers as “ethnic active subjects” within globalisation, is updating and reviving the colonial praxis of segregation that has historically orientated the political agenda of the Mexican nation-state towards its indigenous population. Drawing on Bonfil Batalla’s (1987a) “theory of cultural control”, I show how, within a particular articulation of the dialectic visibility/invisibility and a peculiar construction of “the Maya” as an “archaeological Other”, travel agencies and governmental and non governmental institutions have “alienated” and “appropriated” the *hipil* to serve neoliberal economic goals.

6.1 *Bordadoras, X-ch'achuyo'ob* and *artesananas*: the multiple dimensions of Mayan embroiderers' identity

When examining the link between embroidery and other roles that define Mayan women's identity it is important to note that not all Mayan women sew today. While in the past all clothing was made by the women in a household, today these garments are being replaced by industrially made clothing, mostly purchased in Valladolid, especially in the attire of men and teenagers. In Xocén, however, adult women who continue to sew and master at least the basic embroidery techniques constitute a majority. Among these women, only a few actively participate in the handicraft market.

In the Eastern Yucatán, rural women enter the tourist market through two different pathways: home production and state-led social enterprise. The conditions of production associated with these paths determine to a large extent the embroiderers' identity. Lourdes Rejón Patrón (1993) identifies three dimensions of identity for Mayan embroiderers: the simple embroiderer (*bordadora*), the professional or independent embroiderer (*bordadora de oficio* or *X-ch'achuy*⁶⁸ in Yucatec Mayan) and the artisan (*artesana*). These categories mark the substantial difference between women who embroider for themselves or other family members, and women who do it for strangers (whether they are “*mestizas*”, *catrinas*, or tourists). Each of these categories confers to women engaged in embroidery production a particular social, political, and economic status.

The *bordadora*'s identity refers to women who produce *hipiles* for household consumption. The process of signification of this activity is shaped by a set of “internal” values and cultural practices that, as we have seen, put *el gesto de bordar* at the very heart of the definition of Maya womanhood. This is validated by an unconscious acceptance that every self-respecting Mayan woman must know how to embroider a *hipil*. However, as I said, not all “*mestizas*” sew today; many of them purchase their *hipiles* from other embroiderers, as only a minority of women masters the most sophisticated techniques. These women, the professional embroiderers, are known as *X-ch'achuyo'ob*⁶⁹.

⁶⁸ In Yucatec Maya *X-ch'achuy* literally means “woman who produces embroidery for sale”.

⁶⁹ Pluralised form of *X-ch'achuy*.

Unlike the *bordadora*, the *X-ch'achuy* does not produce *hipiles* for self-consumption but for sale. Her identity thus refers to an ideological process shaped by a productive practice that aims at generating an economic income. This status pertains to most of the Xocén's embroiderers, mainly young women who first entered the labour market as single and then retired at marriage, or married women doing their apprenticeship. The *X-ch'achuyo'ob* can be separated into three different categories: those who create clothing for sale for community members in accordance with personal or community ideas of aesthetic value; those who sell directly to tourists, mostly in the street of Valladolid, relying on their understanding of tourists' aesthetic tastes; and those who enter the tourist market through an intermediary who demands certain items, colours, and designs in order to fit current fashion trends. The majority of Xocén's *X-ch'achuyo'ob* falls into the latter category.

The figure of the intermediary commissions the work to the professional embroiderer following the production patterns of a traditional, well-established yet exploitative putting-out system (*sistema de encargo*).⁷⁰ In the past – and to some extent still in the present – this system has characterised the relationship between non-indigenous urban traders and rural Mayan embroiderers. Today, the same Mayan women who form part of handicraft cooperatives are the ones who reproduce this system (I will return to this point in the next chapter). Also, some North American and European expat-business women recently started to make their contribution to the exploitation of the *X-ch'achuyo'ob*. At the time of my fieldwork, a famous fashion boutique based in Valladolid and run by a European fashion designer employed local Mayan artisans to produce high-end bags and accessories mostly sold online to international customers.

⁷⁰ Also known as “domestic system”, the putting out system is a means of subcontracting work. In putting-out, work is contracted by a central agent to subcontractors who complete the work in off-site facilities, either in their own homes or in workshops with multiple craftsmen. This production system widespread in 17th century Western Europe, where merchant-employers “put out” materials to rural producers who usually worked in their homes or in turn subcontracted work to others. Finished products were returned to the employers for payment on a piecework or wage basis. The domestic system differed from the handicraft system of home production in that the workers neither bought materials nor sold products. It undermined the restrictive regulations of the urban guilds and brought the first widespread industrial employment of women and children. The advantages to the merchant-employer were the lower wage costs and increased efficiency due to a more extensive division of labour within the craft. During the Industrial Revolution, the system was superseded by employment in factories, but in the 20th century it was retained in some industries, notably the toy manufacturing industry in Germany, watchmaking in Switzerland, and numerous industries in China and India. For an assessment of current putting-out system in women's embroidery production in Spain see Encarnación Aguilar (1999).

The owner of the shop received significant attention from the press and was praised in international fashion magazines as the woman “who gave Mayan women hope and their dignity back”. In 2015, the fashion designer received recognition as Ambassador of Valladolid for her “eco-friendly, socially responsible line of unique bags and accessories [...] for her well-compensated craftsmen and women now have economic stability without having to leave home. They manage their own time, and are provided with training to learn not only how to make the bags, but the values of consistent quality and on-time delivery”. When I interviewed the women who produce these items in a Mayan community not far from Xocén, they all complained about the hard working conditions, the poor compensation and the bad treatment they were subjected to. Despite the claims of ethical sustainability and responsibility, the women were not formally hired and did not receive any work benefits. In 2014, a bag with a retail price of 3,200 pesos (£140) was paid 30 pesos (£1.50) to the artisan who had produced it.

Returning to the figure of the intermediary, the distance from the marketplaces, embroiderers’ illiteracy and monolingualism, and the lack of funding that prevents women from purchasing sewing materials make the presence of these middlepersons absolutely essential to the *X-ch’achuyo’ob*. The intermediary, indeed, provides the professional embroiderers with the materials and trades their products in Valladolid or in other tourist centres. Also, the middlemen determine the characteristics of the item according to the customers’ tastes. When an embroiderer receives a commission, she usually displays her drawings (*dechados*) to the customers or the intermediaries, who choose between them. Otherwise, the intermediary provides the embroiderer with new drawings, which have been previously selected by the customer.

A *X-ch’achuy* learns her profession through different stages. Once a mother has taught her daughter a vast range of embroidery techniques, the girl finds an intermediary to work with and specialises in one of the aspects of the work. Hence, is a “*pintadora*” the embroiderer who draws the *hipil*’s patterns on the fabric; an “*armadora*” the one who assembles the different parts that constitute a *terno*; and “*agarra costura*” the embroiderer who sews a complete *hipil* or fabric strips that will lately constitute the garment.

Despite the dependence on an intermediary and the high degree of specialisation required by the production system, the *X-ch’achuy*’s activity implies a specific know-how of the whole productive process, including knowledge about the aesthetic tastes of *catrinas* and tourists. However, many of the most experienced *X-ch’achuyo’ob* who

have worked for urban middlemen and managed to save enough money to invest in an independent activity became intermediaries themselves. As an intermediary, the *X-ch'achuy* has acquired a specific knowledge of the market in relation to the demand, the sale seasons and the marketplaces, and has developed a personal network of potential buyers and sellers, as well as of other professional embroiderers to contract as workforce.

On average, the manufacture of a machine-embroidered *hipil* requires from a week to ten days' work, whereas a handmade *hipil* takes up to six months. Professional embroiderers produce between one and three *hipiles* per month, working six hours per day, usually alternating embroidery production with domestic chores. When embroidery becomes "work", the product turns into a commodity and the intermediary imposes a delivery deadline, the *X-ch'achuy* needs to alter the order and pace of her everyday activities in order to put more effort into the elaboration of the item. This situation is potentially a source of conflict within the household, and is indeed perceived by women as a "*sacrificio*", a sacrifice, which translates into long hours of work to fulfil both their professional and domestic duties. This notion of "sacrifice", with all its corollary of emotional pressure mixed with a strong desire for social recognition, is widely shared among professional embroiderers; although distressing, it makes them extremely proud of their work, as a woman who succeeds in a remunerated artisanal occupation without abandoning her home is socially recognised as a hard worker ("*una mujer muy trabajadora*").

Depending on the technique used, a *X-ch'achuy* is paid 100/150 pesos (£4.30/6.50) for a handmade *hipil*, and 70/80 pesos (£3/3.50) for a machine-embroidered one. As the manufacture of the garment requires an initial investment of 50 pesos to buy the essential fabrics and the threads, the net earnings of a *X-ch'achuy* are 50 pesos for a handmade *hipil* and 20/30 for a machine-made one. Similarly, the elaboration of a *justán* is paid 20/30 pesos; this requires an investment of 15 pesos and three days on average to complete the work. In this case, the net gain of a *X-ch'achuy* is between 5 and 15 pesos. Because of these meagre profits, some women try to join a cooperative to get access to institutional funding and avoid the risk to run into debt with private credit institutions. When a *X-ch'achuy* enters a cooperative, she acquires a new status by becoming an "artisan".

In the Eastern Yucatán, *el artesana* is an embroiderer who is formally registered in a handicraft cooperative legally recognised by the state. Thus, the state constitutes the

most important interlocutor for artisans, both in its political and economic expressions, embodied by credit institutions. Within a cooperative, the artisan is at the top of a pyramid whose underpinnings are constituted by a variable number of members (*socias*). Although these women are formally registered in the cooperative, they often do not take on any leadership role or administrative task. They join the cooperative to get access to credit and take advantage of the fast-track guaranteed by the institutional support, but for a number of reasons that I will analyse in the next chapter, they are unable to carry out all the tasks involved in their role as *socias*. Also, the artisan's activity relies heavily on the exploitation of other *bordadoras*, mostly *X-ch'achuyo'ob*, who do not have access to subsidised credit (see Chapter 7).

The state's involvement in handicraft production entails a peculiar way of conceiving and directing the artisans' practice. Within a cooperative a specific normativity regulates the ways in which the artisans acquire the credit, relate to funding bodies and behave within their own group and in relation to members of other cooperatives. This normativity is legitimised through ritualised practices such as the election of a president, a secretary and a treasurer and, above all, through the assembly, which formally ratifies the birth of a cooperative. Here, the artisan's identity embodies a set of values and knowledge initially acquired through a signification process driven by the state, then transmitted to the new generations of artisans, and finally reinterpreted according to the evolution of the regional handicraft market. As I explain in the next chapter, the identity of the artisan is constructed and reconstructed through conflict – either with other members of the cooperative for the distribution of credit or with external private traders for the occupation of the strategic selling points – and solidarity – between family members or *socias*.

To the extent to which the *X-ch'achuyo'ob*'s existence is hidden by the homeworking system and direct sales, the artisan represents the only identity that allows women to become “public”, acquire a specific political knowledge, and reproduce themselves as a power group within the community and in relation to the hierarchical power structure of the region. However, participation in cooperatives does not necessarily secure the same political visibility or social and economic benefits to all artisans.

In the next section, I will discuss the impact of tourism on embroidery production in the area of Valladolid to illustrate how the adaptation of the *Maya Chuy* to the tourist market has re-signified *el gesto de bordar* and the *hipil*.

6.2 The intercultural encounter between Mayan embroiderers and tourists at the Zací Crafts Centre

Before the tourism boom in the Eastern Yucatán during the 1970s, there already existed a well-established commercial circuit organised around the production and trade of specific crafts, particularly hammocks and embroidered *hipiles*. Labelled today as “touristic”, these pieces were already popular in the area and highly requested both at a regional and a national level. A large contingent of artisans produced these items in line with the traditional putting-out system (*sistema de encargo*), working at home under the direction of local middlemen.

With the tourism boom, the handicraft market expanded to meet tourist demand, and on the basis of the pre-existing commercial structure, a new production system was developed. Along with hammocks and traditional clothing, other artisan practices that appeared to be doomed to obsolescence, such as wood and stone carving, pottery and rattan weaving, were rescued and inserted into the tourist market. However, hammocks and the so-called “*ropa típica*”, the traditional clothing, remained the most popular items among local customers and tourists. A new generation of artisans began to produce under different rules, introducing new designs and techniques and opening new trade channels. In the 1990s production turned completely to tourism (Morales Valderama et al. 1990).

The state began to participate in this new business in 1973 through the *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* (INI). Funded in 1948, it was replaced in 2003 by the *Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas* (CDI). In the 1980s, five governmental departments⁷¹ launched a number of credit programs that both boosted the production of handicrafts and multiplied the number of productive units in the Eastern Yucatán (Rejón Patrón 1998).

In the case of traditional clothing, production aimed at regional markets emerged in dozens of Mayan communities where women worked intermittently from home. These markets are tied to the main tourist routes of the Mexican Caribbean: Chichén Itzá and

⁷¹ These are the Commission for the Development of the Indigenous Population (CDI), the Rural Development Bank (BANRURAL), the Popular Cultures Unit (*Culturas Populares*), the House of Crafts of the Yucatán Government (*Casa de las Artesanías*) and the Ministry of Social Development (SEDESOL). Other institutions that allocate credit to embroiderers are the National Fund for the Development of Arts and Crafts (FONART) and the National Fund for Social Enterprises (FONAES). The latter has been particularly active in the area of Valladolid; its programs are known as *Solidaridad*.

the nearby Maya town of Pisté, the city of Cancún with intermediate points along the coastline, and the city of Valladolid. In each of these areas the elaboration of handmade clothing is carried out through different production systems.

The Pisté-Chichén Iztá marketplace emerged in the early 1980s following the expansion of tourism in the archaeological site of Chichén Itzá and the construction of the Mérida-Cancún Pan-American highway (Peraza López and Rejón Patrón 1989; Castañeda 1996, 1997; Armstrong-Fumero 2013). This area is dominated by the home-working production system (*sistema de maquila a domicilio*) and, at the end of the 1990s, encompassed a population of more than 500 women embroiderers (Rejón Patrón 1998: 278). Here, *hipil*'s production is combined with that of other crafts such as hammocks, pottery and carved wooden objects. The elaboration of these items does not fall directly on women but is carried out at home by a cottage industry with the participation of family members and the use of their own equipment – whether electric, pedal sewing machines, or more simple equipment.

The marketplace of Cancún and the Caribbean coast transcends the state borders of Quintana Roo and includes artisans from a number of frontier communities such as Chemax and Tixcacalcupul. This market is devoted to the production of hammocks, carved wooden objects and various textiles, and is characterised by a mixed system of domestic industry and state-led social enterprise.

The marketplace of Valladolid, which is the one I refer to, includes twelve locations belonging to four municipalities: Chichimilá, Temozón, Tixcacalcupul and Valladolid. It is here that the biggest part of *hipiles*' production for the tourist market is concentrated. This zone is delimited by the presence of the state through the CDI and its coordinating centres in the city of Valladolid. According to the municipal government more than 4,000 women take part in this trade.

Through various credit programs directed at rural women, in 1973 the INI has promoted the creation of the first two embroidery cooperatives of the Eastern Yucatán, which rapidly mushroomed throughout the region. Although nowadays many *X-ch'achuyo'ob* continue to work with middlemen within the traditional putting-out system, social enterprises currently predominate, incorporating more than 800 artisans associated with an organisation called *Unión de Artesanos del Oriente* (Union of Eastern Artisans).

Until 2001, UAO's embroiderers sold their crafts from small removable stands in the Parque Francisco Cantón, located in the very heart of Valladolid. Dozens of tourist

buses coming from the resorts of Cancún, Tulum and Playa del Carmen pass through the city every day on their way to Chichén Itzá. Because of its strategic position and the restricted number of places available to vendors, the park was highly sought after by Mayan embroiderers. During the last decade, competition among Mayan women over buying a place in the park, the hostility of local souvenir shopkeepers and the government's eviction and relocation of *ambulantes* (peddlers), gave rise to an intense political struggle which was eventually settled through a long process of negotiation between embroiderers, shopkeepers and local authorities.

In 2001 the local government decided to withdraw the permits of Mayan embroiderers; all stands were removed and the brand new *Centro Regional de Artesanías Zaci* was inaugurated in the southeast corner of the Parque Cantón. Again, the government made available a limited number of selling points inside the Centre. To minimise competition and prevent conflicts, the UAO decided to issue sales permits exclusively to women who were formally associated with state-funded cooperatives. Today, it is in this Crafts Centre that the intercultural encounter between Eastern Yucatán Mayan embroiderers and national and international tourists takes place. Here, some sixty Mayan women coming from Valladolid's neighbouring villages, including Xocén, sell their crafts to foreign visitors in twenty small shops.



Figure 24: *Zaci* Crafts Centre, Valladolid.

6.3 “*A los gringos no les gusta el hipil*”: issues of authenticity and fashion in the marketing of the Mayan traditional female dress

Although international tourism has accelerated the demand for traditional, handmade clothing, the negotiation between the tastes of tourists and the tastes of women who produce the garments has been problematic. Therefore, government organisations have adopted product diversification as one of the leading strategies to improve sales. The various programs and handicraft projects in the area of Valladolid have followed the same pattern, expanding the supply of embroidery to include blouses and vests, cup holders, cloths for wrapping *tortillas*, and a range of dresses and *hipiles* for dolls and for infants. In addition, other models of *hipiles* have been developed: the “double” *hipil*, for example, combines in one garment *justán* and *hipil*, in order to adapt the Mayan *traje* (dress) to the tastes of *catrinas* and tourists.



Figure 25: Various dresses showcased in one of the indoor shops of the Crafts Centre.



Figure 26: On the right hand side a machine-made *hipil* stands out. On the top of the picture, various *hipiles* and *justanes*.

Although the diversification of embroidery products has increased sales to tourists (Duarte Duarte and Wammack Weber 2010), in the area of Valladolid, the traditional *hipil* remains the most produced and proudly exhibited in Mayan shops. However, despite the fact that the colourful *hipiles* attract much attention, most foreigners approach the shops out of curiosity, to admire the items displayed, check the prices and take pictures, and seldom buy.

In spite of Mayan women's perseverance in showcasing *hipiles* in tourist-dense spots, over the course of my participant observation in the Crafts Centre, I quickly realised that the same characteristics that make the traditional Mayan dress a highly demanded garment in the region contribute to a lack of popularity amongst visitors. Arguably, one of the reason for tourists' indifference towards *hipiles* lies in the intrinsic characteristics of the tourist market's selling strategies in indigenous regions, which attempt to locate handicrafts within an "eternal", "authentic", "uncontaminated" past, free from Western influences (Hendrickson 1995; Quintana Morales 2014). However, due to its intercultural origins dating back to the Spanish Conquest (see Chapter 5), the

Yucatecan *hipil* does not seem “primitive” enough to fulfil tourists’ expectations and desires for authenticity and exoticism. A feeling of disappointment when discovering the European origin of the traditional Mayan dress emerged clearly in interviews and conversations with tourists. As they tend not to be fooled and are mildly sceptical, the authenticity of the *hipil* is often called into question. A Canadian visitor commented:

«I expected to find something authentic, something truly Maya and now I learn that this dress (*the hipil*) is of Spanish origin. Then, what’s the difference between the *hipil* and the other dresses showcased here for sale? There is no difference, they are both made up, but the *hipil* is way more expensive than the other dresses, which, for me, makes it not worthy of buying... I’m sorry, but nobody likes to be fooled».

Clueless about the costs of *hipil* production; inattentive to quality when assessing the differences between the Mayan traditional dress and other clothing; and animated by a stereotypical understanding of what would globally be identified as the “authentic” culture, this tourist pinpoints precisely the “inauthenticity” of the garment, which would make its price “unworthy”, as the principal deterrent towards making a purchase.

As we have seen, the manufacture of a handmade *hipil* is a process requiring between three and six months. The market price for hand-made clothing varies according to the surface area of the embroidery and the number of threads; one-quarter breath (approximately 10 cm) is worth 1,000 pesos (£40), while a *terno* can cost up to 4,000 pesos (£150). Due to its production costs, the *hipil* cannot compete with the most economic garments specifically produced for youth tourism, nor with inferior quality *hipiles*, mass-produced in embroidery workshops and sold at a lower price. During my interviews, many tourists – mainly Europeans and North Americans – defined the price of *hipiles* as being “exorbitant”, especially in comparison to the much cheaper and inferior quality clothing available in Mérida, Cancún and Chichén Itzá. A young American girl, who I met at the Crafts Centre, commented:

«I’ve seen these garments (*the hipiles*) in many souvenir shops in Mérida and Cancún, but they were sold at a fraction of the price. I’m sure that the quality is different but at the end of the day these dresses all look the same. Honestly, quality is not something I bother about as I would likely wear this dress only few times on holiday to go to the beach or, at most, for a dressing-up party. You know, fashion is

too rapidly evolving to care about quality and longevity [...] If you want to keep up with fashion trends and don't have conspicuous financial resources, you have to accept some compromise. In my case, I never buy quality clothing, not even in my country. Back in the US I shop at H&M or Forever 21⁷², and I'm happy with what I purchase even if after one season it literally gets destroyed [...] These Mayan garments are lovely, but for 60 bucks it is definitely a non-sense».

Along with the price issue, this girl's comment highlights a different set of concerns. 60 dollars for a handmade garment is in fact not much compared to the prices of Western quality clothing. Tourists acknowledge this, but they still perceive the *hipil* as overpriced because, quite simply, this garment does not meet their aesthetic tastes and ideas of fashion. When asked if she liked the *hipil* and if she would wear it, a young Norwegian girl responded:

«Honestly this garment doesn't seem to me particularly flattering. It's more a sack that conceals rather than valorises women's physical attributes. It has beautiful, very summery colours that remind me of the tropics, but for my personal taste it's more suitable for dressing a table than a female body. I like the belts and the earrings though; they are nice, peculiar accessories that I would not find in Norway and that I could easily use to embellish an everyday outfit».

For most of the traditional embroiderers, as I explained in the previous chapter, the *hipil* is not a matter of fashion; or rather, fashion is a question of choice from a specific and well-defined range of techniques, colours and patterns. “*Mestizas*” own different styles of *hipiles* and do assign them a different value according to the materials and the techniques used. This value, however, is never merely aesthetic or economic, but it stems from, and is embedded in, a universe of cultural meanings that profoundly shape “*mestizas*” self-image and ideas of femininity. Entangled with wider notions of womanhood, the *hipil* reflects a particular idea of modesty that may be different from the one performed by Western women through clothing – even more in a touristic arena of leisure and relaxation.

Within the touristic encounter that takes place at the Crafts Centre, the cultural meanings attached to the *hipil*, as well as the time Mayan women spend to create this

⁷² These are multinational clothing-retail companies, known for their fast-fashion clothing for men, women, teenagers and children.

garment, remain invisible to tourists. This “invisibilisation” makes problematic for a tourist accepting to pay 60 dollars for an “unfashionable” dress. On the other hand, what is evident is the clash of aesthetic values and cultural capital that tourists and “*mestizas*” externalise through the dress. Contrary to the trendy, replaceable, almost disposable cheap Western clothing, for “*mestizas*” the *hipil* is not just one of many possible types of attire. It expresses cultural allegiance and, as such, it is not interchangeable. In Western societies, where the concept of fashion introduces a broad range of constantly changing images to be aspired to, we are no longer expected to define ourselves in permanent or consistent way. But in the Eastern Yucatán, where social and ethnic stratifications are still strongly expressed and where the fashion industry is still relatively young, a change of clothes is likely to be interpreted as a change of affiliation or an act of desertion. As a changeless “second skin”, the *hipil* does not get adapted to fast-changing consumers tastes, nor to the philosophy of quick manufacturing at an affordable price that Western fast fashion⁷³ celebrates – and more and more aggressively tries to export.

Mayan vendors at the Crafts Centre may not acknowledge the consumption behaviour of an average Western tourist, however, it has become crystal clear to them that “*gringos*” do not appreciate their traditional clothing. As Jacinta stressed:

«*Gringos* don’t like our *hipiles*. They don’t care about the quality of the item and cannot see the difference between a handmade, an industrial and a machine-made *hipil*. They just want to buy cheap souvenirs for their friends and family. They mostly buy handkerchiefs or belts. Sometimes they buy blouses. Other times they roam around the shop and go away without buying anything».

So, if tourists do not like the traditional Mayan clothing, why do they go to the Crafts Centre? During my fieldwork, I sat many times with Jacinta in her shop. Some of the visitors I interviewed stated that they were visiting the Crafts Centre with no intention of making a purchase. When I asked why, some of them responded that they were strictly interested to “see indigenous people” and observe “indigenous culture”.

⁷³ Fast fashion is a contemporary term used by fashion retailers to express that designs move from catwalk quickly to capture current fashion trends. Emphasis is on optimising certain aspects of the supply chain for these trends to be designed and manufactured inexpensively and quickly to allow the mainstream consumer to buy current clothing styles at a lower price.

In his study of Guatemalan Mayan vendors in the tourist handicrafts markets of Antigua and Chichicastenango, Walter Little (2004) reports the various strategies that Kaqchikel vendors elaborate to circumvent the lack of tourist interest in economic transactions. These strategies include striking up short-term friendships with visitors and agreeing to pose for photographs. Like performance artists, Little explains, Mayan artisans transform the plaza into a combination of a Maya marketplace and an interactive theatre. However, bargaining is not part of the strategy. According to the author, this disdain for bargaining is due to the fact that Mayan craftsmen see themselves as artisans, and not just vendors, and feel insulted when tourists continually offer lower prices for their art; most of them would rather have no deal than undersell their crafts.

Unlike Guatemalan Kaqchikel vendors, “*mestizas*” who sell their garments in the Crafts Centre do not employ any particular selling strategy, nor do they “perform” their ethnic identity in special ways to increase sales, as it is the case of Mayan vendors in Chichén Itzá (Castañeda 1994) or in San Cristóbal de las Casas (Quintana Morales 2009). They do not bargain either, but this is not due to a sentiment of pride stemming from their “artisan status”. Mayan women in the area of Valladolid do not perform their cultural “otherness” for tourists for a number of specific reasons.

In first place, they acknowledge the fact that foreigners are not happy to pay 1,000 pesos for a *hipil*; as Jacinta stressed, they would rather spend 60 pesos for an embroidered belt or 30 pesos for a pair of embroidered earrings. At the same time, artisans are aware that the biggest slice of their earnings comes exactly from the sale of *hipiles*, which means sales from local customers, who are *de facto* the ones who buy and wear the Mayan clothing.

Secondly, while embroidery production remains expensive, the income from sales is generally poor. This restricts necessarily the scope for negotiation. Mayan embroiderers do not bargain because if they did, they would not earn anything. As Marta Turok (1996) has pointed out, traditional crafts are sold at low prices because they stem from a barter economy that does not assign a cost to labour. Even when crafts are produced for self-consumption, it is hard to know or determine the time the artisan invested in the production process or estimate the cost of the material used to create the object. This makes that crafts commercialised directly by indigenous artisans are, most of the times, undersold. I will return on this point in the next chapter.

Thirdly, even if they wished to play the game of negotiation, the embroiderers would not know where to start. Although they have learnt some English words to address the foreign customers quickly, some of them can barely speak Spanish, which makes interaction with tourists awkward and frustrating. More broadly, as Novelo has stressed, artisans' infamous commercial incompetence is not a legend but a reality (Novelo 1993: 54). This is probably not the case of Maya vendors analysed by Little, Castañeda and Quintana Morales respectively in Chichicasteñango, Chichén Itzá and San Cristóbal de las Casas, but it is certainly the case of “*mestizas*” who sell clothing at the Crafts Centre in Valladolid. As a matter of fact, these women do not understand the concept of cost-effectiveness in the marketing of their products. They do transform their work to sell it to foreign tourists but, when it comes to the *hipil*, they do not differentiate the garments made for tourists from those of personal and cultural value. Pointing at the different types of *hipiles* hung up on the walls of her shops, Jacinta commented:

«These *hipiles* are all the same; some of them look and are different, but in substance they are still *hipiles*... I understand they [*the tourists*] do not like them, but we cannot change our tradition for them».

While the traditional embroiderers are neither hostile towards tourists nor reconstructing a collective identity for themselves or for visitors, it is exactly the powerful universe of cultural values the *hipil* carries with (in) itself that prevents the artisans from acquiring the emotional distance which is essential to adapt and sell the *hipil* to foreigners.

In the light of the considerations made above, we might conclude that in the Eastern Yucatán the handmade *hipil* is sold more as a symbol of identity for the “*mestiza*” than as a souvenir for tourists and that even as embroiderers commodify their culture for tourist consumption in the world market, they are maintaining a specific, community-based sense of Mayan identity.

Although Mayan women continue to sell *hipiles* and other traditional or “neotraditional” embroideries to domestic and international tourists, the tourism market in the area of Valladolid is not as important as we could imagine, especially regarding typical clothing. Despite the lack of tourists' appreciation, a vibrant trade in *hipiles* does exist in the region, where both Mayan and non-Mayan women are the main customers. The “*mestizas*” who use the *hipil* as their daily attire are the most important and

demanding ones, followed by *catrinas*. None of them, however, shops at the Crafts Centre: while “*mestizas*” commission the work directly to the professional embroiderers, *catrinas* mostly buy their *hipiles* through local intermediaries, fuelling an internal market that is parallel, and yet separated, from the tourist one.

After all, the systematic production of *hipiles* and *ternos*, as well as their commercialisation in Yucatán from the first decades of the 20th century, clearly indicates that embroidery production precedes the development of the tourist market (Rejón Patrón 1995). The domestic industry that was already organised to produce and trade traditional Mayan women’s clothing in the region responded to the new opportunities brought by tourism but was not generated by that. Certainly, *hipil* production cannot be considered an “invented tradition” (Hosbawm and Ranger 1985), expressly made up to be foisted off on tourists, nor the by-product of governmental politics accommodated to global market needs, as is the case of rudimentary tourist souvenirs commercialised as “authentic” indigenous pieces in major tourist sites like Chichén Itzá. Here, the *hipil* is considered to be a poorly marketable item, but it is still strategically displayed by the same Maya vendors to attract tourists and increase the sales of other (cheaper) handicrafts. The problem remains, however, that although in the Eastern Yucatán embroidery production cannot be counted as an “invented tradition”, in the space of the *Zací* Crafts Centre it is treated as such. I deepen this issue in the next section.



Figure 27: A Mayan woman selling an allegedly “traditional” blanket to a tourist inside the archaeological site of Chichén Iztá. In the corner, a *hipil* stands on its own, being showcased more for catching the attention of tourists than for being sold.



Figure 28: Various crafts expressly made for tourists consumption, on sale at Chichén Iztá.

6.4 Reproduction of identity, cultural control and indigenous agency in the tourist market

Although tourism represents the big engine behind the state-led promotion of embroidery, when it comes to sales it does not seem to be a game-changing agent. Therefore, if not financially rewarding, what kind of benefit would it provide to Mayan embroiderers? According to Rejón Patrón, this benefit has to be found in the popularity tourism has given to the *hipil* among *catrinas*, who previously disregarded this garment as a symbol of a largely discriminated Mayan identity (Rejón Patrón 2010: 234). Following Rejón Patrón, Duarte Duarte and Wammack Weber conclude that, by embroidering for the tourist market, Mayan women take advantage of globalisation to enhance the reproduction of one of the most important symbols of Maya identity (2010: 128). However, I believe that the effects of “identity reproduction” Mayan women would perform through selling their *hipiles* to tourists are too controversial and to some extent contradictory to be considered empowering for “*mestizas*”.

This is not to say that tourism does not have the potential to empower Mayan embroiderers. In fact, it does – especially if interpreted as a performance as Walter Little suggests. Such empowerment, however, would require the women to be visible subjects, at the forefront of the process of commodification of their culture. Yet, if we look at who maintains control over the decision-making process, we quickly realise that the idea of Mayan artisans as “ethnic active subjects” who would “take advantage of globalisation” to affirm themselves in the world market is more a theoretical stance than an observable reality.

The “theory of cultural control”, elaborated by Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (1991), can shed some light on this issue. Cultural control is defined as “the system according to which the capacity of social decision over cultural elements is exercised” (Bonfil, 1987a: 27, my translation). According to Bonfil, in a specific situation of cultural interaction, what is important is who decides which elements are imposed, adopted, and transformed. From the point of view of a given group, there are four possible outcomes to this interaction: autonomy (the group maintains control over both decisions and elements); appropriation (the group makes the decisions about whether to adopt another group’s cultural elements); alienation (an outside agency retains control over the group cultural elements); imposition (the group has control over neither the elements nor the decision about how they are used, but the results end up being incorporated into the group’s culture).

In the case of Mayan embroiderers who sell *ropa típica* at the Valladolid's Crafts Centre, the state, through the CDI and other governmental and non-governmental institutions, is the agent behind the promotion of the *Maya Chuuy* within the tourist market. It is the state that promotes (and imposes) the formation of cooperatives, providing women with the essential funding to sustain their activities; it is the state that decides what to sell, and whether and how to diversify the production; it is still the state that institutes embroidery workshops to teach Mayan women new embroidery techniques to diversify the production. In short, it is the state that defines how Mayan culture is commoditised to become an attractive commercial product to tourists. Within this top-down paradigm, Mayan artisans remain at the edge of the decision-making process; they have no voice in the development of a tourism in which they and their ancestors are marketed as the central attraction.

The exclusion of Mayan people's views on their culture and identities is constructed under postcolonial ideologies. The marginalised condition of Mexican indigenous people in the area of tourism, indeed, is not different to the peripheral position to which they have been confined, under the action of colonial and neo-colonial forces, in various aspects of social, economic and political life. In spite of their depreciation, indigenous people trigger the Western fascination with otherness. This paradox has been questioned by postcolonial theories under the influence of Edward Said's work (1978) and his concept of "orientalism": a "discourse that worked through a representation of space in which the Orient was constructed as a theatrical stage on which the Occident projected its own fantasies and desires" (Said 1978: 54-55). As Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) has observed, the exoticisation of the cultural "Other" has invested different cultures beyond the Orient, in particular indigenous peoples and other subaltern groups, playing a central role in the reproduction of colonial power following the end of colonialism. This mode of representation of the previously colonised "Other" is particularly relevant in the context of tourism (Grünwald 2002; Hall and Tucker 2004), whose underpinning rests precisely on the friction between authenticity and commercialisation of culture, and on the intercultural encounter between "the West" and "the Rest".

According to anthropologist Juan Carlos Segura, while anthropology has worked hard to dismantle the "reasons for exoticism", tourism seems to feed them, becoming in fact the most spectacular form of modern exoticism:

«The “beautiful but innocent” bodies that watched over Malinowski’s dreams; the smells to which Segalen, amazed, dedicated one of the most original writings on exoticism⁷⁴; or the colours that seduced Gauguin, seem to have been reborn. Accessing them, without any disease or danger, is possible today thanks to tourism, thanks to its ability to project culture as an uncontaminated, distilled, and “pure” scenario; as a masterful theatre play» (1996: 78 my translation).

The modalities of the gaze that the West projects on itself and on the cultural “Other” are shifting and ambiguous. While for the first travellers and explorers the cultural encounter was a complex relationship with a world that seemed to resist any attempt for decryption, within tourism the world of the Other is already “undressed” and “revealed”. In this fake epiphany, Segura continues, the movement of the anthropological gaze towards an unknown/to-be-known universe slips into the stillness of a gaze that already knows what it will find, a gaze that coincides with its fantasies and expectations beforehand. It is exactly through this new modality of the gaze that the tourist apparatus establishes a precise form of interaction with the cultural Other. This interaction is the result of an actively mediated and prefigured encounter, domesticated and domesticating at the same time, both for tourists and for groups in host societies (*Ibidem* 1996: 52). While within the tourist event cultural production is transformed into a commodity, the cultural practices embedded in a specific social fabric overflow and conflate into a new economic model. Within this model, cultural practices get disjointed from social action, while the “signs” that formerly shaped their universe turn into the raw material and the final object of a peculiar mechanism of production and consumption: the production and consumption of “difference” (*Ibidem* 1996: 71). From being the “strange effect” of cultural difference, the “exotic” turns into an object of collective consumption before which we must be “amazed”. The staging of cultures through tourism advertising strategies makes them transiting from the binding reality of the host groups to the imaginary reality of what most of us want them to be: an “exotic Other” (*Ibidem* 1996: 57).

Suffused with postcolonial ideologies, tourism promotion of Mayan culture in local, national, and international agencies is feeding the tourist’s “quest for the Other” (Van Den Berghe 1994) through stereotypical representations of the Mayas as pristine, proud, exotic survivors who have persisted for thousands of years despite overwhelming

⁷⁴ Segura refers to “Essai sur l’exotisme, une esthétique du divers”, Victor Segalen 1944.

foreign influences. In line with the message conveyed by newspaper articles, National Geographic photo essays, New Age self-help books, public broadcasting documentaries, and Hollywood films, these representations have conflated the ruins in the jungle with the Maya as people, inviting the tourist to muse over the “lost civilisation” of the ancient, prophetic, mysterious, and bloodthirsty Maya.

The screenshot shows the National Geographic Expeditions website. At the top, there is a search bar with the text "Where do you want to go?" and a yellow "FIND A TRIP" button. Below the search bar are navigation links: Destinations, Trip Types, Why Travel With Us?, Get Inspired, Special Offers, and Reserve A Trip. The main content area features a large image of a Mayan pyramid (El Castillo at Chichen Itza) with the title "Mysteries of the Maya". To the right of the image, there are details: Trip Type: Land, 9 Days | Mérida to Guatemala City, and Group Size: Max 25. A blue button says "Request a Reservation" with a sub-link "Click to see dates". Below the image is a section titled "Expedition Details" with a sidebar on the left containing links for Expedition Details, Experts, Optional Extensions, Related National Geographic Features, and Contact Us. The main text describes the tour: "Nestled within the jungles of Mesoamerica, soaring pyramids, hieroglyphs, and long-hidden murals attest to the magnificence and mystery of the ancient Maya. Discover monuments of this fabled civilization showcased in once-grand cities like Tikal and concealed in the remote temples of Bonampak and Yaxchilán. Meet modern-day Maya and encounter traditions that have survived through the centuries." A map of Mexico and Guatemala shows the tour route with stops at Mérida, Yaxchilán, Bonampak, Palenque, and Tikal. Below the map is a "National Geographic Expert" section featuring William Saturno, a Boston University archaeologist who has received numerous National Geographic grants to support his excavation. The "Trip Highlights" section lists:

- Delve into the world of the Maya on an expedition inspired by the work of National Geographic scientists and archaeologists in the region.
- Explore some of the most influential cities of the Maya world, including four UNESCO World Heritage sites: Chichen Itza, Uxmal, Palenque, and Tikal.
- Examine illustrations of Maya warfare depicted in the vivid wall murals at Bonampak, and see Palenque's illuminative hieroglyphs during a special after-hours tour.
- Experience Maya culture today on visits to a traditional village and the colorful market in Mérida.

Figure 29: “Mysteries of the Maya”: a 9-day tour promoted by National Geographic Expeditions.

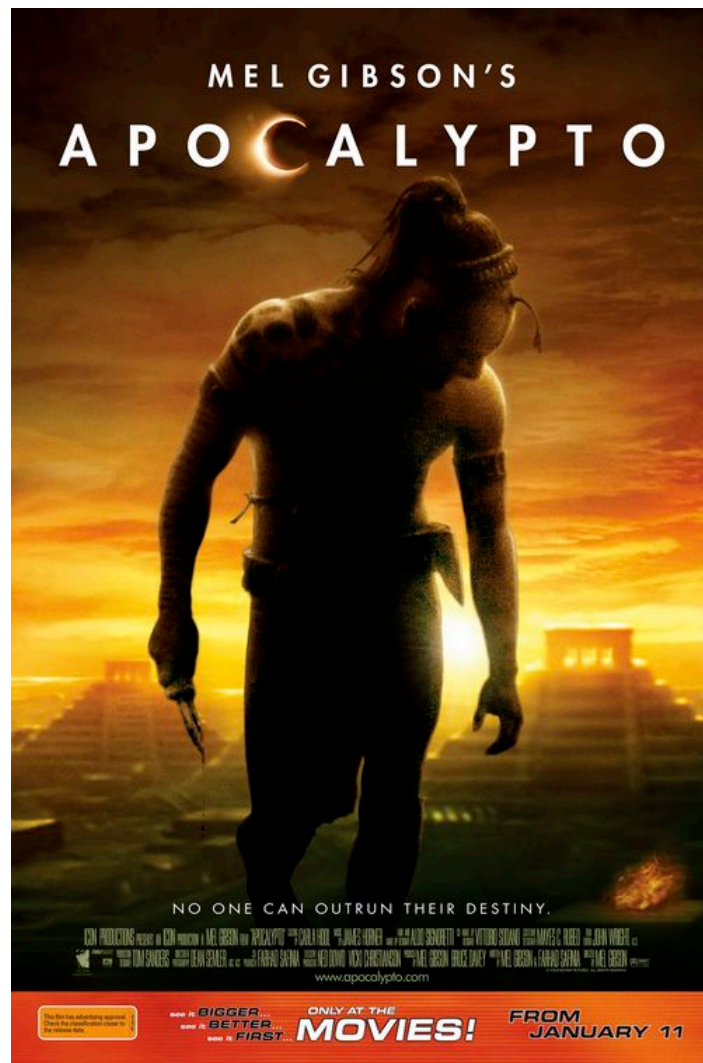


Figure 30: The Mayas of *Apocalypto*.

The recreation of the *Maya Chuy* for the tourist trade has not escaped this representational economy. Capitalising on the allure of the past to seduce tourists, governmental politics have tended to bestow visibility on the object (the *hipil*) rather than on the agents who create and define the object (Mayan women). The removal of Mayan embroiderers from the open-air space of the Parque Francisco Cantón, where they previously sold their crafts to tourists, and their relocation within the indoor space of the *Zací* Crafts Centre is a blatant example of how the state articulates the dialectic visibility/invisibility of the ethnic identity before tourists. While at the very centre of the Parque Cantón a solemn statue of a “*mestiza*” celebrates “the Maya” as central to the Yucatán’s identity, the Mayans as people are segregated in spaces where their visibility

can be controlled, their ethnicity domesticated and their cultural practices subdued to the economic reasons of tourism.



Figure 31: The statue of the “*mestiza*” in the centre of the Parque Francisco Cantón, Valladolid.

The outcome of this segregation becomes visible in the attitude of foreign tourists who browse the Mayan shops in the *Zací* Crafts Centre. During my fieldwork, I regularly found myself in the position of having to explain to college-educated international (and sometimes Mexican!) visitors that the “mysterious tongue” the vendors were speaking was the Yucatec Maya, and that Mayan women currently wore the colourful garments showcased in the shops. I would rather avoid essentialisations about “tourism” and “tourists”, but the comments following my explanations were as homogenous as they were discouraging: “Seriously? I had no idea that there was such a thing... Does it mean that Mayans are still alive?”

On the other hand, tourists who acknowledge that Mayans are living people and explicitly go to the centre to “observe” their culture, tend to associate them with some

physical marks in the landscape, primarily ruins of ancient buildings, stelae, *cenotes* and caves. Although contemporary Mayas are far away from ruins, this “archaeological prototype” is in the back of the mind of outsiders when they meet or relate to Maya individuals. Dragged into the dream of a mysterious “*Mundo Maya*”, created *ad hoc* by government agencies, national and international investors and tour operators, Western consumers are caught in the trap of cultural essentialism and tend to view Maya culture as a static entity. In this view, the artisans are marginalised from continuous processes and interactions with different groups; their role is valued more for their cultural associations rather than their skills. These skills remain invisible just as much as their labour, the time they spend to create their crafts, and the cultural capital attached to their creations. Artisans are viewed as living remains to be framed in picture from behind the curtains by foreign tourists who roam around the shops of the Crafts Centre as they were visiting the rooms of a museum. Within these “rooms” the *hipil* is no longer a “dress”, alive and meaningful for people who wear it, but it becomes an inert museographic “costume” that only collectors would buy. In this scenario, the “tourist gaze” (Urry 1990) turns into an “archaeological gaze” that not only reifies the “Indians”, but it also removes them from the present by consigning them to the past.

By feeding the archaeological gaze of tourists, the nation-state updates and revives the action of segregation that, under the ideological masks of *Mestizaje* and *Indigenismo* (see Chapter 5), has characterised its political interventions towards the indigenous population in the past. In the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), the incorporation of the indigenous population to the new-born nation-state and its “de-Indianisation” (Bonfil Batalla 1987/1989) through economic development and education, land and political reforms ran parallel to the national displays of indigenous heritage, presented as the “authentic” root of Mexican culture and identity, and to the celebration of the “Indio” in monuments and artworks. As Mexican anthropologist Aguirre Beltrán (1967) has stressed, the use of the mythical and glorious past of the “bronze race”⁷⁵ as official nationalist symbols, crystallising the indigenous in the past erased him from the geopolitical present. The rhetoric of *Mestizaje* turned out to be a Janus-faced ideology that devoured the “Indians” at the very moment of celebrating them:

⁷⁵ See José Vasconcelos’ *La Raza Cósmica* (1925).

«The presence of the Indians on walls, in museums, sculptures and archaeological areas open to the public is essentially treated as the presence of a dead world. The living Indian [...] is relegated to the background, when not ignored or denied; he occupies a segregated space, disconnected from both his glorious past, and from the present, which does not belong to him: a dispensable space» (Beltrán 1967: 91, my translation).

Relegated to “dispensable spaces”, to miserable and peripheral “regions of refuge” (Beltrán 1967), the “Indio” would have no longer hampered the entry of Mexico into the Western modernity. While tourism represents today one of the faster tracks to participate in this modernity, the *Zací* Crafts Centre seems to me one of the umpteenth “*regiones de refugio*” where indigenous people are confined to this day.

We should ask now, how the fact that non-indigenous urban women have begun to wear the *hipil* for social gatherings or in public spaces previously considered inappropriate had pragmatically benefited the “*mestizas*”. Certainly, *catrinas*’ appreciation of the *hipil* did not change the ethnicity-based power structures in the region, as Maya identity continues to be featured as a “negative identity” (Bartolomé 1992: 315). As far as I could ascertain, the same *catrinas* who show pride in wearing the *hipil* or the *terno* in urban social events continue to stereotypically identify the “*mestizas*” as domestic servants rather than as skilled creators of beautiful garments. Consequently, when using the traditional Maya clothing, many non-indigenous women appear extremely concerned with remarking that they are not Maya, as exemplified by the comment of this woman in Valladolid:

«I own a *hipil* but – I think it’s evident – I’m not a “*mestiza*”. I use it once in a while because it’s nice and cool, ideal in Yucatán’s hot weather... I also own a *terno*, but I wear it only for parties, while the “*mestizas*” use it for the *Vaquería* [...] My sister got married dressed in a *terno*... All the guests were surprised to see how beautiful this garment looked on her... They were surprised because, if you see a *terno* on a “*mestiza*”, it looks just ugly. The fact is that the *terno* is a too elegant attire to be worn by domestic servants... It requires a certain posture, certain elegance... On “*mestizas*” short, lumpy and unkempt bodies, of course, it cannot look nice».

As I explained in the previous chapter, the use of symbols of Maya culture within the Hispanicised society does not necessarily entail proximity, respect and interculturality. As Garcia de León (1985) has pointed out, in Yucatán, as in the rest of Mexico, stigma and racism towards the indigenous population continue to regulate social relations. During the commemoration of the “First Spark of the Mexican Revolution”⁷⁶ in June 2014, a middle-class Yucatecan woman who had just paraded in the main square of Valladolid lusciously wrapped in a magnificent *terno* told me:

«The *hipil* is Yucatecan. It is not Maya. We need to disassociate it from the “*mestizas*” because “*mestizas*” are incapable; they bring it in their blood. Their race is inferior to ours [...] “*Mestiza*” servants must be maltreated because they are gross and ungrateful; if you treat them well they become equal and do whatever they want...»

Today as in the past, the Maya population continues to be subjected to discrimination and marginalisation, a “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu 1998) that is often internalised and reproduced in rural areas. While historically the domination has been exercised through physical abuse, ideological violence has operated in a subtler, but equally brutal way. As Barabas has pointed out, this type of violence “facilitates the fragmentation of the colonised group promoting its internal stratification; weakens or destroys its history; affects its collective memory and its ethnic dignity; and leads it to despise and judge itself as being inferior” (Barabas 1979: 135, my translation).

All in all, we can affirm that if tourism managed to empower any subjects, these have not been the “*mestizas*”. Increasingly worn by non-indigenous – and at times not even Yucatecan – women in restaurants, hotels and airports to welcome visitors, or in

⁷⁶ “*La primera chispa de la revolución mexicana*”, also known as the “*Dzelkoop Plan*”, was an insurrection against the dictatorship of President Porfirio Díaz, which began in Valladolid on June 1910. Led by the leaders of the Independent Electoral Centre and the Anti Reelectionist Front, this rebellion was the “spark of the revolution” which spread through the country, fuelled by national resentment, until Porfirio Díaz fled Mexico. Valladolid became the scene of a bloody battle where dozens of rebels lost their lives, and its history is known throughout the country as a part of the general history of Yucatán and Mexican patriotism. Every year, on the night of June 3, a simulation is done of the taking of the plaza by the revolutionary forces. At this *fiesta*, a ceremony takes place with the three powers of the state placing floral arrangements at the site where the revolution heroes were killed.

social gatherings to celebrate the regional identity; featured in tourist brochures, guidebooks, postcards, and advertising campaigns, the *hipil* has been “alienated” and “appropriated”, to go back to Bonfil, by the non-indigenous, dominant society and used to serve its economic, political and identity goals. In this light, the *hipil* ceases to be a marker of Mayaness and becomes an indicator of national identity, a symbol of an integrated *Mexicanidad* where the indigenous object is strategically kept but the ethnic subject removed.



Figure 32: Advertising picture of a restaurant in Valladolid. On the right a non-indigenous woman is wearing a *terno*.

In a state-regulated tourist context, just like the identities of the *bordadoras*, the *hipil* and *el gesto de bordar* have gone through a process of resignification. Certainly, for Mayan women the act of embroidering continues to be a cultural gesture; notwithstanding, the tourist market and the state that dictates the ground rules do not value it as such – or, at least, this valorisation happens in very sanctioned, profit-oriented ways. The specific, community-based sense of Maya identity that is embedded in the act of embroidering retains its characteristic in the rural market but loses its context and alters its semantic structure when it enters the urban/global.

CHAPTER 7

Mayan Women and Microcredit: Conflicts, Solidarity and Empowerment in Two Embroidery Cooperatives

7.1 *Unidad Agrícola e Industrial para la Mujer*: the first women's production units in Mexico

During the 1970s, a growing activity arose in Mexico around the formation and consolidation of rural women's organisations, along with a greater intervention of the state as a palliative to the crisis within the agricultural sector. By injecting funding into women's organisations, the state aimed at integrating poor, marginalised rural women into the "productive progress" (Arizpe 1981 and 1982), suggesting that this incorporation would have advanced gender equality.

Three key international events promoted by the United Nations contributed to the development of various public policies directed to rural women. These were the International Women's Year (IWY) in 1975, the United Nations *Decade for Women* (1976-1985) and The *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly. The guidelines proposed in these declarations became requirements for the implementation of public policies in the member states. These guidelines revolved around three conceptual axes: equality (facilitate women's access to labour through training and education); antipoverty (eradicate rural poverty through productive projects directed exclusively to women); efficiency (support capacity building and women's participation both in the household and in the community management).

In Mexico, the state's implementation of public policies directed to rural women gave rise to a vast research field, which focused on the effects of development programs on women⁷⁷. Lourdes Arizpe (1981; 1986) was one of the first observers who pointed out that the agricultural transformation in Latin America was changing the forms of

⁷⁷ See Arizpe 1981 and 1982; Aranda 1987; Labreque 1988; Aranda, Botey and Robles 1993; Pinto González e Villagómez Valdés 1993; Cervera, 1998; Martínez, 2000; Martínez *et al.*, 2005; Zapata y Suárez, 2007

participation of rural women in productive and reproductive labour. According to Arizpe, in the face of the new challenges brought by the debt crisis, economic restructuring and neoliberal adjustments, women were left with few choices: intensifying the agricultural or the domestic, unpaid labour, becoming wage workers in the city, or incorporating themselves into state-led productive projects. According to Nadal (2000), these projects were instrumental to stop the rural exodus through an illusory distribution of scarce – and yet essential – resources to a specific part of the population, considered most vulnerable and less vindictive. At the same time, government programs directed to rural women served to compensate for a major historical oblivion. Women, in fact, had to wait for the New Federal Law of the Agrarian Reform, issued in 1971, to be awarded the status of fully-fledged economic subjects worthy of being inscribed in the agricultural state policies and receiving credit. According to the Agrarian Reform of 1917, in fact, only the head of the family could benefit from the distribution of lands (*ejidos*) originated from the dismantling, in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, of the landholding system. At that time, the only women that were acknowledged as head of the family with access to land rights were single or widowed women; despite their contribution to the production and reproduction of the household, no married women could be counted as *ejidataria*.

As an adjustment to this discriminatory praxis, in 1971 the article 200 of the General Law of the Agrarian Reform granted to all women the opportunity to become *ejidatarias* and work in production units funded by the state. The new law maintained the idea that the *ejidos* were unalienable, and that only family members could inherit the land rights, which opened up for women the possibility to be appointed as successors. However, this measure was not able to break down the gendered discrimination in the access to land rights. In 1984, in fact, only 15 per cent of women benefited from the title of *ejidatarias* (Nadal 2000). They were mostly senior women or widows, whose sons and brothers controlled the production.

An important step towards the implementation of the new law was the creation, in 1971, of the UAIM (*Unidad Agrícola e Industrial para la Mujer*)⁷⁸, the first female production units conceived according to cooperative principles (Aranda, Robles and Botey 1993). The UAIM allowed the women who did not have access to land as

⁷⁸ The UAIM was formally created in 1971 through the articles 103, 104 and 105 of the *Ley General de la Reforma Agraria*. However, it was considered recipient of credit only in 1976, though the article 54 of the *Ley General de Crédito Rural*.

ejidatarias the opportunity to carry out small agricultural or industrial projects through state funding and under institutional supervision. The article 4 of the *Reglamento de Funcionamiento de la Unidad Agrícola para la Mujer Campesina* sets the objectives of the UAIM as being:

1. Encourage the incorporation of rural women, non-*ejidatarias* and older than 16 years, to the productive process of the country.
2. Increase the family income through the establishment of agricultural, livestock, agroindustrial, artisanal firms, which can be developed by rural women and are economically feasible.
3. Provide facilities and protection to women, such as kindergartens, shops, sewing centres, public laundries and canteens, medical assistance and so on.
4. Develop activities that raise the social and cultural level of women, such as the organisation of sporting events, shows, sanitary campaigns, house renovation projects and so on⁷⁹.

Apart from the UAIM, in the following decade the state implemented a number of programs intended to improve women's life conditions. The *Programa Nacional de Integración to Desarrollo de la Mujer* (PRONAM), created in 1980 and dependent on the *Consejo Nacional para la Población* (CONAPO) and the *Programa de Acción para la participación de la Mujer Campesina en Consecución del Desarrollo Rural* (PROMUDER), created in 1983 and run by the Federal *Ministry of the Agrarian Reform*, were the first tangible outputs of this effort. However, the PRONAPO was soon discontinued, while the PROMUDER was never implemented due to lack of funds (Pinto Gonzales 1998). In 1984, it was the turn of the *Programa de Desarrollo Comunitario con la Participación de la Mujer* (PINMUDE), dependent on the

⁷⁹ “Propiciar la incorporación de la mujer campesina, no ejidataria mayor de 16 años, al proceso productivo del país; Incrementar el ingreso familiar a través del establecimiento de explotaciones agrícolas, pecuarias, agroindustriales, artesanales u otra que puedan ser desarrolladas por la mujer campesina y que sean económicamente factibles; Propiciar los servicios y protección para que la mujer por medio de las instalaciones de guarderías infantiles, tiendas de consumo, centro de costura, comedores, lavaderos públicos, asistencia médica y demás que satisfagan esta finalidad; Desarrollar actividades que eleven el nivel social y cultural de la mujer, como organización de eventos deportivos, espectáculos, campañas sanitarias remozamiento de la vivienda e otro” (Article 4 of the *Reglamento de Funcionamiento de la Unidad Agrícola para la Mujer Campesina*, after Pinto González 1998: 245).

Programming and Budget Ministry. As the previous attempts, such program was ephemeral. As a matter of fact, the only program that injected funds into women's projects was the UAIM. However, lack of financial resources and the unfavourable conditions of the credit (Barbieri 1983; Arizpe and Botey 1985; Labreque 1998) eventually marked its failure. The UAIMs, indeed, gained financial independence only in 1984, thirteen years after its creation; at that time, only 1,112 cooperatives out of the 8,000 created by the decree had obtained the credit (Nadal 2000). In 1992, out of the 6,300 UAIMs established across the country, 40 per cent were not legally constituted. As for the case of Yucatán, in 1994 there were 219 UAIMs, of whom only 90 were in surplus (Nadal 2000). This figure gives an idea of the weak integration of women into rural development programs.

The UAIM, as previously mentioned, allowed rural women to receive communal land and *ejido*'s parcels. However, since just one parcel of land could be assigned to a female unit, there could not be more than one UAIM per *ejido*. To circumvent this problem, the state created other types of cooperatives, notably the *Sociedades de Solidariedad Social*, also known as *Triple S* (SSS). Unlike the UAIMs, the SSSs were not eligible for a plot on the *ejido*, as they view themselves as a means of "liberating the land" (Labreque 1998: 245). To be members, women do not need to be wives, mothers or daughters of an *ejidatario*; creating a *Triple S* automatically gives them access to government credit, bank loans and employment training grants. The objectives of these organisations were: "[...] create jobs; implement ecological preservation's initiatives; sustainable utilisation of natural resources; production, industrialisation and commercialisation of goods and services; education of members and their families in the promotion of social solidarity; raise the living standard of community members"⁸⁰. The SSSs must be constituted through an assembly, with collective asset and a minimum number of 15 members. The members must be "natural persons, of Mexican nationality, specifically *ejidatarios*, landless peasants, individuals with the right to work, who direct a part of their proceeds to a social solidarity fund, and that can carry out commercial

⁸⁰ "[...] crear fuentes de trabajo; practicar medidas de preservación ecológica; exploración racional de los recursos naturales; producción, industrialización and comercialización de bienes y servicios; educación de los socios y sus familiares en el fomento de la solidaridad social y elevar el nivel de vida de los miembros de la comunidad" (INCA-RURAL, *Bases jurídicas para la Organización*, Mérida, Yucatán, 1994, pp. 14-15).

activities.”⁸¹. In the early 1990s, there were only twenty female SSSs across the country; four years later, just half of them were operating (Nadal 2000).

Ignoring the fact that women were already participating in production, the logic of the UAIM reflected the idea, advocated by the international development programs of the 1970s, that the integration of women into agricultural production would have bestowed visibility on them through their increased economic income, thus creating more egalitarian gender relationships. However, as Cano, Vaughan and Olcott have observed, apart from changing the law, no substantial actions were taken for pursuing this goal:

«There was no effort to organise women, defend their rights in *ejidos* or grant credit, technical training or market access for their products. In addition, the law did nothing to address the persisting inequalities in local political cultures where community assemblies and decision-making remained in many cases a male emporium» (Cano, Vaughan and Olcott, my translation 2009)⁸².

According to these authors, the Mexican government promoted the UAIM with the intention of gaining control over rural women, transforming them into a new political base for supporting the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).

The UAIMs were abolished in the second half of the 1980s. However, they were retrieved in 1990 by the National Peasant Confederation and, in some federal states, by the Solidarity National Program (PRONASOL), which was the signature program of the Salinas de Gortari presidency. Funded by privatisation proceeds, Solidarity was intended to reduce poverty and neutralise the discontent generated by the application of structural adjustment policies. By creating public works and projects focused primarily on extending sewage system and drinking water to the rural and the urban poor, the

⁸¹ “[...] *personas físicas, de nacionalidad mexicana, específicamente ejidatarios, comuneros, campesinos sin tierra, personas con derecho al trabajo que destinen una parte del producto de su trabajo a un fondo de solidaridad social y que podrán realizar actividades mercantiles. Los socios convienen libremente sus actividades para cumplir con los objetivos de la sociedad*” (*Ibidem*).

⁸² «*No hubo esfuerzos por organizar las mujeres, defender sus derechos en los ejidos o darles crédito, capacitación técnica o acceso a los mercados para sus productos. Además, la ley no hizo nada para atender las continuas desigualdades en las culturas políticas locales donde las asambleas comunitarias y la toma de decisiones seguían siendo en muchos casos un emporio masculino*».

program delivered up to \$15 billion through 150.000 “solidarity” committees (Craig and Cornelius 1995). Thanks to the massive presence of government officials, 81 committees of *Mujeres en Solidariedad* saw the light in just one year. However, in 1994 only 17 had finished the construction of their premises, and an insignificant proportion had started to produce (Nadal 2000). Although it looked good on paper, PRONASOL “ended up being used by the government mostly as a pork-barrel programme for electoral purposes” (Urzúa 1997: 99).

In 1991 the UAIM obtained juridical and financial autonomy, which allowed it to receive funding directly from the government as well as from international development agencies. This measure dissolved the bond with the local authorities but increased dependency on the central governing bodies, particularly the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of the Agrarian Reform. In 1992, the reform of the Article 27 of the Constitution⁸³ eventually stroke a fatal blow to the agrarian sector by ending the distribution of land⁸⁴ and credit to social enterprises. As for women’s cooperatives, the state no longer delivered the credit automatically and limited its presence to contractual relationships, carefully selecting the projects that were considered more feasible. The collectives that did not shut down asked their members to alternate work in cooperative with other economic activities, with the hope that the credit would have increased at some point.

7.2 Women’s organisations and *empoderamiento*

The experiences of women associated with the UAIM and Solidarity projects were different. Although these programs generated new spaces for women’s participation, they also presented new challenges and responsibilities that many women were either unwilling or unable to accept and internalise. A number of studies have documented the various obstacles that women associated with state-funded cooperatives encounter on

⁸³ Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution of 1917 outlined the Agrarian Reform demanded by the peasant armies of the Revolution. It declared that all land, water, and mineral rights to be the property of the people of Mexico.

⁸⁴ The revision of the article 27, formally proposed by President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, not only ended the distribution of land to the *ejidos*, but also opened up a speculative market in agricultural land, paving the way for transfer of rural land from indigenous communities to multinational food corporations. The rise of the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas in 1994 and its quest for land justice was very much connected to the reform of the article 27 of the Constitution.

their path toward the integration into the labour market. Martínez et al. (2005) have pinpointed as recurring problems the lack of administrative and technical training, as well as rural women's disadvantaged position – as women and Mayans – in the labour market. Talamante et al., (1994) and Zapata and Suárez (2007) have emphasised the intensification of women's activities under government schemes, which results in heavy workloads and, consequently, in physical and emotional distress.

Alternatively, few pieces of research have positively stressed women's work in cooperatives. Some authors have pointed out that collective work promotes change, either facilitating access to resources (Chablé et al. 2007) or “expanding” the identities of cooperative's members (Rejón 1998). Lazos (2004) suggests that although women's organisations may encounter obstacles, the experience gained through group work puts them in a better position compared to the conditions of poverty and marginality endured by most rural women.

Rubio-Herrera and Castillo-Burguete (2014) agree that the group *per se* constitutes the very essence of women's experiences in cooperatives; however, they do not forget to stress that being part of a group does not necessarily put women in a privileged position. Echoing Ramírez (1998), the authors conclude that women's integration into state-led productive projects is not yet internalised as a “deep and personal experience”, able to modify values, identities and life conditions – at least not in the short run.

In the same vein, Nadal (2000) argues that development programs directed to rural women have contributed to accentuating gender differentiations within indigenous communities. Women associated with cooperatives, indeed, differ from others for their involvement in a type of work – formal, collective and associated – organised along the lines of a male productive model. The acceptance of a female working space created in the image and likeness of the male one has been everything but easy in rural communities, as men often accuse women to seize the credit reserved for them, to want to work like them or even replace them.

Within the studies of rural women's organisations in Mexico, the most debated topic revolved around the notion of “empowerment”⁸⁵ (see Cervera 1998, Aguilar 2008, Rubio-Herrera and Castillo-Burguete 2014), that is, the idea that cooperatives and

⁸⁵ The Spanish word “*empoderamiento*” translates the English term “empowerment”. However, the term is ambiguous as it implies that power is handed down from on high. García Moreno (2005) suggests that different development agencies use the obsolete term *empoderamiento* rather than the most appropriate “*fortalecimiento*” or “*apoderamiento*”, to perpetuate an ambiguity that would allow them to establish their agenda.

microcredit would promote for women a process of economic, psychological and social emancipation. The term “empowerment” was first used in the 1970s within a discourse of feminism that drew on the influence of popular education, notably on the work of the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire (1970), and focused on the role of the individual in politics. Unlike other debates in feminism, which are dominated by Western thinkers, much of the writing on gender and empowerment emerged from the South.

During the mid-1980s, the “empowerment of women” was central to the debate on gender and development. Feminist critiques of development accused the Women in Development (WID) approach, which sought to include women in development for efficiency purposes, of not questioning the underlying reasons for female subordination. Born in reaction to the WID approach, the Gender and Development (GAD) addressed the dynamics of gender relations and social context, value systems and power explicitly. With an actor-oriented and bottom-up approach, GAD was concerned with the way in which the inclusion of women in development processes increased their workload or displaced it elsewhere in the family. Empowerment was very much connected to the emerging GAD approach.

With increasing democratisation in Latin America and the retreat of the state in the 1990s, the notion of empowerment, previously the reserve of social movements and non-governmental organisations, became a central part of the mainstream development discourse. Informed by the ideas of Sen (1992) and by the promotion of his “capabilities approach”, the term “empowerment” was enthusiastically adopted by international development agencies that support social movements. However, in the 2000s, a widespread criticism in Latin America has put this enthusiasm into perspective. While Caccia Bava (2003) has associated empowerment with neo-liberal policies and the World Bank’s development agenda in the region, Larrea (2005) has seen it as an attempt to co-opt social movements and popular initiatives for democracy. Globally, the recent popularity of the notion of empowerment has brought concern that the focus has not engendered any fundamental change in development practice. Fiedrich et al. (2003), for example, have posited that the use of the term allows organisations to say they are tackling injustice and inequality without having to back any economic, political or structural change.

One of the central goals of empowerment projects was attracting capital and integrating small producers into the global markets. However, these projects have often ignored structural issues, assuming that access to resources has automatically led to

increased choice and, consequently, to empowerment. Behind the delivery of microcredit programs to rural women, as in the case analysed in this chapter, there is the assumption that improvements in women's access to income-earning opportunities automatically increase their bargaining power in both the household and the public sphere, through their greater economic autonomy. However, as Oxaal and Baden (1997) have pointed out, it is often not the delivery of microcredit that empowers the subjects, but the context in which the credit is delivered that might enable women to gain control over resources and increase their decision-making power.

A common approach to promote empowerment is supporting capacity building of local organisations; despite its good intentions, this approach has not always served the interests of the poor. Alsop and Norton (2004) and Mosse (2005) have suggested that grassroots organisations can become dominated by more powerful members of the society, thus perpetuating existing power structures and limiting the capabilities of the poor. Work of Goetz and Sen Gupta (1996), for instance, has shown that in Bangladesh male relatives controlled a large percentage of women's loans and that women had to mobilise funds elsewhere to repay the debt.

Insights from gender theory into the empowerment debate have shed some light on this issue. Rowland's (1997) categorisation of power provides a useful analytical framework to interpret and assess development projects. She categorises four types of power relations. One form constitutes the "power over others", which means controlling other's actions/options not only in the public sphere but also in the everyday matters that shape women's lives – including power over the distribution of resources, goods and services, as well as tasks within the household. Other forms of power that do not involve relationships of subordination and dominance but that instead create new possibilities for action include "power from within", "power to take action" and "power with others". The self-generated power women must build is the "power from within". To the extent to which this power cannot be given by anyone but must be embraced for oneself, the "power from within" acts as a generative, transformative trigger of social change. Strictly connected to the "power from within" is the "power to take action" which refers to women who act as agents of change in their own lives. "Agency" refers not only to observable actions (earning a livelihood, deciding whether or whom to marry, whether to have children and how many etc.), but also to women's ability to define their own life choices, pursue their goals, take up "decision-making space" (Kabeer 2005) and exercise power in their own interest. Finally, "power with others"

achieves what individuals cannot accomplish alone. Building power with others means “organisation”, “cooperation” and “solidarity”. This collective power propels the feminist project of gender democratisation, engaging national and international, governmental and non-governmental bodies to transform social and gender inequalities in both private and public domains.

Drawing on Rowland’s categorisation of power, in the next section I introduce *Chuuy Hipilo’ob* (literally, “embroiderers of *hipiles*”), a female cooperative of embroiderers based in Xocén and funded by the state through Solidarity. I discuss the genesis of the group, its obstacles and outcomes, to evaluate whether the cooperative experience has empowered its members and has created for them a (new) labour identity. As a counterpart to the experiences of *Chuuy Hipilo’ob*’s members, I introduce *Meyaj Noko’ob*⁸⁶ (literally, “creators of garments”), another group of embroiderers funded by a private credit institution and constituted by some former members of *Chuuy Hipilo’ob*. I analyse the differences between the two groups, focusing on the nature and the modes of women’s labour, the levels of their internal organisation, and the income that embroidery generates. Finally, I look at the contradictions arising when women perform a public identity, manage human and financial resources, organise themselves around the production, and create solidarity networks for the purpose of circulating their products in the market and securing an income.

7.3 *Chuuy Hipilo’ob* and *Meyaj Noko’ob*: modes of labour, conflict and solidarity in two groups of Mayan embroiderers

Leaving Jacinta’s shop late one morning at the *Zací* Craft Centre, I was discretely approached by a petite, graceful woman. With a gentle voice, she asked me in Spanish: “Is Jacinta’s shop your favourite one? Don’t you want to visit mine?” This is how I met Regina.

Forty-two years old, single, Regina is the leader of two Xocén-based groups of embroiderers that produce and sell *hipiles* and *ropa típica* at the *Zací* Crafts Centre of Valladolid and at various fairs around the Yucatán Peninsula. Regina lives in Xocén with her mother, who is a widow, her sister Carolina, who is also unmarried, her brother Eugenio and his wife Celestina. Eugenio is a *milpero* and a beekeeper; he sells honey to

⁸⁶ The two cooperatives are named fictitiously to guarantee the anonymity of the research participants.

private vendors in Valladolid during the year and works seasonally as a gardener in a hotel in Playa del Carmen. All the women of Regina's household are members of the cooperatives.

Regina has been involved in *hipil*'s production since 1991. With her mother and sister, Regina was a *X-ch'achuy* who used to "agarrar costura" (taking garments to sew) from several intermediaries based in Valladolid and Temozón. In 2004, with the participation of her mother, her sister, her sister-in-law, and twenty-two other women from Xocén, Regina requested and obtained a subsidy from the government to create a cooperative. The credit allocated to the group was delivered by Solidarity (*Solidariedad*) in the form of sewing materials, on the condition that the women pay back 50 per cent of the loan within a two-year time.

In line with the obligations required by the government grant, the members agreed to get together in formal assemblies once a week to distribute the work and discuss current issues. In the first meeting, which took place at Regina's house, the group was named "*Chuy Hipilo'ob*" (literally "embroiderers of *hipiles*") and Regina, her sister and her sister-in-law were elected respectively as president, secretary, and treasurer of the new cooperative. While thread and fabric were initially distributed equally among members, in the following meetings women decided not to share the earnings from sales: if an item was sold, the woman who had stitched it retained all the profit for herself. However, in the case where a piece made by a member was sold by another one, the latter gained a small commission. During the first meetings, women decided to produce only *hipiles*, which entailed orientating their efforts towards the domestic market. Also, as a group strategy, they agreed to split individual earnings in two: 50 per cent could be used by the embroiderer to meet family expenses, while the rest had to be reinvested in the cooperative for paying the grant and purchasing new sewing material.

The allocated materials allowed women to sew a total of four hundred *hipiles* over a period of two years. At the end of the grant cycle, all the garments produced by the group were sold, mostly in various handicraft fairs organised by the Yucatán government through institutions such as the *Casa de la Artesanía* (House of Crafts). However, in spite of the government's emphasis on cooperation and on the equal distribution of work, tasks, and responsibilities, the credit did not result in similar economic benefits for all the women. In fact, members ended up performing different activities more in line with their personal interests and abilities rather than the group gain.

The activities that are typically required for a woman to be a fully-fledged member of a cooperative can be summarised as buying sewing material, producing *hipiles* (including tasks such as cutting the fabric, drawing patterns, embroidering a *justán*, finishing, washing and ironing) and selling. Each of these activities implies a different cost for the embroiderers in terms of both money and time, and adds value to the overall process accordingly. Because of this difference in costs and required effort, some of the women decided not to carry out all of the activities mentioned above as part of their work for the cooperative. Therefore, although initially the credit was evenly distributed among members, some of them eventually decided to relinquish their part and remain in the cooperative as subcontracted members. This led some women to opportunistically take over an additional share of the credit and subcontract work to other embroiderers (internal and external to the cooperative) for the labour required to produce the *hipiles*. These women, the so-called trader-members, actually secured a greater economic advantage as they could sell in volume larger quantities, reinvest in garments, and propose to customers a wider variety of products.

A significant difference between members and trader-members is that the latter group travelled to fairs to sell their products directly, whereas the former did not. The trader-members gained higher profits, as in the first instance they encouraged customers to purchase their garments over the pieces produced by others. On top of that, they obtained a commission when they sold the clothing made by their fellow-workers. However, women who travelled and traded had to meet extra costs that were not covered by the government grant. For each *hipil*, they had to buy sewing needles, embroidery hoops and the essential drawings. Moreover, attending fairs implied paying for food and transportation. To meet these additional costs women had to draw on their savings, which mostly meant resorting to the sale of backyard products (pigs, chickens, and vegetables).

Despite the low income and the difficulties in making ends meet, by the end of the two-year term, the group successfully managed to repay the credit and requested the same subsidy for two additional biennial cycles. Within the successive four years, as members of the UAO, women were assigned a place in the Parque Francisco Cantón and were awarded a small monetary grant to cover the expenses of commercialisation.

Split into small subgroups, Regina and the other members of *Chuuy Hipilo'ob* commercialised their garments on a rota in a removable stand located in a corner of the park. Due to the high number of tourists, under institutional supervision provided by the

local Solidarity Committee, women decided to diversify the production to meet tourists' tastes. For this purpose, twice a year some members attended a number of dressmaking workshops delivered by the *Sistema Estatal de Empleo* (Employment State System)⁸⁷. Through these training courses, women received free sewing material and a handbook to learn new embroidery techniques. Since many of the members could not speak Spanish, Regina acted as a translator, a role that reinforced her self-esteem and her leadership within the group. She explains:

«Most of the women in my group don't understand Spanish. My role as a leader is to encourage them, to support them, so that they can feel comfortable with the work [...] When you attend the classes, the first thing you are taught is how to measure the fabric with a tape. If you do not know how to do it, the teacher comes and explains you the work. If you don't understand what the teacher says, you can't progress and need to wait for the help of a companion. This happened to me in first place because I am not educated and, in the beginning, I couldn't understand Spanish very well. When I started to attend the classes, there were many words that I couldn't catch. I used to take notes in my notebook and then I asked the teacher to explain the things that I hadn't understood. Now that I feel more confident with the language, I help my group-mates. When the class is over, I usually remain with them at least half an hour to make sure that they didn't have problems. They ask me: "Regina, what did you understand? We didn't understand very well" – and I say: "Don't worry, I take a note in my notebook and the next time I ask the teacher. This way we can make sure to decipher everything he says". This strategy has worked so far [...] We have learned many things in these workshops. Since I've started, I've seen my mind growing. I feel that I woke up because every day I'm learning something... a new word or new things relating to my job as an embroiderer. Even if this is my job, I need to make order, organise

⁸⁷ The Employment State System is an agency of the local government that allocates training grants through the *Programa de Becas de Capacitación para Trabajadores* (PROBECAT). The grant for trainee is equivalent to minimum wage for the duration of the course. The World Bank provides 60 per cent of the funding (Labreque 1998). The PROBECAT offers four types of training. The first includes courses in cooking, carpentry, electrical work etc. and targets people with primary or secondary education. The second consists of courses in industrial sewing and is based on a government-business agreement where the government provides the grant for trainees and the business covers the instructors' wage. The third type offers course in woodworking, hammock weaving, pastry-making etc. and is directed to people who aim to be self-employed. The last option targets cooperatives and collectives working in the field of agriculture. Unfortunately, there is no available data on the number of men and women who have received such training. However, according to Labreque (1998: 249), in 1995 women constituted just 26 per cent of the trainees who benefited from these grants.

myself, fix problems and learn to do what I'm not able to do. I do enjoy working with other women; I learn from them and transmit them what I know».

Although women had prior knowledge of their crafts, thanks to the training courses they had the chance to learn new techniques, share their experiences and reinforce their understanding of the whole production process. Above all, what emerges from Regina's words is that, by learning new skills in an unknown setting, women were confronted with new challenges and felt empowered throughout the learning process. This feeling of empowerment, according to these women, was one of the most valued outcomes of their participation in *Chuuy Hipilo'ob*. This enables some considerations on the pros and cons of constituting indigenous collectives.

From the perspective of the hegemonic, non-indigenous society, the embroiderers are "poor" because they are indigenous, have lower levels of education because they are women, and are doubly discriminated for being women and indigenous at the same time. However, the relationships among them as an ethnic group are favoured. As in the case of *Chuuy Hipilo'ob*, indigenous women who associate with cooperatives have long remained outside the dominant society; they speak poor Spanish and are often oppressed by the patriarchal rule both in the rural and the urban settings. However, as a group, they manage to do with others what they cannot do alone. Following Oxaal and Baden (1997), Rowlands (1998) and Townsend et al. (1999), we could say that by participating in fairs and training courses *Chuuy Hipilo'ob* members experienced a very specific form of empowerment, which can be defined as a "power with others". Empowerment of this kind, however, was not a permanent or stable achievement for women. Rather, it had to be constantly negotiated with family members. How this negotiation unfolded subtly shaped the temporal and spatial boundaries of women's agency, altering the dynamics of conflict and solidarity within the cooperative and eventually affecting women's financial success as members.

According to Regina, the new selling point in the park and the diversification of products slightly incremented the sales after the first three months of activity. However, it also generated some tensions among members. The fact that women had to travel to Valladolid with greater frequency to participate in training workshops or to preside over the stand in the park, on the one hand significantly added to the overall commercialisation cost, on the other generated conflicts with family members. Men,

especially, were unhappy to see their sisters, daughters, wives or mothers “*salir de la casa*”, leaving their homes so often.

Some members increasingly faced difficulties to fulfil their commitments as *socias*, beginning with the attendance to the weekly meetings. Women stated that they could not attend the assemblies because they had to take their children to the doctor, attend to their husbands and perform household duties like cooking, washing and ironing. For the same reasons, two of the women who commercialised the cooperative’s products in the park had to opt out despite their larger profits, a fact that contributed to concentrate the decisional power, and the earnings, to a very restricted number of members. As a result, some of the women who used to pay a commission to the trader-members to sell their garments in the park started to sell door-to-door to their customers in Valladolid to avoid depending on other *socias*. In essence, these women were using the government credit to fund their businesses, which contributed to exacerbating the tensions among members.

Other types of difficulties were added to these. On several occasions, women’s permanence in the park was threatened by the protests of local souvenir shopkeepers, by the “invasion” of mobile embroidery vendors who were installing their stands in the park without a permit, and the government’s evictions and relocations. To maintain their place in the park women were called to join the negotiation process by attending local government meetings. However, this task fell to Regina, her sister and sister-in-law as other members openly expressed their discomfort and/or impossibility in taking on such a “public” role.

Despite these vicissitudes, over a period of four years members continued to sell in the park “under the rain and the burning sun”, Regina explains, until the government created the *Zací* Crafts Centre. The centre was inaugurated the 20th of December 2010. Regina remembers very well this date: “I was really excited... Finally, we had a more decent place where we could sell our products in a nice, indoor shop”. However, not all members were as enthusiastic as Regina. Indeed, the new space required the women to pay an overall monthly rent of 1000 pesos, plus electricity bills. Moreover, the new shop had to stay open every morning and afternoon from Tuesday to Sunday, requiring the women to be there on a rota, which would have added to costs in terms of effort and time away from home. Many members were unable to meet these additional expenses and obligations and ended up leaving the group.

By and large, it is hard to estimate the working hours and the commercialisation costs associated with *hipil*'s production. As previously mentioned, for Mayan embroiderers the work usually progresses slowly and intermittently, as this is carried out at home along with other domestic occupations. Mayan embroiderers cannot tell with accuracy how many hours the production of a *hipil* takes. Likewise, the members of *Chuuu Hipilo'ob* could not remember or estimate how much they earned at the end of the grant cycle. However, bearing in account the costs for food and transportation from Xocén to Valladolid, the expenditure for the extra sewing materials and the costs of labour, we can calculate a rough estimate.

One *hipil* is typically sold for an average price of 1000 pesos (£44). The costs to be considered for the production can be summarised as follows:

1. Cost of Labour - includes tasks such as cutting the fabric, embroidering, drawing, finishing, washing and ironing.
2. Cost of Materials - includes needles, hoops and drawings. Also, fabric and threads are covered under the two-year government scheme that accounts for 50 per cent.
3. Cost of Marketing - includes food and transportation to the park and various fairs.

The above costs have a different impact on the overall calculation of profits, depending on whether we are addressing members or trader-members. Members are in fact dependent on trader-members for the marketing of products and for the provision of the materials that are covered under the grant scheme. Therefore, the calculation of profits for non-trader-members is very straightforward and amounts to the overall price of the labour of members minus the costs of the tools and materials. This amounts to as little as 3.5 pesos (£0.15) per day, far below the minimum daily wage in Mexico⁸⁸.

As for trader-members, the calculation is slightly more complex:

⁸⁸ As a frame of reference, it is worth noting here that in 2010, at the end of the third cycle of the government grant, the minimum wage salary in Mexico amounted to 56 pesos per day (INEGI 2010). This means that working every day six hours per day non-trader-members have earned on average sixteen times less than their husbands who work in *Riviera* at the minimum wage salary.

- The cost of material (under government grant scheme at 50 per cent of the overall cost of the fabric) for one *hipil* amounts to around 35 pesos per *hipil*.
- The cost of labour (which includes remuneration for the subcontracted cooperative members) is in the region of 70 pesos for each *hipil* (which is equal to 4 pesos a day of labour, times an average of 18 days required for completing one *hipil*).
- The cost of marketing is in the region of 75 pesos per *hipil*, and includes the cost of food and transportation for all the women who need to travel to marketplaces.

In summary, for a trader-member the business is sustainable as per table below:

| | |
|--------------------------------|------------|
| Price of 1 <i>hipil</i> | \$1.000,00 |
| Cost of Labour | \$70,00 |
| Cost of Sewing Material | \$35,00 |
| Cost of Marketing | \$75,00 |
| Total cost | \$180,00 |
| Profit per <i>hipil</i> | \$820,00 |

The above calculations have been conducted on the group of twenty-five members, of which just seven were trader-members. The *hipiles* that have been sold over the two-year period amounted to an average of 16 each month, which translates into a monthly wage for a trader-member of approximately 1800 pesos (£79). The monthly pay of a regular member, however, was sensibly lower and amounted to about 120 pesos (£5.20) per month.

Given the analysis of costs and benefits for both members and trader-members, it is evident how, unless women can travel and trade directly, the credit granted by the government is almost entirely unsustainable. As a matter of fact, only trader-members can leverage the fact that they can travel to effectively become intermediaries and take advantage of selling in different marketplaces while producing at a very low cost.

From the figures, we can now understand why when the shop opened, the majority of women decided to leave the group. Out of the original twenty-five members, just ten remained in the cooperative. Those who left were mainly young, married women with small children, and older women who did not get the permission from their husbands to

travel to Valladolid and sell their garments. Forced to turn down by family circumstances, these women went back to sew and sell *hipiles* independently, and continued to work with Regina and other middlepersons as *X-ch'achuyo'ob*.

Pushed by her mother, in 2011 Regina decided to expand her business while also helping these women to get funded. Since the difficulties in fulfilling the cooperative's obligations were the main reasons why women left the group, Regina turned to *Compartamos Banco*, a private credit agency based in Valladolid. The group, which for convenience's sake I will call *Meyaj Noko'ob* (literally "creators of garments")⁸⁹, has been receiving a loan of 800 pesos every four months over the last five years, under the condition for members to pay back the credit at a 20 per cent interest rate at the end of each year. Twelve women currently constitute the group; they work independently from home and sell door-to-door their embroideries to customers in Xocén, Valladolid, Temozón and Mérida. Within the new credit system, women do not have binding obligations: they do not need to attend weekly meetings nor training courses, nor do they have to travel to Valladolid to preside a selling point. Their sole commitment is to turn up at Regina's home the day in which the representative of *Compartamos Banco* delivers the check, once every four months.

As a group, women sell their garments collectively in a single occasion, that is, the Candelaria Expo-Fair, held yearly in Valladolid between the end of January and the beginning of February. However, since only four women attended the event in the first year, this responsibility eventually fell to Regina and her family, including her brother, who occasionally escorts them if he is not busy in Playa del Carmen. Teresa, a member, explains:

«The fair goes on for two weeks. Every day you are supposed to be there from early afternoon to late evening. It's too much... who is going to take care of the house if you are always travelling to Valladolid? Regina is unmarried; no man can tell her what she has to do. She has freedom, and she uses this freedom to help us. We need to thank her because if it wasn't

⁸⁹ I assigned this name to the group to clearly and quickly distinguish it from *Chuuu Hipilo'ob*. In reality, the group has no name, as the private credit agency does not require the women to be legally registered as a group.

for her, we couldn't have the chance to make this little profit and help our families».

“*Salir de la casa*” and taking on “public responsibilities” that clash with their private roles as mothers and *amas de casa*, housewives, constitute major concerns for Mayan embroiderers. Many of them would rather take the risk to run into debt than challenging *la costumbre*. Rosa, 34 years old and mother of three children explains in these terms why she prefers working as a *Meyaj Noko 'ob*'s member:

«In *Chuuy Hipilo 'ob* the work was overwhelming. It was stressing working at home and in the group at the same time. It was a burden [...] my husband supported me at the beginning because he thought that thanks to the government credit I would have earned more. My family and the family of my husband initially helped me out, but when we moved to the park they became unsupportive... Nobody was happy when I had to leave my children and go to sell, including me. One day my mother-in-law told me: “You are not a good mother because a good mother doesn't leave her kids”. I felt depressed when she said that because I know that it's a lie... I love so much my children, and I become apprehensive if I'm not with them [...] I talked to my husband, and he told me to ignore my mother-in-law and keep working in the group since we needed extra cash. I did it, but a problem arose when the neighbours started to spread rumours about me... They said to my mother-in-law that I had a lover in Valladolid and that I went to see him with the excuse to sell in the park. My husband got annoyed, but we talked, and he finally trusted me. Though, he didn't give me the permission to leave home and go to sell. Now I only work from home with the credit of *Compartamos Banco*. When it is time to deliver the work to customers in Valladolid, my brother-in-law goes. I feel happier this way because nobody can tell that I am not a good mother».

The pressure to fulfil gender expectations, the social control over her sexuality and *el chisme* (gossip) were all inhibiting factors for Rosa, which eventually prevented her from putting forward her activity as a member of *Chuuy Hipilo 'ob*. Even if her husband was supportive, her extended family, especially women, behaved in such a way as to make sure that *la costumbre* would have been respected.

Other factors that significantly influenced the organisation of the embroiderers and the outcome of their commercial venture were the fear to leave their houses and the embarrassment to talk to foreigners in the cities. Salustina, a 57 years old member explains:

«My problem was that I was afraid to leave home and to go to the city. You never know what can happen in the city. Here in Xocén you are safe but outside is dangerous, many nasty people can take advantage of you».

In the case of Salustina and many other women, *el miedo de los maleantes*, the fear of “dangerous people”, goes hand in hand with the anxieties generated by the interaction with strangers. She further explains:

«The first time I went to sell in the park many people approached me in the stand and started to ask questions. I couldn't understand well and had to call a group-mate to see if together we could understand better. I felt so ashamed and ended up asking to myself: “Why am I leaving my house if I'm not able to sell anything?”»

If for the women who took part in the dressmaking workshops with Regina *salir de la casa* and sharing a public space with others were empowering experiences, for Salustina and for many of her *compañeras* this was a source of stress and uneasiness. For them, visibility was not a reward but a burden.

As rural women enter the urban setting in their search for marketplaces, they are confronted with unknown and conflicting situations that make them feel vulnerable. They must interact with people outside their communities, but they are afraid to talk, express their ideas, defend their rights and justify the prices they are asking for their work. These conflicting feelings, more than easily quantifiable economic factors, significantly influence women's labour choices, their modes of production and, consequently, the financial outcomes of their activities.

At the end of the first year, apart from one case of insolvency that led to the expulsion of a member, all women managed to repay the credit by the allocated time. However, the economic pressure and the bugaboo of debt were a source of conflicts within the households as the limited mobility of women maintained the sales revenue very low. When selling backyard animals was not sufficient to complement the earnings

and pay off the debt, women had to ask for the financial support of their husbands. When this was denied, some of them were forced to sell their wedding gold, that is, the most important symbol of Mayan women's autonomy. Research participant Narcisca says:

«I've cried for weeks when I had to sell my gold, and I still feel like crying when I think about it. Without my gold, I was left with nothing, absolutely nothing. I do not even seem to be a married woman; now I'm teased and insulted by both my family members and by other people. I won't be respected anymore».

As for *Chuuy Hipilo'ob*, apart from Regina, her mother, sister, and sister-in-law, seven other women currently form the collective. Four of them are aged between 31 and 41, while the two others are aged 52 and 56. The older is a widow who lives with one of her son, his wife, and children; the rest of the women are married and have kids. They all live in Xocén with their in-laws while their husbands work in *Riviera*. Unlike in the past, all members now equally participate in the cooperative, sharing the credit and the same tasks and responsibilities.

At the time in which the shop was opened and the group split, the women who remained in *Chuuy Hipilo'ob* pondered different factors to see if they were able to cope with the shop challenge. A key variable was the capacity of the workforce available in their households. Kinship networks, in particular collaboration of daughters, sisters, aunts or daughters-in-law, played a key role in their decision. Unlike other groups I have observed – Jacinta's one for example – *Chuuy Hipilo'ob's* members relied more on the support of family members who lived under the same *solar*. In the case of married women, the system of patrilocality implied that collaboration mainly came from sisters- and mothers-in-law.

Nadia is a 32 years old member, originally from the community of Xuilub; she has three children and lives in Xocén with her in-laws while her husband, 33 years old, is employed in Cancún at the Coca-Cola factory. She explains:

«Since I'm not from Xocén I cannot rely on the help of my family. Many *compañeras* had to leave the group because they did not get along with their husbands' families and were not supported in the activity. Fortunately, I have never had conflicts with my in-laws. When we moved in the shop, I spoke to my

mother-in-law, and she told me: “if this can help to set ahead the family and my son agrees I will support you”. My sisters-in-law are also helping me out; they keep my children when I go to the shop. They have time because they are still single».

As clearly explained by Nadia, women who remained in *Chuuy Hipilo’ob* and could successfully tackle the shop challenge were the ones who managed to create a network of solidarity within their extended families.

In addition to the support of kinship networks, women pondered another important criterion, that is, the economic benefit that they would have gained from selling in the shop. They judged that the shop would have facilitated the circulation of their crafts, consequently allowing a bigger contribution to the household. Their evaluation proved to be right as, after a few months from the opening, the sales increased dramatically. This success was due, in part, to a further product diversification strategy, which led women to drastically reduce the production of *hipiles* and increment that of “neotraditional” embroideries (mostly blouses, belts, headbands and jewels). The dependency on tourist flow, however, translated into an unstable market and uneven earnings. The busiest months of the year occur between December and March, with business slowing down progressively during fall months. In the first year of sales in the shop women declared to have earned between 7,000 and 8,000 pesos per head (before marketing expenses) in December, January and May⁹⁰, a figure that is typically halved during the rest of the year.

After assessing the economic advantages of being grouped in a cooperative, a last step was necessary: women needed to establish a dialogue with their husbands, sons, fathers and brothers to get the permission to travel to Valladolid on a regular basis and preside over the shop. Through an ongoing dialogue, women eventually managed to convince their family members, provided that they would not have neglected their domestic duties. This sort of conditioned agreement established clear temporal and spatial boundaries for women but apparently did not cause significant issues. When I asked Olga, the youngest of the embroiderers in *Chuuy Hipilo’ob*, whether her

⁹⁰ Due to the raining season, the month of May falls outside the tourist season, yet it is a lucrative month in terms of sales in the domestic market, as local people, especially *catrinas*, buy gifts for their mothers to celebrate Mother’s Day. September and October, on the other hand, are the less lucrative months, due to the start of the academic year when parents have already spent their money on shoes, uniforms and school stationery for their children.

professional involvement in the cooperative was stealing time from her domestic duties and generating problems in the household, she responded:

«I'm not experiencing any problem because I'm well organised. I like embroidering. I mostly work in the evening or late at night when I finish my homework. Sometimes I stitch until 1 a.m., not always, though, just when we have many orders to deliver. My husband is not at home during the week, so that I don't have to attend to him; my family helps with the house and with my daughters so that I can work more on the garments».

As in Olga's case, each of the participants who remained in the group obtained the support of their husbands, sons, and other family members to comply with the shop's obligations. However, the initiation of dialogue was smoother among newly-wed couples, as young wives are usually more educated (and consequently more self-confident) whereas husbands appear to be more flexible and open-minded. This would suggest that in Xocén the domestic environment is not necessarily charged with a patriarchal authoritarianism, whereby, theoretically, women have the chance to build new spaces where they can either participate in the household's decision-making process and establish the conditions for their integration into the labour market.

However, this was not the case for all the members, in particular for the older and less educated. Conversely and at odds with Olga's experience, the hegemonic rules of the patriarchal powers were an inhibiting factor that contained and constrained women's agency, especially in terms of time and space. This limitation hindered the process of empowerment for the embroiderers, particularly in its psychological dimension. This aspect will be examined in greater depth in the next section.

7.4 Conclusions – Microcredit and empowerment: a new labour identity for Mayan women?

Government support programs for Mayan women were not intended to change traditional gender roles and relations; they rather sought to decrease the migration from the countryside to the cities by rescuing traditional indigenous activities such as embroidery, sewing, hammocks and other crafts production, eventually turning them into sources of income for women.

As we have seen, a common critique aimed at these programs is that they systematically channel women into traditionally female occupations: jobs that require a significant investments of time, yield little profit and can hardly migrate towards other categories of less demanding and better-paid activities (Waterbury 1989; Labrecque 1998; Cohen 1998 Page-Reeves 1998; Olson 1999). By focusing on handicraft production, some researchers have posited that the “artisanisation” of rural women is none other than a poor substitute for their integration into the national economy, within which women turn out to be exploited in many ways (Wilkinson Weber 1997; Youkhana 2010). Challenging this view, other authors have suggested that cooperatives and microcredit have empowered rural women, generating positive changes at an economic and social level, particularly regarding traditional gender roles (Villa Gómez Gonzalez and Valdes 1995). I believe, however, that this optimistic view is based on an essentialisation of the notion of gender and gender roles, as well as of the category of the “embroiderer”.

As I discussed in previous chapters, traditional gender roles in Mayan culture are clearly established, yet they are not set in stone. Although the Mayan household continues to emphasise a traditional division of labour, the transition from a primarily agrarian to a wage-based economy, men’s migration and women’s entrance into the workforce, have complicated the symbolic representation of sexes and the assignation of roles and responsibilities within the Mayan family. The “positive changes” in traditional gender roles, if any, seems to be linked to a complex, and often contradictory, articulation of these dynamics rather than to the “liberatory” power of cooperatives and microcredit *per se*.

As for the category of “embroiderer”, as discussed in Chapter 6, embroiderers’ identity is multiple: *X-ch’achuyo’ob*, artisans, and members are different figures with different labour, social and economic statuses. These statuses are informed not only by institutional variables but also by demographic factors like age, marital status, and life-cycle stage of the embroiderer. These factors determine to a large extent the internal organisation of women’s collectives as well as the financial success of its members.

Moreover, gender relations cannot be considered the by-product of credit programs, nor do they respond specifically to economic concerns. Rather, they have to do with more subtle issues, such as tastes, desires, interests and abilities. These factors are not biologically determined but are shaped by domestic ideologies and by culturally specific constructions of gender. Thus, the analysis of embroidery from a gender perspective

must be based on the understanding of this cultural order – including the power relationships embedded in it – and has to consider how the redirection of Mayan women in work considered quintessentially feminine and poorly paid affects gender relations and their social and cultural construction.

Corroborating the results of other studies (Buvinic 1986, Cohen 1998, Olson 1999, Zapata and Suárez 2007; Aguilar 2008), my ethnographic findings show that government support programs for rural women in the Eastern Yucatán have been unable to redefine gender relations in terms of a new autonomy for women. Although artisans associated in cooperatives have started to “*salir de las casa*”, make a financial contribution to their households and gain visibility in political spaces at a regional level, their insertion into the local and the global market happened without transforming the unequal gender relations within the domestic group. As a matter of fact, the supervision that men already exercised over women was reinforced, especially when the embroiderers had to travel to the city because of their new obligations as members of the cooperative.

In Mayan households as elsewhere, earning, spending and controlling money are focuses of conflict. Albeit paltry, the money women gain through embroidery production brings about emotional wellbeing. As research participant Rosalinda explains:

«I feel more confident if I have my savings available in case of necessity... my husband brings home his paycheck every two weeks, but if there is an emergency, an unforeseen circumstance if my children feel suddenly sick, how can I bring them to the doctor without any money?»

The money that embroiderers make out of garment production can either unite the family towards the shared goal of “*salir adelante*”, or create antagonism between genders. Some research participants, for instance, pointed out that the little profit made out of sales was having the effect of shirking men’s responsibilities. Romelia, 39 years old and mother of five children, reported that, after two years since the group was formed, her husband, who works in Tulum as a busboy in a restaurant, started to dilute the remittances progressively until he stopped sending anything. To circumvent this occurrence, some embroiderers chose to keep their husbands unaware of their profits. Research participant Imelda explains:

«When I get paid I don't show the money to my husband because, if I do it, he squanders all his paycheck on beers».

Sometimes, the antagonism between genders translates in real jealousy from men, which lead to the exacerbation of domestic violence. Research participant Florencia says:

«I cannot say that my family is perfect and that I don't have problems with my husband, but I don't like to complain because I know that it could be worse... Six months ago my husband was fired and came back to Xocén; he went back to cultivate the *milpa* while waiting for another job opportunity in Cancún. In the meanwhile, I continued to embroider as I always did. Since he lacked cash, he started to ask me for money to buy alcohol. If he asks, I cannot say "no". Suddenly he got jealous. The more I gained, the more he belted me. One night he was drunk and punched my daughter; at that point, I decided to leave the collective».

As evidenced by these comments, despite embroidery giving women some financial autonomy and emotional wellbeing, the patriarchal domination remained vertical, preventing them from feeling empowered by their professional activities. This suggests that although gender roles of Yucatecan Mayan women are (slowly) changing, traditional gender ideology continues to be upheld, even as men are increasingly absent as migrant workers.

Although this scenario seems to leave little hope, some positive experiences peep out amidst embroiderers' labour narratives. As we have seen in the previous section, some women did experience a redefinition of their identity while learning to work within new structures, in new ways, and with women who did not necessarily belong to their family network. Regina, for instance, felt "*avalorada*" (valued) through her work as an artisan. In the eyes of her fellow villagers, she failed in accomplishing her biological destiny; though, thanks to her work as "*presidenta*" (president) of the cooperative, she experienced a personal and social "rebirth". This resurgence brought about a positive vision of gender relationships and women's empowerment. When I asked if women's work in Xocén was recognised and valued by men, Regina responded:

«Today women can and must work. If a woman doesn't work, it is because she doesn't want to work... she doesn't want to leave her home. Today men have changed; they are not anymore as they used to be. Until recently women were not allowed to leave their homes; they didn't go out to sell as we do today. They used to go to Valladolid to do some shopping but always escorted by their husbands or brothers. Now it's different; there is more freedom. Women work, their daughters go to school and when they finish their studies find a job in Valladolid. When they go back home with their shopping bags from Soriana [*a Mexican chain of supermarkets*], their parents realise that their daughters are working. Back in time, only men worked themselves to death. Poor men. Now women are called to make their contribution. Even if it's not much, it's still something; it helps the family to move forward».

Certainly, through embroidery production, Regina acquired a personal, social and economic power. Not only she did experience a “power with others”, but she also went beyond and gained a “power from within”, which triggered a profound personal and social transformation. She is now a “worker”, and is socially recognised as such. As a result of having experienced the liberatory power of labour, Regina sees women who do not work as “lazy others”. However, between Regina and “the lazy others” a fundamental difference exists. As group-mate Teresa points out above, “Regina is unmarried, she has more freedom”. Regina, indeed, is not a wife and is not a mother; no other identities can interfere or overtake her status as a worker. For married women, the boundaries of freedom have very different contours; within these boundaries, the identity of the wife/mother and the identity of the worker appear to be irreconcilable.

As I have explained in previous chapters, in Maya culture *el gesto de bordar* is intimately associated with motherhood. However, in its process of adaptation to the tourist market and within the context of credit programs handed down from on high, the feminine gesture loses this bond and acquires a new semantic structure. Here, paradoxically, being a mother is perceived more as an obstacle to economic success than as an achievement of womanhood and as a reason for pride.

The differing impact of paid work on women's status is, however, a clear illustration of the heterogeneity of peasant women and the contradictory effects support programs have had on women and gender relations. Likewise, men's reactions to the newly acquired women's economic power highlight a paradox: on the one hand, these clearly

indicate the emergence of an embryonic form of labour identity for women – which is, in fact, causing conflicts within Mayan households and antagonism between genders. On the other hand, this embryonic identity struggles to be socially recognised as such.

Embroidery, as previously discussed, is not a “subtle work”: its double role as a richly dense cultural practice and as a complementary livelihood strategy remains valued within Mayan communities. Yet, embroiderers as gesture-makers are depicted as “non-workers”. Ironically, the more *el gesto de bordar* makes women visible and “powerful”, the more it is turned back into the ranks of the “entertainment”. This is not just a “containment strategy” elaborated by men to keep women in their traditional gender roles; the misrecognition of the embroiderers as workers has to do with the poor profit embroidery production generates. As we have seen in the case study, for married women with children embroidery provides an income of fewer than 150 pesos per month, approximately fifteen times less than the income provided by their husbands who work in the *Riviera* at a minimum wage salary.

Thus, it seems clear that two variables cross the possibility for Mayan women to acquire the social recognition as workers: one gender- and the other money-related. Among Xocén’s embroiderers, only the trader-members who form part of state-funded cooperatives are socially recognised as “workers” by the relative profitability of their occupation. Their income is the only one that can equate to men’s minimum wage salary. Yet, the artisans who can take on leadership roles, as it is in the case of Regina and few other members, are mostly widows, divorced or unmarried women. Since they do not have to defer to a man for the activities they perform, these categories of women are the only ones socially “authorised” to freely execute the tasks required by their leadership role.

For the other embroiderers the situation is very different: in Xocén only a few have managed to join cooperatives as members and get subsidised. Even fewer women have become artisans. One of the main reasons, as seen in the case of Regina’s groups, is illiteracy and monolingualism. Since the activity of the artisan is based on direct contact with traders, customers and institutions, since Spanish is the needed vehicle of any economic and cultural transaction, illiterate women – who constitute the biggest portion of women engaged in embroidery nowadays – have few chances to find their niche in commercial, “public” activities and be successful.

Moreover, the work of an artisan requires an investment of time and money that not all members have. As we have seen in the two case studies, to be able to participate as

active members in cooperative, married women with children must delegate their domestic duties to other family members. Women who succeed in fulfilling their professional obligations are those who can rely on the support of other family members (mostly women) and who have negotiated their freedom through an ongoing dialogue with their husbands, fathers, and brothers. Notwithstanding, even when family members provide their support, if a woman neglects her domestic duties she is sanctioned by the community and by other women. Thus, if an embroiderer – who is a wife and a mother – does not join a cooperative it is because her gender role prevents her from doing it; if she does it, she quickly realises that family obligations will hinder her freedom and impair her success as micro-entrepreneur.

Despite this oppressive scenario, in Xocén cooperatives continue to be formed mainly by married women with children. These women join the groups because they need cash, though they know since the beginning that their participation in the collective will be restrained. Women have coped with this limitation implementing a number of strategies. Many of them encourage the involvement of other family members, mostly sisters or sisters-in-law, who can attend the meetings and inform about any agreement or decision, or who can travel to marketplaces to sell their products. This is a sort of “solidarity arrangement” that allows women to put forward their commercial activities without neglecting their role of caretakers and housewives. However, the urge to *conformarse con la costumbre* (comply with the custom) leads many of them to perceive this arrangement as a burden, a sacrifice, or leads to guilt.

Almost forty years after credit programs were launched in Yucatán to help Mayan embroiderers to convert a domestic, traditional and invisible occupation into a commercial activity for the market, women who join cooperatives and credit unions still face difficulties for commercialising their products, conflicts with other members or with different institutions, economic exploitation by other women, and dependence on subsidies. If on the other hand, one of the primary objectives of government programs was to rescue indigenous culture and traditions, this goal has not been achieved, for instance, for the *hipil*, since many young women have stopped wearing it on a regular basis. It seems paradoxical, then, that women in this area, including adolescents, continue to embroider and commercialise *hipiles*. Why?

According to Labrecque, government support programs for rural women served only to keep them in their homes while waiting for *maquiladoras*' arrival (Labrecque (1998: 253). In fact, when *maquiladoras*, especially garment *maquila*-factories, appeared in the

city of Valladolid in the 1990s, many young Mayan women were employed (García de Fuentes and Pérez Medina 1996). Rapidly, these factories became a valid employment option and source of income for indigenous people in the area of Valladolid, especially for women⁹¹. However, despite the government subsidy in the form of grants during the training period and the attraction of good salary, embroiderers have shown little interest in this job.

In *Chuy Hipilo'ob* seven members were employed for a few years in two Valladolid-based Chinese *maquiladoras*⁹². All claimed without hesitation to prefer embroidering traditional *hipiles* instead of stitching t-shirts in the factory. When asked to mention the reasons for their preference women responded that, unlike *maquila*-work, through embroidering they were able to display their creativity and adjust their working hours to participate in family and community activities. Echoing embroiderers' claims, Silvia Terán writes:

«Through embroidery not only do women feel that they are elaborating items with a high symbolic value for their culture, but they are also free to structure their time according to their tastes, desires and family obligations, keeping a certain degree of decisional freedom» (Terán 2010: 214, my translation).

⁹¹ The National Institute for Statistics (INEGI) reports that in 1994 female labour represented 70.2% of the total workforce in *maquiladoras*, 11 per cent more than the national average for female participation in *maquila*-work (García de Fuentes and Pérez Medina 1995: 165).

⁹² In 2001, three *maquiladoras* were installed in the outskirts of Valladolid. The idea of attracting *maquila*-factories in this part of the peninsula was proposed in the 1980s by the Committee for the Promotion of Valladolid (COPROVALSA), established on initiative of local merchants as a way to create jobs and economic growth in the area (Terán Contreras and Rasmussen 2005). In 1992, "Createx", the first *maquiladora* specialised in underwear production, began to operate. "Jordache", specialised in denim production, followed "Createx". Finally "Hong Kong", the biggest of the three, produced t-shirts and underwear and employed around 1,500 people. At the beginning of the 2000s around 250 Xocenenses worked in these factories (Terán Contreras and Rasmussen 2005). The employees were single or married men, with a significant percentage of unmarried women. The forty hours working week started every day at 7.45 a.m. and finished at 6 p.m.; a fifteen-minute break was allowed to employees at 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. and one-hour lunch break at 11 a.m. The workers were paid 450 pesos per week (which decreased to 350 considering the expenses for food and transportation), and the benefits package included the *Seguro Popular* (Social Insurance) for the employee and his/her family members. The ex-employees I have interviewed, including members of *Chuy Hipilo'ob*, described the pace of the work in *maquiladoras* as being too "fast" and "hard", suitable only for young and flexible individuals. Since the attack on the Twin Towers, the contraction of the U.S. economy led Mexican *maquiladoras* to restrict production and fire employees in mass. Between 2008 and 2011 all the three Valladolid's *maquiladoras* shut down, sending home around 2,500 employees.

In the face of out-migration, which is pushing many men – and increasingly more women – to find employment in town and leave the village, by embroidering women feel that they are acting as keepers of cultural traditions and knowledge, a role that contributes, according to Terán, to their psychological empowerment.

It is certainly true that the pride shown by women as creators of highly valued cultural items does not reverberate in the experiences of *maquila*-factories or hotels' workers; though, it is equally true that the decisional freedom women gain through embroidery production is structurally bonded to the local space. As I have shown above, women cannot overstep this boundary without the permission of a man, whether a father, a husband, a son, a brother or a father-in-law.

Despite the use of the *hipil* is no longer very popular among young women; despite the income generated by embroidery production and trade is meagre; despite the double day and the devouring sentiment of “sacrifice”, Mayan women continue to sew *hipiles*. We could argue, following Terán (2010), that they do it because *el gesto de bordar* remains constitutive of Mayan women's identity. This is true: the act of embroidering has an irresistible cultural force. Though, we need to recognise that it is precisely the persisting association of embroidery with an ideal-typical femininity enmeshed in its own “privateness” that prevents women from embracing other identities and navigating new productive landscapes.

As far as I could ascertain, Mayan women continue to sew *hipiles* because they do not have other viable options. Research participant María puts it in these terms:

«The labour is very poorly paid in Yucatán. What we earn is not that much, though it is still something; it helps the family to move forward. We can't abandon our families and still need to find a way to earn some cash. This requires a big effort, but we have no choice: we have to endure».

Oppressed by the authoritarianism of the patriarchal rule and squeezed by economic pressures, Xocén's embroiderers have neither the skills nor the freedom to experiment new labour identities into the formal economy. Yet, they need to “set ahead” the family by both earning cash and caretaking their children, parents, and husbands. Whatever job they perform, Mayan women need to “*echarle ganas*”, give it a big effort to help their children to “*salir adelante*”, move forward, always prioritising family needs over their personal aspirations and desires. Despite this “unbearable burden”, they feel that cannot

give up, as “*aguantar*”, enduring, is the unit of measurement of their value as women. In the same way as they endure the alcoholic or absent husbands, they endure the double day. As long as they do it, they are recognised as “*buenas mujeres*” or “*mujeres muy trabajadoras*”; though, *as much as they do it* they will not be recognised as “workers”. One might see endurance as a form of resilience; for me, it is rather resignation – another popular virtue of the prototypical Mayan woman.

In a rapidly shifting economy, Mayan people have been hard hit by restructuring; solidarity as a household survival strategy has been strained to the limit. Arguably, women are paying the highest prize for maintaining the Mayan family united in the challenges of globalisation. As Marie Labreque has observed:

«While [women] remain responsible for most of the housework, they also have to work for low wages outside of the home or as seamstresses doing piecework at home. At the same time, violence is on the rise and the number of men who abandon their families is constantly increasing» (Labreque 1998: 255).

Capitalism seems to have found in patriarchy the best ally for exploiting vulnerable, “docile”, illiterate indigenous women and confining them in miserably paid jobs and sectors. In spite of the repeated promises of development and empowerment, embroidery production in the Eastern Yucatán turned out to be one of these exploitative sectors.

Notwithstanding the ubiquitous proliferation of cooperatives in the last thirty years, *el gesto de bordar* continues to be an individual, domestic and fragmented occupation instead of a social and organic one. While it is true that government programs have diverted a huge amount of subsidiary funding into women’s projects, there has not been a systematic and ongoing effort to professionalise women’s productive activities. Silvia Terán Contreras (2010) has suggested that among the multiple spaces needed to open up the productive, social and cultural opportunities that embroiderers deserve, public, open-air workshops could play a central role in raising the community’s awareness about notions of gender, labour and social identities. The workshop as a professionalised gendered space within the community would foster the materialisation of women as a productive group, as well as the creation of alternative spaces of experimenting with new identities and roles. The physical, visible and public objectivisation of professional workshops in Mayan villages would promote the

construction and acceptance within the communities of the new identity of the embroiderers as producers, their social recognition and appreciation, as well as the establishment of more egalitarian gender relations.

In this idea of the workshop as a quasi-theatre stage where a renovated feminine labour identity can be performed in order to be seen, it remains to understand what audience this public performance should target. Migration, indeed, continues to remove men (the unavoidable spectators) from Mayan communities' everyday life, transforming the rural Yucatán into a spectral entity, scantily populated by elders, children, and by the women themselves.

The paced noise of the sewing machine makes Mayan embroiderers audible, yet it does not make them visible.

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