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American Aesthetics and Chinese Copies: New Politics of Artisanship in Oaxaca, Mexico

By Alanna Cant (London School of Economics and Political Science)

When I began my doctoral fieldwork in 2008 with artisans in Oaxaca, Mexico, I expected to spend much time talking about the United States. Indeed, consumers from the US form a significant part of the market for Oaxacan woodcarvings (telarotes), made in small villages like my field site, San Martin Tilcajete. I was not disappointed: the artisans who graciously opened their homes and workshops to me spent a lot of time and energy imagining and discussing what might capture the attentions of American tourists, collectors and wholesalers.

This orientation towards the United States as a source of home and inspiration is, of course, not a new one for artisans and many others in Mexico. In San Martin, migration to the US forms a longer and perhaps more robust connection to American ways of life. However, since the consolidation of woodcarving as a significant mode of livelihood in the 1980s, this industry has formed another link through which villagers connect to the US. While previous anthropological work has emphasized the economic, political and cultural connections between the two nations, my work explores how the expectations and conventions of North American indigenous art and aesthetics have become a source of aesthetic inspiration for artisans in San Martin. As some artisans incorporate what North American audiences readily read as the “form and content” of indigeneity into their work, they also mould the ways in which Oaxacan woodcarvings look and are read “at home” in Oaxaca.

Rather than characterizing these aesthetic changes as North American “impacts” on Oaxacan artisanal production, it was clear to me that artisans themselves were creatively and purposefully drawing these aesthetic grammars of indigeneity into the already existing aesthetics of artesanías (craftwork) in Oaxaca. I discovered that these aesthetic practices not only enhance artisans’ ability to “sell authenticity” to Mexican and North American tourists and collectors, but also have moved villagers to reconsider their own place within both Mexican and global processes of identity and belonging. This materialization in San Martin through the increased energy and commitment of young people to explore and participate in community traditions and a renewed interest in learning the Zapotec language.

While aesthetic practices and politics of artisanship have fostered this new interest in exploring what it meant to be Oaxacan, Zapotec and Mexican in the 21st century, they have also drawn San Martin’s artisans into global debates about cultural and intellectual property. During my fieldwork, artisans discovered that resin replicas of Oaxacan woodcarvings were being industrially produced in China by an American businessman and sold via New Age and giftware websites and fairs. With help from the Mexican and Oaxacan states, their response was to form a collective trademark union, which they hoped would dissuade further copying in the future.

This case raises many of the problems that anthropologists have identified with attempting to protect cultural content through appeals to intellectual property laws: the resin copies did not overtly claim to be...
Oaxacan, Mexican or even indigenous; it was unlikely that intellectual property claims—in any form—were likely to succeed in preventing the replication of the aesthetics of their work.

The language of intellectual property changes the relationship between artisans, their work, and each other, while at the same time draws artisans into the states' concerns about Mexico's place within the current global economy. Despite the fact that it was an American who ordered the replica carvings to be produced, the state and media representations of the case focused firmly on the fact that it was Chinese production. In recent years, Mexico has lost its primacy to China as the chief source of imports into the United States. Coupled with increasing economic woes due to the global financial downturn and the highly publicized drug-related violence in Mexico, the Mexican state is extremely sensitized towards China as a global competitor. By being placed at the heart of these anxieties about Mexico's place in the world, artisans in San Martín are also being reoriented towards other global connections beyond their more traditional relationships with North America. Whether this new mindfulness of China and other regions of the world also influences the aesthetics of Oaxacan woodcarvings remains to be seen.

Please send any comments, suggestions, and ideas, including photos, for future columns to Ronda Brulotte at brulotte@umn.edu.

Society for Linguistic Anthropology

Mark Allen Peterson and Bonnie Urciuoli, Contributing Editors

Language, Health, and Social Justice

By Steven P Black (Georgia State U)

Scholars have been researching health and social justice, language and health, and language and social justice for quite some time, but the incorporation of all three foci into a single object of analysis is a recent development. This is a summary of a report on this topic written for journalists, medical practitioners, and academics. Those who wish to be listed in a directory of scholars doing research on language, health, and social justice or to contribute teaching resources to the compiled report should contact me at sblack@gsu.edu. Below I write about language and explanations of illness, as well as issues related to translation in medical encounters.

Language(s) and Explanations of Illness

Connections between language varieties and explanations of illness remain under-examined. Individuals' culturally patterned ways of explaining illness are linked to multilingualism or the use of multiple registers, genres, or dialects in quite complex ways. Medical pluralism is a term sometimes used to describe the complex, often overlapping multiple explanations of illness that many patients bring to medical encounters. It is important to note that even in middle-class US contexts, patients' use of scientific medical explanatory frameworks is often contextually or situationally specific, and individuals sometimes

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