

### Gender Variation in Mesoamerica

Growing up amidst the oppressive sex-gender binary that pervades American culture, it is easy to imagine that there are only two possible genders. The myth of the sex-gender binary is everywhere in our culture. From infancy, American children are taught that there are boys and there are girls and that everyone fits neatly into one of those two categories. Moreover, the categories boy and girl are determinative of a great deal of behavior, according to the sex-gender myth. Boys like blue and cars and adventures, while girls like pink and princesses and ponies. Looking back, the myth of the sex-gender binary is quite well constructed and pervasive. Especially when one considers the fact that the sex-gender binary is a lie. In reality, humans embody a variety of gender identities which are not determined by our biological sex. When one looks at the history of gender expression present in different cultures, one can see that this variety is widespread and can be traced remarkably far back into human history. The history of Mesoamerica shows a long record of widespread gender variation that is tolerated by the societies in which it occurs. Unfortunately, tolerance of this gender variation has decreased over time due to the oppressive myth of the sex-gender binary.

Gender variation and homosexual behavior among the people of Mesoamerica can be traced back to the pre-Colombian period. In an examination of pre-Colombian Aztec religion, Antonio Requena found that their world had been preceded by four separate worlds which had been inhabited by their ancestors. The Aztecs believed that the world immediately preceding their world was one of sex and sensuality, in which people gave up the manly virtues of warfare and devoted themselves to sodomy, the Dance of the Flowers, femininity and the worship of Xochiquetzal (Requena). Xochiquetzal was the Aztec goddess of carnal desire, sexual realism, and all forms of non-reproductive sexuality (Requena). Most notably, Xochiquetzal was both female and male at the same time and thus is an early record of a third gender figure. Requena's analysis of Aztec religion shows that worship involved a transferring of gender roles and homosexual behavior. Homosexual behavior must have been a socially accepted and prevalent part of Aztec society, since the Aztec people had a goddess devoted to sodomy. Moreover, the fact that the worship of this goddess involved men transitioning from masculine gender performance to feminine gender performance indicates that gender variation was an accepted and acknowledged part of Aztec life.

Written records of homosexual behavior, transvestism, and transgender behavior in Mesoamerica surface during the Spanish Conquest. Stephen notes that Bernal Díaz del Castillo, in an exploration of the coast of Yucatán in 1517, discovered clay figures in which "the Indians seemed to be engaged in sodomy, one with the other." (Stephen 49; Sigal 105). This indicates that homosexual behavior was widespread and acceptable enough in indigenous cultures for people to make art that depicted this behavior. Moreover, Requena found that Bernal Díaz recorded that men dressed as women in order to prostitute themselves, and notes that Cortes addressed the people of Veracruz admonishing them to renounce the custom of male youths appearing in women's dress and to "give up your sodomy and all of your other evil practices."

(Requena). The vilification of sodomy and cross-dressing became the object of major campaigns by Catholic priests in Mesoamerica. Once again, this points to the widespread nature of these practices among the indigenous peoples in Mesoamerica at this time.

Requena found evidence in the writings of Bernal Diaz that many priests and curanderos among the indigenous people of Mesoamerica dressed in gender-ambiguous clothing and engaged in homosexual activity. Requena quotes Bernal Diaz's descriptions of indigenous priests: "they wore a dark habit like a cassock, their hair was long, reaching to their belts filled with clotted blood and so matted it could not be separated. they stank like sulfur and had another bad smell like carrion. the sons of chiefs, they did not take women, but followed the bad practice of sodomy" (Requena). While the true nature of the clothing of indigenous priests and its gender implications may be lost in translation, Diaz clearly portrays the indigenous priests as more feminine than masculine and as having sexualities that are restricted exclusively to homosexual interaction.

Currently, significant gender variation can be seen among the indigenous Zapotec peoples of Oaxaca, Mexico. Zapotec society contains a third gender, which they refer to as *muxe*. In her ethnographic work on the Zapotec Beverly Chiñas found that "the *muxe*, or man-woman, a person who appears to be predominantly male but displays certain feminine characteristics" (Chiñas 108). Chiñas identifies *muxe* as a gender category apart from both men and women. This third gender category is comprised by biological males that take on feminine social roles and mannerisms in addition to masculine social roles and mannerisms. *Muxe* combine the behaviors, role, attitudes, mannerisms, dress, and attributes of men and women into a unique identity. This identity inevitably varies from individual to individual (just as men and women vary in their gender performance), with some *muxe* who are extremely feminine and occupy almost the same social role as women while other *muxe* can be normatively masculine and display few feminine characteristics.

There is some dissent over the degree to which the gender category *muxe* is related to a sexual identity in the minds of the Zapotec people. Some assert that *muxe* are equally likely to be heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual and that their gender identity has no bearing upon their sexuality. Chiñas and her fellow ethnographer Lynn Stephen agree that many *muxe* "are *not* homosexual, there being no inevitable connection [with] homosexuality." some Zapotecs who are known as *muxe* marry and raise families." (Chiñas 110). It is interesting that Stephen and Chiñas found that *muxe* can fill the normatively masculine role of father and husband while occupying a third gender identity that includes feminine characteristics. This seems to suggest fluidity that is not corroborated by other researchers. In fact, most others provide evidence that the *muxe* gender identity is highly correlated with homosexual behavior, though it is not determinative of homosexual identity or behavior. Walter Williams found, in his ethnographic work on the Zapotec peoples, that *muxe* may have any sexual identity, But the definition does show a strong connection between nonmasculine personality and homosexual behavior. *Ira muxe* are respected by Zapotecs, who emphasize their differences from the general heterosexual population. (Williams 142). Many other researchers echo Williams' assessment in their own work, finding that the *muxe* identity is linked with homosexual behavior in the vast majority of cases. Chiñas' claim that *muxe* have been known to raise families thus deserves

further investigation. It would be most useful to know if these *muxe* are self-identified as such, or if their community assigns them the *muxe* identity.

One possible reason that *muxe* are so frequently connected with homosexual behavior, is that most men within the Zapotec community engage in homosexual behavior at some point in their lives. Williams found that "Among the Zapotecs of Mexico, homosexual behavior among males is common for all age groups. Since it is so common, the sexual behavior itself is not a means of classifying people. A masculine man may have sex with *ira muxe*, another masculine man, or a boy, and none of this will mark him as deviant. (Williams 91). Thus, homosexual behavior is conducted freely and openly by a wide range of the men in Zapotec society. Stephen asserts that this can be traced back to the imposition of Spanish Catholic values during the conquest. These values stressed the importance of women's virginity until marriage and purity in offspring, and thus resulted in strict control over women's sexualities. Sex between men, on the other hand, could not produce offspring and was thus less rigidly controlled (Stephen 52). *Muxe* consequently provide an important sexual outlet for men in Zapotec society who cannot access women sexually because they are unmarried, and for men who wish to have a sexual relationship outside of their marriage. Social values in Zapotec society make homosexual behavior simple and acceptable, and so it is often performed by men and *muxe* alike. Chiñas, Williams, and Stephens maintain that the *muxe* identity does not necessarily include homosexuality.

Self-identified *muxe* Amaranta Gomez Regalado disagrees, and asserts that homosexual behavior is an integral part of the *muxe* identity in her community of Juchitán. Regalado claims that as *muxe* begin to identify and enact their gender identity in early childhood, "the *muxhe* begins to form strategies for establishing innocent erotic-affectionate contact with other boys" (Regalado 4). She explains that young *muxe* approach young boys in playful settings, such as hide-and-seek, and engage in erotic activity. Regalado explains that such encounters are usually the topic of much gossip in the local community, though this gossip is usually positive and enables young *muxe* to publicize their gender identity. Regalado asserts that homosexual behavior continues to be an identifying and organizing principle for *muxe* individuals throughout their lives, especially in situations where it is too inconvenient or dangerous for *muxe* to express themselves through behavior, social role, and dress (Regalado 9).

*Muxe* perform their gender identity in many ways, the most obvious of which is their style of dress. Chiñas found that

On occasion young adult *muxe* wear cosmetics and such feminine items as high-heeled pumps, neither of which is traditionally used by Zapotec women. Their hair is cut male-style, but usually combed in more feminine ways than is the usual male practice. Their mode of dress is predominantly male, consisting of men's trousers and shirts, but with more care taken to fit, quality of fabric, and tailoring than is the case with heterosexual males. Sometimes *muxe* wear gold earrings or necklaces and have gold-coin buttons made for their shirts. In private they sometimes wear mestizo-style women's dresses (Chiñas 1992).

Thus *muxe* attire reflects *muxe* gender identity: it is a mix of feminine and masculine components that vary from individual to individual, leaving a wide berth for personalization. *Muxe* dress primarily in masculine clothing that has been slightly altered to be more feminine and decorative. They set themselves apart from both women and men by including elements of dress,

such as decorative gold buttons, that are not worn by either. When *muxe* do wear feminine apparel, it tends to be exaggeratedly feminine and rather sexualized items such as high-heeled pumps and cosmetics.

Yet Regalado claims that *muxe* have not always dressed this way, in a combination of feminine and masculine clothing. Regalado explains that in Juchitán "transvestism is quite a new issue, because [40 or 50 years ago] it would have been seen as something too risky. They added that the first early signs of transvestism – in the decades of the 50's, 60's, and 70's "meant for them and others an accomplishment" (Regalado 9). Due to values that were transplanted from Spanish colonists and Catholicism, an oppressive and strictly enforced sex-gender binary pervades most of Mexico. *Muxe* in the past could not violate this sex-gender binary by dressing in feminine clothing for fear of retaliation from members outside of the Zapotec community. Recent instances of *muxe* wearing feminine clothing without facing retaliation have been regarded as triumphs for the *muxe* community, because they allow *muxe* to express themselves more freely.

In the description of *muxe* clothing, Regalado uses the term transvestism loosely to describe any instances in which someone of one gender wears any article of clothing that is designated for another gender. Thus Regalado's usage of the term transvestism and the style of dress of *muxe* are distinct from typical conceptions of transvestism in the US, which usually involves someone of one gender who dresses entirely in the clothing designated for another gender and tries to pass as the gender as which they dress up. Thus, as Williams notes, transvestite is not an appropriate word to describe *muxe* (Williams 75).

Rather, *muxe* must be thought of in terms of their character, the ways in which they enact their gender identity. Williams explains that the Zapotec "defend the right of *ira/muxe* to their different gender and sexual roles simply because "God made them that way." Both characteristics are accepted as integral to the character of berdaches. It is this emphasis on a person's character, or "spirit," that is one of the most important elements of berdachism. (Williams 49). The Zapotec see the gender identity of the *muxe* as an essential part of who they are, a concept that they describe as spirit. *Muxe* cannot be labeled as transvestites because clothing is ultimately superfluous to their gender identity and sexuality. *Muxe* are not dressing up as another gender when they wear feminine clothing, they are expressing their own third gender. The *muxe* identity is just as essential and subtle a part of an individual as sexuality. One cannot definitively infer an individual's sexual identity merely by looking at them or even speaking with them. Yet it is an essential part of that person's nature that they cannot change and did not choose. When individuals express their *muxe* identity, they are expressing an integral part of themselves.

The subtle yet essential nature of the *muxe* identity raises the complicated issue of identification. Many children are identified as *muxe*, some at ages as young as three. Chínas and Regalado both agree that these early identifications are made by the community, based early assessments of the character and behavior of male children (Chínas 109; Regalado 3). Chínas found that a tentative identification of *muxe* is assigned to male children "by the family and community if they prefer playing house and dolls with little girls, if they imitate their mothers more than their fathers in play, or if the habitually enjoy dressing up in girl's clothing." (Chínas

109). Yet these identifications are not always predictive of the child's later behavior or the gender identity that the child will use to describe himself. Chiñas and Regalado agree that some male children who display few feminine characteristics as a child will manifest a *muxe* identity around puberty, while some male children who were extremely feminine at a young age will cease to display feminine characteristics around puberty and become indistinguishable from their non-muxe brothers, marry and raise families (Chiñas 109). Ultimately, the *muxe* identity is something that an individual must claim for themselves.

Each individual will express their *muxe* identity in different ways, and it will come to influence many different aspects of their lives. Many *muxe* express their gender identity through their occupation, mostly by taking working roles that would not normally be performed by men. *Muxe* will often perform traditional women's work such as embroidering, tailoring, bartending or healing / shaman. Sometimes *muxe* will do traditional men's work that is artistically oriented, such as jewelry-making. Recently, *muxe* from upper-middle class backgrounds have begun to take white-collar jobs which are traditionally filled by men but are opening up to women. These include jobs in banks, government offices, business, and political offices. Generally *muxe* are considered valuable and skilled workers no matter their profession because Zapotec people believe them "to be exceptionally intelligent, [and to] have a reputation for having artistic abilities and the women's work they do is said to be done more artistically and with greater care than when women do it" (Chiñas 109). Williams suggests that these expectations for *muxe*, combined with the absence of child-care responsibilities, provide *muxe* with the incentive and opportunity to be exceptionally intelligent and creative (Williams 59). Thus expectations within the community shape the ways in which *muxe* express their gender identity.

Although Zapotec social values dictate that social separations between unrelated men and unrelated women must be maintained, these separations do not apply to relations between unrelated women and unrelated *muxe*. *Muxe* are often included in women's social circles, especially those *muxe* whose occupation traditionally belongs to women. Stephen found that "The loyalty and helpfulness of *muxe* for female relatives is often contrasted with the laziness and irresponsibility of husbands (both imaginary and real)." (Stephen 44). Women generally have positive feelings toward *muxe* and do not hesitate to accept them wholeheartedly as part of the community. Chiñas, Williams, and Regalado agree that much of the tolerance of the Zapotec people for *muxe* stems from the deep-seated belief that "God made them that way" (Chiñas 109; Williams 49; Regalado 7).

Stephen asserts that men, on the other hand, are not always quite as accepting of *muxe* as women. While men still publicly accept that *muxe* were made by God and thus cannot be changed, Stephen found that their behavior and private feelings reflect a different attitude. Stephens found several instances of cruel jokes and disparaging remarks made about *muxe* by Zapotec men. "Because they may not meet all of the norms of Zapotec masculinity—exhibiting physical strength in rural labor, socializing with men, maintaining a public face of authority in their homes and on the street—they may be disparaged by men because they are a constant reminder of the constructedness of masculinity." (Stephen 44). Stephen asserts that some men feel confined in the rigid masculine role that they must fulfill, and resent the freedom and fluidity that is afforded *muxe*.

The Zapotec people also have a the gender distinction *marimacha*, which refers to females who display masculine behavior. According to Chiñas, "they are not recognized as essentially different from other women although physically they appear more masculine and sometimes display hostile, aggressive behavior." (Chiñas 110). Chiñas explains that *marimachas* do not dress differently from other women or wear different hairstyles, yet they are singled out because of their masculine behavior and preference for masculine work. Marimachas are much less common than *muje* individuals, and are not considered to be their own gender category (as *muje* are). Nonetheless, they are accepted as part of life in Zapotec culture.

Unfortunately, the Zapotec people of Oaxaca are the only region of Mesoamerica that currently displays such deep and widespread acceptance of gender variance. Most of Mesoamerica is deeply invested in a strict sex-gender binary in which women fill passive mothering roles and men portray active controlling roles. Women are held to the ideal of virgin motherhood embodied by the figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe (Stephen 54). Men are expected to live up to the rigorous masculine identity of machismo. This identity involves careful maintenance of a power dynamic in which the man must always be considered dominant in order to qualify as masculine. Under this machismo hierarchy, "ideal (cultural) norms distinguish masculine insertors (*activos*) who are not considered *homosexuales* from feminine insertees (*pasivos*) who are" (Murray 49). *Pasivos* are considered pathetic and unworthy of any respect as men, and thus are often singled out for violence. In line with this oppressive ideal of machismo, gay and transgender people are forbidden from serving in the military.

In the face of this oppressive sex-gender binary, homosexual and transgender rights organizations have formed. Frente de LiberaciOn Homosexual and Frente Homosexual de AcciOn Revolucionaria were early gay rights groups that formed in Mexico City in the 1970s and 1980s. Unfortunately, many of these groups were slow to include or even acknowledge transgender people.

In spite of prejudice and internal disputes, LGBT rights organizations in Mesoamerica have made encouraging progress. Homosexual acts are legal throughout all of Mexico. In June 2003 the Federal Law to Prevent and End Discrimination was passed by the Mexican Federal Parliament. This law forbids any form of discrimination based on sexual preferences and also on appearance, mannerism, and expression of one's sexual preference or gender (www.iglhrc.org). On March 13, 2004, amendments to the Mexico City Civil Code were enacted that allow transgender people to change the sex and name recorded in their birth certificates. These forms have amended the city's laws in order to allow individuals upon request to change a name or any other essential data affecting a person's civil status, filiations, nationality, sex and identity [Note] that the inclusion of the term identity is of fundamental importance, as it will allow also non-operative and pre-operative trans people to request a change of their names in birth certificates (www.iglhrc.org). Same-sex civil unions are legally recognized in Mexico City.

The backlash to this progress has been devastating. Violence against transgender people is rampant, and the authorities often turn a blind eye. According to Transgender Europe, In total 91 murders of trans people were reported in 11 Latin American countries in 2008, and 73

murders of trans people in 11 Latin American countries in the first six months of 2009. The reported murders of trans people in Latin America account for 75% and 88% of the world wide reported murders of trans people in 2008 and the first six months of 2009 respectively (vivirlatino.com).

Due to prejudice against them, many transgender people are abandoned by their families at young ages. With little education and scant financial resources, many transgender youth are coerced into prostitution (Murray 172). In an ethnographic study on transgender people in Hermosilla, Mexico, Joseph Carrier found that the bars of the red-light district were filled with transgender hostesses, all of whom were also prostitutes. In a city of approximately 200,000 people, there were five main bars in the red-light district that included transgender prostitutes. Each bar contained between three and eleven transgender prostitutes, depending on the night and the crowd within the bar (Murray 71). The Mexican Center for Health Systems Research found that In Mexico, male sex workers (MSW) and travesti, transgender and transsexual (TTT) sex workers are among the groups most affected by HIV. They suffer from stigma and discrimination, yet are often absent from the design of programmes and HIV prevention campaigns (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov). Transgender people in Mesoamerica suffer terribly from violence, poverty, and venereal diseases that are visited upon them as a consequence of extreme prejudice.

Unfortunately, tolerance for gender variation in Mesoamerica has decreased markedly over the arc of human history. People have come to ignore the ways in which gender variation is naturally occurring among humans. The unfortunate consequence is prejudice against transgender people. Yet this prejudice does not have to remain. If awareness of historical gender variation increases, people may come to realize that it is a natural part of the human population which harms nobody. We must abolish our irrational fears and hatred, and come to accept transgender people.

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#### ZAPOTEC MUXE IN SOUTH MEXICO

[http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2008/12/07/weekinreview/1207-MUXE\\_index.html](http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2008/12/07/weekinreview/1207-MUXE_index.html)

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/07/weekinreview/07lacey.html>

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#### A Lifestyle Distinct: The Muxe of Mexico By MARC LACEY

But nowhere are attitudes toward sex and gender quite as elastic as in the far reaches of the southern state of Oaxaca. There, in the indigenous communities around the town of Juchitán, the world is not divided simply into gay and straight. The local Zapotec people have made room for a third category, which they call "muxes" (pronounced MOO-shays) — men who consider themselves women and live in a socially sanctioned netherworld between the two genders.

"Muxe" is a Zapotec word derived from the Spanish "mujer," or woman; it is reserved for males who, from boyhood, have felt themselves drawn to living as a woman, anticipating roles set out for them by the community.



Anthropologists trace the acceptance of people of mixed gender to pre-Colombian Mexico, pointing to accounts of cross-dressing Aztec priests and Mayan gods who were male and female at the same time. Spanish colonizers wiped out most of those attitudes in the 1500s by forcing conversion to Catholicism. But mixed-gender identities managed to survive in the area around Juchitán, a place so traditional that many people speak ancient Zapotec instead of Spanish.

Not all muxes express their identities the same way. Some dress as women and take hormones to change their bodies. Others favor male clothes. What they share is that the community accepts them; many in it believe that muxes have special intellectual and artistic gifts.

Every November, muxes inundate the town for a grand ball that attracts local men, women and children as well as outsiders. A queen is selected; the mayor crowns her. "I don't care what people say," said Sebastian Sarmienta, the boyfriend of a muxe, Ninel Castillejo Garcia. "There are some people who get uncomfortable. I don't see a problem. What is so bad about it?"

Muxes are found in all walks of life in Juchitán, but most take on traditional female roles — selling in the market, embroidering traditional garments, cooking at home. Some also become sex workers, selling their services to men. .

Acceptance of a child who feels he is a muxe is not unanimous; some parents force such children to fend for themselves. But the far more common sentiment appears to be that of a woman who takes care of her grandson, Carmelo, 13. "It is how God sent him," she said.

Katie Orlinsky contributed reporting from Juchitán, Mexico