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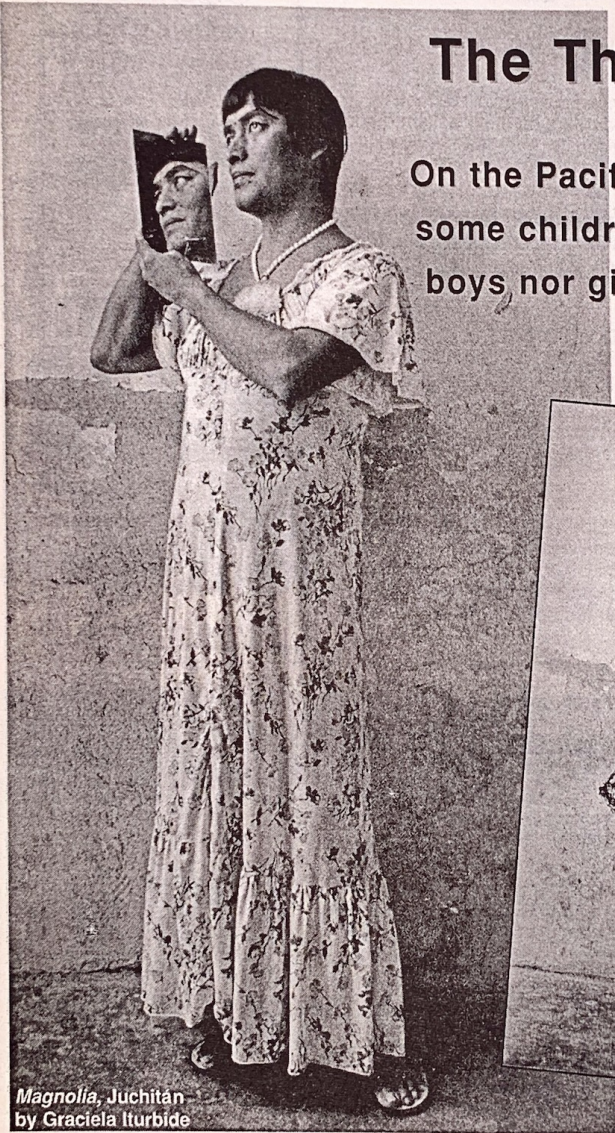
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The Third Gender

In the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, on the Pacific coast of Oaxaca, some children are born neither boys nor girls. They are muxe.

Report and photographs by JULIE PECHEUR

Under the still fiery rays of the late afternoon sun, two dozen ox-carts decorated with flowers, palms, and multicolored banners parade down the center of Juchitán. The *convite*, the traditional procession announcing a special mass, brings together the whole neighborhood. In one cart, sit erect dignified old men in white shirts and straw hats; in another, motionless boys in blue shiny costumes with their palms joined in prayer; and in a third one, little made-up girls in regional embroidered dresses throw plastic cups and plates as gifts to the enthusiastic crowd.

As the procession moves forward, standing on the upper part of another cart, two children energetically ward off the branches of the surrounding trees to protect the cart's adornments. They are about 12 years old,

with narrow bodies and loose hair down to their round naked shoulders. One wears a pair of blue jeans and a short white top that reveals a flat belly and no waist. They both look like boys, but they could be mistaken for girls. Here in Juchitán, on the Pacific coast of the Tehuantepec Isthmus, Mexico's narrowest land near Guatemala, they are neither girls nor boys. They are *muxe* (pronounced Mooshey).

In striking opposition to Mexico's dominant *mestizo* culture, which is racially mixed and where *machismo* prevails, the population of Juchitán is predominantly Zapotec and does not condemn or reject effeminate male homosexuals. On the contrary. Here *muxe* (the word comes from the Zapotec adaptation of the Spanish word for woman, *mujer*) are generally regarded as part and parcel of society, a third element or gender, combining the assets of both the female and male, and sometimes equipped with special intellectual and artistic gifts.

No one knows how many *muxe* live in this city of 80,000. Around the shaded plaza at the center of town near the market, one often spots them: slightly effeminate older men, young transvestites (*vestidas*), and men dressed in shirt and trousers but wearing make-up (*pinadas*). The majority of the *muxe* live in the two popular neighborhoods where most fishermen and peasants reside. Those in the upper classes however, still tend to stay *en closet*, in the closet.

"In Juchitán, nearly all families have a great-uncle, a son, or a bother who is a *muxe*," says Adolfin Pineda Esteva, a 47-year-old primary school teacher whose younger brother, now known as América, is a *muxe*. "Not all parents accept them, but they are not rejected," she explains while her husband Andrés nods in agreement. "They have their space in the society. They teach dance, sew, head beauty salons, make adornments... *Muxe* are very active and creative."

"Here one is born a *muxe*. One does not become one," says Ulises Toledo Santiago, a thirty-year-old *muxe*, echoing the general opinion. Ulises, who dresses as a man but whose face expressions and voice are somewhat effeminate, has a license in law and works for the city family planning agency. In an article published in 1995, anthropologist

Beverly Chiñas confirms that: "The idea of choosing gender or of sexual orientation—the two of which are not distinguished by the Isthmus Zapotecs—is as ludicrous as suggesting that one can choose one's skin color."

Much to the annoyance of the 16th-century Spanish conquerors, male homosexuality was widespread and tolerated in many North American indigenous societies, such as the Isthmus Zapotecs and the Yucatan Mayas. The Spaniards highly valued "manliness" and "assertive" behavior and placed a stigma on "submissive" attitudes. Their chronicles never failed to mention the Indians "corrupt" behavior, which they labeled as "sodomy" after the biblical town of Sodom, destroyed by God because of the sinful mores of its inhabitants. While systematically destroying all statues and frescoes representing male-male sexual encounters, the Spaniards found in the natives' different approach to sexuality yet another theological justification to annihilate their culture and convert them to Catholicism.

The people of the Isthmus however have always fiercely defended their identity against conquering powers, whether Aztec, Spanish, or later French. Nowadays in the region, contrary to the national *mestizo* pattern where men prevail in every strata of the

society, women have more outlets for social participation and enjoy the resulting powers. Typically, Juchitecan men work the fields and go fishing, participate in politics, and shape intellectual and artistic life. Women, on the other hand, do the housework, but also organize the fiestas and take part in various important commercial activities. In Juchitán for instance, they control the vital daily market, reigning over piles of mangos and dried fish, their full-size bodies wrapped in long black skirts and *huipiles*, the short dark traditional blouses embroidered with large bright flowers.

Juchitecan women thus enjoy unusual financial autonomy and prestige, which has led many observers, chiefly foreigners, to mistakenly define Juchitán as a matriarchal society, a designation which overlooks the male equally crucial, and sometimes domineering, roles. Nevertheless, women and female activities are not considered secondary, which may partly explain why *muxe*, who assume effeminate manners and participate in both female and male economic activities, are usually not discriminated against.

When a son prefers dolls to pistols, female cousins to male ones, and dresses to trousseaux, many mothers rejoice, even if the majority of fathers merely resign themselves. For women, raising a *muxe* implies that strong arms will take care of their house while they go out to work and that someone will look after them as they grow older. (Men have a tendency to prefer younger women and leave the household, even in Juchitán.) "Parents with a *muxe* know that he will always take care of them because he will never get married and leave the house," says Ulises, who lives with his mother. "Our society is very tolerant because the *muxe* work hard and support their families."

Traditionally, *muxe* are expected to cook, clean, look after the children, take care of the elders, and bring home an additional income. In recent years, *muxe*, like women, have started to gain access to higher education and careers such as lawyers and doctors.

Moreover, they play a key role in preparing the countless fiestas, essential to the identity of the community. This is not a light task: Juchitán celebrates at least 20 in-town *velas*, the round of parties in honor of patron saints or particular events. During virtually the entire month of May for instance, the streets are filled with parades, music, and flowers. Then, there are 20 or so obligatory national holidays, about 30 unmissable *velas* in neighborhood communities, plus the frequent weddings, birthdays, graduations. For all these celebrations, *muxe* design, embroider and sew traditional female outfits, make gar-



Adolfin Pineda Esteva with a picture of her brother América



Oscar Cortzora and



Andrés López, Santia

lands and paper chains, fix hairstyles and make-up, and set family and church altars.

Less visible however, is the sexual role the *muxe* play in the Juchitecan society. Although classical heterosexual rigid classifications hardly hold when it comes to homosexual preferences, it is generally true that *muxe* do have sexual relations with other *muxe*. They see themselves as women and want men. And the men they sleep with, called *mayate*, are not considered homosexuals because they play the "active" part.

"Because a woman's virginity before marriage is still very important in our society, many young boys are initiated by the *muxe*," says Judith López Saynes, the director of Gunaxhii Guendanabani, an association dedicated to AIDS prevention. "It is widely accepted, but with AIDS now, people are more cautious."

Andrés López, a thirty-year old *intpada* nurse who heads a medical service, explains laughing, "You go in the street and the boys play tough with their friends, but then they flirt with you." His friend Felina Santiago Vadivieso, a 36-year-old fake blond *muxe* who heads a beauty salon, confirms that younger boys keep on asking her advice on how to please their girlfriends. She prefers older men however, although she can't kiss them or hold their hands in the street. "A lot of Juchitecan men marry women from other towns like Puebla. They are very conservative and more homophobic," she explains, before adding in a laugh: "But their sons get caught in the local movement, and their husbands never leave it!"

For almost thirty years, *muxe* have had their own *velas* in Juchitán. Ulises for instance, organizes his club's December 28th *vela*, *baile con migo*, or Dance With Me. The first *muxe vela*, the *vela de las auténticas intrepidas buscadoras del peligro*, or the *vela* of the Authentic Intrepids in Search of Danger, took place in 1976. The organizer, Oscar Cazorla Pineda, a fifty-four-year old *muxe*, is the owner of a famous dance hall in the center of Juchitán and the leader of the *Intrepidas* club. With large features and figure but feminine movements, he is also a successful and

respected business *muxe*, who sells the traditional and ubiquitous gold jewelry, which he himself puts on to party.

Each year in November, after a special catholic mass held in its honor, the *Intrepidas vela* gathers all the city's *muxe* along with fifteen hundred men, women—grandparents and young adults—and children. The blast, which now gets national attention, requires a full year of preparation and costs around \$10,000 dollars. Oscar and the *Intrepidas* cover some of the expenses, but most are now paid by others, including the

town's elected officials. In fact, the *Intrepidas* are partisans of the PRI, the political party in power in Juchitán, and they regularly participate in political meetings and demonstrations. Conversely, during the *vela*, it is the city officeholder who crowns the Intrepid beauty queen.

Nowadays during fiestas, many *muxe* wear traditional women's dresses or drag queen outfits. An increasing number, and virtually the entire new generation, also dress like women in every day life. To Filiberto Cruz, who, at 89 is the oldest Intrepid, this new tendency is rather shocking. In his time, nobody would do it, although he confesses with a shy smile that he himself would sometimes wear gold buttons and discreet bracelets.

This new transvestite tendency has created dilemma and friction in the society as well. In schools, for instance, some teachers, often from other parts of the country, do not tolerate the new trend and children, as mischievous as anywhere else, make fun of it. Many Juchitecan women also twitch at the sight of their traditional dresses on *muxe*.

"This transvestite process is rather new," says Amaranta Gómez Regalado, a 26-year-old beautiful *muxe* who wears traditional *huipiles* and became famous last year when she ran for congressional in the Oaxaca state elections. "It started about twenty years ago and I think it has to do with the advent of marketing and television." In her low caressing voice, she says she understands the debate about traditional clothing, but states, "It is part of our culture, and I consider myself a vehicle of that culture too."

Vicki Santiago Luís, a twenty-year-old *muxe* who was born Jorge and came to Oaxaca because she found Juchitán intolerant towards gays, decided to wear women's clothing when she was 13, against the advise of a *muxe* her age who thought it could be dangerous. She received the support of her mom, grandfather, and a couple of girlfriends who helped her define her style—western and sexy. But to these days, her grandmother has refused to accept it. Next December nonetheless, Vicki will wear to the *vela club baile con migo* the regional dress her uncle bought for her to receive the 2004 beauty queen crown. "I am so happy to be the queen," she confesses with a soft, but rasping voice, her ecstatic eyes twinkling. "I have admired the transvestite *muxe* since I was a very little boy."

"The new generation is only interested in dressing up like women and looking beautiful. They don't think at all about their future," argues Felina who herself wears a knee-long blue jeans skirt. "We follow the



Amaranta Gómez Regalado

Photo Jorge Luis Santiago

examples of the older *muxe*: we work and take care of our parents. My motivation is my parents. I live alone and it is my duty to help them."

The new generation's attitude is not limited to clothing. A few *muxe* have also started considering using hormones, breast implants or aesthetic surgery to narrow their noses. Only one so far is said to be thinking about getting an operation to remove his genitals.

For Amaranta, who was able to travel around the world as an anti-AIDS activist and is considering furthering her education in social studies, *muxe* ought to create different roles for themselves within the Juchitecan society. "When I was 13 or 14, it was impossible for a *muxe* to enter politics, to write articles, to be an activist, an opinion maker. We had to embroider and create adornments," she says. "Now the *muxe* who wants to should be able to open up intellectual



Vicki, the 2004 *muxe* Beauty Queen (right), when she was 14 (above)

spaces for herself." With her charming ironic smile she adds: "It has not been easy for me. My mom

wanted me to learn a traditional *muxe* job. Between two conferences she would tell me, at least bake a cake or something."

When asked if marriage is part of the agenda, the vast majority of *muxe* seem perplexed, as if they had never thought of it. "People get married, and then they divorce," says Felina. "I don't want that. I want my relationships to last the time they should last and that's it. And I want to enjoy all the men I want."

"In Juchitán marriage is not a necessity," says Ulises. "It is an issue that you find in other societies, where homosexuals are discriminated against. Here we don't need a political movement or the creation of special space in society. We already have it."