



# Commercialization of Indigenous Handicrafts in Mexico as Empowerment



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## Abstract

The production of art and handicrafts in rural areas has been appreciated in literature in different directions: as a contribution to sustainable rural development [1], as a prevention of rural-urban migration [2], as an improvement of rural living conditions by balancing the distribution of incomes [3], or as a tools for diversification of the rural economy [4]. Only a few studies do not concentrate on the economic dimension and place people themselves at the centre [5,6]. In order to provide new impetus to this discussion, we argue in that opinion paper that the commercialization of handicraft can be interpreted as empowerment in that term that creating handicraft enables the community to deal constructively with the systematic disadvantages they experience through the government.

**Keywords:** Indigenous handicrafts; Empowerment; Mexico; Wixárikas

## Introduction

The term 'Professional indigenous' describes people of a certain community, who sustain their income through the production - according to ancestral knowledge - of cultural goods [7]. In the case of the indigenous community Wixárika, those handicrafts are bright and colorful, figurative, exotic and aesthetically pleasing to the broad public. For the Wixárikas, the governmental plan 'Huicot', a strategy for the commercialization of the handicrafts in the 1970s, is of a great importance [8]. Handicrafts are hereby declared as 'patrimonio local', which translates to local heritage [9]. This declaration is followed by a sudden interest in Wixárikas by the Mexican government since the financial benefit is getting recognized. However, with the 'Huicot' many new possibilities for indigenous people opened up [8]. One of those possibilities is the migration to urban areas due to working opportunities and new live-style possibilities for urban indigenous people in Mexico in which the stereotypical image of rural indigenous people dressed in traditional clothes and working as farmers is confronted [10]. Migration, in this context, means a way of breaking a possible circle of poverty, repression in communities, a possible access to education, and a broader non-indigenous society. Nevertheless, many indigenous people are struggling to find new ways of identifying themselves in urban areas and are still confronted with inequalities [9].

## Handicrafts as Symbolic Territory

The appearance of cultural industry in which the production of cultural goods and services is tied to industrial criteria and strategies [11], creates a new sector within the Mexican economy. Hence, tourists and the interest of the Mexican society is attracted by this sector. Still, there are critical aspects to this cultural industry, which include an asymmetry due to the perception of producers as vulnerable people who are unable to auto present themselves [9]. This thematic can currently be witnessed in the five states of Durango, Jalisco, Nayarit, San Luis Potosí and Zacatecas by the political land grabbing of Wixárika symbolic territory [12]. Since those places are rich of natural resources, many mines are opened in the region and nature is being destroyed due to tourism [13]. The Mexican government is on the one side celebrating its multiculturalism and on the other side exploiting rural indigenous communities [9].

Those processes represent a disconnection of arts and the artist whereby the cultural good is being supported as an aesthetically pleasing object while artists are being left aside and exploited [10]. Expressions such as 'artista chamane' [9] reflect this common consideration of indigenous artists as 'primitive'. Opportunities to obtain more visibility are given to those artists and an indigenous population by means of indigenous art, social

networks, and international art exhibitions. This iconographic representation opens the possibility to an informative exchange of inequalities and builds a platform for indigenous political demands.

### Anthropological Views on Handicrafts

Culture can, in an anthropological way, be conceptualized as fluent, a 'way of living' instead of a determined and a static complex [10]. It is certain that nowadays handicrafts and Wixárika art – for touristic purposes - are not produced in the way that religious and cultural objects were created for their proper use such as religious offerings [14]. It is about serving the needs of the market which often means a so called 'feeding the search for the other', reinforcing a stereotypical picture of 'a homogenous indigenous community' and disconnecting the tourists of their own known world and thus creating an 'antiocident' [8]. However, this is not a new phenomenon; Wixárika art has been influenced for a long time by external factors and their designs changed already due to the invasion of Europeans in Mexico.

In its earliest state, the Wixárika religion was more abstract than figurative and decorations were not of importance [15]. This leads to the conclusion that if it were not for the commercialization, the actual objects would not exist [8]. This reflects the importance of a monetary incentive to the production of cultural goods, which not only changes cultural significances but also maintains different cultural aspects. This maintaining of an indigenous culture must be seen in consideration of power relations and a partly 'imposed development' [10].

There exists a variety of creative individual strategies to deal with this external imposing of values, one of those being the idea of selling tourists a 'versión acultural' which translates to an 'acculturated version' of the cultural object [8]; in this way two living worlds can be separated. One world ensuring the producers an economical surviving and another world of the personal believe system and culture. Furthermore handicrafts and art enable a process of informing interested people about elements of ones own indigenous culture. This informing processes resolute in more visibility among a broad public that may lead to more activist engagement dedicated to indigenous communities living conditions.

### Conclusion

Those considerations of a very complex subject lead to three main conclusions, which allow seeing the processes of monetization, commercialization and de-contextualization as a possible empowerment of indigenous communities. Due to new opportunities of income - built on already community-intern existing knowledge - possibilities of breaking a circle of poverty are given, and with that access to many goods, are

enabled. Migration and the international exchange of knowledge allow indigenous communities to raise their voices. This new platform should and must be used more for the addressing of political claims and claims of fundamental human rights. Lastly, the discussed aspects build an opportunity for a maintaining of indigenous cultural elements and reliving ancestral roots in new contexts.

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