

Transnational Commodities as Local Cultural Icons: Barbie Dolls in Mexico

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THE TRANSFORMATION OF NORTH AMERICAN IMAGES AND PRODUCTS into transnational commodities and their circulation around the world in a process of globalization has raised concerns about the homogenization of cultures. This research explores how commodities need not serve exclusively as vehicles for the meanings and values invested in them by Western producers, but may be transformed into representations of indigenous or local identities through a process of *creolization*. The term *creolization* refers to the process by which foreign goods are assigned novel meanings and uses in diverse cultural settings (Howes 5).

The transnational product analyzed in this article is the Mattel Barbie doll. This doll has been made to represent more than thirty nationalities with at least forty different career personas and is sold in 140 countries. Despite efforts by Mattel to blanket diverse markets by adapting Barbie's skin color and clothing, the changes that she has undergone in the hands of non-Western consumers remain striking.

Research regarding the reception of transnational products in the Yucatan region of Mexico reveals that Barbie has been reformulated by Mexican consumers to represent local identity rather than emulating the meanings and values she was attributed by Mattel. Specifically, the local values embodied in Mexican versions of the Barbie doll relate to the significance of traditional *Maya* clothing, a regional dance called *jarana*, and a rite of passage for adolescent girls called the *quince años* ceremony. In addition, the Mexican image of Barbie as a woman

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enmeshed in a solid network of family and friends in Mexico contrasts with her North American incarnation as a liberated career woman. The indigenous processes by which Barbie has been transformed in Mexico are an assertion of local values and present a gentle resistance to the forces of globalization.

Globalization, Homogenization, and Cultural Consumption

Apprehension surrounding the concept of globalization stems from assumptions about the power of the economy to shape social life. For example, it has been presumed that as transnational commodities penetrate new environments, recipient cultures will transform to emulate the images embodied in these goods (Tomlinson). The question arises as to whether diverse cultures are able to retain their social sensibilities despite the introduction of transnational commodities. If so, what is the significance of consumption in this process? The fusion of foreign and local images that takes place at this level will be explored through a discussion of hybrid commodity forms in the Yucatan region of Mexico.

During the last half of the twentieth century, the attention devoted to consumption as an area for social research reveals that people are increasingly defining themselves in terms of their access to commodities, and are using consumption as a marker of social identity (with reference to clothing, sports, cars, music, brand names, television images, and so on) (Bocock 4, 109; Tomlinson 1–9). However, far from simply reiterating the intentions of producers, the meanings attached to commodities may also represent consumer desires and values. This is especially apparent in cases where commodities cross cultural borders and circulate outside of the culture in which they were produced. Research suggests that when foreign products enter into new environments, the creativity of consumers can act as a source for the generation of new commodity meaning (Douglas and Isherwood; Appadurai; Howes; Miller). In exploring the resiliency of non-Western (and Western) cultures in the face of globalization, David Howes explains that “When one takes a closer look at the meanings and uses given to specific imported goods within specific ‘local contexts’ or ‘realities,’ one often finds that the goods have been transformed, at least in part, in accordance with the values of the receiving culture” (5).

In order to further explore the significance of consumption in defining commodity value, this research examines the transformation that the Barbie doll has undergone to become a symbol of Yucatec cultural identity. Six months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Merida, the capital city of the state of Yucatan, forms the basis for the findings presented here. Fieldwork was carried out over the course of the academic year between 2000 and 2001.

Transnational Barbie

The Mattel Barbie doll made her debut in 1959 at the American Toy Convention in New York. The Barbie doll image is derived from a three-dimensional version of a promiscuous comic strip character named *Lilli*, who appeared in a tabloid newspaper in Germany during the 1950s (Rand 25, 32). The original *Bild Lilli* doll was intended as a pornographic pleasure for men and sold in tobacco shops and bars (see Figure 1).

Legend has it that Ruth Handler (the founder of Mattel creations in 1945 with her husband Elliot Handler) had been trying to conceive of a three-dimensional representation of paper dolls when she came across the *Lilli* doll during a trip to Switzerland in 1957. Despite the sexual overtones of the doll, Mattel negotiated for the rights to *Lilli* and brought her back to America to be redesigned and sold as Barbie. Her sexy image was transformed slightly to elicit a more “wholesome” image. For example, her sultry side glance was shifted forward and her black eyes were widened and painted blue (Lord 10–12). In effect, the Barbie doll is herself a commodity that has been uprooted from its culture of origin and redesigned to suit American social and cultural values. Through this process of creolization, she has effectively become an American cultural icon (Ebersole and Peabody; Lord 6).

In 1992, Mattel was quoted as having a value of \$1.6 billion, and it was suggested that the average American girl owned seven Barbie dolls (Lord 127). By the turn of the millennium, consumer statistics had risen to ten dolls per child, and it was estimated that a Barbie doll is sold *every second* (Dubin 19–20). Handler’s initial conception of Barbie as a fashion model illustrates the central importance of appearance to her identity, and the rise of feminism in the late 1960s prompted Mattel to diversify Barbie’s career and devise their new slogan, “We



FIGURE 1: *Lilli* Doll, illustration printed in *Forever Barbie* (Lord 29).

girls can do anything, right Barbie!" (Rand 66). Mattel attributes their successful marketing campaign to the infinite imaginary potential of Barbie (see http://www.barbie.com/Parents/Girls_Inc/). However, the ideal body type associated with Barbie leaves little room for imaginative transformation and has been discussed in hegemonic terms related to the promotion of beliefs about the female self that create a rift between dominant and subordinate female ideals (Rand 8–9). The naturalization of this body form and hair and eye color could be seen as promoting ageism, sexism, and the general perception that a woman's beauty is her most important feature (10). Women who are unable to achieve Barbie-esque characteristics may feel subordinate in a society that values the Barbie doll image.

The physique of the Ken doll stirred up further controversy about the anatomy of mature dolls designed for children. Debate centered

around how to represent Ken's penis, if he was even to be given one. In her book *Barbie's Queer Accessories*, Erica Rand explains that the "modest bump" Ken prototype sent off for production in Japan during 1961 was reconceptualized when a supervising engineer advised Mattel that omitting any hint of Ken's genitalia would lower production costs by 1.5 cents per doll (42). After considerable debate, Ken was neutered. Children still felt that he was an acceptable escort for Barbie, and the assumption that his lack of genitalia would be more disturbing than the absence of Barbie's vagina turned out to be the preoccupation of adults rather than the concern of young children (44–45).

Barbie's family name is Roberts and her middle name is Millicent, and Ken's family name is Carson. The dolls were named after Ruth Handler's children, Barbara and Ken, and Mattel's advertising agency, Carson/Roberts (Rand 49). Barbie's parents are named George (an engineer) and Margaret (a housewife), but reference to these figures is absent outside of Barbie novels that were published during the 1960s. In these novels, Barbie is portrayed as a high school student whose family lives in a small town called Willows. Her parents were never made into plastic form, and Mattel does not often admit to their conceptualization of parental figures for Barbie (Jones 99–100). Barbie has eight family members, including five younger sisters, two cousins, and a younger brother named Todd. The creation of Barbie's family without parental figures (aside from the obscure and outdated reference to George and Margaret) situates Barbie in a position to give guidance to younger siblings and extended family but provides no mentors for Barbie herself (98).

In all, Barbie has sixty-three "friends" who represent a variety of ethnic groups and identities. None of these characters ever became more popular than Barbie, and they were basically designed to meet consumer demands for a network of friends and increase potential fantasy scenarios. Barbie's classic Caucasian features, such as round eyes, small nose, and petite frame, remain constant even in alternative versions of the doll. This could be understood as the homogenization of aesthetic features associated with different ethnic groups, the same way the female physique is standardized with Barbie.

Despite the unrealistic physical characteristics attributed to Barbie (her measurements have been estimated by author Anna Quindlan in *The Barbie Chronicles* at 40-18-32 [119]), she remains a commodity

with remarkable potential to represent whichever identity the consumer imagines. The transformations that the Mattel Barbie doll has undergone in Merida will be discussed by looking at the materialization of cultural symbols in local versions of the doll, which contradict some of the original meanings associated with this product. In this context, the generic use of the term “Barbie” to refer to adult female dolls of any kind (even when they are made from wire or *papier mache* and bear little resemblance to the Mattel Barbie doll) draws attention to the possibility for transnational brands to penetrate local systems of meaning without carrying their original significance. A general description of Yucatec culture and identity leads into a discussion about the position of Barbie as a cultural icon.

Merida: The Capital City of the State of Yucatan, Mexico

Merida was founded by Francisco de Montejo in 1542 as part of the Spanish Colonial project and today has approximately 700,000 residents. It is the largest city in the Yucatan peninsula and plays a leading role in the reception of Euro-American products and cultural traits, which are sometimes modified to become more readily transmissible within local cultural contexts (Redfield 20–21). Historically, imported products that arrived at the port of Progreso, located twenty-two miles north of Merida along the Gulf coast of Mexico, were either approved or rejected once they reached Merida, and the city has been viewed as a locus for social change and a source of “progress” in Yucatan. Commodities that were well received in Merida had added prestige value once they reached other parts of Yucatan.

Local resources include *maize* (corn), beans, cattle, hogs, sugar, bananas, tobacco, cocoa, and mangos, as well as gold, copper, lead, petroleum, salt, sulphur, and especially silver (Ryan et al. 398). During the early 1900s, it was said that the export of *beniquen*—the sisal fiber extracted from the *agave* plant to make twine, bags, fabric, and hammocks—determined Merida’s position in the worldwide economy, while the production of *maize* characterized the local economy (6–7). In recent decades, tourism has become a pillar of the Yucatec economy, with Cancun and Cozumel located along the eastern Caribbean coast in the neighboring state of Quintanaroo. In terms of domestic industry,

lower income families engage in weaving, sewing, and cooking as a supplemental source of income.

The people of Yucatan consider themselves to be *Yucateco* (male) or *Yucateca* (female), and are further distinguished as being either *Maya* or *Mestizo/a*. The term *Mestizo/a* is used to refer to people of mixed descent, with both Spanish and Maya heritage. Some of the central features of cultural identity in Yucatan, as identified by the Yucatec people themselves, include regional dance, traditional clothing, and woven textiles. Maya crafts are consumed in great quantity by tourists and can be purchased at the shops and stands that line the downtown streets of Merida. Handwritten signs that read *broken English spoken perfectly* hang nostalgically outside small craft shops to capture the attention of passing tourists. In recent years, these signs have been mass-produced in bright blue plastic with sharp yellow print to entice *touristas* into the more commercialized Maya world of multicolored textiles, hammocks, pottery, carvings, traditional sandals, Mexican silver, hair bands, and postcards of the ancient Maya ruins.

Despite the widespread availability of Western commodities in Merida, locally produced items dominate the market because they are more reasonably priced. American products are at least twice as expensive, while imitation versions of brand name products are affordable but usually poor quality. The status associated with Western commodities is evidenced by the use of English words to advertise local brands such as *USA* brand nail polish, *Bimbo* bread, *Pure Baby Powcley* talcum powder, *Renova* makeup (similar in presentation to Revlon), or *Birbie* dolls. These English-sounding titles channel the same trust that is connected with American brands to local products. Constance Classen noted this phenomenon in her study of domestic products in Argentina (188), and the same marketing strategy was recorded in Japan with even greater frequency (Tobin 1–38).

Aesthetics as Cultural Reflection

To understand the transformation that transnational images undergo in Yucatan, it is worth exploring the aesthetic dimension as a source for the reconfiguration of images to make them aesthetically acceptable and culturally appropriate (Douglas 93). Deeply ingrained in the psyche of both men and women, make-up constitutes a basic

component of female identity in Merida. People explain that the use of heavy make-up mimics the brilliant cosmetic colors used by female dancers during cultural performances. Bright blue eye shadow with false lashes and sharp red or hot pink lipstick are popular combinations that have been passed down through generations of women. It seems that women prefer never to be seen without make-up, and that cosmetics constitute an essential aspect of femininity. Although this may be the case for many women who rely on make-up elsewhere in the world, the situation in Merida is pronounced. The popularity of *tatuajes de belleza* (beauty tattoos) provides a glimpse into the extent to which women have internalized make-up as being a natural aspect of their appearance. *Tatuajes de belleza* are permanent facial tattoos of eyeliner, lipstick, and eyebrow contours that have gained popularity in the past ten years. Rose or café colored lips with deep blue eyeliner are the most popular color combinations for facial tattoos. One woman explained that *beauty tattoos* are a means of always being made up, since she prefers never to be seen without make-up (“*Los tatuajes de belleza son una forma de estar siempre maquillada, porque prefiero que nadie me vea sin maquillaje*”). Because women who have *tatuajes de belleza* also apply additional make-up, it is difficult to determine if women are simply wearing make-up or if they have tattoos underneath as well. Both men and women suggest that tattoos that are well done look “natural,” or the same as make-up. This idea that make-up can look *natural* (whether it is applied or tattooed) suggests that cosmetic use has been naturalized, or established as an inherent aspect of a woman’s identity. Indeed, the social stigma surrounding body tattooing does not apply to *tatuajes de belleza*, which are considered attractive and socially acceptable. *Beauty tattoos* are understood in utilitarian terms to make women appear more beautiful, whereas body tattoos are seen as unnecessary and somehow deviant (as they have sometimes been perceived in the United States and Canada).

The application of local cosmetic principles to Barbie is a mechanism used to recontextualize her image in Mexican terms. At a factory in Mexico City where imitation hard plastic dolls are produced (and sold for about five pesos apiece, or fifty cents US) the color of Barbie’s hair is switched from blonde to brown, and startling blue eye shadow is applied to render her image local. In Mexico, the fascination with blonde hair and blue eyes is pronounced, and it has been suggested that people use blue eye make-up to create the impression that they actually have light eyes. This adoration of pale skin and light

eyes fits in nicely with the classic image of Barbie and could be a reflection of how popular Euro-American aesthetic qualities have been internalized in some respects. Another example involves the growing importance placed on being thin, which may be associated with the idea that Barbie represents a *mujer perfecta* (a perfect woman). However, the continuing use of the terms *gorda* and *gordita* (fat or fatty) to refer affectionately to friends and family suggests that the slender female ideal has not traditionally characterized Yucatec culture. *Mestiza* Barbies are designed slightly shorter than Mattel Barbie dolls and are considered a more accurate representation of the female body type in Yucatan.

Locally produced versions of Barbie are less expensive than Mattel Barbie dolls, and the former are sold for an average price of 25–100 pesos (\$3–\$10 US), whereas Mattel dolls are priced between 200 and 600 pesos (\$20–\$60 US). Some of the prepackaged imitation versions available are called: Betina (28 pesos), Monique (24 pesos), Nina (30 pesos), Erika (20 pesos), Tatiana (30 pesos), and Birbie (28 pesos). Hard, plastic, no-name brand versions of Barbie produced in the Mexican factory are packaged in clear plastic bags and sold without clothing. The identity of undressed dolls is ambiguous compared to Mattel Barbie dolls, whose personas are designated at the time of production when they are adorned with costume. As will be seen presently, the local production of culturally appropriate clothing for undressed dolls is one of the means through which Barbie has been redesigned as a culturally meaningful icon.

Barbie as a Family Figure

In exploring how gender roles and family life relate to the identity bestowed on Barbie in Merida, it becomes obvious that consumers are using local standards as the basis for her character, rather than the identity she was assigned by Mattel. During social play, children often situate Barbie in an extended network of family and friends instead of enacting her role as a liberated career woman. On one occasion, two young girls aged seven and four arranged their collection of twenty-five dolls into a family and explained that “*la familia*” was their favorite game. Mothers said that Barbie play scenarios are a reflection of a young girl’s fantasy about being an adult woman and mother, since

young girls always want to be “like” their mothers (“*Las Barbies representan a las mamás y cuando eres niña siempre quieres estar ‘como’ tu mamá*”).

The family is central to personal and social identity in Merida. Children usually continue living with their parents until they marry, even if that is not until later in life. This contrasts with the situation in the United States and Canada, where priority is placed on independence and children are likely to leave home once they reach eighteen, if not before. Studies of Mexican identity reveal the importance of the family for emotional and economic well being, and it has been said that “Cohesive families aid their members in both emotional and economic terms, as they provide an added sense of security through nepotism and the degree of care extended to family members” (Turner 133).

Gender roles are quite clearly defined, and women have internalized their responsibility to cook for the family, keep the house clean, and do the laundry. The maternal position of a girlfriend or wife is suggested by the caregiving role that she assumes in intimate relationships, taking on the responsibilities that were once provided by a man’s mother. One young man said that women know that these are their responsibilities because that is the way of their culture (“*la mujer sabe que es su responsabilidad porque así es la cultura de nosotros*”). On the other hand, feminists construe stringent gender identities as “*injusto*” (unjust), and people admit that gender roles are becoming slightly more fluid, although women do not often contest traditional female responsibilities. The enactment of household gender roles with Barbie is not uncommon, where she serves dinner to Ken and her younger sisters Stacy and Kelly, who are imagined to be her husband and children. After dinner, Barbie clears the table and typically summons her daughters for help washing the dishes while Ken relaxes (“*Vamos hijas, vamos a lavar los platos y el papá va a descansar*”). When children enact family vacations (with at least nine children piled into a Mattel camping vehicle), they drive off with Ken behind the wheel and Barbie monitoring the children. In preparing for the road trip, it is Barbie who does the laundry, packs suitcases, and dresses the children. She also prepares the picnic basket and ensures that the house is tidy before leaving.

Generally, Barbie and Ken fit in with Mexican gender roles and family life quite nicely. Barbie dotes on Ken the same way that women

serve their boyfriends and husbands at home or in social settings. Of course, with the spread of popular media images from the United States, notions about liberation are reaching Mexico and women are beginning to question the authority of men and embracing their right to express themselves. Even though the imagination of Barbie as a maternal figure appears to be the most common persona she is attributed, on occasion Barbie provides an outlet for girls to explore shifting gender roles by imagining Ken as a *mandilon*, a man who lacks strength of character with the woman he loves and lets her control him completely. This contrasts with the traditional image of the *macho Mexicano*, a man who is domineering and often unfaithful to his spouse. Whenever a man does something not traditionally deemed appropriate male behavior (e.g., involving food, cleaning, child care, or overt affection in some cases), others tease him by calling him a *mandilon*—an apron, associated with women's work. Most women consider domestic work to be their responsibility and tease men who express any interest in becoming involved in this sphere. (On this complex, see Hoodfar 166–69).

In the United States and Canada, Ken could be understood as an accessory to Barbie, and his role as a dominant male is downplayed. He was created to take Barbie out if she so desires, but he has never been an essential element in the formation of her own identity. Furthermore, he never questions her desire to pursue a career outside of the home (Shapiro 123). In Merida, Barbie is often situated inside the home, performing traditional female responsibilities rather than being conceptualized as a career woman. Ken is considered to be “*my macho*,” and his relationship to Barbie is not always understood in monogamous terms—related to the fact that the number of Barbie dolls in a collection outweighs the number of Ken dolls. During games, children often enact the typical gender relations they witness, and Barbie frequently complains to her girlfriends about possessive Ken who stops her from participating in social activities because of his jealousy. When boys are present during Barbie play, they insist on the superiority of their action figures to Ken, and explain that girls prefer to use their *Maxtil* or *Actionman* dolls as the boyfriend of Barbie because they are stronger and more *macho* (“*A las niñas les gusta jugar con los muñecos activos porque son más fuertes que el Ken, más machos*”). Often shy in the presence of boys, young girls agree with this assertion, but they do not appear to prefer these *macho* dolls when boys are not around.

Overall, the way Barbie is understood in Merida reflects the expectations that female youth have about their future role in family life as defined through gender role traditions. In the United States and Canada, Barbie is associated with female empowerment, and her mission (as stated on the Barbie.com Web site) is explicitly to “engage, enchant and empower girls.” In contrast, the pronounced family identity of Barbie in Merida represents an inversion of the empowerment ideal, wherein Barbie is often understood as a maternal figure rather than as a career woman.

Quince Años Barbie

From a local perspective, the most significant appropriation of Barbie in Yucatan involves the representation of the *quince años* ceremony, the fifteenth birthday celebration. Locally produced *quince años* Barbie dolls are by far the most popular dolls in Yucatan because they capitalize on the desire girls have to act out their future as teenagers and Mexican women. The *quince años* ceremony is a rite of passage that marks a turning point in the life of an adolescent girl, after which she is officially permitted to wear make-up and become engaged. The ceremony is equally if not more important for parents to signify the introduction of their daughter into society as a woman. The commemoration of the fifteenth birthday is a tradition that dates back to the ancient Maya civilization. For young men, the fifteenth birthday marked their becoming warriors, and they received a sword and a shield to participate in battle. At this time, fifteen-year-old girls were expected to take on the commitments and responsibilities of motherhood and were recognized as a vital force in the community. Even though the *quince años* forms an important part of local identity, it is a hybrid cultural form that draws structural aspects and ritual symbols from European sources. For example, the celebration involves the use of typical Catholic wedding attire, an ornate wedding-style cake, the performance of a waltz, and a religious ceremony.

The evening begins with a mass where the young girl is blessed for her future endeavors as a woman. Afterwards, a dinner and fiesta take place in a rented hall, usually with live entertainment (often a Mexican *Mariachi* band) and a disc jockey who plays popular dance tunes. People are seated at assigned tables that have been strategically placed

around the dance floor, where the *quinceñera* takes center stage to ceremonially waltz with her father. When the waltz is finished, the hall fills with the sound of pop music, and people of all ages join the dance floor. About an hour later, when the *Mariachi* band begins to play, people sit down at their tables to enjoy bottles of vodka and whiskey that have been placed there with plates of *bocadillos*, snacks similar to *bors d'ouvres*. The consumption of imported alcohol signifies the special nature of the occasion, and the performance of the waltz followed by the *Mariachi* band exemplifies the combination of European and local images that characterize the event.

When a girl turns fifteen, after having fantasized about it for years, Barbie plays a key role in the ceremony. On this day, the *quinceñera* actually *becomes* her dream Barbie, and a *quince años* Barbie doll is displayed on top of her birthday cake wearing a miniature version of the *quinceñera's* wedding style dress. It is not uncommon for girls to have a say in the design of their dress and to have the seamstress produce a miniature replica for Barbie. The *quince años* Barbie represents a girl who *has passed* into womanhood, and at this point the *quinceñera*, now a woman, reconceptualizes Barbie as an ornament or collector's item rather than a toy. The formative European elements of the *quince años* ceremony (the religious ritual, waltz, and formal clothing) are embodied in this representation of Barbie, making her a culturally layered image that combines multiple transnational elements to generate a locally and personally meaningful symbol.

Jarana Barbie

Another locally constructed persona for Barbie involves her ability to represent regional identity through her outfit. Dance is an important aspect of Mexican culture, and Barbie dolls are used as a vehicle for the display of regional clothing. Handmade dresses modeled after the costumes from different regions are used to bestow an identity onto Barbie that reflects the Mexican identity embodied in dance. Schoolteachers use Barbie dolls during history lessons to demonstrate the clothing designs associated with particular regions of Mexico.

Jarana dance is the Yucatec version of a Latin American folk dance descended from the *iota* dance and its cousins from Spain (Redfield 270–75). Traditionally, the performance of *jarana* honored a patron

saint at *fiestas*, but it is now used to render any occasion festive. Although the origins of this dance appear to be specifically European, local people suggest that *jarana* represents a fusion between Spanish and Maya traits. One elderly *Mestiza* woman explained her understanding of *jarana* dance and suggested that the upper body movements (arms) represent Spanish dance techniques, while the complex leg movements (performed with white tap shoes) are derived from traditional Maya dance. Whatever the truth of this genealogy, the local conceptualization of *jarana* dance as a hybrid cultural form is another example of creolization whereby imported performances or cultural symbols have been reconceptualized by situating them within local customs and aesthetic forms.

The performance of *jarana* dance invites male and female self-display and has the power to bring excitement and charm to any atmosphere (Redfield 274). Participants raise their hands above their heads, elbows bent, and perform intricate tap routines, keeping their feet close to the ground. Every so often, dancers hop slightly, kicking one leg up and out in front of their bodies. Men twirl the women around the floor and the couple separates periodically to perform the detailed foot work. It is customary for regional folk dances involving colorful costumes to take place during religious festivals to facilitate the shift from mundane life into a spiritual state (Ryan et al. 2006).

Authentic regional dance dresses are variable, and the choreography from different states across Mexico are distinctive as well. At a well-known folkloric dance school in Merida, *El Arte Mexicano*, Barbie plays a key role in the study of regional variations. Every three months, students learn the choreography associated with a particular state and are required to hand in a research paper documenting the history of that region. For their final exam, students perform the dance and present handmade miniature versions of their costumes displayed on Barbie and Ken dolls. Children meticulously sew regional outfits and paste them onto locally produced Barbie dolls with the hope that someday they will have an impressive collection of costumes from the thirty-two states of Mexico.

Many Yucatec women collect regionally dressed Barbie dolls, and this is one instance where people prefer to use authentic Mattel Barbies rather than locally produced dolls. Perhaps linking the pride associated with regional dance to the prestige of American products accentuates the value of the collection. This could be seen as a form of syncretism where the combination of a local symbol (the *jarana* dress) with a

powerful foreign image (Barbie) generates a greater value than either of these images possesses independently. (For further discussion, see Howes 9, Comaroff 19–38.)

Identity, Symbolism, and Maya Textiles

The expression of Maya identity through textile production has been used to reconfigure Barbie as an indigenous image. For the Maya, community and lineage identity are expressed through particular patterns that decorate their traditional dress, a *huipil* (Alfred A. Knopf Publishing 94–104). The creation of miniature *huipiles* for Barbie is a good example of indigenization whereby an American product has been redesigned to represent local symbols (see Figure 2). In this way, the Maya generate an identity for Barbie using the same symbolic mechanisms that act as the basis for their own identity: traditional clothing. Traditionally dressed Barbies are the type sought by collectors, both local and foreign.

The transformation that traditional Maya weaving patterns have undergone for tourist consumption is controversial, and designs that distinguish group affiliation have been altered to suit the taste of foreigners who favor blue and purple instead of the classic red and orange combinations preferred by the Maya (Vigesaa and McKay). In

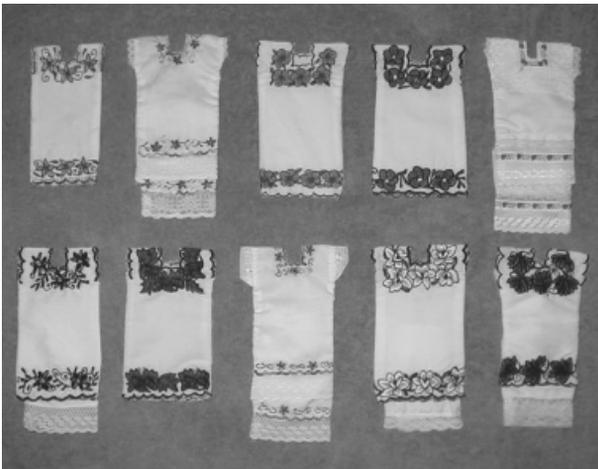


FIGURE 2: Miniature Yucatec Maya huipiles for Barbie.

some cases, foreign influences have been incorporated into regional designs to create culturally hybrid textile forms that draw attention to the impact that foreign images have on traditional culture. Ironically, traditional textile production techniques constitute an important aspect of the market value for “things primitive” in the United States, yet they have been replaced by labor-intensive technology to meet increased market demands (Hendrickson 106). In her article “Selling Guatemala,” Carol Hendrickson points out that “Maya” products described as having been produced in “tiny” villages were actually produced in Guatemalan cities of over 40,000 residents (107). The use of words such as jungle, rain forest, handwoven, tradition, or traditional generate inaccurate ideas about the “primitive Mayan technology” used by women in the highlands of the Guatemalan rain forest to produce their crafts (107–08, 112–13). Misleading notions about the “authentic” quality of Maya textiles organize consumer perceptions around misrepresentations that have been designed to generate sales and profit, without respecting genuine Maya weaving traditions. The production of novelty items such as hair bands, placemats, and Barbie dresses could also be viewed in this light. However, local perspectives highlight the positive side of tourism associated with the generation of income for indigenous families who represent the poorest segment of Yucatec society. The movement of creolized versions of Barbie in the global economy is also noteworthy. For example, when American tourists purchase Maya clothing for Barbie and then return home to the United States with these images, they reintroduce Barbie into her culture of origin—America, where the German *Lilli* doll was initially creolized to become the Mattel Barbie doll. Maya citizens express a great deal of pride in the fact that their traditional clothing is desirable to foreigners, because once again, weaving is central to their sense of identity. In the outdoor marketplace, a Maya woman explained that of all the crafts she produces, Barbie dresses are her favorite. She enjoys creating the beautiful dresses and is proud to participate in the American market by selling a popular product that has been reconceptualized to reflect *Mestiza* and Maya identity.

Conclusion

The power of consumers to express their identity by reformulating foreign commodities so that they fit in with local practices and systems

of meaning is impressive. In Merida, Barbie has been appropriated and refashioned to reflect local aesthetics (make-up, clothing, physical form, and packaging), the *quince años* ceremony (an important aspect of female adolescent identity), traditional values (regional dance), and Maya clothing (*huipiles*). As in the United States and Canada, the identity of Barbie is defined through clothing, although access to locally produced dolls that are undressed provides consumers with added creative freedom to generate novel identities for Barbie. The enactment of Mexican gender identity through Barbie highlights her position in family life compared to the emphasis placed on her career and social life in her Euro-American incarnation.

This study illustrates that when products are displaced from their culture of production, they have the potential to take on characteristics associated with the new atmosphere in which they are situated through processes of consumption. The eventual reproduction of Barbie dolls in Mexico City to make them economically accessible and aesthetically appropriate has been an important element in transforming her status from a foreign commodity into a local cultural icon. It is significant that it was the processes of *consumption* that generated these locally meaningful dolls and situated the image of Barbie inside Mexican relations of production. Overall, the creolization of Barbie dolls in this context demonstrates the power of consumer agency to contain global images within local systems of meaning.

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