

Societies with multiple genders: Reflections from ethnography

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Abstract

The ethno-cartography of sexual diversity in different societies around the world shows that there is an incredible variety of scenarios where transgenderism, sexuality among people of the same sex, or the institutionalization of a “third gender” is socially integrated and accepted. From an anthropology point of view societies with three or multiple genders are discussed as social and individual constructions. This paper addresses two concrete case studies of the existence of “third genders”, institutionalized in two ethnic groups in México: the Zapotecs of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and the Rarámuris from the Tarahumara ethnicity.

Keywords: Third Gender, Ethnic Group, Zapotecs, Rarámuris, Mexico.

1. Ethnicity and sexual diversity / gender

The study of the “other” has been rewarding and clarifying in the development of western science by questioning the validity of certain categories and theoretical postulates that were considered universal. Facing critics which consider that the anthropological works about the “other” are an “ethnographic underworld”, this research aims to highlight the synchronicity between these societies and the West (Campbell *et al.* 1999; Harris 1979; Martín 2007; Mead 2006; Moore 1999; Reeves 1981).

In recent years, the Sociology of Gender investigated the variability of cultures in terms of social and symbolic constructions of different socio-sexual categories. In 1972, the sexologists John Money and Anke Ehrhardt popularized the idea that sex and gender are separate categories. Sex refers to physical attributes and is determined by anatomy and physiology, while gender is a psychological transformation of the self, the internal conviction that one is male or female (gender identity), and the behavioral expression of said conviction. The feminists of the second wave of the seventies, meanwhile, also argued that sex is different from gender. However, feminist definitions of sex and gender did not address the possibility that cognitive and behavioral differences could derive from sexual differences. The proposal of Anne Fausto Exterling questions this model (Fausto-Exterling 2006). Works like those of the Nigerian anthropologist Oyewumi Oyeronke question sex-genderism as a cultural universality. This anthropologist affirms that among the Oyo-Yoruba of western Nigeria, gender has not been the main social organizer or creator of hierarchies amongst individuals, since age and belonging to a particular lineage were more relevant. All this is reflected in the Yoruba language where there are no gender marks (Oyewumi 1997).

Anthropological studies completed to date show that gender is a social construction in a very specific context. In this sense, one of the most paradigmatic realities are societies with multiple genders (Bolin 2003). Indeed, nowadays there are societies with multiple genders, such as the Indonesian Bugis who recognize the existence of five genders:

man (*oroané*), woman (*makkunrai*), man that behaves as a woman (*calabai*), woman that behaves as a man (*caalai*) and mixed and non-permanent identities (*bissu*). The Chukchi people, from Siberia, recognize the existence of seven genders: masculine, feminine, three ulterior genders for biological men and two other genders for biological women (Cucchiari, in Cosentino 2013), even though most frequent are societies with three genders¹.

Patricia Alberts and Evelyn Blackwood (López 2005) discovered that the Crow Nation had male shamans that dressed as women and performed sexual favors to warriors. Something similar has been detected in the following cultures: Mohave, Zuni, Hopo, Navajo, Yuman (or Quechan), Crow, Yokuts, Tohono O’odham (previously known as Papago), Cheyenne, Winnwbago (or Ho-Chunk), Omaha, Ojibwe, Cocopah, Apache, Miami, Yurok and Piegan of North America (Webster and Newton, in Miano 2003, 192). In these Native American cultures “diversity” was important, as shown in the colonial chronicles of the 15th and 17th century. “Third genders” exist in many contemporary societies: such as the Khanith of Oman (Wikan, in Nieto 2003, 243), the Hijras from India (Nanda, in Nieto 2003, 264) the Bakla from Philippines (Tan, in Nieto 2003, 337), the We’wha among the North American Zuñi (Nieto 2003, 21), the Hawaiian Māhū, the Sarombay of Madagascar (Malagasy republic), or the Omeguid, from the ethnic group *Kuna* in Panamá (Nieto 2003). Ethnographers found that lesbian practices were institutionalized in many North American pre-Columbian societies (López 2005).

A society's sexual system corresponds to the degree of institutionalization of the shared sexual culture of a population and represents the deployment of the *erotocentric* vision of each culture (Bolin 2009, Rubin 1996), so that ethnology is not exempt from this rule. In the western tradition, biological asymmetry has been used to construct the Western system of *cisgenerity* (Schilt *et al.* 2009) that excludes and generates dissonances in people called transgender. However, biologists such as Anne Fausto Exterling (2006) and Javier Cabral (2006) (in Gavilán 2016) argue that sexual identities, from the biological point of view, correspond more to a continuum or gradual scale of stages, in relation to the type of chromosomes, hormones, gonads and genital devices, than to bi-

¹ Multiple sexes are also called “third gender” (Rae *et al.* 2015).

nary immanent, essentialist and excluding patterns. For this reason, the anthropology of gender and the anthropology of sexuality have been proposed to investigate the variability of socio-sexual orders in different cultures, to analyze them as “ethnophilosophical schools” in order to propose a new scientific epistemology that overcomes the hegemonic biomedical discourse in the West.

This paper investigates two exceptional societies. On one side, the Zapotecs who live in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Mexico (America), where “third genders” are institutionalized and on the other side the Rarámuris who live in the Tarahumara ethnicity in Mexico, where the *nawiki* exist, a term referring to homosexual effeminate men and homosexual masculinized women, accepted and integrated in the Rarámuri society (Pérez 2001).

These communities represent two good research areas to observe how life develops in a population where the “sexual culture” differs from the dominant Western culture.

2. Methodological considerations

From the constructivist perspective «society is a human product and man a social product» (Berger *et al.* 1979, 64). The research method chosen is the case study as focal point. For this, two paradigmatic cases were selected: the Zapotec indigenous people who live in the Mexican Isthmus of Tehuantepec and the Rarámuri people of the Tarahumara mountain range of Mexico, both being clear examples of an unquestionable “social fact”: the existence of transbinary identities in their sociosexual order. This text is based on several qualitative research studies since 2005 and financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of the Government of Spain, the Ministry of Science and Technology; Ministry of Education and Science; The Regional Government of Galicia, 2007; The Caixanova Bank, the University of Vigo and the University of La Coruña². The field work in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec was carried out in several peri-

² The author has directed several qualitative research studies approved in a competitive setting from which the text presented in this article is extracted. These are: “Creation of the Center for Studies in Gender, Sexuality and Ethnicity”, AECID, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of the Government of Spain, 2012 and 2011; “Indigenous sexual cultures in Mexico”, AECID, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of Spain, José Castillejo Program, Ministry of Science and Technology of the Government

ods: 2011-2012; 2008-2009 and 2005-2007. Places such as Juchitán, San Blas Atempa, Tehuantepec and Xadani, among others, were visited. Many informal interviews and 18 formal interviews were made with the Zapotecs, mainly with prominent people in the social, political, cultural, intellectual or artistic area. In addition, there were three focal groups: women in intellectual jobs and artists; a group of professional men and a group of *muxes* people of higher education, with professional jobs and belonging to the middle class. The field work in the Sierra Tarahumara was carried out during several research trips (2007 and 2008) in the communities of Creel, Guachochi and Batopilas, among others. An exhaustive repertoire was compiled collecting photographs and videos of everyday life.

It is important to point out that the object of this study are the stories about the existence of the multiplicity of gender / generic identities, in order to analyze the stereotypical ideological discourses and the symbolic social representations associated with this collectively elaborated and shared social phenomenon (Ibáñez 1986). Therefore, this investigation does not aim to verify or analyze the real praxis of the persons, but the perception and the sense that they give to those facts, it is important to know what they say (their imagined reality) in order to identify the hegemonic story and its ideological dimension. The construction of these typical stories filtered through analysis and critical knowledge form the basis of our argumentation. The fieldwork was carried out in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca and in the Tarahumara mountain range, where interviews were carried out with residents of different communities. The people interviewed were selected referrals by some acquaintances or interviewees to others, or sometimes by spontaneous approach in the street. In the individual and collective interviews, vari-

of Spain, 2009; "Ethnicity and analogical identities: elaboration of didactic materials", Ministry of Education and Science, 2008; "Are there matriarchal societies? Learning from gender equality between two ethnic groups: the bijagós (Guinea Bissau) and the Zapotecas (Mexico)", Ministry of Education and Science, 2008-2009; "Educating for equality from sexual anthropology: Zapotecas, Bijagós and other ethnic groups", Xunta de Galicia, 2007; "Reflections on gender equality in different ethnic groups of the world: elaboration of teaching materials Caixanova Chair of Feminist Studies", University of Vigo, 2007; "Are there matriarchal societies? Learning from gender equality between two ethnic groups: the Bijagós (Guinea Bissau) and the Zapotecas (Mexico)", University of La Coruña, 2006-2007; "Woman and ethnic mobilization in the matriarchal community of Juchitán, Oaxaca, Mexico", Caixanova Chair of Feminist Studies-University of Vigo, 2005; "Women and ethnic mobilization in the matriarchal community of Juchitán, Oaxaca, Mexico (sej2004-0411-e)", Ministry of Education and Science, 2005-2007.

ous aspects were treated: socio-sexual order, identity, social politics, life changes and contradictory situations. For this empirical approach, not only technical knowledge but also a large amount of empathy is required to analyze the meaning and understand human behaviour. Therefore, in parallel, during the fieldwork the technique of “participant observation” was used, attending parties, informal meetings, talks with academics and experts, traditional ceremonies etc. With these additional sources, it was possible to complement the stories and perceptions of the interviewees.

	<i>Social Area</i>	<i>Political Area</i>	<i>Cultural Area</i>
<i>Women</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 3 interviews with woman Rarámuri - Interview with a retired zapotec social leader - Interview with a traditional zapotec midwife - Interview with a zapotec gender specialist - Interview with a zapotec associative leader - Interview with a zapotec social leader - Interview with a zapotec religious leader 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2 interviews with zapotec politicians - Interview with a former municipal and political zapotec leader - Interview with a municipal zapotec counselor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interview with a zapotec painter - Interview with a zapotec cultural manager - Interview with a zapotec woman writer - Focus group with intellectual and artist women
<i>Men</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interview with a gender specialist working in the Rarámuri area - Interview with a Rarámuri man - Interview with an elder Rarámuri - Interview with a Zapotec technician - Interview with an elderly Zapotec man - Focus group with Zapotec professional men 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interview with a Rarámuri political leader (Siríame) 	
<i>Muxe's and Nguiu</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1 interview with an elder muxe - 21 interviews with other muxes - 3 interviews with muxes in focus groups - 3 interviews with nguui 		

Table 1. Interviews with focus groups among the Rarámuris and Zapotecs

3. Sexual diversity in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Mexico)

The Isthmus, the narrowest area in North America, is a region in the Mexican state of Oaxaca. In its tropical climate, hot and humid, the forests and most important tropical rainforests in Mexico survive. The population of one million inhabitants consists of five cultural groups, of which 100,000 persons are Zapotecs (Barabás *et al.* 2004; Campbell 1993; Careaga 2004; Cobarrubias 1980; De la Cruz 2007; Reina 1997). The Zapotecs refer to themselves as *binnizá* (“people that come from the clouds”).

The organizational basis of the Zapotecs is the matrifocal family, where the main reference is the “mother”. The woman is the one who sells products from house to house, in the market or traveling abroad and it is her who manages the family economy (Miano 2002; Gómez Suárez 2010; Gómez Suárez 2011). Prestige is based on the one who “gives the most”, not the one who “has the most”.

In this region, sources from the 16th century mention the presence of homosexuals³. The socio-sexual order in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec accepts the multiplicity of genders. Currently, homoeroticism, together with transgenderism, is normalized as a socially permitted and accepted “third gender”. It is called “third” (in the meaning of “other” - since in some societies the number of admitted genres can reach up to seven) to underline its contrast to the binary model and to biological dimorphism. Tole and Morgan (in Bolin 2009) criticize the use of the category “third gender” because it hides the diversity of social gender identities that exist in different societies. In this text, this approach is supported. The *muxes* are a natural and normal part of the generic composition of society and are valued, basically, due to their economic and cultural role (Bennholdt-Thomsen 1997, in Miano 2002, 17). The status of *muxe*⁴ is related to the strong division

³ According to the “*Vocabulario castellano zapoteco*” (Spanish-Zapotec Vocabulary), an anonymous text from the 16th century, the following terms exist in order to name sexual diversity: *nabeelchi* or *nageelachi* (not austere or vain man), *beniconnaa* or *benegonaa* (woman), *naguebenigonaa* or *nacalachicabennigoona* (effeminate man), *benigonaaguielachi* (masculinized woman), *beniricaalezaaniguio* or *beniriyotexichebenigonaa* (gay sodomite) and *benibiraaxe* or *benibixegonaa* (gay pretending to be a woman) (Guerrero Ochoa 1989, in Miano 2002, 16).

⁴ This “proliferation” of genders and sexes is well reflected in Juchitán, where there is an extensive vocabulary to grasp the diversity: *machos*, *pintada*, *hembra*, *buga*, *mayates*, *chichifo*, *loca*, *gay*, *travesti*, *varón*, *jotero*, *jotera*, *perra*, *reina*, *vestida*, *chica*, *puto*, *gay tapado*, *de closet*, *homosexual*, *muxe*, *mampo* and *machín* (Miano 2002, 16).

of social roles and to the situation of the woman in the family and in the community (Miano 2002; Gómez Suárez 2010; 2011). The definition of the term *muxe* that most closely approximates the observed reality is that elaborated by the anthropologist and activist Muxe Amaranta Gómez : «[...] *muxe* is a regional name for transgender people but with characteristics» sui generis «in relationship to a concrete sociocultural environment [...]» (Gómez Regalado 2016, 12). This figure can not be compared to the gay figure or the western homosexual⁵.

If the characteristics of the individuals self-identified as *muxe* are analyzed in terms of identity, status, role and *cathesis* (erotic-affective orientation), what distinguishes them is their gender condition more than their homoerotic practices. They self-define themselves as «[...] neither man nor woman, but all the contrary» or « [...] a female soul in a male body» (Gómez Suárez 2010, 34). They do not give up their masculine identity and assume their feminine identity, naturalizing their condition by “birth” or by God’s will, pointing out the pre-social character of their condition. Their role consists of «[...] knowing how to be a man and a woman at the same time and also how to be a better man and a better woman» (Miano 2002, 168).

From a Western perspective, we call transgenderism the enormous plasticity of the expressions of *muxeidad*. Indeed, there are *muxes* that maintain their identity and masculine aspect; others wear feminine make-up but maintain their virile appearance (“painted”). Other *muxes* are identified as “*travestis*” because they usually dress as women (Miano 2002, 154). However, in the last decades, some *muxes* have adopted a permanent feminine appearance, they are the “*vestidas*” (dressed): with feminine clothes, hairstyles, facial expressions, language, they are baptized with female names, go to the “ladies restroom” etc. «[...] they are playing how to be women» (Gómez Suárez 2010, 34).

⁵ As indicated by Gilbert Herdt (1994), when analyzing sex / gender systems of non-Western societies, it is important to distinguish between sexual orientation and transsexuality or third sex. In this sense, it is necessary to highlight the work of the researcher Luanna Barbosa who collects a testimony from a very significant *muxe*: «What is it that characterizes a *muxe*? What do you like “sticks” (penis euphemism)? No, he liked dolls when they were girls» (Barbosa 2015), where gender identity is emphasized over sexual orientation to define itself as *muxes*.

At a social role level, the *muxe* devotes himself to tasks identified as “feminine”: embroidery, doing the laundry, ornamentation, ceramics, headdresses with braids, make-up, prayers, traders, etc. *Muxes* are present in masculine spaces (tavern⁶, high culture, public management etc.) and in feminine spaces (market, parties, domestic environment, etc.). They have their own homo-sociability, their own subculture and their own cohabitation codes, something that is expressed by the organisation of two big annual strictly *muxe* festivals, called *Velas*.

Curiously, the homoerotic practices of men that have sexual relations with *muxes* (the so called “*mayates*”, “*machines*” or “*chichifos*”)⁷, do not determine that the sexual identity of these men can be catalogued as homosexual, because they are socially qualified as heterosexuals. However, the *muxe* is socially considered as homosexual and their eroticism is characterized by the absence of sexual desire for women or other *muxes*: «[...] We get turned on because we are men but we feel like women» (Gómez Suárez 2010, 34), but rather their lust is focused on “real” men, with the most valued being married men with children. They assume the receptor role in sex although there may be an inversion of “roles” during the sexual intercourse. The sexual practice focuses on penis based acts and fellatios: «[...] God disposes and he puts heat in different hollows, that is all». Generally, they live transitional affective-sexual relationships: «[...] men are for a while [...] not a partner, we just like sex» (Gómez Suárez 2010, 34), even though the relationship with the *muxe* is socially admitted, because a very strong libido is attributed to men and, as determined by tradition, the sexuality of women must be respected, this is why the *muxe* turns into a sexual outlet and an initiator in the sexuality of many teenagers, that sometimes they end up adopting. They call their partners “*marido*” (husband) but they also state that «[...] cohabitation kills love, it is boring to do the washing, ironing... because men are used to being served by women» (Islas

⁶ The taverns are masculine spaces where men gather to drink and listen to nostalgic love theme songs. They are places where the expressiveness and the emotive nature open up in an environment of solidarity and comradeship. It seem to comply with an emotional balance function in the masculine world, which normally is characterized by the scarce externalization of feelings and lack of communication on their intimacy, unlike the sociability forms in the feminine world.

⁷ The “*mayates*” are self-perceived men and socially perceived as heterosexuals with a girlfriend or wife but they have sexual intercourse with persons of the same sex for pleasure or interest. The “*machín*” is the manly, strong, dominant and aggressive heterosexual. The “*chichifo*” is a young man still undefined in his sexual preferences that lives at the expense of a homosexual person of older age (Miano 2002, 156).

2005), and sometimes these marriages are unilateral and exploitative, for example, when the “*marido*” (husband) (*mayate*) lives at the expense of his wife (*muxe*), although it can be also affectionate. There may be bonds where the “*mayate*” receives presents, economic incentives, is bought beers, etc., this is a way of “legitimizing” the sexual encounter for himself and the others. The “real men” defend their *muxe* and can have outbursts of jealousy if the *muxe* is flirting with others, in terms of “territory” and economic interests.

In terms of social class (well defined in Juchitán by the part of the city where they live), in popular classes there is a higher acceptance of the proliferation of all behaviours and identities, while in part the upper class adopts the ruling Western norms in a much more restrictive way. Many upper class individuals no longer consider themselves as *muxes* but gays, containing notions of sexual liberation, politicization of identity and openness to relationships with other masculine identities.

The *nguiu* adopt an identity, status and similar role to what was described in the typology of “mixed gender roles” (Bolin 2003) in that they do not intend to transform their gender or genitalia: «[...] I am a woman but I like sex with women, I do not like sex with men» (Gómez Suárez 2010, 33). The sex/gender remains unchangeable, but the behaviour of the one that assumes this gender includes attributes that are usually associated to the other gender, for example, in the work environment, they often carry out typically masculine jobs and often they do not like domestic work. In other words, they are some kind of “manly” women characterized by their independence, courage and certain aggressiveness. They act like men but do not deny their condition as women. It is possible to talk about an “alternative role” for women, rather than about a different institutionalized status. This role is not stigmatized negatively (contrary to the West): they are “respected” and not rejected. They recognize that social consideration is «[...] a conquered right and we do not need to wave the rainbow flag» (Gosling 2000). Nevertheless, the *nguiu* are less known publicly and socially less visible.

Concerning homoeroticism of the *nguiu*, they think that there is «[...] more love, more friendship, more affection» (Gómez Suárez 2010, 34) in the relationships between women than in heterosexual relationships or in those established between a man and a *muxe*. There are similarities with the typology described by Anne Bolín for the “mar-

riages between women”. The husband-women (*nguiu*) normally are so from childhood and are devoted to masculine tasks; instead, the wife-women have a temporary status (they may have had unions with men in the past or in the future), perform tasks associated to the feminine role and suffer more jokes from society than the *nguiu*. Just as someone is “born” *muxe*, someone is born *nguiu*. There can be no late realization or coming out. They believe that «[...] they are ashamed or afraid of repression. You are either lesbian, a man, a woman or *muxe*» (Gómez Suárez 2010, 32). Even though couples of women can hold the social positions in the traditional ceremonies, it is considered that in politics, the woman (*nguiu* or heterosexual) has not yet achieved complete integration. As in traditional anthropological research, where female sexual diversity has lacked the needed attention, in this research, the analysis of the *nguiu* has been more difficult than the study of the *muxe* due to their social invisibility. The aim is to address this deficit in the feminine sphere in future research.

4. Sexual diversity among the Rarámuris

The indigenous *Rarámuri* or *Tarahumara* settled 2,000 years ago in the state of Chihuahua, due to the Uto-Aztecan migrations towards the south. Currently, their population is around 86,000 persons. They⁸ have been recognized due to the strength of their runners, a result of the long tradition of races, typical games of this community and the celebrations of their traditional festivals. Festivals are very important for this community, they guarantee the social and communitarian reproduction, and are one of the spaces where they look for a partner. At Easter, in a very special celebration, they represent God and the Devil: the Pharisees (*juríosi*) and the Christians (*morosos*). Music feeds their *arewá* or strength and they must dance to avoid diseases and the ills of the under-

⁸ In the pre-Columbian period, the Rarámuri were semi-nomadic and lived in groups or disperse family clans along cultivable valleys. The leader of the group was a male or female chief. They did not know trade or money and were practicing bartering on a small scale (Pintado 2000). The first Spaniards entered the Tarahumara territory in 1589 looking for mines in the region of Chínipas. The missionaries related in their chronicles that Rarámuri men would get drunk at festivals and practice sexual promiscuity (in homosexual relations) (Pérez 2001).

world⁹ (Montemayor 1995; Perez 2001; Pintado 2000). The *danza del matachín* (traditional dance adapted by the missionaries), the *teswinadas* (festivals where *teswino*, the “sacred” drink of fermented corn, is drunk) based on *kórima* (collective work and mutual help), and the *Tutuburi* or *Dutuburi*, also called *Yúmame* or *Yúmari* (group dances, offerings, dances¹⁰ and tarahumaras chants), are some of the other most celebrated *Rarámuri* celebrations.

Despite the pride for their celebrations and sports, generally, the *Rarámuris* tend to renounce to their indigenous condition and use of their language when they study and leave the community. This is because of the inferior status that the indigenous world has in certain parts of the country and certain social spheres (Mendoza, in Gómez Suárez 2010).

“Riosi” is their god, also called *onorúame-eyerúame*, which is composed by a “masculine element” called *onorúame* and a “feminine element” called *eyerúame* (Martínez *et al.* 2002). In ancient times, they used to adore a single father-mother god, represented by the sun and the moon, they did not have idols or priests but they had male and female sorcerers and healing rituals. The sun and the moon are the *Rarámuris*’ ancestors and their deities. In some regions of the range, the sun is a woman: « [...] because she is the one that gives heat, she works all day long, and the moon is the man because he works during the night, getting up early to go to the land, wood etc.». They consider that God is everywhere: «Invisible but seeing all of us: rich, poor, thugs [...]» (Martínez *et al.* 2002, in Gómez Suárez 2010).

The *Rarámuris* have different healers, men and women, depending on the type of “work” that these do: the *owirúames* (plant healers), the *rimúame* or *rimúkame* (healers

⁹ They also celebrate the *awilachi* festivals, linked to the agricultural calendar, in the *nutema*, devoted to recently deceased relatives; they give them food for their long journey. They celebrate the festival of the *chuwé* when a deceased person is buried; they celebrate the *Rarájipari* or running games and the *napawí nochaza* where they celebrate together the work or *kórima*. Having a party, dancing and drinking *batari* (*tesgüino*) is an obligation, because their ancestors asked them to (Pérez 2001).

¹⁰ A myth of *Rarámuri* origin tells that before the existence of the range and the *Rarámuri* people, there only was a piece of land and the rest was water, there were no mountains, no corn or houses. In this little piece of land two *paskoleros* (dancers) appeared. God told them to dance and to stamp on the ground, with a rattle in their right hand and others on their ankles. They danced for days and nights. Water started to spring up until the mountains started to grow. This is why today we must keep dancing, so the land stays solid and it does not get flooded again (López, in Pintado 2000).

via the dreams), the *sipaame* (healers using peyote, or *jícuri* and the *bakánowi* or *bakánowa*) and the *sukurúame* (dangerous healers allied with “evil”) (Gómez Suárez 2010; Martínez *et al.* 2002).

For the *Rarámuri*, it is very important to take care of the *arewá*, the soul-strength, which is life giving. The man has three *arewá* and the woman¹¹ four. This is why she is stronger than men, giving birth and working hard¹² (Pintado 2000). The soul of someone can be lost, because he fell in love with a spirit (*orimaka* or firebird) from a swamp, a waterfall, a cenote or a landscape. The *rimúame* or *rimúkame* must find the soul through dreams and give it back to the person, to save him or her from illness and even death (Gómez Suárez 2010; Martínez *et al.* 2002).

The *Rarámuri* “sex/gender” system is characterized by the “male dominance” and the “flexibility of the affective-sexual relations”. In the past, the families arranged the unions while the spouses could not decide. The *seriates* advised man and woman and the procurers united the couples that could not be separated. It was not important if the woman was virgin. If any of them committed an infidelity, and she was a woman, she could be beaten or obliged to have sexual intercourses with an elderly man from the community; if the unfaithful was the man, he was beaten with *Chiwite* branches (soft-wood tree) (Gómez Suárez 2010).

This “patriarchal” model, reinforced by the “modernization” inflicted on this society (Ejido structure and patriarchal-type clerical positions)¹³, is based on proscriptions suffered by the female world: a woman cannot be an owner or be part of the *Ejido* of the

¹¹ As Martínez (2002) explains, there are no differences between the *Rarámuri* woman and the mixed woman because they “feel the same pain”, referring to birth (Gómez 2010).

¹² Another “origin myth” told by Martínez (2002) says the following: «In the beginning, when the world was created, there was only one man and one woman. Thus, as they were not used to burying the deceased, they would put their remains in a cave. Once, the man went to visit his wife, who died first. The man was very sad and cried because of the memories. He cried and saw a pigeon. A big pigeon that asked him why he was crying. He said: «I’m sad because my partner left, *onorúame* took her». The pigeon said: «I think that she is walking there, in the heights, in *Riwugachi*. Come with me, I’ll take you to visit her». Very soon, they arrived there, in the heights, and there was the wife, carrying water. They reunited and his wife told him, «Come in three days time and on the fourth day I will go with you, back to the earth». After three days, the husband left and on the fourth, he came back with his partner. This is why it’s said: «on the third day the man rises to the sky and on the fourth, the woman» (Martínez *et al.* 2002).

¹³ For Cesar Mendoza, director of the NGO ALCADECO, who works in the field of gender, the *Rarámuri* women lost influence due to the “Westernization” of their society: the *Ejido*, the political structures and the religious positions prioritized the power of men. (Gómez 2010).

land (only widows can), a woman cannot participate in assemblies, does not have the right to occupy a community position... If divorced, she must abandon the family house with her children, the unfaithful woman has more troubles than the unfaithful man, the polygamous woman can be mistreated by her partners and is not accepted in the community, they work harder than men, they do not receive special attentions during pregnancy, birth and post-birth (self-restraint of pain is very valued among the *Rarámuris*), they are married very young (12-13 years old) and single women are not respected (they may be harassed and “molested”); adults rape girls, 50% of them do not speak Spanish, having difficulties accessing family planning methods; homosexual women are more invisible than homosexual men and suffer from gender-based violence in their houses from their partners¹⁴ (Villalobos, in Gómez Suárez 2010, 36).

The flexibility of the affective and sexual relations also characterizes this people. Even though it is not usual to show and express affections publicly, at the festivals there is a certain “liberation” from the ordinary rule, some kind of return to the “pre-Columbian order”. During the *teswinadas* a collective disinhibition is experimented and everyone acts, as they want: there are changes of partners, homoeroticist relations, laughs, erotic games, etc.: «everyone show himself or herself as they are» (Villalobos, in Gómez Suárez 2010). There also are polygamous families (one man with two or three wives) and polygyny (one woman with two men), socially accepted. (Gómez Suárez 2010).

In the pre-Columbian period there is no trace of homoeroticism, except for the existence of the linguistics terms “*reneke*” (Pérez 2001), “*ropeke*” or “*ropechi*” (Vaca, in Gómez Suárez 2010) (persons that like having sexual intercourse with another person of the same sex, it does not matter if it is a man or a woman, though more used for female homosexuality), “*nawiki*” (sing, the one who sings), *rope*, *puchicachi*, *bizacachi*, *rekes*, or “osexuals”. Characters, *ropekes* and *nawikis* are defined not only by their sexual

¹⁴ As Maribel Villalobos, a *Rarámuri* woman and gender promotor of the NGO ALCADeco, explained, even though the woman, in an act of recognition, is the first invited to try the *hueja* (traditional glass) with *teswino* in the *teswinadas*, four times (because she has 4 souls), this does not mean that for the rest of the year they are the most mistreated by the community (Gómez 2010).

preferences but also by an interest to be like women (earrings, scarfs, necklaces, lipstick etc.) or like men.

It is also considered that there may be *renekes* and *nawikis* from “month to month”. These changes are related to the moon cycle, which also regulates female menstruation. Depending on the moon, these people can change into *renekes* for one month and the following month not and then later be again *reneke*. This reversible mutation exists only amongst men. They consider that they are born with these characteristics, thus, from childhood they behave as “*nawiki*” (Pérez 2001; Gómez Suárez 2010). The “*nawikis*” do jobs traditionally assigned for both men and women and, in some cases, they change their name to its female version (Villalobos, in Gómez Suárez 2010). Some “*nawiki*” women usually dress like men and live in a couple for a long time.

The homosexual is defined as «[...] the man that likes *bisaka* (penis) and allows himself to be penetrated by another man, but it is made clear that the man that penetrates is not homosexual: on the contrary, he is reaffirmed as a macho man» (Pérez 2001). The *nawikis* are highly valued sexually, they usually have many relations and they can even choose their partners. They also receive money or presents in exchange of their “sexual favors” (Gómez Suárez 2010).

During the celebrations of the dead, known as “*chuwíbaris*”, it is allowed for one of the relatives of the deceased person of the opposite sex to perform acts assuming the role of the deceased, making jokes of high sexual content. The spirit of the deceased “possesses” this relative of the opposite sex and, through them, “bids farewell” to their widow or widower through signs of affection, gestures and comments of a highly sexual nature. For this reason, the family's children are not usually present. This last “farewell” is done only with the partner and not with the parents or children of the deceased person (Gómez Suárez 2010). If the deceased was a man, he needs three parties and if it was a woman, she needs four. They drink *teswino* at these parties and when everyone is drunk, anything can happen, for example, that the person representing the dead woman may end up being penetrated by the widower. It can also happen that the woman representing the deceased ends up sexually playing with the widow of the deceased (Pérez 2001).

5. Conclusions

The discussion about the validity of certain categories and theoretical postulates that have been considered universal has been enriched through the analysis of contemporary realities outside the modern Western European society. This was the main intention of this paper.

The aim of this investigation was to show the sex/gender systems of the Zapotec community of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and the Rarámuri community of Tarahumara range, both in Mexico. Both realities present a series of attractions and challenges for social sciences due to the singularity of their sex/gender systems and the integration of sexual diversity in their societies, among other aspects. This investigation has determined that the sex/gender system in both communities does not respond to binary, patriarchal and heteronormative logic.

Indeed, in the case of the “isthmus zapotec model” two characteristics are notable: the institutionalization of the “third gender”, the *muxe* and the permissiveness with masculinized and homosexual women (the *nguiiu*), showing a very particular sex/gender order.

Nevertheless, the *Rarámuri* have a particular sexual pattern. Even though there is a certain “male domination” model, without homophobic features, exists a “third gender”, the so-called *Nawikis* and there is, as well, a higher degree of flexibility in the affective/sexual relations among their members.

In the ethno-cartography of the sexual diversity of the different societies in the world, it is concluded that there is an incredible variety of scenarios where transgenerism and sexuality among people of the same sex can be found.

In short, this journey through the vast plurality of the socio-sexual realities in Mexico confirms that, from an intercultural perspective, a new epistemology on gender and human sexuality that proposes new analytical categories for the analysis and understanding of the current social reality can be elaborated.

This demonstrates that the biologist approach and the legitimation of the sex/gender order is a fallacy, because the sex/gender systems are cultural representations with a

strong arbitrary component that correspond to historic and social relationships of power and social control and do not derive only from the sexual “nature” of human beings.

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