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(Re)constructing Motherhood in Contemporary Mexico: Discourses, Ideologies and Everyday Practices

Abstract: In the Mestizo and urban cultures of contemporary Mexico, motherhood is a site of confrontation of various gender (hegemonic, subordinate and alternative) images, practices and discourses. The local pattern of motherhood is undergoing social change, determined by traditional gender ideology, the government's modernization policy, and the agency of ordinary men and women. This text is based on a field study which I conducted in a district of Mexico City in 2005/2006. I analyze the process of reconstruction of official motherhood ideology and mothering practices on three levels: the official cult of motherhood and state activity, local celebrations of Mother's Day in the studied community, and women's individual strategies. These strategies are expressed in the adaptation of the *baby shower*, an American custom, to local conditions. This adaptation has led to the development of a hybrid cultural form. It is also the site of women's resistance to the state-supported, hegemonic cult of motherhood.

Keywords: motherhood; agency; nationalism; social change; cultural hybridity; globalisation.

In many contemporary societies, including non-European ones, motherhood has become a site of confrontation of various visions of social or national development. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, an American sociologist, argues that motherhood—perceived as a locally determined cultural construct—has become a contested terrain (1994: 2) where various gender (hegemonic, subordinate and alternative) images, practices and discourses are being confronted. In other words, motherhood is a site of social change. Two tendencies determine the nature of this change and are crucial for its course and nature. On the one hand, there is the empowering activity potential of ordinary men and women and on the other hand there is the power of the dominant ideologies and the role they play in blocking and restricting change (Montoya, Frazier & Hurtig, 2002). It is noteworthy that both individual and group activities and ideologies are associated with gender, and so we can say that they are gendered.

One place where the specific image of motherhood has become an element of collective imagery and also a characteristic, recognisable cultural feature is Mexico. In Mexico's Mestizo culture, despite the changes which have taken place in women's status over the last few decades, motherhood discourse continues to be the main element in gender discourse. The most socially desirable feminine role is still *madresposa* (mother-wife). This *marianismo*-based personal image, still very prominent, was developed by patriarchal society and reinforced by nationalist ideology and its maternal symbolism, and also by the teaching of the Catholic Church which propagates the

model of "family-centric" society. Within the last few decades it has also been propagated by neoliberal discourse based on the public-private divide as the separate spheres of women's and men's activities.[1]

Motherhood has been the formula for women's participation in the national community since the dawn of Mexican nationality. Women-mothers were mobilized to enact their non-traditional roles at times of conflict or to succumb to the state's modernisation policies "for the good of the children, family and country." Various discourses: cultural, religious, nationalistic, state, medical, and even feminist, have all emphasised the social significance of the mother role and led to "maternalization" of the Mexican woman's identity. They have also elevated motherhood and the mother figure to a privileged place in Mexican culture (Hryciuk 2008).

At the same time, a dynamic transformation of maternal and family cultural patterns and practices has been taking place over the last decades, especially in the large cities. This transformation is determined by both social processes at the macro level (Mexican women's increasing social importance due to their massive entry into the labour market, reduced fertility and increased level of education combined with the development of urbanization due to industrialization, migration and the demographic boom, the impact of the media and globalisation processes), as well as the day-to-day agency of men and women who are adopting individual strategies of mothering and fathering.

In this article I am going to analyze the reconstruction of official motherhood ideology and mothering practices in Mexican urban culture and its local manifestations. The Mexican megapolis is extremely fragmented and hybridized. This makes any attempt to generalize extremely difficult. It also forces us to adopt a methodology which combines research perspectives and accentuates the investigation of gender practices along with other categories (race, class, age etc.). Most of all, however, it emphasises the "here-and-now approach" without losing sight of global processes. By adopting this perspective we are able to grasp the specific nature of the social processes which take place in local contexts.

This is why I have decided to focus on a relatively recent custom: organising a baby shower[2] for the pregnant woman in one of the communities of Iztapalpa, Mexico City's largest districts.[3] I am going to analyze this new maternal fiesta as a site

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[1] The dominant pattern of motherhood, created on the basis of *marianismo* ideology, is typical in Mestizo and Creol communities, i.e. mainly the middle and upper classes, but also urban lower classes. The complementary sex role model is still very prominent in Indian communities (Hryciuk 2009).

[2] According to Wikipedia, the website encyclopaedia, the baby shower is a party at which parents or parents-to-be are given presents for the newborn baby or baby-to-be. The purpose of the baby shower is usually to help the parents collect things they need for the baby, such as baby clothes. It is a popular tradition in the United States and other cultures, often ones which are under the influence of American culture and media. In some countries the baby shower is not organized until the baby is born (…) Arranged originally for mothers-to-be and attended by women only, but eventually also attended by men. Nowadays there are also male baby showers but only for the first baby. [Accessed: February 2008]

[3] This American "craze" has also reached Poland. Various websites (so-called women's websites and of course maternity websites) are competing for entries and advice on how to organize a baby shower. There is also a website specifically devoted to this subject: www.baby-shower.pl.

of women's resistance to the hegemonic, state-supported cult of motherhood which culminates during the annual Mother's Day celebrations.

This text is based on data collected at a fieldwork during which I conducted a participant observation as well as in-depth interviews with elements of life-stories, in the district of Iztapalpa, Mexico City, in 2005–2006.[4] The actual site of the study was Santa María Tomatlán, one of the *pueblos originarios* (communities of pre-Columbian descent) which due to their extraordinary ability to adapt ancient rituals and festivals to the conditions of the contemporary metropolis, continue to inhabit Mexican towns and cities, and sometimes even their very centre.[5] Tomatlán is a 'de-indianized community' (Bonfil Batalla, 2003) which has preserved its local customs and traditions (e.g. popular religiosity, *mayordomía*,[6] organisation of local holidays) despite years of rapid urbanization, powerful state modernization policies, loss of its local language (*nahuatl*) and costume. Another key characteristic of Tomatlán from the presented point of view is its local gender order (Connell 1987) with its indigenous pattern of strong femininity (Hryciuk 2008).

As in other Indian communities with preindustrial roots (Zárate Vidal, 2004), the indigenous pattern of femininity is represented by self-sufficient and very independent women who regard their extra-domestic work very highly and own and inherit land. The local pattern of strong and independent womanhood has been confronted within the last few decades with the hegemonic, Mestizo ideal of motherhood, but it has also been reinforced by women's mobilization during the economic crisis of the 1980s, increased social significance of women (the systematic increase of Tomatlán women's participation in the workplace and access to education) as well as Mexico City's authorities' equality policy (Hryciuk 2008).

Motherhood a'la Mexicana

In Mestizo Mexico, motherhood was and still is venerated not only in the family. Woman's "natural" vocation and "true," noble nature is enhanced in the public sphere by the state cult of motherhood whose most important element is still Mother's Day, introduced on the wave of nationalistic policy in 1922 and celebrated on May 10.

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[4] This study was conducted during my stay as a visiting scholar (scholarship sponsored by the Mexican government) in 2005/2006 within the Gender Studies Programme at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (*Programa Universitario de Estudios de Género, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, PUEG UNAM*). This research project was also funded by PhD Supervisor's Grant no. 1H02E 074 28 to Professor Anna Titkow. The results provided the empirical material for the author's PhD thesis "The cultural context of motherhood. The case of Mexico" defended at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences in 2008.

[5] There are 16 *pueblos originarios* in Mexico City, all in the Iztapalpa district.

[6] The sponsoring of ceremonies and feast days associated with the local cult of saints and representations of the Holy Virgin (*Virgenes*), according to Diccinario Del Español Usual en México: "*Mayordomía* is a typical institution of Indian and Mestizo Catholicism. Its function is to protect the cult and also to organize, administer and cultivate religious feast days in city districts and localities (*barrios de los pueblos*), whose representation has been granted for a certain period of time to individuals who are honest and widely respected."

From the very start, the priority of successive Mexican governments has been to introduce and implement "maternal policies" (Hryciuk 2008). The symbolic honouring of motherly devotion by means of rewards for "the best mothers," presented by representatives of the highest state authorities on May 10, countless monuments to the mother and maternal sacrifice in Mexican towns and cities or the impact of ideological state apparatuses (media communications: cinema, radio, school curricula etc.) (Althusser 1971) propagating maternal behaviour were really reactions to the revolutionary activation of women (1910–1920) and the social changes taking place in post-revolutionary Mexico and above all to the tendencies to increase the range of rights and freedoms of Mexican women. Also, official post-revolutionary discourse focussed on Mexican women's reproductive functions (both biological and symbolic/cultural), rendering motherhood and prenatal policy one of the strategies of modernization of Mexico (Acevedo 2002).

Despite the many changes which have taken place within the last few decades—transformation of women's social status, prominence of feministic discourse deconstructing the national "Mexican mother" stereotype, and the state's equality rhetoric and consequent activities promoting new patterns of parenthood, motherhood remains the major element of state gender ideology. In this respect, little has changed since the revolution and today, several dozen years later, motherhood is still the formula for women's participation in the Mexican national community. The responsibilities of the modern mother have changed, however.

Modern woman is well-prepared for the (post)modern national project: "the nationalism of the new millennium" (Gutiérrez Chong 2004) when she is a mother and reproduces the nation in a new way, according to current requirements. Woman is now to be an ally of the state on its road to modernity and to this end she is to control her fertility and plan her family.[7] Social advertisements, sponsored by government agencies and forcefully revealing the official gender discourse, continue to portray woman in her maternal function: she is responsible not only for her children's good physical condition (proper nourishment, vaccinations, psychological consultations etc.) and their proper education but also for the condition of her entire family. In 2005, in the spotlights of the media campaigns which I observed in the national media (radio, television, Internet), the "average" Mexican mother was also expected to be well-informed about modern methods of family planning offered by the federal government and state assistance programs (e.g. insurance policies for the poorest, the so-called *Seguro Popular*), the system of stipends for children and adolescents, know her civic responsibilities (spots encouraging voting) and inculcate them in her children etc. The Mexican state is confronting women with new tasks and expecting them to be flexible and adjust to new conditions in times of dynamic social change. And in case of crisis, they are expected to act in their maternal roles as "buffers" and cushion the negative consequences of the ongoing processes (Hryciuk 2004). Hence it

[7] In the early nineteen-seventies, under the pressure of the sudden and uncontrolled increase in the population of Mexico, the state changed its discourse and demographic policy in accordance with UN directives for developing countries and the Mexican government adopted the neo-Malthusian discourse promoted by international agencies and with it the new family planning policy.

is in the Mexican state's interest to continually boost motherhood in the public sphere and continue to reinforce Mexican women's maternal identity. What the state is really doing is promoting a new edition of the motherhood cult. This cult is so powerful that nothing will threaten it, not even the simultaneously promoted equality discourse: as always, mother is the family pillar, home her main domain, and other members of the family including her partner her "helpers." Even a rough analysis of the media messages suggests that motherhood is a battlefield of opposing tendencies: the still powerful, culturally determined gender contract, the official equality discourse accentuating marital partnership and equal opportunities for both sexes,[8] and neoliberal discourse based on the division of public and private into two separate spheres of male and female activity. Mixed messages are therefore the norm (Hryciuk 2008).

An excellent example is the Mother's Day speech which the President of the Republic Vicente Fox gave on television on 10 May 2005. This rightist *Partido de Acción Nacional* (PAN) politician first greeted all the mothers of Mexico, then his own mother, and finally his wife. He underscored the historical role of motherhood as a "constitutive Mexican feature" and foundation of cultural identity. He criticized and rejected patriarchalism expressed in the ubiquitous *machismo*, accentuated the change in women's status and their contribution to national development, and his government's efforts to introduce an equality policy in every aspect of social life. He finally reminded Mexican women that their basic obligation was to execute their maternal role and do their duty for the good (*bienestar*) of the Mexican family because the future of the nation was in their hands. Even the most emancipated and modern Mexican women must not forget about their feminine, patriotic duties.

Therefore, despite the dynamic socio-cultural changes in women's status, Mother's Day is still one of the most important national holidays in Mexico and its purpose is to remind women of their "basic duty." On May 10, the president delivers an address to the nation, in many places (INMUJERES,[9] parliament, various government agencies) and there are official celebrations: speeches, awards for people who have made a special contribution to the "case" (mothers, social activists, female politicians and less frequently, male politicians), laying flowers at maternal monuments throughout the country. There are official celebrations at schools and nursery schools, state offices are closed (and so are the Universities). Maternal topics dominate the media, from the news to quizzes and extremely popular gossip programs. For several weeks before May 10 commercial advertisements appear suggesting the best, most fashionable and most popular presents for Mexican mothers and ways of celebrating Mother's Day that season. The price of flowers reaches its annual peak and at most restaurants one has to book "dinner with mother" several weeks in advance.

At midnight on Mother's Day television broadcasts a special midnight service from Our Lady of Guadelupe Basilica at which well-known artists sing *Mañanitas* (the

[8] The Mexican government began to introduce the gender mainstreaming policy in 1995, following the recommendations of the World Women's Conference organized that same year in Beijing under the auspices of the UNO.

[9] INMUJERES (*Instituto Nacional de Las Mujeres*)—The National Women's Institute, a federal organization established by Mexican parliament in 2001.

Mexican *For She's a Jolly Good Fellow*) to the "Mother of the Nation." Everybody greets their mother: politicians (who eagerly take advantage of the occasion to earn political support), journalists, normally scandalising actresses and "celebrities" talk about motherhood as the most important and enriching life experience and emphasise the importance of "family values." Film stars, renowned for their sitcom productions and tabloid coverage, skilfully manipulate the cultural image of motherhood because they know that the public will forgive them their moral and financial scandals or their addictions but will never forgive them for being bad mothers!

Mother's Day celebrations, initiated in the 1920s, together with the official motherhood discourse propagated by the ideological state apparatus and especially the media who have also led to the extreme commercialization of the holiday, have gradually become a Mexican duty, a "Mexican craze" (as one of my interlocutors said on May 10) This craze is both public and private, played out locally and within relationships and families.

Mother's Day in Tomatlan

The Mother's Day celebrations also have their local aspect which is worth analysing. This way, we can see how the dominant discourse is interpreted in everyday life, but also how agency is manifested. In Santa María Tomatlan in 2005 Mother's Day celebrations began (as they do every year) early in the morning. At 6 o'clock at the parish church the *Mariachi*[10] ensemble, hired earlier for the occasion, sung the *Mañanitas* in front of the local Our Lady figure. In the afternoon, the *mayordomia* men and the hired musicians visited the houses of the women who were taking part in *mayordomia* 2005 where they sung the *Mañanitas* once again but also each woman's favourite songs, and greeted and toasted the women. In the evening there was dancing at the square in front of the church to which all the Tomatlan residents were invited. The women reciprocated by organising the Father's Day celebrations on June 29.[11]

In Tomatlan, Mother's Day is also celebrated in nearly every family in a variety of forms: children invite their mothers to special celebrations at kindergarten and school (where there is usually a short performance and then a meal) and give them handmade greetings cards and gifts. Older and adult children buy their mothers more or less elaborate presents, invite them to dinner or even take them on excursions. My female informers often recalled that they were absolved from cooking on Mother's

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[10] *Mariachi* are a "traditionally Mexican" musical ensemble from Jalisco state in West Mexico. *Mariachi* usually consist of several musicians, dressed in traditional *charros* costume, who play a traditional repertoire, including *ranchera* songs, on guitars, violins and trumpets. *Mariachi* entertain at the most important occasions (weddings, *años*, feast days of the Virgin Mary). Even today, one can also hear them playing serenades under the windows of the beloved of enamoured men who hire them to do so.

[11] In Tomatlan this was the first time that Father's Day was celebrated this way. My interlocutors explained that they got this idea because Father's Day was already being celebrated at their children's primary school (on a much smaller scale). They also got their inspiration from television: the feast is now being popularised as part of the media campaign for new parenthood within the government's equality policy.

Day: the male members of the household (husbands and sons) cooked "male food," i.e. meat dishes which men customarily prepare for various fiestas.

It seems that Mother's Day is widely accepted and celebrated at the local level. However, when I interviewed the women, I learned that they had mixed opinions and ambivalent feelings about this holiday. Some interviewees, both male and female, pointed out that one should celebrate this holiday because "mother is the foundation on which the family rests," "mother is the most important member of the family," "one must respect mother's dedication," "without mother the family will fall to pieces." In addition to these traditional opinions, reinforced by the official discourse, my interlocutors stressed that this was the time to reflect on one's maternal duties and ask oneself the question "am I a good mother?" On the other hand, even those interlocutors who repeated the cliché about the importance of motherhood did not fail to notice the holiday's manipulative and commercial aspects.

Time and time again, I heard the opinion that one should respect all women, not only mothers, on a daily basis, maternal effort and sacrifice should be recognised every day, not only by the family but above all by the government which should make mothers' lives easier by implementing woman-friendly and mother-friendly policies. I believe that these opinions show very clearly that the rhetoric of the leftist programs of Mexico City's government, which have been present in Iztapalpa for two decades, as well as various actions of the capital's local government (education programs on women's rights, human rights, family violence, sexual education) are having an effect.[12] A considerable portion of my female interviewees (not only those who were directly involved in pro-PRD politics) were aware of the need to fight for their rights and were able to articulate their individual and group expectations (e.g. the need for nursery-schools for working mothers in Tomatlan and the surrounding *pueblos*). Women's rights and the authorities' responsibilities were a recurrent subject in our conversations.

At the individual level, negative opinions concerning the traditional way of celebrating motherhood surfaced. When I asked her about the Mother's Day celebrations, one of my interviewees, Socorro (a forty-year-old fulltime homemaker, mother of four) told me outright that every year at the beginning of May she feels she is under great pressure and all this "fuss" is a source of frustration rather than joy. In 2005, two of her children, one at kindergarten and one at primary school, took part in the May 10 school performances. What this meant for Socorro was greater expenses in terms of money, time and work. She had to make two costumes, cook food for the celebration meal and take her children to extra rehearsals. My informer told me angrily that nobody really cared what she felt or thought about motherhood and people only made sure that she carried out the teachers' assignments efficiently. Hence, she felt that Mother's Day was not very different from other national holidays: Independence Day or Constitution Day when her children (and their mothers) had to prepare occasional celebrations.

[12] The Federal District of which Mexico City is a part has been the bastion of leftist PRD (*Partido de la Revolución Democrática*) since the late 1980s. Mexico City local government has been dominated by representatives of this party, both male and female, uninterruptedly since 1997.

This is how symbolic gender structures—in this case, the Mexican Mother as national icon for whom Mother's Day was instated and many monuments erected—acquire meaning for men and women in their daily lives (Melhuus & Stølen 1996). Obligatory school ceremonies have become yet another Althusserian "state apparatus" for the subtle, veiled promotion of hegemonic gender ideology.

The May 10 celebrations have become an element of daily practice. Many of my interlocutors felt that these official "celebrations" were oppressive but, like Socorro, they did not contest them openly. Fear of breaking out of the crowd and negative evaluation (*el que dirán*), the pressure to do their maternal duties properly, and these duties certainly included active participation in the organisation of Mother's Day, induced all these women to take part in all the preparations and celebrations.

Baby Shower—Mothers' New Holiday!

When I was observing the nationwide preparations for Mother's Day in May 2005 and talking to my informers about this "invented tradition," I intuitively sensed that the explicitly expressed, increasing frustration of mothers, trapped between incompatible expectations, had to find an outlet. The totalizing hegemonic motherhood discourse, investing mothers with great responsibility for the nation, continually reminding them of their mission and importance, demanding the heroic effort of adjustment of the maternal role to changing conditions, had to confront sooner or later the resistance of the female population of Tomatlan, which was becoming increasingly aware of the oppressiveness of the dominant discourse.

My intuition was correct. According to the majority of my interviewees, motherhood, a typically feminine experience, is experienced as the main component of feminine identity. However, the official Mother's Day celebrations leave women no room to celebrate this experience personally and intimately. The hegemonic motherhood discourse neglects mother's real life and traps them in symbolic, petrified maternal figures. So the women of Tomatlan reached for new cultural patterns which were already deeply imprinted in urban communities. As their site of resistance of the official discourse they chose the baby shower, a recently imported American custom. Readily accepted and adjusted to local conditions, this celebration was to become a site of the Tomatlan women's creative agency. To quote one of my interlocutors, it became "our own special way of celebrating motherhood."

When I enquired about customs relating to motherhood and non-official ways of celebrating it, my interviewees mentioned "welcoming the baby into the home": the family (usually the women) of the new mother prepare a "welcome home" for her: they prepare a room or special part of a room by redecorating it, hanging paper festoons and balloons, and equipping it with necessary furniture and accessories. Next, the women mentioned visits during which mother and baby received gifts. Finally, they told me about the christening ceremony. Young and middle-aged women spontaneously listed the baby shower, a fiesta for women in their last weeks of pregnancy.

Before I began my fieldwork in Tomatlan, most of what I knew about baby showers came from the American mass media. I gradually discovered that this custom was also present in the Mexican media and had become an element of sitcoms or semi-feature documentaries of the lives of contemporary Mexican women (such as *Lo quo callamos las mujeres* or *Mujeres: los casos de la vida real*). Research on motherhood in Mexico City also documented this new custom. In her 1996–1999 study, Ángeles Sánchez Bringas (2003) found that the baby shower was a constant element in the preparations of the mother-to-be to "welcome her baby." Like in the media messages, Sánchez Bringas found that this custom was cultivated by middle and upper class women, was a typically feminine experience organized for women by women, and that its main purpose was not only to socialize but also to accumulate things that the baby was going to need.

Some of my informers did not know where the custom had originated, they simply told me that it had appeared in Tomatlan several years earlier and had quickly been accepted. Other, more educated interviewees indicated the middle class, the one to adopt American patterns most willingly, as the source and inspiration for the first baby showers in Tomatlan and the baby showers they saw on TV were to strengthen this trend even further. Although not all Tomatlan women organize or participate in such celebrations, the vast majority of my interviewees were enthusiastic about them.

As with the fiesta celebrating the girl's fifteenth birthday (*XV años*), the baby shower was adopted from the upper social class and was initially closely modelled after the media. According to researchers of urban culture in Mexico, the media, including television, the most important medium of all, have become the principal means of transmission and creation of gender representation and identity. The most popular forms of media message, i.e. telenovelas, mostly viewed by women, transmit middle-class lifestyle and consumption patterns to the lower classes and set the standards for them (Napolitano 1997; Páramo 2005).

I also observed the trend to aspire to a middle-class lifestyle and the associated changes in the gender contract in Tomatlan. This is not a unidirectional or dominant trend, however. The *pueblo* women have not assimilated the baby shower model passively. They have adapted it to local conditions and their own needs and financial means.

When I asked them how they organize their baby showers, my interlocutors , in contrast with the middle-class women interviewed by Sánchez Bringas (2003), highlighted not economic factors but emotional ones: they meet to celebrate together and to share the joy of pending childbirth. Most of my interlocutors pointed out that this was, first and foremost, a feast of the mothers who can "enjoy their pregnancy" (*disfrutar su embarazo*), take advantage of their status, a moment when the pregnant woman is the focus of attention because, as many of my informers often explained, the moment the baby is born the mother is inevitably sidetracked as she yields to the baby's needs. The woman for whom the fiesta is organized never participates in the preparations: on the day, she is served, her favourite titbits are cooked and she is the centre of attention.

Together with the "heroine of the evening," all the invited mothers celebrate the experience of motherhood, sharing their observations, stories of their pregnancies,

childbirths and childcare. My informers pointed out that the most important thing in the baby shower was *convivencia*, sharing experience. This is both an individual and a group experience. Women organize the fiesta for each other and usually attend several of them a year. The baby shower highlights the idea of cooperation, the strength of family relations, the importance of *compadrazgo* [13] and women's friendships, and is an expression of the community of feminine experience and empathy.

When I interviewed her, Socorro had four children: a 17-year-old daughter, another school-age daughter and two sons, one five and one just a few months old. She told me enthusiastically that she had always wanted to have her own baby shower, that was her dream (*yo siempre tenia la illusion de baby shower*) but it was not until her last pregnancy that her best friend and *comadre* organized her surprise-fiesta with the help of her teenage daughter. Socorro never mentioned the economic aspect, nor was it the leading motive of my other interlocutors. This does not mean that economic support was not important. Guests always brought presents (often selected from a list prepared earlier), gave advice and greeted the mother-to-be or both parents if the father was present. The local variety of baby shower is first and foremost a fiesta, the celebration of the experience of pregnancy and motherhood.

The baby showers I saw differed in yet another significant way from what I knew from the media. Unlike the celebrations organized by the Mexican upper and middle classes, the Tomatlan celebrations were also attended by men. There were purely feminine baby showers too but not because that is what the organizers wanted but simply because no man in their environment agreed to participate or had time to do so. Usually several men, including the baby's father, attend. They take part in games and quizzes together with the women. There can also be separate male quizzes. Occasionally, whole families come to the baby shower and then the men take care of the children. According to my observations, the men's presence is not a priority. This is a women's fiesta, organized by women for women, even when men are present.

My interlocutors, very sensitive to *machismo* which restricts women's mobility and controls their behaviour, expressed very positive feelings about men's presence at the baby shower. They did not view it as an attempt to gain control *macho* style. On the contrary, those men who wanted to accompany the women (*juntarse con las viejas*—go to bash with their "old lady" as one woman blandly put it) were viewed as the most open to experience and most willing to adopt an attitude of partnership.

A brief description of one out of several baby showers in which I participated in Tomatlan will help us to grasp the nature and dynamics of this celebration of the local form of baby shower. I was invited to the baby shower of one of my interviewees, Emily (30 years old, 8 months pregnant with her first baby) by her mother-in-law who prepared the fiesta with her daughter, Emily's sister-in-law. Since I was on very good terms with the whole family, I was asked to help with the preparations. In addition to bringing a prearranged present, I was to buy badges for the participants

[13] *Compadrazgo* is an extended kinship system, a system of relations between people who are not blood relatives, between a child's biological parents and godparents or people who sponsor other lifecycle celebrations such as confirmation or marriage. Close friends of many years' standing can also be called *compadre* (in the case of men) and *comadre* (in the case of women).

and document the celebrations with my camera. I purchased the occasional badges ("a stork carrying a baby") at a market in the city centre which has a whole quarter of stalls specialising in baby shower gadgets. Emily's mother-in-law accompanied me to the market where she bought various decorations, balloons, games and quizzes, prizes and *recuerdos*, special "souvenirs" to be handed out to participants on their departure (also portraying storks, a symbol imported from American culture). Emily's sister-in-law was to take care of the food and the cake was ordered and paid for by another *comadre*. On Saturday afternoon three of us decorated the large *patio* of the house (inhabited by all three families), placed chairs in a circle and erected the tables. The invited guests began to arrive in the early evening.

Throughout the fiesta (which lasted four hours) the mother-to-be—*festejada* (the one to whom this fiesta was dedicated)—sat in the place of honour. Emily was seated in the middle of the *patio*, beside a colourfully decorated table on which the guests placed there presents and which also held occasional gadgets. Emily's sister-in-law was "master of the ceremonies" (more and more frequently, professional animators are now hired for this role). Knowing that men were also to be present, she prepared several quizzes especially for them.

Emily opened the fiesta, welcomed her guests and invited them to have a good time. Then her sister-in-law immediately took over and handed out little cards, specially bought for the occasion, with riddles and crossword puzzles on motherhood. The answers were checked amidst giggles, commentaries and jokes, richly peppered with *doble sentido* (words with double meanings). The winners received prizes whereas those who forgot themselves and crossed their legs while solving the riddles were punished. They had to put on a nappy or a towel or scarf imitating a nappy and "pretend to be a baby" until somebody else was caught with her legs crossed and forced to put on the nappy. Of course this is reminiscent of the prohibition, found in many cultures, against closing, tying or crossing things in the presence of pregnant women lest it delay or impede the birth, i.e. the delivery.

Then we were all given a balloon. When we pierced it, we found inside a little piece of paper describing baby activities which we were to perform and Emily was to guess what the activity was. One of the male competitions involved drinking milk in as short a time as possible from a baby bottle and in order to make the drink "tastier," Emily's mother-in-law poured some rum into each bottle. Another obligatory competition at every baby shower is guessing the pregnant woman's girth. To do this, everyone makes a rating then cuts a piece of toilet paper to measure and measures the pregnant woman.

One of the last games, and also an obligatory part of most baby shower programs, is bathing the baby. Emily was blindfolded and then asked to bathe a baby doll (the size of a newborn baby), dry and dress it. The baby's father often participates in this game but this time, since Emily's fiancé was absent, she had to cope by herself. She then unpacked her presents and had to guess who had given each present.

Just before the meal which closed the fiesta, I was asked to record short statements by the participants who gave Emily advice "for the future" and wished her well. During my fieldwork in Tomatlan, at most of the baby showers I attended, I was

asked to take photographs and record the greetings (in short video clips) which were then transferred to CDs and presented to the future mothers as "important souvenirs."

The Mexican women's agency was manifested in their ability to improvise and transform the American baby shower into a local "mothers' fiesta." When we analyse the material, we can see how global processes are filtered through local needs and individual agency at the local level. The women of Tomatlan needed a new way to celebrate motherhood. Representatives of the middle-aged and young generation, participants and beneficiaries of changes which have taken place in women's status in Mexico City, are contesting the petrified, nationalistic motherhood image staffage and adapting an American custom known from the media to local conditions.

Motherhood as a Site of Change

As we analyse the transformation of the American baby shower into an alternative "mother's fiesta" in Mexico's urban culture, we find a combination of different factors. Motherhood has been used as an instrument in successive state modernisation strategies and the nationalistic cultural discourse continues to emphasize the role of motherhood as women's main mission. On the other hand, we have the "subjective experience of a national identity" (Radcliffe & Westwood, 1996) by individuals who are actively participating in the transformations of patterns of Mexicanness. Globalisation processes are another significant factor. These processes are making their presence clearly felt in the capital city's cultural landscape.

Not only were women in Mexico the object of various modernisation projects (for example, family planning programs). They also contested these programs, resisted them and adjusted to them to their own needs as far as possible. Also, the effect of modernisation practices was always contextually determined: it could have various effects on different groups of women and be variously experienced by them (Hryciuk 2008).

Researchers who study vernacular modernities draw attention to this aspect. Dorothy L. Hodgson (2001) argues that modernisation processes, which expect women to adjust to the needs of the modern state, are mediated and transformed in local socio-cultural contexts by the activities and opinions of individuals differing in positionality. Hodgson introduces the term production of modernities" meaning the variety of forms of modernity which are emerging in response to the mutual effects of the global and the local, as well as the role of human agency which creatively and actively combines the two processes to produce new, historically, culturally and socially determined, ways of "being modern."

In the Mexican context the mechanisms of "production of modernities" have led to the development of local, grassroots interpretations which are subtly but inevitably contesting dominant, nationalistic gender patterns and discourses. One example is the baby shower, discussed above, which is a local interpretation of Mexican middle class lifestyle. In Tomatlan, celebrations initially associated with the American ideology

of "intensive motherhood,"[14] have become a site of expression of the experience of mothering, a local, alternative and genuinely community version of Mother's Day. Adoption of the baby shower custom is associated with the inclusion of Mexico City's poorer districts (*colonias populares*) in global transmission channels of values and cultural patterns. The lifestyles of the lower Mexican classes are transforming under the influence of the media, migration and contact with representatives of the middle class who, in turn, are under the great influence of American culture. In other words, they are more or less the outcome of globalisation processes. However, despite the fears of many experts, these processes need not inevitably lead to cultural homogenisation. Rather, they are leading to the development of locally negotiated and transformed patterns of culture.

Remember that in his *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai (1996) suggested that we study globalisation processes from the local perspective, the perspective of specific places and situations. In this book he argues that regional studies in culturally diverse environments have demonstrated that

> …globalization is itself a deeply historical, uneven and, even *localizing* process. Globalization does not necessarily or even frequently imply homogenization or Americanization, and to the extent that different societies appropriate the materials of modernity differently, there is still ample room for deep study of specific geographies, histories and languages. (1996: 17)

In other words, globalisation does not mean homogenization, it means the gradual internalisation and processing of new patterns by means of local negotiation with the *habitus*, introduction of new elements, the ability to "improvise." This American anthropologist underscores the role and position of the social actor, his/her agency in the generation of social life. He underscores the individual's subjectivity and ability to mould his/her own life and its social manifestations:

> …ordinary lives today are more often powered not by givenness of things but by the possibilities that the media (either directly or indirectly) suggest are available. Put another way, some of the force of Bourdieu's idea of the *habitus* can be retained, but the stress must be put on the idea of improvisation, for improvisation no longer occurs within a relatively bounded set of thinkable postures but is always skidding and taking off, powered by the imagined vistas of mass mediated master narratives (1996: 55–65).

Studies of globalisation have found that media information and discourse are becoming indigenized (Appadurai, 2005) or—as others would have it—are undergoing cultural hybridization (Garcia Canclini, 1990). In both cases, they are producing new cultural forms appropriate to local needs "here and now"—cultures or societies in given conditions. This is why we should interpret the baby shower as a cultural hybrid developed by the women of Tomatlan at the turn of the twentieth century to suit the real needs of contemporary female inhabitants of *colonias populares*.

We can also interpret the appearance of the new custom, the baby shower, in terms of the processes of deconstruction and redefinition of gender imagery which are central to national discourse. The Mexican construction of motherhood definitely occupies the central place in the "subjective experience of national identity" (Radcliffe & Westwood 1996). Contemporary Mexican women are actively involved in the

[14] A term borrowed from Sharon Hays (1996).

interpretation of the official version of national identity. These changes are taking place at the individual level via women's experience and their agency (Melhuus & Stølen 1996).

A very useful concept here is the concept of cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 2005) understood as the intimate, collective and national space used to analyze " the performances of selfhood—collective and individual—in the interstices of many another institutional framework between other institutional frames" (ibid.: 46) and social poetics as "the creative presentation of the individual self" (ibid.: x). According to the author of this concept:

> …because national ideologies are grounded in images of intimacy, they can be subtly but radically restructured by the changes occurring in the intimate reaches of everyday life—by shifts in meaning that may not be registered at all in the external cultural form (Herzfeld 2005: 31).

In the intimate space of Mexicanness (*mexicanidad*), motherhood ideology, expressed officially in Mother's Day celebrations, is manifested in the "craziness" of ritualized celebration which has led to the development of the cultural image of Mexico as a country of indomitable, suffering mothers, where motherhood is an implicit feature of local culture. By organizing baby showers, the women of Tomatlan are questioning the essentialist, nationalistic and monumental image of motherhood. Mothers' new fiesta is therefore an expression of social poetics. It is an expression of disemia, the dissonance between the official, nationalistic motherhood ideology expressed in the institutionalized celebration of Mother's Day and compelling women to make incessant sacrifices for the good of the family, state and nation, and the joyous, spontaneous celebration of the experience of motherhood.

As Herzfeld argued:

> The state is caught on the horns of its own reification. To achieve at least an illusion of stability it must command the active involvement of ordinary people; and ordinary people reify, all the time, everywhere. They, too, invoke solidified histories, rediscovering in the official mythology some aspects that will serve their own cause (Herzfeld, 2005: 25).

The ordinary women of Tomatlan continue to make references to belief in the importance of the maternal role and the right to worship motherhood, shared by participants of Mexico's Mestizo culture. They use a culturally unfamiliar alien, American pattern but they have interpreted it according to their own interests, resources and desires and have actually created an alternative motherhood fiesta. In this context, baby shower is not a product of mindless imitation. This would have been immediately branded *malinchismo*[15] and its propagators would have been labelled *malinchistas*. It is a creative adaptation in response to changing social conditions in which motherhood is increasingly becoming a site of women's agency rather than their one and only, "sacred," duty and destiny.

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[15] In Mexico the term *malinchismo* signifies an attitude of preference of everything foreign, a form of cosmopolitanism or even betrayal of the Mexican for the Alien. People representing this attitude are called *malinchistas*. The term is derived from the first name of Herman Kortez's partner and translator, Malinche, who was declared a traitor of the Mexican nation during the intense nationalism of the 1920s.

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