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Mesoamerican Culture and *The Children of Sánchez*

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Let's start by saying that the film *The Children of Sánchez* (1978), produced and directed by Hall Bartlett, has unique characteristics as an aesthetic object: it originates as anthropological discourse. In its original form, it was conceived and produced as a book, written by the renowned anthropologist Oscar Lewis in 1961. The author used anthropological methodologies and techniques to generate its content and form. Structured around chapters that describe in ethnographic detail the life style, values and customs of the different members of the Sánchez family, each chapter is literally a translated transcription of each participant's self-description. Lewis uses open interviews, observer participation and participant's testimony as anthropological techniques to generate the cultural data on the Sánchez family. Lewis' intention is to give the reader an inside view of family life and what it means to grow up in a one room home within a slum tenement situated in the heart of Mexico City.¹

The Children of Sánchez was eventually transformed from book form into screenplay, and later to its final film form. For the purposes of this essay, it suggests a rich potential for cultural analysis since the aesthetic object is, first of all, anthropological data rendered into dramatic and narrative structure, and secondly, it is a cultural object that depicts Mesoamerican culture. Therefore, it offers unique opportunities for examination utilizing the analytical tools provided

by a cultural model of Mesoamerican societies. This cultural model, which I call “The Mesoamerican Cultural Code,” can be seen as a methodological instrument to decode cultural objects that relate to Mexican and Central American culture. Let us say then, that this exercise has a dual objective: to reveal the hermeneutic possibilities of the methodological instrument, and to shed light on the cultural subtext of the film.

The Mesoamerican Cultural Code

Anthropologists who have studied the people living in the territory ranging, more or less, from the great basin in the United States to the Isthmus of Panama, have long faced problems in defining the large cultural area their studies may illuminate. However, three solutions to these problems appear to have gained social recognition: units called “Mesoamerica,” “Middle America,” and “Mexican Cultures.” For the purpose of this study I have chosen the concept of Mesoamerica following the classical definition of Kirchhoff, who defined an area occupied by “superior cultivators” or “high cultures” as a contiguous whole.² Kirchhoff clearly established the uniqueness and importance of the Mesoamerican cultural area at the time of the Spanish conquest and for several centuries before. His attempt to define Mesoamerica in direct reference to a cultural area gives to the concept a cultural and anthropological meaning of its own which is not present in “Middle America” (geographical area) or in “Mexican Cultures” (modern political state). In geographic terms, I refer to the three precincts of the Mesoamerican citadel: the central highland in south-central Mexico, the southern highlands in southern Mexico, and the southeastern highland in Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua). This cultural area has maintained throughout the historical process a common cultural boundary.³

I have defined cultural code as a set of semantic rules to code social reality or, in other words, as the system of classification upon which all the variations of meaning are produced. This system will be described in the form of an inventory of binary oppositions whose significance reflects at the level of the symbolic—culture—the contradictory poles of meaning constructed within antagonistic social formations.⁴

It will be my task to identify the categories of a cultural inventory, and within them, the binary oppositions upon which social meaning is constructed. The notion of a cultural code as a set of binary oppositions derives from the study of language as a structure in which each term and each context is different and unique, and that no term and no context has meaning or significance in and of itself. The meaning of any term then derives from oppositions within a context.

Categories for a Cultural Code

In his study of culture as the “silent language” through which groups communicate, E.T.Hall defined ten operational criteria that describe ten basic kinds of human activity from an anthropological standpoint. Hall has labeled these criteria Primary Message Systems.⁵

Only the first of these criteria involves language. All others are non-linguistic forms of communication. The Primary Message Systems are: interaction, association, subsistence, sexuality, territoriality, temporality, learning, play, defense, and exploitation (i.e. use of materials).

In what follows I am going to attempt to identify a fundamental cultural complex for each category, and I am going to describe it in the form of a binary opposition.

Interaction: One of the most highly elaborated forms of interaction is speech, which is reinforced by tone of voice and gesture. Even though speech is the manifest aspect of interaction, the latent aspect is thought. Thoughts emerge and are organized around a particular world vision. Therefore in this category I find that the language spoken in Mesoamerica came from two different fountains: Spanish, a European language that has its origins in Latin and, on the other hand, indigenous languages such as Nahuatl and Maya and their different dialects and variations. Spanish, having been the language of the conquerors, became the dominant and official language with its inherent logic of conceptual thought and rationalistic world outlook. On the other end of the spectrum are the indigenous languages, organized around analogical thought and vivid imagination representing an animistic concept of the universe that rests on the notion that all things have an inherent anima or soul. Therefore, the dynamics of meaning production within this category would be set by the oppositional values inherent in the polarity: rational world view vs. an animistic world view.

Association: Refers to the various ways in which societies and their components are organized or structured. In this category, I identify the Mesoamerican kinship complex with its two opposite expressions: the patripotestal extended family and the nuclear unstable family. The patripotestal extended family can be defined as a system of kinship in which family ties extend through different family branches that have grown out of an original family trunk and in which the line of authority is invested in the figure of the father. The relative position of the patripotestal extended family in the social structure is directly linked with the landed estate. A reasonable assumption is that the larger the land holding, the more cohesive and extended the family would be. On the opposite side of the social structure, among the landless peasants and the working class in general, the family structure seems to be nuclear and unstable. The inherent inequality of the social structure added to the egalitarian ethics of Mesoamerican belief systems leads to paternalistic relations among the members of the two classes. *Compadrazgo* as a mechanism of kinship extension serves to relate people of different social status and to provide personal intermediaries between individuals and social institutions.⁶

Subsistence: This category refers to the ways social groups feed themselves through working and making a living. In Mesoamerica, we find three basic modes of economic production; the hacienda, the plantation, and industrial enterprises. Within these forms I find the following set of oppositions: in the *hacienda* model—the *patrón* vs. the *peón* or *colono*, or the landowner vs. the laborer or sharecropper; in the plantation model—the capitalist entrepreneur vs. the agricultural proletariat; and in the industrial model—the industrial capitalist vs. the urban proletariat.

Sexuality: Refers to the way in which a society differentiates sexual behavior, especially in relation to the social division of labor. In this category I have assigned the opposition between the cultural outlooks of *Machismo* and *Marianismo*. *Machismo* could be defined as the cult of virility. The chief characteristics of this attitude are exaggerated aggressiveness and intransigence in male interpersonal relationships and arrogance, and sexual aggression in male to female relationships. *Marianismo* is just as prevalent as *machismo* but it is less understood by Latin Americans themselves and almost unknown

to foreigners. It is the cult of feminine spiritual superiority, which teaches that women are morally superior and stronger than men.⁷

Latin American *mestizo* cultures exhibit a well-defined pattern of beliefs and behaviors centered on the popular acceptance of the stereotype of the ideal woman, modeled on the prototype of the Virgin Mary. Semi-divinity, moral superiority and spiritual strength are among the characteristics of this ideal. This spiritual strength engenders an infinite capacity for humiliation and sacrifice. The woman is supposed to be submissive to the demands of men: husbands, sons, fathers, and brothers. Beneath the submissiveness however, lies the strength of her conviction—shared by the entire society—that men must be humored, for after all, everyone knows that they are *como niños* (like little boys) whose intemperance, foolishness and obstinacy must be forgiven because “they can’t help the way they are.” This interpretation makes it possible to understand *machismo* as a part of a reciprocal arrangement, the other side of which is *Marianismo*.

Territoriality is the term used by ethnologists to describe the taking possession, use and defense of a territory on the part of living organisms. In this category I find the next set of oppositions: the *hacienda* that is privately owned by the patripotestal extended family, and the communal lands for subsistence agriculture. The plantation, also privately owned by the capitalist entrepreneur or corporation, is contrasted with the family parcel or *minifundio*.

Temporality refers to the perception of life cycles and rhythms. In Mesoamerica there is a sharp distinction between the urban, industrial and mechanical perception of time, and the natural, organic, rural perception of time in the countryside.

Learning refers to the inherent capacity of living organisms to obtain information in order to adapt to their environments. Mesoamerican anthropologists make the distinction between education and schooling. Education refers here to the process of enculturation that is informal, imitative and also ritualistic, especially among the Indian population. Schooling refers to the formal and supposedly compulsive system. Therefore, we have the opposition between formal learning and informal learning; the first one following an authoritarian mode and the second one a participatory mode.

Play: Refers to the recreation activities of a human group. In Mesoamerica, anthropologists have pointed out to the *fiesta* complex

as a trait characteristic of the area. The *fiesta* complex is often a culturally patterned outlet for frustrations imposed upon the individual by the overall system. On the opposite pole of the spectrum, I will suggest ceremonial mourning as the dramatic opposite of the *fiesta* complex. Ceremonial mourning for the dead is also linked to a spiritual vision of the universe in which the dead continue to exist. The classic example is the collective ritual of *El Día de los Muertos* or “The Day of the Dead.”

Defense: Relates to the struggle of social groups to protect their social interests. In his analysis of the *caudillo* complex, Emilio Willems suggests the seigniorial state owner as the autocratic head of his extended family, boss of his labor force, commander of his private army, and a power contender in local politics.⁸ As an autocrat, the seigniorial state owner was not inclined to recognize the legitimacy of his competitor’s political aspirations, nor was he willing to surrender all his power to the state. Thus, existing political structures could be broken only by the use of force. In this way, the stage was set for the dialectic interplay between autocracy and rebellion. The former was an expression of the dominant classes protection of their social interest and the latter became the response of the dominated classes.

Exploitation includes the ways in which a human society uses technological strategies to adapt to the environment. In Mesoamerica today, I find a tendency toward capitalist modernization using capital intensive technology and a revolutionary tendency oriented toward structural change and labor intensive technologies. I can then set the opposition in this category as being that of modernization vs. development/liberation. The basic lesson of dependency theory is that the interplay between the internal Latin American structures and international structures is the critical starting point for an understanding of the process of Latin American development. In this sense, dependency theory challenges the concept of modernization as the only path for development. Furthermore, dependency perspective creates the theoretical need to differentiate the concept of modernization from that of development. Jack Corbett and Scott Whiteford have attempted to define modernization as an “inherently uneven process which creates greater dependence and subordination of regions and populations to urban-industrial centers and elite classes.” On the other hand, development is defined as a process in which structural change leads to more equitable distribution of power

and resulting in increasing standards of living of the population as a whole. This change can include increased technological efficiency in productive or service sectors.”⁹

The Film Text as Narrative/Dramatic Discourse

The film describes the story of the Sánchez family. Their poor, one-room apartment located in a slum in the heart of Mexico City becomes the privileged site or locus of the narrative. Jesús Sánchez, the father, has been a tenant there for over twenty years, and although his children have moved in and out during this time, the one room is a major point of interaction and stability in their lives. The Sánchez family is a collective character seen by Lewis and Bartlett as representative of a whole sector of the population. Lewis uses the term “culture of poverty” to identify this specific subculture.¹⁰

Lewis identifies some traits or cultural complexes that are related to the primary message systems that we will be using in our analysis: sexuality, association and defense. These categories can be seen in dialectical terms: *Machismo* or the cult of virility opposes *Marianismo* or the cult of femininity; the predominance of the nuclear family contrasts with the patripotestal extended family; and a strong predisposition towards autocratic/authoritarian behavior eventually generates an opposing rebellious attitude.

The film features Sánchez, the father, as a central character of the plot. His sons and daughters appear in brief sub-plots interspersed in the narrative. The story begins with a Catholic pilgrimage in rural Mexico. The icon of the Virgin of Guadalupe is featured as a key cultural motif. Indeed, the Guadalupe icon could be regarded as a cultural archetype that shapes and sets the limits for the construction of the female identity in Mesoamerican societies. Guadalupe is seen as the virgin mother, the protector of the humble and the poor as mediator of God towards the indigenous people. As a result, the Guadalupe virgin functions as a cultural factor that has an impact in the cultural world of Mesoamerica. Octavio Paz argues that the social significance of Guadalupe as a cultural assimilation instrument is deeply tied to the process of cultural *mestizaje*.¹¹ It is interesting to observe at this juncture that Sánchez Family represents a stratum of *mestizo* culture with deep roots into indigenous culture.

A first person narrator, Consuelo, one of the Sánchez children, tells us the story of her family. Consuelo explains about the death of

her mother, and the lack of affection that resulted after her death. A series of shots identify the rest of the children: Roberto drinks; Manuel is a gambler; and Martha is making out with her boyfriend. In downtown Mexico City, in the so-called Zócalo or main plaza, the father Jesús Sánchez appears. The dramatic conflict of the story is centered on the struggle between Jesús Sánchez and his sons and daughter. However, the predominant figure and source of conflict in the narrative is his daughter Consuelo. For the purposes of this analysis, I will focus on the film sequences associated with the development of this central conflict.

Sánchez is introduced as an employee of a restaurant. The scene between the restaurant owner and Sánchez is indicative of a class conflict in which the autocratic patriarchal figure corresponds to the owner, while Sánchez in this particular context, takes on a filial attitude. Sánchez assumes a submissive role to denote respect for his boss superior status. He requests a salary raise because, he argues, his children have grown and he wants to build them a house. This is his dream as patriarch of his family. He wants a house with a room for every one of his children. This specific goal appears as the super-objective of Sánchez, a motivation that alludes to the primary message system of association. In this sense, Sánchez is indeed a member of a social stratum that Lewis labels “culture of poverty.” In terms of the category of association, he would fit in the condition described as the unstable nuclear family. However, he reflects the aspirations and values associated with the patripotestal extended family complex, as his dream is to become a landowner and to build a house with a room for every one of his children. He dreams of living the life of a patriarch of the extended family, but he lacks the means to achieve it. Eventually, though, by a stroke of luck, he wins the lottery and is able to buy land and build his home.

Sánchez’s request for a salary raise is denied by his boss. As he leaves the office, Sánchez expresses a rebellious attitude with a particular body gesture that for Mexicans represents the phrase *chinga tu madre* (loosely translated as fornication with your mother) which can be described as the ultimate insult in *macho* mythology. Octavio Paz remarks on the significance of the verb *chingar* in the following text: “The verb denotes violence, and penetration in the other by force, and also to hurt, scratch, violate bodies and souls, destroy...the idea of rape rules all the significations.”¹²

This episode could be seen through the lens of “defense” as a primary message system. Jesús Sánchez, the autocratic head of his family, appears submissive with the restaurant owner. However when unable to achieve his objective, he rebels against the authority of his bourgeois boss. This gesture appears as a symptomatic sign that reveals the rebellious attitudes underneath Sánchez—apparent submissiveness. In a more general sense, this particular attitude could represent the rebellious attitude of the whole “culture of poverty.”

Within the narrative, Consuelo represents the character who challenges the autocratic rule of her father. She represents the cultural legacy of *Marianismo*, but also the aspirations of modern women. She expresses a rebellious attitude that is based on her need for independence and self-sufficiency. At first she is portrayed in a position of submission to the patriarchal figure of Sánchez. A clear symbol of this relationship is the feet-cleansing ritual where Consuelo’s filial submission and Sánchez’s position as the autocratic macho are visually reinforced.

As the narrative develops, she takes on a rebellious attitude. Consuelo’s conflict with her father is related to a series of interconnected issues all spreading from Sánchez’s autocratic and *machista* character. Lewis describes Consuelo’s motives to rebel as due to the lack of affection in her family, and her need for freedom and independence. She rebels against her father because he has lost touch with love, with his family, and even with himself. Her first open rebellion occurs when her father is attempting to have sex with his new woman. She rebels against this action out of the sense of respect for her dead mother. Throughout the confrontation, Sánchez’s *macho* behavior is illustrated as he justifies his conduct arguing that it is his natural right under his own roof. He is the master of his house and he can do as he well pleases—a clear indication of an autocratic and *machista* attitude.

This last episode is related to the sub-code of sexuality and expresses a typical macho behavior in more than one sense. Sánchez is also portrayed as a man of many women. These consensual unions are also typical of the “culture of poverty” since their situation is plagued by a set of unstable conditions, such as unemployment or sub-employment, the need to migrate for seasonal labor and the macho attitude of indifference and irresponsibility towards women and children. Living at the margins of institutionalized life and barely

making it also means that Sánchez is marginal from the institutions of church and marriage.

Consuelo's rebellion leads her to the grandmother's house. Her grandmother is also named Guadalupe after the virgin and represents the voice of *Marianismo* as a cultural tradition. In the episode, she lectures Consuelo on the role of women in Mexican society: "Many years will go by until woman can be free...a woman has to be a very special person and accept the *machista* ways of the man with dignity and be the chain that ties the family together."¹³ Our heroine is culturally bound by the grandmother, who acts as the mother in absentia, and also as the keeper of tradition and of the ways of womanhood in the context of *Marianismo* as a cultural model of behavior.

As the film continues, Consuelo's act of rebellion leads her to leave the patriarchal roof in search of her identity. She gets involved with the first candidate that comes around, gets pregnant and has an abortion. At the peak of her crisis, Sánchez rescues her and brings her back to the paternal home. In terms of the dramatic story, the first crisis has ended, but it eventually triggers a second crisis.

In the next crisis, Sánchez brings a daughter from another marriage into the parental household. Consuelo becomes jealous of her new sister and resentful because her father has given her step-sister the family name. Consuelo's frustration erupts when she deliberately tells her father what the neighbors are saying: that he is having an affair with his new daughter! Sánchez explodes and slaps Consuelo in the face. Consuelo takes her father's picture, throws it to the floor and steps on it. Symbolically speaking, Consuelo destroys her atavistic ties to the patriarch. This leads her to work as a waitress in a night club, which in Mexico would be considered bordering with open prostitution. For Sánchez, she becomes a whore, which would be the ultimate offence to his dignity as patriarchal father and *macho*. The theme of "women as whores" runs deeply in Sánchez's worldview. This is reiterated as a motif indicating Jesús Sánchez's perception.

The final scene opens with Sánchez already living in his new home, where there is a room for each of his sons and daughters. He is having a celebration, a dinner in the open patio. All of his children are there, except Consuelo. He is bragging about how an owner of his own house can say "fuck to the rest of the world." Suddenly,

Consuelo appears. By this time she has graduated as a stewardess and considers herself free from the influence of her father. She confronts her father accusing him of cruelty and oppression against his children. Her speech of condemnation comes to a climax when she plots the ultimate offense for her father. She argues that he doesn't love her and her brothers because he knows that they are not his children, therefore setting Sánchez in the position of the betrayed *macho*. Sánchez goes mad in a violent attack hitting Consuelo and any one near him. A moment later, Sánchez is seen in a reflective attitude while his daughter appears in the background. She has come to apologize and to ask forgiveness. Consuelo reveals that she only wanted to hurt him, that, of course, they are his children, and she wants to find a relation of love between father and daughter. Then she says: "I love you father, father do you love me?" He answers: "I don't know how!" Sánchez is incapable of loving because his autocratic/macho mask has crippled his sensitivity.

This final confrontation between father and daughter reveals the dynamics of a conflict that has roots in the primary message systems of sexuality, defense and association. In relation to sexuality, there is the strong identification of Sánchez's behavior with the *macho* complex. His *machismo* has crippled his capacity for love because love is considered within the *macho* world as "feminine." On the contrary, to be a *macho* is to be hermetic, never to love openly because people would abuse you. However, his autocratic mask is shattered by the love of his daughter, and in this sense, Consuelo proves the *Marianismo* belief that women are spiritually stronger than men.

Sánchez's aspiration and need for independence leads him to build a house where every one of his children's nuclear families has their space. This represents the mythology of the extended family in which every member would occupy a physical space in the patriarchal household. Consuelo, however, won't live with him anymore. She has her own dreams of independence. Her struggle is twofold: against the prevailing *macho* attitudes in her society, and against the lower economic status in which she is also immersed.

Consuelo represents the rebelliousness of the oppressed and subjugated, while Sánchez, although living the culture of poverty, is ideologically alienated to a world view of the dominant culture in which *machismo*, autocracy and the patriarchal extended family are

the dominant values. The final confrontation is then between the authoritarian, *machista* and extended family values identified with Sánchez and the *Marianismo*, rebelliousness and nuclear family tendencies identified with Consuelo.

Conclusion

What does this movie reveal in terms of the story and finally about the culture of poverty within the context of modern Mexico and Central America? First of all, I believe it indicates how cultural behaviors can be discovered in a film discourse and how these are determined by some deep structure or cultural sediment that is at the base of our perceptions, attitudes, and social practices as members of a particular culture. The film relies on notions of the “culture of poverty” and informs in a dramatic/narrative structure, the set of dilemmas and expectations that surround this specific subculture.

In terms of the methodological instrument “The Mesoamerican Cultural Code,” we can say that it is as a method tailored for cultural analysis. Having the primary message systems as analytical tools allows for a reading based on cultural categories. Furthermore, this type of cultural analysis shows the relationship between the film as dramatic/narrative discourse and the embedded cultural subtext. The dramatic situation of the *Children of Sánchez* offers a rich site to examine the primary message systems of association, sexuality and defense within Mesoamerican culture. By applying these three categories of the cultural code as analytical tools, we have forced the text to reveal traits, premises, rituals, symbols and complexes that are prevalent in a particular subculture of Mesoamerica.

Notes

¹ Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sánchez*. (London: Hilman and Sons, 1961).

² Paul Kirchhoff, “Mesoamérica: Sus límites geográficos, composición étnica y caracteres culturales” en *Acta Americana*, 1. (Revista de la Sociedad de Antropología y Geografía, 1943), p. 92f.

³ Michael Salovesh, "Person and Polity in Mexican Cultures: Another View of Social Organization," *Heritage of a Conquest: Thirty Years Later*, Carl Rendall, Jhon Hawkins and Laurel Bossen (eds.) (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1983), p. 20.

⁴ Alfonso Moisés, *An Alternative Strategy for Communication and Development in the Mesoamerican Cultural Area* (Unpublished dissertation, Northwestern University, 1988), p. 119.

⁵ Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language*. (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1959), p. 62.

⁶ John Gillin, "Ethos components in Modern Latin American Culture," *Latin American Culture and Society*, Dwight Heath and Richard Adams (eds.) (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 505.

⁷ Evelyn P. Stevens, "Marianismo the Other Face of Machismo in Latin America," *Female and Male in Latin America*, Ann Pescatello, (ed.) (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973), p. 90.

⁸ Emilio Willems, *Latin American Culture: An Anthropological Synthesis*. (New York, Harper and Row, 1975), p. 24.

⁹ Jack Corbett and Scott Whiteford, "State Penetration and Development in Mesoamerica, 1950-1980," *Heritage of a Conquest: Thirty Years Later* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1983), p. 29.

¹⁰ Lewis states, "Some of the social and psychological characteristics (of this poor urban part of the population) include living in crowded quarters, a lack of privacy, gregariousness, a high incidence of alcoholism, frequent use of physical violence in training of children, wife beating, early initiation into sex, free unions and consensual marriages, a relatively high incidence of abandonment of mothers and children, a trend toward mothered centered families and a much greater knowledge of maternal relatives, the predominance of the nuclear family, a strong predisposition to authoritarianism, and a great emphasis in family solidarity-an ideal only rarely achieved. Other traits include a strong present time orientation with relatively little ability to defer gratification and plan for the future, a sense of resignation and fatalism based upon the realities of their difficult life situation, a belief in male superiority which reaches crystallization in

machismo or the cult of masculinity, a corresponding martyr complex among women, and finally, a high tolerance for psychological pathology of all sorts.” Lewis, p. xxvi.

¹¹ Octavio Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad*. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1959).

¹² Paz.

¹³ Hall Barlett, *The Children of Sánchez*. (Distributor: Lone Star Pictures International, 1978).

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