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*Shopping and Sociability at a Traditional Market  
in Mazatlán, Sinaloa, Mexico\**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the anthropology of markets and shopping practices in Mercado Pino Suárez, a traditional indoor market located in the historic center of Mazatlán, Mexico. The research objective of this anthropological fieldwork is to investigate how markets are a center for social relationships that influence shopping and consumption practices. Sociability between consumers and vendors is significant, as it represents the traditional market. The field research is a two-month-long summer project to understand why people shop at the market, with a major focus on shopping for food-related products. Interviews and participant observation, including participation as a consumer and as a volunteer vendor, support observations of social shopping practices that occur within the market. Shoppers attend the market for various reasons, such as convenience, price, and quality of produce; however, this paper will show how shoppers visit the market for the experience of socializing, which contributes to familiarity and trust from knowing vendors and their products. Shopper and vendor interactions go beyond economic reasons to create social influences in the participants' daily lives, illustrating the market's strong effect in shaping local culture.

**KEY WORDS** Markets; Mexico; Anthropology; Sociability; Food

Traditional markets are places of sociability and exchange, transferring knowledge and influencing consumption practices within a community. If supermarkets are considered impersonal places for the consumer, how are traditional markets embedded within a community's social experience? In this paper, I share some anthropological fieldwork experiences that demonstrated sociability in the market. The purpose of this ethnographic study is to elucidate the shoppers' experience and vendor-consumer interactions at a large indoor Mexican market, Mercado Pino Suárez, in Mazatlán, Sinaloa, and to illuminate how traditional markets are still embedded within a local community. I observed the formation

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of social relationships through face-to-face communication between vendors, shoppers, suppliers, and administrators at the market. Consumption at a market involves sociability that contrasts strongly with contemporary shoppers at supermarkets; the market is a place where people can meet strangers (and friends) and socialize with them, rather than the typically more utilitarian experience of shoppers at supermarkets (Hine 2002).

Several studies on market life in the anthropological literature guided my research. Rachel Black (2012) studies Porto Palazzo, the largest open-air market in Europe. Black performs participant observation as a volunteer of the market and explains how the Italian market is the connection among different realities as she observes the social and economic exchanges and consumption practices within a multicultural space. According to Black, “At a very basic level, the concept of a market is dependent on the social” (2012:4). In her study, the market is a place centered on food, community, and cultural diversity associated with cooking, preparing meals, and eating, and people have the ability to connect themselves to food and to each other.

In my study, I was determined to look at how economic exchanges, shopping practices, and the sharing of ideas about food shaped social relations in the market. Karl Polanyi, author of *The Great Transformation*, discusses the concept of embeddedness referring to trust and mutual understanding in the market, saying that “social relations are embedded in the economic system” (1944:60). Similarly, I argue that shopping is embedded in social relations of trust and reciprocity.

The fieldwork was an approximately two-month-long summer project in Mazatlán, Mexico. I chose to study Mercado Pino Suárez because it is the central market in the historic center and was built in 1899, making it the oldest market in the city. It is the largest indoor market in Mazatlán, with more than 250 vendors, and is a major tourist destination (Mazatlán Construyendo Futuro 1999). In anthropology, interviews and participant observation are important methods, and I felt that I was able to perform participant observation at the market by being a volunteer and consumer. I volunteered in various stands within the market. I first went to a *dulcería*, a sweetshop, to undertake my participant observation. Other places I worked were a *cremería* (dairy store), a *frutería* (fruits and vegetables store), and a souvenir store. I was able to get interviews from these stores as well as two *carnicerías* (butcher shops), a kitchenwares stand, and a *pescaería* (seafood store).

I was introduced to the market by my grandmother, who has lived in Mazatlán for 23 years. During the time of scoping the market, I reached out to my grandmother’s friend who lives in the historic center. Her name is Margarita<sup>1</sup>, and she lives just three blocks away from the market. She would spend two or three days each week going shopping for whatever she would need at the market. It was evident how proud she was to have the power and capability to walk from her home to the market; despite being elderly, she was happy at how she was living. The interesting thing is that her family lives out in El Cid, a large resort and residential area, but she chooses to live in the historic center. She is content with living on her own, and it has become a part of her identity. During an interview, Margarita said that she goes to the market because it is convenient for her and she likes that everything at the market is fresh; all the goods are brought in daily to the market.

Toward the end of my fieldwork, I decided to shadow Margarita on a trip to the market. I observed how shopping at the market is a culturally embedded practice. During the walk, I was already observing Margarita's relationships with friends, neighbors, and local shop owners. She was saying hello and greeting her friends as she made her way to the market. I saw that the socializing space of the market could expand to where Margarita began her walk because she was already conversing with shoppers of the market. Even in a brief conversation or when responding to questions, she was already talking about going to the market.

We walked around the market, and during this time, Margarita wanted to know where I wanted to go, but I told her to follow her normal routine. We went to a *panadería*, and she purchased specialty Mexican breads. At the shop, all of the breads were spread out on top of the wooden counter. One of the breads she picked out was *Pan Integral Puro Trigo*, or pure wheat bread, from the company Pinturitas Maryel, made in Culiacán, Sinaloa. The bread has *piloncillo* in the center, which is Mexican brown sugar.

The *panadería* would ask which bread the customer wanted before picking the bread out and wrapping it in a bag. I took note in this interaction of who did the choosing, because it establishes a sense of trust in the vendor picking out the best item for their customer. Margarita was able to choose which bread she wanted while trusting that the vendor would handle the bread with care and wouldn't damage it in any way. In supermarkets such as Wal-Mart and MEGA, there are *panaderías* where customers are able to take a large tray and pick and choose the breads at this section of the store, but there isn't a trust between the customer and cashier or any seller at the supermarket. The individual is left with his or her own decision of which breads to choose. I found this trust and intimacy to be an interesting component in the market. There is trust in the supermarket that the food won't be poisonous, but it is an impersonal trust based on laws and marketing rather than on personal relationships.

We left the *panadería*, and Margarita started looking for another place to buy goods for her house. We took a couple of small paths in the indoor market that led us to the *fruterías*. Margarita chose a stand randomly and purchased a papaya. I watched her interaction as she asked how much the papaya was; later, she told me that the papaya cost way too much for what it was worth. She bought it anyway, because she wanted the papaya and wanted to show me what she would purchase at the *frutería* in the market. If a papaya was deemed of lower quality than other papayas, perhaps it was starting to get old, and then the vendor would make it cheaper; that is what the shopper would have to trust. The shopper communicates with the vendor to ask about the price and quality of the produce, perhaps asking how long it will last depending on the quality.

Margarita's interaction with the vendor showed that although she knew she wasn't getting a good deal, she wasn't haggling for a lower price. She might take her business elsewhere the next time. Locals appear to be more trusting or accepting of the price they are about to pay, whereas foreigners are skeptical of prices. There may be a negotiation for a different price, but there is no haggling allowed in the market. There is unwarranted haggling at the souvenir shops, however. Customers unaware of Mexican consumer culture and of the norms of market shopping practice will go to the souvenir shops and haggle fixed prices of shirts, jewelry, and other Mexican artisan wares. I spoke

with an owner of one of the souvenir shops, who would be upset when tourists haggled for lower prices. It was especially upsetting for the vendors when foreigners from other countries would haggle because the currency exchange for the Mexican peso is much lower than for currencies from countries such as the United States and Canada, making it already inexpensive for foreigners paying the fixed price for merchandise.

As part of my participant observation, I decided to volunteer at a *dulcería*; it was a popular stand at the market where I would be able to see a lot of customer and vendor interactions. The different candies and piñatas would excite children as they passed by, and adults would be interested in the local candies that were available. People would ask for local food because they wanted to use the foods as specialty gifts.

The three main workers at the *dulcería* were Eduardo; his wife, Teresa; and their nephew. I would often ask questions to Eduardo, the owner of the store and secretary of the market's administration team. The *dulcería* would get suppliers coming in from different organizations and companies. One man I saw every day would bring in *Suaves*, which are coconut marshmallows that many people enjoyed because they are a local treat of Mazatlán. These *Suaves* are made with minimal ingredients and no preservatives, so they attract a lot of customers and tourists.

At the *cremería* next door to the *dulcería*, I met Teresa's sister Rosa. Rosa's assistant workers were Rodrigo and Ximena. Sometimes Teresa's daughter would help out at the *cremería* on summer vacation. Her help was certainly a good thing, because summer is the busiest time for market vendors. The families were comfortable in the market and would often share jokes with each other. It was an honor to be privy to the intimacies of the families' interactions and work in the market.

I also volunteered at the *cremería* and had a chance to meet Ximena, who is just a little older than me. The first time I met Ximena, I was watching her make ceviche from ingredients she had bought at the market. The type of ceviche she made is very popular in Mazatlán. She mixed *dorado*, or mahi mahi fish (already filleted and ground at a *pescaría*), with diced onion, carrots, cucumber, and cilantro, then added lime juice and salt. Her work was improvisational, using the freezer as a countertop. She took some of the tostadas that the *cremería* was selling and gave me a bit to try and to take home to my grandmother. I not only got a delicious snack but also learned about Mazatlán's traditional ceviche.

One could buy many things at the *cremería*: cheese, milk, fresh eggs, tostadas, salsa, tamales colorados, and lunch meat. The tamales colorados were red chili tamales made by Ximena's mother. Sometimes Ximena would make and sell *mangoñadas*, which are mango-juice popsicles dipped in *chamoy*, a chili and fruit syrup, and *tajin*, chili and lime seasoning that she got from the *dulcería*. Similar to the vendor at the *panadería*, the *cremería* vendor would pick out eggs for the shopper. Meat and cheese are sold by weight. I'd watch as Ximena would cut slices of baloney or cut a chunk of *queso fresco*, fresh cheese, for a customer. Often, the *queso fresco* supplier would come in to talk with Ximena. He would bring wheels of cheese that his family makes at a local farm.

Sometimes, knowledge is passed between vendors. For example, vendors such as Ximena would get food from *taquerías*, small restaurants selling tacos, and juice shops. Sometimes these same vendors would visit Ximena at the *cremería*. It's in this way that

recipes and tastes travel. Ximena's favorite meal to order from the *taquerías* was *churrasco*. She describes it as a taco or tostada that has *carne asada* (grilled beef) with *queso chihuahua* (Mexican cheese), guacamole, salsa, and other vegetables mixed in. Both Teresa's daughter and Ximena really like this dish, and Ximena said she likes to cook this at home.

There were instances when I noticed friendship among vendors, customers, and distributors. The vendors knew their suppliers and distributors by name and engaged in frequent conversation. One couple worked for a *taquería* in the market and would visit the *dulcería* regularly to see Eduardo. The owner of the *frutería* that I also had a chance to volunteer at was Eduardo's brother, Manuel. His wife, Paula, introduced me to the restaurant owner of Muchacho Alegre, a popular restaurant on the *malecón* (boardwalk) that would play *banda*, a famous music genre from Sinaloa. Paula knew the restaurant owner because he was a regular customer. I saw another example of long-lasting social relations when I saw a previous owner of a shop that sold dried chilies in the market. The owner was sitting at the café next to Eduardo and Teresa's *dulcería*. The owner of the café and the previous owner of the chilies store were friends. I learned that the previous owner would often spend her afternoons at the market, hanging out with her old friends. Surprisingly, I saw this woman again when I went to the *panadería* during my trip with Margarita. She was playing a makeshift miniature soccer game with a little girl, using chiclet gum as the soccer ball on the bread counter.

"Whether you are a buyer or a seller, when you are in the market, you're part of a performance. You're looking. You're learning. You're alive," explains Hine (2002:62). As an anthropologist, I went to the market to conduct ethnographic research to understand Mexican market culture. The people in the market were friends and family who shared a common interest of shopping, eating, cooking, and socializing with one another. It was a daily ritual for many of the people who worked in the market, and the market therefore became a central part of their lives. Friends and family members would work together at the market. Frequent shoppers of certain stands formed trust with vendors. Rather than shopping at a place that is anonymous to the consumer, people could feel trust and gain knowledge of ideas, especially about food, at a place like the market. I saw that Mercado Pino Suárez benefited local communities by bringing the knowledge of food culture that allowed consumers to create identities and maintain social relations. James Carrier (1998) suggests that in the United States during the 20th century, shopping was increasingly abstracted from social relations into a pure market transaction. After observing the local community social interactions within Mercado Pino Suárez, I know the market remains embedded in society.

## ENDNOTE

1. All names provided for people in the Mazatlán community are pseudonyms.

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