AGRO PRODUCTIVIDAD

Colegio de Postgraduados

The chita, handicrafts in vegetable fibers

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Identify the vegetable fibers and activities carried out in the production of basketry, in particular the chita, as the most significant craft of the community of San Miguel Tenango (SMT), in Zacatlán, Puebla.

Disign/methodology/approach: A phenomenological study oriented to the artisan production of San Miguel Tenango was carried out, through documentary research, observation and interviews with artisans and key informants. The value chain approach was used to understand the process, the inputs and the actors involved in the elaboration of the chita, the main handicraft in vegetable fibers in the study site.

Results: The vegetable fibers used in the elaboration of traditional crafts were identified, the "chita" was distinguished as the most significant. The links of the value chain in production were recognized, as well as the perception that artisans have about their work.

Study limitations/implications: Most of the people dedicated to basketry do not recognize themselves as artisans, moreover, they are not organized or adequately account for the cost of their work.

Findings/conclusions: The plant species used in the elaboration of handicrafts are easily accessible for their use; although discrimination against native (ethnic) peoples and the use of traditional materials persists. They are biodegradable, highly resistant, flexible and can be an ecological option in the face of the indiscriminate use of synthetic materials.

Keywords: Handicrafts, Indigenous Peoples, vegetable fibers, Zacatlán, chita, value chain.

Citation: Carrasco-Soria, J., Sánchez-Quintanar, C., Figueroa- Rodríguez, Ó. L., Castañeda-Mendoza, A., Jiménez-Velázquez, M. A. (2022). The chita, handicrafts in vegetable fibers. *Agro Productividad*. https://doi.org/10.32854/agrop.v15i11.2288

Academic Editors: Jorge Cadena Iñiguez and Libia Iris Trejo Téllez

Received: June 06, 2022.
Accepted: November 09, 2022.
Published on-line: December 20, 2022.

Agro Productividad, 15(11). November. 2022. pp: 141-147.

INTRODUCTION

In the Sierra Norte of the State of Puebla, Mexico, there are various Indigenous People, among their cultural richness they preserve a link with nature that provides them with various inputs. In the community of San Miguel Tenango, in Zacatlán, there are plant species that grow wild, with which utensils are made that, in addition to being used by the community, have become a valued merchandise for tourism. In this municipality, tourism has been a trigger for local development, involving local actors with various economic activities, as well as institutions that interact with each other, having a positive impact (Figueroa, 2017); however, the benefits are not reaching the entire population.

One of the objectives of rural development is to improve the quality of life of the people, and for this, strategies are required to avoid the migration of the inhabitants, improving their income at the local level, in order to maintain local employment, reduce migration and poverty. Work with vegetable fibers has ancient roots in Mexico; however, in this type of crafts there is no value chain approach, which could help in having a dynamic analysis and a holistic vision, since it analyzes activities, people and actions, because culturally the producer only deals with the production stage without taking into account other activities such as marketing, market analysis, negotiation processes and strategic planning, necessary to be successful in the market (Figueroa, 2012). The art of weaving palm leaves (*Yucca filifera*), wicker sticks (*Salix viminalis*), reeds (*Phragmites australis*), jonote (*Heliocarpus appendiculatus*), and vines (*Mikania glomerata*), among others, arises as a necessity where the natural environment offers whatever is used (Anonymous, 2019). Based on the above, the objective was to identify the activities carried out during the production of handicrafts with vegetable fibers, applying the value chain approach in the chita, in order to learn the perception that artisans have of their trade and those that they have of themselves.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study site

San Miguel Tenango is located southeast of the municipal capital of Zacatlán, to reach the town you have to travel 15.3 km of road through the "Barranca de los Jilgueros", (López, 1998) at an altitude of 1993 masl, latitude and longitude 19.9062483, −97.9395337, its climate is humid temperate, with rain all year round. It has a population of 1,323 inhabitants, 708 women and 615 men, with 94.86% Indigenous Population, 64.02% of the population speak an indigenous language and only 3.25% do not speak Spanish, INEGI (2020). The main economic activities are agriculture and commerce (INAFRED, 2020). However, as of April 2011, with the appointment of Zacatlán as a "magical town", the services sector has become another of the main activities of the municipality and an opportunity for more people to supplement their income with the preparation and sale of handicrafts.

Intervention method

It is a case study focused on the artisans dedicated to the elaboration of basketry from San Miguel Tenango, in Zacatlán, Puebla, Mexico. A phenomenological method was chosen, since it requires the description that people make about the experiences lived around a situation or event, in order to capture the fact or phenomenon as close as possible to reality. The observation technique was used, interviewing artisans and people considered key because of their knowledge of the community and artisan work. The chain approach is appropriate for carrying out diagnoses that are useful for development projects that make an organization efficient in the market (Figueroa, 2012). Additionally, the links of the value chain were identified (Porter, 1986) in order to determine competitive advantage from the set of activities in the processes, creating value in the products and competing with similar products in the market (Quintero, 2016).

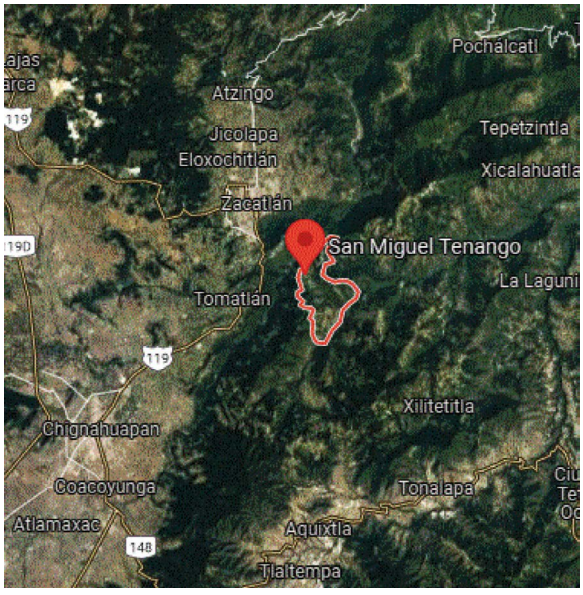

Figure 1. Satelital map of San Miguel Tenango. Source: Google, date november, 2021.

Variables and statistical analysis

Interviews were conducted with 10 key informants (five men and five women), mostly City Council managers and some of the most outstanding SMT artisans, as well as 10 Tenango artisans dedicated to basketry (eight women and two men), who contributed with: characteristics in general terms of the community, matlahuacal (*Cornus excelsa*), ixtle (*Agave* sp.) and palm (*Yucca filifera*) were identified as the main fibers used in basketry. The study variables that were identified were: family and crafts, cultural identity, organization and production, marketing, economy and tourism, and socioeconomic effects of craft work. Transcription, concentration, categorization and coding were carried out for the analysis of the interviews, through the Excel program statistical tools were applied in order to obtain data such as: average, percentage, mean, median, maximum, minimum; Dynamic tables were also prepared to organize, analyze and interpret the information collected, achieving the elaboration of the chita value chain.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Community Overview

The municipality of Zacatlán has large extensions of coniferous forests and mountain cloud forest; where the matlahuacal (*Cornus excelsa*), ixtle (*Agave* sp.) and palm (*Yucca filifera*) are found, among other plant species, in their natural state (Iracheta, 2010). The craft called chita, also known as huacal, is made from the extracted vegetable fibers. According to the Great Nahuatl Dictionary of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (2012), the chita is an object of pre-Hispanic origin, originally called "chitatli" that appears in the Acolhuacan and Telleriano Codes. In San Miguel Tenango the "chita" is part of the traditional clothing of men and women, and unlike other regions where shawls are used to transport infants, in this region the chitas are mainly used for this purpose, although they

are also a load implement to carry fruit, harvest corn, or transport other products in their daily lives. Over time, artisans have used these fibers to make new products, adapting to the needs and tastes of local and visiting buyers. Table 1 was prepared with data provided by the artisans and documentary information, it describes the plant species from which the fibers used in basketry are extracted.

Chita or huacal value chain

Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 indicate the brief links in the "chita" handicraft value chain, in order to make it more simplified and to be able to visualize the interrelationship between the various links.

Table 1. Vegetable fibers from which chitas are made.

Matlahuacal	Ixtle	Palm
Scientific name: (*Cornus excelsa* H.B.K.) Family Cornaceae, Common name: olive, wild jasmine, etc. (Peredo, 2020) in Zacatlán it is known as matlahuacal. It grows in humid canyons and bordering some streams in oak and pine forests. It is distributed in Guatemala, Honduras, Panama and in a large part of Mexico (Calderón, 2001). Uses: helps control erosion, infiltrates rainwater, improves soil, honey species, ornamental and basketry.	Extracted from the Maguey Tlaximalmitl (maguey to scrape) *Agave* sp. Small maguey that grows on the slopes of the hills of San Miguel Tenango. Deforestation, droughts and fires that arise every year are reducing the population of this species. Its main use is the extraction of the ixtle, from which ties, loins for pack animals, among other utensils can be made.	It can be "hat palm", yucca or izote (also called quisiote) (*Yucca filifera*) grows wild on the slopes of the hills, it is used fresh either green (outer part) or white (internal part), it is common that it is used as "live posts" to delimit the cultivation lands in this region.

Source: Own elaboration with research data.

Figure 2. Links in the chita value chain.

Figure 3. Sample of chita crafts based on vegetable fibers.

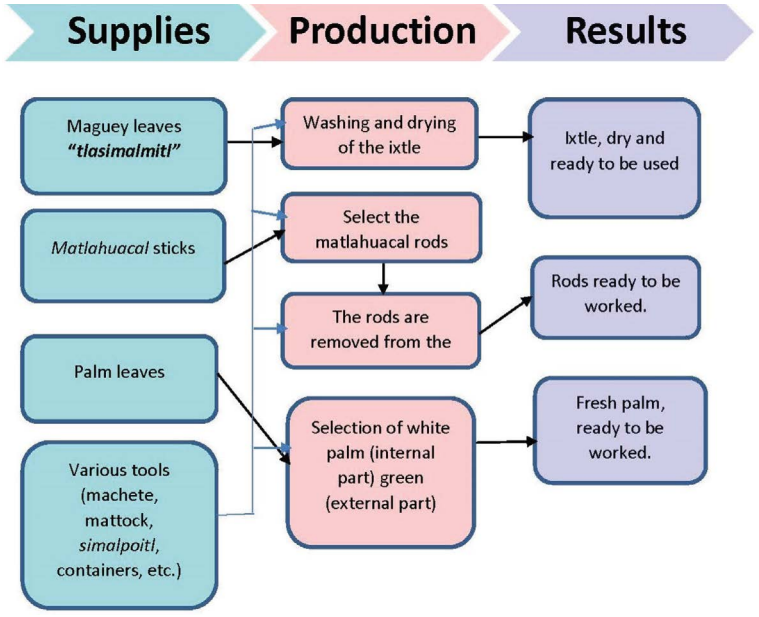

Figure 4. Brief description of the vegetable fibers for the elaboration of the final product.

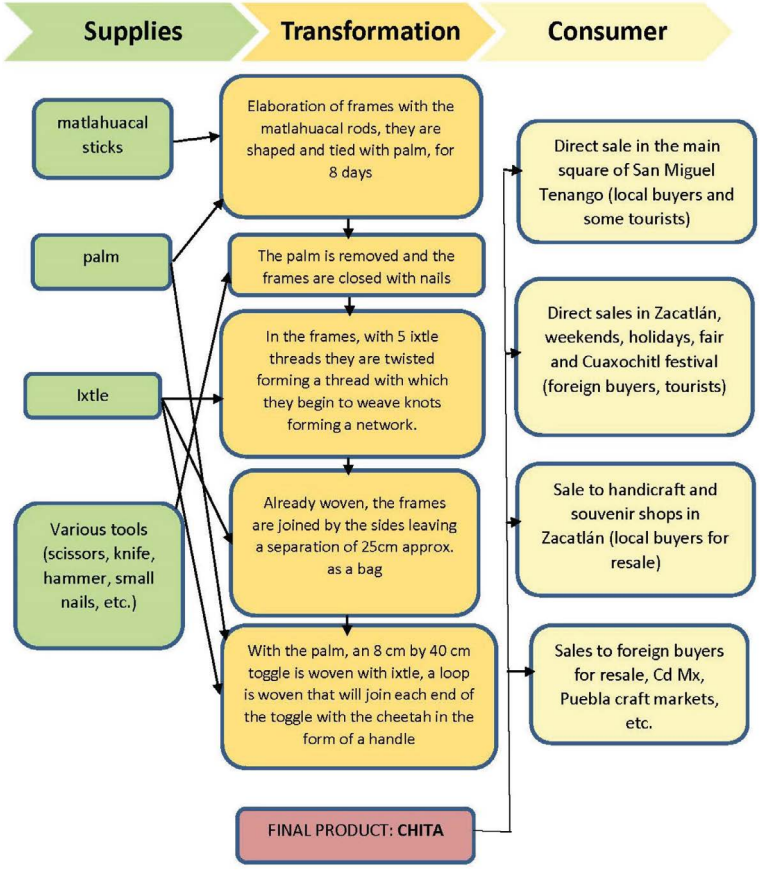

Figure 5. Links in the value chain of "cheetah" handicrafts based on vegetable fibers.

The actors in the chita value chain are artisans, jarcierías, tlapalerías, artisan shops, local buyers, foreigners, resellers (Figure 4).

Production costs of a standard size chita

The preparation begins with a kg of ixtle at a cost of $5.14 USD, 300 g of palm at a cost of $1.54 USD, as well as free sticks, nails at $0.15 USD, and a processing time of 15 days, added to the marketing event, which includes transportation to the point of sale for $1.85 USD, adding a final total of the chita that ranges between $12.86 USD and $18.00 USD (Prices in the month of October 2021).

Ditrect sales are made in the streets of the center of Zacatlán, where they do not have a fixed place and sometimes they are also charged for occupying a space, sometimes they are discriminated by the artisans of the municipal head, sometimes, the municipal Tourism Directorate invites them to occupy a stand at significant events such as the "Cuaxochitl" festival or the "Apple Fair" among others. Some artisans from Tenango concur in five semi-formal artisan organizations that bear the names: Sihuamej Ma Xochil Tlatzomani, Macehual Zihuatzitzin Matiquitini, Tojtla Tojtojmi tlajkitini, Yolotl and Xochitl, two of these share a local artisan shop in the lower part of the auxiliar presidency of San Miguel Tenango; however, and according to what was expressed by the artisans, they need to be supported through government institutions, so that the artisans themselves recognize themselves as artisans.

It is important to specify that a productive chain, by consuming what is produced locally, generates development, jobs and possibly inhibits the desire of the population to migrate in search of sustenance, improving living conditions in general. For the artisans, making and selling their chitas is a symbol of pride and satisfaction, the transmission of knowledge mostly occurs in childhood, within the family nucleus, strengthening their identity ties with their community; however, Tenango artisans do not have an efficient organization, they usually work in isolation, and lack communication and cooperation networks that allow them to access governmental and non-governmental programs that could strengthen their customs and the use of traditional materials, such as vegetable fibers.

Regarding whether Tenango artisans consider that handicrafts can become their main economic activity, 80% said yes and only 20% said no, mentioning that this would be viable only if tourism increases, taking advantage of the popularity of Zacatlán as a tourist destination and spreading not only the municipal capital but its other localities, thus attracting more customers and increasing sales.

The vegetable fibers to make the chita are still easily accessible; however, it would be advisable to encourage their propagation since, in addition to their artisanal use, they may have other purposes. The findings set the tone for more people in the academic field to become interested in the study of traditional vegetable fibers. It is necessary to carry out field inventories, and it is advisable to use conventional methods to quantify and evaluate the existing resources in the area, as well as their properties and uses in various areas. It is suggested to carry out workshops aimed to artisans, in order to propose strategies such as the value chain approach, make visible the importance of their work, highlight the importance of the interrelationships of the various actors involved in the processes, as well

as the possible advantages to which they can access. Provision of trainning is necessary, also a decent space where they can present their crafts and where they are not discriminated by other artisans, in this way they would achieve better marketing.

CONCLUSIONS

From the phenomenological point of view, the different perspectives of Tenango artisans and the perception that other key people have of artisan work were known, agreeing on the lag that still permeates the living conditions of Indigenous Peoples.

The production of handicrafts is important for Tenango families that are dedicated to it, through the elaboration of the value chain it is noted that the main advantages that SMT artisans have are the vegetable fibers that are in a free natural state, their vast knowledge of handling the materials used, as well as their attachment to their traditions and cultural identity.

Handicrafts are an opportunity for the inhabitants of the Indigenous People to generate new opportunities for development, self-esteem and strengthening of tourism.

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