CRAFTING MEXICO
Intellectuals, Artisans, and the State after the Revolution

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deduce the most plausible explanations and interpretations of historical changes within the community.

These chapters take particular interest in artisan agency and how artisans viewed themselves and their own roles as creators. Did they see themselves as anonymous reproducers of tradition, as elites suggested? What was the role of collectivism versus individualism in their act of creating and marketing their wares? How did they experience indigenousness? And how did they experience the changing articulation between nationality, indigenousness, and aesthetics? By moving between the elite narrative and local power struggles in Olinalá, and by tracing how processes filtered through multiple layers of local society, these chapters argue that the glue that integrates the nation around an ethnicized nationality is not simply a product of elite discourse, international markets, and state institutions. Rather, the strength of this integration lies in the linkages that local communities such as Olinalá built between themselves, the national, and the international, and in the ways nationalist discourses, art markets, and state institutions became imbedded and remade within local society.

Finally, before going any further, it is important to remember that this is not a community study in the usual sense. It is a study of how local, regional, national, and international processes intersected on the local level to impact the power relations that shaped the artisans’ lives. In this context, the town of Olinalá emerges as a point where the local, national, and transnational flow together and where myth and reality intermingle to remake one another. As the following chapters will show, from the Aztec era through the conquest and into the nineteenth century, Olinaltecos used their art to mediate empire, region, nation, and ethnicity. But what was new in the twentieth century was the way the artisans, after the revolution of 1910–20, used their art to stake a claim as producers of national identity and as part of an inclusive and ethnicized nation. Their integration into the postrevolutionary ethnicized nation has come as a product of their struggle over the place and meaning of their art within their community and the nation and, eventually, from their claim that their art and bodies marked them as rightful beneficiaries of state-led transformation.
they knew, had always been isolated. Moreover, their lack of direct contact with the town, due to its physical inaccessibility, made it easy for them to weave their own narratives. A view from Olinalá, however, offers a perspective that challenges aspects of the top-down view.

This chapter reconstructs an alternative narrative of the place of art in Olinalá from the preconquest era through the revolution. It argues that though Olinalá did suffer from isolation by the time of the revolution, it had not always been that way. On the contrary, Olinaltecos had a long history of using their art to mediate their relationship to the state and markets. As such, their art unfolded not as a naïve expression but through local-imperial/national interactions and grounded power struggles. This account is not a general or background history of the town; rather, the intention is to understand how *laqueros* used their art to mediate the intersections among local, regional, national, and transnational power structures.

Power and Place in Olinalá: From Aztec Tribute to Spanish Market

Olinalá owes its existence to Aztec imperial expansion. During the fifteenth century the Aztecs created this Nahua town as an imperial foothold within the ethnically *Tlapaneco* and Mixteco region now known as the Montaña. The town was to serve as a gateway through which the imperial capital of Tenochtitlán gained access to the tropical lowlands that lay beyond the Montaña, from whence the militarized traveling merchants known as *pochteca* derived such riches as jaguar skins and cacao. With an anchor of ethnic loyalists firmly in place, the Aztecs made Olinalá the head town of the administrative and tribute jurisdiction known as Quiyuahteopan. Olinaltecos' link to empire lay in their lacquered gourds, which they traded along imperial routes and rendered as tribute to the Aztec elite.

Along with quetzal feathers, cacao, and spices, the painted gourds of Olinalá ranked among the most treasured possessions of Tenochteco nobles, who used them as vessels from which to drink precious chocolate, the liquid gold of the Aztecs. So esteemed were the gourds that in public feasts only the highest ranked of those present were allowed to imbibe from these lacquered *xícalli*—others had to console themselves with elaborately decorated ceramic cups. Elites even took their gourds with them to the grave, having them placed like hats upon their heads for burial, perhaps to testify to their status and to provide a vessel for drinking chocolate in the afterlife. In the central valley the use of exotic luxury goods was tightly regulated by sumptuary laws, but in Olinalá and its vicinity, gourds of widely varying quality seem to have been available for all classes of society.

A second wave of Nahua migration followed the Spanish and Tlaxcalan conquest of Tenochtitlán in 1521. Fleeing Tenochtecos found refuge in Olinalá, and, in the process, remade the town's relation to the center and to its neighbors. These newcomers cemented the local dominance of Nahua culture, though it was now unmoored from the political and economic domination of the Aztec state. This also marked the beginnings of Olinalá's entry into the Spanish imperial orbit. Elders from the neighboring town of Temalacacingo preserve in oral tradition a story of their town's founding, which the writer Gutierre Tibón recorded during his visit in 1595–60. They explained to Tibón that the people of Olinalá and Temalacacingo descended from sibling warriors fleeing Tenochtitlán. One brother, Temalacatzin, founder of Temalacacingo, strongly opposed mixing with the Spanish conquerors. His sibling Olinaltzin encouraged such intermixture. For the elders of Temalacacingo this explained why Temalacacingo remained pure Nahua while Olinalá, despite its similar history, did not. A few years before Tibón recorded this story, the ethnographer Alejandro Wladimiro Paucid recorded a different version of the myth, told from the perspective of the elders of Olinalá. According to the Olinaltecos, two powerful Aztec *caciques* arrived in what is now Olinalá. They soon entered into a bitter rivalry that ended when Olinaltzin overcame Temalacatzin. The latter submitted himself to Olinaltzin's domination and cowered away to found Temalacacingo. According to this version of the tale, the Franciscans arrived soon after to lead the children of Olinaltzin to Christianity and the Spanish empire. Though the two versions of the myth convey contrasting moral lessons about the power relationship between Olinalá and Temalacacingo, they both affirm Olinalá's reputation for openness to outside cultures (indigenous and nonindigenous alike), its role as the imperial gateway into the region, and its dominance over nearby Nahua communities, including Temalacacingo.

Invading Spaniards took notice of what Hernando de Alvarado Tezozómoc, a descendent of Emperor Moctezuma and translator for the Spanish legal court, later remembered as the "brilliantly painted" gourds esteemed by the Tenochtecos. The Spanish chronicler Juan Suárez de Peralta de-
described them as "gourds that are like porcelain cups, large and small, richly painted" with "finely rendered colorful exteriors." Despite taking notice of these lacquered goods, the Spaniards did not value them as had the Aztecs. The art historian Sonia Pérez Carrillo has conjectured that the absence of surviving objects from the late sixteenth through the early seventeenth centuries suggests that Olinaltecos ceased to produce lacquer, such that they had to relearn the craft in the eighteenth century. But a focus on social and economic processes suggests otherwise.

As a reward for its nonviolent acquiescence to royal authority, the Spanish Crown in the 1530s renewed Olinalá's head town status, making it the administrative center of a República de Indios (an indigenous territory of the Crown) and granting it its own Catholic parish. By that time priests in the region reportedly were baptizing as many as 500 Indians per day. The Crown granted the República de Olinalán (as it was known at the time) to the Spaniard Alonso de Aguilar as an encomienda (a trusteeship that permitted the grantee to exploit land, minerals, and people for his own profit). With no interest in the gourds and pigments that Olinaltecos had rendered unto the Aztecs, Aguilar demanded such items as gold and cacao, which Olinaltecos had to deliver directly to his home in Mexico City; and corn that they had to transport to his mines in Ayoteco (modern-day Chiautla, Puebla). After 1550, Olinaltecos even had to render laborers to work in the mines of Ayoteco and Chilapa. When the natives rebelled against Spanish abuses in the hills just south of Olinalá, Viceroy Luis de Velasco, hoping to forestall any further uprisings, sent Don Gonzalo Díaz de Vargas of Puebla de los Angeles to investigate abuse on the Encomienda de Olinalán. In his 1556 report Díaz de Vargas found that the tribute demanded from Olinalán exceeded the republica's capacity, and he complained about abuse and overexploitation of the 1,555 tributarios (a tributario was defined as an indigenous head of household responsible for delivering his family's tribute). Neither lacquered gourds nor the pigments and other raw art materials that had figured prominently on Aztec tribute rolls appear on Spanish tribute lists. But a closer consideration of Olinaltecan tribute suggests that lacquer existed between the lines.

The three main parts of Olinaltecos' tribute were corn, gold, and cacao; yet Olinalán had little arable land on which to grow corn, no gold to pan or mine, and a climate that could not grow cacao. How, then, did Olinaltecos acquire the goods that their encomendero demanded? The answer probably lies in the town's lacquer production. Daniele Dehouve cautions scholars not to presume that just because tribute was paid in products rather than money that the products were produced locally. She argues that Spaniards demanded items that montañeros could acquire only through trade with the tropical Costa Chica. Though Dehouve does not address Olinalá, her insights prompt speculation that Olinaltecos may have traded their lacquered gourds for tribute goods. Under Aztec rule Olinalá had served as the imperial gateway to the markets of the southwestern highlands and coastal zone. Under the Spaniards it probably continued as the gateway, but now Olinaltecos exchanged lacquered gourds for gold and corn from Tlapa and cacao from the tropics, which they then rendered to the empire.

Other evidence supports this hypothesis of continued production. In 1554 Fray Jerónimo de Mendieta wrote that the region's Indians of that time produced "cups made from certain kinds of durable gourds" that "grow on a certain kind of tree from the hot tropics. They used to paint these, and still paint them today, with diverse delicate figures and colors. And they are so durable that even 100 years in water would not fade or damage the lacquer." In 1610 the Relación de Chilapa mentioned that Olinalá was producing lacquer, and that it had developed a new industry of cochinilla. These small insects were highly prized as a dye in Europe, and locally they were used to produce red lacquer. By the end of the 1500s, chocolate drinking had become the fashion in Mexico City and Spain. It was particularly a la mode for a host to serve guests from an authentic Mexican chocolate set. In 1652 the Spanish painter Antonio de Pereda y Salgado depicted such a set in a still life painting that included an elaborately lacquered gourd and chest that seem to have been produced in Michoacán (which, along with Olinalá, was a major producer of lacquer). Given the demand for such sets it is likely that Olinaltecan gourds served a similar purpose. Since no gourd from either Michoacán nor Olinalá from this period survives, it is impossible to know. Such a hypothesis, however, is made likely by the fact that Olinaltecan lacquer, more than that of Michoacán, had a history of close association with chocolate consumption.

All these different sources suggest that lacquer production continued without interruption from the Aztec period into the Spanish era. Olinaltecos who traded their lacquer for tribute goods likely strengthened Olinalá's linkages across the region, and those who journeyed to Mexico City, Chiautla, and Puebla de los Angeles (which had political oversight over
Olinalá) to deliver their tribute and interact with the Spanish government. They maintained Olinaltecos' political, economic, and cultural ties to the colonial empire. By producing and marketing their crafts, laqueros learned to use their art to mediate the demands of the Aztec and Spanish colonial systems while building upon their town's importance as a gateway between the empire and the hinterland.

The Golden Age of Olinaltecan Lacquer

The eighteenth century marked what would come to be known as Olinalá's golden age. It was then that artisans created the wood boxes, dowry chests, and lecterns that survived into the twentieth century to capture the imagination of collectors and nationalists. The scarce documents from this golden age suggest tentative insights about the roots of this artistic florescence and how it was affected by growth in the lucrative high-end market. A reading of the objects themselves is particularly revealing in this regard.

This was a time of demographic, political, and economic change. Olinalá's population collapsed due to epidemics, starvation, and flight to the southern Montaña to escape the forced labor drafts of the north. Between 1575 and 1743 the number of tributarios for Olinalá and Cualac declined from 2,100 to 1,113. This population collapse coincided with the exhaustion of the mines of Ayoteco. When the mines no longer needed labor or provisions, the encomienda of Olinalán reverted to the Crown, which transferred it from Chiautla to Tlapa, capital of the region now known as the Montaña de Guerrero.

Moreover, in the 1600s the colonial state began stripping the native elite of its privileges, thereby leveling indigenous society. This began with a reduction in the number of tlatoques (native kings). In the neighboring town of Cualac the tlatoque officially lost his status, and the town was reduced to an estancia (literally estate, but in this case referring to a subordinate administrative status) of Olinalá. This was followed by a ban on the native nobility's practice of demanding labor from macehuales (commoners). The Crown then removed the indigenous nobility's exemption from tribute payments, which lowered them to the same status as their former tributarios. Until this time the state had turned a blind eye to native violations of sumptuary laws that had been created to enforce the caste system, but in the 1600s it began enforcing these throughout the Montaña, prohibiting the native nobility from riding horses, carrying weapons, or dressing as Spaniards. When the tlatoque of Olinalá flouted the law by going in public in an elegant Spanish outfit complete with sword, dagger, and harquebus, Crown officials arrested him.19

A colonial report from 1743 notes that at that time, long after most subjects across New Spain had shifted from paying taxes with merchandise to paying with cash, two groups in the Montaña received exemptions. These were the Mixtecos on the southwestern edge of the Montaña who paid in fabric, and the Nahua of Olinalá who paid in lacquered goods. The report notes that Olinaltecos regularly purchased chia seed (salvia hispanica) from neighboring communities to make the oil base for their lacquer, and that they traveled south on foot and beast to the Costa Chica to buy jícara en blanco (undecorated gourds) to carry back to their workshops.11

The decline of the native nobility and the reestablishment of direct tribute were followed by a change in the town's ethnic composition. Spaniards, mestizos, chinos (as Filipinos were known), and mulatos began entering the Montaña at this time. For reasons that remain unclear, Spaniards and mestizos spread across the region, while mulatos and chinos concentrated around Tlapa and Chilapa. North of Olinalá in Puebla and south of Olinalá from Tlapa and Chilapa down through the Costa Chica these newcomers accumulated large tracts of land. But in the area around Olinalá they lived as volantes (drivers) running their livestock on common lands, acquiring only small plots or no land at all. According to Dehouve, these volantes continued to live this way until the twentieth century when the revolution devastated their livestock, forcing them to form small communities thinly scattered across the municipality.12 A 1746 census reveals the ethnic changes wrought by this new wave of migration. It lists the population of the municipality of Olinalá as 2.8 percent Spanish, 53.8 percent mestizo, and 43.5 percent indigenous (mestizo, at that time, seems to have implied individuals of mixed ancestry as well as Indians who understood Spanish or who no longer were official members of the República de Indios).13

With an otherwise weak economic base outside of livestock, Olinaltecos found a niche in the production of the lacquered gourds that they sold in regional markets and continued to render in lieu of taxes. Demand for their goods exploded across the colony thanks to a rapidly growing population, expanding wealth of the New Spanish elite, development of a dense internal economy, a rising mixed race population, and acculturation of indigenous groups. Olinaltecos tapped into these markets through new
carpentry techniques and by adapting their decoration so as to trumpet their clients’ wealth and good taste.

Many of these eighteenth-century items survive, but I have found only two that bear the dates of their creation. The earlier of these, housed in the Museo Franz Mayer, is a lectern dated 1760 (plate 6).14 The carpentry reveals the use of European tools, and the lectern form suggests that it was for liturgical service. The materials and rayado style are typical of Olinaltecan production from the period. The hand-rubbed orange base coat known as tlapetzole contrasts with the three layers of red, green, and white lacquer. The artisans who made it would have applied each of these topcoats one at a time, etched the design, removed the negative space with a thorn attached to a turkey plume, and then thickened the lacquer by handrubbing it with specific recipes of pulverized minerals and buffing it with large wads of cotton. The technique was laborious and required years of apprenticeship and specialized knowledge as well as artistic talent. Visually, the lacquered design on the lectern is graceful and balanced and conversant with the chinoiseries and mudejar tastes that were in vogue at the time in Europe and among New Spain’s elite. The workmanship suggests attention to quality and a discerning client willing to pay a premium price. It improves upon European styles yet moves the design in a distinctive direction.

The second item, an election ballot box dated 1779 (plate 7), is of higher quality.15 Whether the more sophisticated style and workmanship of this box is attributable to a broader refinement of workmanship, the abilities of the particular artist, or the price of the commission, we cannot know. The inscription on the lid tells us it is an election box, and suggests production for the Spanish market. This ballot box, like the lectern, has an exterior decorated entirely in the rayado style, with red, green, and white atop an orange base, and etched surface details. The interior of the ballot box has been sealed with a base coat of orange tlapetzole. Where flowering spikes predominated in the decoration of the lectern, this box combines vegetative grotesques and human figures executed in rayado on the exterior, with brushwork on the interior. It is unclear whether this brushwork was done by Olinaltecos at the time of creation or applied later by artists elsewhere. It also is unclear whether the date 1779 refers to the date of the box’s creation, the date of the interior painting, or the year of some important election for which it may have been intended.

These two objects suggest the artisans’ cultural engagement with and understanding of Spanish aesthetic tastes, cultural norms, social structure, and vocabulary of symbols and motifs. It is clear that during the eighteenth century Olinaltecos tapped into an elite market and that this was a time of creative innovation for local artisans. But it remains impossible to trace with certainty the local pathways and impacts of these innovations.

Documents offer little insight into how Olinaltecos tapped into the growing elite market or how this market affected the local social structure, but they do teach us about the town’s lacquer techniques. This information comes to us by way of the Enlightenment and natural historians’ penchant for recording their observations. In 1780 the Jesuit Francisco Clavijero, famous for his advocacy of natural science and refutations of European indictments of the Americas, described Olinalá’s decorated jicaras and the “pleasant odor” of its lacquered chests, or baíles.16 Our most important documented account, however, comes not from Clavijero but from an obscure Jesuit named Joaquín Alejo de Meave. New Spain at that time saw the rise of journals of natural science and philosophy among a small circle of Creoles. These New World Creoles, intent on claiming their place within the Enlightenment, walked a fine line between trying to impress Europeans and trying to elevate their own masses.17 In 1788 the priest José Antonio de Alzate founded the most famous of these journals, the Gaceta de literatura (Journal of Literature). Alzate structured his publishing efforts around the argument that foreigners lacked the epistemological knowledge to comprehend the natural and human world of the Americas. True knowledge about “the many wonders found in our America,” he insisted, came only from a lifetime of sustained observation and intimate experience.18 As part of his effort to publish information about the “wonders of our America,” Alzate commissioned Alejo de Meave, the parish priest of Olinalá, to write an account of the town’s lacquer industry.

On 28 June 1791, Alejo de Meave published his brief account of Olinaltecan lacquer in Alzate’s Gaceta de literatura.19 We do not know the date of his arrival or departure from Olinalá, but his account suggests intimate familiarity with the lacquer industry. He informs us that along with Olinalá, thirteen other communities in the vicinity contributed to the lacquer industry. Olinaltecos processed a wide array of gourds, the most important being jicaras (xicalli) and tecomas, both still widely used today. The Jesuit provides excruciating detail about each of the different kinds of
gourds, how they grew and how they were harvested, the ways they were cut open for different uses, and the names—all of them Nahuatl—used for each configuration. He also explains the vegetable and mineral sources of all the oils, powders, and pigments employed by the artisans, and how they were processed.

In addition to his observations about the materials, Alejo de Meave offers insight into the gendered structure of production. He relates that women prepared the raw materials and created the base coat (tlapetzole), while only men did the decorative rayado and dorado. Olinaltecos marketed their goods principally in such regional fairs as the one in “Tepalcingo” (Tepalcingo, Morelos) on All Saints Day. He informs us in detail how they packed and transported their goods, and that their crafts made their way to Mexico City and Puebla de los Angeles, and as far away as Madrid and Peru. Alejo de Meave explains that Olinaltecan lacquer was consumed by a broad segment of New Spanish society, from poor indigenous buyers to wealthy Creoles. In addition to the gourds, the artisans manufactured and lacquered carpentry products, including dowry chests, trays, stationery and pencil boxes, sewing boxes, linen boxes, side tables, lecterns, music stands, mantles, and bracket shelves. They decorated these with the materials and styles adapted from their gourds, making clear that even if these carpentry items were the most esteemed and lucrative lacquered items, they remained subordinate in quantity and design to the gourds destined for regional indigenous consumption. Alejo de Meave’s description suggests that lacquer production was woven into the local social fabric of Olinalá, from gender roles to detailed knowledge about local plants and minerals, and that it remained bound to the Nahuatl language and Nahua culture. Unfortunately, while he offers detailed recipes for every pigment, Alejo de Meave is frustratingly silent about what percentage of the town engaged in lacquer production, the number of producers, their ethnic background and local status, and how they were organized socially, politically, or economically.

Other sources help us to place Olinalá’s lacquer industry within the context of regional markets. Records from 1800 show that, of the 61 Olinaltecos who paid an iguala (transportation tax), 43 of them (70 percent) paid it to transport gourds, most likely from the humid Costa Chica (which lies to the south of the Montaña region and today continues to provide most of Olinalá’s jicaras) or else transported decorated gourds to such markets as Tepalcingo. In neighboring Cualac, whose merchants helped supply the needs of Olinaltecan artisans, nine people paid an iguala, five of them for gourds. Beyond Olinalá’s immediate vicinity, the number of people who transported gourds drops to almost nothing. In addition to jicaras, Olinaltecos imported cotton, which they used to polish the lacquered finish. In 1792, despite its lack of a textile industry, Olinalá received 3.01 percent of all the cotton marketed through Ayutla. Other than jicaras and cotton, most of the other items used for the lacquer industry—pigments, tierras (different varieties of ground stone), oil pressed from chia seed, turkey quills, rabbit fur, and a range of other kinds of gourds—were produced locally, often by the artisans themselves. 20

The objects and documents, despite their silence about cultural, social, and political dynamics, make clear that under eighteenth-century Spanish colonial rule Olinaltecos continued to innovate in styles and techniques and in the ways they engaged the growing markets. In contrast to surrounding areas, where communities dealt with Spanish colonialism by withdrawing into tightly bounded villages referred to in anthropology as “closed corporate communities,” Olinaltecos seem to have maintained an openness and a dynamic, even fluid, Nahua ethnic identity that was shaped by local, regional, and imperial interactions and through the creation and marketing of their lacquered art.

“Backwardness of the Most Frightening Sort”

The nineteenth century was not kind to Olinaltecos. Whereas under the Spanish empire Olinalá had stood as an indigenous but culturally incorporative and dynamic center, during the nineteenth century Mexican elites looked down on it as backward, Indian, and incapable of fulfilling the ideals of universal liberal citizenship. In the aftermath of the Independence Wars (1810–21), economic stagnation set in across southern Mexico, hitting the Montaña particularly hard. National and regional elites viewed this lack of development as the natural, timeless stagnation of the Montaña’s majority indigenous population.

This prejudice was made clear in 1848 during the Puebla congressional debates over whether to cede the district of Tlapán, as the Montaña was known, to the proposed state of Guerrero. Debate transcripts reveal the role of racism, ideology, and political pragmatism in the construction of the Montaña as a marginal zone. Congressmen argued that the people of...
the region lived in a preconquest state of savagery amenable to neither civilization nor republicanism. Their “homes are miserable huts, their food is fruit picked straight from the trees, and the best of their population centers are but monuments to destruction and ignorance.” One legislator asked: “What kind of distorted society would these people form among themselves, lacking as they are in the basic elements of civilization, finding themselves, to put it bluntly, submerged in stupidity and barbarism? What do they know of the rights and obligations that a social pact imposes upon its citizenry? What capacity do they have to fill the public offices and undertake high administrative functions? Would it not be a scandal to see their assemblies filled with rude, vulgar men, unfit to handle even the most trivial domestic matters?” He concluded that “all the horrible misery, all the contemptible ignorance, in short, all the destruction and backwardness of the most frightening sort” was found in the Montaña. Such denunciations demonstrate how a region previously viewed as a gateway to riches and luxury had become, by the middle of the century, synonymous with Indianness, poverty, isolation, and backwardness.

The Mexican congress overruled the concerns of these legislators, creating the state of Guerrero in 1849 from territories shorn from Michoacán, Estado de México, and Puebla. Created three decades after the consummation of Mexican independence from Spain, Guerrero symbolized not an act of faith in the indigenous population but a political concession by the central government to the caudillo Juan Alvarez, who demanded it as reward for his role in the wars against Spain (1810–21) and the United States (1846–48). Guerrero became a ground for Alvarez to carry the banner of federalism in what was, in fact, a brutal struggle for power among local and regional warlords who defended their fiefdoms against one another and against the central government. In defense of these fiefdoms they also warded off infrastructural and economic development.  

Racist legislators and regional caudillos acted on their prejudice with concrete political and economic policies that pushed the indigenous people of the Montaña into the very backwardness that the Pueblan legislators had claimed was Indians’ destiny. Beginning in the period known as La Reforma (1850s–60s) the state converted Church land and peasant commons into private property. Later, as a strategy to wrest Guerrero from regional anti-Porfirian caudillos, Diaz imposed as governor General Francisco Oatalara Arce, who expropriated land from peasants and the Church so as to put it into the hands of a new ranchero class that he hoped would be loyal to Diaz.  

In 1886 Olinalá still was a mix of commons and smallholdings, but the new local elite allied with regional officials to consolidate land. Three events that year set the stage for the completion of Olinalá’s transition into peonage and introversion, and for the tensions that would make Olinalá a hotbed for indigenous insurgency during the revolution. First, Arce decreed that campesinos had only six months to show ownership of their commons and divide it into private lots or else have their land auctioned out from under them as terrenos baldios (vacant lands). Though vecinos appear to have complied with the order, this did not stop local elites and prefects from taking their lands. In that same year, rancheros officially separated their territory from Tlapa to form an autonomous district known as Zaragoza. This freed Olinaltecos and others from outside control but left them even more impoverished, isolated, and subject to unrestrained abuse by the empowered ranchero elite. Finally, 1886 was the year the campesinos rose up against the Porfirian prefects whom they accused of colluding with local elites to falsely declare that peasant lands belonged to the Church, and thereby were eligible for expropriation. The government quelled the rebellion, but tensions flared again in 1900 when fifteen aggrieved vecinos of Olinalá rejected the corrupt verdict of the local prefects. They wrote a letter directly to President Diaz denouncing Nicolás Rodríguez and Juan Andreu (father of the future Zapatista general and presidential candidate Juan Andreu Almazán). The vecinos fought a losing battle against the alliance of an emerging ranchero bourgeoisie and a patron state.

Censuses from 1900 and 1910 offer a glimpse of the life of Olinaltecos. The heavily indigenous municipality had 5,566 residents. Of the 1,914 who lived in the head town, 850 were above the age of 15. Among these, 93 percent were illiterate and 44 percent spoke no Spanish, not even rudimentarily. Not a single foreigner resided within the municipality and, among the 23 residents born outside Olinalá, none was born farther than one of the adjoining municipalities. The few Olinaltecos who did receive an education locally did so through private tutors in the monastery of the Virgin of Guadalupe, atop Olinantzin Hill.

Sugar, which had no previous history in the area, now dominated the economy. A group of rancheros had worked with the local prefect to gain control over most of the arable land in the small valley, which they planted
with sugarcane. At the top of this new oligarchy (comprising the members of the León, Patrón, Salgado, Acevedo, and Franco clans) stood Manuel Almazán. He controlled not only most of the land but also the storage houses, crushing mill, and boiling and cooling sheds upon which other oligarchs depended. Some oligarchs also monopolized food and livestock production and marketed milk and cheese, along with corn, chile, beans, and honey, though not in significant quantities. By 1910, the Almazán family held a tight grip over the region, reinforcing its place atop the local oligarchy through shared control over the land, the economy, and the municipal council, as well as through daily economic relations, intermarriage, compadrazgo, exclusive cofradias (religious associations), and political cronyism.

Eight out of every ten adult vecinos had been pushed into landless peonage. They did not accept the loss of land passively. When the corrupt courts failed them, they turned to violence. In neighboring Morelos, where communities experienced a similar loss of land and conversion to peonage, the historian Paul Hart has found that the situation had remained calm until 1910, when the sugar economy fell into crisis and sugar producers became unable to employ the people they had displaced. Social unrest ensued.

Olinalá, whose sugar plantations operated as an extension of the Morelos and southern Puebla sugar complex, similarly faced unrest in the form of small rebellions, stabbings, beatings, and assassinations. Some of this violence grew out of rivalries within the oligarchy, but most reflected discontent from below, as campesinos struck back against intimidation, extortion, legal maneuvering, and land usurpation.

The turn of the century was a time when railroads, communications, and commerce helped much of Mexico to become, in the words of Alan Knight, “stitched together to form regional, national, and even international markets.” But as Jaime Salazar Adame points out, Guerrero was the only Mexican state that did not participate in Porfirian railroad expansion. And neither could it rely on its outdated and inadequate roads. As the most underdeveloped corner of Mexico’s most underdeveloped state, the Montaña region became isolated as never before. The only way to move goods was to carry them on the backs of man and beast over steep, difficult terrain along washed-out trails. Under Aztec and Spanish rule, the region had stood at the crossroads of a lively trade; now the only thing that Olinaltecos transported commercially was rancheros’ sugar, which they delivered to the railroad depot across the state line in Puebla.
Caudillo politics and lack of communication infrastructure had forced Olinalá into introversion and deepening inequality. This was exacerbated by the Porfirian disentailment of the masses and creation of a local rancho elite tied to the state. Rather than critique their own racism, cronyism, and failed economic and political programs, the Porfirian elites, like the mid-nineteenth-century Puebla congressmen before them, blamed the region’s woes on the inhabitants’ indigenous heritage. Isolation, indigenosity, and backwardness came to be seen as unchanging characteristics of the Montaña.

The Decline of Olinaltecan Lacquer in the Nineteenth Century

Artisans suffered from the same economic and political difficulties as their nineteenth-century neighbors, but they also faced their own challenges born out of the collapse of their industry. Following its wars of independence, Mexico descended into political instability and economic stagnation. This alone would have hurt the artisans, but the more serious blow was the new disdain of the middle and upper classes. Consumers took new pride in the Mexican landscape, regional stereotypes, and the archaeological Aztec past, but they shunned domestic aesthetics in favor of “universal” bourgeois tastes, and they rejected domestic crafts for manufactured goods imported from France, England, and the United States.

Faced with shrinking markets and falling prices, laqueros abandoned their labor-intensive, aesthetically idiosyncratic rayado style. They turned to dorado, which could be executed more quickly and in series and which was more in line with emerging elite tastes. As shown in plate 8, artisans responded to changing elite tastes by adopting the practice of copying urban architectural scenes from European prints. The only remaining trace of the eighteenth-century rayado aesthetic in this chest is in the arches and in some of the squares on the apex of the lid, decorated with chunky birds and animals. Ornately rendered dorado-style borders, mostly strings of flowers and egg-and-dart patterns, cover the green expanses. Objects such as this show how artisans merged the rayado and dorado into an aesthetic vocabulary that, while still distinctively Olinaltecan, accommodated elites’ growing preference for overtly Europeanized modalities.

Artisans soon abandoned even these final traces of the rayado method in favor of dorado. For rayado objects, the rayador had to decorate one object at a time, layer by layer and line by line balancing the motifs across

*Late 16 Bateo (shallow bowl), Olinalá, circa 1930s. Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts. Gift of the children of Dwight W. Morrow (Class of 1895) and Elizabeth C. Morrow. Used by permission.*
The space as he (it always was a male) went. This method assured the distinctiveness of each object, but in an era fascinated with mass production, when prices were falling, the rayado was neither attractive to consumers nor cost effective for artisans. The advantage of dorado, and the reason it became more common than rayado at this time, was that it could be done by a team lined up alongside a row of a dozen or more boxes or chests, with one artisan adding a flower, another tracing a roofline, and so on until the series of nearly identical objects was complete, ready to be polished and shipped to market. The sewing box shown in plate 9 illustrates the impact of serial production, falling prices, and changing consumer tastes. The rapid brushwork renders simplified human figures and borders. Areas that in eighteenth-century rayado were populated by animal and vegetative grotesques here are graced by fanciful scenes of courtiers and soldiers. Pastel tones and a loose style, meantime, mimic the rococo chinoiserie that was in vogue.

The few remaining artisans who had not been pressed into peonage on the sugar plantations almost abandoned the production of boxes and chests. They focused instead on the lacquered gourds that they and their indigenous neighbors used as receptacles. One of the most widely circulating of their creations was the half gourd, with a red or black base coat and a central blue or white dot, or, for a slightly higher price, a painterly motif such as a swan or heron in the bottom of the bowl encircled by rings of blue and white. These were popular among indigenous consumers who used them as food and drink vessels that they could wear as hats during the journey to field or market. Mid-nineteenth-century prints of recognizably Mexican scenes, such as plate 10, often depicted indigenous peasants grinding corn and using these kinds of Olinaltecan drinking gourds. Later, in 1921, this same kind of gourd was handed to the India Bonita to visually affirm her indigenous authenticity (chapter 1, figure 5). These bowls sold at such low prices that their producers lived in deep poverty. And they reached a large consumer base, not because of artisans' physical mobility but thanks to peddlers who purchased these bowls at regional fairs and then resold them at distant 10cales. Prior to the revolution, elites looked down on such objects as evidence of rural, indigenous backwardness.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Mexico's middle and upper classes shunned not only the rayado style but even Europeanized dorado production. Intellectuals such as José Antonio de Alzate and Alejo de Meave, eager to esteem Mexico's own "wonders" by publicizing idiosyncratic arts, were men of the past. The remaining Olinaltecan laqueros now relied upon the sale of cheap gourds, yet some continued to show off their skill through the decorations of sometimes stunning baules and boxes. As plate 11 shows, they moved away from the rococo designs such as that found in plate 9 in favor of densely layered borders and linear designs framing painterly depictions of animals borrowed from gourds and urban or garden landscapes borrowed from imported prints. By the start of the twentieth century, they had turned to objects such as the box in plate 12, with simplified yet graceful borders, flora, and fauna. Each of these design innovations reflects Olinaltecan artisans' efforts to adapt their work to consumers' changing tastes while flaunting their artistic talent, but in the end they found themselves overwhelmed by falling prices and by elites' preference for imported rather than Mexican-made luxury items.

Olinaltecos, who for centuries had used their art to mediate their links to the outside world, declined into an isolated existence enforced by local elites and regional caudillos. Few Olinaltecos still participated in lacquer production, and perhaps no one recalled that the town's fortunes once had been intimately linked to craft production, much less that just a century and a half earlier their pueblo had been one of the most notable craft centers in New Spain. The world Olinaltecos now confronted was shaped by inequality, isolation, and the zafra (sugar harvest). Tax and church tithe records (Olinaltecos continued to pay tithes until the revolution) confirm that lacquer had become inconsequential to the overall economy. Only two or three families, including the Ayala and Navarrete clans, continued to produce lacquer. Rayado, which had fueled the lacquer industry in the eighteenth century, faded from local memory. Dorado gourds sold in large quantities and low prices in regional markets. The urban middle class and modernizing elite of the Porfirián era, meantime, looked down on this mainstay of Olinaltecan production as embarrassing evidence of the country's rural indigenous backwardness.

Insurgency and Incineration

When historians speak of Guerrero's role in the Mexican revolution, most often what they have in mind is the bourgeois movement led by the Figueroa family from Huitzuco. The historian Alan Knight has shown that, as bourgeois reformers and caudillos, the Figueroas "sought to subvert the
political, not the social order." As such, "they aimed to roll back the frontiers of the power-hungry, centralising Porfirian regime and replace it by a form of traditional caciquismo run by themselves and their supporters."24 The insurgency in the Montaña set itself in opposition to Figueroaists and rallied instead behind the Morelense populist Emiliano Zapata. The only base of support for Figueroa in the Montaña came from merchants and rancheros, including Manuel Almazán of Olinalá, whose political and economic fortunes derived from the disentailment of vecino lands and the dismantling of the peasant commons.25

For many Olinaltecan Zapatistas, the revolution offered an enlarged context for them to continue their struggle against the ranchero oligarchy that had robbed them of their land. Campesinos did not simply rise up as Zapatistas the moment they lost their land or when their wages on the sugar plantations fell below a certain level. Instead, they experienced a gradual process of radicalization through daily struggles against the rancheros and through conversations with Zapatista recruiters. One such recruiter was well known to the Almazanes: he was a member of their own family. Juan Andreu Almazán was born in Olinalá, but his parents moved to Puebla after the 1886 uprising against the prefects, including against his father's usurpation of peasant lands. Though later he would become a conservative presidential candidate in 1940, at the start of the revolution he emerged as a populist leader. His politics (along with those of his brother Leonides, who later became a progressive governor of Puebla) ran counter to much of the rest of his family. During his medical training he met the Maderista Aquiles Serdán, who was organizing in Puebla for the upcoming rebellion against Díaz. Government troops stormed the Serdán home in October 1910, killing the patriarch and his family, but not before Serdán had sent the young medical student to the Montaña with a shipment of weapons and orders to recruit for the coming uprising.

Andreu's mission was to mobilize not the ranchero bourgeoisie and merchant landowning class of which he was part but the indigenous peasantry. Andreu joined the Zapatista forces of José Salgado, the leading rebel from the Montaña to whom he had delivered Serdán's arms. Then, aided by a handful of montañero coreligionists, including Melquiades Nájera of Olinalá and Antonio Gálvez of Tlapa, he went from town to town winning adherents. After Serdán's death, Andreu left for Ciudad Juárez to rendezvous with Francisco Madero. The nineteen-year-old student's meeting with Madero did not get him the additional arms he had hoped for, but it did win him recognition as a leader in the Maderista revolution and as an ally of the mounting indigenous insurgency of the Montaña. He returned to Guerrero where he and Nájera, together with another Olinalteco, Pedro Vivar, set up rebel training camps.26

In mid-1911, Manuel Almazán ordered the rural police to contain the growing Zapatista threat. When this failed, the government sent federal troops to hunt down rebels in the area. But, the more they squeezed the population, the more they drove peasants to the Zapatista camp. The Figueroaista government blamed the war on the "ignorance and illiteracy" of the indigenous majority, claiming, "We have always had a sadly elevated percentage of illiterates in Guerrero; especially in the Montaña in the east, populated by cave-dwelling barbarians, plagued by every form of vice that is induced by ignorance."27

Though Manuel Almazán and the rest of the oligarchs failed to quell the growing insurgency, they did manage to keep the Zapatistas from taking direct control over Olinalá. Almazán had the local police harass and arrest suspected Zapatista sympathizers. Zapatistas responded by storming the jail to liberate their allies. As the conflict intensified, so did recruitment. In April and May 1912 alone, the Zapatistas reportedly gained 1,200 soldiers just from the environs of Olinalá. From late 1912 through mid-1913, armed attacks, robberies, and murders in the vicinity ranked as the highest in Guerrero and there seemed to be no hope for a quick end to the violence. As Zapatista incursions became more organized and larger in scale, government-controlled towns such as Olinalá, Xochihuehuetlán, and Temalacacingo formed militias known as Security Commissions. In Olinalá the local oligarchy-financed Security Commission routed at least three major Zapatista attacks.28 As word spread that the Zapatistas were preparing for a major offensive, government troops and town militias readied themselves.

Olinaltecos saw their lives transformed abruptly in 1913 when Morelense Zapatistas fell upon the town. The troops had attacked Huitzuco as the linchpin for their much-anticipated offensive. They suffered a surprising and humiliating defeat. Perhaps eager to embolden the remaining 800 troops with a quick victory after their failure, Emiliano and Eufemio Zapata turned toward Olinalá, from whence they had received an appeal to intervene against the Almazán family. On news of their approach, a fed-
eral official in Olinalá fled for Tlapa, taking with him a twelve-man guard, leaving only twenty-six federal soldiers to support twenty battle-hardened militiamen commanded by local cacique Luis Pantaleón. Most of the local elite, including members of the Almazán family, also fled.

Bullets started to fly in the morning. Over the course of the day and through the night, Zapatista losses mounted. Rather than a quick, morale-building victory, the attack on Olinalá was shaping up to be a repeat of the humiliation of Huitzuco. The tide abruptly turned when the Olinaltecan militia ran short of ammunition. Thirty of the defenders, including those who had been perched in the parapets atop Olinantzin hill, used the last of their cartridges to make an escape into the surrounding hills. The remaining guards who had been firing from the edges of town and from atop the tower of the parish church had no way out, so they ran for cover in the homes of family members. Zapata’s frustrated and angry troops poured into the town, rounding up the few caciques that remained, looting their homes and businesses, and demanding forced loans. Hungry soldiers commandeered peasants’ meager granaries, chickens, and anything else that could be eaten. They also ferreted out the remaining militiamen and anyone else suspected of supporting the government. A survivor from Olinalá recalled that one of the militiamen they pursued was the laquero Alberto Navarrete. Trapped in the middle of town, Navarrete took refuge in his mother’s home. The Zapatistas dragged him and other militia members to the town plaza, then riddled their bodies with bullets. 39

The beleaguered villagers hoped that this was the end of the destruction, but it was only the beginning. Soon after Zapatistas took the town, they learned that government reinforcements were at their heels. For reasons that remain unclear, Emiliano and Eufemio Zapata ordered their men to douse the entire village with petroleum and set it ablaze. Villagers ran screaming and weeping as their chinantle (wattle and daub with grass roof) homes, along with all the oligarchy’s granaries, fields, commercial establishments, and sugar mill, burned. The fighting was dramatic as government troops poured into the town and the two sides fought amid the flames. The Zapatistas found an opening for retreat, but one column of government troops pursued them as another cut them off at the edge of town, forcing them up the steep side of Olinantzin hill. Zapatistas and Carrancistas scrambled on foot and horseback for the high ground. Government reports and local memories recount the sight of horses and men tumbling down, covered in blood. As soon as the Zapatistas had fled, the government troops also took their leave. To the villagers’ eyes and by official accounts the death toll on both sides seemed staggering. 40

The town lay in charred ruins, ravaged by the very Zapatistas whom villagers had called upon to defend them. All was destroyed, including the grain from the recent harvest. Bloated bodies lay scattered on all sides. Concepción Ventura Pérez recalls that some soldiers strewn upon the bloodied embankment were still alive and begged for water. All the jicaras had been burned, so she ran to the arroyo and scooped water into her hands. Time and again it drained between her fingers before she could reach the dying men. Most horrifying to her was watching the pigs wander back from the hills that night to eat the heads and limbs of the dead. The next day, to avoid disease, the exhausted and hungry survivors buried the bodies in the municipal clay pit. This brought an abrupt end to Ventura Pérez’s family’s trade as potters. 41

The next two and a half years, armies from both sides again and again struck the devastated town. Unable to reestablish the foundations of their power, and fearful of further Zapatista retribution, most of the oligarchy permanently relocated to Mixtepec (Puebla), Puebla de los Angeles, Mexico City, or anywhere else they had connections. Their cane fields lay burned, their stores looted, and their peons no longer in a position to serve them. 42 Out of the ashes of the old social order Olinaltecos would have to search for new means of survival.

Reborn from the Ashes: Local Revival for Survival

Ironically the Zapatista attack of September 1913 that devastated Olinalá also reconnected it to the larger world and triggered a local lacquer renaissance. As the starving population looked for ways to survive, some turned to collecting firewood, but there was little wood and fewer buyers. The hardest hit begged for stale tortillas from the few vecinos whose supplies the flames had spared or who received help from relatives outside Olinalá. They ate pachote grass and whatever edible roots they could unearth in the hills: “After the revolution passed, those of us who wandered about dying of hunger, what else were we to eat?” asks Ventura Pérez. 43 The crisis of 1913 could have dealt a death blow to this already struggling art, as it did
to Olinalá’s sugar industry; instead, Olinaltecos turned to their art for survival. It was out of the depths of desperation that Olinalá was reborn as a center of lacquer art.

Ventura Pérez recalls that members of the old oligarchy held on to most of its pastures and agricultural land but sold their burned-out homes and town lots. Outsiders from neighboring towns and some local families with outside connections bought the properties and opened new commercial establishments. They were betting on the future of Olinalá, which remained the municipal seat and the largest town in the region. For the time being, however, they had little for sale and almost no customers. Enterprising merchants turned to the town’s artesanías as a foundation for commercial expansion.

Lacquered gourds were among the few things Olinaltecos could produce that had cash value yet were not capital intensive. To profit from lacquer, merchants would have to gain control over production, but the lacquer families marketed their own goods and had no need for the merchants. The merchants could introduce new producers, but this was difficult because, unlike today, when most artisans buy industrial ingredients, at that time they had to know how to manufacture every tierra, pigment, and thickening agent themselves and even gather their own raw material from the surrounding hills.

The two merchants who took the greatest interest in lacquer were Luis Acevedo and Roberto Lujan. They wrestled with ways to turn a profit in a town where few had money to buy anything; where the land still was monopolized by the prerevolutionary elite; and where those who did turn to crops used half of the harvest for their own subsistence while the other half went to the landlords or else was marketed by the Rendón, Almazán, and Salgado families. They would find the answer to their problem within the gendered structure of local society and of artisan production.

Women had more difficulty establishing themselves as sharecroppers or laborers, and they earned less for their work than did men. Many had lost brothers and fathers to the war, and even those who had not needed to found ways to add to the household income. They could sell firewood, wash laundry, make tortillas to sell at fairs and on the streets of Chilapa or Tlapa, or they could participate in lacquer production. The key for the merchants lay in those women who had trained in the artisan families’ workshops. Female artisans were prohibited by gender norms from head-

ing their own workshops. This left them particularly vulnerable. In their desperation, they had little choice but to turn to the merchants. In the merchant workshops, women with skills trained others, further expanding the pool of cheap, skilled, female labor.

Mostly the merchants relied not on women who were members of the main artisan families, such as the Ayas and Navarretes, but on other women who, after the crisis of 1913, had learned aspects of lacquer production from the main families but did not possess enough skills within their households to operate an independent workshop. Concepción Ventura Pérez was one such woman, and her experiences offer a valuable perspective on the development of the lacquer industry. She was born in December 1900 into a family of potters. When the town filled their clay pit in 1913 with the corpses of revolutionaries, Ventura Pérez’s aunts Rosa and Iladia Ventura turned to fellow artisans. They found work with laqueros applying the base coat known as tlapotzole. Doña Concha’s cousin Benito Ventura started traveling to the Costa Chica to buy jicaras, which did not grow in Olinalá temperate climate, and then sold them to laqueros. As his sisters learned to mix pigments and create the tlapotzole, Benito, too, turned to the laqueros, who taught him the dorado technique, painting patterns as well as fish, birds, rabbits, deer, and flowers inside the lacquered bowls. Though they did not achieve high levels of mastery or refined knowledge, Rosa, Iladia, and Benito Ventura did learn enough to create their own small family workshop, selling their crude products to the merchants to complement income from other sources.

After the loss of the clay pit, Ventura Pérez’s father turned to carpentry. When he died in a construction accident, his widow faced grinding poverty and the starvation of herself and her family. She distributed her children among kin, keeping only Concepción by her side. Together they begged, collected firewood, and made tortillas to sell in regional markets. After a time, Ventura Pérez learned from her aunts how to process tierras and oils to create tlapotzole. She worked with her aunts and cousin in their small family workshop until 1916, when her family hired her out to her cousin and godfather Luis Acevedo to pay off the family’s debt. The merchant paid her 20 centavos per ten-hour day to make and apply tlapotzole in his workshop. Shortly thereafter, she left Acevedo’s workshop to do similar work for Roberto Lujan.

Lujan and Acevedo each hired economically destitute female artisans as
well as a few men. Each artisan brought his or her own skills to the workshop in exchange for wages or to pay off debt they had accrued for food, supplies, and medicine. By the 1920s, even the old lacquer families fell into debt to the merchants and had to send members to work for them. An artisan family, for example, might need extra gourds or cotton, which the merchants could sell them on credit, or else they might need medicine for a sick family member, or a sack of beans to feed themselves through the rainy season. The artisan family would then be required to send one or two members to work for the merchant to pay off the debt. The result was that merchants mobilized skills that otherwise would have benefited family workshops. These merchants sold their production in regional markets, as did artisans, but they also developed connections to market stall vendors and ambulatory peddlers in Tlapa, Chilpancingo, and Mexico City.

As the lacquer market grew crowded with producers, some artisans developed innovative approaches. The Jiménez family practiced lacquer into the latter part of the nineteenth century but had abandoned it long before the revolution. Luis Jiménez’s father returned to the craft in 1913, but he followed his own creative inclinations, cutting gourds and fitting them together to make birds, serpents, fish and whatever other animals his imagination conjured up from the woody husks, or carving fruits from pipirucha (the pith from a local plant), which he then lacquered. These lacquered sculptures were purely decorative and directed toward a low-end, mostly indigenous market. As they attracted the attention of nationalists and collectors in the mid-1930s, Jiménez’s creations became emblematic of authentic artesanías and appeared in many popular art advertisements, including those for Frederick Davis’s shop; and many artistic photographs, such as those by Manuel Álvarez Bravo and Edward Weston; and in important collections, such as the 1930-32 Mexican Arts Show. They would also be copied by lacquer artisans in Michoacán. Some of these Olinaltecan gourd and pipirucha figures are shown in figure 20.

Though these became compelling symbols of authentic Mexican popular art, they never developed much monetary value and the Jiménez family remained marginal even among the towns’ artisans. Luis Jiménez continued his father’s innovation, and when Doña Concha married into the family in 1930 she, too, learned to make animalitos and fruit. Concepción and Luis combined their skills into a family workshop and even took in apprentices from the nearby Nahua town of Temalacacingo. Some of these apprentices carried their new skills back to Temalacacingo, where they pioneered their town’s toy-making tradition (for more on Temalacacingo’s toy industry, see chapter 8).

Town elders emphasize that in the years between 1910 and 1930, lacquered boxes and dowry chests were rarities. At that time, Olinaltecan lacquer consisted almost entirely of gourds and bowls decorated in the dorado style. The only laqueros who produced boxes and chests, as far as they knew, were members of the Ayala and Navarrete clans, most of all Juvencio Ayala. In his family’s workshop Juvencio learned not just one or two skills but the entire production process, including curing gourds, drying wood, carpentry, extraction of chia oil, creation of pigments, and detailed dorado applied with rabbit fur brushes in the styles shown in plates 11 and 12. As an independent artisan family, the Ayalas, like the Navarretes, marketed their own wares, and in light of the lacquer resurgence in 1913 they tried to guard their autonomy from the merchants. After the crisis that followed the town’s incineration, as more and more of their fellow Oli-
naltecos turned to lacquered gourds for survival, the Ayalas, too, relied on these jicaras, but it was in the production of boxes and dowry chests that they would find their niche.

Conclusion
We know little about why indigenous consumers increased their demand for lacquered gourds after 1913, but it is clear that the market easily absorbed the upsurge in Olinalá's production. While gourds served the daily needs of the consumers of the region, it was the occasionally produced chests that most caught the imagination of the new coterie of collectors and nationalists. A dowry chest required more skill and time to produce than did a gourd and was harder to market on account of its size and price, but it brought higher profit margins and offered talented artisans an edge over the merchants who began to dominate the lacquer trade. More importantly, by marketing chests, Juvencio brought Olinalá into contact with changes on the national and international level.

These chests convinced collectors and nationalists that the town's artisans still produced in the manner of their ancestors and that their art embodied something historically transcendent about the nation. From their perspective, this art compressed the entire history of Mexico, from the Aztecs through the Spanish colonial era to the present, into a coherent transhistorical aesthetic. In 1920 Manuel Gamio argued that, through the revolution, the masses had affirmed their "right to be studied so that they might be known and strategically advanced in their social evolution." Popular art advocates, adhering to this same ideal, esteemed contemporary Olinaltecan lacquer even as they hoped to cleanse it of supposed corruptions and set it back on the path of its distinctive aesthetic evolution so that it might contribute to the creation of a nationalist aesthetic and a culturally unified ethnicized nation.

As this chapter has shown, behind the elite-constructed image of a slowly degenerating local culture in which craftspeople passively carried on the traditions of their ancestors lies a dynamic history of artisan struggle and local revival. Cultural nationalists were unable or unwilling to imagine a history in which the lacquered arts were continually changed and then reborn through the agency and struggle of the artisans. Even though post-revolutionary intellectuals interpreted the revolution as a mandate from below, they treated it neither as a call for a popular plebiscite nor as a call to arms against local injustice; instead, they saw it as an appeal for uplift and integration. By erasing the agency of the people, cultural nationalists claimed to have discovered what they were looking for: childlike, downtrodden indigenous peasants, naïvely clinging to tradition, silently awaiting the generous hand of the postrevolutionary elite to lift them up, to give them form, and to grant them a condescending dignity. Olinalá had become part of the broader canvas upon which nationalists projected the rural masses as a defanged indigenous population awaiting elite benevolence, and this came at the expense of acknowledging the grounded struggles that shaped artisans' daily lives.
Promoters of Mexican popular art in the 1930s treated it as common knowledge that René d’Harnoncourt had revived Olinaltecan lacquer in 1927 while working for Frederick Davis. His success at this revival contributed to his reputation and helped him secure the post as curator of the Mexican Arts Show of 1930–32. It also convinced John Collier of the U.S. Indian Arts and Crafts Board to hire him in 1936 to spearhead a similar revival among native craftspeople north of the border, which later aided his rise to the directorship of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. From the perspective of Olinaltecos, however, the revival of their craft had occurred in 1913, not 1927. How to explain this disjuncture? The conflicting views of the “revival” began to make sense when I learned that the *rayado* style had disappeared from local memory in the nineteenth century. This led me to suspect that rather than having revived Olinala’s lacquer industry, d’Harnoncourt merely resuscitated this particular eighteenth-century technique. This also explains why d’Harnoncourt, despite his use of the term “revive” to describe what he had accomplished, persisted in describing Olinaltecan lacquer as an unbroken tradition that linked the modern era to the colonial and Aztec pasts. Unaware that the industry he encountered in the late 1920s was the product of a local revival, he saw his actions as the first major intervention in an industry that, from his perspective, had endured passively over the centuries.

My hypothesis was confirmed by an obscure article that Frances
Toor published at the end of 1939 describing her visit to Olinalá. Though she had already spent fifteen years traveling widely throughout the country, this was the first and only time she made the difficult trek to Olinalá. She reported that the “Indians” there were “Aztec and fine artists” who had “abandoned for a long time” the rayado technique, but that “about ten years ago Count René de'Harnoncourt and Mr. Fred Davis discovered some old pieces and got the workers to renew it.” Davis and de'Harnoncourt “bought all that the workers produced and paid them more for each batea [broad shallow bowls carved out of wood] than they are [typically] sold at retail.” Later I came across a statement by Stuart Chase affirming Toor’s account. “By showing the Indians the old designs, by finding a readier market for the revived as against the debased [meaning the rayado as against the dorado] he has started an eddy in the other direction.” Chase emphasized that “D’Harnoncourt did not teach, he only showed examples—and suddenly, mysteriously, something long dead came back to life.”

From the metropolitan perspective, de'Harnoncourt’s revival of the rayado style signaled nothing less than the rebirth of Olinaltacan lacquer because it brought contemporary production into conformity with the style that nationalists and collectors idealized as authentically indigenous and muy mexicano. In both its antique and revived form, the rayado style consists of one layer of lacquer placed atop another. After designs are etched into the top layer, the negative space is scraped away to reveal the base coat, or tlapetzole, which often is of a contrasting color. Rayado built upon techniques the artisans already possessed, but it also called upon them to develop new skills and new stages of production. It soon acquired its own aesthetic norms and expectations and new avenues for creativity and innovation. The exaltation of colonial-era rayado and the style’s re-introduction were at the center of the nationalists’ and collectors’ interest in contemporary Olinaltacan lacquer. And, as this chapter will show, its re-introduction had implications beyond what d’Harnoncourt or his nationalist colleagues could have recognized.

When I began my research on Olinalá my exposure to the elite-level documentation had predisposed me to ask whether the artisans were really indigenous, or whether they were mestizos constructed as indigenous by postrevolutionary nationalists and popular art promoters. I found that local history offered no easy answer. Just as it would be a mistake to view national identities as closed units, it also would be a mistake to think of the artisan community as reducible to indigenous versus nonindigenous. A more accurate reflection of local reality requires consideration of how particular cultural formations emerged and articulated with one another. Just as categories of “foreign” and “national” were often contingent and mutually constituted, tied to changing balances of power and perpetually in need of reanimation, so too were ideas of indigenousness and mestizaje in Olinalá.

The case of Olinalá demonstrates the degree to which local identities continually are remade through interaction with, but never reducible to, the dominant narrative. When subalterns appear within the historical record they often do so by strategically aligning their speech in relation to the elite discourses and in the context of existing power relations. As the historian Peter Guardino points out, subalterns learn to employ “the forms, arguments, and metaphors learned in dialogue” with cultural elites and the state. For the artisans of Olinalá this meant that they were heard to the degree that they and their art conformed to elite expectations of indigenousness. The historian Paul Nadasdy in his study of First Nation peoples of Canada points out that by engaging outsiders’ expectations regarding their indigenousness, it was easy for such people to find themselves dragged into “positions that are not their own.” The benefit was that, when elite expectations and local practice aligned, subalterns could exploit such alignment to advance their grounded political and economic concerns; but when they clashed, it risked calling into question the validity of the subaltern group’s preferred modes of interactions with dominant society. What ensued for Olinaltecos was not a clash between the view from above and that from below but a remaking of the two within the context of inequality and incomplete knowledge (even misunderstandings) on the part of both metropolitan elites and Olinaltecos. Negotiation unfolded through contestation over the form and meaning of artistic production and Indigenousness, over the nature of local-metropolitan interactions, and over who in Olinalá had power to mediate and benefit from these interactions.

This chapter is about neither d’Harnoncourt nor Mexican nationalists but the processes they set into motion within Olinalá. It traces the parallel development of art, state, nation, and market from the beginning of d’Harnoncourt’s intervention in 1927 through the subsequent local boom, ending with the collapse of the local market in the 1940s. The study draws
heavily upon oral interviews with Olinaltecan artisans as well as firsthand accounts from outsiders who visited Olinalá during these years. The most important such outsider was the ethnologist Alejandro Vladimiro Paucic Smerdu, who visited the town periodically from the 1930s through the 1970s, meticulously recording details about production, changing pay rates, language use, and many other aspects of local life. Paucic, whose records now belong to the State of Guerrero, is a mysterious figure. Because his archive is rich in observations about many rural corners of Guerrero, researchers and archive staff have attempted to learn more about the man, but without much success. It is not known when or why he came to Guerrero, nor where he came from—though, based on his name, he likely emigrated from Croatia—and he died in 1980 never having been interviewed. Despite how little is known about Paucic, his observations about lacquer production in Olinalá are remarkably detailed and provide an invaluable resource. Drawing on Paucic, oral interviews, and a range of archival documents and published accounts, this chapter untangles the complicated impact that the ethnicization of Mexico's national identity had upon Olinalá. It considers also the ways artisans reshaped their place within the local political and economic structure, and within the imagined national community.

A Distant Revival
As Toor and Chase suggest, the cornerstone of d'Harnoncourt's strategy in Olinalá was to show antique objects to artisans. He explained to them the virtues of these pieces and asked them to produce new works with the same aesthetic sensibility and with the old techniques and materials. This was a strategy that he adopted from Jorge Enciso and Roberto Montenegro, who had gone to Uruapan to work directly with the craftspeople, one might think that d'Harnoncourt similarly had visited Olinalá. Few outsiders ventured to this small isolated community prior to the middle of the century, so a visitor bearing the count's six foot six inch stature and Austrian accent would likely have drawn some attention, particularly if he were working closely with artisans to revive their craft. That is why, when I went to Olinalá, I was surprised that not even the oldest artisans had ever heard of d'Harnoncourt nor did they recognize him from a photograph. It seems d'Harnoncourt may never have visited. This possibility is supported by the fact that nowhere in his voluminous archives or in his prolific publications does he mention a visit to the town or make any firsthand observations about it.

It is easy to understand his reasons for not doing so. He traveled widely through the countryside, but generally only in areas dense with artisan communities, such as central Oaxaca, the Lake Patzcuaro region of Michoacán, the Bajío, Estado de México, and Morelos. He also tended to chart an itinerary that allowed him to ship goods by train. Olinalá offered none of these benefits. It was isolated in the sparsely populated northern Montaña de Guerrero that, aside from Olinalá's lacquer, produced little in the way of distinctive crafts. Moreover, as noted in chapter 7, the railroad network bypassed the Montaña de Guerrero, and a visit required a long, arduous trek. When Toor visited in 1939 she could travel along the new road linking Taxco and Chilpancingo, but the remainder of the journey involved several days on horseback and foot. Even today to get there from Mexico City requires an eight-hour drive over rough dirt roads, or else ten to twelve hours by a paved but sometimes washed-out route passing through Chilpancingo and Chilapa.

If d'Harnoncourt did not travel to Olinalá, how did he "revive" the industry? Pilar Fosado, daughter of Victor Fosado, recalls her father talking about travels with d'Harnoncourt to the fair in Tepalcingo, Morelos. This is the same fair visited by Olinaltecos since as far back as the eighteenth century. We know, moreover, that by the early 1930s a few Olinaltecos had gone from hawking lacquer at the fair to delivering some of their work directly to Davis's shop in Mexico City. It is likely, then, that René d'Harnoncourt carried out his revival from afar, probably initially meeting with artisans in Tepalcingo and then asking them to bring crafts directly to the capital.

While d'Harnoncourt provided few details about how he carried out the revival, he did give a Mexican reporter the names of two of the Olinaltecan
laceros with whom he had worked. These were Guillermo Romano (León) and Andrés Rendón. Like other artisans, the lucid centenarian Concepción Ventura Pérez had never heard of René d'Harnoncourt, but she did know these two artisans. They worked as doradores in the workshop run by the merchant Luis Acevedo in the 1920s, and, by the end of the decade, also as rayadores. Other artisans are clear that the first time they saw the new style was in the objects coming out of Acevedo’s workshop. This suggests that d’Harnoncourt introduced his revival through a merchant’s workshop, perhaps by sharing with Romano and León images of antique wares and the ancient techniques, recipes, and ingredients described in Alejo de Meave’s eighteenth-century published account (see chapter 7).

Though d’Harnoncourt argued that artisans should benefit directly from sales, physical distance made it difficult for him to gauge the impact of his revival on the local level. This was complicated by the dominant view about artisans that d’Harnoncourt shared with much of his milieu. From d’Harnoncourt’s perspective, which he elaborated upon in countless publications, an artisan was “unaware of his own individual style.” Rather, “his eyes and hands unconsciously saw and reproduced in their own way,” with the indigenous hands acting as passive conduits of a primitive unconscious. The artisan was a practitioner of what today we might term Bourdieuan habitus, creating his art “without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.” By this formulation the “active presence of past experiences,” rather than strategic or conscious calculation, guided the artisans, who passively inherited forms and normative practices in conformity with their and their community’s worldview.10

This perception of artisans remains widespread today among collectors and promoters of popular art, and even among scholars; but it does not capture Olinaltecos’ experiences. After d’Harnoncourt introduced rayado in 1927, the style spread rapidly within the community, not because of a suddenly awakened unconscious but because merchants and artisans embraced it as part of their struggle over access to knowledge, resources, capital, and markets.

Learning Rayado in Olinalá: Metropolitan Connections and Local Power Struggles

Through his ties to d’Harnoncourt the merchant Acevedo gained privileged access to a high-end market and the larger than normal profit margins paid by Davis. Locally, this placed him in the enviable position of being able to gauge elite preferences and tastes and to readily market his goods. Other merchants soon used their own capital to follow Acevedo’s example, going beyond local fairs and peddlers to build connections with Davis and other urban dealers. Rather than sit idly by as they were cut out of the market, independent artisans, too, adopted the rayado style. The elder artisans Concepción Ventura Pérez, Isaac Helguera, Siriaco Escudero Mejía, and Josefa Jiménez recall that rayado was best mastered not in Acevedo’s shop but by Juvencio Ayala, the independent artisan who had learned lacquer and carpentry from his parents.11 Just as the life story of Ventura Pérez gives us insight into the renaissance of 1913, that of Juvencio Ayala offers a prism for assessing the revival of 1927.

Before the revolution laceros were few in number and low in social status. When lacquer blossomed following the crisis of 1913, many of those who turned to the craft appear to have considered it a decline in their status, and so they readily returned to farming (generally as sharecroppers or as laborers) at the first opportunity. The longstanding stereotype of campesinos farming by day and creating crafts in the evening, or, alternatively, farming in the growing season and making crafts in the winter, did not hold true for Olinalá (nor, for that matter, Uruapan or Pátzcuaro).12 A few did have access to small parcels of land to grow gourds and chia seed along with small quantities of corn, beans, and chile, but artisans generally devoted themselves entirely to their craft. Up through the first half of the twentieth century, in fact, Olinaltecos drew a distinction between those who farmed and those who did lacquer (a distinction that would exclude artisans from the agrarian reform of the late 1940s; see chapter 9).

Those families that stayed with lacquer production after the recovery of the agricultural sector were poorer than their farming neighbors. They dedicated themselves to lacquer partly out of choice and partly out of economic necessity. Though they did not yet have a strong group consciousness that they could draw upon to defend their collective interests, laceros appear to have developed their own norms and signs of status related to craftsmanship and their own ideas of quality. And their craft seems to have involved the entire family. Even those who worked mainly in merchant workshops also produced work in small quantities within their own homes that they sold to other artisans, to merchants, or at regional fairs. Most of those who continued as craftspeople came from old artisan stock.
but some were newcomers. These newcomers adopted the techniques and cultural practices of the older laquero families, including punctuating each stage of a child’s life by introducing him or her to a new stage of production, hiring out their children to other artisans or to merchants to pay off debt or to accumulate capital with which to initiate a new round of production, and having newlyweds live for several years in the home of the husband’s parents so the new wife could learn the trade, or, if she already knew it, to adapt herself to the norms and styles of the husband’s family. If the husband was a newcomer he might move in with the wife’s family, as was the case when Josefa Pantaleón took a husband who had only recently learned the trade.13

Artisans typically married other artisans. Such was the case, for instance, when the potter-turned-lacquera Concepción Ventura Pérez married the laquero Luis Jiménez, as described in chapter 7. And it was the case for the marriage between Juvenicio Ayala and Isadora Navarrete, both of whom came from some of the oldest lacquer families in Olinalá. Isadora Navarrete, who townspeople refer to as Doña Lola, was sister to Alberto Navarrete (killed by the Zapatistas during the revolution) and Abraham Navarrete (who, along with Juvenicio, became a leading producer of dorado-style dowry chests after the 1913 revival). The marriage solidified the bond between the Ayala and Navarrete clans and combined the talents of two highly skilled individuals. Doña Lola brought to the marriage mastery of those stages of lacquer production defined as women’s work—such as collection and processing of raw material, kneading of the chia dough, and the application of the tepetzole—while Juvenicio did the tasks defined as masculine—including extraction of chia oil, scraping of gourds, carpentry, and, most importantly, the dorado and, by the time of his marriage, the rayado.14

In the decades following the 1927 introduction of rayado, the complexity of the new style made it difficult to produce, and even harder to master. Owing to its difficulty and perhaps also to the fact that it sold at higher prices and was more esteemed by collectors, rayadores earned more esteem within the artisan community than did doradores. The artworks depicted in plates 13 and 14 are attributed to the Ayala family, and the work shown in plate 15 has an unidentified artist, and all three are dated from between 1927 and 1930. These three objects are of such remarkable quality, and done in such a style, that it would be tempting to date them from the golden age of Olinalá. If these were from the eighteenth century, the jicara in plate 15, along with another jicara from the same collection, would be the only surviving examples of decorated gourds from that period. If, however, the attributions are correct, and these, indeed, are from between 1927 and 1930, as their owners claim, they would indicate a remarkable revival of craftsmanship and leave little doubt as to why the best rayadores won the respect of other craftspeople.15 Though they gained social status within the artisan community, masters of rayado such as Juvenicio Ayala or Andrés Rendón were not necessarily any better off economically.

During his visits to the town Alejandro Paucic compiled a list of all artisans considered “masters” by their peers in 1930. Consistent with what the oldest artisans from the town had been telling me in interviews, Paucic lists Ayala as in a class all to himself, as the best laquero in both styles. He also lists seven other “masters.” Five of these achieved their “master” status for their work in rayado, including Andrés Rendón, who had introduced the new style through Acevedo’s shop. Only two achieved their master status for their work in dorado: Rufino García who worked in both rayado and dorado; and Ysmael García, who worked not with gourds or boxes but with tecuani (human-jaguar; see figure 21), ritual masks that he carved from the wood known as colorín (Erythrina americana, also known as zompantle or naked coral) and decorated with lacquer, wood, leather, and boar’s hair and teeth—a craft his descendents continue.

Paucic also tells us that in 1930 there were a total of six instalados (workshops capable of completing all stages of lacquer from beginning to end in-house with family or hired labor). He seems to exclude the various small scale shops operated by artisans who might spend their days working for Acevedo and their evenings producing at home with family labor. He does not list the location or head of any of the six instalados. He does, however, note that while an instalado might have many oficiales (hired hands who received either a wage or a piece rate), they took only a small number of apprentices (who, instead of a wage, received a percentage of the workshop’s profits).16

When Ayala saw d’Harnoncourt revive rayado through Acevedo’s shop, it seems that he took matters into his own hands. He mastered the new style, married Isadora Navarrete (who brought her skills, labor, and family connections), and soon was delivering his own rayado production directly to Davis’s Mexico City gallery, where one might imagine d’Harnoncourt,
In their effort to revive and preserve this art form, Ayala and other lacquer artisans worked closely with museums and collectors. For example, the lacquered tecuan mask from Olinalá, exhibited in 1920, was featured in Frances Toor's article in *Mexican Folkways*.

Fosado, and Davis gave him detailed feedback about what they thought was good about his work and what to improve. One of Frederick Davis’s photographs (figure 22), which accompanied an article that Jorge Enciso published in *Mexican Folkways* in 1933, shows Juvencio Ayala with one such delivery, which consisted of a dowry chest and a number of palanganas (also known as peribanas or bateas), all beautifully executed in the rayado style.  

Ayala was atypical for making direct contact with an urban dealer, and he was among the few (and possibly may have been the only one) who bypassed the merchants to buy some of his own peribanas in Mexico City and to establish direct access with Davis’s shop. He was even more atypical in that, whereas other lacquers relied on carpentry shops and merchants for boxes and chests to decorate, he made most of his own blancos (boxes and chests to be lacquered).

Even though it was independent artisans who best mastered the rayado style, and although Ayala took steps to compete against merchant workshops, the merchants enjoyed key advantages. First, the complexity of the rayado process favored a division of labor that was easier to organize with hired help (oficiales) than within the family unit. Second, demand for rayado was idiosyncratic. This gave the merchants, who could meet with dealers such as Davis with regularity (except for during the rainy season), the advantage of steady capital accumulation, frequent turnover of goods, and regular interaction with buyers to gauge their tastes.

A third advantage for merchants came from the fact that the most profitable objects done in the rayado style were bateas (plate 16). The merchants largely controlled this trade. Locally, these carved wood trays were known as bateas or palanganas, but Olinaltecos also employed the term preferred by Mexico City dealers, who called them peribanas (named after a town in Michoacán known as a marketing center for carved trays). Dowry chests, or baules, were more esteemed and valuable, but they required more time, labor, and materials. Moreover, compared to peribanas that could be stacked, baules were difficult and expensive to transport and they were more likely to suffer damage during the long, arduous journey through the Montaña. Overall, peribanas offered higher profit margins,
entailed less risk of loss to damage, and required less capital outlay. They also enjoyed a brisk demand in Mexico City. The problem for independent artisans was that the lack of suitable trees made it impossible to carve peribanas locally. Merchants imported them from Michoacán via Mexico City and within a short time directly from Mexico City woodcarvers. Artisans recount how in the late 1920s through the 1930s Luis Acevedo would return with tall stacks of unfinished peribanas. After day-workers lacquered them in his shop, he would take them to Mexico City, then return with a fresh load of peribanas en blanco.18

Artisan families that ran their own instalados had several main options: borrow money at high interest rates from merchants so they could undertake the costly trip to the capital to buy their own bateas; buy bateas on credit from the merchants; concentrate their efforts on less capital-intensive (but also less profitable) gourds; or focus on the more labor-intensive and risky, dowry chests. Juvencio Ayala and Isadora Navarrete combined all these strategies, but most other artisans appear to have relied upon merchants or found themselves closed out of batea production (except when working as oficiales for the merchants).

Even artisans such as Ayala, who could compete against the merchants in the production of high-quality rayado-style chests and bateas, relied for their livelihood on gourds decorated in the dorado style, which they sold regionally at low prices. After 1927 the ideal was to combine high volume corriente production (which brought predictable, if low, profits) with a smaller stream of high-end goods (which entailed more risk but brought higher profits). This balance was difficult, and a shipment lost to flooding or a slight misreading of metropolitan tastes could spell disaster. Even the most talented and independent of artisans at times had to turn to merchants for loans, which often required loans from merchants to pay wages, he needed within his family people trained in each stage of production. And to market his own wares without taking out an expensive loan from a merchant, he needed to finish a production cycle with cash on hand for travel expenses. Artisans seemed locked into a losing battle. Even Juvencio Ayala, who possessed the skills and the in-house labor to complete the entire production process from beginning to end, sometimes had to turn to merchants for loans, dry goods, and occasionally even capital to start a new cycle of production or to finance a sales trip to regional fairs or to Mexico City. Independence, in this context, was a matter of degree, not an absolute, and those who had the most success worked in both rayado and dorado and in both high-end and low-end markets. Rather than group solidarity, they, artisans strove for autonomy. And while some of them did achieve a fair degree of autonomy up through the middle of the 1930s, it was never easy.

Local accounts, together with Paucic's notes from his visits to Olinalá at the time, make clear that, despite the obstacles during the early and mid-1930s, some male artisans maintained their own shops, shipped and sold their own wares, and negotiated rates with merchants. One of the ways artisans tried to protect their autonomy was by strengthening their ties to urban dealers and fair vendors. To help these artisans Manuel Calderón of the Museo de Artes Populares in Mexico City in 1933 and again in 1937 attempted to compile a list of the artisans in Olinalá, so as to help urban dealers bypass intermediaries (see chapter 5). Such efforts do not seem to have had much impact and artisans were on their own as they competed against merchant-run workshops.

Without minimizing the merchants' exploitation of their fellow townspeople, their often violent manipulation of local political and economic relations, and their use of debt to corner the local market and exploit their neighbors, it is important to recognize their crucial role during the late
1920s and early 1930s as a linkage between the growing but idiosyncratic high-end market. Absent merchants' frequent interaction with urban dealers, Olinaltecos would have had difficulty figuring out how to make their work convey the signs that collectors and nationalists expected to find in authentically indigenous popular art. And in the late 1930s it was merchants who made it possible for Olinalá to respond to the growth in demand for low-end products. As discussed below, this ballooned the size of the artisan population to half of the adults in the village. Like most kinds of middlemen or hingemen, the merchants gained power not just because of their access to capital but because they used that capital in such a way as to serve those above them and those below. The problem for the artisans was that once these middlemen gained this advantage, they exploited it to prevent competitors and subalterns from circumventing their authority. As middlemen, therefore, Olinaltecan merchants manipulated market connections and indigenousness to act as both facilitators and exploiters.

Merchants were not laqueros' only problem. Lack of roads and bridges, severe aridity followed by a long heavy rainy season that swelled streams and caused flash floods, and a precipitous, crumbly terrain, made travel within the northern Montaña de Guerrero difficult. Even if artisans managed to travel without incident, they, unlike merchants, rarely could count on guaranteed buyers. If the destination was Mexico City or if travel occurred during a dangerous time of the year, only males made the trip, but if they were going to regional fairs during a safe time of the year, the whole family might go. Often the women sold in the fairs while repairing nicks and dents and polishing the objects (figure 23) while males hawked in the streets of towns or villages or traveled to meet dealers.

Artisans negotiated merchandise exchanges with others along the road so as to diversify the goods they would sell in the next town or the next fair. They also might invest some of their income in dry goods and supplies that they hoped to bring back to Olinalá to feed their families, stave off debt to the merchants, or exchange with other artisans. In addition to Tepalcengo, Morelos, which was the most important regional marketplace, Olinaltecos also visited over two dozen other fairs. The number and importance of these fairs, however, declined during the 1930s and 1940s as tin, plastic, and glass became cheap alternatives to lacquered gourds and as the population in the Montaña stagnated. This decline of the fairs and difficulty of travel and marketing, coupled with the competition from merchants capable of high-output of lacquered crafts at low prices, made it common for artisans to reach the end of the fair season with some of their merchandise still in tow and no choice but to sell it at a loss to anyone who would buy, so as to recuperate some of their costs and get cash to pay off debt and to initiate a new cycle of production. In the face of growing financial risks and mounting debt artisans found it even more difficult to market their own goods.

One of the ways artisans tried to gain room for maneuver was through the high-end market. Merchants had managed the town's introduction to the high-end market in 1927, but in the 1930s artisans brought a revival of their own. During the colonial era, Olinaltecos sometimes had employed the fragrant wood of the linaloe tree (Bursera aloexylon) in their baules, but based on comments by older artisans and objects in existing collections, they seem to have stopped using it back in the nineteenth century. In the mid-1930s the artisans either reintroduced it or stepped up its use—though it would not be until the 1960s and 1970s that use of linaloe would become widespread. To use the trees in this way required human intervention in the months before harvesting, when strategically placed cuts
stimulated the growth of fragrant veins. At harvest time sawyers cut the trunk in such a way as to maximize surface exposure of these veins. Linaloe increased demand and price per piece within the high-end market. Unlike rayado, linaloe did not unleash major changes in marketing or production, but it did provide a way for artisans to raise the value of their work without increasing dependence on merchants. Moreover, because lacqueros left the interior of linaloe bailes unlaquered, so as to release the wood's fragrance into the textiles stored within, linaloe saved on labor and materials. Its use alleviated master artisans' need to go into debt to the merchants and helped them fetch high prices. In neither the short term nor the long term, however, did the introduction of linaloe present a serious challenge to merchant control.

Independent artisans held their own until the second half of the 1930s, when merchant-artisan relations underwent an abrupt shift. This shift was precipitated by new state policies that favored large-scale craft dealers at the expense of artisan producers. Merchants who previously had acted alone now became local agents of an organized commercial network based in Chilapa. As discussed in chapters 5 and 6, the state provided funds that private investors channeled through regional and local agents or acaparadores. These acaparadores used these funds to entangle artisans in cycles of debt that assured a steady flow of products to the growing low-end market. Olinala provides a context for understanding how this state policy unfolded on the ground and how it impacted artisans and handicrafts.

As merchants gained greater access to large buyers and to capital with which to make loans, they moved away from the workshop model. They learned that control over credit was more lucrative than control over production. They tightened their monopoly over the sale of dry goods, food, and craft supplies, then sold these goods at inflated prices on credit that often had to be repaid not in cash but with crafts. They also offered cash loans on similar terms. Artisans in desperate need of food, cash, or supplies sold their future work at far below normal market value. When making the loans, the merchants stipulated the style, materials, level of quality, and due date. This enabled the merchants to assure a steady stream of goods of predictable quality to agents in Chilapa, who then moved the crafts to Mexico City warehouses.

Roberto Lujan pioneered an ingenious refinement to this system. As he moved away from running a workshop, Lujan developed a peculiar piece-work system in which he supplied an artisan with the materials necessary for a particular stage of production and a certain quantity of partially finished crafts. He then treated these goods as an interest-bearing loan. For example, after one artisan returned to Lujan a set of gourds that she had burned for him, he would then "lend" that load of gourds to another artisan to apply the tlapezole, or base coat. He would "lend" her also all the necessary pigments, tools, and tierras, along with a small cash advance.

For each day that passed between the time he delivered the goods to her and the time that she returned the finished product, she owed accrued interest on the full value of all the tools and supplies, and on the value of the partially completed gourds. When she finally did return the gourds to him with their tlapezole, he calculated her pay by starting with the price that he had agreed to pay her for lacquering the gourds, then subtracting the interest and the price of whatever materials she had used. The difference between these two amounts was what he paid her. If she was fast and lucky, she would earn a meager profit; if she were unlucky, she would end up owing him money, which she would have to pay off by taking another loan of partially finished crafts. The merchant then turned the gourds over to another artisan for the next stage of production, with all the same conditions. Once a load of crafts was complete, he sold it to associates in Chilapa. This putting-out method pioneered by Lujan attracted other merchants, such as Daniel Almazán, who previously had avoided dealing with lacquer but now recognized it as a great business opportunity. The system benefited from consumers' growing indifference toward quality and workmanship during the late 1930s and 1940s, which gave the acaparadores more flexibility in their dealings with artisans.

This putting-out bore some similarities to earlier systems in Europe and the United States. But, whereas those putting-out systems developed as preludes to industrialization—leading to in-house contracting and then factories and assembly lines—in Olinala merchants used it as a way to profit from the underdevelopment of their region within the context of national and international capitalism. The system in the Montaña therefore was not a classic example of putting-out, but something of a hybrid between pre-industrial putting-out systems, debt-peonage, and high-capitalist sweatshops.

Seeing as one way acaparadores ensnared artisans was through debt in the form of supplies, one might expect craftspeople to avoid this by
manufacturing all their own materials. Unfortunately, it was not so simple. There were too many stages in the production process, and each one consumed so much time. This meant that at a moment when prices per piece were falling (as was the case from the mid-1930s through the 1940s) a workshop struggling to do everything in-house could not earn enough to survive. This becomes clear if we look at one task: the preparation of gourds. Artisans differentiated among many different kinds of gourds; jicara, bailes, chirianes, tecomas, guajes, and many others. The preparation of these gourds, though regarded as one of the simplest of artisans’ tasks, was involved and time consuming. After acquiring the proper assortment of gourds in the Costa Chica, buying them from dealers, or growing some varieties themselves, artisans then submerged them in water for at least a month to cure. Failure to cure them adequately would result later in cracking, and soaking them too long deteriorated the surface of the gourd such that it bonded poorly with the lacquer. Some artisans tied together bundles and sunk them in pits that they dug in arroyo beds, while others created special wells in their patios at home. After curing the gourds, the artisans had to saw them in half (if they were to become bowls) or into whatever simple or elaborate shapes they would eventually take. They then scraped out the insides, and set the husks to dry at a controlled rate for four to five days, after which time they scrubbed the gourds and polished the inner and outer surfaces with burnishing stones to prepare them to accept the first layer of lacquer, or tlapetzolli. 26 Artisans had not only to prepare gourds but also each pigment, each tierra, the chia oil, each burnishing stone, marking tool, cotton wad, and countless other tools, craft supplies, and packing materials. It was simply impractical for them to continue to do everything for themselves in an era when falling prices demanded greater output. To survive, even the most independent of artisans had to turn to the merchants for at least some of their supplies.

Merchants displayed ingenuity as they transitioned from direct production to control over supplies and debt. They coordinated a dizzying array of raw materials gathered from near and far. At first the merchants bought their supplies from local women, but they soon turned to regional suppliers who undercut local producers. By the end of the 1930s they were going even further afield, replacing local products with cheap commercial pigments, linseed oil (which they introduced as an alternative to the locally produced chia oil—using, at that time, a low grade of linseed oil that did not adhere well to the wood), and plaster and dolomite to replace such local tierras as tetzicalite. The ironic outcome was that the very merchants who in 1927 had acted as purveyors of Olinaltecan authenticity, a decade later undercut the community’s ability to comply with collectors’ expectation that “authentic” crafts be made of local hand-processed materials.

Under such a system, the new challenge for the artisans was no longer to compete directly against the merchants but rather to try to minimize the chances of being crushed by expensive debt. It was at this time, at the end of the 1930s, that Alejandro Paucic, confirming what older artisans have described, observed that acaparadores had gained such control over the crafts that few artisans were able to market even a fraction of their own goods or to select their buyers.27

Gender Roles and Market Transitions

Lacquer production was highly gendered. Without an analysis of the gendered pathways of power and production it is impossible to understand how merchants exercised their control or how artisans contested such control. Certain tasks, usually laborious and tedious, were defined as feminine, and those that were more highly valued, creative, and varied were defined as masculine. Women made the lacquered object utilitarian (with waterproofing, for instance) and processed all the raw materials. In the context of 1920s and early 1930s ethnicized cultural nationalism, it was the tasks defined as masculine that determined most of the work’s value. For this reason, when we talk about the nationalist and metropolitan validation of Olinaltecan lacquer, we are talking about a privileging of the men’s contribution.

Gender roles are never fixed. They are continually challenged, nego-

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27
tance they could present. Because *laqueros* could extrapolate from practices related to *dorado* production and upon assumptions that pervaded local society more generally, gender norms for *rayado* production regularized fairly quickly.

Paucí's notes offer remarkable detail about the structure of labor, work rates, and remuneration. One notable feature was that male artisans' pay and prestige were tied closely to their demonstrated skill, which varied widely from one artisan to the next. Women's work, by contrast, provided little recompense in pay or reputation for skill and talent. Whereas Olinaltecos judged a man's skill as hard-earned and a mark of personal talent, they attributed variations in women's work to the quality of her raw materials and the particular process employed. A woman might be thought to possess a certain level of competence expected of all women artisans, but she was not celebrated for her unique mastery. Moreover, when women's skills added to the quality of a work, the prestige went not to that *laquera* but to the male *rayador* or *dorador* wise enough to have competent women helpers. The gendered structures that emerged around *rayado* did not improve women's economic leverage or social status, but they did offer her a greater variety of tasks. Rather than being confined to processing raw materials and applying the *tlapetzole*, a woman now could take part in some of the final stages of production, such as "thickening" the design created by the men, or waxing and buffing the final product. The greater number of stages that required female artisans meant that women, while still low paid and lacking in status, gained more room for horizontal movement among tasks or workshops. While for women *rayado* offered only horizontal options, for men it created opportunities to move vertically and to demand rates of compensation based on skill and talent. This led to a wide variation among men's compensation. The lowest-paid men earned the same as women for a ten-hour workday, but a skilled *rayador* working as an *oficial* could earn twice as much as the highest-paid woman.

Lest we exaggerate male artisans' economic leverage we should keep in mind that even the best *rayador* on the best of his days earned less than 10 percent of the daily rate d'Harnoncourt charged his clients for his collecting services. Even the most successful artisans, such as Juvencio Ayala, lived in grinding poverty. Also, though a *rayador* earned more per piece than did a *dorador*, he did not necessarily earn more per day. This was because a *dorador*’s income level was more likely to be maintained by high output, whereas a *rayador* could slow down and pay more attention to design and detail—provided his work was good enough and of the proper aesthetic to break through a certain market threshold.

The greater complexity of *rayado* as compared to *dorado* offered advantages to artisans, but a major drawback was that it was more capital and labor intensive. It also required access to a wider range of specialized skills. This was because the second layer of lacquer called for in *rayado* was of higher-quality materials and craftsmanship than the base coat. For a 45 cm diameter *palangana*, for example, application of the *tlapetzole* needed for both *rayado* or *dorado* could be accomplished by one female *oficial* and cost only .25 pesos in labor and materials. But application of the second coat necessary for the *rayado* style required a team of at least seven specialists. For maximum efficiency, a different person focused on each specialty (though, in a family workshop, where the pay for *oficiales* cut into the family income, individuals often specialized in two or more stages). Depending on quality, *rayado* added between .65 and 6.40 pesos to the production cost of each 45 cm *palangana*. This assumes that only two colors were being used (one for the base coat, the other for the design), but high-quality pieces used as many as five different colors. The entire procedure had to be repeated for each color, adding significantly to the production cost. Even the highest quality *dorado*, by contrast, never added more than 1.25 pesos to the production cost. Production of *rayado*, then, demanded a much higher investment in capital and labor. High quality *rayado* brought more esteem than did high quality *dorado*, but not necessarily a higher income.

Production bottlenecks emerged at the point where men stepped in as *rayadores*. Female skills were widespread within the community and poorly valued, whereas it was hard to find a good *rayador*. Male artisans used this bottleneck as leverage to gain respect and higher wages. In most cases, the strategy worked. But in at least one crucial case it backfired and was what helped precipitate merchants' decision to abandon the workshop model in favor of the debt and piecework model described earlier. The backfire happened in Roberto Lujan's workshop just when he and other merchants began operating as *acaparadores* for agents in Chilapa. Frustrated by the *rayadores*’ growing leverage, and cognizant of falling prices and of con-
Dore's was not talented at the same daily rate as two highly skilled workers paid by the artisan pieceworkers and from the final sale of the craft to buyers. Because women had no other employment options, it instead undermined their already weak ability to negotiate compensation. Cheap industrial alternatives rendered women's work dispensable unless those women lowered their prices to compete with the new materials. The impact of these industrially produced alternatives on the physical crafts and their market is addressed later in this chapter. The thing to note for now is that as merchants introduced these new materials, the act of processing local raw materials became a cultural mark of extreme poverty, undertaken only by women from families who could not gain access to the capital or loans necessary to acquire labor-saving industrial alternatives. Ironically, even as their art departed from the nationalist ideal, the denigration and growing poverty of Olinalá's craftspeople made them more fully compliant with local definitions of indigenousness, which, in Olinalá as elsewhere in Mexico, remained linked to poverty and inefficient, even irrational, modes of production.

Declining Profits and Economic Immobility

Even as consumer demand for Olinaltecan lacquer grew in the late 1930s and 1940s, artisans' standard of living eroded. To meet the rising demand for crafts, merchants used debt to compel economically destitute townpeople to participate in lacquer production, but the declining prices, higher costs, and rising inflation prevented the artisans, old and new, from making a decent living. This section of the chapter explains why growth in consumer demand undermined, rather than increased, artisans' leverage and why it hurt craftsmanship. It also points to the beginnings of economic solidarity among laqueros.

After a decade of relative stagnation, the town's population suddenly swelled in the first half of the 1940s by almost 50 percent to around 2,000 people. At that time, more than half of all Olinaltecos participated in the lacquer industry, and they did so in a wider diversity of ways than previously. Some townspeople combined piecework for the merchants with a few independently produced items that they sold at local markets, to other artisans, or to merchants. Others worked in multiple artisan workshops as hired help, did some piecework on contract and produced a few lacquered earrings made of small gourds that they sold on consignment with the help of independent artisans. In short, the possible ways of taking part in the market multiplied. Nevertheless, the sector that benefited most was the merchant class which, by this time, comprised about seven families. They built upon their ties to dealers in Chilapa; developed connections with other dealers throughout the area and in Mexico City, Puebla de los Angeles, and the growing tourist city of Acapulco; and, as described earlier, exploited artisans through debt and by tapping into gendered structures so as to extract crafts at depressed prices. Some centered their business strategy on crafts, but the more powerful and wealthy merchants treated crafts as only part of a broader economic strategy that involved livestock, crops, and transportation. And the wealthiest of the merchants avoided crafts altogether.

Artisans, meantime, contended with an increasingly crowded field at home and from the outside. As discussed in chapter 5, the simplification of designs and the decline in craftsmanship made it easy for dealers from as far away as Japan to flood Mexico and the United States with objects designed to mimic the appearance of Olinaltecan lacquer and other Mexican
crafts. Competition also grew closer to home. Temalacacingo entered the
market thanks to vecinos who had apprenticed in Olinaltecan workshops,
and thanks to well-intentioned teachers, eager to offer the people a means
to support themselves economically, who taught them aspects of Olinatle­
can lacquer techniques through the public schools. Temalacaltecos tried
to imitate Olinaltecan dorado gourds, but their knowledge of the materi­
als and processes was too fragmented to sustain such an industry, so they
focused on wood toys decorated with store-bought paint—this remains
their market niche even today, though most recently they have also started
to produce stunningly burnished gourds. Temalacacingo was not unusual.
Paucic notes that throughout Guerrero and into Oaxaca and Chiapas out­
siders were trying to convince communities to take up lacquer production
as a strategy to alleviate poverty. As low-cost items flooded the market,
Olinaltecos found they had to produce in even greater quantity and lower
quality to survive. The diversification of ways of participating in the mar­
ket, under these circumstances, did not open new opportunities. Rather,
it was part of a desperate effort at survival by craftspeople stuck in a race
to the bottom, and a symptom of the lack of other options within the local
economy.

Artisans, ever on the lookout for ways to improve their situation, at­
ttempted to emulate the merchants. In fact, we see slippage on both sides,
from both merchants and artisans. For some merchants—such as Daniel
Almazán, who now dealt in crafts but, unlike Lujan or Acevedo, never
established a workshop, and others, like Cirio León, who never dealt with
handicrafts in any way—their status as merchants was unambiguous. For
others, it was less stark. Luis Acevedo and Roberto Lujan, for example,
both ran workshops during the 1920s and 1930s. As mentioned earlier,
Lujan, even as he outsourced most of the production, acted as his own
rayador. Moreover, during the late 1920s and early 1930s, some merchants
seem to have presented themselves to metropolitan collectors and nation­
als as indigenous artisans.

Slippage was more pronounced on the part of artisans. It became com­
mon for an artisan preparing for a long journey to take with him the works
of other artisans so as to haul a full load. Such arrangements might be
based on commission, outright purchase for resale, barter, or repayment
of personal loans. As mentioned previously, sometimes these were part of
reciprocal agreements by which an artisan preparing to travel might agree
to sell the work of fellow artisans. This gave nontraveling artisans a sales
option outside of the merchants, and it gave the traveling artisans a com­
mission as well as an opportunity to vary their offerings at fairs or in urban
marketplaces. Artisans looked for similar opportunities on the road. While
traveling, one might exchange lacquer for a load of rebozos (shaws), bask­
ets, or bits of dry goods to sell along the way or upon returning to Oli­
nalá. The end effect was that artisans tended to deal in a range of goods in
search of market opportunities and in a vain effort to accumulate capital.
Despite such slippage, neither the documentation nor my interviews re­
vews a single artisan who successfully transitioned into the rank of mer­
chant. Artisans were unable to marshal the capital that would have been
necessary to bring large quantities of goods back and then to wait to sell
them over the long rainy season. If they were lucky, they might bring back
enough goods so as not to have to ask local merchants for loans, but they
did not earn enough to establish themselves even as minor merchants or
as lenders (except for small short-term loans to friends and kin). Despite
the reality of economic immobility, independent marketing continued to
attract artisans (and still does to this day), because it offered the dream of
escaping the cycle of poverty and insecurity that seemed the inevitable lot
of the craftspeople.

A Pyrrhic Victory
At the end of the 1940s, following years of struggle for the freedom to mar­
ket their own goods, artisans finally got what they wanted, but it turned
out to be a pyrrhic victory achieved only on account of the market for lac­
quer having become so unattractive. Prices for Olinaltecan crafts sank so
low that local merchants shifted instead to the agricultural sector, where
corrupted land reform had opened up new opportunities for profit (see
chapter 9). Merchants continued to act as local high-interest lenders and
as sellers of craft supplies, but they now expected repayment in cash. This
not only allowed artisans to market their own goods; it compelled them to
go out and do so aggressively.

As merchants abandoned the lacquer trade, so, too, did many laqueros.
As will be more fully addressed in the next chapter, the artisans who re­
mained active found themselves excluded from the ejidos created in the
mid-1940s. They won control over the marketing of their crafts, but rather
than the vibrant market they had encountered in the early 1930s immedi­
ately following d'Harnoncourt's revival, they now grappled with depressed prices, indifference toward quality on the part of most buyers, and a lack of a reliable marketing network—it is not clear why they did not sell to agents in Chilapa. And the irregularity of their contact with high-end buyers left them unable to gauge reliably collectors' expectations. To survive, artisans had to produce quickly, cheaply, and in bulk, and they had to have a fast turnaround in sales if they hoped to make any profit at all after paying their debt to the merchants. And, after they paid their debts, they still had to take out more loans to finance a new cycle of production.

To keep their debt at a manageable level craftspeople had to minimize their own costs. The only way to do this was to use low-quality materials. This meant that even as they regained control over the marketing of their goods, they were more dependent than ever upon the industrial substitutes that merchants sold on credit. Laqueros leaned on dorado-style gourds and small boxes that they could produce rapidly, in series, with minimal investment, and which could be quickly marketed at low prices in regional markets. They also abandoned carved peribanas in favor of cheaper rectangular plywood trays, known as charolas or bandejas. Even for high-end goods, whose production had slowed to a trickle, artisans had little choice but to replace traditional materials with such industrial substitutes as gesso, aniline pigments, linseed oil, and ground dolomite. Overall, they concentrated on crafts that were cheap to produce and easy to transport and market and thereby tied up little capital and required only minor economic risk.35 The trade-off was that such goods brought thin profit margins and decreased opportunity for capital accumulation. This treat to gourds, small boxes, and plywood trays, all decorated in the dorado style with low-quality industrial materials, was a conservative strategy that kept artisans locked into deepening poverty and dependence. Moreover, it afforded few opportunities for them to hone or flaunt skills, which further depressed their social status locally—though I would argue that even the work they produced under those conditions often was quite beautiful.

The use of these industrial materials created quality-control problems. Indigenous consumers, upon whom laqueros now relied, bought lacquered gourds as drinking, serving, and storage vessels for liquids, or, in the case of gourds with lids, for storing powders that needed to be shielded from moisture. Yet the abandonment of chia and local tierras, along with simplifications in production, compromised this lacquer's impermeability. Artisans tried to address this problem by introducing automotive wax, but this did not greatly improve water and weather resistance, and it offered a less durable gloss than did lacquer made with local tierras, chia oil, and careful stone burnishing. As lacquer quality declined, indigenous consumers turned even more to tin, glass, and plastic alternatives.

The cheap materials also cost artisans the trust of collectors, who now refused to pay high prices for objects that they justifiably feared might be made of questionable materials. The more craftspeople replaced linaloe with pine doused in fragrance (see chapter 9), abandoned chia oil in favor of low-grade linseed oil that did not adhere well to the woody surface of the gourds and trays, cut corners in the curing of their pine boards such that their buyers a few months later found their lacquered chests devoured by moth larvae eating their way out of the wood, and either replaced local tierras with industrial substitutes or accepted adulterated tierras from local producers (who themselves were cutting corners), the more the reputation of their craft suffered and the harder it became for them to command high prices.

Olinalá was not the only artisan community experiencing this kind of crisis of quality and reputation during the 1940s and the 1950s. As described in chapter 6, government policies and strategies by private investors took a toll across Mexico. Doctor Atl, who had spurred the resurgence of crafts in the 1920s and 1930s, correctly observed that beginning in the 1940s most crafts entered a dramatic decline in workmanship and artisans suffered an eroding standard of living. He wrote that "it is our responsibility to make the aesthetic lightning bolt of 1914–1940 strike again with even greater intensity and benefits." It was at this same time that the nationalist ethnologist Enrique Othón Díaz worried that the overall decline of crafts might encroach upon Olinaltec lacquer, which he and others saw as one of the final bastions of authenticity, and wondered if there was any hope of "salvaging" popular art "from the inferno that is burning away the spirit of Mexico."36

The economic situation continued to drive producers from the market until the percentage of Olinalá's population involved in craft production seems to have dropped from more than half to 15 percent or less. Ironically, the decline in the number of artisans coincided with the proliferation of small, full-time workshops, which reached more than four dozen by 1950.37 This seeming paradox resulted from the fact that, as production became
less complex thanks to labor-saving industrial materials, declining profits made it hard for a workshop to support many workers. Moreover, the simplifications introduced into the production process made large instalados unnecessary. Artisans who might have worked as oficiales instead struck out on their own. In 1930 a workshop had been expected to complete the entire lacquer process from beginning to end, but these new workshops each specialized in a particular stage of production. Sometimes they performed stages of production subcontracted to them by well-established instalados, other times they simply worked in conjunction with other small workshops, with each completing a stage of production before selling the partially completed objects to another workshop, until, in the end, a final product emerged ready for market. The proliferation of workshops, then, like the newfound marketing autonomy of the artisans, was not a sign of artisans' triumph but rather another effort to survive in the face of the deepening crisis and marginality of their industry.

As crafts lost their place within the nationalist imagination, artisans lost whatever local social status they had gained during the 1920s and 1930s. At the close of the 1940s Paucic noted that the "authentic folkloric industry" in Olinalá "is poorly remunerated" and "disparaged." Today's artisans no longer suffer such low status, and they look back upon the 1940s through the middle of the 1960s as their low point. Families involved in livestock, farming, or trade, many of whom benefited from the agrarian reform and who linked masculinity to access to land, went so far as to refuse to allow their children to marry artisans, whom they ridiculed as tlapetzolientes ("those who stink of tlapetzole," a disparaging term that marked the artisans as indigenous, unwashed, and effeminate, since it was the job of the lowest ranked women to apply tlapetzole). Moreover, the artisans' poverty and low status marked them as more indigenous than other townspeople. The flip side of this situation was that artisans began to change how they grappled with new challenges and developed new strategies for survival, they began to think of themselves as a distinct and bounded social sector endowed with its own identity and interests within Olinaltecan society.

Quality and Indianness in Olinalá

With a sagacity that would be lost later in the next two decades, a Mexican consul in New York City in 1933 recognized some of the complexities of the market and of taste. The consul noted that a lively demand for popular art in the United States resulted from the success of the 1930–32 Mexican Arts Show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, along with the public's fascination with the excavations at Monte Albán and frequent exposure to Mexican crafts in schools, clubs, churches, and bazaars. But the consul explained that there were peculiarities to the market that had to be understood. One of the things he emphasized was that the market for products of quality operated differently than the low-end market, but that the two were tied together. If the quality of high-end crafts were to decline, low-end prices would follow. He also noted how poorly expectations regarding quality were conveyed along the chain linking consumers to producers. He lamented how often artisans created pieces whose materials, workmanship, and price appealed to the collectors' market but whose style and taste responded to the cheap souvenir market. "Hybrid" pieces of this kind led to significant losses. But what was quality? Why and how did artisans misread the market? To what degree was this misreading mutual? The meaning of quality and the question of who had the right to make such discernment and on what grounds, speaks to the interlinkages as well as the disjunctures between the local, the national, and the transnational, and it comes back to the question of Indianness.

The idea of "quality" was not merely an elite imposition. During the 1940s, even as other Olinaltecos looked down upon them and the market forced them to compromise in materials and craftsmanship, a core of artisans clung to an ideal of quality. Part of their aesthetics-versus-market dilemma is captured in a story shared by a number of artisans who came of age in the 1940s. According to this story, one day Juvencio Ayala was preparing to travel to the fairs to sell his work. As was often done, he took with him goods by fellow artisans. One of the artisans, Don X, was recognized as mediocre, but since he was a good friend, Ayala agreed to sell his work on commission. At one of the rural fairs, Ayala laid out his merchandise but, embarrassed by the poor workmanship of Don X's crafts, could not get himself to bring those out. When the fair was ending, he still had not made a single sale. Then a costumer wandered over and lingered at the stall. After looking over all the merchandise he finally asked Ayala if he had anything else. Embarrassed, the artisan uncovered Don X's work. The delighted costumer bought several of them. This oft-repeated story of Ayala and Don X reveals the tension that artisans experienced between workmanship and
the market; between their own trained, discerning eyes and the seemingly
undiscerning eyes of most buyers. One of the artisans who recounted this
story explained what he saw as its moral: “That is how things happened,
and [even today] people still do not know” how to differentiate good work
from mediocre. From laqueros’ perspective, to create quality work was to
take a risk that might not pay off economically. Yet to be recognized as able
and willing to make such a sacrifice initiated an artisan into an informal
but mutually supportive circle of like-minded individuals.

Taste and quality were shifting and negotiated categories that involved
the constant exchange of ideas, knowledge, and assumptions among artis-
sans, middlemen, buyers, and metropolitan collectors and promoters. Oli-
naltecos, for instance, embraced the elite notion of rayado as generally
of higher quality than dorado, and they also came to embrace as signs
of aesthetic refinement the subtleties of style that elites saw as marks of
indigenousness. Even within this seeming consensus, however, there was
mutual misunderstanding. Collectors and artisans agreed that, rather than
copy antiques identically, it was better to improvise upon these old aes-
thetic foundations. But whereas artisans saw their own improvisations as
proof of their talent and creativity and of their ability to address subtle-
ties of taste and refinement, elites saw them as passive, unconscious ex-
pressions of a collective worldview. As such, the expectation of controlled
improvisation created opportunities but also a minefield for miscues and
misunderstanding. Collectors and artisans agreed that, rather than
negotiation of quality in Olinaltecan lacquer was tied also to the shift-
ing terrain of indigenousness. In Olinalá, as in other parts of Mexico, indi-
genousness was a contingent category more often applied to others than
to oneself. While language could serve as a marker of ethnicity for census
purposes, in practice indigenousness was tied to a range of signs, strate-
gies, status markers, traditions, practices, and modes of representation.
Cultural identity applied to individual people not in a fixed sense, but to
their strategies, practices, and relations to others at particular conjunc-
tures. On the local level, moreover, indigenousness was linked to poverty
and backwardness and to a lack of control over one’s own destiny. Arti-
sans, following these criteria, were often viewed by themselves and others
as indigenous, and their lacquered art as an expression of this indigenous-
ness. At the same time, an artisan who mastered high-end rayado and
maintained some form of autonomy from merchants would, by virtue of
his decreased dependence, move away from local, demeaning definitions
of indigenousness. More importantly, he used his art and his metropolitan
interactions to construct and embrace alternative, positive understandings
of indigenousness. In other words, he moved away from degrading local
notions of indigenous toward an affirming cosmopolitan and nationalist
definition.

The historical legacy of this discourse of indigenousness continues to
permeate laqueros’ identities. In 1997 during a conversation with the arti-

For metropolitan nationalists and collectors, despite their esteem for
independent craftspeople and demonization of middlemen, these artisans’
agency presented a problem. According to the way popular art was valued,
craftspeople were supposed to be unselfconscious, passive creators. Un-
like a canvas painting, whose value was tied to its author, popular art was
supposed to be anonymous, created by “the people” out of a communal,
timeless worldview. Part of the appeal of the rabbits, flowers, and other
motifs that populated rayado designs was their aura of mystery and their
seemingly passive invocation of the deep Mexico. Even today, some arti-
sans develop idiosyncratic styles and motifs to individualize their work—
Felicitas Ayala Martínez, for instance, does exquisite black on black rayado
butterflies with small red highlights—but they will not do so too obviously,
and they will not sign their work except on request because they know
that evidence of individual agency usually will diminish the value of their
products.

Negotiation of quality in Olinaltecan lacquer was tied also to the shift-
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The historical legacy of this discourse of indigenousness continues to
permeate laqueros’ identities. In 1997 during a conversation with the arti-

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san Francisco "Chico" Coronel about town politics, I commented that I had always seen his town described as an indigenous village. He stopped me to clarify that he was not an indígena. Neither were any of the other artisans. They were all of "clean" blood, as he put it. Yet later, when we were talking about lacquer, he asserted the opposite, insisting that the art was entirely indigenous, and so were the lagueros who created it. His direct ancestors had been practicing this art since before the Spaniards arrived, he claimed. This seems like a contradiction, but it points, instead, to the contingent nature of indigenousness, and the degree to which it has emerged through the negotiation of local politics and elite nationalist discourses. As I learned from other conversations, artisans like Coronel rejected the indigenous label when it related to issues that were local, where indigenousness was considered a marker of cultural and social inferiority; yet they highlighted the indigenousness of their persons, their culture, and their art when appealing to nationalist sentiment in Mexico City or to dealers in the international art market.

There can be no simple answer to the question of whether the lacquer and its makers were (or are today) "really" indigenous. Any claim to resolve the issue or to give a clear answer to whether the artisans were authentically Indian or whether they were merely mestizos cast as indigenous by promoters of popular art would be disingenuous and deceptive.

To understand the local ethnic situation in Olinalá it might help to look at the results of an effort in 1930 to fix ethnic categories. The priest filling out baptismal forms in Olinalá had to categorize each child as Asian, black, white, pure Indian, or mestizo. He listed as pure Indian fifty-three of the fifty-four children baptized during the sample period of January through April 1930. This means that he listed as pure Indian 98 percent of the baptized children. Olinaltecos would likely have agreed with this characterization of their ethnicity, for, compared to the priest, they were Indian. But compared to some of their neighbors they would have been considered mestizo, if for no other reason than that they lived in town and spoke some Spanish. Neither today nor in the historical record have I found an instance of any Olinalteco deploying indigenousness in a fixed, categorical manner, either in relation to themselves, or to others. Indigenousness was, and remains, a contingent category in Olinalá and on the national and transnational level. Compared to white urban elites from Mexico City or abroad, virtually everyone from Olinalá would have been considered, and would have considered themselves, Indian. Yet they considered themselves less indigenous than nearby campesinos, and merchants considered themselves less indigenous than the artisans.

Indigenousness was important not just abstractly or discursively but in the way it impacted the net of power relations that structured artisans' cultural, economic, and social opportunities. Olinaltecos learned in the 1920s and 1930s that the value of their crafts was intimately bound to Mexican cultural nationalism and ideas of indigenous authenticity. This meant that artisans and merchants had to confront the challenge of learning about and conforming to metropolitan expectations, even as they continued to police the contingency of ethnic boundaries and status on the local level. By the 1940s and 1950s, when the market moved toward cheap goods in large quantities, indigenousness on the local level lost much of its nationalist connotation and reverted to a primarily negative category. Yet it remained a complex, shifting indicator that artists navigated in the context of changing circumstances and contingent relations, never as a fixed ethnic or racial descriptor.

Conclusion: Making Mexico in Olinalá

The postrevolutionary nationalist imagination dramatically impacted Olinaltecos' lives. But local experiences were neither controlled nor fully embodied by postrevolutionary cultural nationalist discourse. As the art historian Karen Cordero points out, behind the elite discourse that validated artesania as an authentically national art lies a dynamic historical reality that (until now) has remained unexplored. By the 1930s, nationalist projects had become so thoroughly entangled with local struggles that to separate the national from the local would have been impossible. It was not that the ideas of Mexico City-based nationalists trickled down into Olinalá. Nor was it, as Ricardo Pérez Montfort argues, that a "fake" identity took the place of an authentic one as a form of "false consciousness." Rather, it was that the markets, ideas, and institutions tied to the cultural nationalist movement fundamentally altered the terrain of local struggles and, in the process, tied Olinalá firmly into the emerging cultural nation. This did not signal homogenization, since the discourses deployed from the center took on different meanings on the local level, and it was not merely an imposition, since locals readily took advantage of these discourses. What it did indicate was the degree to which the postrevolution-
ary validation of popular art contributed to Olinalá’s negotiated integration into an ethnicized, postrevolutionary Mexican nation.

While the interactions between nationalist elites and Olinaltecos animated the discourse of national integration and contributed to the emergence of Mexico’s ethnicized nationality, the artisans had failed to use this discourse to alter the balance of power in their favor on the local level. By the end of the 1940s, they seemed to be going full circle, returning to the misery and marginalization of the prerevolutionary era. Even as Mexico became Indianized and campesinos became “Mexicanized Indians,” the artisans had not found a way to economically or politically benefit from this cultural shift. The next chapter explores how the artisans at last forged group solidarity. Through these bonds of solidarity they harnessed an identity as the makers of an authentically indigenous nationalist art, demanded a new relationship to the state and the nation, and challenged their economic and political marginalization on the local level.

"The ricos always win," lamented the Olinaltecan artisan Felicitas Ayala Martínez. But this time “the poor won.” Like many of the town’s artisans, Ayala Martínez saw the completion of the paved highway in 1973 as “a triumph for those from below” against the caciques.1 Attainment of the road marked the moment when artisans at last managed to use their place within Mexico’s ethnicized nationality to bypass the local oligarchy and forge their own cultural and economic ties to the central government in Mexico City and, in doing so, helped transform local society.

Before the highway was completed the artisans, despite their ties into an ethnicized Mexican nationality, had been unable to improve their economic and political status in local society. This chapter is the story of why this changed by the mid-1970s and how these changes continue to reverberate into the twenty-first century.

The Social Terrain of Olinalá: Violence, Isolation, and Inequality

One of the peculiarities of Guerrero is that the state archive in Chilpancingo holds no government documents. In the 1950s it had returned them to their municipalities of origin. When the archivist informed me of this unusual situation, I headed for the municipal hall in Olinalá. There I was shocked to learn that, as soon as Olinalá had won the return of its archives, the municipal president, Tomasa Patrón, ordered the four and a half centuries of documents burned. As a historian I was saddened by this loss of cultural patrimony and
frustrated by this unforeseen impediment to my investigation. When I dug deeper, however, I came to understand that the destruction of the archive was part of the narrative of how economic and political power operated in Olinalá.

As I met townspeople they informed me with suspicious eagerness that in Olinalá there are neither rich nor poor. Their claim was unusual given the obvious inequalities within the town, the blatant way some hold power over others, and the political and economic violence that occurs almost daily. I soon learned that Olinaltecos uphold the myth of equality only in public. Behind closed doors both the powerful and the powerless drop the façade. That Olinalá might be less than idyllic is not surprising. The entire state of Guerrero is notorious for the proliferation of violence and arbitrary use of power. And according to the Centro de Derechos Humanos de la Montaña Tlachinollan, in this state rife with human rights abuses, Olinalá ranks as among the worst municipalities. Still, older townspeople stress that, however bad the situation may be, it pales compared to the 1940s and 1950s. No one wants to reignite those smoldering animosities.

The anthropologist Cathy Winkler recognized in 1980, after completing her fieldwork in Olinalá, that because “past feuds had left deep scars... on the people and their interactions,” there is an almost excessive desire on the part of the townspeople to cultivate an image of their town as peaceful and united.2 This compulsion was evident as far back as 1959–60, when Gutierre Tibón visited. Taking the claim at face value, he wrote that in Olinalá “there have never been exploiters nor exploited.” There “are neither rich, nor poor. Life is modest, but everyone eats and dresses the same.”3 Rather than erase the quotidian climate of violence and inequality from the art, as Tibón and many folklorists and popular art collectors have done, we would do better to understand how local politics and art shaped each other.

Much of the conflict began in January 1944 when, following a year of careful planning, a group of campesinos and merchants brought the Agrarian Reform to Olinalá. In 1945 land surveys revealed that in this municipality of 9,012 people (2,393 of whom lived directly in the town of Olinalá), the Almazán clan, which had dominated the town before the revolution, still owned almost all the arable land and pasture. The Almazán family responded to the campesinos’ request for land redistribution by dividing its holdings among kin to get their plot sizes below the 100-hectare minimum required for expropriation. This maneuver won legal exclusion for all but 661 of their thousands of hectares. The state seized these 661 hectares and granted them to the peasants of Olinalá as an ejido. The Agrarian Reform commission, however, specifically excluded the laqueros as beneficiaries on the grounds that they “did not have as their primary occupation the working of the land.”4

The Agrarian Reform in Olinalá became a tale of land distribution gone awry, clan vendettas, and artisan marginalization. In Mexico, general practice was for an elected ejido council to oversee land distribution. In Olinalá, however, the municipal president, who already wielded most official local political power, took control. As factions competed for control over the process, the office of the municipal president changed hands frequently and land claims and distribution became fraught with corruption and backroom deals. The interested parties coalesced into several major factions: peasants who hoped to use land reform to inaugurate a fundamental change within the local power structure; those who allied themselves with the Almazán clan in opposition to the land reform altogether; and several competing groups who tried to control the land distribution process as a way to expand the dominance of particular caciques.

Things got even worse after the initial distribution. Because the ejido was overseen by the municipal president with no checks or balances, ejidatarios were allowed to buy and sell land (or to lose it due to debt), as they would have with private land, with no safeguards against land accumulation. Ejidal lands were not the only source of conflict. The Almazán clan began to divest some of its holdings and the seven or eight leading pre-revolutionary oligarchs jockeyed to gain ownership. The sudden availability of land through the ejido and through private sales ignited a scramble. Some plots changed hands frequently, and many Olinaltecos acquired land only to quickly lose it.

Land conflicts escalated into clan vendettas until violence and intimidation permeated local society. At the conflict’s height in the mid-1950s, armed bands known locally as ganchos roamed the town ambushing “enemies,” caciques shot opponents in their fields, and, reportedly, at one point the henchmen for one cacique rounded up a rival’s entire extended family and executed them in the town plaza. In this climate of fear Olinalá won the dubious distinction of having the highest murder rate in Guerrero. While other towns with high murder rates were market centers in which
most of the victims and perpetrators were outsiders, in Olinalá the violence was endemic.\(^5\)

It was at that time that Olinalá’s municipal council won return of its archive so that Tomasa Patrón could light a match to it. The explanation that Olinaltecos offer for why the municipal president burned the archive was that, as a woman, she naively did what women do best, which is to clean. But the inescapable implication of the incineration was that without a paper trail, plaintiffs who had lost their land through usury and connivance no longer had any way to press their case. Far from the result of naïve ignorance, the flames that swallowed the past seem to have been a deliberate attempt to set Olinalá on the path of unchallengeable inequality. By the 1960s private land became concentrated in a few hands, and ejidal land, too, became concentrated and treated as though it were private property. As this happened, Olinalá became one of the most unequal municipalities in Guerrero in terms of access to land.\(^6\) The incineration put an end to the worst of the violence, but the price was an inability to contest the basis for inequality or to redress past injustice.

Though some artisans fought and died in the vendettas, for the most part they remained on the margins of the conflicts because few of them had either private or ejidal land to dispute. Yet, the fact that violence had replaced politics meant that it impacted every aspect of Olinaltecos’ lives and shaped artisans’ economic and cultural strategies. As important as violence and intimidation were and as much as they permeated daily life in Olinalá during the 1960s was difficult. The paralysis induced by the vendettas and land struggles extended into the education system. Since the nineteenth century the oligarchy had provided its children with a private Catholic primary education, after which some continued their studies in Puebla. But the majority of the population had no access to an education. Records from the Ministry of Education reveal that townspeople had struggled for years to get a public school. When they finally received it at the start of the 1960s, the oligarchy-controlled municipal government refused to support it, and members of the oligarchy seem to have intimidated the teachers and students, such that only a fraction of the eligible students enrolled, and among those who did enroll, only 32 percent attended. The school, meantime, occupied a half-built, almost furni-
tureless shack. The school inspector had commented in his reports on the sad condition of the schools throughout the Montana, but the situation in Olinalá seems to have particularly upset him. Whereas every one of his reports on other schools ended with concrete suggestions for improvement, his report on Olinalá simply closes with the lament that “it is regretful that the Authority in Olinalá does not care about education.”\(^8\)

The government had classified Olinalá and its municipality as indigenous based on its reputation. To address social needs in indigenous zones, the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI) sent its agent Maurilio Muñoz to Olinalá. Muñoz was an Otomi Indian from the state of Hidalgo. During his early education he learned Spanish and became an ardent Cardenista. He then studied at the National University and won a scholarship from the National Museum of Anthropology (Museo Nacional de Antropología) to complete graduate studies in anthropology at the University of Massachusetts.\(^9\) After his return to Mexico he spent his career as an advocate for indigenous issues within the INI at its coordination center in Tlapa, and as spokesperson for the Indigenous Foundation of the Valley of Mezquital and the Huasteca Hidalguense (Patrimonio Indígena del Valle del Mezquital y la Huasteca Hidalguense). After his visit in 1962 he affirmed Olinalá’s indigenous designation based on the inhabitants’ physiognomy, poverty, low levels of education, wattle and daub homes, poor hygiene, lack of access to water, frequent malnutrition, high incidence of alcoholism, and meager diet of corn supplemented by squash, beans, and quelites (Chenopodium album, a wild leafy vegetable known in English as Lamb’s Quarters). Most Olinaltecos, too, considered themselves indigenous based on these same criteria.\(^10\)

In his report Muñoz argued that the town’s problems resulted from unequal access to land. He explained that all land in the area, including that which was supposed to be part of the ejido, was concentrated in a few hands and treated as private property. With few exceptions, those who did have access to land did so only as renters or indebted sharecroppers beholden to the local oligarchy. Agriculturalists, moreover, faced severe land erosion, and pests and disease destroyed a third of each year’s crop. This left farmers deeply in debt to moneylenders and unable to meet the needs of their families. To make matters worse, the municipality’s population, after a long period of stagnation, had doubled between 1940 and 1960, reaching 11,545. With no access to affordable credit and with so many
Artisans rarely owned or had access to land, had been excluded from the agrarian reform, and generally held no livestock, not even hens. Because lacquer production stood outside of the equation of land and status, it was disparaged. Two of Juvencio Ayala's sons, Margarito and Dámaso, were unusual in that they acquired small plots of land, though Margarito owned his plot only for a few years before he lost it around 1951. Without access to land, most artisans continued to produce crafts year round as in the past, though a few temporarily combined craft production with sharecropping.13

From the point of view of the artisans, the main problem they faced still was Olinalá's isolation, which was imposed and continually enforced by regional caudillos and local elites.13 Carlos Romero Giordano, who undertook the journey several times at the end of the 1960s on behalf of Banfoco, recalled that the land route from Chilpancingo took three eight-hour days by horseback. This showed no improvement over 1939, when Frances Toor visited the town (see chapter 8). To come from the other direction, by way of Huamuxtitlán, was so dangerous due to steep brittle terrain, flooding, and erosion that he judged it "would have been pure madness" even to try. Nevertheless, for artisans to travel the safer route via Chilpancingo favored by Toor and Giordano was simply too exorbitant in time and money; so they had to rely on the route of "pure madness" through Huamuxtitlán.14

Artisans found their situation complicated further by the difficulty of transporting fragile crafts. To manage the terrain and minimize the risk of breakage, artisans preserved the shipping methods that laqueros had employed since at least the eighteen century. After sorting their lacquered gourds by size, quality, and style, they packed each pante (a group of twenty) into a huipinada (a tube made of reeds, corn husks, and grass), then tied the huipinadas into pairs to form cañas (pairs of pantles), which they wrapped first in fresh banana leaves, then in tightly woven petates (palm mats). They similarly stacked and wrapped boxes. Large bañiles were more cumbersome because they had to be wrapped and loaded individually. Each mat-wrapped package made one bulto (package) ready for a month or more on the market circuit. They then loaded the bultos onto the backs of tamemes (human cargo carriers) or onto pack animals. Each tameme carried bultos on his back with a macapal (a leather or woven fiber strap) pulled across his forehead or upper chest. Paucic does not tell us how much each tameme carried, but each likely hauled a dozen or more bultos. For pack animals, Paucic notes that the artisans used special saddles that allowed each beast to carry 40 to 60 pantles (800 to 1,200 gourds). Artisans who lacked family labor to carry all their merchandise had to pay the cost of renting mules and tamemes. At each water crossing all the cargo had to be unloaded, floated across the water on special gourd-and-reed rafts, and then reloaded. They also had to unload at the end of each night and reload each morning. The difficulty of transportation meant that, if they were headed to Mexico City, the northern route through Puebla offered a key advantage over the Chilpancingo route: access to the railway (which was nonexistent within Guerrero). In Puebla artisans transferred their merchandise to train, then continued on foot to Mexico City, where they waited for their goods at the depot. If artisans were traveling within Guerrero, northwestern Oaxaca, or to Tepalcingo (Morelos), they needed cargo carriers for the entire journey.15

Through the 1940s and 1960s laqueros battled marginalization and isolation, but their lack of solidarity made it impossible for them to push for change. In time, they gradually would learn to act collectively, first through ad hoc mutualism, and ultimately by forming themselves into a formal producers' cooperative linked to the Mexican state. It is to this process that we now turn.

The Search for Markets and the Rise of Artisan Mutualism

For much of the country the 1940s and 1950s was the so-called golden age of emerging mass markets, industrialization, and rising middle-class incomes. But for the laqueros of Olinalá this was a time of decline. By 1963 laqueros had seen their real income fall to one quarter of what it had been in 1937.16 They lived in wattle and daub huts with dirt floors, no access to water in which to bathe, and often did not have enough to eat. Things were worst during the rainy season, when, to avoid going into debt to merchants, they had to ration their food until, by the end of the season, they each ate as little as one tortilla per day. Elders note that the peasant sharecroppers at least had food but that they themselves did not have even that. Artisans suffered as a group, but they had not yet developed a system for acting as a group.17
The first traces of solidarity had come in the late 1930s. Rather than bring artisans together as a group, this early form of solidarity united small circles of artisans against one another. Perhaps concerned that they previously had shared their knowledge and techniques too openly with fellow townspeople, merchants, and outsiders, the artisans in the late 1930s moved toward secrecy and interartisan competition. Their interactions in the mid-1930s with a Mexico City hotelier remembered simply as Don Poli offer insight into how the new emphasis on secrecy and interartisan rivalry operated in relation to the search for new markets. During a visit to Huamuxtitlán Don Poli met up with some laqueros and agreed to start selling their corriente boxes and trays, which he transported to Mexico City with burros. Previously, artisans had gained access to dealers in the limited high-end market, but this was their first consistent nonmerchant-mediated access to Mexico City buyers dealing in the expanding corriente market. To fill orders for Don Poli, artisans needed group cooperation. And to prevent merchants and other artisans from flooding Don Poli with crafts and thereby drive down the price he was willing to offer, they kept their connection with him a secret. Through Don Poli, laqueros experienced their first taste of the power of extending group solidarity beyond short-term arrangements and outside of narrow kin networks.

In the 1940s, as merchants withdrew from marketing, artisans found that the markets to which they had access were inadequate. Some of the best workshops continued to sell their high-end work to Casa Sanborn’s (to which they had become connected through Frederick Davis) and, after 1951, to the Museo Nacional de Artes e Industrias Populares, but these markets were too small and high risk to support the instalados. To gain economic stability artisans needed large steady markets for their corriente and midrange production. Artisans, back in control of the marketing of their own wares, initially concentrated on six main fairs (one in Oaxaca, one in Morelos, and four in Puebla). But, as noted in the previous chapter, these fairs were in decline. To compensate, the laqueros expanded their connections to urban buyers.

The story of laqueros’ relations with La Carreta in San Angel, on the affluent western edge of Mexico City, offers a window into how artisans built upon their earlier experience with Don Poli. At the time of my fieldwork La Carreta was an important market for all types of folk crafts, selling to Mexico’s middle class and to tourists. Back in the 1930s, however, it had been occupied exclusively by flower vendors. In the early 1940s the young Siriaco Escudero Mejía, godson of Juvencio Ayala, was in Mexico City hawking goods in the streets when he decided to visit the flower market. He prevailed upon a vendor to sell a few items on commission on the condition that, if buyers lacked interests, Escudero would stop bothering him. When the lacquer sold quickly the vendor agreed to become a dealer for Escudero’s work. Other vendors at La Carreta soon emulated this success and La Carreta blossomed into one of the laqueros’ largest buyers. Moreover, whereas other buyers were only interested in one level of quality, whether corriente or fino, the dealers at La Carreta bought work ranging from the most corriente to all but the most fino, with a particular taste for the midlevel crafts that artisans previously had difficulty marketing. Initially a handful of laqueros kept the new market at La Carreta a secret, but they soon brought more craftspeople into confidence so as to assure a steady supply to meet growing demand. The difficulty for artisans was that, unlike sales to Don Poli, which they could manage from Huamuxtitlán on the eastern edge of the Montaña, dealers at La Carreta required that artisans deliver their production directly to Mexico City, which required expensive long-distance travel and loans from merchants. Despite this difficulty, in the coming decades laqueros gradually branched into other Mexico City markets, particularly Casa Legorreta, Casa Cervantes, and various vending stalls in the market at San Juan, and even into other cities such as Puebla de los Angeles and Acapulco, with a group of artisans coalescing around each new market opportunity.

Information from artisan interviews regarding this period is fragmented since it was a time of group secrecy, with each artisan privy to some facts but ignorant of others. Yet a general picture emerges of multiple small and shifting solidarities. Rather than one large cooperative, the network functioned as a series of small unwritten agreements. An artisan still was focused on his own immediate interests, but he allied with one group of fellow artisans for one market opportunity, another set for another opportunity, and so forth. These different groupings overlapped, with each workshop involved in multiple opportunities.

As was the case for their agricultural neighbors, one of the artisans’ largest problems in addition to physical isolation was lack of access to affordable credit. To get through the rainy season and to afford trips to fairs and Mexico City to market their goods, even the Ayala workshop had to
encouraged Olinaltecan artisans to look into their community’s past for goods, offered small loans, and ran craft competitions that awarded cash for artistic revival and creative inspiration that contributed to the artisans’ and mule trains. Air travel reduced what had been a three-day trip by artisans had to get themselves and their merchandise to Mexico City, and could buy only a small share of the artisans’ wares, it offered a new source encouraged artisan innovation and experimentation. Though the MNAIP other twenty-five-minute flight to get from there to Mexico City. What had become a rarity. When the INI took an interest in Olinala as an indigenous zone in the 1960s, its Museo Nacional de Artes e Industrias Populares (MNAIP) worked with laqueros to help them reconnect to the high-end market.23 Similar to Rene d’Harnoncourt decades earlier, the MNAIP encouraged Olinaltecan artisans to look into their community’s past for inspiration. Laqueros recall that the museum officials distributed photographs of antique bailies, promised to buy a limited number of high-end goods, offered small loans, and ran craft competitions that awarded cash prizes for the best works. This helped the artisans better tailor their workmanship for a high-end collectors’ market. Unlike d’Harnoncourt, who had focused only on rayado, the MNAIP bought both rayado and dorado and encouraged artisan innovation and experimentation. Though the MNAIP could buy only a small share of the artisans’ wares, it offered a new source for artistic revival and creative inspiration that contributed to the artisans’ success across a range of markets.23

The problem, still, was Olinala’s isolation. To work with the MNAIP, artisans had to get themselves and their merchandise to Mexico City, and travel in and out of the Montaña was difficult, dangerous, time consuming, and expensive. The higher prices paid by the MNAIP, together with technological advances, opened to artisans a new option: air travel. Small three- to four-passenger aircrafts offered the first alternative to tamemes and mule trains. Air travel reduced what had been a three-day trip by horseback between Olinala and Chilpancingo to twenty minutes, with another twenty-five-minute flight to get from there to Mexico City. What had been a month-long round trip—including preparation, travel, waiting at the train station for craft shipments, and time spent searching for buyers—now took only a day.24 It also avoided the many personal and economic risks inherent in land travel and exposed the lacquered objects to fewer risks of damage. But air travel was too expensive to replace land travel. Airfare from Olinala to Cuautla in 1963 cost 100–125 pesos per person, plus an additional 100–125 pesos for each seat an artisan filled with crafts. The price to fly all the way to Mexico City might have been twice that. For an artisan to fly himself (only male artisans accompanied air deliveries) and a small load to Mexico City, then, would have been equivalent to four or five times the cost of his wattle and daub home or the equivalent of an entire season of field labor.25

Despite its high cost, and though it could not replace overland shipping, air travel did help the few artisans who marketed high-end work. It limited the time they were away from their workshops, avoided the hazards of overland transportation, and, for the first time, enabled them to ship goods at the height of the rainy season when all overland routes were flooded.26 With the MNAIP buying all the items in each small shipment, artisans received a much-needed infusion of cash to carry through the rainy summer months; then, when the rains ended, they could send most of their production by way of the regular land route. Because an artisan could bring only a small load on a plane flight, air shipments tended to occur outside of the mutualist network, undertaken only by the best artisans whose workmanship could command the highest prices, and as part of a household or workshop strategy.

Though artisans had begun to market their goods cooperatively in the 1930s and 1940s, it was not until the 1950s that they expanded this mutualism into the realm of production. As prices continued to fall, male artisans from different workshops began engaging in reciprocal labor swaps to complete orders. This saved them from having to take out loans to hire expensive male oficiales and it allowed them to complete larger orders on a predictable schedule.

Much like the lacquer production process itself, this mutualism was highly gendered, as female labor was excluded from the reciprocal labor exchanges that bonded together workshops. Workshops run by master artisans swapped male labor, but, for female tasks, they continued to rely on poorly paid oficiales, often using cash loans from fellow artisans within their mutualist network. This gendered dynamic extended into the mutualist lending system. To alleviate the severity of their dependence upon
merchants and to earn some interest on their short-term surplus capital, master artisans made small loans to one another. But because these loans went only to heads of workshops, they excluded women. Female artisans also found themselves cut out from the practice by which artisans would transport and market one another's goods. In these ways the mutualist network enabled male artisans to defend patriarchy within their families and workshops—which their declining status within the community and the difficulties they faced financially supporting their families threatened to undermine—while reinforcing women's dependence and low wages. Mutualism, then, created the means for artisan solidarity but stifled the development of female-headed workshops and limited women's opportunities for social esteem. Moreover, the many small, specialized workshops that had proliferated in the early 1940s, but that had begun to disappear as the artisans who had recently come to the trade returned to agricultural production after the agrarian reform, either found themselves excluded from these exchanges or else played a subordinate role, in which their services were coordinated by the handful of firmly established family workshops.

In the 1950s master artisans began to draw on their mutualism to defend their collective interests. In the aftermath of the revolution craftspeople had allowed for the exchange of their skills with their neighbors within Olinahí and beyond. But now they began to guard the boundaries of their craft in guildlike fashion. This is illustrated, for example, in a story that artisans recount about a visitor in the 1950s who went around asking questions about techniques and gathering samples of artisans' tierras, tools, and pigments. As soon as the visitor departed, the artisans held a meeting. Concerned that he would use the samples and notes to create a competing lacquer industry elsewhere, they caught up with him in the mountains, relieved him of all of the materials and his notes, and then sent him on his way empty-handed. 27

Woven through the mutualism of the artisans was a pursuit of quality. This pursuit could unite artisans around common ideals, but it could just as easily divide them as each strove to shine on his own. Margarito Ayala, son of Juvencio Ayala (who passed away in the early 1950s), became known as one of the most talented of his generation. When Gutiérrez Tibón visited Olinahí at the close of the 1950s he marveled at how explicit Margarito was about his aesthetic ideals. Margarito explained that artisans may be poor, and life may be hard, but at least they can take pride in their commitment to quality, which he defined as doing work in the manner of his father, Juvencio. Others in his generation who shared his ideals included Antonio Guerrero, Juan García Jr., Eborio Jiménez, Dámaso Ayala Sr., and Liborio Escamilla. Together they formed the core of the mutualist network, but because they also competed against one another in the small high-end market, individual workshops continued to maintain secrecy about some of their clientele, market opportunities, and stylistic innovation. 28

While the artisans' mutualism offered a means for some level of coordination, it was far from a cooperative. During his visits to Olinahí in the late 1930s and 1940s Alejandro Paucic had noticed that some of the artisans were beginning to cooperate in marketing, but they did not do so consistently or through a strong structure. In 1960, Tibón similarly noted that "strength comes from unity," but despite some level of mutualism, there still was "no unity among the artisans of Olinahí." His statement points to the limitations of the artisans' mutualism; most notably that it did not provide a mechanism for them to negotiate their interests collectively against moneylenders, merchant suppliers, urban commercial houses, or the government. Without a means to negotiate collectively even master craftsmen like the Ayalas, Juan García, or Liborio Escamilla were unable to reduce their dependence on merchants and moneylenders or to advance economically. But things were about to change. As Muñoz noted in his report in 1963, the artisans were feeling "the need to become organized" into a cooperative that, at long last, could "enable them to improve their currently low incomes." 29

The Road to Olinahí: Solidarity, Identity, and the Neo-Nationalist State

The MNAIP had offered artisans guidance and it bought some of their high-end production but it lacked the resources to help laqueros challenge their marginality in Olinahí or to counter state policies that undermined their interests. Only with the reform of Banfoco's management of the Fideicomiso would this change. As one artisan declared: "With Banfoco began the revolution." 30 With this he referred to the fact that only with the reform of Banfoco, which led to the creation of Fonart, did the artisans feel they finally had succeeded in linking their interests with those of the post-revolutionary nationalist discourse and the self-proclaimed revolutionary state. The laqueros would use their alliance with the reformed Banfoco
something of a formality in which little was said as the artisans presented themselves and their art to the president. In their bid to break the grasp of the local oligarchy, whose political and economic power was reinforced by the physical isolation of the town, the artisans rested their appeal for a road not on the details of local inequality but on three assumptions that they, the Fideicomiso-Banfoco, and the president had come to share: (1) that Indianness held a special place in the nationalist imagination; (2) that the laqueros’ art and ethnic bodies embodied this Indianness; and (3) that, as a nationalist, the president would act to defend Mexico’s indigenous patrimony.

Within weeks of Olinalá’s audience with the president, road crews arrived in the Montaña. By the end of 1972 they inaugurated a dirt road that finally united Olinalá’s artesanos with the nationalist state centered in Mexico City. The local oligarchy, led by the municipal president Eustorgio Salgado Venegas, had received no advance warning of what was transcending and did not welcome the road. Throughout Guerrero caciques still opposed infrastructural development just as they had since the nineteenth century, seeing it as a threat to their political and economic control. In the 1970s, for example, Governor Rubén Figueroa Figueroa managed to halt construction of a commuter rail linking Mexico City to Acapulco because he was concerned that it would undermine his personal interests in the vehicular transportation of passengers and goods. In the case of Olinalá, because the order for the road came directly from the president, the oligarchs’ political connections were of no use in halting construction. Oral testimonies recount how the ricos (as locals refer to the oligarchy of that era) resorted to arson and sabotaged bridge construction equipment. I was unable to document these acts of vandalism, but whether real or apocryphal, they point to the heightened tensions of the moment. They also highlight the importance this road held as a symbol of the artisans’ new relationship with the national government, and their elation at having at last bypassed the local oligarchs.

Beyond the nationalist appeal, Echeverría likely also had pragmatic political reasons to ally with the artisans. As opposition to his government grew among industrialists and among urban youth, the new president tried to increase the level of participation of other sectors, including the campesinado (see chapter 6). Guerrero assumed particular strategic importance for the administration because, after the government repression of 1968, that southern state became the stronghold of a guerrilla insurgency. Rural groups’ frustration at their inability to work through official channels contributed to this insurgency and to the radicalization of such peasant organizations as the National Peasant Confederation (CNC). Throughout Guerrero the government responded to such armed opposition groups as the National Revolutionary Civic Association (ACNR) by restricting civil liberties, stepping up repression of suspected supporters of guerrillas, and intensely militarizing the entire state.

Alongside the stick, Echeverría also held out carrots in the form of programs designed to help campesinos and to integrate them in the state structure. The reform of Banfoco-Fideicomiso was part of this strategy. Other national programs operating within the Montaña included Conasupo (the government network of rural stores designed to undermine the tight control of local merchants), Banrural (which offered loans to peasant farming cooperatives), Codisuco (which marketed milk at subsidized prices to the poor), and Inmecafe (which dealt with coffee growers, and, regarding the Montaña, was active only in Tlapa). As the political scientist Jonathan Fox points out, these new government agencies successfully channeled potential radicals into the institutional fold.

In some regions Echeverría supplemented these programs with land redistribution, but in the northern Montaña land surveys showed that there was no land eligible for distribution. Moreover, as Armando Bartra argues, popular demands fueling guerrilla activity in Guerrero were not about land but about usury, debt, repression, corruption, and sharecropping exploitation. By building a road to Olinalá the state found an alternative strategy to win rural support. By improving transportation for montañeros and loosening the local caciques’ stranglehold, the government hoped to improve the lives of the rural poor, or at least integrate them into the state, such that they would not join the guerrillas’ cause. Further, the road simplified military access to the region.

An alliance with artisans, then, promised a rural base of support to expand the central government’s presence and limit the spread of the guerrilla insurgency. It also offered a context in which a government program could produce quantifiable improvements in rural living conditions. Moreover, this alliance enabled the state to break into an area where the local elite had long opposed its presence. In these ways, Echeverría’s policies in relation to the laqueros merged his cultural nationalist politics, his
need to pacify Guerrero, and his effort to bring new constituencies into the state fold.

For the artisans, the arrangement affirmed their indigenous heritage and their place within the national community. Though most laqueros long ago had lost fluency in Nahuatl, they continued to embrace the language as an integral part of their identity and they took pride in the fact that all the terms related to their industry were in the native language. Their main connection to their indigenous heritage, however, was not language but the art to which they dedicated most of their waking hours. Their interactions with metropolitan nationalists and collectors had made them acutely aware of the deep historical roots of their art and its place within the nationalist imaginary. They embraced this history, blending it with their own cultural and historical understandings until the local and the national became inseparably intertwined. Through their rituals of production, their avenues for creativity, and terms of contestation, the laqueros continually remade their narratives of collectivity, rooting themselves in a historical epic leading back to the Aztecs, celebrating the positive aspects of their indigenous heritage, and giving form to the discourses and relationships born of their national and transnational interactions.

Every time they applied tlapetzole, cut lines of rayado, uttered the Nahuatl names of their processes and materials, hauled their panties of lacquered gourds and petate-wrapped chests upon their backs, and every time they presented their work to indigenous buyers in the countryside and metropolitan dealers in Mexico City, they reinforced the interdependence of their ethnic and national identities. Locally, they gave physical testimony to this identity and history when they made lacquered cups that they and other montañeros still use to swirl their chocolate and atole. And it was laqueros who made the elaborate human-jaguar (tecuani) masks for the Fiesta de los Masuchiles (celebrating San Francisco, the patron saint of Olinalá). And every few decades since the colonial era they have rela­quered the walls, pillars, and altars of their parish church. The indigenous aspects of their art and the positive value they placed upon this indigenousness came from the particular ways the local, national, and transnational intersected through their art and lives. The artisans' view of their indigenousness as integral to the national identity became strategically useful as they appealed for federal intervention, yet it also was a discourse born of grounded historical experience, reinforced through daily rituals and interactions.

While they embraced an indigenous identity, like most Mexicans they did so contingently. Though the national identity had become heavily ethnicized beginning in the 1920s, the term indio continued to imply subordination and unequal power. During daily interactions in the 1960s and 1970s, it still was more common to call someone else an indígena than to apply the term to oneself. To call someone an Indian was to declare their subordination, as was the case with urbanites who readily identified Olinaltecan artisans as Indians. It could also be used by an individual to affirm his or her own inferior status compared to another person. Anthropologists have found that, except for the local elite and trained professionals, montañeros still identify themselves as indigenous compared to non-montañeros. They base this identity not only on language but also on their poverty and what they perceive as their own marginality, ignorance, and backwardness as compared to Mexicans from outside the region. Through their lacquered art Olinaltecos in 1971 drew upon their interaction with the state and with national and transnational markets and discourses to claim an alternative indigenous identity, one that was affirmative, emotive, and nationalist.

The effect of the road and of the new connection to the central government rippled across Olinaltecan society. Townspeople, for instance, formed a parent organization to support the school that the local oligarchy had long opposed. Bypassing the intransigent municipal council controlled by caciques, they contributed their own funds to pay one of the two teachers and to maintain the school. Olinaltecos also lobbied the bus company Flecha Roja to start service to their town, so that they might have an alternative to the monopoly over local automotive transportation that the local oligarchy quickly put into place with the completion of the road.

By the time Fonart took over from Banfoco in 1974 the alliance between artisans and the state had led to a dramatic rise in the number of laqueros. Where there had been only six workshops in 1930, an increase to four dozen in 1950, and then a drop to fewer than a dozen in the early 1960s, by 1974 the number of workshops jumped to almost 200. Head of the MNAIP Carlos Espejel observed that by 1968, just before the creation of Olinka, the number of full-time artisans had fallen to about twenty, but by 1976 the...
number had rebounded to several hundred. Even though travel still was not possible in the rainy season (except with the four-wheel drive vehicles that the local elite now acquired), and large sections of the road had to be rebuilt each year after the floods, the road and the new connections to the government made an enormous difference. Between 1968 and 1976 the prices artisans received for their crafts shot up between 50 percent and 300 percent, depending on quality, materials; and market. Since the greatest increase was for good craftsmanship made from nonindustrial materials, artisans now had a strong incentive to improve their work.

These developments brought hope to a community grappling with population growth, severe land concentration, and an eroded landscape. Regular interaction with buyers gave laqueros the confidence to experiment with new styles, most notably puntiado (multicolored dots of commercial paint applied atop tlapotzole), and a form of dorado in which “dorado” is taken literally such that gold powder and gold leaf are applied to the surface of the tlapotzole of trays, gourds, and chests. Artisans also worked regularly with university extension programs, government advisors, and private organizations to improve quality, foster innovations, and seek out new markets in Mexico, the United States, Europe, and Asia.

Since 1970 women artisans have found new opportunities. Some benefited from the renewed demand for local materials. But the bigger change was that under Fonart, women for the first time found they could earn recognition as heads of workshops and as talented, creative artisans, rather than just menial labor. The inclusion of women came quickly, such that by 1971, when the reformed Banfoco first honored laqueras at the presidential residence of Los Pinos, the delegation included two women: Aurelia Ayala and Juana Patrón. Because this delegation presented the request for the road, this put these laqueras in an unprecedented position of authority, even if they did not act as the leaders of the group. Carlos Espejel similarly notes that, whereas in 1968 none of the major artisans were women, by 1976 Guadalupe Valdés, Aurelia Ayala, “and others,” were able to independently produce and market their own laca. The new opportunities now open to women artisans did not immediately eliminate the local stigma against them acting independently. It still was difficult for female artisans to gain status on their own. Those who had the most success were widows or wives filling in for husbands who had migrated to the United States.

Even today the few women who head workshops find acceptance locally in large part because their status is validated by Fonart. While Fonart and the road improved the lives of artisans, the transformation of local society was not as deep as some had hoped. Government programs gained access to rural areas through what Jonathan Fox has described as a “divide-and-conquer” strategy in which it temporarily allied with one side, thereby forcing other factions to similarly court its support. In the absence of meaningful electoral politics this form of clientalism brought constituencies into the state structure, but it did so without fundamentally undermining the regional status of “the authoritarian regional elites.” This certainly was the case for Olinalá. After it had been brought into the federal sphere of influence through an artisan-state alliance, the previously reluctant local elite learned to benefit economically and politically from the situation. The oligarchs found market opportunities in the very shift they had opposed. They bought minibuses to move people between towns, and trucks to transport crafts and other goods. They once again became major buyers of artesanías, which they resold in Chilapa, Puebla de los Angeles, Mexico City, Taxco, and Acapulco. They also found new money-lending opportunities, helping artisans to make good on their payments to Fonart, lest they risk losing access to cheap government credit. Once the federal government gained a permanent presence through Fonart and other rural development institutions, it reached an accommodation by which oligarchs delivered votes for the ruling party while the state turned a blind eye to their manipulation of local politics and economics. Because the PRI became synonymous with the oligarchs, the artisans’ exuberant praise for Echeverría did not translate into support for the ruling party.

Politics remains repressive, but less so than before. As the town grew, as people moved in and out with ease, and as the economy became more complex, the oligarchy had to adapt itself to new times and never regained the tight hold that it once had. Moreover, greater openness brought to Olinalá the ideal of democracy, if not the practice. In the 1990s, even as the PRI led Mexico toward authoritarian neoliberalism, montañeros grew more committed to using both the ballot box and international attention to try to change their political and economic situation. After Guerrero’s Priista governor Rubén Figueroa Alcocer oversaw the massacre of peas-
ant protestors in Aguas Blancas in 1995, support for the oppositional PRD skyrocketed throughout the Montaña. Regional and local elites, including those in Olinalá, met these demands for democratization with repression, violence, and voter fraud. During the years of my field work (1997–99), frustration with government corruption and violence led some montañeros toward a new wave of guerrilla activity. The state, in turn, seized upon the guerrilla insurgency to justify militarization and human rights violations. Military pickup trucks loaded with machine-gun-wielding young men regularly rumbled through the streets of town and patrolled the countryside, turning Olinalá into one of the dozen municipalities with the worst human rights record in the state. In 1999, despite guerrilla activity, intense violence, and heavy repression, Guerrero’s elections enjoyed their largest turnout in the state’s history.48

As the Montaña lurches toward democracy, Olinalá remains a difficult place. According to the 2000 census, the population of the municipality grew to 22,645. A human rights report from 2004 records that, among those over fifteen years of age, 51.1 percent were illiterate and 10.3 percent spoke no Spanish. Along with Chiapas and Oaxaca, Guerrero was one of the three poorest states in Mexico, and, among its seventy-seven municipalities, Olinalá ranked in the bottom third. The region has been named one of the twenty-six priority zones within Mexico based on the incidence of poverty, drug trafficking, migration, violence, and militarization, which combine to make life dangerous.49 Though life remains difficult in Olinalá, the laqueros stress that they are no longer so helpless, because they are no longer as desperately poor and vulnerable. To affirm this, one artisan points out that many of them now own chickens, and sometimes even cattle, and that a few even have purchased small plots on which they have built adobe and cinderblock homes rather than continuing to live in rickety chinantle huts.50

Though the violence continues and though Olinalá is still poor and isolated with a weak market economy compared to most of the rest of Mexico, Olinaltecos seem unanimous in their opinion that things are far better than they were in the past. The number of Olinaltecos involved in the industry, meantime, has continued to grow. By the year 2000, 80 percent of adults participated in the production and marketing of lacquer, the number of workshops had risen to 1,000, about 400 of which were members of one of the eight cooperatives.51 By all appearances these numbers have held steady. One elder expressed a widely shared sentiment when he stated that Olinalá “has progressed thanks to the artesanía.”52

Conclusion

When asked how “those from below” were able to beat the ricos “who always win,” one artisan suggested that, while the ricos were masters of local and regional politics, they simply did not know the ins and outs of the national system. Her response points to a major shift in Olinaltecos’ relations with the national government and with Mexican nationalist discourse. The opening of the road came as part of the artisans’ long-term struggle to finally reap some of the benefits of the place their art had long occupied within the ethnicized nationalist imagination.

In January 1994, at the same time that the Zapatistas were rising up in Chiapas against NAFTA and in defense of indigenous rights, claiming that they were not just indigenous people but indigenous Mexicans who held a special place in the nationalist imaginary, the government awarded to Olinalá the 1993 National Arts and Sciences Award (Premio Nacional de Ciencias y Artes).53 According to artisans, municipal leaders tried to pressure them to hand over the 200,000-peso prize, supposedly to finance town improvements, but the artisans did not trust them. More importantly, the laqueros felt that it was they who had earned the award, and it was they who should benefit from it. To prevent local elites from taking control of the funds, the artisans quickly distributed the money evenly among the 200 instalados that participated in Olinka at that time, urging each to decide how best to use their 1,000-peso share.54 The award had gone the final step toward officially recognizing the town as part of Mexico’s national patrimony. In contrast to the India Bonita discussed in chapter 1, who lost control over the money she won in recognition of her embodiment of the ethnicized nationality, the artisans of Olinalá demonstrated a new level of local self-determination. Their preemptive action, however, undercut any hope for using the funds for the creation of an enduring local institution to support their craft, which was something they had wanted.

In the decades since they won the road, laqueros have found themselves in a contradictory position in terms of ethnicity. The benefits of the road have gone disproportionately to the town of Olinalá at the expense of the rest of the municipality. As a result, a cultural gap has separated towns-
people and campesinos. Artisans have had to negotiate between their own changing sense of ethnicity, the increasingly mestizo identity of their town, the continued local denigration of indigenousness, and the national and international—and their own—celebration of the Indianness of their lacquer art. As early as 1976, Carlos Espejel conceded that the artisans were no longer necessarily Indian, yet their art remained indigenous and "entirely autochthonous," and thus, "one of our most valuable crafts that must be protected." As laqueros' indigenous identity has become more ambiguous, their rural neighbors have embraced a positive cultural and political understanding of themselves as Nahua, Me’phaa (Tlapaneco), and Na’savi (Mixteco). According to the anthropologist Evangelina Sánchez Serrano, who studies indigenous communities near Olinalá, the conflict between the head town and its satellites has taken on characteristics of an ethnic conflict as political and economic inequalities intersect with ethnic differences.

Artisans continue to train the next generation and express remorse at the thought that their craft might fade away. It is with a mix of satisfaction and sadness that they watch their children leave for Acapulco, Mexico City, Chicago, Los Angeles, or New York in search of better opportunities. This remorse on the part of Olinaltecos contrasts with the sentiments of practitioners of other crafts, such as the silversmiths of Taxco, the Seri ironwood carvers, or the Oaxacan carvers of colorful alebrijes. The anthropologist Michael Chibnik, for example, finds that though advertisers tout the woodcarving of Oaxaca's central valley as a timeless indigenous art, it—like the silversmithing of Taxco and the woodcarvings of the Seri—is of recent vintage and its makers feel no cultural commitment to their craft. Those artisans' detachment from the discourses that surround their art contrasts with the sentiments of the Mayan producers of típico crafts analyzed by the anthropologist Walter Little, who construct and deploy their indigenous identity within the complex web of social, political, and market relations that define their art as valuable because of its indigenousness. Similarly, though Olinaltecan laca and its meanings have been recreated continually over the years, and even though many laqueros understand when their children trade the life of an artisan for better opportunities, they are pulled by their art's entanglement with tradition, ethnicity, and nationality, which run deep and speak intimately of their place in Mexico's process of ethnicization and nation formation.

As the definition of indigenous shifts on the local level, the place of Olinalá as a symbol on the national and international level also is in flux. Olinalá persists as a symbol of Mexico's multistranded ethnicized nationality, but, whereas in the 1920s elites managed these flows of transnationalism and cosmopolitanism, today many Olinaltecos manage these connections for themselves. Most households in Olinalá have a member who either lives, or has lived, in the United States. And artisans have learned to cultivate direct ties with dealers as far away as Germany and South Korea. Through ever denser and less easily controlled intersections between the local, the national, and the transnational, Olinaltecos and non-Olinaltecos are renegotiating the meaning of ethnicity, nation, and art and affirming lacquer's place within the nation's collective identity.

Today Olinaltecan dowry chests, gourds, and trays, exquisitely lacquered in updated renditions of the eighteenth-century rayado style as well as dorado and even puntiagudo, hold center stage in Fonart's showroom on Mexico City's Avenida de la Reforma. Each piece, with its price tag discreetly tucked under its base or deep in its interior, faces out the showroom window toward a past symbolized by the towering statue of the last Aztec king, Cuauhtémoc (recently relocated a few hundred meters to the east to make room for modern traffic flows), and a future embodied in the gleaming ultramodern mirrored skyscrapers. This art likely will endure as laqueros and laqueras improvise new ways to speak to the ever-changing place of Indianness in Mexico.
1962; and “La artesanía nacional produce al país cuatrocientos millones de pesos al año,” folder GOI091, BLT-AE.


34. Schmidt, Deterioration, 84–89.

35. Tonatiuh Gutiérrez, interview, 28 June 1999; and Felicitas Ayala Martínez, interview, 20 Jan. 1999. Ayate is a coarse cloth with an open weave made from the fibers of the lechuguilla plant and used by cargadores to transport cheap merchandise.

36. The term “frozen revolution” comes from Raymundo Gleyzer, Mexico, the Frozen Revolution, documentary film, 1972.
Arts in Latin America, 1492–1820,” 110. The painting Still Life with an Ebony Chest is owned by the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg.


13. Joseph Villaseñor y Sánchez, Teatro americano (1746), cited in Muñoz, Mixteca, 16–20. He reports 372 families, but it is unclear whether this count is for the town, or for the República de Indios.


15. Inventory no. 05146, Museo Franz Mayer, Mexico City; and Pérez Carrillo, “Postcolonialism avant la lettre?” 95–97.

16. Francisco Clavijero, Historia antigua (Mexico, 1780), 365, quoted in Pérez Carrillo, Laca, 118.


19. Alejo de Meave, “Memoria sobre la pintura del pueblo de Olinalá.”


21. Documentos relativos a las sesiones habidas en el Congreso del Estado sobre la agregación del Departamento de Tlapa para formar el nuevo Estado de Guerrero, 8, 29 and 42, quoted in Pavia Miller, “‘Origen,’ 55–56.


25. Martínez Rescalvo, Reseña, 64; Salazar Adame, “La modernización,” 283; and Dehouve, Cuando, 73.


30. Pavia Miller, “‘Origen,’ 87 and 121–29; Knight, Mexican Revolution, 1:8; Cárdenas de la Peña, Historia de las comunicaciones; Ortiz Hernán, Caminos y transportes en México; Gojman de Backal, Historia del correo en México; and Salazar Adame, “La modernización,” 201, 218 and 223. On economic and infrastructural development in neighboring Morelos, see Hart, Bitter Harvest, 171–92.


32. On changing Mexican tastes, foreign goods, and the general impact this had on Mexican manufacturing, see Chávez Orozco, ed., La agonia del artesano, 11; d’Harnoncourt, “The Mexican Exhibition,” 134; Gamio, Forjando patria, 49, 144–49; Orlove, ed., The Allure of the Foreign; and Novelo, Artesanos y capitalismo, and Artesanos, artesanías, 114–22.


34. Knight, Mexican Revolution, 1:307; and Womack, Zapata, 83–84. This parallels what was unfolding at that same time in San José de Gracia, Michoacán. See González, San José de Gracia.

35. Ravelo Lecuona, “La revolución guerrerense,” 45–49, 74; and Jacobs, Ranchero Revolt, 7–12; 19, 35; 79–82 and 100.


38. Periódico Oficial del Estado de Guerrero, 3 and 10 May 1911; 29 July 1911; 30 Sept.
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2. Atl., 11, and Toor, “Lacquer.”


6. Paucic seems to have studied every rural corner of Guerrero and is regarded as having known Guerrero better than anyone else, but his interactions with other scholars remained minimal. In 1949, after he assembled a detailed map and encyclopedia about Guerrero, the Servicio Geográfico began paying him to keep his map and encyclopedia up to date. This seems to be part of the reason why he kept his materials organized as an archive and eventually passed them on to the State of Guerrero. He also founded an Indian school in San Luis Acatlá and in 1937 he wrote a letter to the federal Department of Indian Affairs offering his services. Accompanying the letter was a study he wrote concerning the Mixtecos in Guerrero, focusing on their views regarding mestizos and the government. He later published part of this study in the _Revista de Estudios Antropológicos_ under the name Paw (which he seems to have created from the initials for Paucic Alejandro Wladimiro). Apparently impressed, the department employed him as its inspector in charge of the Montaña of Guerrero from 1937 to 1939. Ignacio García Téllez to Graciano Sánchez, Jefe de Dpto de Asuntos Indígenas, 12 Sept. and 9 Dec. 1937, exp. L.C.R. 533-4/27, box 685, AGN; Wigberto Jiménez Moreno, conference report, 16 Jan. 1949, vol. 42 (1948–1949), folder 16, AHI–AHINAH; Catalán Blanco, “El Archivo Paucic en la reconstrucción de la historia del Estado de Guerrero”; Paw (Alejandro Vladimiro Paucic Smerdul) “Algunas observaciones acerca de la religión de los mixtecos guerrerenses”; Paw, “La región oriental indígena de Guerrero y sus problemas actuales”; and Paucic, _Carta geográfica del estado de Guerrero_.


9. Se organiza la gran exposición,” newspaper clipping, ca. June 1930, section 6, DHP.


11. Isaac Helguera, interview, 22 Jan. 1999; Donasiano Ayala Mejía, interview, 19
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3. A much earlier one, dated 1927, is in the permanent collection of the Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City.
4. The dealer who prompted the use of \textit{linaloe} may have been an Argentine named Francisco Belasco Orilla, though it is difficult to determine from the interviews. Others have suggested that his name may have been Francisco Bartolo or Basola. Angel Rodriguez Navarro, interview, 23 Jan. 1999; Josefa Jimenez Patron, interview, 25 Jan. 1999; Ventura, interview, 27 Jan. 1999; and Alejandro Paucic, field notes, folder 86ap304.6dem, IG-AP. Studies of forestry, \textit{linaloe}, and Olinaltecan lacquer tend to assume erroneously the unbroken use of \textit{linaloe} since the colonial era, but, though it may have been used in the eighteenth century, its use did not reemerge until 1935. See Munoz, \textit{Mixteca}, 100; and Hersch Martinez et al., \textit{"El Linaloe,"} 439–62, which explicitly links it to the indigenous authenticity of Olinaltecan lacquer and to national cultural pride.

5. There are reasons, therefore, to question the dates and attributions. Yet, whether they date to the eighteenth century or to 1927–30, these are remarkable objects deserving of further provenance research and materials analysis.

6. Paucic, typed field notes, folder 745, IG-AP.
7. Davis’s image was reproduced in Enciso, “Pintura sobre madera,” 16. The gourd sculptures were probably by the Jiménez family, not Ayala, who likely included them in the delivery at Davis’s request, since these were winning a healthy market among collectors of the time.

8. Ventura, interviews, 1999. Note that Abraham Navarrete disappears from artisans’ accounts and from the documents by the late 1920s.

9. These objects are from the Guillermo Tovar y de Teresa collection of the AAMAP, which has no record of the basis for the attribution. Some details of the attributions clearly are incorrect. The item in plate 15, for example, is listed by the museum as being from 1926, which was before the rayado revival and therefore cannot be correct. And the object in plate 13 is dated 1930 but is attributed to Juvencio’s son, Margarito, who was either not yet born or at most was an infant. There are reasons, therefore, to question the dates and attributions. Yet, whether they date to the eighteenth century or to 1927–30, these are remarkable objects deserving of further provenance research and materials analysis.

10. Paucic, typed field notes, folder 745, IG-AP; Rodriguez Navarro, interview, 3 Aug. 1997; Ventura, interviews, 1997–99, Olinalá; and Munoz, \textit{Mixteco}, 34–35. The municipality of Olinalá saw only a small population increase of 6.4 percent, from 5,849 in 1930 to 6,281 in 1940, and surrounding municipalities saw a decline.

11. Alejandro Paucic, field notes, folder 86ap304.6dem, IG-AP.
12. The fragrance of Olinaltecan lacquer is most famously celebrated in the poetry of Gabriel Mistral, “Cajita de Olinalá,” published in 1924 as part of her \textit{Tender-

ness} collection. In recent years the assumption has been that she is describing \textit{linaloe}, but based on the specific words of the poem and the similes she draws, it is likely she is describing the odor of \textit{tlapetzole}. If it is \textit{linaloe}, the box she describes was likely an antique. In a published interview an unnamed artisan born around 1916 mentions that as a youth he used to collect tecomates and \textit{linaloe} in the countryside to sell to artisans, but it is impossible to date when he did so, since the interviewer presents the interview as a highly romanticized narrative that collapses 1920 through the 1990s as a single, synchronic moment. Cabañas, “Olinalá,” 13.


15. Paucic, typed field notes, folder 86ap304.6dem, IG-AP.
17. Paucic, typed field notes, folder 745, IG-AP.
19. Paucic, typed field notes from Olinalá, folder 745, IG-AP; Rodríguez Navarro, interview, 3 Aug. 1997; Ventura, interviews, 1997–99, Olinalá; and Munoz, \textit{Mixteco}, 34–35. The municipality of Olinalá saw only a small population increase of 6.4 percent, from 5,849 in 1930 to 6,281 in 1940, and surrounding municipalities saw a decline.

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16. Paucic, field notes, folder 471, IG-AP.
17. Davis’s image was reproduced in Enciso, “Pintura sobre madera,” 16. The gourd sculptures were probably by the Jiménez family, not Ayala, who likely included them in the delivery at Davis’s request, since these were winning a healthy market among collectors of the time.
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32. Toor, "Laquer," 14-17. The net national inflation rate between 1934 and 1940 was 36 percent. This rate may have varied on the local level. Anguiano, El estado, 83.

33. Paucic, typed field notes from Olinalá, folder 745, IG-AP; Domitla Pantaleón, interview, 4 Aug. 1997; Ventura Pérez, interviews, 1997-99; and school inspector report, 19 May 1933, Temalacacingo, box 20, folder 9081, AHSEP-EP.


38. Paucic, typed field notes from Olinalá, folder 745, IG-AP.

39. They began to coalesce into what Stuart Hall has described as a distinct and self-conscious "social formation." Building upon the theories of Antonio Gramsci, Hall argues that we cannot assume social groups exist based solely upon abstractly deduced affinities, such as class or religion. By "social formations" he refers to the need to investigate the historical processes by which particular groups of people come to form solidarities, and the way various solidarities intersect with one another. Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity."


41. Because this negative evaluation of the artisan in question might impact current-day artisans, I refer to the artisan simply as Don X.

42. Today some artisans-most notably Francisco "Chico" Coronel (who adds gold to his dorado-style boxes, trays, and gourds)—have developed idiosyncratic markets in which their signature enhances rather than diminishes the value of their work. This, however, is a recent development.

43. Baptismal records, Jan. to April 1930, AP-Olinalá.

44. Paucic, typed field notes, n.d., folder 745, 1G-AP. For an insightful discussion of the complexities and ambiguities surrounding the meaning of "Indian" on the local level in Mexico prior to the vindication of native identity in the 1990s, see Friedlander, Being Indian.
21. At the time of his visit to the town, Munoz noted that only three workshops,
26. view, the eight-person workshop run by Margarito and Donasiano Ayala Mejia, interviews, 1997-99, Olinala.
Munoz, typed field notes from Olinala, expo 745, IG-AP. For insightful
16. This is based on figures compiled by Munoz and by Paucic. See Muñoz, Mixteca,
29. Alejandro Paucic, field notes, folder 86ap304.6dem, IG-AP; Tibon,
15. Paucic, typed field notes from Olinala, exp. 745, IG-AP.
40. Schmidt, Deterioration, 74-75; and Bartra, “Sur profundo,” 26-27. On the shortage of land to redistribute, see files on Temalacacingo, Zacango, and Ocotitlán, Sección Ejidal-Dotation, ARA-Mex.
41. Tibón, Olinala, 56, 81, and 152-53; Muñoz, Mixteca, 107; and Donasiano Ayala, interv. 25 Jan. 1999, Olinala.
42. The situation in Olinala is analogous to the situation in another part of Mexico as Starkly analyzed by Friedlander, Being Indian in Hueypan. Negative views of indigenous identity have been challenged in recent years as some montañeros have begun to embrace their indigenous identities as a basis for demanding human rights. Canabal Cristiani, introduction, in Los caminos de la Montaña, 13-23.
43. School inspection report, 22 May 1972, box 55, folder 7, AHSEP-EP.
44. Espejel, Las artesanías tradicionales en México, 12-13, 29.
46. On the role of women in workshops, see Winkler, “Changing Power.”
47. Fox, Politics of Food, 2.


54. Espinosa, “Olinalá de las flores.”

55. Espejel, Olinalá, 33.


57. Chibnik, Crafting Tradition, 342–43; and Little, Mayas in the Marketplace.

Conclusions

1. Mistral, Ternura; Quezada, prologue; and Quezada, “Cronología.”


3. Hernández-Díaz, “National Identity”; Palacios, “Postrevolutionary Intellectuals”; Vaegan, Cultural Politics; and Dawson, “From Models.” Dawson provides a judicious critique of the tendency within the historical literature to exaggerate de-Indianization and homogenizing mestizaje.


8. Stephen, iZapata Lives!, 342. This draws upon the idea of multiple selective traditions, as described by Nugent and Alonso in “Multiple Selective Traditions.” For insightful comparisons of how nation, economies, and indigenousness have connected within movements in other parts of Latin America see Yashar, Contesting Citizenship in Latin America; García, Making Indigenous Citizens; War-