Sjalel Lekil Kuxlejal: Mayan Weaving and Zapatismo in Design Research

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Situated in the highlands of Chiapas, southeast Mexico, this research seeks to contribute to decolonising textile artisanal design and the recognition of Indigenous design alongside Mayan Tsotsil and Tseltal weavers in search of a fair-dignified life, Lekil Kuxlejal. Using textiles as sources of rich knowledge and research metaphor, a woven methodological approach is developed by interlacing decolonial theory and design from the Global South. Furthermore, drawing from Indigenous onto-epistemologies such as corazónar, Zapatismo and Buen Vivir (good living, collective well-being), this study presents a new approach to textiles as resistance combined with Mayan cosmovision, and is in alignment with the autonomía of the independent collective Malacate Taller Experimental Textil. For this reason, the Zapatista principles of Mandar Obedeciendo (Leading by Obeying) have been used as research guidelines, and are intertwined with the corazón (heart) leading the way. The presence of the heart is active in past and present Mayan worldviews, language, textile knowledge and practice, and is connected to Zapatista ideology to sjalel (weave) Lekil Kuxlejal, a contribution to the pluriverse.

\textit{Mayan; Textiles; Weaving; Zapatismo}
1. Introduction

Textiles are an important part of Mayan culture since its pre-colonial origin, and are strongly linked to tradition, identity and ancestral knowledge. Artisanal textiles have been used as a strategic entry point for poverty alleviation and development where NGOs and government initiatives bring external designers to train artisans and collaborate under dominant views of design from the Global North. These approaches, frequently focused on market-driven outcomes, clash with Indigenous ways of being and doing. This leads to situations where artisans are used as labour for the designer’s collections (Lamrad & Hanlon, 2014), and their knowledge is extracted and appropriated (Smith, 2013).

Our research presents a decolonial alternative to textile artisanal design, seeking the recognition of Indigenous design. In collaboration with Mayan Tsotsil and Tseltal weavers from the independent collective Malacate Taller Experimental Textil, we use textiles as sources of knowledge, combined Zapatismo, Lekil Kuxlejal and corazonar understanding what constitutes a fair-dignified life.

2. Positionality as an outsider-within

My personal and professional life has been marked by a feeling and position of in-betweenness, and this research was no different. I positioned myself as an “outsider-within”, a place of “border spaces occupied by groups of unequal power” (Collins, 1998, p. 5) a place of paradox for decolonial efforts. This in-between space has led to the questioning of my identities in relation to other people and within myself, and to a deep reflection on the shifts in power, privilege, politics, and access (3P-A) according to the context (Albarrán González, 2020).

I am a women, a mother, a craftivist from the Global South, born and raised in Chiapas, Mexico. I am also an ‘ethnic’ woman of colour, a Mexican in diaspora, a migrant from the so called ‘Third World’ living in a ‘First World’ country. Interestingly, I live in the last land to be inhabited and then colonised, the land of the long white cloud, Aotearoa, New Zealand. Living here and working alongside Māori colleagues, the native people of this land, has influenced my approach to identity and research and is reflected throughout my writing.

I am a ‘mestiza’ decolonising her own subjectivities, choosing to reconnect with her Indigenous ancestry but conscious about the privilege that the mestizo identity grants in the Mexican territory. I still wonder if it is possible for mestizos to reclaim our Indigenous identity and reclaim our Indigenous heritage without reproducing mestizo dominance and privilege. While I cannot fully answer this question, the pursuit of reconnection to my Indigenous roots became an embodied experience of transformation and healing through naming and knowing more about my Nahua ancestry (Aztec descendant) from my mother’s side and P’urhépecha ancestry (Tarasco) from my father’s side, and is still an ongoing journey.

Living in Aotearoa, and my in-between space, led to the questioning of my identities, especially around the connection to my Indigenous ancestry. According to Rivera Cusicanqui (2010), being mestiza is being and not being at the same time; the conjugation of the Indigenous and its opposite without mixing them, but it has also been perceived as being mixed or hybrid (Aboul-Ela, 2004; De la Cadena, 2006). Nevertheless, the ethical considerations of doing research with Indigenous communities has been deeply explored and considered, especially as a person from the Global South living and performing in the Global North (Benton Zavala, 2018; Marín-burgos & Enríquez Paz y Puente, 2015; Sahagún Sánchez, 2015). Location and other people’s perception have greatly influenced what I have come to consider appropriate or not.
Being a mestiza researching Indigenous topics shifts according to location and the background stories of other researchers. It is not the same to present this research in Mexico, Latin America, Turtle Island, Australia or Aotearoa, as I have experienced. For example, according to Tedlock (1991), I did native research as someone “who (has) their origins in non-European or non-Western cultures and who shares a history of colonialism, or an economic relationship based upon subordination” (p. 80). From Te Ao Māori (Māori worldview), my Indigenous whakapapa (ancestry or genealogy) identifies me as an Indigenous researcher. While Indigenous identity is relevant, the diversity of historical background and context shift are important points to consider beyond academia for respectful and ethical approaches. The change of location and audience triggered a personal exploration to inhabit a space where people could understand my origin and ancestry beyond Latinx identity. Therefore, I identify as a Native Latin American, a decolonial stance by using the term Native before Latin giving priority to my Indigenous roots and a sign that I am from a Spanish speaking country in Latin America and not Native American from the U.S.

The outsider-within position and the paradox of doing design research was manifested in different ways. I enacted the role of design researcher and artisanal designer, educated under dominant-hegemonic design (Akama, 2017; Ansari et al., 2016; Escobar, 2016). I collaborated with an independent collective of Mayan Tsotsil and Tseltal weavers, mis compañeras and research partners from Malacate Taller Experimental Textil, towards the decolonisaion of textile artisanal design as a kaxlana (mestiza in Tsotsil). This collaboration is reflected in this text shifting the voice between ‘I’ as a first person to ‘we’, as yosotras (a mixed of yo [I] and nosotras [us], yosotras).

At the same time, I am a woman of colour researching design, a space known to be predominantly white, male, cis gender at the service of the capitalist agenda. However, I seek to contribute to the transformation of the design field towards the recognition of the great value and contribution of Non-Western and Indigenous ways of being, doing and knowing, often perceived of as having lesser value to those coming from the Global North.

In this research from the Global South, mis compañeras of Malacate are considered my kaupapa whānau (Mikahere-Hall, 2017; Smith, 2013; Wilson, 2013) with shared values and skills, and it is aligned with the integration of collectivity (colectividad), and horizontality (horizontalidad) (Pérez Daniel & Sartorello, 2012), as appropriate context-based approaches.

3. Artisanal textile knowledge and practices in the highlands of Chiapas

Textile traditions are an important practice in the Global South and are critical for individual and community well-being, part of their Buen Vivir. Mayan textiles are strongly linked to identity, worldview, way of life, and are permeated with patterns telling stories through patterns, symbols, icons and colours. In the highland of Chiapas, the territories from different Mayan Tsotsil and Tseltal communities, textiles also serve as an identifier of the origin of the person wearing the garment, and to the expert eye, even to a particular family of weavers.

The commercialisation of textiles in the region has provoked changes at different levels. Not only the aesthetics of the garments appealing urban contemporary markets but also in terms of organisation, production, material, and symbolism. This transformation involves the creativity, innovation, and cultural re-signifying by Mayan weavers and embroiderers, showing their agency and autonomía over their culture and processes. However, the influence of designers in artisanal textile collaborations not only make these Indigenous transformations and agency invisible but also shows the bias of only considering designers as capable of innovation and creative processes. Nevertheless, the influence of traders and consumers perceiving textiles only as merchandise under the logic of the capital, aggravates the working and living conditions of the artisans and negates their autonomía. Therefore, it is important to
understand the strong connection of weaving (sjalel) textiles individual and community well-being and support their pursuit of a fair-dignified, Lekil Kuxlejal.

4. Lekil Kuxlejal, the Mayan Tsotsil and Tzeltal Buen Vivir

Buen Vivir (Good life, collective well-being) is a decolonial stance from Abya Yala. It is the creation of alternative worlds in harmonious co-existence for human and diverse beings with nature (Gudynas & Acosta, 2011). Lekil Kuxlejal (good life, a fair-dignified life) from Mayan Tsotsil and Tzeltal peoples, considered an equivalent to Buen Vivir, includes important aspects like autonomía, the recognition and importance of all living beings and the harmony between humans and nature (López Intzín, 2015; Schlittler, 2012). According to Avila Romero (2011), Lekil Kuxlejal requires to be in one heart (a collective heart), knowing how to listen, pursuing the common good, offering mutual support and obeying a mandate, in other words, to lead by obeying. The presence of the heart and leading by obeying are present not only in Mayan ways of being and doing but also in Zapatismo, points I will develop in the following sections.

The exploration of Lekil Kuxlejal was a key aspect of our research, wanting to understand how this worldview is manifested in textile work and organisation and what constitutes a fair and dignified life. Through co-design workshops, this concept was explored focusing on collective embodied creativity, sensorial activities, and the all-important exchange of dialogue following a design-by-doing using the heart as guide. The collective exploration became an appropriate medium considering our shared visual language as designers/artisans/artists and emphasis on mutual care in the desire to understand how mis compañeras live and manifest Lekil Kuxlejal in their work. According to Schuler and Namioka (1993), the mutual support of participants is an important aspect of knowledge exchange in co-design and participatory design research. It also invites everyone involved to “design our world, and ourselves, with others” (Akama & Prendiville, 2013, p. 31), in what we called a yosotros co-design.

The multisensorial co-design sessions involved the body, mind, heart, and spirit manifested through drawings, colours, patterns, photography and natural objects as modes of expression. The focus of multiple senses allowed going beyond visual creations. An example of this was Lucia’s representation of Lekil Kuxlejal through a flower from the region stimulating embodied ways of communication, knowing and understanding.

5. Corazonar, a heart-led approach

The heart (corazón, O’tan in Tzeltal) is important in past and present Mayan worldview (López Intzín, 2015; Pérez Moreno, 2012), and it is connected to Lekil Kuxlejal and Zapatismo. It was also present in pre-colonial Mesoamerican civilisations, and remains so in popular culture and some Indigenous
communities. This was also manifested by mis compañeras of Malacate through their language and textile practice. For example, they mentioned how they put their hearts when they sjalel (weave), and how el tejido no sale (weaving does not work) when their heart is sad. Therefore, acknowledging the importance of the heart was pivotal not only for mis compañeras but also aligned with my views.

Mayan Tseltal scholars and activists reflect on the centrality of the heart doing research and writings. O’tan or O’tanil is present in everything in the Earth like in water, plants, animals and mountains, they are alive, and as such, they are sacred and need care and appreciation (López Intzín, 2015; Pérez Moreno, 2012). This view is linked to different Indigenous worldviews where humans are only part of the whole but not central and our well-being is dependent on the whole. In contrast, modernity and coloniality prioritizes the experience of privileged humans considering nature a resource to be exploited not as a living being. Therefore, our decolonial efforts should include different ways of seeing, feeling, sensing, thinking, expressing and being, corazonando towards a fair-dignified life.

Corazonar requires reasoning and feeling with the heart as a collective, co-razonar (razón, reasoning) (Cepeda H., 2017). This echoes Lekil Kuxlejal principles, to be in one heart, mutual support and common good and horizontality, as mentioned previously. These views became pivotal to fracture dominant design research approaches and for balancing our 3P-A, as well as the integration of the Zapatista principles of leading by obeying (Mandar Obedeciendo).

6. Zapatismo as guiding principles in Design Research

The Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) is an Indigenous resistance movement from Chiapas in defence of their territories, people, and rights. The Zapatistas have created autonomous communities, caracoles (snails), with their own governance, organisation, education system and health services, demonstrating that otro mundo es posible (other world is possible). Zapatista ideas have influenced other Indigenous communities and socio-political movements, and have been echoed by scholars throughout Mexico and Abya Yala (Escobar, 2018; Esteva, 2005; Mora, 2017; Santiago Santiago, 2017).

The Zapatista principles of Mandar Obedeciendo (Leading by Obeying) (Esteva, 2014; Komanilel, 2018) were a source of inspiration, and I used them as research guidelines to collaborate with mis compañeras of Malacate. This approach also includes following the pathway of the heart, con el corazón por delante (Zapatista expression). These principles are:

1. Obedecer y no mandar (Obey, don’t lead).
2. Representar y no suplantar (Represent, don’t replace).
3. Servir y no servirse (Serve, don’t self-serve).
4. Convencer y no vencer (Convince, don’t conquer).
5. Bajar y no subir (Go down, don’t go up).
6. Proponer y no imponer (Propose, don’t impose).
7. Construir y no destruir (Construct, don’t destroy)
These principles help to regulate my role as an outsider-within and are key in my ongoing relationship with Malacate. This table illustrates some examples of how these were applied in different situations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obey, don’t lead</td>
<td>I followed Malacate’s protocols of interaction and collaboration rather than conducting the sessions under an academic agenda.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Represent, don’t replace</td>
<td>Presenting our research side by side is the ideal scenario, although distance, language and time zones are some of the limitations we face. We have been exploring different mediums like co-presenting online or pre-recorded videos. When it has not been possible, I consulted with them about the presentation’s content, and I emphasize the collective nature of our research.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Serve, don’t serve yourself</td>
<td>My collaboration with Malacate field goes beyond academic outcomes. I am an advocate of their work and try to create spaces to echo their voices and creations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Convince, don’t defeat</td>
<td>This principle is being applied in the writing of the thesis, trying to focus on argumentations that validate other ways of knowing through ontologies and epistemologies of the South, and putting Indigenous experiences at the centre.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go down, don’t go up</td>
<td>To be humble. This is particularly important when designers and researchers approach Indigenous communities and recognise them as experts in their knowledge, not putting formal academic formation and Euro-Anglo knowledge as superior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Propose, don’t impose</td>
<td>Our research focused on the creation of alternatives to hegemonic-dominant design through Indigenous Mayan knowledge and experience, instead of the imposition of academic extractions from the Global North.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Construct, don’t destroy</td>
<td>In academia and design spaces, it has become apparent the predominance of critiques without action, especially around textile collaborations. My position as an outsider-within has been a latent concern and even provoked certain paralysis of how to advance our research. However, this principle helped to direct efforts into the creation of alternatives and proposals going beyond critiques.</td>
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*Table 1* Zapatista’s *Mandar Obedeciendo* (Leading by Obeying) as research principles.

**7. Decolonising textile artisanal design**

Our research proposes an alternative to textile artisanal design, seeking to decolonise design practices from the Global North (Botero et al., 2018; Schultz et al., 2018) and challenge the 3P-A of dominant design approaches. This requires reassembling design approaches to contribute to a pluriverse of design(s) from the South (Fry, 2017; Gutiérrez Borrero, 2015) where Indigenous ways of being and doing are the guidance. Our proposal weaves Mayan knowledge, textile significance and Zapatista principles through heart-led and Lekil Kuxlejal-centric approaches, as shown in the following diagram.
Decolonising Textile Artisanal Design
Challenging the 3P - A of Hegemonic Design

We consider heart-led and Lekil Kuxlejal-centric approaches allow Mayan knowledge to flourish as a seed (sbék'), to go up. Simultaneously, the external designer or researcher as a person (winik) needs to be humble and go to the roots, to go down. This cyclical process echoes the natural rhythms of the pathway of the sun, reflected in textiles symbols, and work as a complementary duality, not as opposed binaries. The knowledge and teachings from Mayan ways of doing and ‘being’ textiles have been the main contributions, not only for this research, but also to transform my ways of understanding and approach to design, and my own sense of self. This approach also helped us to reflect and understand what a fair-dignified life means in textile artisanal work, creating a series of guidelines that respect the autonomía of the artisanal community. These guidelines are:

1. **Creativity as a right.** Artisans have the right to be creative, not only makers.
2. **Indigenous design is a right.** The acknowledgment of design (process, patterns, and techniques) as part of the rights of Indigenous communities as established by UNESCO.
3. **No individualism.** Trade or brand name not under one person as the designer (Indigenous and non-Indigenous).
4. **Horizontality, no hierarchy.** Artisans to be considered as designers/artists at the same level, not putting formal academic training and Euro-Anglo knowledge as superior.
5. **Personal and meaningful relationships.** Prioritise human relationships and interactions beyond monetary transactions.

*Figure 2 Connections of Mayan knowledge with Zapatismo to decolonise textile artisanal design research. Source: Diana Albarrán González, 2020.*
6. **Colectivo autónomo (Autonomous collective).** Groups that are not dependant on external funding only, or transparency about the receiving external support.

7. **Long-term connections.** Collaborations that are respectful and committed, going beyond short-term transactions.

8. **Indigenous knowledge at the centre.** Rescue and revival of techniques, community-based innovation.

9. **Educate consumers.** Informing and educating consumers about context, processes with transparency (community, artisans, hours, techniques).

10. **Prioritize Indigenous language.** For example, huipil instead of kaftan.

11. **Alternative economies.** Operate under alternative economies that do not follow the logic of the capital such as a social and solidarity economy.

These points are grounded in our experiences, discussions, and reflections on ethical collaborations in highlands of Chiapas, and across Mexico. This could be the starting point for alternative ways of certification that are local, collective and accessible for textile initiatives operating under ethical, horizontal and respectful practices, aligned to Buen Vivir-centric design (Albarrán González, 2020). We recognise that one of the most challenging points is trading considering the fiscal and legal barriers under capitalism. This needs further exploration and development with community members and specialists who wants to dismantle predatory economic practices.

In summary, this article discussed our collective research towards decolonising alternatives to textile artisanal design. We shared aspects of our research journey using Indigenous onto-epistemologies like Mayan worldviews and textiles practices, Buen Vivir, Zapatismo and corazonar towards a fair-dignified life. We showed the results of our heart-led, Lekil Kuxlejal-centric approach to challenge the 3P-A of hegemonic-dominant design from the Global North, and presented guidelines as to regulate collaboration and that respect the autonomía of artisanal communities.

### 8. References


About the Authors

**Dr Diana Albarrán González** is a Native Latin American researcher from Mexico, a mestiza of Nahua and P’urhepecha descent seeking to decolonise her own subjectivities and (re)connect with Indigeneity. Currently, she is teaching and researching in the Creative Arts and Industry faculty at the University of Auckland in Aotearoa, New Zealand. She graduated from the Māori and Indigenous faculty at Auckland University of Technology where her PhD thesis focused on the decolonisation of design in collaboration with Mayan weavers from Chiapas, Mexico, her birthplace. She proposed a Buen Vivir-Centric Design model towards a fair-dignified life, based on collective well-being, textiles, crafts-design-arts, embodiment and creativity. Diana has more than 18 years of experience in New Zealand, Singapore, Japan, Spain and Mexico applying, re-learning, researching and teaching design. This has given her the ability to address challenges in a variety of contexts, and the opportunity to develop a meaningful sense of culture and diversity awareness and sensitivity. She is a craftivist, a mother and an active member of the Latin American community seeking to contribute to women's and families' well-being through connections to our own cultural roots.

**Malacate Taller Experimental Textil** is a women-led independent collective focused on the reactivation, preservation, protection and diffusion of textile art in the Highlands of Chiapas. The group emerged 15 years ago based on the research from the ethnologist Karla Pérez Cánovas about artisanal textiles as a medium of cultural transmission and resistance from globalization in Zinacantan, later transformed into an applied anthropology project. Based on a self-determined and autonomous form of community organisation, Malacate has achieved the preservation and inter-generational transmission of their knowledge and customary practices as Mayan weavers. Currently, the collective is integrated by 90 women from 10 different municipalities in the state of Chiapas, Mexico.