

# Tsotsil Rock : stereotypes on another way to make music

Luis Fernando Bolaños Gordillo

## About the Author

Chiapa de Corzo , Chiapas (1970). Doctor in Social Sciences and Humanities by the Center for Advanced Studies in Mexico and Central America (CESMECA) University of Science and Arts of Chiapas , professor and researcher at Full Time Degree in Intercultural Communication Intercultural University of Chiapas and leader Academicians Languages and Cultural Discourses on the Southern Border . Work issues collective identities , subcultures and mass culture.

## Abstract

Tsotsil rock has been present for more than a decade in the music scene in Chiapas . Groups : such as Saktzevul , Vayijel , Lumaltok , Among Others , talk about their realities in diverse situations in their native language . However , there hasn't been a lack of adjectives from various fields describing this genere, such as "indigenous rock", "ethnic rock" , and " etnorock " as a way to grade and stereotype from a western vision regarding the forms of creativity done from a particular culture which had empowered its identity, language, and cosmo vision through this genre of music.

*Keyword : Rock, ethnic identity , cultural industries, autonomy*

## The rock tsotsil : Stereotypes about another way of making music

*"Here the temptation of narcissism is all the more fascinating to the extent that it seems to express the common law : do as others in order to be yourself."*

Marc Augé ( Non-places )

The delimitation of objects of study is not without the romantic unilateral construction of the new, of the extraordinary, which goes beyond the everyday. In short, the exotic. In this methodological framework the observer , even without linking the structure of the symbolic territory, life histories and collective identities , draws a series of arbitrary lines that generate that the observed or subjects being observed appear to those who read academic papers as "interesting", " unique ", " special " characters- with qualities constructed from another age that provides a series of surprises for the Western world .

It is as if the act of thinking of themselves could apply equally in the act of thinking in others, as if it were providing real experience - that even goes unnoticed before seeking such exquisiteness - a

mystical halo in which he or the subjects being observed reveal themselves as entities that star in unexpected spectacular acts and , as it were , “ curious ” about the methodological rigor of the investigator.

The rock made in Zinacantán<sup>1</sup> does not escape this continued development of the construction of the “extraordinary ” and has been defined , as if the object of social research, as “ ethnic rock ” , “indigenous rock” or “ folk rock ” as if they were suggesting that Rock is the exclusive patrimony of the Western world and that these youth are installed in a musical Integrationism flying the ethnic flag both to share their identity through the songs as to transform it to the influence of cultural industries . If in this direction we are going, then let scholars and experts in the subject matter...why not define Pink Floyd as “ ethnic English progressive rock ” and El Trias “ Chilango classic rock ” or the Tex Tex as magnificent examples of “postmodernist otomie ethnorock ” .

“ For starters, I do not agree to call it native rock, since all cultural events either in terms of music , painting and dance , no way should be labeled because they are expressions and manifestations of people who take the meaning of what they generate , “said Omar López Espinosa , an anthropologist who heads the Multidisciplinary Unit of the Intercultural University of Chiapas, in the town of Oxchuc .

In this sense , the problem of the definition of indigenous rock is cultural boundaries and scientific otherness in an effort to describe and explain the object of study under tons of theoretical premises and methodological arbitrariness , coupled with a particular perception of Rock as part of the Western heritage , who overlook a different way of making music with its own style, own music composition , own tuning (where traditional instruments are used ) and even its own public and spaces.

Far from these perceptions , there is the methodological approach to the analysis of rock groups from the municipalities of

---

<sup>1</sup>Located in the Tsotsil-Tzeltal highlands region, bordered to the East by San Cristobal de las Casas, to the northeast and north by San Juan Chamula, to the West with Ixtapa, to the Southeast by Chiapa de Corzo and to the South with Acala and San Lucas. The name of the municipality in its own language is “Sots’leb”, Place of the Bats.

Zinacantán and Chamula, a marked cultural frontier that fosters the axis of analysis depart from the views that Westerners have rock and the main label to analyze it and later make it a stereotype. That is not the purpose but the result of such approaches , whether indigenous , where it becomes a “ prodigious “ act when a young tsotsil takes an electric guitar and share their songs in their native language. “ If he is playing Aerosmith or Van Halen, then it is rock. If the person playing is from Zinacantan then it is Indigenous Rock. These labels are completely racist , “affirmed Omar López Espinosa.

In this agrarian society we are surprised and it calls attention when there is a group of Tzotzil which are organized and fought to defend and disseminate a musical style which they call - phonic rock , which is a composition of mostly traditional music that comes from indigenous music mixed with rock and classical music , with no alteration in the lyric and traditional rhythms ; the traditional appropriates new instruments and denotes a contemporary composition with tints and foreign influences,from which results a new traditional music , as he says Damián Martínez : “ the spirit of the zinacanteca land shared by three musical metaphors highlighting two different emotions as the allegorical and the gloomy, without losing the sense of spiritual origin.”<sup>4</sup>

The fact that it is “ surprising “ and “ attention-grabbing “is that these young people playing rock with a foreign influence reflects the desire to rebuild them as protagonists of a new way of being that does not fit with what researchers normally expect from them . Is it as exotic in the eyes of those who investigate a young native of Zinacantán making a riff using a distortion bar ? If the youth in question was from Mexico City , Tuxtla Gutierrez or San Cristobal de Las Casas, the fact would not make it worthy of being studied, but as it does seem a Zinacanteco that gives you the “ folk “ touch to make it known to the academic community as something unique and unrepeatabe , since the hands that are making a riff a Tzotzil .

It seems that the person or persons who analyze these startling facts are assumed as spokespeople of an academic community that is surprised to not own acts of conception of those who venture into symbolic territories designated as themselves. If a mestizo or a foreigner , however , experiment with music they call arbitrarily as

---

<sup>3</sup>[http://www.comie.org.mx/congreso/memoriaelectronica/v10/pdf/area\\_tematica\\_12/ponencias/0052-F.pdf](http://www.comie.org.mx/congreso/memoriaelectronica/v10/pdf/area_tematica_12/ponencias/0052-F.pdf)

indigenous , maybe that would not be an object of study but an act of self- experimentation of the musical evolution of the interpreter. Why not just call it rock and that's it? By some chance do labels guarantee indexed publications?

"It seems that we have become a guinea pig for playing music in our native language ," said Julián Hernández , guitarist of the group Lumaltok which was interviewed in the radio room at the Intercultural University of Chiapas. He said he is loaded with a stereotype that a lot of people generate who go to see them out of curiosity and not for the musical concept they have. " By singing in tsotsil anyone who hears it says wow!What language is that ?" And it is his point of view that they are biased because ethnicity is valued more than the interpretation .

According Ulises Fierro , 30 years ago it would have been unthinkable the existence of an indigenous rock band singing in their own language . What's more, although he played with electric instruments, there wasn't a break with his community because youth had already identified with them.<sup>4</sup>

"Rock is culture and it has always stuck everywhere, even in the indigenous world with what we are doing which of course cannot be called or labeled as indigenous rock since it is a universal genre, but thanks to that label many are coming closer to that genre and this allows us to learn more ,"said Moises Perez Perez, drummer Lumaltok group.

In social research , the subject observes in theory should not ignore the context and in the case of the analysis that is made of rock produced in Zinacantán and to a lesser extent in the town of Chamula, it focuses largely on integrative approaches , where the term that prevails is fusion . It seems as if the other stereotype, such as exotic, is defined based on an musical analytic ethnocentrism of rock and marks a cultural border where there is a perception that these young people were "exploring " outside symbolic territories.

Although the members of the group had the opportunity to join the Western world , the spirit of ancient culture has remained in them. In this sense, the rockers become re -creators of cultural practices to encode and decode the an ancestral message of sounds and meanings

---

<sup>4</sup><http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2008/01/06/index.php?section=espectaculos&article=a07n1esp>

in rituals and myths that support the configuration and transmission of knowledge to new generations . We can say that in the musical art its cultural history is summarized , and in turn , nourishes their learning process . Those who arrive denote a different way to stimulate the interest of children and young people following the logic of their own culture that can be applied to other aspects of education .<sup>5</sup>

Clearly the perception that there is a different world - "modern" - to which these young people have had the "opportunity" (the term is very clear in the above quote ) to " join the Western world." This western / indigenous dichotomy is quoted, reproduced , legitimized and accepted as such ,and promotes the incursion of these young people in rock is like a fairy tale in which they live in a magical bubble where ancestors take a guitar , bass and drums and sing the whole world about their culture to the surprised look of social researchers or journalists who also claim to have candle in this ethnocentric burial and incidentally put a rebellious touch, but I do not mean RBD but the association that is made with the Zapatista National Liberation Army.

"In this manner, Bill Haley, John Lennon , Ozzy Osbourne, Billy Joel , among others , already have talented indigenous rivals that have generated a new variant of this rhythm : The Indigenous Rock. A native of this area that still feels the influence of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation ( EZLN) " ,Damián Martínez ,A musician at heart who has promoted along with other groups, Indigenous Rock . This was evident last month in Zinacantán, where for a moment the indigenous forgot their ideological disputes and for the possession of the water."<sup>6</sup>

It is evident in this type of analysis of life stories that the motivations of the individual - or group - playing rock, breaks generational motivations. The events are in a way ( including stereotyping from research and academia ) the presence of their worldview at the time of writing , the influence of the media and cultural industries , the influence of other rockers groups from diverse backgrounds ,the presence that that make concrete elsewhere in the country, building their sense autonomy , their sense of resistance, taking their position at various institutions such as the family, schools , churches

---

<sup>5</sup>[http://www.comie.org.mx/congreso/memoriaelectronica/v10/pdf/area\\_tematica\\_12/ponencias/0052-F.pdf](http://www.comie.org.mx/congreso/memoriaelectronica/v10/pdf/area_tematica_12/ponencias/0052-F.pdf)

<sup>6</sup><http://chiapas.turista.com.mx/article188.html>

and traditional authorities , participation in social movements , their perception about the uses and customs, etc. . Even the same groups perceive these two worlds in their areas of expression .

The native rock is a fusion of “folk rock”, as a merger between the rhythms of both traditional rhythm and contemporary music adaptations <sup>7</sup>

Research and the academia have place their gain of sand for these young people who assume their role as representatives of indigenous rock ( label which at the end of the day that has been repeated for ten years ) and as a result of a merger and experimentation with different rhythms and sounds , attracting as well the “intercultural” a touch to their analysis. Thus, the possible world from the observer’s analysis focuses on the musical integration , and from the point of view of these youth who are involved in the ongoing reconstruction and revitalization of their culture , this seems to go unnoticed .

Members of YibelJ’metik Banamil (Roots of Mother Earth ) have the idea of fusion . Valeriano Garcia, vocalist and guitarist, said : “We see the possibility of making new music , as long as the root of our culture is that which gives it meaning . We explore what the traditional music can offer for a new sound. Music brings joy to the soul, the spirit , because every note penetrates the heart , even in the toughest people. It makes us reflect on life , which must be enjoyed through love , and death . If one love is shared with others, it is like water and land. <sup>8</sup>

It seems that this civilization in denial insists that Bonfil Batalla ( 1987) tries to explain from the construction of an essentialism that chronicles the relationship between a musical Integrationism describing the appropriation of what are considered Western instruments to speak from the “ native ” culture with processes cultural transformation .

The native rock it self is derived from several musical fusions between western music and other genres such as blues and reggae. The emergence of this mode of musical expression which takes traditional instruments and cultural ideas as a spoken language . Indigenous rock is like a mixture of Western music with the traditional. It is a fusion that we express , or as we say in our own culture as is Zinacantán and

---

<sup>7</sup>[http://leietnorockchis.blogspot.mx/2011\\_11\\_01\\_archive.html](http://leietnorockchis.blogspot.mx/2011_11_01_archive.html)

<sup>8</sup><http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2010/05/05/espectaculos/a09n1esp>

San Juan Chamula and converting music such as a Western rock, we have influences of Western rock, Nirvana or something ( ... ),” Alfredo de la Torre, guitarist Yi’belJme’tik Banamil said. As , Eduardo Gómez Gómez , professor of Bilingual Intercultural University of Chiapas ( UNICH ) , states “Without a doubt , the language of music is universal , mixing sounds and instruments carry a message of resistance and expression as gender, and a cultural rescue . Indigenous rock is a current and part of the resistance to keep , to preserve indigenous languages and cultures [ ... ] of course with its changes that have occurred and at the same time expressions that they mention in the lyrics of their songs .<sup>9</sup>

These processes are not only described ,they are arbitrary categories that seek explanations from the re- discovery of the “ethnic” in the rock, where it is stressed to the marrow that these musicians “ adapt” songs and rhythms that are not theirs and present them live for indigenous use.

SakTzevul creates their lyrics , adapts them and translates them to Tzotzil . At concerts the members present themselves with the typical zinacanteca clothes ( straw hat with colored ribbons , shirt and pants, blanket, a kind of multicolor cloak and Aztec style sandals). They also set the stage with the representation of a Mayan ritual using whistles, drums , rattles and conch.<sup>10</sup>

The analysis present subjects divided between modernity and cultural encapsulation, between the rock identity and ethnicity , between empowerment and subordination , between the human condition and as a fantasy called “ ethnic rock essence .” Bonfil Batalla ( 1987:11 ) argues that the peoples of Mexico continually deeply create and recreate their culture, adjust to changing pressures which strengthen their own private areas and make foreign cultural elements to put to thier service , cyclically reiterate collective acts that are a way to express and renew their identity.

“There’s nothing different, playing rock does take away the tsotsil , it does not remove the original thing you are and what you bring this tattooed on the heart, you cannot take it away ,” said Juan Javier Pérez Pérez , drummer YibelJ’metik Banamil . For him, his music is a way to

---

<sup>9</sup><http://kuxaelan.blogspot.mx/2011/05/vivencias-y-experiencias-en-el-rock.html>

<sup>10</sup>[http://www.comie.org.mx/congreso/memoriaelectronica/v10/pdf/area\\_tematica\\_12/ponencias/0052-F.pdf](http://www.comie.org.mx/congreso/memoriaelectronica/v10/pdf/area_tematica_12/ponencias/0052-F.pdf)



reclaim their culture and not a cliché imposed from other contexts. “Modernity will crush you if you do not react and our music is a way of saying we are here and what we cling to is our language and cultural elements,” he said.

Indeed , a good part of this band’s songs are composed in whole or in part in this language along with Spanish . In addition to these languages others have been included in compositions and lyrics such as Tzeltal or Tojolabal . SakTzevul was precisely born as a project to bring the field of rock music to the native languages that did not have access until now to this type of musical expression . In this sense, SakTzevul is a pioneer in recognizing the value of the native languages of Mexico not only as a vehicle as a modern wing of artistic expression. SakTzevul was created in 1996 by Enrique Martinez, Otto Anzures and Damian Martinez, the latter is the composer of most of the songs that, they play. Since its founding SakTzevul has been growing increasingly well known in the musical world inside and outside of the State.<sup>11</sup>

For Sergio Omar Perez, bassist of Lumaltok , playing music represents another stage in the history of Chiapas rock ,and gives new meaning to play in both the tsotsil language , at the institutions that promote such events , and with other groups playing in Castilian that have another way of making music and the public attending their concerts. “We’re musicians that share knowledge about our culture, not Indians who pretend to be rockers .Our root is our own culture.,”he said .

Music and rock music are cultural expressions where we can see different social realities. They have been discourse in the last two decades in general, and in Chiapas in San Cristobal de Las Casas in particular where there has been building positions about criticisms which are intended to make conscious asymmetries and social injustice or environmental irresponsibility. From there , from the makers of music, from those who create and interpret , there is a discourse that seeks to gauge the exclusion of the indigenous world , the “destruction of mother earth “ or verbalize the “ ecocide” . It emphasizes in favor of pacifism and against the militarization processes . Thus we have a kind of ethnic revival from rock, a genre that , although locally redefined , is one of the great landmarks of mass culture , the culture industry and globalization of much of the twentieth century and new millennium. Talking about the indigenous is not a matter of fashion, there is more background , look : although there are several cultural identities in Mexico that have merged with the West, there continues to be many

---

<sup>11</sup><http://macuala.blogspot.mx/2009/10/sak-tzevul-xchulel-balamil.html>

traditions that we carry and express daily and have an ancestral origin, the mode to be Mexican that comes to us from our first root, which is indigenous.<sup>12</sup>

This historical connection in the way to make rock is not recognized. How did Zinacanteco rock begin? What are its roots?, its history , its tensions , contradictions, complexities , transformations , settings , its continuities and even the charges of selling traditional musicians on their culture ? Not enough to say , “adapt “ to Western rock music , dress in costumes, put incense on the stage, and things like that. What is said of its involvement in the promotion of a sense of resistance and , conversely , why does it insists on its de-Indianization by simply touching a genre that is not native to your town ?

For members of YibelJme'tik Banamil , rock and traditional indigenous music is not only a complement as to what is musical but it can be integrated as a contemporary cultural expression of indigenous youth . In this course , something is changing in the cultures of these native peoples, and what is outstanding is these young people who are leading these changes and to the others that are emerging and forming more groups , reaffirming the taste for the música.<sup>13</sup>

On these transformations , the writer Javier Molina , said in La Jornada:

“The youth of San Juan Chamula opened the concert. They interpreted traditional music, or “another type of rock ,” as they call themselves. “Starting from this the make their own creations , using the same instruments. What changes is the rythm , time , shape ,everything changes “ The old seed is now renewed, according to the present times.”<sup>14</sup>

Another type of rock is a afirmation that fully describes the musical preferences of these young men who compete in both the quality and content of their interpretations ,with other Chiapan and national groups . And about making an extra point , the rock groups from Zinacantán and Chamula, not play covers and most of the bands of Tuxtla Gutiérrez do.

---

<sup>12</sup><http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=273579>

<sup>13</sup><http://kuxaelan.blogspot.mx/2011/06/rock-tsotsil.html>

<sup>14</sup><http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2010/05/05/espectaculos/a09n1esp>

Rock music and cultural expressions are where we look at the different social realities. They are a speech in the last two decades in general and in Chiapas in San Cristobal de Las Casas in particular - has been building positions that reviews are intended to make conscious asymmetries and social injustice or environmental irresponsibility. From there , from the makers of music, from those who create and interpret , there is a discourse that seeks to gauge the exclusion of the indigenous world , the “destruction of mother earth” or verbalize the “ecocide” . It emphasizes pacifism in favor of and against militarization processes . Thus we have a kind of ethnic revival from the rock, a genre that , though redefined locally , is one of the great landmarks of mass culture , the culture industry and the globalization of much of the twentieth century and the new millennium ( Ascensio and López, 2012:70)

“I think it should be seen as a new form of musical expression without any labels. To talk in Tzotzil and Tzeltal does not mean that things have to carry that label . They are musicians who are responding to interest created through music and recreate their everyday world. They obviously have different musical influences but you are giving a twist ,”said Omar López Espinosa.

The importance of freedom of expression and cultural manifestation of indigenous and non-indigenous people in a globalized society is to promote and contribute in the preservation and dissemination of traditional values , either : language , prayers, tales, myths , and legends expressed through the language of music. Such as the proposal of Yi’belJme’tik Banamil does.<sup>15</sup>

This way of making rock is revitalizing the tostsil rock culture and is strengthening the original language , promoting a sense of autonomy , has a rebellious sense , disseminating ecological thinking , strengthening its spaces of expression due to its link with alternative communication, telling different stories of life, promotes the interest of other young people to pursue music , and many more aspects that make the labels fall short .

Despite the social importance of rock music as music for the masses in Mexico, it is still a topic that has yet to be discussed and analyzed considering the cultural environment in which it operates

---

<sup>15</sup><http://kuxaelan.blogspot.mx/2011/05/vivencias-y-experiencias-en-el-rock.html>

. In general , there is no real interest in making visible the most important music of the youth of the world , so you should always find opportunities to encourage open discussion ( Zebadúa , 2011:13 ) .

## Final Thoughts

The treatment that is given in certain analysis of rock that is done in Zinacantán marks cultural boundaries between the researcher and the subject of study ; there is a lack of humanistic sense in the methodological approach to the subject and a need to set aside the stereotypes that have been brewing since the emergence of this peculiar way to rock .

These stereotypes foster the idea that these young people are perceived as “guinea pigs” who are giving a “surprise” to the academic world by playing rock, forgetting to cultivate their fields , tend their gardens or nurseries : the have become endo culturalized people who do things that are not specific to their culture.

If rock has a universal character , why the stereotype ? Adjectives abound and their use explains virtually nothing. The important thing from my academic and musical point of view, is that they talk about their things related to their own culture and develop their peculiar style . Cheers for the rock made by the Tzotzil for anyone who wants to listen without prejudice.

## Bibliography

1. **Cedillo** Ascensio Efrain **De la Cruz** Lopez and **Moya**, Martín ( 2012) *Music, Young and otherness : Indigenous rock in southern Mexico* . Contemporanea | comunicação and culture - v.10 - n.03 - set- dez . - P . 705-724 | ISSN : 18099386 .
2. **Augé** , Marc ( 2008). *Non-places . Spaces of anonymity . An anthropology overmodernity* . Gedisa. Mexico .
3. **Bonfil** Batalla, Guillermo (1987 ) . *Deep Mexico* . RandomHouseMondadori . Mexico .
4. **Corzo** Clemente , Julia **Perez** and **Pecha** , Mary Esther (2009). *Saktzevul : ancestral rock phonic sounds . Musical education in Zinacantán , Chiapas*. Presentation . X National Congress of Inves → Educational mitigation. Recovered from : [http://www.comie.org.mx/congreso/memoriaelectronica/v10/pdf/area\\_tematica\\_12/ponencias/0052-F.pdf](http://www.comie.org.mx/congreso/memoriaelectronica/v10/pdf/area_tematica_12/ponencias/0052-F.pdf)
5. <http://chiapas.turista.com.mx/article188.html>
6. [http://www.comie.org.mx/congreso/memoriaelectronica/v10/pdf/area\\_tematica\\_12/ponencias/0052-F.pdf](http://www.comie.org.mx/congreso/memoriaelectronica/v10/pdf/area_tematica_12/ponencias/0052-F.pdf)
7. <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2008/01/06/index.php?section=espectaculos&article=a07n1esp>
8. <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2010/05/05/espectaculos/a09n1esp>
9. <http://kuxaelan.blogspot.mx/2011/05/vivencias-y-experiencias-en-el-rock.html>
10. [http://leietnorockchis.blogspot.mx/2011\\_11\\_01\\_archive.html](http://leietnorockchis.blogspot.mx/2011_11_01_archive.html)
11. <http://macuala.blogspot.mx/2009/10/sak-tzevul-xchulel-balamil.html>
12. <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=273579>
13. **Zebadúa** , Juan Pablo (2011). *The rock of the Century : 22-year analysis of identities and change in rock music* . AcysAlevin . Mexico .