



Cultural Appropriation and the usage of Rebozos in Western Birth Work

Doula Canada Report

Table of Contents

Background	3
Cultural Appropriation	4
Colonialism and Power Dynamics	5
Intimacy and Sacredness	7
Economic Exploitation	9
Authenticity	11
Summary	13
Recommendations	14
Limitations	15
References	16
Appendices	17
Appendix A: Call for Participants (Recruitment Letters)	17
Request for Focus Group Participants	17
Request for Consultant 1	17
Request for Consultant 2: Central American Birthworkers, unknown to DTC	18
Request to Secondary Contact re Consultant 2	19
Request for Consultant 3: Central American scholar with expertise in cultural appropriation	20
Appendix B: Interview Guides	21
Birth Worker Interview	21
Historian Interview	21

Background

In recent years, there has been considerable discussion and debate within Western birth work regarding the usage of Rebozos for the provision of non-medical comfort and support during labour and delivery.

Rebozos and similar textiles originate from Central America. The Rebozo is particularly iconic within Mexican culture. The cultural history, development, and modern usage of Rebozos in Mexico are highly complex, as will be discussed in greater detail below.

As a result of this complexity, some Mexican people state the use of Rebozos as a comfort measure tool within Western birth work constitutes cultural appropriation. There is growing, but uneven awareness that cultural appropriation is a form of racism.

While there is undoubtedly a broad social consensus that racism is harmful, there is ongoing social dissent and unrest in all quarters of society as to what constitutes an act of racism and the threshold for harm. With regards to cultural appropriation, there is no consensus that it exists, what it is, or that it is harmful.

In the arena of birth work, this lack of consensus has manifested as significantly divergent views regarding the use of the Rebozo, and whether techniques with it can be taught responsibly and respectfully by Western birth work organizations, which are usually white-dominated.

In order to address this debate proactively and in a manner that is aligned with social justice values, Doula Training Canada (DTC) undertook a policy research project to ameliorate its understanding of cultural appropriation, the history and culture of the Rebozo, and whether its current teaching practices were aligned with anti-racist principles in this regard. DTC suspended the teaching of techniques using the Rebozo until such time as there were outcomes from the research project.

The research was designed and largely conducted by Keira Grant, MSc, EDI Lead and Social Media Coordinator. Keira holds a master's degree in health services research (policy concentration) and has professional experience designing and conducting health equity and social determinants of health policy research. Keira also identifies as a Queer, Black, cis woman. Keira drew upon these experiences in leading the research project.

Research methods included a literature review, qualitative analysis of discussions on Rebozo within DTC's private member Facebook group, one-on-one consultations with 5 birth workers of Mexican ancestry, including one Indigenous Mexican birth worker, and a roundtable discussion with 3 birth workers, one a recent Mexican immigrant to Canada who is training with DTC and two birth workers practicing in Mexico. We also conducted an interview with a university professor (Ph.D.) teaching 18th-19th century Latin American history, with a focus on Mexico.

The historian is a white Canadian and not of Mexican ancestry. Her knowledge is based on her academic research and on marriage into a Mexican family. All interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom.

The goal of the literature review was to synthesize current discourse regarding the definition and impact of cultural appropriation; as well as the history and modern use of the Rebozo. The literature review was used to inform qualitative analysis of the interview and member group data.

Participants were recruited using the recruitment letters found in Appendix A. Most prospective participants were identified by Google searching the recruitment criteria. One birth worker of Mexican ancestry was recruited directly because she has previously taught Rebozo workshops in partnership with Doula Canada. The DTC member participant was identified via recruitment efforts within the DTC member group (recruitment letter in Appendix A). Participant interviews were semi-structured, qualitative interviews using the interview guide in Appendix B. The researcher conducted a thematic analysis of the interviews using an *a priori* coding scheme determined by the literature review.

This report summarizes findings regarding the definition and impact of cultural appropriation, and how this applies to the use of Rebozos in Western birth work. Four key themes were identified in the literature review and interview data: 1) Colonial power and racial identity; 2) Intimacy and sacredness; 3) economic exploitation and economic justice; and 4) authenticity.

Cultural Appropriation

In broad terms, cultural appropriation refers to members of a dominant culture using items or ideas created by a minoritized, marginalized, or racialized culture. The term cultural appropriation has often been seen in the media in recent years in relation to everything from celebrity fashion and hairstyles, to food, and songwriting. It is unsurprising that the term is poorly understood by the public. Most references to cultural appropriation in popular culture provide no definition. As a result, a diverse spectrum of interpretations exists. There are those who believe that it is appropriation anytime members of one culture use something made by members of another culture and that it is always harmful. There are others who feel that anything that is not legally owned by an individual is fair game and others who feel that using the artifacts of another culture is appreciation, not appropriation.

To an extent, the academic discourse mirrors this discord regarding definitions and views. Despite this, there were still four themes that were common to all reviewed sources that authors agreed amounted to cultural appropriation and a cause of racial harm. These common themes were 1) the power dynamic between the appropriator and those being appropriated from, including colonial legacies, 2) the intimacy or sacredness of the practice or object in question, 3) patterns of economic exploitation arising from the appropriative act, and 4) the authenticity of

the appropriated object or practice (Khamisi; Nguyen and Strohl, 2019; Ramirez Martinez 2020; Rivas, 2018; Salvador, 2020; Turok, 2016; Vega, 2017; Vézina, 2020).

Colonialism and Power Dynamics

When individuals or cultures use a practice or artifact created by another culture, it is more likely that this usage will be characterized as appropriative if those using the artifact or practice have a history of colonizing those who created the object. The harm of this appropriation is amplified when colonial descendants currently enjoy greater social power and the legacies of colonial harm continue to be felt by the originating population. Additional aggravating factors include whether the object was maligned or suppressed by colonial forces while now being claimed as a novel trend by colonial descendants who continue to benefit from colonial legacies (Khamisi; Salvador, 2020; Rivas, 2018; Vega 2017).

Members of the colonized group typically note that colonial or white people will be celebrated for adopting practices that they are denounced as “savages” for attempting to preserve. This is the result of the significantly higher degree of power enjoyed by the dominant, colonial group (Khamisi; Salvador, 2020; Rivas, 2018; Vega 2017).

The power legacies of colonialism are highly relevant to considerations regarding the usage of Rebozos in Western birth work. It is exactly these complexities regarding colonial power that are fueling much of the controversy within Mexican culture regarding whether the artifact of the Rebozo itself and any associated practices are “Mexican” or “Indigenous” in origin. This complexity was highlighted in several consultant interviews and will be discussed in greater detail in the interview analysis below.

The pathway of Spanish colonization of Mexico differs significantly from the sequence of events that took place in North America (Turok, 2016). As a result, constructions of race and Indigeneity are very different from North American constructions of the same. The historian and other participants indicated that race is seen as a continuum in Mexican culture, rather than as categories, which is the typical view in North America.

This is because when Spanish colonizers planned their conquest of Mexico, they had to contend with a powerful, local imperial Indigenous group, commonly referred to as the Aztecs. For hundreds of years, the Aztecs had operated a highly organized economic regime called tribute arrangements that resembled modern-day racketeering throughout what is now known as Mexico. They would use their increasing military might to extort resources as a “tribute” from other Indigenous populations in exchange for avoiding attack. This practice had made them extremely unpopular throughout the region. In order to colonize Mexico, the Spanish needed to overthrow the military might and control of the Aztecs. To achieve this, they made alliances with many Indigenous communities that were desirous of overthrowing the tyrannical Aztec regime. Alliances were more likely to be made with Indigenous cultures that had social hierarchies more

similar to those that were typical in Europe. Alliances were often facilitated through intermarriage between Spanish nobility and elite members of Indigenous groups.

Spanish colonialism was largely focused on imposing their economic, political, and religious systems. They were not particularly focused on assimilating other aspects of culture, such as folkways and customs. As a result of frequent intermarriage and a higher degree of latitude regarding the preservation of Indigenous culture than was enjoyed by Indigenous peoples in most other colonized regions, there was a high degree of cultural exchange between Spanish colonizers and various Indigenous groups, including regarding textiles and weaving practices (Turok, 2016).

Additionally, there was a large population of people of African descent, some enslaved and some free people as part of Spanish expeditions. The historian participant had this to say about how race is understood in Mexico:

“The idea of race in Latin America is not quite as clear cut as we have. We tend to think in blocks of race whereas for them it's sort of like this continuity. For example, I always find it interesting that here in Canada, you have a status card, whereas in Mexico Indigenous people simply are Indigenous by how they live and present themselves. So ideas of race are much more fluid.”

What is now referred to as “Mexican culture” arises from this complex mix. Many Indigenous traditions were blended with Spanish traditions and now exist as part of the dominant culture in a manner where European components and Indigenous components cannot be clearly identified nor extricated from one another. The Rebozo itself and its various uses are a fine example of this fusion. The weaving of the artifact itself underwent complex shifts during colonial times when there was a significant exchange of both weaving techniques and textiles (Turok, 2016).

With regards to use, Rebozos are still commonly owned and worn as a garment by Mexican people in Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. The textiles and weaving method used are drivers of value and these elements are markers of status (Turok, 2016).

In addition to this fusion of cultural practice, a significant proportion of the Mexican population is of mixed Indigenous and Spanish ancestry. The manner in which people claim this “Mestizo” ancestry, and how it pertains to their relationship with the Rebozo is another point of tension among members of the Mexican birth work community who were interviewed for this project.

In the modern-day, the usage of the Rebozo as a household item is more common in Indigenous communities. In addition to being worn, it is also used as a basket, for babywearing, and for health-related treatments as will be described in greater detail below.

In the context of the usage of Rebozos in North America, the impact of colonial power has further nuances. While white North American settlers did not colonize the Indigenous peoples of Mexico, they are still associated with the same entitlement, colonial processes, and inherited power that the descendants of colonizers are associated with everywhere. Moreover, Mexicans

in the diaspora enjoy less social power as compared to white North Americans, regardless of whether they are of colonial descent in their country of origin (Rivas, 2018, Khamsi).

When Western birth workers use Rebozos in birth work, this usage occurs on the layered backdrop of this complex colonial and racial history. The complexities of racial power surrounding the Rebozo encompass unequal power dynamics within Mexican communities and between Mexicans and white settlers in the diaspora.

Intimacy and Sacredness

Several academic sources agreed that the usage of an object created by one culture by members of another culture can be aptly characterized as appropriative when the object in question is intimate or sacred to the originating culture. The appropriation is more injurious if the object (artifact or practice) is used in secret, meant to be used in ceremonies only, reserved for members of a certain subset of the population, associated with a rite of passage, or must be gifted or passed on by Elders or Holy people. More harm is caused when sacred objects are used outside of their intended purpose or for-profit (Nguyen & Strohl, 2019; Ramirez Martinez, 2020; Vezina, 2020).

The concept of intimacy and sacredness was also complex when applied to the Rebozo. There was no consensus among the birth workers consulted as to whether the Rebozo was “intimate”, or “sacred”, nor in what context or to what extent. Factors such as age and ethnicity appeared to impact the views of Mexican birth workers on this topic. Two participants explained that among younger Mexicans there is a burgeoning trend of reclamation regarding certain traditional practices, including practices associated with the Rebozo. Adding further complexity is that the Rebozo has been used as a garment in an unbroken tradition predating colonialism and encompassing female-assigned individuals across socioeconomic status and ethnicity. Moreover, Indigeneity impacted views on the sacredness of the Rebozo.

While some interviewees viewed the Rebozo as a garment, devoid of sentimental attachment, others saw it as an object of deeply personal, community, and historical significance that would definitely meet the definition of an “intimate” or “sacred” object.

One participant is a Mexican-American birth worker who teaches comfort and intimacy techniques using the Rebozo to other birth workers in North America. Growing up in the diaspora, Rebozos were not in use in her household and she did not learn any techniques related to birth using the Rebozo in the home environment. The techniques that she teaches now are a mix of ones she has learned from birth workers on trips she has made to Mexico, and techniques she has developed herself based on her own practice with the Rebozo. She stated that she finds her trips to Mexico to learn are a powerful means of connecting with her ancestry. In all of the techniques she uses, she emphasizes the intimacy of the Rebozo and encourages couples to use the Rebozo in a manner that fosters intimacy. She used to facilitate train-the-trainer sessions where Western birth workers would learn to teach other birth workers.

She has discontinued train-the-trainer workshops because she saw that Western birth workers were not able to effectively capture the intimacy component of techniques using the Rebozo. She had this to say of her views:

They're not even techniques. You're just sharing a culture with them and a way of being with each other, connecting with each other. The Rebozo is an extension of their love for each other. It could be man-woman, grandma and grandpa, a best friend, a neighbour, I don't even care who's there. Whoever was honoured by the birthing person to say, 'I want you to be with me' whoever that person is. That connection is much stronger when we incorporate the Rebozo.

I used to certify people, I don't anymore. That was my ex-husband's idea, I was always against it. What I share is 6 hours, sometimes depending on the group. If they'll let me, I'll talk about it for 12 hours. I'll do 2 days, 6-hour days. I don't think that there's an hour that you can put on it. My biggest goal when my students leave my classroom is that they're looking at birth in a different way. That they don't treat the Rebozo as a tool, I can't stand hearing that it's a tool. That completely takes away its sacredness. It's not a tool. A hammer is a tool, a screwdriver is a tool, the Rebozo is not a tool. It's something that you share with your clients because you love them, and you love this not just as a piece of fabric but you love this cloth that comes from another country that you've come to respect and love. That's different. I used to train instructors, but I don't do that anymore. I never wanted anybody to share the Rebozo unless they loved and respected it. It's not some quaint thing and it's not a damn tool that you have. That's not what it is. It's very special and it's something that you share because you care about this birthing person and the person they asked to be at their birth. Not because you're some cool doula who learned this neat thing at a training.

The same participant noted that many parents will wrap and bury stillborn infants in the Rebozo as an example of its intimacy and sacredness.

Another participant also described the importance of intimacy in her experience with the Rebozo. She was not aware of the Rebozo's usage for birth support growing up, but when she became pregnant, many of her female relatives began to relay many stories about traditional Mexican birth practices, including the Rebozo. She was not living in Mexico during her pregnancy, so hearing these stories from relatives was an important means of creating an intimate connection with her family during that time. After her pregnancy, the empowerment she found through connecting with her heritage during her pregnancy inspired her to return to Mexico and learn traditional birthing practices from birth workers there. Now, her practice in Europe is focused exclusively on traditional Mexican techniques. She had this to say regarding the intimacy of using the Rebozo:

After my first birth, I decided to go into birth work and I specifically traveled back to Mexico to learn it. The most important thing for me was to own my own heritage. That was a thing that connected me with my family when I was in my postpartum period. The women of my family started acting like Mexican moms. They shared all of this advice with me about herbals and started talking about herbals and it just popped into my head that I wanted to learn more about it. I didn't know anything about my heritage and birth culture. And when I had this experience away from my home and away from my culture it kind of connected me back to my roots as Mexican

and my legacy. I was a little bit lost on that because I left. So that's why I decided to not only become a doula but to become a Mexican doula.

This comment reflects a theme that emerged in the data and literature with regards to cultural erasure, the experience of losing connection and identity to ancestral culture through colonial migration, and life in the diaspora. Using the Rebozo is an attempt by removed Mexican birth workers to re-engage with their cultures after cultural genocide, and exercise the right to engage with their own ancestry.

While not all participants endorsed the view that the Rebozo, and any techniques using it, were “intimate” practices in the context of their culture, this sentiment was held strongly enough by some participants that it is a relevant dimension of cultural appropriation to consider with regards to Rebozo usage in Western birth work.

Economic Exploitation

The usage of an artifact or practice for profit or commerce has a significant impact on whether such usage is considered appropriative or harmful. One of the entrenched historical patterns of colonialism is the commodification of products and services that were not used for profit by the originating culture. Additionally, appropriation is harmful if the use of the artifact or practice by a more dominant group removes an avenue of income from the originating culture. Economic exploitation can also occur in the form of compensating the originating culture unfairly for access to the artifact or practice. This is entwined with the pattern noted above where practices that are maligned when carried out by the originating culture are often celebrated when adopted by the more powerful, appropriating culture. Economically, this phenomenon can manifest as the artifact or practice commanding higher market value when it is adopted by the dominant, appropriating culture. This is often true even when the appropriated object is of lesser quality than that produced by the original culture (Khamsi; Ramirez Martinez, 2020; Salvador, 2020; Vega, 2017; Vezina, 2020).

The participants advised that contemporary Rebozo production in Mexico features a range of textiles, weaving techniques, thread counts, and price points. Rebozos can range in price from \$10 USD to over \$1000 dollars if the product is of especially fine quality (Ramirez Martinez, 2020; Turok, 2016). Low-end Rebozos are not suitable for birth support techniques because they do not have sufficient length, weave density, or a high enough thread count to be suitable for such treatments.

Participants endorsed that even when Rebozos that appear in the North American market are authentic in their source, in that they are made by Indigenous artisans, it is extremely difficult to know if Indigenous craftspeople, usually women, have been compensated fairly. Economic exploitation can occur at any part of the supply chain. Participants were aware of economic arrangements wherein a middle person with access to Indigenous artisans, usually through Mexican culture or ancestry, buys from Indigenous people in bulk and then sells the Rebozos to

Westerners at a markup that significantly shortchanges the craft person. Rebozo artisans are often unable to make a living wage through their craft. The economic underpinnings of this are complicated because several participants also noted that Rebozo artisans do need to sell to non-Mexican markets to survive.

If Rebozos are sold on online marketplaces such as Amazon it becomes virtually impossible to verify the seller's claims regarding the authenticity or the fairness of the price.

The potential for economic exploitation to arise in relation to techniques using the Rebozo was also addressed by participants. Some participants described this in the context of economic stratification within Mexican culture, and some described this in relation to Western birth workers using Mexican techniques.

Within Mexico, the traditional Indigenous midwife or partera is seen as the cultural knowledge keeper regarding traditional birthing practices, including techniques using Rebozos. One of the round table participants reached out to a physician who is a leader in the preservation of traditional medicine within the Mexican healthcare system. He had this to say:

Every time we use the Rebozo we should recognize the source of this knowledge, which are the traditional midwives from Mesoamerica and the Indigenous artisans that craft the Rebozos. I worry that other countries state this knowledge is theirs or they even try to patent or certify it as original. This has happened before with a lot of Mexican elements. In the handcrafted field, they steal designs and profit from them and the Indigenous artisans are left with nothing.

We have to try not to take the place of Indigenous midwives in some ways including the Rebozo use and massages. We will never be able to do it like they do, that is why in every chance we get, especially in the province, we have to talk to them and try to get them to participate in the health care network. We will always learn from them and they can learn from us too.

Ideally, if we are profiting from the Rebozo, whether is through workshops, pregnant care, or postpartum care we could make a trust fund so we could send some of this back to the women in charge of this knowledge, and that way we wouldn't be profiting with their knowledge without giving anything back.

The Indigenous participant noted that the teaching of Indigenous techniques to non-Indigenous birth workers often occurs in the context of “extractivism” wherein birth workers will acquire nuggets of knowledge from Indigenous birth workers from multiple nations, and then sell this knowledge domestically and abroad. Any profit made from the transmission of these teachings is not shared with the source communities.

Another Mexican birth worker in the sample corroborated that she had acquired teaching from multiple nations. While there are traditional mechanisms for compensating the source of knowledge at the time of transmission, there are no economic mechanisms for compensation for ongoing profit from the transmission of the teachings.

When traditional teachings are imparted by someone who has used extractivist methods to acquire teachings, what essentially operates as a knowledge transmission “supply chain” becomes further diluted. Not only is there no way to financially compensate the teacher, but the ability to provide compensation in the form of recognition also becomes eroded. Several participants noted that being able to clearly identify the genealogy of the original source of the teachings is highly valued as a form of recognition in many Indigenous societies. Not only does it become difficult if not impossible for Western birth workers trained by non-Indigenous birth workers in the diaspora to practice recognition by providing a clear genealogy of the source of the teachings, but it also becomes increasingly likely that practices that are not authentic will be inserted into the teachings, which is a further affront to Indigenous recognition practices.

Authenticity

Greater harm is caused to the originating culture when the artifact or practice is adopted in a manner that deviates significantly from the intended use or practice of the appropriated object. Examples include a dance that is performed only by men in the originating culture being performed by a mixed-gender group, tattoos that are only conferred as part of a rite of passage being applied outside of that context, and similar offenses (Khamsi, Salvador, 2020; Vezina, 2020). In the context of any practice that can be used in a health care setting, additional concerns regarding safety if practices are not adopted authentically can arise. For example, there have been cases of injury or death when people outside of Indigenous cultures have sold sweat lodge retreats (Khamsi).

Questions regarding authenticity also arise with regard to the apprenticeship model. For example, if it is traditional in a culture that someone undergoes years of training before they are authorized to deliver a particular ritual, it would cause significant harm to that culture if someone learned how to do the ritual from a YouTube video and carried it out. Similarly, significant harm is also caused when non-traditional practices are inserted (Salvador, 2020; Vega, 2017; Vezina, 2020).

In the case of the Rebozo, one interviewee noted that many Western birth workers have adopted the traditional Mexican practice of “tying off” postpartum using the Rebozo, however many are selling the practice as one where “chakras” will be used to determine where the fabric should be tied. She found this practice offensive since chakras have nothing to do with Mexican culture.

The Indigenous Mexican participant was of the view that everything about how Rebozos are used in Western birth work is inauthentic and of very little practical value. She noted that the Rebozo is not used as a “doula bag essential” in her culture. In addition to its many practical and sartorial uses, it is used in a range of ways in health and wellness treatments.

Her grandmother was not a practitioner of any one of her culture’s healing disciplines, however, she was well versed in a number of techniques and treatments used by traditional practitioners

who are analogous to chiropractors, physiotherapists, and midwives. During childhood, she observed her grandmother using the Rebozo to adjust joints, do stretches and wrap sore muscles. In any of these cases, using the Rebozo was viewed as a medical intervention and used as a last resort. For most of the healing treatments in her culture, the hands are the primary tool that is used. She asserted that most of the comfort techniques used by Western birth workers such as “shaking the apples” have no resemblance to traditional techniques she is aware of. She questioned the efficacy and necessity of such techniques. She observed that the most typical manner in which Indigenous women use the Rebozo during birth is as something to pull on while it is suspended during pushing. A non-Indigenous Mexican participant who has lived in Canada for several decades said she had observed Indigenous people using the Rebozo during birth in this fashion.

She and another participant also noted that most often when the Rebozo is used during birth, it is used by midwives for repositioning. This usage is out of scope for doulas and could cause harm if performed incorrectly.

The participant data raises several concerns about the authenticity of the apprenticeship approach that is currently standard in Western birth work training programs. No one was able to pinpoint a precise study duration to acquire competency with using the Rebozo for birth support. Multiple participants noted that they have studied for several years with traditional midwives and doulas from various Indigenous communities in order to describe themselves as competent. Most were of the view reflected in the quote above from the physician and traditional medicine advocate that techniques had to be learned directly from traditional providers in order for the practice to be authentic.

The need to engage in life-long learning was a theme in several interviews as well. One doula practicing in Scandinavia returns to Mexico regularly to learn from traditional birth workers there. Her practice is devoted exclusively to providing traditional Mexican birth support. She decided to practice in this manner as a means of reconnecting with and reclaiming her culture. Before opening her practice in Scandinavia, she returned to Mexico for 5 years to learn from birth workers there. She had this to say:

When I came back to Mexico, I trained in Mexico City. I paid for classes with renowned professional, well-known doulas. They were not Indigenous. They were professional raised normal¹ doulas but knowledgeable about Mexican traditions and the Rebozo. And I also traveled around within my family. I learned one relative has been a traditional midwife for years and I didn't know. She was very old to teach me much but she did give me knowledge about a couple of things and she was very happy I asked. And I just went around just asking my family, not my friends as much because our generation has not really taken it up. Especially in the big cities like where I come from. I was born in Mexico City in a poor neighbourhood. I am not Indigenous, or at least I don't know if I have any Indigenous origins, but I come from a very humble Mexico City

¹ This is a direct quote from the participant's interview. We recognize that the use of the term “normal” in this manner is problematic. The participant does not speak English as a first language and her reasons for choosing this term are not known to the research team.

neighbourhood. So I just asked around family, and friends, here and there, and started to connect with mums and make friends who were also reconnecting with birth culture. I just started exploring more and more and after about 5 years of learning, I felt confident saying I know about the Rebozo.

She indicated that many traditional Mexican practices related to birth have been lost with the increased medicalization of birth in Mexico, as discussed by Vega (2017). There is a burgeoning movement to reclaim these lost practices. She indicated that reconnecting with her culture in this manner has had a profound emotional and spiritual effect on her. She shared the view that the teaching on techniques using the Rebozo by birth work organizations in her region was not authentic, and painful for her to witness.

Summary

Considering the concerns raised in the data regarding colonial power, intimacy and sacredness, economic exploitation, and authenticity, there is a strong argument to be made that the current teaching model regarding techniques using Rebozos in Western birth work organizations amounts to cultural appropriation.

As noted in the section on colonial power, there are compound considerations regarding the Rebozo, with concerns about racial power dynamics within Mexican culture and in the Western world. When Western birth work organizations claim and teach techniques using the Rebozo this occurs in the context of a global power system wherein Western nations have considerably more economic and political power than Central American ones. Thus in the ability to claim and profit from techniques developed by less powerful nations, the impact of this global power cannot be stripped from the situation. Given that some Indigenous Mexicans believe non-Indigenous Mexicans are appropriating their techniques, this adds an additional layer of power dynamics when the techniques or artifacts are used by Westerners in a white-majority setting.

There are also a number of challenges regarding the economic dimension of appropriation. The current teaching model involves the use of a mix of traditional Indigenous techniques and techniques developed by Westerners after the use of Rebozos or similar Central American textiles became popularized in Western birth support practices. There is no mechanism to compensate the originating source of knowledge for the transmission of the Indigenous teachings. Further, it does not appear that comprehensive genealogical recognition of the source of traditional knowledge can be implemented consistently or at all.

Sourcing Rebozos is an additional challenge. A review of posts in DTC's member group on the subject of Rebozos indicates that members are desirous of a source of Rebozos that is authentic and which they can be certain adequately compensates Indigenous artisans. Unfortunately, participants in our data set indicated that it is both challenging to be certain not only that the Rebozos were produced by Indigenous artisans, but also that the Indigenous

artisans were compensated fairly. They are aware that often a non-Indigenous Mexican middle person will buy a bulk amount of Rebozos for a very low cost and sell them in the Western market for a markup that significantly shortchanges the artisan.

While the data set was heterogeneous in this regard, enough participants indicated that they viewed the Rebozo in ways that were consistent with the appropriation concerns identified in the intimacy and sacredness domain.

Concerns regarding authenticity were also identified in examples such as including chakras in the tying off ritual. Additionally, significant authenticity concerns were cited with regards to the apprenticeship model since most participants in the data set endorsed that they spent years learning Rebozo techniques from various teachers and that elements regarding intimacy and sacredness were difficult to impart.

Recommendations

If Western birth work organizations are desirous of continuing to use the techniques that have been developed by Westerners while alleviating appropriation concerns, they can implement the following recommendations:

1. Provide students with a comprehensive narrative history of the Central American origin of the Rebozo and how techniques using the Rebozo came to be incorporated into Western birth work.
2. Provide a comprehensive analysis to students of the cultural appropriation issues that have been identified in this report.
3. Remove all hands-on teaching of techniques that are of Indigenous or other racialized origin.
4. Teach Western techniques using a textile with the right characteristics and avoid the use of Rebozos.
5. If Rebozos are used, ensure they are authentic. Do not call anything that is not an authentic Rebozo a Rebozo.
6. Provide students with a list of options for sourcing authentic Rebozos wherein it has been verified that the Rebozos have been made by traditional artisans who have been compensated fairly.
7. Avoid the phrase “Rebozo techniques” and use “techniques using a Rebozo”, or “textile techniques”.
8. Provide guidance to students on the properties that are needed in a textile for it to be suitable for birth support work (i.e. length, thickness, texture, etc.)
9. Offer Educational Units (EUs) for external Rebozo teaching only if the instructor is of Mexican or another ancestry that is relevant to the techniques they are teaching. Ideally, the organization should confirm whether or not the instructor is Indigenous, incorporates Indigenous knowledge, how this knowledge is sourced, and if/how the source of the teachings is compensated.

10. Create a moment of gratitude when Rebozos are used. Incorporate a gratitude practice at the commencement of all workshops regarding the range of techniques used and their history with an acknowledgment that some histories have been lost to colonialism. This gratitude practice will also be enacted by capitalizing the word “Rebozo” when it is used in print.
11. Encouraging students to become aware of and implement techniques that have been used in their own heritage and to acknowledge colonial histories that exist in their own heritage.

Limitations

Three significant limitations impacted this qualitative policy study. Firstly, all birth worker participants were of Mexican origin or ancestry, and secondly, only one participant identified as an Indigenous Mexican. Thirdly, due to the linguistic limitations of the research team, participants needed to be able to communicate fluently in English to be eligible to participate.

The first limitation is relevant because textiles similar to the Rebozo are used in other parts of Central America, including in the traditional birth support practices of other Central American nations. Perspectives from birth workers from other Central American nations would have been ideal and this was sought in participant outreach materials (see appendix A). Unfortunately, the correspondence that was drafted at the outset of this project repeats some of the language that this report now advises against.

All participants who responded to the outreach were Mexican. While the four theoretical dimensions of appropriation on which this analysis rests are not exclusive to Mexico, at this time we cannot be certain that the themes identified in the data provided by our participants would be replicated by participants from other parts of Central America with regards to their textiles and techniques.

With regards to the second limitation, given how central Indigeneity was to the presenting policy problems, more input from Indigenous Central Americans was desired and sought. Although only one Indigenous participant volunteered, this participant's data when compared to statements made by other participants made it clear that significant racial tensions exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Mexicans, despite greater fluidity in the cultural construction of racial categories. Given this, usage of the Rebozo by white Western birth workers occurs in the context of these racial tensions within the originating culture. These observations regarding racial tension in the participant data add further support to the analysis regarding the central dimensions of cultural appropriation in this report.

Thirdly, recruitment correspondence and interviews were conducted in the researcher's language (English). This means that potential participants who were Spanish speakers or who spoke an Indigenous Central American language were tacitly excluded from the research. This

significantly narrowed the pool of research participants with relevant positions on this subject matter.

Doula Canada is exploring its options to conduct further policy research in this area to address these limitations and answer new questions arising from this research.

References

- Khamsi, Nadia. "Respecting the Lodge." *Indigenous Land Urban Stories* (blog). Accessed November 24, 2021. <https://indigenouslandurbanstories.ca/portfolio-item/sweat-lodge/>.
- Nguyen, C., and Matthew Strohl. "Cultural Appropriation and the Intimacy of Groups." *Philosophical Studies* 176 (April 1, 2019). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-018-1223-3>.
- Ramirez Martinez, Claudia. "Knowledge of Excellence, the Artisans and the RebozodeSanta Mariadel Río, Mexico.," 2020. <https://doi.org/10.31124/advance.12278366.v1>.
- Rivas, Mekita. "It's Not OK to appropriate Mexican Culture — Especially If You're Dehumanizing Its People." *Teen Vogue*, June 28, 2018. <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/its-not-ok-to-appropriate-mexican-culture-if-youre-de-humanizing-its-people>.
- Salvador, Marta. "The Mayan Weavers of Guatemala: The Fight against Cultural Appropriation of Their Art." *Alba Sud*, March 15, 2020. <https://www.albasud.org/blog/en/1193/tejedoras-mayas-de-guatemala-la-lucha-contra-l-a-apropiaci-n-cultural-de-su-arte>.
- Turok, Marta. "SOME NATIONAL GOODS IN 1871: THE REBOZO." *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*, 2016, 11.
- Vega, Rosalynn Adeline. "Commodifying Indigeneity: How the Humanization of Birth Reinforces Racialized Inequality in Mexico." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (2017): 499–518. <https://doi.org/10.1111/maq.12343>.
- Vézina, Brigitte. "Ensuring Respect for Indigenous Cultures: A Moral Rights Approach," n.d., 29.

Appendices

Appendix A: Call for Participants (Recruitment Letters)

Request for Focus Group Participants

Doula Canada is currently working on a policy analysis project to determine an ethical and anti-racist approach regarding the inclusion of rebozo techniques in its certification curriculum.

We believe that input from members with backgrounds from the countries where rebozos originate is vital to developing a sound policy on this complex issue. To that end, we are looking for focus group participants from Mexico, Ecuador, or Costa Rica. Indigenous Peoples from these countries are especially welcome to participate.

The focus group will be 90-120 minutes long. Each participant will receive an honorarium of \$20 per hour for their time. Participants who express interest will be selected based on the above-noted criteria and the order in which they express interest. The exact date and time will be determined once participants are confirmed. All participants will be asked to review and sign an informed consent document prior to participation in the focus group.

If you are interested in providing input regarding this important policy question, please contact Keira Grant, Social Media Coordinator, at moderator@doulatraining.ca

Request for Consultant 1

Hello Potential Consultant,

I am writing on behalf of DTC to find out if you would be willing to contribute your expertise to helping us answer a policy question. Doula Canada is currently working on a policy analysis project to determine an ethical and anti-racist approach regarding the inclusion of rebozo techniques in its certification curriculum.

Given that you provide rebozo training in the community and for DTC, we believe that your input is vital to developing a sound policy on this complex issue.

We are asking for a maximum of an hour of your time to answer a few questions about your approach to teaching rebozo techniques and your views on the appropriate teaching and use of rebozos and related techniques.

We can provide an honorarium for your valuable time and expertise. We would be happy to negotiate suitable recognition for your time. This could also take the form of a donation to the charity of your choice.

We would like to complete consultations for this project by **June 18**. Please let me know if you can find an hour in your schedule to meet with us between now and then.

Thank you for your consideration,

Keira Grant
Social Media Moderator
Doula Canada
moderator@doulatraining.ca

Request for Consultant 2: Central American Birthworkers, unknown to DTC

Hello {X-Contact Name},

On behalf of [Doula Canada](#), I would like to invite you to contribute your expertise to help us answer a policy question. Doula Canada is currently working on a policy analysis project to determine an ethical and anti-racist approach regarding the inclusion of rebozo techniques in its certification curriculum.

Doula Canada provides opportunities for doulas and childbirth educators to professionally develop their skills and confidence as birth workers and postpartum support people around the world.

Established in 2001 Doula Canada has a long history of offering quality training, with a personal approach. “Certification with confidence” and evidence-based approaches to resource and skill development are two mandates of our organization. They are also the reason for our students' success.

We are seeking policy advice from birth workers with backgrounds from the countries where rebozos originate. We believe that perspectives from birthworkers with culture-specific knowledge and lived experiences are vital to arriving at a sound and ethical policy on this issue. In order to ensure the neutrality of our data, we are seeking the expertise of birthworkers who are unaffiliated with Doula Canada.

We are asking for a maximum of an hour of your time to answer a few questions about your understanding of the cultural context of rebozos, the use of rebozos to support birthing people, and your views on the teaching and use of rebozos and related techniques by birth work certification programs in the North American context.

We can provide an honorarium for your valuable time and expertise. We would be happy to negotiate suitable recognition for your time. This could also take the form of a donation to the charity of your choice.

We would like to complete consultations for this project by **June 18**. *Can you please let me know by June 4 if you are interested in this opportunity?* If you would like to participate, please let me know if you can find an hour in your schedule to meet with us between now and June 18.

If you do not wish to provide advice on this topic, but have a colleague you feel would be interested in doing so, please feel free to pass along this request.

Thank you for your consideration,

Keira Grant
Social Media Moderator
Doula Canada
moderator@doulatraining.ca

Request to Secondary Contact re Consultant 2

Hello {X-Contact Name},

On behalf of [Doula Canada](#), I am reaching out to you because I believe you may be able to assist us in answering an important policy question. Doula Canada is currently working on a policy analysis project to determine an ethical and anti-racist approach regarding the inclusion of rebozo techniques in its certification curriculum.

Based on [insert online reference], I believe you may know birthworkers who could provide expert advice on the subject of rebozos and their use in the support of birthing people.

Would you be so kind as to review the invitation below and forward it to individuals in your network who may be able to provide much-needed input on this question? We are seeking policy advice from birthworkers with backgrounds from countries where rebozos originate, including Mexico, Ecuador, and Costa Rica. Input from Indigenous birth workers from or with ancestry from these countries is especially welcome.

Please feel free to reach out to me with any questions about Doula Canada or this initiative.

Thank you for your consideration,

Keira Grant
Social Media Moderator
Doula Canada
moderator@doulatraining.ca

[insert invite for consultant 2]

Request for Consultant 3: Central American scholar with expertise on cultural appropriation

Hello {X-Contact Name},

On behalf of [Doula Canada](#), I would like to invite you to contribute your expertise to help us answer a policy question. Doula Canada is currently working on a policy analysis project to determine an ethical and anti-racist approach regarding the inclusion of rebozo techniques in its certification curriculum.

Doula Canada provides opportunities for doulas and childbirth educators to professionally develop their skills and confidence as birth workers and postpartum support people around the world.

Established in 2001 Doula Canada has a long history of offering quality training, with a personal approach. “Certification with confidence” and evidence-based approaches to resource and skill development are two mandates of our organization. They are also the reason for our students' success.

We are seeking policy advice from scholars with expertise on Central American cultures and views regarding cultural appropriation, especially with regards to Indigenous artifacts. We believe that perspectives from birthworkers with culture-specific knowledge and lived experiences are vital to arriving at a sound and ethical policy on this issue. In order to ensure the neutrality of our data, we are seeking the expertise of birthworkers who are unaffiliated with Doula Canada.

We are asking for a maximum of an hour of your time to answer a few questions about your understanding of cultural appropriation and whether and how this might apply to the teaching and use of rebozos and related techniques by birth work certification programs in the North American context.

We can provide an honorarium for your valuable time and expertise. We would be happy to negotiate suitable recognition for your time. This could also take the form of a donation to the charity of your choice.

We would like to complete consultations for this project by **June 18**. *Can you please let me know by June 4 if you are interested in this opportunity?* If you would like to participate, please let me know if you can find an hour in your schedule to meet with us between now and June 18.

If you do not wish to provide advice on this topic, but have a colleague you feel would be interested in doing so, please feel free to pass along this request.

Thank you for your consideration,

Keira Grant
Social Media Moderator
Doula Canada
moderator@doulatraining.ca

Appendix B: Interview Guides

Birth Worker Interview

1. How did you acquire knowledge and skills regarding rebozo techniques?
2. What techniques do you do/teach with a rebozo to support birthing people?
 - a. Which of these techniques are derived from Mexican culture?
 - b. Are any of these techniques specific to Indigenous Mexican peoples?
3. How much and what type of training does a birth worker need to use rebozos and related techniques with birthing people?
4. How much and what type of training does a birth worker need to teach rebozo techniques to other birth workers?
5. What is your understanding of the historical role of rebozos within Mexican culture?
 - a. Spiritual significance or practices?
 - b. Marker of status or identity?
 - c. Indigeneity?
 - d. Artisanal traditions?
6. What is your understanding of the contemporary role of rebozos within Mexican culture (in Mexico and diaspora)?
 - a. Are there cultural differences in attitude towards rebozo in Mexico vs diaspora?
 - b. Contemporary spiritual practices in Mexico or diaspora?
 - c. Contemporary markers of status/identity?
7. What are the characteristics of the rebozo that make it suitable for techniques to support birthing people (e.g. lengths, thickness, stretch, etc.)
8. How can one distinguish an authentic rebozo from a similar long piece of fabric?
9. What is the best way to source a rebozo? What is the typical CAD cost?

Historian Interview

1. To your understanding, how is the concept of “Cultural appropriation” viewed in Mexico?
 - a. How does this compare to understandings of this concept in Canada?
2. Mexico is a settler-colonial nation. I am trying to better understand how settler-colonialism in Mexico compares to settler colonialism in Canada and the

formation of cultural identity. What does the category/identity “Indigenous” mean in the Mexican language/culture?

- a. Who/what is Mestizx?
 - b. Who/what is a “colonial Mexican”.
 - c. The current state of power dynamics between these groups?
3. What are your insights as to how the use of Indigenous artifacts/practices by colonial or mestizx Mexicans would be viewed by Indigenous people?
 4. To what extent do Indigenous peoples in Mexico have the power/agency to “preserve” their culture?
 5. To what extent is the concept of “secrecy” relevant to Indigenous traditions?
 6. How is settler colonialism currently enacted in relation to Mexican Indigenous peoples?