

# Porcelain art: neo-crafts in Moyuta, Jutiapa

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Aracely Esquivel Vásquez

## Resumen

El objetivo de esta investigación es dar a conocer las neo-artesanías que se elaboran en la cabecera municipal del municipio de Moyuta, departamento de Jutiapa, Guatemala. Para la recolección de la información se aplicaron las técnicas de las historias de vida y la entrevista estructurada. Con base en los resultados del trabajo de campo, se estableció que en la población de Moyuta existe una artesana que se dedica a la elaboración de las neo-artesanías, labor que desarrolló a raíz de un accidente que sufrió con la explosión de un artefacto que la dejó por varios meses con impedimento de movilidad en brazos, manos y dedos. Se trata de la profesora Silvia Saraí Polanco Esquivel de Guerra quien adicional al trabajo artesanal, se desempeña como profesora de grado en la aldea Las Pilitas, Conguaco, Jutiapa. En la escuela enseña a sus estudiantes el arte de modelar la porcelana, estimulando la capacidad creativa y habilidades motoras en los alumnos y, con lo cual, se arraiga el sentido de pertenencia y fortalece la identidad cultural en la población estudiantil joven. La elaboración de estas nuevas formas artesanales influye en el conocimiento intangible de quien las hace posibles y, en consecuencia, incide en la producción artesanal tradicional de esta localidad, lo cual contribuye no solo a establecer un medio de producción e identidad de la cultura regional de dicho lugar, sino también a la promoción de la cultura innovadora que permiten los avances tecnológicos, para el desarrollo local, regional, nacional e internacional.

**Palabras clave:** neo-artesanía, educación, identidad, cultura, historias de vida.

## Abstract

The purpose of this research is to make known the neo-crafts that are made in the municipal seat of the municipality of Moyuta, department of Jutiapa, Guatemala. To collect the information, both the technique of life stories and the structured interview were applied. Based on the results of the fieldwork, it was found that in Moyuta, there is an artisan who is dedicated to the creation of neo-crafts, work that she developed after an accident she suffered with the explosion of a device. Such an accident left educator Silvia Saraí Polanco Esquivel de Guerra with impaired mobility of arms, hands, and fingers for several months. In addition to her craft work, she works as a grade teacher in *Las Pilitas* village, Conguaco, Jutiapa. In class, she teaches her students the art of modeling porcelain, stimulating creativity and motor skills in her students. As a result, a sense of belonging is rooted, and the cultural identity of the young student population is strengthened. The elaboration of these new craft forms empowers the intangible knowledge of those who make them and, consequently, affects the traditional artisanal production of this locality, contributing to establish means of production and cultural identity of the region. This promotes a novel culture allowed by technological advances for local, regional, national, and international development.

**Keywords:** neo-crafts, education, identity, culture, life stories.

## Introduction

This article will discuss the production of neo-crafts. This topic came up through the fieldwork carried out in 2021 in the municipal seat of Moyuta, department of Jutiapa, occasion in which the data collected was used to compile the historical ethnography of such place.

Considering that there is little information about these works and that there is only one artisan dedicated to producing these crafts in this town, it was considered important to inquire about the artisan work of Mrs. Sivia Saraí Polanco Esquivel de Guerra. The importance of making these works known is to highlight the changes that are emerging and, consequently, how the traditional forms of manufacture vary in some handicrafts, even though these have had a long history in different places. Certainly, about handicrafts, Toledo (1997) indicates that “there are permanent and living elements reflecting values and features of the past, present in the design, ornamentation, and technology, as well as in their meaning” (p. 523). The tangible objects of material culture are changeable and often respond to personal preferences and market dynamics, whether regional, domestic or international.

Handicrafts are part of Guatemala’s cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) established that cultural heritage “represents what we are entitled to inherit from our ancestors. Our duty is to preserve it for transmission to future generations” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2002, p. 1). Therefore, culture in its tangible and intangible aspect is inherited from generation to generation, and what artisans create with extraordinary skill is based on tradition, which they innovate in some cases, since culture is dynamic par excellence.

Handicrafts are immersed in traditional popular culture and following the guidelines of Déleón (1987), who formulates the conception that popular culture or popular cultures are those created by the people or popular classes of each country. For this reason, it is important to locate them in a certain sector or field since, as Gravano (1988) mentions: “the socio-cultural reality is given by the relations that can be established between the level of analysis and the objective emergence of the subject from a totalizing perspective, in the last instance” (p. 1). This means that the socio-cultural reality determines the type of crafts, whether they are art, handicrafts, popular industry or new crafts. This is the case of the neo-crafts elaborated in Moyuta, Jutiapa, Guatemala.

These new artisanal products are partly the people’s cultural identity and contribute to the sustainable development for those who produce them. Due to the current fact that in current times the mass media have reached a global level, causing markets, producers and consumers to be in constant change, this condition reflects the emergence of new handicrafts that are part of the culture of know-how.

The purpose of this research was to make known the emergence of the neo-crafts that are currently made in the municipal seat of Moyuta, as well as to describe the manufacturing process and to inquire about the commercialization of these objects. The technique of life stories was applied as a methodology, by means of which the artisan narrated her experiences in this new facet she had to adopt, abruptly, from the lifestyle that she had previously led with serenity, dedicated to her teaching work and her home. In this light, it is hoped that this article will contribute to the knowledge of popular culture through the amazing story of this artisan.

As any narrative story, “it involves complex relationships between the narrator, the informants who have told us stories, and readers who interpret the narrative forms from their reference framework” (Bolívar, 2021, p. 3). Therefore, it is expected that this story will offer new knowledge about handcrafted work, since both the market and consumers are constantly changing, but the handcrafted pieces that are created for the first time remain, and that is where the importance of handcrafted work lies, which is not lost, but, on the contrary, serves as a basis for later industrial production.

The body of the paper begins with a brief ethnography of the region under study, followed by what should be understood as neo-crafts. Next, the importance of life stories in the research is discussed, as it continues with the life story narrated by the artisan, the way in which marketing is carried out, closing with the final comment, acknowledgments and references.

### **Brief geographic, historical and cultural facts about the municipality of Moyuta**

Moyuta is the municipality of the department of Jutiapa. It is located at the foot of the volcano of the same name and other hills of lower altitude. The capital city has the category of town, with an approximate area of 380 square kilometers. Its official geographic name is *Moyuta*. It is bordered on the north by *Oratorio* and *Tecuaco* (Santa Rosa); on the east by *Jalpatagua* and *Conguaco* (Jutiapa) and the Republic of El Salvador; on the south by the Republic of El Salvador and the Pacific Ocean; and on the west by *Pasaco* (Jutiapa). “The capital city is in a small valley, on the northeast side of the Moyuta volcano. It is located at an altitude of 1283 meters above sea level” (Gall, 200, p. 698). About the etymology of the name, “formerly Moyuta, it comes from the Nahuatl word *Moyotl*, which means mosquito, that is, a place where there are plenty of mosquitoes” (Gall, 200, p. 699).

To get to Moyuta by car there are two routes: the *Carretera Interamericana* CA-1, and the *Carretera del Litoral del Pacífico* CA-2, both of which connect with the RD-3. Rural transportation service is provided by *La Humilde* buses, which cover the route between Guatemala, Moyuta, the border village of *Ciudad Pedro de Alvarado* and *Jalpatagua*. There are also roads and trails that link its towns and rural properties with each other and with neighboring municipalities. It has a minibus service that leaves from the municipal seat to the different towns, surrounding villages and to the departmental seat of Jutiapa. The use of motorcycles is common, both in men and women, and also that of small motorized three-wheeled vehicles (*mototaxi* or motorcycle taxi) popularly known as *tuk tuk*.

Regarding the creation of the municipality as such, the exact date of when the town was formed is unknown, but when the department of Jutiapa was created “by decree of the Executive on May 9, 1852, Moyuta was mentioned” (Gall, 2000, p. 699).

Archbishop Pedro Cortés y Larraz, in his pastoral visit to the parish of Conguaco in 1770, mentioned that it was two leagues away and lacked a school (Cortés, 1958). At the time that Cortés visited the parish of this municipality, he reported that in Moyuta there were “105 families with 520 people” (Cortés, 1958, p. 58). Archbishop also indicated that the inhabitants, although they understood Spanish, the language spoken was Populucan, it can therefore be inferred that the population was probably Xinka.

This town has the following public services, which were collected during fieldwork: National Civil Police substation 21-51, mobile telephony, Health Center (*Centro de Atención Permanente* or CAP by its acronym in Spanish), Municipal Fire Station, Justice of the Peace, Public Ministry, National Registry of People, Registry of Citizens, *San Juan Bautista* Coffee Cooperative, Micoope Savings Cooperative,

banks and financial institutions, and three Catholic churches located in three neighborhoods: one in *El Tesoro*, another one in *La Inmaculada* and one more in *El Calvario*. In addition, it has the *San Juan Bautista* parish in the neighborhood *El Centro*. There are also evangelical Pentecostal churches, a hall of Jehovah's Witnesses, and 12 churches of other denominations, public schools, five private schools, Educational Supervision of the Ministry of Education, middle and high schools, as well as a school for preschool teachers in intercultural education.

The municipal seat is made up of nine neighborhoods: *El Centro*, *Tesoro*, *Calvario*, *Fuente*, *Cielito*, *Pacífico*, *Ojo de Agua*, *Alameda* and *La Reforma* (M. Castillo, personal communication, April 8, 2021). Formerly, what is now the *La Reforma* neighborhood was the village known as *La Lejía*, which was named due to the fact that in the past there were several women who were dedicated to the artisanal trade of producing soap from the seeds of the fruit of the olive tree, *simarouba amara*. Later, this town was called *La Florida*. Although *La Reforma* neighborhood is far from the center of the population, it is the most important because most of the public institutions are located there. (M. Castillo, personal communication, April 8, 2021).

In addition to these neighborhoods, it also has the *Morán*, *La Fe*, *La Inmaculada* and *Buenos Aires* neighborhoods, to the north; likewise, *El Maestro*, *Colonia Chea I* and *Chea II*, because they are divided by the paved road that connects with the CA-2 of the Pacific coast. In the past, two local newspapers called *El Volcán Moyuteco* and the *Periódico El Pacífico* circulated. Currently, the written media that reach the residents are *Prensa Libre* and *Nuestro Diario*, with national distribution.

This municipality has stood out among those that constitute the department of Jutiapa for the traditional quesadillas (Guatemalan rice cake)

that are made there, because, as in other municipalities of Jutiapa and in the eastern area of the country, the variety of artisanal bread reflects the historical development of the region. Unlike in the west of the country, the Spanish settlements promoted manor houses that had wide corridors and spaces reserved for pastures, intended to keep and reproduce cattle. This explains how obtaining dairy products allowed and stimulated creativity through traditional artisanal baking, which later became an important part of the diet of the locals.

Likewise, it is a large coffee producer. It is worth highlighting that, unlike other municipalities of the department of Jutiapa, Moyuta has stood out for the production of high-quality coffee. The altitude, geographical characteristics, climate and special types of cultivation have made it possible for the particularities of the fruit to be peerless, in addition to promoting a rural coffee culture.

After these ethnographic data, it has been included some theoretical references that support the value and importance of the study of neo-crafts that establish an element of identity for those who create them as objects or those who consume them as merchandise.

## The neo-crafts

Handicrafts, in general, constitute one of the most expressive forms of any country's culture. As traditional art, "it is undoubtedly one of the most genuine expressions of the human spirit" (Canaza, 2018, p. 7). The author in question refers:

While it is true that these were created with a utilitarian purpose, still intact in many cases, it is undeniable that in the course of time, their use has been transformed to the point of becoming objects of aesthetic appreciation. This phenomenon dates back to ancient cultures, as an example, it suffices to mention the number of everyday, ornamental or ritual artifacts reported by archaeological finds. As an economic-

cultural activity aimed at the production and elaboration of goods, either entirely by hand or with the help of manual tools, and even mechanical means, as long as the finished product contains historical, cultural, utilitarian or aesthetic value, which are identified with a place of production and its classification is traditional crafts and innovated crafts or neo-crafts. (Canaza, 2018, p. 7)

What should be considered as neo-craft? In this regard, some authors have contributed to the knowledge of what should be understood as neo-crafts. "The concept of neo-craftsmanship dates back to the 80s and arose from the need to give a new space to the handcrafted creation of the moment, breaking the barriers between the traditional and the contemporary" (Pérez, 2013, p. 7). The aforementioned author also refers to the fact that:

Neo-craftsmanship offers new ways of evidencing the richness of the historical or artisanal base in a contemporary way and with authenticity, since it consists of a revised tradition, which combines and alternates traditional elements with contemporary details in a careful and respectful way with tradition. (Pérez, 2013, p. 7)

Besides, Gil (2002, quoted by Pérez, 2013) indicates that:

Neo-craftsmanship is a new contemporary craft trend, a new way of producing consumer goods, in a more flexible, sustainable way, that allows the preservation of cultural traditions and explores new tools that consider users' senses as well as their aesthetic, formal and material, color and texture needs (p. 8).

On the other hand, Hermoza (2012, quoted by Canaza, 2018) points out that innovation is a very important element in the handicraft subject, since it contributes to the introduction of a new product in the market and, consequently, gives another image to the local

handicraft, which can be disseminated within and outside the community.

At the same time, Ponce (2016, quoted by Canaza 2018) refers that flexibility is of great importance, as this proves that the application of new teaching strategies and methods in the field of arts contributes to the creative development to produce neo-crafts. This is conducive to innovation in what has traditionally been done.

Neo-crafts respond to market demand and consequently, what has been traditional, is taking other nuances of innovation, this agrees with what is expressed by Canaza (2018), who indicates that "neo-crafts are the fusion between contemporary life and the richness of the legacy of the ancestors, products that link the value of design and new experiences (...) mixtures of materials and techniques, achieving harmony and clarity in the product" (p. 7).

In addition, neo-crafts are objects of both tourist consumption and ornamentation. The modern and contemporary technologies have allowed the production of new materials as García (1997) indicates:

To the traditional *piñatería* can be added the so-called neo-crafts, whose fundamental characteristics is their lack of incorporated historical time although it is constituted by traditional materials and whose current manufacture also uses new products such as wire, plastic, synthetic fibers, and traditional paper. (p. 112)

The different products of what is called neo-crafts, besides the value of use or, in any case, ornamentation, have great acceptance among the inhabitants of the region studied, as they are currently in demand and are requested for gifts for various festivities and also to send them abroad. With the above definitions, we hope to have contributed to the knowledge of what should be understood as neo-crafts.



## Life stories in research

Why is it important to apply this technique of the ethnographic method of qualitative research? Because through the application of life stories the researcher obtains a broader picture of how the life of a particular person has been, as long as it is possible to establish what in anthropology is known as *rapport*, in other words, to achieve trust with the individual to be interviewed. Why are life stories important when there are no written documents that refer to a certain place, institution, or individual person? Because through the story told, not only do we come to the knowledge of the reality of a spoken testimony, but we also obtain richness in description and narrative.

Moreover, people's life stories contribute to the construction of collective memory, since, according to Pensado (1997), people's life stories are of special importance when narrating the events related to the community to which they belong, because they provide a clear picture of the social phenomena immersed in the group.

Through life stories, the past is relived, its evocation goes beyond the reconstruction of an era and its details; the details include "emotions and affections, disappointments and failures, and the body language and non-verbal language that human beings always remember, since the episodes referred to are alive in the subjects, as if they were happening in the present" (De Garay, 2001, p. 26).

In a broad sense, it can be understood that all qualitative research is, in fact, narrative research. The research reports themselves are composed of narrative structures, which the researchers have accumulated in practical and theoretical known-how.

On the origin of life stories, some authors have made important contributions and, in this regard, García (1998) refers that:

It was at the beginning of the 20th century when Franz Boas (1858-1942), initiated the practice of researching cultures in a particularized way in the Kwakiutl Indian groups in northwestern North America. The method consisted in applying the technique of what have since become known as life stories. Although he was not precisely its initiator, as it is known, who began these studies were the Grimm brothers in the eighteenth century looking for the Germanic national soul with emphasis on philology. (p. 2)

According to the aforementioned author, "the purpose, according to Boas, should be to see how the world is viewed by a member of his culture" (García, 1998, p. 2) and, he also recommended that: "first we should have the facts building up a body of ethnographic data from which further generalizations can be drawn later" (García, 1998, p. 2).

The truth is that "since then, certain oral sources began to be used as a resource for the rescue of the history and cultural process of the communities. These oral sources are now known as testimony, case, social history or proper life stories" (García, 1998, p. 2).

Now, to be more specific, what is meant by life story? It is the technique that allows knowing in depth the trajectory of a single person from what he says about himself, his family and the people who work directly with him.

In orality studies, for Jan Vansina (1966), testimony is known as the historical reconstruction of social facts of an illiterate community. The autobiographical account of a real character that links him to these events is known as a life story, which he narrates himself through his autobiography told as an actor, where he relates his past and, as a result, allows the reconstruction of his entire history.

De Garay (2001) considers that: "oral history admits, as an important practice within its work, the construction of life stories, understood as

oral autobiographical narratives generated in the interactive dialogue of the interview that complemented with other testimonies and other sources" (p. 5).

In accordance with Taylor and Bogdan (1987), three stages should be taken into account in the data collection and storage phase. The first, which is vital to achieve a good empathetic connection with potential informants from outset, is the establishment of rapport, or, as it is commonly said, to break the ice. Once this trust is established, the informant feels comfortable with the presence of the researcher and answers questions with evident spontaneity and enthusiasm. The second stage is when field strategies and tactics are established to be in the place and at the time the information is generated, and the third stage involves the recording of data in the form of written field notes.

Life story is a type of in-depth interview in which the researcher attempts to apprehend the remarkable experiences of a person's life and the definitions that person applies to the experiences. Through oral testimony, the researcher obtains information from the personal sphere, life stories about their experiences and testimonial information about some events and periods of time in their life, which occurred in certain spaces and historical and socio-cultural contexts, which are always nuanced by the personal senses and experiences of the interviewee (Galindo, 1998). Finally, to conclude this space on the importance of life stories, we recall what Angrosino (2007) indicates: that the life story is used when a single individual needs to be studied. It is also used by the researcher when there is a need to study a particular individual who lives a typical day-to-day life. Such is the case of artisan Sivia Sarai Polanco Esquivel de Guerra, whose life story is told here.

## Family

Professor Sivia Sarai Polanco Esquivel de Guerra was born in the municipality of Moyuta, department of Jutiapa, on January 3, 1989. She is the daughter of farmer and coffee grower José Miguel Polanco Sandoval and housewife Marta Odilia Esquivel Salazar. Her older sister, Astrid Altayra Ramírez Esquivel, is 36 years old and, although she has degree as an elementary school teacher, she does not work as one, instead, she is dedicated to other tasks. Her brother, the third son of the family, Heber Josué Polanco Esquivel, is 30 years old and an automobile mechanic, and migrated to Canada in 2016. Lastly, her younger brother, Miguel Antonio Polanco Esquivel who is 10 years old.

The teacher says that she attended pre-primary and elementary school at the *Escuela Oficial Urbana Mixta* in Moyuta. She attended middle school at the *Instituto Nacional de Educación Básica*, in the same town. She complemented her high school studies at the *Instituto de Magisterio por Cooperativa*, in Jalpatagua, Jutiapa.

To complete her studies, she traveled daily from Moyuta to Jalpatagua, leaving at 11:00 a.m. and returning at 7:00 p.m., Monday through Friday, until she completed her education and graduated as an Intercultural Elementary Education Teacher. The following year she began working with the Ministry of Public Education, under contract, for a period of 10 years.

## Her work as a teacher

After obtaining her teaching degree, she began working with the Ministry of Public Education in 2009. She began her work at the *Escuela Oficial Rural Mixta*, at El Pinito village, Moyuta, Jutiapa. She worked there only one year. In 2010, she was transferred to the *Escuela Oficial Rural Mixta*, Pino Santa Cruz village, in the same jurisdiction, where she stayed until 2014.

In 2015, she was again transferred to the *Escuela Oficial Rural Mixta, caserío Sector 3, El Rodeo* village, *Conguaco*, Jutiapa. In 2016, she was sent to work at the *Escuela Oficial Rural Mixta, El Sincuyal* village, *Conguaco*, Jutiapa. In 2017, she went to work at the *Escuela Oficial Rural Mixta, San Pedro* village, *Conguaco*, Jutiapa. From 2018 to 2019 she worked at the *Escuela Oficial Rural Mixta, caserío El Matocho, El Bran* village, *Conguaco*, Jutiapa. And so, the time went by, going from one place to another, spreading knowledge and educating children.

When asked about the reason for so much relocation, she commented that teachers deserted because of the distance and difficult access to the communities and, despite the need of parents to attend to their school-age children, the teachers abandoned these communities. She was oscillating from one place to another for ten consecutive years. Finally, tired of so much change, going on desolate roads and difficult traffic, especially in the rainy season, she decided to participate in the call for applications for a budgeted position that the Ministry of Public Education announced in the printed media. She prepared her file with the required documentation, according to the competition rules, and presented it before the *Jurado Municipal de Oposición* (JUMO) in the municipal seat of *Conguaco*. Why did she file her paperwork in *Conguaco* and not in Moyuta? According to her, she already worked in *Conguaco* and was aware of the need for teachers in the rural communities of that municipality, so she had a better chance of obtaining a position.

A few months later, she received notification that she had been awarded a budgeted position and, since 2020 to date, she has been a teacher at the *Escuela Oficial Rural Mixta, caserío Las Pilitas, Las Pilas* village, *Conguaco*, Jutiapa, a remote place with a narrow, rough road that is very far from urban areas. The teacher says: "It is so far, it is in the middle of nowhere" (S. S.

Polanco Esquivel, personal communication, April 8, 2021). To get to this place one drives by motorcycle, by bus and sometimes on foot.

Teacher Polanco says that, during the rainy season, this road becomes difficult to travel, so sometimes she had to walk from before the *San Pedro* village to the destination, a journey of 10 kilometers. The school has a complete elementary school and is attended by 80 students, who are taught by three teachers, each in charge of two classes. In 2020, the teacher taught third and fourth grade children. In 2021, she taught fourth and fifth graders. Currently (2022), she teaches sixth and first grade students.

In addition to teaching, Sivia Saraí Polanco also worked in a computer science academy in the municipal seat of *Moyuta*, which she attended in the afternoons from Monday to Friday and on Saturday mornings. The attendance of people interested in learning and using the computer was numerous but, according to the teacher's information, she had the capacity to assist them individually.

## Her family

The artisan Sivia Saraí Polanco commented that when she was 20 years old, she met a boy in *Moyuta* who she disliked, as she said, because she considered him very daring, since he was direct in his intentions with her. She also commented that at the time her mother had guests in their house, young people who came to study in *Moyuta*. The brother of her now-husband lived at her home, as he was a student. It happened that on the day of the election of the queen of the patronal festival of *Moyuta*, the student's brother came to visit and was introduced to Sivia Saraí Polanco's father. As the artisan commented, the young man immediately got along well with her father, José Miguel Polanco. They kept talking for a long time, the conversations were pleasant. Time went by and the time for the activity of the election came. The two brothers, Sivia Saraí



Polanco and her sister Astrid Ramírez went to the place where the presentation of the candidates would take place. The following Saturday he came to visit again and, the third time he visited her, he asked her if she wanted to date him, by which time the teacher had another image of the lover and agreed to be his girlfriend. They had been dating for two years. After that time, he made the engagement official, and they set the wedding date. As the relationship was serious, before getting married they thought about building their own house. To do this, the boyfriend was granted a fraction of land on his father's property. With the site available, the teacher applied for a loan from one of the system's banks operating in the town. With the money in hand, they began the construction of the house in the village of *Ciudad Pedro de Alvarado*. Within six months the house was ready to move in and the necessary furniture was acquired. The wedding took place on March 24, 2009. The civil ceremony was held in the municipality of *Moyuta*. That same day she left her mother's house for her new home.

Once installed in the house, she had more chores to do, because, in addition to the workload, she had to deal with the household chores and, as is customary in this culture, she also had to take into account her husband's care. This situation required her to get up earlier to get to school on time, since the distance from *Ciudad Pedro de Alvarado* to *Las Pilitas* is longer. She only had one child, Joseduardo Guerra Polanco, a complicated pregnancy because she was in danger of miscarriage on three occasions. She was on bed rest for several months to prevent the loss of the baby, who was born prematurely in natural childbirth, but required special care. Currently, her son is 10 years old, studying in the capital of *Moyuta* in a private school and is in the fourth grade of elementary school.

### **From misfortune to porcelain art**

An unexpected accident changed the path of her work as a teacher dedicated to instructing the minds of children in a remote rural town, located in the southeast of the municipality of *Conguaco*, department of Jutiapa. It was 2015, June 18, when she was sweeping the fallen leaves in the yard of the house and, being abundant dry leaves, she did not notice that in the middle of them there was an aerosol container. When she gathered all the garbage she set fire to it and burn it, when the debris was almost gone she approached to remove what was on the edges without burning and, at that moment, the container exploded, causing severe third degree burns to her head, face, arms, hands, legs, feet, and a fragment of the container remained embedded in one of her legs. Her eyebrows, eyelashes, and hair were burnt. She was absent from her teaching job for more than six months and went to live in *Moyuta* with her mother, who took care of her. After that time, the treating physician sent her for physiotherapy to recover the mobility of her hands and fingers. The exercises did not work, and it was then recommended that she should try crocheting.

She tried to practice the art of crocheting for several weeks, but she was unable to make much movement. Joints and tendons continued to be stiff. She was asked to draw and paint. It had been six months since the accident and, finally tired of not seeing any progress, she began to search on social media for some work that would make it easier for her to move. That is how she found videos of modeling handicrafts using porcelain.

With these audiovisuals, teacher Sivia Sarai Polanco says that she felt motivated and liked the final products that were obtained with this material, since everything was produced by hand, without the use of molds. Enthusiastic about learning the art of working and modeling porcelain, she looked for courses, enrolled and took them.

She bought the materials, i.e. cornstarch and other supplies needed to prepare the porcelain, in order to begin a new stage in her life. The preparation of the raw material into a malleable paste requires approximately 45 minutes with constant movements of both hands. She said that while working with porcelain she felt how her fingers and hands became more flexible and thus she recovered the mobility of both upper extremities.

### Preparation of porcelain

Porcelain is a white powder made of cornstarch, which is bought by kilo, at a price of Q180 (Q stands for quetzals, the currency of Guatemala). In its preparation it goes through a process of cooking over low heat and uses glue used by carpenters, in addition to other products that are available at the drugstore such as: glycerin, zinc oxide, baby oil, *Vaseline*, *Teatrical* blue cream, when the latter is not available, Nivea cream is used. At the hardware store she buys the glue and, in the stores, the cornstarch and white vinegar. Regarding the prices of the products, she did not specify them, as they always vary due to inflation, which is on the rise.

When asked how she learned to prepare porcelain, she replied: "watching tutorials on YouTube, I improved my own recipe by adding ingredients or removing others that I could not find" (S.S. Polanco Esquivel, personal communication, April 8, 2021). When she has all the products, she adds them little by little so as not to put them to excess, as this would spoil the material. The artisan calls this process "*cuartear*". After the paste is ready, the process of stretching and gathering it begins, kneading it for approximately 45 minutes, in order to remove the air bubbles contained in the paste.

According to the information from the artisan, this process is essential to prevent the pieces from bursting when they are finished. Because once the porcelain object dries out and cracks, there is no way to repair it. In the process of stretching and kneading, the porcelain is heard

to thunder, which means that the air bubbles burst and thus the air is eliminated. When it no longer thunders, it is free of all particles, and it is only then that the paste is ready to be worked. To prevent it from hardening, it is necessary to mash it from time to time so that it does not lose its malleability. When asked how to know that the porcelain is ready to be worked, she replied:

When you start to knead it, it is hard and difficult to stretch. As it is manipulated, you can hear when the air bubbles burst and it becomes softer, then you separate the dough into two parts and when they are separated, the ends stay pointed and that means that it no longer has any air particle, and it is then when it is ready to work with it. (S.S. Polanco Esquivel, personal communication, April 8, 2021).

If the designs are large, one kilo of porcelain is enough to decorate five cups, because it tends to lose volume when it dries. All the pieces undergo a sealing process, for which she uses a product called *Glanzen*, but she also uses resin, lacquer or liquid glass to make the object last. In its natural state, porcelain is white. Acrylic paints are used to dye it.

Porcelain has a certain degree of difficulty to work depending on the climate. The pieces must be dried in the open air in a place where the sun does not hit them, because the sun causes them to crack. On the other hand, the environment influences the finish of the pieces, since the heat makes them dry more slowly. In many cases the material melts and the figure created is distorted. For this reason, the artisan does not work her neo-crafts in *Ciudad Pedro de Alvarado*, where she has her home, due to the excessive heat of the region.

When she has many orders, she travels to her mother's house, who lives in the municipal seat of *Moyuta*, a place that has a favorable climate to make possible the manufacture of the different figures and they dry in less time, because the cold helps this indispensable process to apply the decoration, the paint, and

the sealant. In contrast, in hot weather, medium-sized pieces dry in eight to ten days, while small pieces dry in five to seven days. For larger pieces, the process takes longer, about 15 to 20 days.

### The production of neo-crafts

The raw material used is cold porcelain, i.e. pure, without firing process. It is purely manual work, simple and at the same time with a certain degree of difficulty, everything is modeled by hand. In this process the finished products are unique, no work is repeated. After work, every day in the afternoons and evenings, she produces the different orders requested by friends, neighbors, and relatives.

Among the variety of products, she manufactures are boots, watermelons, human figures, corn, cameras, flower buttons, hats, rose buttons, key chains, octopuses, figures of emojis and other characters such as the Cookie Monster. Cups decorated with human or animal figures, elephants, sheep, rings, horses, frogs, butterflies, insects, bees, dogs, cats, chickens, hens, turkeys, roosters, pigs, cows, houses, farm tools, a variety of miniature roses and flowers, dolls with long, short, straight and curly hair. And, as if this were not enough, she learned the art of decorating on comals, hats, tiles, bottles, and wooden chairs.

Likewise, the teacher Sivia Saraí Polanco developed the art of painting, which she does on cotton canvas. She designs, paints and decorates rose petals on skirts, as well as on aprons, handkerchiefs, scarves, blouses and skirts. As an added value to her long list of products, she also learned the art of embroidery. In this regard, Eisman (1985) refers that “embroidery lacks a systematic study and the news that art historians dedicate to this noble manifestation of the misnamed minor arts are minimal” (p. 55). This work has been for many centuries an activity linked to women, a task carried out in their leisure time, in times when women were relegated only to household

chores. However, for the artisan Sivia Saraí Polanco, it was not work learned in times of unemployment, but rather circumstances and the desire to normalize her motor functions led her to discover that she was capable of learning new skills.

In this way, she embroiders ribbons, napkins, bread baskets, tablecloths, pillowcases, cushions, towels and handkerchiefs. All works are made to order, whether for everyday and common use or to fulfill the social function of a gift or ornament. Although her work is in demand in the community, what she dedicates most of her time to is porcelain modeling, a business she began in December 2015. As can be seen, the production of neo-crafts is recent in this population and this agrees with Gil (2002), who indicates that it is a new contemporary handicraft trend, and with García (1997), who refers that the fundamental characteristic is its lack of historical time.

Even though there are people in the town interested in learning what the teacher does, when they learn about the cost of the materials, they are discouraged and for that reason, until now, she is the only artisan producing the so-called neo-crafts.

### Instruments used in decoration

The sculpting tools or *estecas*: these are lime-green plastic rods, and some are made of stainless steel in different sizes and thicknesses. With these instruments she is able to place the roses where fingers cannot penetrate. She also uses them to shape, cut or outline the hair of anthropomorphic decorations. The set of white sculpting tools cost Q. 27.

Brushes with silicone bristles are another tool used to smooth out any design that has been left with a crack, because, as she said: “in porcelain work there should be no cracks” (S.S. Polanco Esquivel, personal communication, April 8, 2021). These are more expensive, each one has a price of Q. 27, and she has six in total. She also has bristle brushes, which she uses to

shape eyebrows and eyelashes. The set of three has a cost of Q. 25.

Ball stylus tools: these are another instrument used to design the eyes and to shape the face. The ball stylus tools are made of metal and the set of four is Q. 54.

She also has a set of strainers of different sizes that she uses to form the center of the sunflowers. These have several small dots without perforation that, when forming the center, look similar to the seeds of a sunflower flower. How is the center for a sunflower made? A small portion of porcelain is taken, and a small ball is made with the fingers, it is placed inside what she calls the strainer and pressure is applied to flatten the porcelain, it is peeled off and the center keeps the design.

She said that at the beginning she did not have any tools to work the designs, she only had the porcelain, then, with household objects such as knives, scissors, toothpicks and spoons, she used to make the designs. With the profits from the first sales, she began to buy her accessories to decorate. She acquired molds, measuring spoons for pastry, one to form heads and, if she is going to make several, she uses them so that they are all the same size. She does this because she does not have a weight to measure the grams of porcelain needed to form the heads.

X-acto knife: this is an instrument with a great similarity to a surgical scalpel, it is used to cut the excess of porcelain that remains on the edges of the modeled figure, and to cut and shape the petals of flowers and roses.

Markers: these are used only to mark designs so that they are all the same size.

Molds: these are made of silicone and are used to reproduce larger models. One mold has a cost of Q. 35.

### Decoration of cups

First, she acquires the objects, that is, she buys the cups by the dozen in the stores of the town,

or at the border with El Salvador. According to her, she prefers the latter because they are of better quality than the national ones. The thinner ones are the ones with the best finish, the material is thicker, the weight of the pieces and the design. The Guatemalan product is priced between Q. 5 and Q. 10 per unit. In El Salvador the cup has a cost of Q. 18, but the quality is different and that gives more value to the decoration on the body of the cup.

The most common designs used to decorate them include the Virgin of Guadalupe, the most requested by users. It is probably also due to the miraculous powers attributed to this image. Once the piece is finished, it has a value of between Q.100 and Q. 125, depending on the design that is superimposed on it. Teacher Polanco said that generally the design of the effigy of Guadalupe is only decorated with five roses at the bottom, the standard decoration. However, there are clients who asked her to bring more flowers, and she said:

They asked me to make this virgin with two dozen roses. So, this one is more expensive because the rose is made in miniature. These take more time to work, because there are spaces where the fingers cannot reach because of the smallness of the rose, so I use these instruments (she shows the utensils), these are called *estecas* (S. S. Polanco Esquivel, personal communication, April 8, 2021).

She says that the first time she made miniature rose buttons, it took her 20 minutes to form one, because she had no experience, but now she makes them in two minutes.

### Petals on skirts

Skirts are in common use among the women of these southeastern places. For this reason, she thought that if she painted petals on fabric, she could have an impact on women. She says that the first skirt with petals did not fit well, but “you learn by doing,” so she always makes the first test for her use. The following ones were

better and the demand for work became a reality. Such has been her ingenuity that she thought of modeling women's legs and torsos to decorate various objects, especially mugs.

### **Decoration of faces**

Her eagerness to work knows no bounds. Although she has experience in the decoration of animated faces, according to her, these do not require a precise shape, but take more time to make and, therefore, are products that have a higher price compared to the value of other products, which does not mean that these are better than others, because they all present a certain degree of difficulty in their manufacture. However, she had the idea of decorating faces thinking about giving another nuance to the decoration of the cups, which are the most requested by local and regional customers, because in addition to the value of use of these, they are a valuable detail as a gift, since the price of a cup decorated with a face cost between Q. 200 and Q. 250. Others that are of lesser value have a simpler decoration, but still have the care, attention and dedication shown by the artisan when manufacturing them.

### **Decoration of hats**

These are purchased by dozen at a cost of Q. 300, in the *San Pedro* village, *Conguaco*. In 2015, there were still some artisans dedicated to the manufacture of hats, which are made with tule, which is used in the manufacture of *petates*. She then paints them with designs of Guatemalan landscapes, national symbols, flora and fauna. She sells them at the price of Q. 125.

### **Misfortune arrives again to her life**

As mentioned in previous lines, after the accident she suffered with the explosion of the aerosol can, the teacher went to live at her mother's house, in the urban population of *Moyuta*. Once she recovered from the accident, she returned to her teaching duties, but did not return to the Pacific coast where she lived with

her husband, since it was closer for her to travel to this town than to come from *Ciudad Pedro de Alvarado*. After the work week, every Friday afternoon she would travel to spend the weekend with her husband and spend time with her in-laws and other family members.

On May 14, 2021, she walked with her young son to the station of the minibuses that cover the route between *Moyuta* and *Ciudad Pedro de Alvarado*. They had already traveled several kilometers when, in the opposite direction, a pick-up truck with several women on board came along, driven by one of them in a drunken state. On a curve, she lost control and impacted the minibus. In this brutal accident, she suffered serious and multiple fractures of the femur of her right leg and bruises in several parts of her body. Her son, fortunately, was unharmed.

Although she was entitled to social security medical services, she was unable to obtain the required assistance due to the slowness in the process of obtaining a work certificate. And, in the meantime, she was suffering from the pain caused by the multiple fractures and other blows. When she was unable to obtain admission to the IGSS (Guatemalan Institute of Social Security), her husband had no choice but to request a loan from a bank and finally she was admitted to a private center in the town of *Oratorio*, Santa Rosa, where she underwent surgery. She had five fractures in her right leg, none of which were open. In the left she had one. She had 10 surgeries on her right leg. The first seven were performed on May 15. She entered the room before 7:00 in the morning and left after 5:30 in the afternoon. What a surgery!

Immobilized from the waist down, she spent two months in bed, where she continued to work on the various objects that had been pending delivery before the accident. What did she do with the students in her care? Fortunately, since the teaching-learning system was still in the virtual modality, during the morning she worked with her students and



fulfilled her teaching duties. In the afternoon she dedicated herself to the production of neo-crafts. She received virtual workshops on new design techniques and created her own image under the name "SiviArtes."

On February 23, 2022, the rods placed to support the bone broke, and the femur again suffered three fractures. According to her, the body rejected the platinum that had been put in and the platinum rods broke and caused more damage, so it was necessary to intervene again. She was again immobilized for 22 days.

For the second time she tried to be treated through social security, but she faced the same situation as the first time and had to resort to the same surgeon who had treated her. She went again to the operating room and this time a nail was placed inside the bone. The IGSS, although it did not admit her, suspended her and she has not received a salary for six months.

With the sale of neo-crafts, since she has no shortage of orders due to the quality of the designs, finish, and creativity, she has managed, in part, to provide for herself, in addition to the support of her husband, family, friends, and neighbors who visit her and bring her groceries, vegetables and fruits.

Despite all these hardships, she continues to overcome, as she is studying for a teaching program in Intercultural Primary Education at the San Carlos de Guatemala University, in the virtual modality, and will graduate this year 2022. A great example of struggle and perseverance of this warrior artisan, who has been able to overcome the misfortunes that have befallen her.

### **Commercialization of the products**

These are sold directly from the artisan's hands, and in her mother's house, in the municipal seat of *Moyuta*. Her frequent customers are Lizbeth Amabilia León, who when interviewed said that the work done by Mrs. Sivia Saraí Polanco is of excellent quality, demonstrated in the

decoration of the various elements that arise from her inventiveness. We also obtained the impression of Mrs. Violeta Fuentes, referring to the artisan work of the artist, who indicated that she is a frequent buyer of the different objects manufactured by this artisan because they are unique and unrepeatable. We were able to talk to the following neighbors: Esperanza Alarcón Mencos, Sidia Alonzo and Sonia Isabel González Mendoza, who request products from the artisan throughout the year and whose opinions are similar to those expressed by the first two consumers. They are joined by sporadic buyers who place orders for special occasions.

### **Discussion of results**

The artisan Sivia Saraí Polanco developed the skill of manual work from 2015, as a result of burns caused by the explosion of the aerosol device when she was sweeping the fallen leaves in the yard of her house. From that experience, she began painting on bottles, jars and glass vessels. Later, she tried her hand at painting on canvas and wood. The products were accepted, in the first instance, by their friends. As time went by, she perfected the technique and orders increased. Her inventiveness and talent prompted her to try this technique on fabric. This is how the decoration of aprons, napkins, pillowcases, skirts, and towels came about.

The mentor says that she was motivated by the results obtained in the mobility of her arms, hands and fingers with painting as an occupational therapy. Enthusiastic about the results, she searched on social media for other ways to produce other objects, and that is how she gave life to the new handicrafts, a task to which she has dedicated herself since 2020.

Currently (2022), in the town of *Moyuta*, department of Jutiapa, she is the only artisan dedicated, in addition to teaching, to the production of various objects made mostly of porcelain and other handicrafts including decorations on hats, fabric, wood, tiles and

glass. Her products are sought after by neighbors from both the urban population and neighboring regions. She says that many of her products have been taken abroad, specifically to the United States and El Salvador.

In the future, the production of neo-crafts will constitute the traditional history that will be reflected in the cultural richness, as a legacy of the artisan Sivia Saraí Polanco for the people of this community in the southeast of Guatemala. Human beings need to understand and know the cultural elements that are part of the identity of a past that was characterized and is characterized by the manufacture of these new craft forms, since culture is not static, although it preserves knowledge, but it is modified according to how the world evolves and ultimately recovers those ancestral elements that make the culture of a people unique.

### Final comment

It is somewhat complicated to write a commentary on the impressive life story of teacher Sivia Saraí Polanco. However, if she had not suffered the accident of the explosion, she probably would not have discovered this talent for modeling various figures, which are unique to the town of *Moyuta*, in Jutiapa. Her products have transcended borders, as several neighbors request them to take them to the United States, Canada and the neighboring country of El Salvador, as well as for domestic consumption.

In the work *Neoartesanía Quiteña*, the author Diana Ferro (2017) refers that cultural identity analyzes how it can mutate and resignify itself to be a factor of innovation and ensure that handicrafts and their managers can remain with the sublime feeling of wanting to do and are driven to sustainable development in the face of the great developmentalist contradictions of industrialization and excessive consumption of postmodernity.

And, as part of that identity, Lozano very appropriately indicates that:

Every people has the right and must always have a legitimate history; to do so, it must settle accounts with the past, knowing and valuing the experiences that have occurred, however painful they may have been, so that they do not become shadows of its own existence, and prevent it from starting a new path, the search for a new dawn. (1991, p. 18, quoted by Ferro, (2017, p. 15)

It is precisely the fatality that was overcome by the teacher that which manifests itself in the creativity of the different designs made by the artisan lady, same that gave rise to the so-called neo-crafts in this population, which are tangible objects that are increasing and becoming more and more entrenched in the cultural identity of this locality.

The pieces have a fine finish, which makes them coveted among the population. And, although they are of recent manufacture, they have already positioned themselves and are recognized, therefore, they are part of the cultural heritage of this locality. In general, handicraft productions in every community are related to a socio-cultural, economic and environmental context, which originates from the need for daily survival, on the one hand, and on the other hand, they seek to give continuity to the legacy inherited from the ancestors. But Polanco's neo-crafts originated from the anguish of recovering the mobility of her hands and fingers.

It is admirable the effort she dedicated to the situation that abruptly changed her life, but that today makes her feel satisfied with what she produces, since her neo-crafts are valued, and her products are mainly consumed by the inhabitants of the neighboring towns as well as the capital city. Although her beginnings were not based on the folk-art tradition of *Moyuta*, this artisan introduced a new way of producing art to the people. Therefore, in this particular case, what Perez mentions about the basis of neo-crafts does not apply and in this regard, she points out that:

Neo-crafts are inspired by the traditions of popular art and benefit from the labor of traditional artisans. They are produced with new techniques and materials, and invent new shapes and designs, while retaining a well-defined continuity between tradition and adaptation to new uses and wider markets. (Pérez, 2013, p. 7)

The author is correct when she indicates that neo-crafts are inspired by the traditions of popular art, but for the teacher this was not the case. Finally, with this publication, the *Centro de Estudios de las Culturas en Guatemala* contributes to the dissemination and promotion of the neo-crafts made by artisan Sivia Saraí Polanco Esquivel de Guerra in Moyuta, Jutiapa, Guatemala.

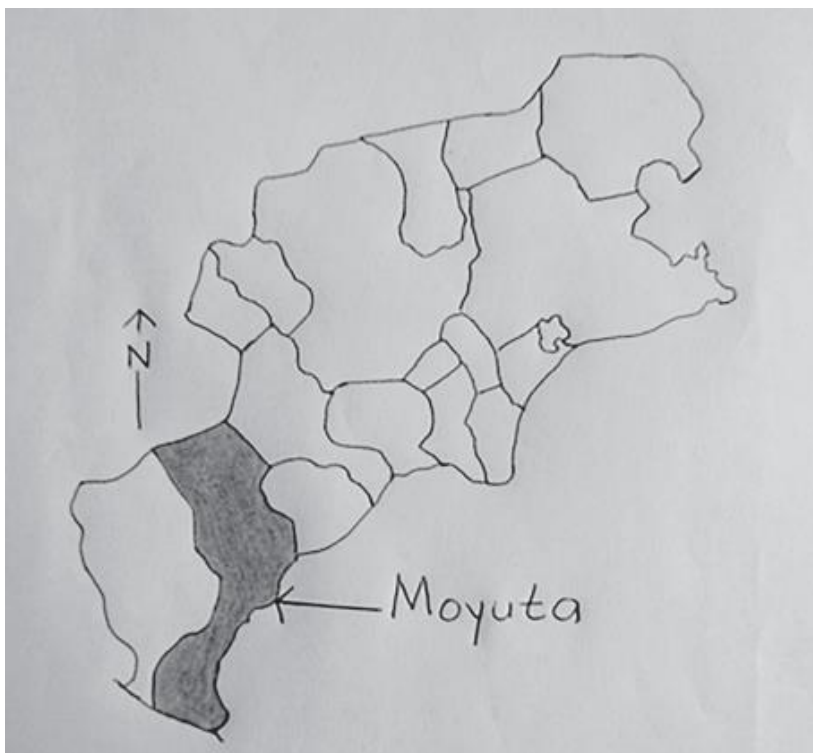
### Acknowledgments

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**Figure 1.**  
Map of the department of Jutiapa.  
August 2023.



**Figure 2.**  
Artist, Sivia Saraí  
Polanco Esquivel de Guerra.  
April 2021.





**Figure 3.**  
 Decoration of a tile.  
 April 2021



**Figure 4.**  
 Elephant head censer.  
 April 2021



**Figure 5.**  
 Decoration of a pillowcase.  
 April 2021



**Figure 6.**  
Tools used to decorate the art pieces.  
April 2021.



**Figure 7.**  
Mug decorated with a woman's face.  
April 2021.



**Figure 8.**  
Decorated mug.  
April 2021.





**Figure 9.**  
Decorated mugs.  
April 2021



**Figure 10.**  
Mug decorated for Mother's Day.  
April 2021.



**Figure 11.**  
Decoration of a mermaid's face.  
April 2021.



**Figure 12.**  
Decoration of hats.  
April 2021.



**Figure 13.**  
Magnets with different fruit figures.  
April 2021.



**Figure 14.**  
Jeweler decorated with The Grinch.  
April 2021.



**Figure 15.**  
 Decoration on napkins.  
 April 2021.



**Figure 16.**  
 Photo frame.  
 April 2021.



**Figure 17.**  
 Decorated chair.  
 April 2021.