

# KEEP IT SIM- PLE MAKE IT FAST!

AN APPROACH  
TO UNDERGROUND  
MUSIC SCENES (VOL. 4)  
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***Keep it Simple, Make it Fast!***

An approach to underground music scenes (vol. 4)

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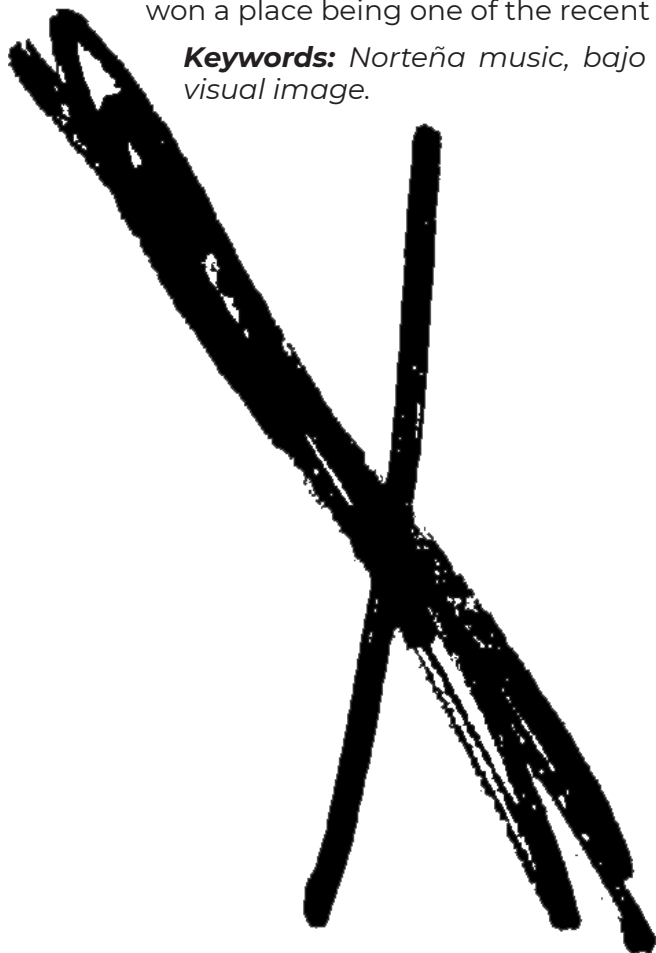
### 5.3. The *Laudero Del Desierto* and his place in bajo sexto's construction field<sup>121</sup>

Ramiro Godina Valerio<sup>122</sup>

#### A b s t r a c t

Economic circuits for the *bajo sexto*, a symbolic musical instrument of U.S./Mexico border culture, have increased in recent years leading to the emergence of new brands. Among various brands from Mexican northeastern and South Texas, *The Luthier of the Desert*<sup>123</sup>, is one of the most distinguished because of its innovative visual design and physical construction, giving it an advantage within the field (Bourdieu, 1990). This article analyzes bajo sexto construction field and its main characteristics to understand and examine how *newcomers* and *dominants* take their position within the "field" and, specifically, how *The Luthier of the Desert* has won a place being one of the recent brands.

**Keywords:** Norteña music, bajo sexto, border-culture, luthier, instrument visual image.



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<sup>123</sup> Original name in Spanish: El Laudero del Desierto.

## 1. Outline

*Conjunto norteño* (northern music) (Peña 1985, p. 14; Díaz-Santana, 2015, p.15), *Mexican norteña music* (Montoya, 2014, p. 136-137), or simply “norteña” music, emerged in the northeastern Mexican countryside in the mid-nineteenth century (Ayala, 2000, p. 39-40). It would migrate to the city and beyond the northern border into the U.S. with immigrants seeking better economic opportunities. This music became a commercial product of the Texas regional recording industry in the 1940s (Ragland, 2009, p. 65-73) whose market were Mexicans on both sides of the Rio Grande. Moreover, Mexico's national cinema participated in the construction of “*lo norteño*”<sup>124</sup> primarily within the music and films of iconic musician and actor Eulalio Gonzalez “Piporro,” becoming an indispensable element for the music's popularity outside of the region. In the last quarter of the 20th century, key groups such as Los Tigres del Norte would help “...launch a highly expansive and lucrative norteña music industry ...” (Ragland, 2009, p. 142).

In the global era, the scope of this musical expression grew to the extent that musicians from other countries such as Chile, Colombia, and Holland created their own bands imitating the Mexican ones. For these reasons, and according to Ramirez-Pimienta, “since the last third of the 20th century until now norteña music is what mariachi music was during the first part of the 20th century” (2013, p.14, [personal translation]) meaning it has become a musical symbol of Mexico in the world. An essential part of constructions of “*lo norteño*” and its music are the instruments: *bajo sexto*<sup>125</sup> and the diatonic accordion. The sound and visual image of the *bajo sexto* and accordion have played a central role in the production, circulation, and consumption of this music, such that, the growth of the instrument manufacturing industry has paralleled the growth of norteña music's popularity. In this article, I present part of my ethnographic research on the *bajo sexto* and its economic circuits in northeastern Mexico and South Texas, one of which is the instrument manufacturing industry. Tradition and innovation are two important characteristics defining the industry and while on the surface these may seem like opposing forces, visual design provides a space that potentially connects or disconnects the two. While brands that utilize tradition as a principal characteristic are the oldest and most well-known, those considered innovative are seeking a new path to gain a foothold in the market. One of these brands, The Luthier of the Desert, has gained a valuable position in what Bourdieu (1990) refers to as the “field,” mainly through its innovative designs for the instruments visual image.

In the following case study, I examine how the Luthier of the Desert has been positioned in the *bajo sexto*'s field of manufacturing. I begin by offering a rationale for the importance of *bajo sexto* research, followed by indicating the brands within the manufacturing industry in the delimited area. This includes a general typology of *bajo sextos* made by these brands. Next, I address those factors that have enabled to the Luthier of the Desert to win a place in the field of *bajo sexto* manufacturing. Which are the main characteristics of the field? What are the elements that make it possible for a new brand to win a place in the field? What are the characteristics of the market catered to by the *Luthier of the Desert*? My fieldwork was conducted from November 2014 to September 2018 in the U.S. cities of San Antonio, Laredo, and McAllen, in Texas, and in the Mexican cities of Saltillo, Monclova and Torreon, in the state of Coahuila; and the metropolitan area of Monterrey in the state of Nuevo Leon. I also communicated with informants in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas through internet social networks. It is important to mention that during the

<sup>124</sup> *Lo norteño* is an imaginary of Mexico's northern regional culture and identity commercialized in popular media.

<sup>125</sup> This is a chordophone with twelve metal strings, grouped in pairs and played with a plectrum. Its traditional function is to accompany the accordion by playing chords, bass notes and making some ornamentation. *Bajo sexto* variants have emerged, such as the *bajo quinto* and the *bajo cuarto*, which have ten and eight strings, respectively.

latter part of my fieldwork, I have examined other brands, beyond those discussed in this study, however, they will be addressed in a later work.

## 2. *Bajo sexto's makers and a typology about their instruments*

Academic scholarship on the *bajo sexto* is relatively recent and growing. First references tell us about *bajo sexto* as part of musical traditions and as a common product of music stores in northeastern Mexico and South Texas by the end of nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth (Diaz-Santana, 2015, p. 96-104, ; Garza, 2006, p. 132-135; Guerrero, 2002, p. 28-29), besides, this instrument appears as part of a family heritage and as a handmade product in the state of Guanajuato, Mexico (Montoya, 2013, p.191-208, tomo I). Although there is a theory about its origin (Montoya, 2013, pp.191-208, tomo I), there is no certainty about its emergence "specific" place nor its organological ancestry. In this regard, and referring to aforementioned theory, Hernandez indicates "... it would be corroborated with effective arguments derived from the study and comparison of other documentary sources such as the different types of *bajo sextos* used in various musical regions of Mexico; it means, it is necessary to carry out a solid *ethnolauderia* of the different variants of Mexican *bajos*..." (Hernández, 2017b, p. 11-12 [personal translation]).

Within this initial construction of knowledge about *bajo sexto* from the academic studies, emerged a question Have been done studies on these instrument makers? Inquiring about it, I found two types of research: those studies that reference the *bajo sexto* as corollary information and those who utilize it as the direct subject of their investigation. About the first type of research: first one was mentioned, and it tells us about an instrument maker from Guanajuato, Mexico, who migrates to Pennsylvania, USA in 1917 (Montoya, 2013, p. 205-206, tomo I); another one tells us about a guanajuatense migrant that arrives to Anahuac, Nuevo Leon, in 1999. This man worked for twenty-five years creating guitars and *bajo sextos* in a self-taught way (Ayala, 2009, p. 124, 125); another contribution narrates the knowledge circuits about *bajo sexto's* construction in the municipalities of Allende and Santiago, both in Nuevo Leon (Ayala, 2014, p. 142-143).

On the other hand, the second type of research, in the US literature there is a text that addresses the migrant Acosta family. These Jalisco's manufacturers would arrive to San Antonio, Texas (McNutt, 1991, p. 172-187); a second one work deals the Macias family history, based in the same city of San Antonio (Young, 1987, p. 131-134). In the Mexican literature are Hernandez Vaca works and my own research. Hernandez tells us about *bajo sexto* manufacture in Paracho, Michoacan, identifying 4 stages: 1) Without influence of the electric guitar; 2) With influence of the electric guitar; 3) increase in manufacturing; 4) With drug trafficking themes (2014). In a recent research, Hernandez studies the migration of builders and knowledge, and tell us about manufacturing investment related to Paracho, Michoacan (2017b). Within my research about *bajo sexto* makers, I documented its presence in the city of Monterrey visiting instrument workshops and music stores. In part, this ethnographic research addressed the instrument's visual image (Godina, 2014); in another work I examined the personal history of instrument maker Rubén Castillo. This study exposed the recent history of *bajo sexto's* construction in Monclova, Coahuila (Godina, 2017a). A recent work shows the links between Monterrey, Nuevo Leon

and Paracho, Michoacan, through this chordophone (Godina, 2017b).

In light of these past contributions on *bajo sexto* construction, this article offers a new perspective. *Figure 1* summarizes obtained information through my fieldwork, adding to the fore mentioned texts. The resulting topics articulated in the information in *Figure 5.3.1* are interesting. This time I will only mention them in a general way. The first one is migration. The main migrations, in terms of number or transcendence of the brand, came from Jalisco, Michoacan and San Luis Potosi. Jalisco migrants nested in San Antonio, Texas; San Luis migrants did it in Guadalupe, Nuevo Leon; and Michoacan migrants have been present in all northeast of Mexico and some cities at South Texas; the second one is the growth of instrument manufacturing industry. Oldest brands were established around twenties, and in the nineties, there was a clear increase of brands number. It favors a wide range of instruments, prices and designs.

The third one is about brand positioning. The best positioned brands are the longest ones: Macias, Hernandez [from Guadalupe, Nuevo Leon] and Acosta [from Guadalupe, Nuevo Leon], which were established in reference cities for record industries of *conjunto* (San Antonio, Texas) and "norteño" (Monterrey, Nuevo Leon) music. This brand positioning, at least from the perspective of some musicians, is measured by: visual and sound characteristics of the instrument, price and groupings that acquire those instruments.<sup>126</sup> This is replicated in those interactions between musicians and fans through of convergence points around the instrument at social networks.<sup>127</sup> Another relevant topic is knowledge circulation. Mainly, knowledge passes from father to son or sons<sup>128</sup> although it can also happen from family to family through friendship. Another way for knowledge circulation is labor link. This type of circulation is common, specifically, with some brands from Texas and Coahuila. In San Antonio part of Andrés Peña's knowledge passed to Agustin Escobar, and later, Escobar shared a little with Jacob Salinas. Angel Hernandez, from Monclova, learned it from Vicente Acosta in Guadalupe, Nuevo Leon. In turn, Angel shared it with his brother Javier and his friend Ruben Castillo.

To finish this section, I expose a *bajo sexto* typology as result of my fieldwork. I represent these kinds of *bajo sextos* through *Figure 5.3.1*. The *full body bajo sexto* is it that Hernandez Vaca identify like "without influence of the electric guitar" (see past pages). Its sound and image were diffused through radio and cinema in the middle of the 20th century. In those years, it accompanied the accordion in unfavorable acoustic spaces and without amplification. For this reason, its body needed to be widened and using wood that resonate. Now this model is called classic or traditional; the *cutaway bajo sexto* is it that Hernandez Vaca calls "with influence of the electric guitar" (see past pages). Another clear example of this influence is that *bajo sexto* was amplified using pickups. The image of these *bajo sextos* was stamped on LP's (Long Play), influencing musicians to purchase this kind of instrument or to make a *cutaway* on their *full body* model. Amplification and cutting would become almost the norm in the music industry.

Another cutaway can be possible in this model, called *doble cutaway*. Finally, the *solid body bajo quinto*. This model is not typical in the region; however, it represents an example of customer orders because in recent years consumers has more interference in instrument visual image. An important note is: since 1990's, *cutaway bajo quinto* presence has been increasing to the extent that currently this kind of *bajo* is the most common. It was possible, or conditioned, when electric bass entered in the group, so it was no longer

<sup>126</sup> This perception has been resulting of my experience like participating and no participating observer.

<sup>127</sup> This can be an example: ReyesAccordions.Com. "Bajo sexto reviewers". Published at <https://www.reyesforo.com/?forum=41322>

<sup>128</sup> Many of these brands have ramifications through their offspring.

necessary to play the bass line in the bajo sexto. Although the trend of *bajo sexto* is reborning.



Figure 5.3.1- Full body bajo sexto is to the left; cutaway bajo sexto is in the middle; solid body bajo quinto is to the right. Ramiro Godina collection. The *bajo sexto* 's construction "field" and the Luthier of the Desert<sup>129</sup>

Family/ Brand	Origin	Residence & begin at instrument making	Active or not	Labor (L), commercial (C) or friendship (f) link
Acosta	Lagos de Moreno, Jalisco	San Antonio, Texas. 1920	No	Macias (L)
Macias	Michoacan	San Antonio, Texas. 1930	Yes	Acosta (L)
Peña	México	San Antonio, Texas. ¿?	No	Escobar (F)
Escobar	Texas	San Antonio, Texas.1996-97	Yes	Macias (C) Peña (F), (C) Salinas (F), (C)
Salinas	¿?	San Marcos, Texas. 2015	Yes	Escobar (F) (C)
Garcia	Guanajuato	Anahuac, Nuevo Leon. 1955	No	
Hernandez	Matehuala, San Luis Potosi	Guadalupe, Nuevo Leon. 1920	Yes	Castillo (C) Hernandez [de Monclova] (C)
Acosta	San Luis Potosi	Guadalupe, Nuevo Leon. 1948	Yes	Castillo (C) Hernandez [de Monclova] (C)
Aguirre	Santiago, Nuevo Leon	Santiago, Nuevo Leon. ¿?	¿?	
Avila	¿?	Allende, Nuevo Leon. ¿?	¿?	Ochoa (F)
Ochoa	Santiago, Nuevo Leon	Santiago, Nuevo Leon. 90 ´s	Yes	Avila (F)
Herrera	Paracho, Michoacan	Monterrey, Nuevo Leon. 1994	Yes	Castillo (C)
Badines	Paracho, Michoacan	Monterrey, Nuevo Leon. 2010	Yes	



Flores	Allende, Nuevo Leon	Rio Bravo, Tamaulipas. Near 1970.	Yes	
Garcia, Teofilo	¿?	San Fernando, Tamaulipas	Yes	Flores (F)
Garcia, Nemesio	¿?	San Fernando, Tamaulipas	¿?	
Rojas	Michoacan	Laredo, Tamaulipas. ¿?	Yes	
Heraclio	¿?	Saltillo, Coahuila. 70's	No	Escobar [de Saltillo] (F)
Escobar	Coahuila	Saltillo, Coahuila. End of the 70s and beginning of the 80s	Yes	Heraclio (F)
Nunez	Michoacan	Saltillo, Coahuila. ¿?	Yes	
Hernandez	¿?	Monclova, Coahuila. 1990	Yes	Castillo (L), (F)
Castillo. "Kin"	Monclova, Coahuila	Monclova, Coahuila. 2000	Yes	Hernandez [de Coahuila] (L), (F) Hernandez [de Guadalupe] (C) Acosta [de Guadalupe] (C) Herrera (C)
Mendoza. "Luthier of the Desert"	Torreon, Coahuila	Torreon, Coahuila. 1999-2000	Yes	

Figure 5.3.2 - Brands in Mexican northeast and South Texas<sup>130</sup>

According with Bourdieu, *field* is a space of interaction, a field of objective relationships between individuals or institutions that compete for an identical game. In this field of haute couture [in our case the *bajo sexto*'s construction], the dominant ones have the greatest degree of power to build objects as something unusual by the signature procedure (the "griffe"); are those whose signature has the highest price. In a field, and this is a general law for all fields, those who hold the dominant position, those who have more specific capital, are in many ways opposed to newcomers (purposeful employment of this metaphor taken from the economy), those who arrived late, the upstarts who do not have much specific capital. Those with more seniority use conservation strategies whose objective is to take advantage of a capital that they have accumulated progressively. The newcomers have subversion strategies oriented towards a specific capital accumulation that supposes a radical alteration of the value table, a revolutionary redefinition of the production principles and the products appreciation and, at the same time, a devaluation of the dominant's capital (1990, pp. 216-217).

Analyzed as a "field", *bajo sexto*'s manufacturing industry is that "space of interaction... between individuals or institutions that compete for an identical game". But what are they competing for? As I mentioned, *bajo sexto*'s manufacturing industry is a growing profitable business, so "...the *dominant ones*" have the greatest degree of power to build objects as something unusual by the signature procedure..." their instruments prices are the highest. As "dominant" brands are Macias, Hernandez [from Guadalupe, Nuevo Leon] and Acosta [from Guadalupe, Nuevo Leon]. According with musicians, these brands have an indisputable quality in their instrument's visual and sound images, these ones have many years of experience and their instruments have been played by famous musicians and bands. Some "newcomers" and their

<sup>129</sup> Personal communication with con José Mendoza, by Ramiro Godina Valerio, Torreon, April 1st, 2016. Audio, Ramiro Godina's collection.



customers have been influenced by the “dominant” brands. An example of this influence is related by the *bajo sexto*’s maker Ruben Castillo, from Monclova Coahuila.

*...my customers from Monclova do not want a rosette with another ornamentation if it does not is like Hernandez one. I use “concha”, a typical ornament in Michoacan instruments, just to write the customer name in the fingerboard but my customers do not want to know nothing about Michoacan instruments... (Ruben Castillo, personal communication, 2016).*

Hernandez influence on *newcomer* brands is an example of *greatest degree of power* that “dominant ones” posses, this can be called *capital*. Just *dominant brands* posses this element that makes a big difference within the *field*. These brands have accumulated that “specific capital”, as I mentioned, through the experience and those instruments bought by famous musicians and bands. Their designs are a confinable path to walk. On the other hand, *bajo sexto*’s “newcomer” brands have increased since the nineties. These brands have two paths to take: tradition and innovation. The tradition path is a sure way for the instrument’s sell. These designs have been sold many years by *dominant* brands and the instrument’s images have been disseminated in the recording industry products (Guerra, 2013). Almost all brands make these designs although trying to include a distinguishing feature. It is necessary to mention that innovation is present in traditional brands when they are developing their own designs. Additionally, these instrument makers have some consumers who wants an exotic model, so results are innovative too. At the same time, “newcomer” brands make their innovative instruments based on *bajo sexto*’s construction principles. The Luthier of the Desert is a brand created by Jose Mendoza who was born in Torreon, Coahuila, Mexico. With a bachelor’s degree in medicine and animal husbandry, he learned from his father some techniques about carpentry. Along with his studies he maintained his love for music and became a guitar player. In 1999 he started to repair his own guitars. It was just the beginning.

Mendoza does not have an instrument maker as father nor any kind of links with other luthiers. Considering this condition, an uncomfortable way to go into guitar construction’s secrets, Jose began a process of self-learning that he calls “trial and error”. According with Mendoza:

*[The musical instrument construction] is a mystical thing, is like a mystery, a tremendous mystery and you cannot find information on any corner. It’s fascinating how this process produces a way to build, to unite wood with strings, to learn how you produce a sound, this is... more than that. It was a mystery and still is a mystery to a lot of people, construction is fascinating. I suddenly found that I had tools and knowledge, I was a musician and I knew how to work with wood, and I started doing research too, struggling a little bit because master craftsmen are very jealous of their knowledge. This knowledge*

*transfer is typically from father to son. Not everything is learned on the Net, not everything is learned on the Net, so ... there are always secrets in all of this, and little by little I have been unraveling it* (Jose Mendoza, personal communication, 2016 [personal translation]).

Among his first projects were the classical and jazz guitars construction. In 2008 and 2009, he noticed a quality's increase in his instruments, a new business was coming. In those years a customer, a norteña music player, visited Mendoza's workshop. This musician asked to Mendoza to make a *bajo sexto*, Mendoza said: yes! "... I gave it to him [the instrument], he was delighted and "the soup was spilled" (la sopa se regó). Analyzing other instruments when copying, researching on classical guitar construction, studying electric guitar information, were some paths walked by Mendoza to hybridize his ideas on *bajo sexto*. An interesting question is: What are the elements that make it possible for a new brand to win a place in the *field*? Bourdieu tell us of "conservation and subversion strategies" in his concept of "field" (see past pages). "Conservation strategies" are used by the best positioned brands to "take advantage of a capital that they have accumulated progressively". Among some activities used these brands are:

- To consider that younger brands are making a lower quality copy of their models (in some cases it is true).<sup>131</sup>
- At the best positioned brand's workshops photographs and journal's images referring to famous musicians and bands that have bought their instruments are common. This practice is used in instrument makers social networks too.<sup>132</sup>
- To share videos in their social networks of famous musicians playing their instruments.<sup>133</sup>

To write the brand name in *bajo sexto* headstock is a recent practice that has an interesting impact in the customer's perception.

These main practices show that *bajo sexto*'s visual image has a principal role in these strategies, innovation and tradition are in stage once again. According with Steven Ray Pearlman, who makes a work on *Standardization and innovation in mariachi music performance in Los Angeles*, considers 'innovation' involves the substitution of non-standard musical elements into otherwise traditional forms. The elements substituted may be small and auxiliary to the main form or may involve major structural alteration and even the importation or the creation of entirely non-standard forms. The important concept is one of restructuring. The effect of this restructuring is formal change. This approach is consistent with an anthropological view of innovation and cultural change, as originally formulated by Barnett (1953), in which innovation implies process. Understanding innovation in any cultural context then involves searching for those forces and conditions under which it is likely to occur and to have effect, that is, to affect cultural change. In the case of mariachi music in Los Angeles, the primary forces affecting standardization and innovation are more easily understood in terms of social and contextual factors (see Pearlman 1983) rather than in terms of traditional conservatism or musical creativity, although these factors cannot be ignored (1984, p. 1).

<sup>132</sup> Acosta, Hernandez and Macias workshops have these images.

<sup>133</sup> Macias bajo sexto videos in social networks have been shared principally by their own customers.

<sup>131</sup> This reference is according our personal communications with these instrument makers, specifically Macias and Hernandez.

Innovation in *bajo sexto*’s visual imagen has a principal role in “subversion strategies”. In my fieldwork I saw “small and auxiliary elements substituted” in some *bajo sextos* and just with the Luthier of the Desert I saw a “main form substituted” or a “major structural alteration” that created a “non-standard form”, maybe a non-standard hybridization. Initially Mendoza’s *bajo sextos* was called just Mendoza and these had a traditional image than now. I can mention some The Luthier of the Desert’s *subversion strategies* that make possible his place in the *bajo sexto*’s “field”.

- An innovative name for a brand.<sup>134</sup>
- A constant social network activity.
- To share videos where he argues their instrument’s quality
- Their instruments have a nontraditional visual image

I consider that shared material in his social networks and the way how it is showed make a difference. He is not only showing his finished instruments, he is building an identity, arguing why it have a place in the *field* (Guerra, 2013, 2016). An example<sup>135</sup> of this material is a video in his YouTube account. He begins it giving the date and showing finished instrument then he mentions the model name, in this case the model is called Jaguar King. Mendoza finishes introduction with a drink. Later, luthier gives specific information about this model. This has a shiny polish; does not have a traditional sound hole; a special Pepe Mendoza *bajo sexto*’s pickup (unique case in the delimited area) and a Fishman one. The Luthier of the Desert mentions that his *bajo sexto* pickups has same quality and is prettier than famous ones, additionally these are made in Mexico. Customer’s name and last name on the fingerboard is a customer idea. Mendoza mentions “look here this is a characteristic feature of my brand, the screwed mast”. Brand name is in instrument headstock. This model includes a special *cutaway*. This video continues with an instrument sound test. In the delimited area this kind of videos are unique. These are a specific strategy to win “capital” and create his own “capital”. His videos show us that his market is not only Coahuila, Mexico. His instruments have been sold in national and international contexts, from Chiapas to Nuevo Leon, from Argentina to USA. Maybe younger people are his principal customers because of designs but another kind of customers is buying your instruments.

### 3. Conclusions

Mexican northeastern and South Texas *bajo sexto*’s construction “field” has been configured by instrument maker’s migrations since 1920. These migrations came from Jalisco, Michoacan and San Luis. In recent years new brands from native people have been emerging. Oldest brands or “dominants” have accumulated specific capital positioning themselves as principal references in the “field”. Their longevity and fame are two fundamental elements than makes a difference. Additionally, social networks have being another path to increase their brand positioning, sometimes this activity is developed by their own customers or followers. On the other hand, “newcomers” have two ways: innovation or tradition. The Luthier of the Desert has taken innovation path in a different form. After the copy and study stage, Mendoza

<sup>134</sup> Instrument maker’s last name usually is the name’s brand. Generally, it is more a cultural result than a strategic action.

<sup>135</sup> EL LAUDERO DEL DESIERTO B5 “Rey Jaguar”. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6bDKYNfXTE>

has hybridized his ideas, and these have made possible unusual models. As older brands, Mendoza is using social networks to spend out his instruments, adding interesting activities in them as an instrument sound test, arguments about instrument construction and guaranteeing their chordophones. He is not only winning that "specific capital" but creating his own "capital".

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