
Traditional Guatemalan Textiles

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Introduction

This research examines some of the different Guatemalan indigenous groups and how their clothing identifies the specific community to which they belong.

Explains:

- The effect of Spanish colonization.
- Patterns used for group/tribe identification.
- Types of fibers used to create fabrics.
- How they created the dyes for the fabric.
- The process of hand weaving.
- The research elaborates on the traditional dress of Guatemalan women.
- How they are in danger of disappearing



The Effect of Spanish Colonization

The native Guatemalan style of dress has survived because Spanish allowed some autonomy to the rulers of the native peoples. Which meant that the they could keep most of their customs.



The Spanish settlers did not like to interact with the indigenous women, even if they held a position of authority. Therefore, the Spanish had little to no influence on the traditional dress of the women.



Symbols are visual codes that indicate the wearer's social, political, and spiritual beliefs.



Broken lines represent a serpent which is an important and religious symbol.

The serpent is revered by the Mayans because it is seen as the mover of the sun, moon, and stars across the heavens. It is also a symbol of rebirth and renewal.

Specific patterns used for group/tribe identification

The patterns and style of clothing used by the local communities were a fundamental way of identification, not only for the local communities, but also for the Spanish settlers in the developing socio-political structure.

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- These can indicate the wearer's marital status or project a special event or ritual ceremonies.
 - A widow will usually wear darker colors and not use red.
 - An unmarried girl will use bright colors.
 - They liked to show off who they were and what they had by putting it on their clothes.



Historically speaking, the Maya were one of the most complex civilizations in the entire world.

- The designs themselves have significance for the indigenous peoples.
- For example, flowers and plants represent the cycle of life and death.
- Zigzag designs represent serpents, which signify the messenger of the Mayan sun god, weaving and rain.
- In the same way, colors also had meaning:
 - Red reflects passion, power and strength
 - Blue refers to skill, virtue and calm



Types of fibers used to create fabrics

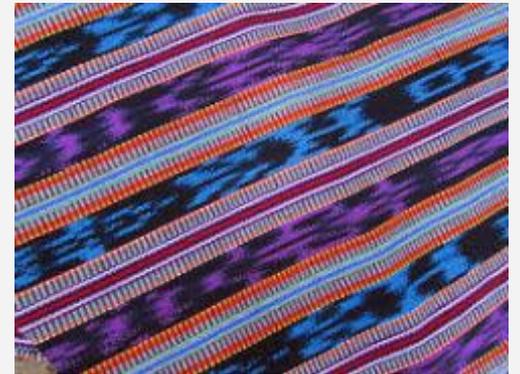
Textiles were spun from cotton, agave, and other plant fibers. The cotton used is some of the finest in world. It is called *new world Gossypium barbadense*, now known as Egyptian cotton.

Soaking or cooking the agave leaves tenderized them which made it easier to extract the fibers. After they were dried in the sun, the fibers could be spun into different thicknesses.

(El Progreso, Guatemala)



(Joyabaj Guatemala)



How They Created the Dyes for the Fabric



Plants, minerals, insects, and other animals were used to dye the fabric.



Indigo or anil plant, creates a distinct blue shade. It was created by binding it with a clay mineral (palygorskite) using heat.



Purple was obtained by using the ink of a large sea snail (*Picopurpura pansa*).



Cochineal, a vivid red was produced from a scale insect found on the *Opuntia* cactus.



Mayan women had been weaving and dyeing fabric for over two thousand years before the Spanish colonizers arrived.

The Process of Hand Weaving.

Thread was woven by hand, usually on a backstrap or standing loom. The process is painstaking and requires not only talent but, long hours of practice.



Weaving was such an important part of the lives of women that when a baby girl was born, it was common for her to receive weaving tools as a gift and they were almost always buried with her upon her death.

Girls were often taught to weave beginning as young as eight years of age.



- There are more than eight hundred styles of traditional dress used in the different communities.
- These “trajes”, as they are called, have changed very little since the 16th century.

The Backstrap Loom

Women would connect one side of the loom to a tree or pole and put the other side behind them on their lower back. They did this as a way to have better control over the loom.

Generally, the indigenous women’s costume consisted of a wide rectangular blouse (huipil), a wraparound skirt (corte), shawl (rebozo), sash (faja) and a headband (cinta) which is wrapped into a disc shape.

Maya textiles can be categorized into four groups,

- Chichicastenango, largest identifiable styles , because it is one of the most colorful and is still worn by a large portion of the native population.
- Wedding, ceremonial style is all white from head to toe, with some purple decoration.
- Santo, which is the Spanish word for saint, and it is associated with the catholic church.
- Jaspe, elaborate type of pattern that is challenging and time consuming, which is why it is so rare.



(Chichicastenango)



(Jaspe)

- The 16th century marks the arrival of Europeans to the isthmus and the influence they had on the indigenous cultures. It is important to include some facts related to the origins of the art of weaving.
- Weaving is not just a signature of Guatemalan craftsmanship, it is also a tradition that spans generations and goes back thousands of years.
- Their weaving originated over 2,500 years ago with the ancient civilization.



(Coban, Guatemala)

- There is limited information in regards to the ancient clothing styles because so few fibers remain. Archaeologists have discovered carved stone monuments and painted ceramics with pictures to identify the textile arts from the Classic period.

(Xela, Guatemala)

Maintaining Tradition



Throughout the centuries their designs remain generally the same except that now they sometimes use synthetic materials since they are cheaper.

In recent years there has been a greater emphasis put on wearing the native style of dress as a way to ensure the survival of their history and culture. People have become more aware of the fact that the indigenous communities are in danger of disappearing.



The indigenous peoples of Guatemala currently represent over half of the population. Sadly, illiteracy and poverty are the highest among this group.

It's hard to understand why people try to erase our cultural history. There is so much to be learned from the origins of the native peoples, along with their values and beliefs.

People should be able to live in harmony while having both national and cultural identities.

As a result of having to flee their villages many women went to the capital to get jobs in textile plants. After working all day, they are tired and do not want to weave when they get home. This is an example of why the art of weaving is dying out in this country.



Efforts have been made to encourage the revival of the traditional dress.

In Guatemala's National Assembly women have made a point to wear their huipiles to all official events. Rigoberta Menchu, a recipient of the Noble Peace Prize in the year 1992, wore her traditional huipil to receive her award in Norway.

By wearing their traditional clothing, women in important positions empower other women to do the same, while highlighting the importance of their heritage.





- There are organizations like the (FTM) Foundation for Maya Traditions that work with Mayan weavers in Guatemala so they can connect to US markets and have a better source of income.
- FTM works with the native weavers to design culturally rich products that are of high quality and help them develop business skills.
- They also carry out social programs in education and health to help support the many rural communities where the weavers live.

A close-up portrait of Rigoberta Menchu, a Guatemalan indigenous woman. She is wearing a blue headscarf with a white pattern, a red and green embroidered blouse, and a silver necklace with a circular pendant. She has a warm, smiling expression.

**WE ARE NOT
MYTHS OF THE
PAST, RUINS IN
THE JUNGLE, OR
ZOOS. WE ARE
PEOPLE AND WE
WANT TO BE
RESPECTED, NOT
TO BE VICTIMS OF
INTOLERANCE
AND RACISM.**

—RIGOBERTA MENCHU—

If we allow our traditions to be lost, we lose the ability to connect with our ancestors and to understand who we are as people, also the art and tradition of our heritage.

Demetrio Cojti, one of only five indigenous professors at the University of San Carlos, Guatemala's largest university said, "It is a form of national oppression designed to make Guatemala Mayan-free," "If an Indian wants to save himself economically, he has to die culturally."

We tend to forget that the Maya culture was an advanced culture in its time. There is much that we can still learn from their traditions and culture as with other ancient cultures.

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