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Contextualizing the Debate on Weaving Groups and Development: Mayan Weaving and the Changing Politics of Identity in Guatemala

Jodi Martin

On one hand, weaving groups have been praised as a creative way to organize and empower Mayan women while improving their families’ access to resources. On the other hand, they have also been criticized (Green 1999, Bachrach-Ehlers 2000) for their lack of positive impact on the families and communities they aim to assist, and for using weaving - a product rich in cultural significance - for development purposes. Why has weaving as a means of “development” been the subject of so much attention? In Guatemala much of this debate centers on the relationship between weaving and cultural identity among Highland Maya groups. For example, Linda Green argues that weaving for development projects creates a shift in the relationship between women and cloth, and that weaving “under new socioeconomic arrangements that alter[ed] social relations of production, time, and the aesthetics of making cloth, undermined an important aspect of Mayan cultural production” (Green 1999:147). This is one example of the many criticisms which assume that weaving as an expression of culture and identity is an activity “frozen in time”, an activity expressing only local processes, and rooted unproblematically in the past. This paper will deal with this assumption by exploring how weaving as a cultural symbol has been used to express the changing politics of Mayan identity and thus illustrate that like culture, these expressions of identity are not static, but instead a dynamic means of communicating cultural experiences within specific social, political, and historical contexts.

Historically, many Maya women certainly wove clothing and household pieces for themselves and their families, however, weavings have also long been the site of commerce and trade in Mesoamerica. Robert Hill, in his study of Kaqchikel Maya adaptations to Spanish Rule, explains how resources were diversified throughout the Maya world depending on climate, geography, and environment. This diversification made it necessary for Maya groups to trade with others in order to access various goods (Hill 1992: 15). Pre-conquest market sites have been identified throughout the highlands and some of these have endured despite the reorganization of communities by the Spanish, and subsequently by the Guatemalan state according to national economic aims.

Sheldon Annis (who studied the difference between Catholic and Protestant weavers in Guatemala) argues that weaving for commercial purposes is not a new phenomenon (Annis 1987:124). In addition to a woman traditionally weaving for others in her community, weavings were used in long distance trade as early as the 10th and 11th century in the Valley of Mexico, and even offered to Columbus by the Chontal Yucatec at Guananja in 1502 (Annis 1987:125). The use of weavings for commercial purposes continued after the Spanish conquest and in the highlands it was common to use cotton cloth to pay tribute to the new crown. Community tribute obligations often required input from each member family, and wives and daughters could offer their contributions by weaving cloth (Hill 1992: 120). Although weavings had obvious utilitarian and commercial functions in trade and tribute, their importance as symbols of Maya culture extends beyond these roles.

As both an art form and a cultural text weaving transcends several different spheres of Maya life. Weaving on the loom, and particularly the backstrap loom, is a material expression of
Mayan culture (Green 1999:128) which is as much about the process of weaving as the product of weaving. Weaving as an activity is a means of teaching young Mayan women and men the importance of the symbols and signs of their culture. The choices of images, designs, motifs and colours speak of a family, community, and cultural history. The chosen patterns and combinations are both an expression of the weavers’ personal creativity and a means of transmitting “traditions and values from the past to the present, from one generation of women to the next” (Nash in Green 1999:128). A consideration of the iconographic images that commonly appear in the cloth: tree of life, corn plants, flowers, animals, birds, volcanoes, and people, illustrates how weaving is used by weavers to “visually recreate the world around them” (Green 1999:135). This recreation of the Mayan world through the art of weaving is both a means of reproducing Mayan epistemology and teaching this world view to the next generation (Green 1999:135). The weavings must be considered both in terms of the significance of certain designs, and the significance of these designs within specific historical, geographical and political contexts. Irma Otzoy explains that the importance of weaving is expressed in both a “visible language” (the aesthetic selections of the weaver) and a “language of silence” (expressions of political significance that the weaving implies) of both the weaver and the wearer within a sociocultural context (Otzoy 1999:147).

Maya culture is embodied in both the creation and the wearing of traje; Maya traditional woven dress. Although men and women may weave for other purposes (especially handicrafts in the current tourist market), I would argue that the popularity of such items are linked to their association with Mayan traditional dress. Weaving and traje are inextricably linked, both in the minds of consumers and in the hearts of Maya people (see Hendrickson 1995. Green 1999).

Traje, especially women’s traje, is synonymous with weaving; indeed most of a woman’s traditional clothing is woven. All of the components of traje are understood as an expression of cultural identity, however, a woman’s huipil is a particularly powerful cultural symbol. The huipil blouse is traditionally woven on a backstrap loom and its elements exemplify the cultural importance of weaving both in the past and present. The huipil can serve as an example of not only the strong relationship between weaving and identity but furthermore how a changing politics of identity can be adopted by and expressed within traditional forms of material culture. I will now discuss three different statements that one’s woven clothing can express to others. These could be labeled expressions of: community identity, national identity (pueblo maya), and pan-mayan identity.

Community Identity

Mayan women occupy a very important cultural position within their communities, and the wearing of trajes is a statement not only about membership in a specific cultural community but about pride in that membership. The design of the huipil and furthermore how the piece is worn communicates the distinctive style and patterns of a specific community (Hendrickson 1995. Bachrach-Ehlers 2000, Otzoy 1999). These stylistic boundaries are flexible enough to encourage creativity and personal expression in the designs, motifs, and patterns of a given weaving, but maintain a certain continuity with the past which allows other Maya women to identify its origins. As Carol Hendrickson in her study of traje in Tecpan explains: “change itself can be a predictable, enduring quality of life” (Hendrickson 1995:197), and it is this predictability and endurance of certain stylistic elements that enables women to continue to identify the origin of garments. These stylistic continuums can be so entrenched as to allow a trained eye to identify not only the community or municipality of the wearer but their specific aldea or cantón within that municipality (Annis 1987:119).

Hill argued that this connection between weaving and community identity emerged in the 17th century, when increasing land scarcity made it extremely important for communities as “corporations” seeking land titles to be able to identify who belonged and who did not (Hill 1992). This need to identify community members was exacerbated by the creation of new communities through Spanish congregación, meaning that many community members could not identify each other without the distinctive dress.

The style of the huipil and how it is worn can also indicate information about a person’s status within Mayan society. This is indicated by a combination of age (of the garment), quality of thread, and quality and artistic merit of the
National Identity

In Guatemala’s recent past the wearing of a huipil, or any form of traje, also carried additional symbolism. This symbolism is embedded within the primary purpose of traje – to express one’s material culture. This expression of Mayan identity became particularly important in the context of the continuing repression and violence facing both indigenous communities and their advocates in Guatemala’s highlands.

During the 36 year civil war, and particularly during the terror of the state’s counter-insurgency campaigns of the early 1980’s, many forms of political expression or organization were either silenced or driven underground (and made very risky). In this context the decision to wear traje expressed not only commitment to one’s community, but pride in being a member of the pueblo Maya. This expression of Mayanness in the face of danger connected Maya from many different communities to each other. In this way the wearing of traje, despite the constant threat of military violence as a direct result of such identification, can express and teach other Maya communities to each other. In this way the traje allows people to express one's cultural identity by wearing clothes that are specific to their community.

Pan-Maya Identity

I have illustrated how traje can express both community membership, and political resistance. Discussing traje with reference to the growing Pan-Maya movement in Guatemala will illustrate how traje can be “part of a larger cultural politics” (Hendrickson 1995: 198). The Pan-Maya project has aimed to unite Guatemala’s 20 Maya ethnic groups (Warren 1998:16) while still maintaining and respecting the differences between them. Kay Warren summarizes that “their strategy is to erode internal divisions and localized identifications to create an encompassing ‘imagined community’” (Warren 2000: 298). At the centre of this project is a focus and examination of what it means to be Maya. This construction of an “essential Mayanness” has focused not only on history but also on the different ways that Maya communities express and transmit their identity. Many of the projects have focused on an examination and maintenance of Mayan languages as they are considered a truly non-Hispanic marker of this identity (Warren 2000:298). However, traje also bears mention as its use has been co-opted by the movement to express Mayan identities for political ends. Through the periods of violence, the peace process, and now an increasing awareness of the Pan-Maya movement, choosing to wear traje has become symbolic of more than simply membership in a particular community. As John Watanabe argues, wearing traje “has also become a more politically self-conscious affirmation of Maya identity” (Watanabe 1995: 37). Both Hendrickson and Watanabe note that many Maya women have begun to wear traje from many different communities. When asked, Linda Green found that women explained “no importa, somos indígenas” (Green 1999:142). This very idea expresses the growing sense of awareness among tight knit communities of a larger common Mayan identity. Though traje has been an expression of one’s awareness of and membership in a specific community, borrowing dress from other communities is a powerful statement about a commitment to something larger. Through traje, women can express their commitment to pan-mayanism and as Watanabe argues remind others that “what is Maya is not alien to Maya” (Watanabe 1995: 37) despite its specific local origins.

It is within this framework of identities and expressions of culture and politics that we find the parallel commodification of these designs and motifs on an international level. Women, organized into weaving groups as a strategy for “development” are using a skill that they have long possessed to create woven goods for tourists in Guatemala and for sale on the international market. There is still much to be debated about whether weaving is an appropriate site for development, but in examining how weaving has been a site for expressing the changing politics of
Mayan identity it becomes clear that one underlying assumption of the criticism is not valid. Weaving is not only an expression of local processes, but instead reflects both broader political processes and economic linkages – not just today but also in historical contexts. Any examinations of weaving as a development tool must consider weaving not only as a means of teaching and communicating traditional Mayan worldviews but also as a means of expressing contemporary Mayan experiences as indigenous peoples, as members of their communities, and as Guatemalans.

Bibliography


