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Textiles Recorded: Fashion Reconstructed Through Aztec Codices

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The historical documentation of the use of textiles during the Aztec empire as tribute offerings and sumptuary laws indicates the elevated role of textiles at the time. Yet, further research is warranted on the artistry of these textiles. This is difficult because the climate of central Mexico is not conducive to preserving fiber materials; fortunately, the rich manuscripts of this region preserve many images of textiles created during the Aztec empire. Early colonial manuscripts, many of which are copies of pre-conquest manuscripts no longer extant, preserve images of textiles from the pre-conquest period. These manuscripts provide invaluable information regarding the regional variations, creation technologies and costume elements for textiles.

This paper explores images and texts of two groups of textiles: textiles with diagonal bifurcations, and jaguar related textiles found in the Codex Mendoza, the Matrícula de Tributos, the Codex Magliabechiano and the Florentine Codex. These textile groups provide insights into the naming practices, materials and status given to textiles in central Mexico at the time of the Aztec Empire.

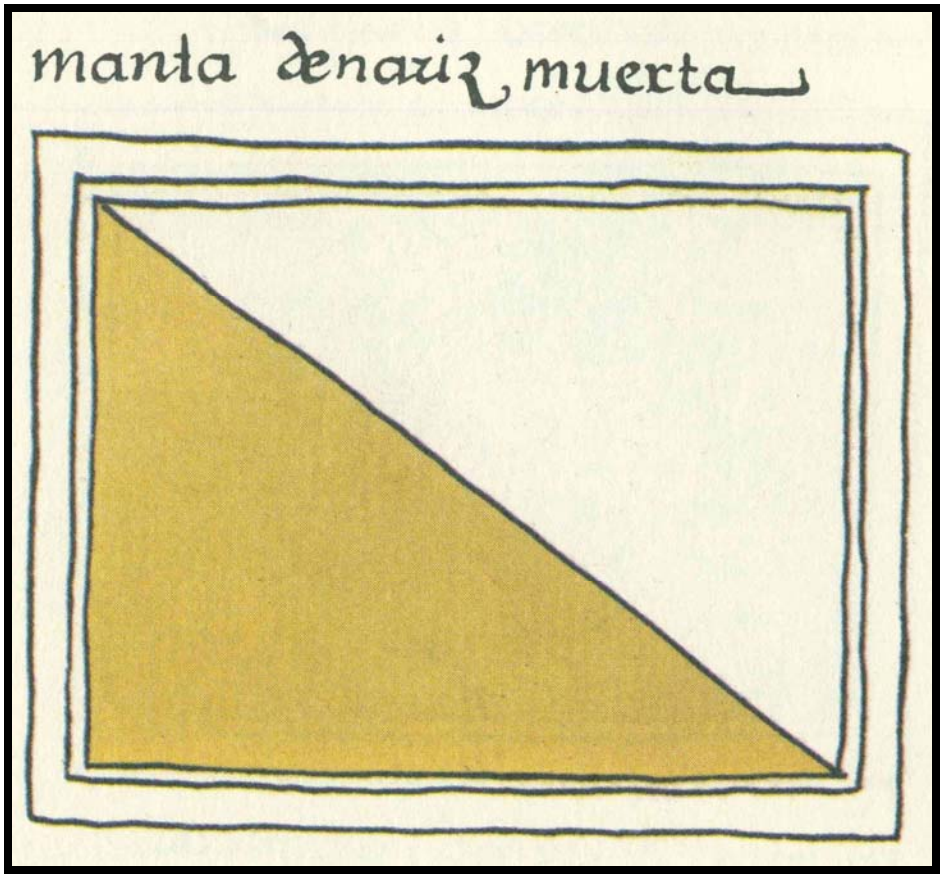

Figure 1. *Codex Magliabechiano, folio 6v. Illustration of "Mantle of Dead Nose" textile. Reprinted by permission from Codex Magliabechiano 1983, folio 6v.*

***Nacazminqui* Textiles**

According to the Florentine Codex, "for the fifth one whom he captured, then he gained great honor … Then Moctezuma gave him a long blue labret and a head band with [two] tufts of [eagle] feathers, perchance with silver flint knives [between the eagle feathers], and leather ear plugs, and a bright red, rich, netting cape. And also he was then given a cape of two colors divided diagonally, and a leather cape."[1] The Nahuatl text identifies this textile as *chicoapalnacazminqui*. The image accompanying this text depicts a textile diagonally bifurcated, with two solid color blocks. An illustration from the Codex Magliabechiano is nearly identical to the Florentine Codex image, however, the gloss is given in Spanish as the "Mantle of Dead nose."

While the Florentine text describes this textile as a gift to a warrior after capturing five enemies, the ethnographic section of the Codex Mendoza (folio 64r) differs slightly from this description by illustrating a warrior who has captured four enemies alongside an image of a textile. The gloss does not identify the textile's design as *nacazminqui*, rather it merely states that "This warrior [receives] the style of warrior costume he is wearing and this square manta of two stripes of black and orange with its border in honor of having captured four enemies in battle."[2]

Figure 2. *Codex Mendoza, folio 64 r. Illustration of a warrior who has captured four enemies.*

[1] Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain.* Trans. and eds. Arthur J.O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble. Monographs of the School of American Research, Book 8: 77 (Salt Lake City: Salt Lake City Press, 1950-1982).

[2] *The Codex Mendoza*, Translated and edited by F.F. Berdan and P.R. Anawalt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) vol. 2, 184.

Reprinted by permission from Codex Mendoza 1992, folio 31r.

The tribute section of the Codex Mendoza also includes textiles with diagonal bifurcations. While these textiles appear quite different from the previously shown nacazminqui textiles, and there is no gloss in the Codex Mendoza identifying the name of the design, the Matrícula de Tributos includes images of the same textile with a gloss identifying the textile as nacazminqui. Ten textiles of four different designs with the nacazminqui gloss are in the Matrícula de Tributos. These designs include textiles that look similar to the images in the tribute section of the Codex Mendoza.

Figure 3. *Codex Mendoza, folio 31r. Textiles given as tribute with the nacazminqui design. Reprinted by permission from Codex Mendoza 1992, folio 31r.*

These different images and glosses can most easily be divided into two groups, those with both image and text and those with only one or the other. The Codex Magliabechiano includes a Spanish gloss identifying the textile design as "Mantle of Dead Nose."[3] The English translation of nacazminqui is "his ear is pierced" (*nacaztli* – ear; *min* - to pierce). The Codex Magliabechiano is clearly a mistranslation. Elizabeth Boone attributes this difference to the scribe having misread and mistranslated nacazminqui as *nacazmiqui*,[4] thus translating the verb as *miqui*, meaning to die. But this does not account for why the body part would be translated as nose (which is *yacatl* in Nahuatl) instead of ear. It is possible that certain elements that were given in conjunction with this level of warrior rank created confusion in translating this motif's

[3] *The Book of the Life of the Ancient Mexicans*, ed. Zelia Nuttall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 6v. The Codex Magliabechiano gloss reads in Spanish "manta de nariz muerta."

[4] Elizabeth Hill Boone, *The Codex Magliabechiano and the Lost Prototype of the Magliabechiano Group* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) 174.

name. In the Codex Mendoza, the warrior who has captured four enemies is shown with the black and orange nacazminqui textile and also with the *cuexyo* shield (see Fig. 2). The *cuexyo* shield is decorated with four Huastec nose ornaments.[5] This could be the connection between the nacazminqui textile and associations with the nose. In order to make this "mis-translation", the scribe must have been familiar with the larger group of adornments that accompanied the nacazminqui textile as a gift to the warrior. This indicates the importance of the group of items, as well as the strong association between the warrior rank and the name of the nacazminqui textile.

The Florentine Codex and the Matrícula de Tributos also provide both image and text in Nahuatl. The images from these two codices illustrate several key features of nacazminqui textiles. First, all of the textiles have a diagonal bifurcation. While this seems obvious, it is important to recognize the graphic layout, which is the strongest shared characteristic between these textiles. Second, the color schemes and designs of the two sections are not the same in any of these images. The first design depicted in the Matricula de Tributos is diagonally bifurcated, with one half solid yellow and the other half the blue and white tie-dyed design. The second design depicted is diagonally bifurcated, with one half solid red and the other half the blue and white tie-dyed design. The third design has a lateral bifurcation, with the left half solid red and the right half diagonally bifurcated, with one half (or one quarter of the total textile) solid yellow and the other half the blue and white tie-dyed design. The final depiction of the nacazminqui design is a textile, diagonally divided, but not in equal halves. The larger bottom section includes the Tlaloc motif, which is found on other tribute textiles from the Codex Magliabechiano, folio 6r and the Codex Mendoza, folio 37r, while the top section is a solid black color field.

If only the first three nacazminqui designs from the Matrícula de Tributos are considered, it would appear that the blue and white tie-dyed designs are a crucial element in the *nacazminqui* design. While the Tlaloc version of the nacazminqui textile does not include blue and white tie-dye, the Tlaloc design does impart an element of technical virtuosity and higher status than a plain color field. There are no glossed depictions of nacazminqui textiles in the Matrícula de Tributos where both sections of the textile is comprised of solid color fields, as depicted in the Florentine Codex or Codex Magliabechiano. These differences further illustrate the significance of the diagonal bifurcation for nacazminqui textiles. It would seem then, that in order to qualify as a nacazminqui textile, the woven or dyed design is subordinate to the graphic design of the textile. The variations in the woven and dyed designs might indicate more subtle differences in the status associated with these textiles. According to the Florentine Codex text, these textiles would have been given to a warrior after capturing five enemies. There is no indication what would be given to a warrior after capturing six, or seven or eight warriors. Perhaps these variations are an indication of an increase in the status.

Further supporting this conclusion is the Codex Mendoza ethnographic section. While the Codex Mendoza text indicates that these textiles would be given after capturing four enemies in battle, it is also the highest status of warrior according to number of enemies captured. The textile shown in the Codex Mendoza also has two plain color fields. In this way, the nacazminqui textile might function as the United States military symbols for rank, where stars are employed to denote a

[5] Frances F. Berdan and Patricia R. Anawalt, *Essential Codex Mendoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 184.

rank. Just as a brigadier general wears one star and a major general wears two stars, rank in the Aztec military could have been determined by the design of the material in the two sections of the nacazminqui textile.

An overwhelming majority of the images of nacazminqui textiles are shown with a blue-tie dyed design. According to Patricia Anawalt, this design is of particularly high status, as exemplified by the Aztec emperor frequently being illustrated wearing a cape with a blue tie-dyed design.[6] The images of nacazminqui textiles in the first section of the Codex Magliabechiano and the Codex Mendoza ethnographic section can still be considered depictions of nacazminqui textiles, but probably of a lower status than the images present in the Codex Mendoza tribute section or the Matrícula de Tributos.

Further confusing the significance of nacazminqui textiles are textiles with non-diagonal bifurcations, where one of the halves is the blue tie-dyed motif. According to the Codex Mendoza, four provinces provided textiles that were laterally bifurcated, with half in the blue tie-dye motif and half solid red. While some scholars include these vertically bifurcated textiles in the nacazminqui category, I maintain that nacazminqui textiles must have a diagonal division.[7] There is no mention in the Florentine Codex of a textile divided in two rectangular halves, nor are there vertically bifurcated textiles labeled as nacazminqui textiles in the Matrícula de Tributos. It seems more likely that these vertically bifurcated textiles are not nacazminqui textiles. These textiles are undoubtedly still high status, as the blue tie-dyed motif connotes. However, I believe that the creative process for the vertically bifurcated, red and blue tie-dyed textile was less intensive than that for the diagonally bifurcated nacazminqui textile, and thus, perhaps loaned the final product a lower status. Since the entire textile was not created using the tie-dye technique, it can be assumed that the two sections, of either style of textile, were created independently and then joined together. One of the limitations of the backstrap loom is that the width of a textile can only be created to be slightly larger than the width of the weaver. This creates textiles that can vary greatly in length, but not in width. In order to make the vertically bifurcated textile, it would thus only have been necessary to plain weave two sections and join them after the tie-dye process. In order to make the nacazminqui textile, which requires joining triangular pieces, a more elaborate process would have been necessary.

The significance and variety of nacazminqui textiles is only discerned by analyzing several codices. Nacazminqui textiles were associated with high-ranking warriors, and the absence or presence of a high status design, such as the tie-dyed motif, as well as the type of bifurcation, diagonally or vertically, imparted a different significance. It would seem then that the absence of the blue tie-dyed design in the warrior repertory would indicate that this textile was not as highly valued as a diagonally bifurcated textile with the blue tie-dyed design.

Jaguar Motif Textiles

The second example that highlights the importance of using multiple codices in a textile analysis is textiles incorporating jaguar motifs. Jaguar patterns were manifested on textiles using three materials. First and most frequently depicted, warrior costumes with jaguar-skin patterns were

[6] Anawalt, “Comparative Analysis” 139.
[7] Anawalt, “Comparative Analysis” 139.

made of feathers. Second, there were textiles with a woven, or possibly painted, design of jaguar spots. Finally, actual jaguar pelts were used.

Warrior costumes were given in conjunction with military rank. According to the Codex Mendoza ethnographic section, jaguar costumes were "in honor of having captured four enemies in battle."[8] Nine provinces are identified in the Codex Mendoza as giving jaguar warrior costumes.[9] The Codex Mendoza tribute section indicates that eight of the nine provinces annually gave "one warrior costume of rich feathers."[10] The gloss thus identifies the material, feathers that formed the outer surface of the costume. It is likely that the feathers were attached to a cotton and/or maguey backing, which provided the structure of the costume.[11] As the majority of the provinces only gave one jaguar warrior costume annually, this would seem to indicate that the costumes were labor-intensive and made of fine materials. None of the provinces that gave jaguar warrior costumes were feather-producing regions, as such, feathers would have been in scarce supply.

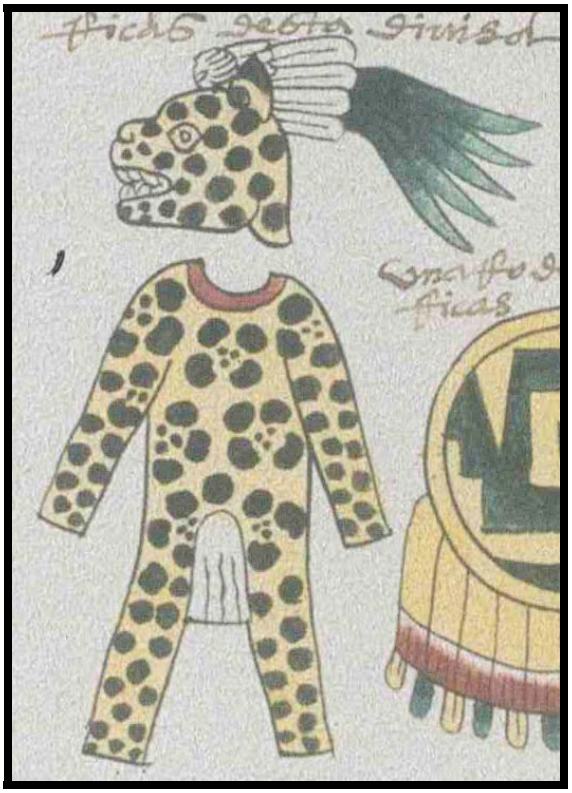

Figure 4. *Codex Mendoza, folio 31r detail. Illustration of a feathered warrior costume with a jaguar design. Reprinted by permission from Codex Mendoza 1992, folio 31r.*

There are two woven cloaks with jaguar motifs in the Codex Magliabechiano (see Figs. 5 and 6). Similar motifs can also be found in of the Codex Mendoza, which represents the tribute from the province of Xilotepec, on the northern Pacific coast. This province was inhabited by the Otomí,

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[8] Berdan and Anawalt, *Essential Mendoza*, 133.

[9] Petlacalco, Acolhuacan, Quauhnahuac, Huaxtepec, Hueypuchtla, Xilotepec, Tepequacuilco, Tlatlauhquitepec, and Tzicoac.

[10] Berdan and Anawalt, *Essential Mendoza*, 149.

[11] Luz Maria Mohar Betancourt, *Manos Artesanas del Mexico Antiguo* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional de Ciencias y Tecnología, 1997) 90.

who paid tribute to the Aztec empire. One of the main agricultural resources of this region was maguey, including processed maguey products such as *pulque* and fibers for mats and clothing. Book 10, Chapter 29 of the Florentine Codex includes a lengthy section on the Otomí, in which Sahagún describes the Otomí weavers:

> They wove; they made the wonderful capes with designs…the so-called ocelot cape… But all the Otomí women concerned themselves only with maguey fiber... Neither was the value great of what they made.[12]

This section of the Florentine Codex reveals the low status often afforded maguey textiles, but also praises the quality of textiles produced by Otomí weavers. This contradiction seems to indicate that while the design could be great, the textile was of little value due to the material used. Despite the preponderance of maguey in this region, many scholars still assert that the textiles demanded in tribute were of cotton.[13] One of the main uses of tribute textiles was for redistribution by the emperor, or more likely by the emperor's agents, as gifts. These tribute textiles, even though they were made of maguey, must have been used for this purpose, and therefore must have maintained a certain status to be given as a gift by the emperor. That this region was producing high status textiles in maguey fiber is further corroborated by other sections of text from the Florentine Codex. In Book 8, Chapter 8, one of the capes of the rulers and noblemen is described as "the maguey fiber cape with an ocelot tail pendant."[14] Again, Book 10, Chapter 20, sellers of maguey fiber capes are reported to include in their stock "the cape with the ocelot design."[15] These repeated references indicate that maguey certainly was used to create textiles that included high status design motifs.

Figure 5. *Codex Magliabechiano, folio 5v detail. Textile with a jaguar design. Reprinted by permission from Codex Magliabechiano 1983, folio 6v.*

[12] Sahagún, Book 10, 180.
[13] Berdan and Anawalt, *Essential Mendoza*, 61.
[14] Sahagún, Book 8, 23.
[15] Sahagún, Book 10, 73.

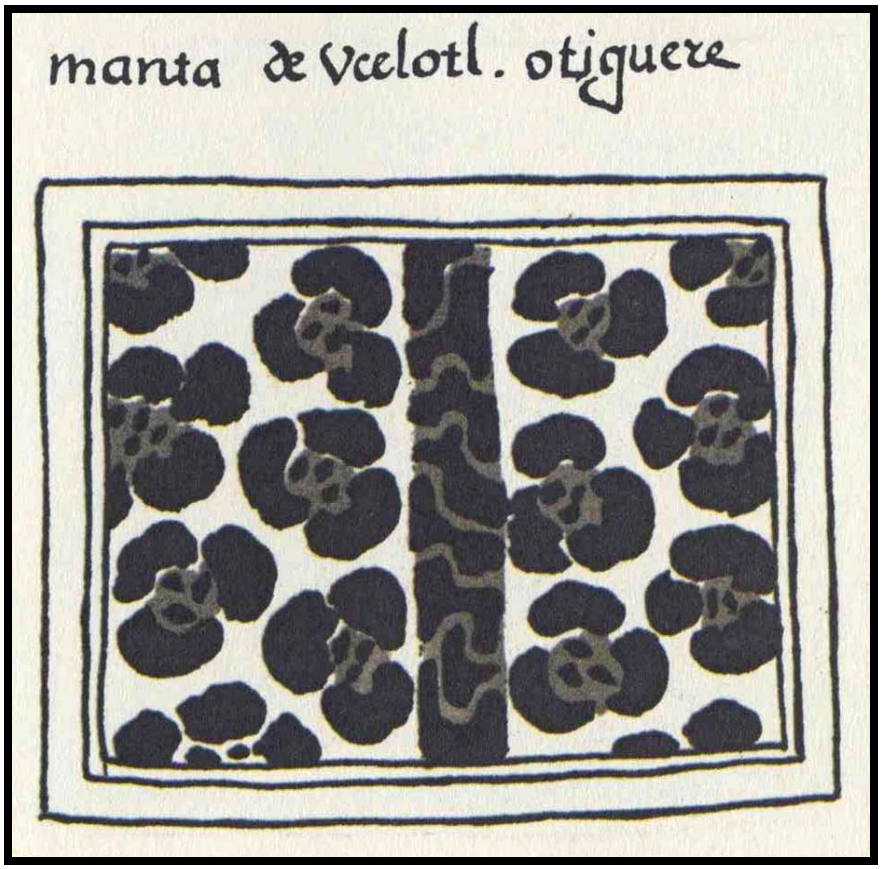

Figure 6. *Codex Magliabechiano, folio 6r detail. Textile with a jaguar design. Reprinted by permission from Codex Magliabechiano 1983, folio 6v.*

While the woven jaguar motif was not associated with a specific military rank, there are several jaguar motif textiles mentioned and depicted in the Florentine Codex in relation to nobility. The chapter describing the articles adorning noblemen is not illustrated, but there are descriptions of six different textiles with jaguar designs.[16] While the Codex Magliabechiano includes illustrations with jaguar designs appearing on cloaks, the Florentine Codex describes this design as also being used for loincloths and women's skirts.

Chapter 15 of Book 8 in the Florentine Codex describes the adornment of noblewomen. In this section there is an accompanying image of a group of textiles that includes a jaguar motif textile. These textiles are described in the text as skirts, and the jaguar textile in particular is described as "the ocelot skin skirt."[17] It would seem that the jaguar motif, unlike the nacazminqui design, is not gender specific, but rather a motif that was shared by both sexes of the nobility.

While jaguar pelts were collected from one province, Xoconochco, they were probably not used as clothing items, as wearing animal skins was typically associated with being uncivilized. The

[16] Sahagún, Book 8, 23. Seven textiles are described, with the "ocelot cape" mentioned twice; thus only six distinct designs are described.
[17] Sahagún, Book 8, 47.

inclusion of the pelts in the tribute list still provides valuable information, however, as it demonstrates the convention used for illustrating jaguar spots.
Jaguars were frequently used throughout Mesoamerica in order to exemplify the most powerful land predator. The wearer of the jaguar warrior costume drew "inspiration from the jaguar, a powerful and much revered feline."[18] This design motif highlights the hierarchy of materials that was present in the Aztec Empire, and the creativity of the indigenous textile artists who used such a variety of materials to create different effects with the same design.

Conclusion

These are only two examples of the necessity to evaluate textiles by using multiple codices. The nacazminqui design is particularly important in gaining an understanding of Aztec naming conventions for textiles. In this case, the graphic design was prioritized over the woven or dyed designs that were imparted on the fabric. Within this group of textiles, varying degrees of status could be communicated, as determined by the woven or dyed designs in the separate sections. Jaguar related textiles exemplify the variety of materials used to create designs on textiles. The different materials imbued the textiles with varying degrees of status. By using multiple codices, it is also possible to determine some of the uses of these motifs. While the nacazminqui design was seemingly limited to high status warrior, jaguar motifs were worn by warriors, noblemen, and noblewomen. The different information presented in the codices allows for a more nuanced understanding of textiles and their uses during the Aztec Empire.

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[18] Anawalt, "Comparative Analysis" 116.