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“The British are coming! A contraband cloth tsunami flows over Maya handicrafts and homespun in The Kingdom of Guatemala, 1760-1820”

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Latin America today has a lower perceived place on the global scale of development in comparison to other Western regions, however incorrect that assumption may be. And, Central American nations, in particular, seemingly fulfill that notion. One might ask, why did the nations of Middle America not become industrialized at an earlier point in their histories? If those nations had at their disposal adequate land, natural resources, and labor, as well as ports for exit for their products, why did they not advance in the 18th and 19th centuries alongside other northern hemispheric nations? This research paper investigates the thriving colonial textile industry that existed at the end of the former “Kingdom of Guatemala,” which consisted of modern-day Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, while assessing the capabilities for transporting the product of local labor, the gender and racial stratification of that production, and class interference in its success. At the same time, it is important to identify and explain the long-term devastating effects of elite preferences and their damage to local textile production with the influx of foreign textiles clandestinely through the port at Belize. This study emerges from the 18th and early 19th century documentation from the Central American Archive in Guatemala City, utilizing primary sources that include complaints from guild weavers, waybills and receipts of cloth and general textiles crossing local and regional borders, pawnshop and other activity dealing in stolen textiles or illegal European imports, and official as well as unofficial correspondence.

The Kingdom of Guatemala was a peripheral colonial region within Spanish America and it existed in the shadow of Mexico to the North and Peru to the South. The area is heavily mountainous, contains numerous volcanoes, and has frequent earthquake activity and a climate of tropical rainforests with banana and pineapple plantations, cloud forest highlands, and temperate zones perfect for coffee production. Most of the urban areas are in the cooler highlands and sit anywhere from 2300-7000 feet in elevation for Spring-like temperatures year round and avoidance of mosquitoes. Guatemala is the main focus here, partly because of its importance as the seat of colonial and ecclesiastical governance, as well as its economic prominence in the Colonial Era. Guatemala also claimed the highest overall population in Central America and the densest indigenous population of Maya extraction.

For the colonial period, essentially the Pacific side was largely ignored for road and port development since, within the space of 50 miles, one had to physically carry or ox-cart items upwards 1000s of feet in elevation. Even to the mid-19th century Central America’s Pacific coastline seemed daunting to anyone attempting to consider delivering imports from the coastline to the capital or goods from the highlands to export to the coast. The shallow nature of the Pacific ports prevented most shipping transport because of the distance ships needed to stay away from the coastline in order to not run aground. Stories about Maya men bracing themselves in the waves at the time of independence, forced to carry foreigners on their shoulders to bring them to the long boats with a healthy fear of sharks, permeate the accounts as
well.\textsuperscript{1} Even with the later 19\textsuperscript{th} century introduction of smaller boats, and a pulley rope with an iron cage for embarking and disembarking, and, eventually, a mile long pier did not make things very much easier.\textsuperscript{2}

The old capital of Guatemala, La Antigua, sits in a beautiful valley at the base of the extinct Volcán de Agua. A series of calamities struck the city at the close of the colonial era that caused serious disruption at all levels of the textile industry. A devastating series of earthquakes struck in 1773 that essentially leveled the city and, over the course of the next few years, caused the government to issue a royal decree forcing the inhabitants to move to another, safer valley over 20 miles away. It certainly caused dislocation in every sense of the word to the inhabitants of what had been the largest of the cities of Central America. As the esteemed Central American historian, R. Lee Woodward, states, “Many artisans were ruined, for their labor was required in construction work, and in the meantime the rising imports of European manufactures undermined their own craft trades, leaving them unemployed once the construction of the new city was finished.”\textsuperscript{3} This hardship after death and loss of property was just the beginning. Even after the removal of the capital to the present-day Guatemala City site, further disasters struck. In 1780, Guatemala suffered a smallpox epidemic, then in 1802 and 1803 there was a plague of locusts that caused the destruction of much of the indigo producing regions and food shortages. As if that were not bad enough, there were significant droughts in the years 1803 and 1810 further damaging agricultural lands and hurting cotton production, putting a strain on the colonial currency supply.

Central America has hot and steamy coastal lands that did not encourage high population densities in the era before banana cultivation and air conditioning. Cultivators of cotton, sheep herders and producers of wool, spinners, weavers, and purchasers of domestic and imported textiles all preferred to live in the highlands. However, even after two centuries of Spanish colonial control, there were only two main roads, one leading North to Mexico and South towards Costa Rica and the other out to the Caribbean through British Honduras. In the dry season those roads were clouds of choking dust from ox carts. In the rainy season they were mud tracks where one could end up near waist deep and stuck. The only major river from Caribbean inland, the Motagua, did not even come close to reaching the capital city and bridges other than rope bridges of indigenous origin were too narrow for actual cart travel. To add to the difficulty of the situation, all around the mountainous region were steep ravines. These are but a few of the reasons that retarded the advent of true industrialization since transport to markets is key to success. Truthfully, Guatemalan elites opposed economic advancement for other elements of the society and had no interest in investing in infrastructural improvements that might have hurt their own commercial gains importing expensive foreign manufactures. Suggestions were that while the merchant elite and guild system supported and encouraged

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1} Just look at the cover image of Mary Louise Pratt, \textit{Imperial Eyes: Travel Writers and Transculturation} (New York: Routledge, 1992), for an example of the cargador and his European cargo sitting in a chair.
\item \textsuperscript{2} Descriptions of the cage and pier harrowing experiences appear in the water color drawings of Caroline Salvin in her posthumously published diary \textit{A Pocket Eden: Guatemalan Journals, 1873-1874} (South Woodstock: Plumsuck Mesoamerican Studies, 2000) and in the publication by Anne Cary and Alfred Percival Maudsley, \textit{A Glimpse at Guatemala and Some Notes on the Ancient Monuments of Central America} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
\end{itemize}
economic development, they “shunned improvements of ports and roads that might divert trade
and production away from the capital’s merchants.”

The confines of the modern-day Guatemalan highlands had a minority elite, Spanish and
American-born Spanish population, a sizeable Ladino or Latinized/Hispanicized population of
mixed-race or culturally mixed groups, a small mulatto population, and a large Maya Indian
population. These groups were, for the most part, either Spanish-speaking or speaking one of
the dozens of Maya languages in the area. For instance, the population of Santa María de Jesús, at
nearly 7000’ elevation on the side of an extinct volcano was still 98% indigenous through the
close of the 1900s and speaking the Kaqchikel language. They were responsible for bringing ice
from Agua volcano as well as firewood to the capital at Antigua at its base in the colonial era.

While not all Guatemalans were weavers, they all wore clothing and utilized cloth for utilitarian
and religious purposes. Elites as well as mixed race populations normally purchased their cloth
and clothing, and there also existed a small, but distinct population of African heritage in the
colonial period who worked as household servants, tavern waitresses, shop clerks, and general
laborers. Either their employers had to purchase clothing for them, or they had to buy it
themselves. To an observer of the late colonial era, an elite, whether Spaniard or would have
worn elaborate fashions of imported fabrics in imitation of the latest styles in Europe. One of
mixed-race or lower status might have been identified by a poorer imitation of the elite dress.
Indigenous women and men wore distinctive costuming particular to their language group, town,
and sometimes even neighborhood. While the value of the individual articles of clothing would
seem obviously to vary according to origin, cut, and quality, that is too simple a guess. The
huipile, or traditional blouse of an indigenous woman, handmade usually at her own hands, her
morga (a heavy cotton wrap around skirt), and oftentimes a tightly wound belt at the waist made
up her traje, or complete outfit. By the close of the Colonial era, Mayan men’s outfits varied
greatly, some with split pants over homespun white trousers, others with elaborate embroidery
on the base of short trousers, and still more with checkered woolen aprons over their outfits in
the colder regions.

At the time of the separation of Central America from Spanish control in the 1820s, what had
emerged was the distinction of women’s textile production being relegated to the marginality of
the stick loom and associated with indigenous practice. Male Maya production of woolen pieces
was exclusively for indigenous men’s usage, and the foot loom production with Maya and mixed
race populations created rough cotton pieces of inferior quality for the lower classes and workers
in society. Those of primarily or “pure” Iberian heritage continued their guild memberships
copying European styles, and the wealthiest in society contributed heavily to the importation of
expensive goods. The inventories of the storehouses, pawnshops, and wills of the wealthy
abound in luxury fabrics and clothing from England, India, France, and China from silks to
Rouans, chambray, lace, and printed cottons.

To be true to the traditions of the master Spanish weavers, one had to sit at the loom with the 18th
century technology of pulleys and pedals. Where would the Maya men, the primary labor force
in the colonial period, or the mixed race populations fit into this skilled labor equation? If

weaving had existed solely associated with female labor from time immemorial amongst the Maya, how could their men become weavers? There exists much documentation to support that there were early obrajes, or rudimentary organizations of factory labor to produce textiles in colonial Mesoamerica. There is evidence to support the creation of weaving guilds and the domination of commercialized fabric production by men in urban areas that was sent to the cattle ranches and mining camps of Nicaragua, the indigo plantations of El Salvador, and for general use by laborers and servants in and around the Kingdom of Guatemala. How could men produce these goods without figuratively emasculating themselves from a cultural standpoint?

Ultimately, Maya men would reject stick-looms along with the spinning of cotton as “feminine”, restricting cotton usage to foot-loomed utilitarian plain manta, or generic commercially produced yardage. These men psychologically could justify their entrance into the world of loom technology by: first, suggesting footlooms were foreign in origin and associated with the conquering peoples; second, by being seated in a chair, stool, or on a bench, men were physically raised off the ground; third, they focused on utilitarian plain cotton yardage that was cut off the frame rather than smaller selvedged handloom pieces. Men also adapted to the introduction of sheep and the foreign use of woolens in clothing by becoming the exclusive weavers and occasional spinners of wool, though women might card and spin. The men additionally wove in pita fiber for loose rope bags.

Why were women not the recipients of this new knowledge and technology of Spanish treadle loom weaving? One possibility was simply the continuation of a gendered tradition of male master weavers. Maya women, as a racial and gendered minority, were physically lowered by sitting or kneeling at ground level to weave, evidence of their lowered social status. Women also retained the traditions of cotton textile production for home, not commercial use, with elaborate pattern and symbolism designating language-specific and town-specific information as well as religious and cultural beliefs. Their goods, however beautiful, and their looms, however portable and adaptable to changes in tension and manipulation of design, could not compete with the requirements of extra yardage for Spanish clothing styles or the speed with which a footloom could accomplish that goal. A Maya woman, depending on the size and intricacy of her weave, could spend anywhere from one to three months to complete a single shirt or carrying cloth. There was also the mistaken notion by Guatemalan elites that the simplicity of the stick loom itself indicated simplicity, and thus lack of prestige, for the finished product.

The elite of Guatemala hit the top of economic prosperity and social control between 1760 and 1810. Much of this change tied directly to the Bourbon Reforms and reorganization of the colonies and colonial control in Spain’s remaining decades of power. War between Britain and Spain in 1798 caused the biggest consumer of indigo, Britain, to reduce. After defeat at Trafalgar in 1805, Spain could not “suppress the contraband trade or protect their shipping lanes” which “meant that the flow of trade…via Belize continued without hindrance.” That, plus locusts and droughts as well as competition for indigo production in Venezuela and India sent the death knell for indigo, the largest money maker in Colonial Central America. However, it was still illegal to trade directly between Guatemala and Britain. Illicit trade abounded on the Caribbean coastline in dyewoods, indigo, and sugar with grain, cloth, and even taxes and tithes being paid in indigo. A decline in the power of Spain to hold onto its colonies meant a rise in

Woodward, *Central America, A Nation Divided*, 73.
English contraband with “cheap, manufactured textiles, destroying the local textile industry of highland Guatemala.”[7] The intrusions of British textiles into the ports of the former Kingdom of Guatemala and the resultant destruction of its own textile industry occurred within the triangle of trade in Salvadoran indigo, lowland cotton, and highland weaving.

What is heavily documented and supportive of the importance of textiles in colonial society and their production and usage by the entire breadth of society is in regard to illicit trade. Historian Murdo MacLeod provides extensive coverage about contraband trade coming out of the Caribbean and flowing through ports on the Central American coastline earlier in the colonial period and it only continued throughout the remainder of Spain’s control. [8] Spanish forces could not keep up with the demand for the goods and their inadequate fortresses and military might could not plug all of the holes in the dam from Belize to Honduras, while merchants loaded with illegal foreign textiles found their way into the capital city of the Kingdom and to other areas in the highlands. The leaders of the merchant elite “imported cheap foreign fabrics that, in turn, destroyed the cotton and wool industries in interior Guatemala and, particularly, the textile artisans in and around the cities of Quezaltenango and Antigua.”[9] The system of forced labor, or repartimiento, was no longer reliable for the labor of indigenous peoples and Guatemalan producers of cotton and wool could not compete with industrialized foreign competition. There had been thousands of artisans and dozens of towns devoted solely to the weaving industry and all suffered. By 1818, the newly appointed head of the Guatemalan colonial government arrived and observed that everyone was “dressed the same—in English articles.”[10] While he did not mean the Maya villagers, the elites had made clear their disdain for locally produced fabrics and styles and a preference for foreign imports. Even with royal orders banning the importation of cotton goods in 1811 and again in 1816, nothing could stem the tide of, particularly, British textiles.[11]

With changes overseas due to Napoleon, a treaty in 1809 made England and Spain allies against the French, which then had a direct effect on the opening of relations with the colonies in Central America. Per Woodward:

Trade expanded rapidly, and Belize, although its inhabitants numbered fewer than 5000 took on a more prosperous appearance as new construction sprang up. In 1810...the British had successfully established bases that facilitated extensive illicit trade. It had damaged not only the Spanish trade monopoly, but also the limited manufacturing industry, particularly of textiles, permitted in Central America under Spanish mercantilism. It had exposed the Central Americans to an ever-increasing supply of comparatively inexpensive British goods and, as a by-product, to British ideas on economics and politics.[12]

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[10] Ibid., 193.
[12] Ibid., 81.
And, “(b)etween 1811 and 1818…Inexpensive British cottons were the principal object of …policies, as cotton imports were damaging the native weaving industry and cutting into profits normally reserved for the capital’s merchants.”

The true end to any sort of protoindustrialization and more than just cottage industry in textiles came in 1819 when the new leader of the kingdom, Carlos Urrutia y Montoya “authorized trade with Belize”, made lax coastal defense and closed numerous ports, which “permitted illicit trade to flow easily…to Guatemala.” After Independence from Spain officially occurred in 1821 and Central America was free to trade with anyone and any nation, trade in British cottons and manufactures only increased and flowed in at higher levels than ever before coupled with the first legal trade in cochineal dye.

After 20 years of research in Central American studies, I have in some way always been following the threads that lead back to Guatemalan textiles. While my attention has moved from gender, to production, to connections to crime, along the way I have uncovered some interesting stories. There have been fascinating accounts of angry guild members frustrated by supposedly illegal indigenous hawkers of thread in the streets who avoided taxation; household mistresses crying over the real or imagined theft of precious textiles by their servants; the importation and contraband of a wide variety of textiles from Europe and Asia housed in the shops of wealthy merchants; pawnshops with an abundance of textiles for sale on their shelves; and indigenous peoples continuing to produce goods whether under coercion by local Spanish officials or for their own consumption. On the periphery of the Spanish colonial world, the Kingdom of Guatemala was a crossroads of trade, and intersection of culture, and a seat of administrative power for Central America.

13 Ibid., 85.
14 Ibid., 86-87.
15 Ibid., 90.