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Dolls and Upholstery: The Commodification of Maya Textiles of Guatemala
by Margot Blum Schevill
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Introduction

Maya weavers of Guatemala are well known for their beautiful backstrap and treadle-loomed cloth, which they create for clothing and related garments and for sale, both within and outside Guatemala. Backstrap weaving, mainly a woman's occupation done in the home, has an ancient history—over two millennia, although there are few extant examples of the weavings of the ancient Maya due to climatic conditions (Figure 1). The process, however, was documented in ceramic art, and the tradition of handwoven clothing can be seen in monumental stone carvings, murals, and also in ceramic art. Today weavers purchase the yarn called *mish* already spun and dyed in nearby shops. A backstrap loom is only sticks and a batten, hence it is often called a stick loom. Embroidery yarn, which is used in supplementary weft brocading often mistaken for embroidery, comes from many parts of the world. I have samples in my collection from France, England, Hungary, Germany, Japan, China, and elsewhere. These are purchased in regional markets such as Chichicastenango and Antigua. Men generally produce yardage on treadle looms for women's skirts and other items for sale.

Following up on field work done in 1994 that focused on four weaving cooperatives in Guatemala, my current research looks at two successful textile projects. *Colibri*, a shop in Antigua, and *Maya Traditions*, with headquarters in San Francisco, that are not laden with the bureaucratic cooperative structure that became cumbersome, corrupt, and eventually in some cases completely broke down. Within these currently successful groups, decision-making is a communal act responsive to group dynamics and increasing self esteem. Two non-indigenous women, both North Americans, started these groups and continue to advise them and market their products. Learning to modify traditional design layouts, shapes, colors, and products, weavers are creating commodities that can be sold within Guatemala and in the world markets abroad. As a result, these women are adding to their family incomes, as well as gaining linguistic and leadership skills not available to them in the past. In order to discuss the ongoing and successful projects, I want to provide some background about cooperatives in the 1980s and early 1990s. In addition I will discuss some of the notions of commodification or commoditization (neither word is in Webster's Third New International Dictionary) that were buzz words in anthropological research on world markets and textile production as put forth by June Nash and others in *Crafts in the World Market* (1993) and Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider and others in *Cloth and Human Experience* (1989). Brenda Rosenbaum and Liliana Goldin have also addressed the remaking of Maya artisan production in Guatemala with conclusions similar to mine (1997).

Commodification

In the 1980s I became increasingly aware of the adaptation or commodification of indigenous textiles or parts thereof into western-style fashionable dress and accessories. Relating to the 1960s free spirit movement that continues to a much lesser degree today, Ronald Waterbury mentions "a nostalgic fascination for the rustic or the natural" (1989:244) by those non-indigenous people who wore traditional dress in some form or another. This clothing projected a distinctly personal image, was not mass-produced, and the wearers were making a social and political statement by rejecting factory standardization. So much for the foreigners.

Now to the Maya themselves. I have always been interested in the theme of Costume as Communication in terms of Maya dress and the visual dictionary of meaning that it signals to the educated viewer (Schevill 1986). Robert Carlsen, writing about traditional dress or *traje* in Santiago Atitlan, noted that the *Atitecos* have made the changes

necessary in their textiles in order to stay the same, because the wearing of a proper costume "puts one in the form of one's ancestors" (1993:208).

As for commodities for sale, the indigenous artists have shown new creative syntheses. They have drawn inspiration from the achievements of the past and entered into new circuits of creating for the marketplace. *Colibri* and *Maya Traditions* exemplify the ability of artists of the loom to apply themselves to creating beautiful, as well as marketable products without compromising their own standards and traditions.

Cooperatives

During the early 1980s, the time of violence or *la violencia*, as the Maya call it, the Guatemalan Army waged war against the guerillas throughout the northwestern part of the country, the scorched earth policy. Women lost their husbands, children, and homes. In time many projects were launched to aid the widows by government, on-government organizations (NGOs), and alternate trading organizations (ATOs). The cooperative model was the most common. Sometimes the cooperative was an umbrella organization that brought together many artisan groups. Sometimes it was housed in one community, and weavers from outlying hamlets brought their work to central locations. The functioning of the cooperatives differed from each other: some were run by men, others by women, and over time drastic circumstances have affected several of these organizations. Here are a few examples:

Zunil is close to the second largest city in Guatemala, Quezaltenango. *Cooperativa Santa Ana* is one of the oldest cooperatives and is a success story. It is run by women, but the idea came from the local priest who wanted to provide them with more income so their children could attend school. At first the women wove in the cooperative building that was rented, but having their wives away from the home all day upset the balance of home life, and their husbands were unhappy. Now the women work at home and bring in finished products, which are traditional garments and for-sale items like napkins and table cloths. They receive a small monthly income, and at the end of year profits are divided according to the type of pieces they produce. A few years ago they built a new building, which belongs to the cooperative.

The *Cooperativa Estrella de Occidente* in Todos Santos Cuchumatán, high in the mountains of Huehuetenango, has been operating for many years, and is run by men. The mayor is usually the director. Weavers are identified as their names appear on tags attached to the garments, which are mainly traditional styles and colors. They buy yarn on credit and receive payment when their pieces sell, less 10% for operating cost. There is competition, however, as documented in Kathryn Lypke's video, *Daughters of Ixchel*, shown at a TSA meeting four years ago (Lypke 1994). A local woman, Santiago Mendoza, set up her own cooperative and encouraged weavers to use new colors, while maintaining the Todos Santos style *huipil*. She wanted to keep up with the times and the tourist trade, and she succeeded!

Now to TRAMA. The business headquarters is located in Quezaltenango. In 1994 the umbrella organization of mostly widows had local representatives in seventeen communities and included five ethnic groups. Weavers created finished pieces of cloth, and the cooperative did the marketing. Building on familiar patterns and colors, women produced large pieces of cloth, which served as table cloths or bed covers. Maria Quiacain was the coordinator for San Pedro la Laguna. She said to me: "We all want a better way of life for our children....we hope that TRAMA will find better markets for our textiles"(personal communication, 1994). Not long after this interview, Lucina Cardenas, a Mexican consultant funded by a Dutch foundation to organize and work with TRAMA, was killed after she had received a death threat. There was talk of a \$60,000 deficit about which Lucina knew, and that some of the men were trying to take over fiscal leadership, and other internal struggles. The murderer was never identified, as is the case with so many military-style assassinations.

In 1997 I talked with Maria again in her home in San Pedro la Laguna. Before Lucina's death, she was elected president of TRAMA and was very proud of that honor. When reelections occurred, she had to travel to Quezaltenango and her bus broke down. She was late, and therefore not reelected. She was still very upset and alluded to all the problems and promises never realized. I asked her who killed Lucina and why. She answered "Only God knows." Maria continues to weave innovative textiles with new colors. I bought a recent piece, and she cut off the end because it was the last one she had. She wanted a sample for future weavings.

What is the best solution for Maya weavers now?

Two outlets are working well for Maya weavers at this time. One is the shop, *Colibri*, in the beautiful Colonial town of Antigua, one of the most popular tourist stop in the country. *Colibri* sells a range of Guatemalan *artes* including textiles, which are designer-influenced and based on what weavers have produced for themselves. using their technical knowledge, local designs, colors, and shapes.

Fey Smithers, a North American woman, started the shop almost twenty years ago. She became familiar with Antigua because her mother had a house there, and she knew the town and the people well. *Colibri* is located on one of the main streets. In the time of the violence, some widows came to her from Sololá wanting to sell their own garments. They were desperate as their men had been "disappeared" or killed during the civil war. Styles had changed, and Smithers knew she could not market successfully traditional garments. She wanted to work with the women, so together they developed textiles she knew she could sell. She supplied yarn from local sources of more subtle coloring and of a high quality. Long pieces of cloth were woven on the backstrap loom, a form familiar to the weavers and suitable for drapes or upholstery. Ikat or tie-dyed black-and-white yarn was integrated—another local tradition (Figure 2). Lovely cloths in a range of colors were created. Smithers pays weavers directly; more for larger and more labor-intensive pieces than for smaller napkins, mats, and other utilitarian items. She started with small groups of twelve to fifteen weavers in the Sololá area, where there are outlying communities who share the same textile traditions. Now over 400 women are involved. She has six assistants who work with the weavers and monitor quality control and make sure the work is ready when promised. Her project provides weavers with a steady income, and she only sells retail at the top price.

Maya Traditions, a San Francisco-based, fair trade, wholesale business is run by Jane Mintz, another American, former social worker, tapestry weaver and teacher of weaving. Since 1988 Mintz has focused on the Maya weavers of Guatemala with an emphasis on non-profit projects. In one of her annual newsletters, she wrote "It was natural for me to follow the trail south to Maya weaving villages. What I found was a beautiful and proud culture where backstrap weaving is a continuous thread through generations of Maya women who begin to weave at eight years old." Spending three to four months of the year in Panajachel, Guatemala, she handpicked goods, and helped to create new designs and new products. She has worked mainly with small family businesses for over ten years, who pay their workers well and treat them with respect. Mintz wanted to spread the resources out in the communities and not give all the income to a few suppliers who offer the cheapest prices for poor quality work. In addition to backstrap-loom weaving, she became involved with artisans in crochet, ikat dyeing, treadle-loom weaving, and sewing.

She began with four groups on special projects in different locations—Sololá, Chichicastenango, Santiago Atitlán, and Nahualá—a total of 100 women, who speak three different Maya languages. Her ongoing goals are: to provide consistent work and income in order to raise the daily wage to what the women consider a liveable standard; to create a continuing market in the United States; to develop an appreciation of native textile arts; to preserve traditional crafts and quality of materials, i.e. using first-quality cotton thread, not

acrylic; and finally to support services related to healthcare, education, and leadership training.

It is interesting to note that Smithers and Mintz have defined their goals in different terms and have different agendas. Smithers lives in Guatemala most of the time and pursues her business from an insider perspective, while Mintz, who runs her business from San Francisco, works within a framework of social responsibility. My interviews with Smithers were brief, my friendship with Mintz started in 1993 when we worked together on an exhibition of Maya Textiles. I report in more detail here on *Maya Traditions* and hope to engage Smithers in further discussion on future visits to Antigua.

Maya Traditions receives donations from friends in the United States. In 1996 Mintz initiated a Scholarship Fund and makes a personal donation annually to the fund. Target programs provide financial support for the education of the weaver's children, over one hundred students, and, in some cases, for the weavers themselves. They are 95% illiterate, some have never gone to school, and some of the women lack the mathematical skills required to handle the group's business. As for Maria Quiacain of TRAMA, education for their children is a priority. This year *Maya Traditions* supported seventeen high school students who had to travel far from their own communities. Some hope to attend universities and the scholarship fund will assist them. Global Exchange is the non-profit fiscal agent through which donations are funneled.

The Doll Project

In 1996 I learned about the new doll project and wanted to observe the actual process of making them. Mintz presented prototypes—the outcome of the first workshop at her home with dolls made of local materials—at the International Gift Show in San Francisco and Los Angeles (Figure 3). Individual retailers placed orders for them including Hearth Song catalogue, who ordered 120 dolls. I hoped to obtain funding from Aid to Artisans (ATA) for *Maya Traditions* to initiate a thread bank for this project. In January 1997 I went to Panajachel and spent the morning with the four groups of women who had traveled to Mintz's home to work on the project. Martha Lynd, who works with Mintz and is fluent in Spanish and the Fair Trade representative, was present. She also visits the communities regularly to work with the women. The doll's body of soft brown cotton (the women are pleased that the dolls are brown-skinned) is footloomed in Totonicapán by a male weaver (Figure 4). The doll bodies are cut and sewn by a professional sewer in Panajachel. The women embroider their faces, stuff and sew the dolls, apply the hair, and weave their *traje*. The women themselves monitor the quality control and discuss with Mintz how much they think they should earn per doll. She explains what the market value could be and suggests that there are some shortcuts to save time and labor.

Since having enough money to buy weaving thread has always been a major concern for the women, they wanted to create a thread bank so they could buy large quantities at a time. At the same time Hearth Song successfully marketed through their catalogue the 120 dolls they had previously ordered. They then placed an order for 1500, a huge amount for the group as it was set up then. ATA granted them \$1000 towards the thread bank, and the production operation had to be expanded. Along with Martha, Margarita, a *ladina* with indigenous roots who has years of experience working with women, was hired. She became the day-to-day manager of the operation, which now has its own working space.

Recently health promoters were brought in to talk to the women in their indigenous languages about birth control and women's health issues. Gynecological exams are provided at a local low-cost clinic. An experienced chiropractor from Montana volunteers his chiropractic and acupuncture services.

The women are interested in medicinal herbs. In a recent talk with Jane Mintz, she mentioned the workshops given by Andrés, a health promoter who cultivates herbs, harvests and dries them, and sells them at low cost through workshops to all the groups.

Also Mintz plans to share her garden space with women who want to grow medicinal herbs.

Piecework

Waterbury, writing about the production of San Antonino wedding dresses in Oaxaca, commented on how piecework did not give the embroiderers artistic satisfaction or pride in what they had produced (1989:256-267). Their work was just part of a process, and they were not involved in the final product. Their earnings were meager. Rosenbaum and Goldin also mention the increasing social stratification within indigenous communities that separates those who make the textiles from those who market them (1997:75). In contrast, the doll project does not include the names of individual weavers. Each doll, however, has a personal name, and the label identifies the community, weaving process, language group, and that it is created by *Maya Traditions*. It is not customary for individual Maya weavers to be singled out; in this instance the group and community are mentioned. The women, however, derive personal satisfaction and pride from the dolls because they weave the *traje* to mirror their own native dress.

Is there a big change in symbolic function and cultural value from that which is produced without salary to that which is produced to bring in an income? I do not think their products are devalued artistically and culturally when they are produced solely for income. I have written on this topic elsewhere as it relates to weavers in the late and early twentieth centuries (Schevill 1993).

Conclusion

What happens when the marketing connection is severed? The catalogue business *Pueblo to People* recently ceased functioning. When I visited the cooperative of San Juan Laguna in 1997, the warehouse was full of inventory to be marketed through *People to Pueblo*, but the women said there were no orders. Mintz works successfully with an alternative group of twenty-five San Juan weavers, *Mujeres Tejedoras*, who broke away from the larger organization at an earlier time because of the corrupt bureaucracy.

Funding comes and goes. Many development projects originating from both within and outside Guatemala have been imposed on communities. In some situations, assessment needs were never gathered. Women often are not part of the discussion since they do not speak Spanish. Some cooperatives have survived like those in Zunil and Todos Santos. Others like TRAMA have disbanded. There are other projects modeled after *Colibri*. A Guatemalan woman, Olga Reiche, who has worked with weavers on natural dyeing processes, has a shop *Un Poco de Todo*, in Antigua where she successfully sells high-end products of brown cotton, silk, and, in some cases, suggests older designs published in the literature to her weavers who can replicate them.

In closing, for a researcher like me who has worked with Maya textiles and weavers for twenty years, I am constantly amazed at the innovation and virtuosity I see in their weavings. Rosenbaum and Goldin also mention: "changes in forms of production and exchange are concurrent with changes in Maya culture and conceptions of self" (1997:80). Through their textiles that serve as tools of ethnic revitalization, the Maya see themselves in mirrors that reflect the history of changing civilizations and their mythical history. With the introduction into the world market of new products made by the Maya, textiles remain an integral part of their future.

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Figure 1. Backstrap weaver, figurine from Jaina Island, Mexico. Classic Period A.D. 500-899. Photograph by Barbara and Justin Kerr.



Figure 2. A chair upholstered in cloth woven by Sololá weavers, purchased at *Colibri*. Photograph by Margot Blum Schevill, 1998.



Figure 3. The prototype (left) of the Sololá doll and the doll that was marketed by *Maya Traditions*. Photograph by Margot Blum Schevill, 1998.



Figure 4. The dolls marketed by *Maya Traditions*. From left to right, the communities represented are: Chichicastenango, Nahualá, Sololá, and Santiago Atitlán.

Photograph by Margot Blum Schevill, 1998.