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2004

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Gunzburger, Cecilia, "Tradition and Transformation in Chicahuaxtla Trique Textiles" (2004). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 483.

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## **Tradition and Transformation in Chicahuaxtla Trique Textiles**

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San Andrés Chicahuaxtla is a Trique-speaking village in the mountains of the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca. There are five Trique villages, along with many farms scattered throughout the surrounding ridges and valleys. The Trique area is a linguistic and cultural island surrounded by a Mixtec-speaking population, and this area of Oaxaca is known as the Mixteca (Nader 1969, 400).

Chicahuaxtla Trique women wear a costume distinctive to their village, like many indigenous women throughout Mesoamerica and indeed the world. The main component of this costume is the huipil, or long tunic-like dress. This paper begins with an historical overview of developments in women's costume in San Andrés and of the textiles they have produced over the past century. This period, for which photographic images and ethnographic reports are available, is characterized by the ever-increasing availability of commercial goods, including yarn and clothing. Then I will turn to an analysis of the types of textiles woven today in San Andrés and the current women's costumes based on my own observations in the area in 2002, with particular attention to the varied responses to changing times they represent.

The earliest photographs of Triques are by Frederick Starr, a University of Chicago anthropologist who spent time in San Andrés in 1898 (Starr 1899). At this time, women were wearing a mostly white huipil, with only a few scattered narrow bands of colored supplementary-weft patterning. The most prominent band was that with zigzag patterning at the chest, both front and back. The huipil was made in three loom widths stitched together, with narrow red warp stripes at the edges of the central panel. Starr reports that huipils were woven either "close or in openwork" (1900-02, 44), perhaps referring to the gauze weave documented in subsequent decades. Huipils varied in length, and were sometimes tied up around the waist for work. Women's skirts were knee-length, and hand woven with simple warp stripes in blue, white, brown, or black. Starr mentions the use of belts to hold up the skirts, as well as brown wool twill-woven shawls used for warmth and to carry loads and babies; however, he says that women did not wear head- or footwear of any kind.

At the turn of the last century, Chicahuaxtla women wove their huipils and skirts themselves and purchased the belts and shawls at the weekly market from weavers in Mixtec and Zapotec villages elsewhere in Oaxaca. Starr writes that the women in San Andrés "spin constantly" (*ibid.*, 45) and mentions natural dyeing as well. Cotton was traded from lowland areas in Oaxaca and Veracruz and spun and woven in San Andrés. In addition to their own clothing, women wove plain white cotton cloth for men's clothing, which was cut and sewn into simple 18<sup>th</sup>-century European-style shirts and pants. Women also wove servilletas, or square napkins for wrapping tortillas, their staple food, in the same style as their huipils.

A huipil at The Textile Museum (figure 1) dates from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and has been attributed to San Andrés. It has more supplementary-weft patterned bands than those in Starr's images, and a simple hemmed neck opening. No published written reports are available for this time period, but it is likely that the commercially-produced and dyed cotton yarn from new Mexican factories was becoming more available and affordable in highland villages in Oaxaca. The time women formerly spent spinning and dyeing yarn could be redirected into more elaborate weaving.



*Figure 1. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century Chicahuaxtla Trique huipil.  
The Textile Museum 1976.24.5. Given in memory of Rene d'Harnoncourt by his family.*

By the 1940s, commercial cotton yarn was definitely readily available for purchase in the San Andrés and other nearby markets. Donald and Dorothy Cordry visited San Andrés in 1943 and published photographs and observations from their trip (Cordry and Cordry 1968, 308-315). In their images, the number of patterned bands on Chicahuaxtla women's huipils continues to increase, and a new feature appears: colored satin ribbons stitched around the neck opening in decorative points and hanging loose down the back of the garment. The Cordrys report that these ribbons are a standard feature of San Andrés huipils (*ibid.*, 310). Ribbons were probably also among the newly-available commercial goods, and women incorporated them into their huipils.

Men at this time were wearing commercially-manufactured western-style shirts and pants, thus freeing even more of women's textile production time for weaving their own clothing. Skirts, shawls, belts, and servilletas remain similar to their earlier counterparts,

but several other mid-century visitors mention a new costume item: hats made of half of a gourd (Johnson 1994; Mompradé and Gutiérrez 1976). Women wore these half-gourds on their heads and also used them as drinking vessels when needed. Curiously, Starr does not mention these at all, so it may have been a mid-century fashion.

The first paved road from Tlaxiaco, the nearest larger town, to pass near San Andrés was installed in the mid-1960s (Nader 1969, 408). This led to an increase in foreign visitors as well as, presumably, easier trade and more imported items available in the market. Images from the 1970s show an even higher concentration of patterned bands in women's huipils. A range of patterning concentration can be observed, with some huipils exhibiting wider white bands and others many more patterned bands. June Hiatt, a 1970s visitor, reports she was told that wider white bands were associated with older women because young girls wove more patterned bands to show off their weaving skill to prospective mates (Hiatt 1972, 45). Alternately, older women may weave fewer patterned bands because they no longer weave as well, or they are conserving the style of their youth.

Shawls also were becoming increasingly embellished, with the colored bands at their ends growing in size. Shawls and belts continue to be purchased from other villages, along with another new costume item: the straw hat (*ibid.*, 40). These are made in nearby Mixtec villages and have completely replaced the formerly-reported half-gourd hat. Skirts remain hand woven, but according to all reports are always dark blue with red and white stripes. Indeed, this color scheme is also mentioned by the Cordrys in the 1940s (Cordry and Cordry 1968, 310), so it appears that weavers standardized their skirt pattern from the range of colors seen in the 1890s.

In 2002, industrially-manufactured clothing and accessories were becoming increasingly prevalent in markets in San Andrés and other Oaxacan towns. Belts and shawls, of course, have been imported and purchased by San Andrés women since the turn of the last century at least, but these items were hand woven in other towns in Oaxaca and traded into San Andrés. Handmade belts, shawls, and straw hats are still available, but, like men, women have begun to wear manufactured western-style clothing.

Much of the commercial clothing available follows prevailing western fashion. Television and internet cafes in Tlaxiaco and other larger towns make images of the larger world available to Trique women on visits. San Andrés women now wear a commercial western-style blouse, shirt, or sweater under their huipils. Women also now wear black plastic shoes when in the street, going barefoot only when indoors. Young women often wear sneakers instead of the plastic shoes, and even baseball caps instead of the straw hats that older women continue to use (figure 2). Young women have also replaced the hand woven skirt with the ubiquitous blue jeans. One girl even wore patchwork hipster flare jeans and red sneakers under her hand woven huipil.



*Figure 2. Trique women from San Andrés Chicahuaxtla. Woman at center right is wearing a straw hat, hand woven skirt, and black plastic shoes. Younger woman at left is wearing a baseball cap, jeans, and sneakers. Photo by Cecilia Gunzburger, 2002.*

In spite of this incursion of western manufactured clothing, the huipil remains vital to a San Andrés Chicahuaxtla woman's wardrobe and very much a living tradition. All the aspects of the huipil's development over the previous century are increasingly elaborated today (figure 3). It is now almost completely covered with patterned bands, with wide red outlining bands surrounding each patterned band and very little white showing between them. The warp stripes are wider, and can be black, dark blue, green, or brown, in addition to the traditional red. Women now prefer acrylic yarn to cotton, since the colors are brighter and it wears longer. Up to three colors of ribbon are cut and stitched into a point design around the neck opening and stream down the back. The three panels are stitched together with decorative multi-colored embroidery instead of simple whip stitches.

If a huipil has wider white bands, they are likely to be in gauze weave, which is more time-consuming to set up on the loom and decorative in itself. Gauze weave has been reported in San Andrés since the 1940s, and may be the open weave to which Starr referred.





*Figure 3. Early 21<sup>st</sup> century Chicahuaxtla Trique huipil woven by Juana Jimenez Concepción.  
The Textile Museum 2002.7.1. Latin American Research Fund.*

The huipil remains the crucial piece of identifying clothing for a Trique woman. Statues of the Virgin Mary and of female saints in the church in San Andrés are dressed in huipils (figure 4). These garments are woven to size, with woven-in slits for the statues' praying hands.



*Figure 4. Saints and Virgin Mary in San Andrés Chicahuaxtla church wearing custom-made huipils.  
Photo by Cecilia Gunzburger, 2002.*

Every Chicahuaxtla Trique woman and girl has at least one huipil, and huipils are made for even the smallest baby girls. Most San Andrés women wear a huipil when

outside of the house, and many women can be seen walking through the markets and streets of nearby villages and even Oaxaca City in their huipils. Shawls also continue to be used for the same purposes of warmth and carrying babies and loads, although they are now made of black and white acrylic rather than brown wool. Her costume identifies a woman as a Trique from San Andrés Chicahuaxtla to others in the surrounding area, as well as proclaims her cultural identity to the world at large.

Older huipil styles, with wider white bands, and older blankets of brown wool, can still be seen on older women (Figure 5). The woman seated in front in this photograph is from Copala, another Trique village. She is distinguished by her huipil, which has very wide plain red bands and smaller brocaded pattern bands, as well as ribbons stitched over the seams instead of woven-in colored warp stripes of the Chicahuaxtla huipil.



*Figure 5. Older Trique women (standing) in San Andrés Chicahuaxtla market have an older style of huipil, with more white, and an older style of shawl, of wool rather than acrylic. Seated woman is Trique from Copala. Photo by Cecilia Gunzburger, 2002.*

In addition to the manufactured clothing and accessories, women continue to purchase hand woven shawls, hats, and possibly belts from other villages as always. Although the weavers with whom I worked claimed that their shawls were woven in San Andrés, the shawls in fact continue to be woven in Mixtec villages in the same style as before in the new acrylic yarn. The Chicahuaxtla weavers also claimed to produce their own belts, but I did not observe this and the belts may be another item that continues to be purchased from other weaving villages. The belts used are plain woven with alternating-float weave patterns, and are sewn to a palm-leaf soyate, or stiff underbelt, for wearing.

In addition to the huipils they weave for themselves and their children, many women continue to weave skirts and servilletas for their own use. Skirts have the now-standard

blue, red, and white striped pattern and are the same one-panel, knee-length, wrapped style. Servilletas are still woven in the same style as huipils, and reflect the same stylistic developments: they are now completely covered with patterned bands.

Many women are now also adapting their weaving skills to the creation of textiles for sale outside the village. This kind of commercial weaving has never been mentioned before and may be a new development as weavers take advantage of opportunities created by increased traffic and by increased weaving time as manufactured clothing replaces handmade. The target customers for this commercial weaving are tourists, both Mexican and foreign, and weavers sell their textiles in markets in Tlaxiaco, other nearby towns, and even Oaxaca City. Weavers make huipils with solid-colored bands in purple and green, which would not be worn by a Trique woman, instead of the traditional red. I also saw a gauze-weave blouse made in the style of a huipil, in three panels with a zigzag band at chest, but with no other patterned bands, no ribbons at the neck, and a much shorter length. No Trique woman would ever wear such a thing; instead, these stylistic choices reflect Trique concept of tourist taste.

Other weavers have applied huipil-weaving techniques to entirely new types of textiles for sale. A tablecloth in my collection is woven in three strips, just like a huipil, with supplementary-weft patterned bands at very wide intervals on a ground of plain weave alternating with gauze weave. Fewer patterned bands means quicker, more cost-effective weaving, which is also true of the fringed ends of the tablecloth as opposed to the finished warp selvages created on textiles for the weavers' own use. The bands flanking the patterned bands are green, instead of the red that a Trique woman invariably uses in a huipil for her own use.

Other new textile forms for sale to outsiders include bags, placemats, and napkins. The bags are made of servilleta lengths with a belt for a strap and ribbons sewn huipil-style along the edge of the opening. Placemats and napkins are woven in plain weave, with simple warp stripes at each side, only one or two brocaded bands, and fringed ends, which means they can be woven quickly for profitable sales. All of these new types of textiles are not used by Triques themselves, but represent an adaptation by weavers of their existing skills to the creation of textiles marketable to outsiders.

In conclusion, Trique women have responded through their textiles and costume in multiple ways to the changes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Far from being destroyed by the availability of manufactured goods, their weaving tradition is flourishing. Women have selectively replaced hand-woven items with manufactured goods in such a way as to preserve their energy for the most important costume element for their cultural identity, the huipil. They also have begun to use their weaving skills to exploit markets in the opposite direction. Young girls continue to learn to weave, which remains a crucial skill for a San Andrés woman. And young girls continue to wear huipils, in a vibrant and living tradition that shows every sign of continuing.



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