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It's in the Bag: Transformation in Guatemala

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Guatemala's geographical location is in the middle of a region where the endemic maguey or *agave* plant grows in abundance. Evidence from as early as 6500 to 4800 B.C. prove that fibers of this plant were used even before cotton (Ventura 1996: 11), continuing to present day. In one region legend states that the fibers were first noticed when a bolt of lightning struck a leaf, searing away the green outer flesh, exposing the white stringy interior. As with other people around the world, discovery of a fiber that could be spun into a strand and manipulated into useful items led to many inventions. This included bags, as the need to carry items over long distances gave the native Maya and Xinka incentive to find ways to carry objects. Over time, due to its usefulness, durability, and adaptability, the bag transformed. Still in use today, they are called *morrales*, *bolsas*, *matates*, and *redes*.

The steps necessary to complete a bag include fiber extraction, spinning and construction techniques. Today fiber extraction methods vary nationwide depending on the species (Mayan words *che'ch* and *saqchi* are used to describe maguey), climate and local custom. The monocarpic maguey plant takes three years to mature, and if harvested will live up to twenty-five years (figure 1). There is a nationwide belief that the fibers will be stronger if the leaves are cut from the plant a few days following the full moon. Generally after the leaves are cut and trimmed, they can be pounded, scraped, retted, rotted, pulled between two closely spaced sticks, or steamed. Many ancient pounding stones have been unearthed in archeological sites around the country, and show us that historically similar processes were used to extract the fibers. Lorthop in his 1929 article mentions that wood pounding objects were used with maguey.



Figure 1. Harvested maguey plants.

Unspun fibers can be found for sale at twenty-five cents a pound in many markets around the country. In one region reddish-brown fibers dyed with the cambium layer of the alder tree, avocado pits and limestone are also sold. The more common bright synthetic dyes are sold in powdered form in small, neighborhood stores.



Figure 2. Spinning maguey.

The extracted fibers are spun into long strands suitable for manipulating into bags (figure 2). The oldest method, still in use, is thigh, or leg spinning. Requiring nothing more than bare skin, the down and up motion of the hand against the leg produces a tightly spun two-ply, z-twist thread. In many places a piece of tire or leather is placed on the leg, protecting the skin, while in others dried pine pitch, ashes, roasted termite pilings or spit help keep the fibers together. In one region where women are the primary spinners the development of a three legged stick with leather or rubber on it acts as a “leg”, so that while wearing a *corte* (an eight foot piece of fabric that wraps around the lower body), spinning is possible. Another old spinning technique is the opposing motion of both hands, working much the same way as leg spinning, with a downward motion, and then back up again. One woman told me that as a child she thought this was magic, for she would watch the loose fibers go in one side, and come out the other side spun!

Thigh or hand spinning works well with *morrales* that are looped, as only a small amount of fiber can be spun at a time, for the size of the loop prevents a large ball of pre-spun fiber to pass through. This is one of the qualities that make these bags exceptionally

strong, for they are made with one strand, or single element that continues, without any knots, alternating between spinning and looping from beginning to end. The varieties of looping found in Guatemala are simple, figure-eight, cross-knit and single-interconnected.

With contact from Spain beginning in 1523, introduced tools and methods of textile production were incorporated into bag making. Spinning wheels, “rope makers” or *taravillas* (small portable spinning apparatus, used for spinning rope on long voyages), *cirinuelas* (another small hand-held variety), knitting needles, crochet needles, and looms found their way into every corner of the country. Spinning wheels and *taravillas* are used where bags are knit, crocheted, have big loops (such as a *red*), or made from a plain woven piece of fabric, because these techniques do not have loop size restrictions. Thigh spun maguey creates the tightest, strongest strand, and is more time consuming, but can be done inside or out, while *taravillas* or wheels require much more space, and are usually used on village streets, beneath coffee trees, and between corn stalks.

Backstrap looms are used by the Mayan population to make their clothing, and some cases maguey items on made on these looms. However, most maguey products are made on looms that were adapted for maguey or introduced into areas where weaving is not a traditional part of the culture. One location where an apparent adaptation to a backstrap loom has the bottom part of the loom pegged into the ground, so that it becomes a fixed vertical loom (figure 3, below). The reasons for this could be that maguey fibers are hard, and more rigid than cotton, or that men weave with maguey more than women. In the eastern region of the country, home of the Ch’orti’ and decedents of the Xinca, neither whom have backstrap weaving traditions, unique vertical and horizontal frame looms are used to make bags and saddlebags (figure 4, below). These bags are made by doubling over a plain-woven length of fabric, sewing the sides together, and adding handles.

Additional influences to the maguey bag industry were the introduction of horses and coffee. The arrival of horses created a demand for strong cheaply made saddlebags (*alforja*, *arganilla*, or *arga*), and other horsegear (halters and cruppers, made using the techniques of ply-split braiding and darning). In the 1760’s coffee, native to the Arabian Peninsula was introduced to the area and led to the need for sacks or *costales*. These were necessary because the coffee beans, once picked need to be stored in a bag where they can “breathe”, and maguey sacks woven on big continuous-warp treadle looms were ideal. As coffee became one of Guatemala’s biggest cash crops, it also became one of maguey’s biggest downfalls. In the 1980’s the value was so high that farmers transplanted hundreds of maguey plants with coffee trees. After this, where there was still a demand for maguey products, plants were rented from neighboring villages where maguey was not replaced by coffee. Today the price of coffee has fallen greatly and many farmers wish that they had not replaced a relatively low maintenance crop with one that requires so much work. Currently these treadle looms are used to weave rugs and fabric for the tourist market.



Figure 3 (left). Weaving a bag on a fixed vertical loom.



Figure 4 (right). Weaving maguety on a horizontal frame loom.

The sailors that manned the ships also brought skills with them that became integrated into bag construction. This includes a knot called the pyramid knot, mentioned by Lila M. O’Neale in her book on page 498 and classified as an ornamental knot by Graumont, Raoul and John Hensel (1970: 320-21). This knot is the basis for most of bag straps in the country, and when strap construction begins, it duplicates this knot, but as it continues it transforms into single-element interlacing. This is a very clever construction method and has been mistaken for sprang by many scholars, but it is a continuation of the same single element that the bag began with. Braiding is also used for straps, and a few bags were seen made from macramé.

As missionaries moved into remote villages around the republic, they taught techniques that they knew such as knitting and crochet. Today there are two neighboring municipalities where *morrales* are knit, but over time they developed independently and became uniquely adapted to each isolated location. In one an adaptation of circular needle is used, with long needles made from hammered out umbrella sprockets, and in the other locale, three tapered sticks are used. Here, a strand is worked with the fingers, taking a loop from one stick and placing it on the next one, in something that resembles “finger-knitting.”

There is one small village where net bags are made with the technique of linking. This is a method likely originating in the upper Amazon River basin of South America that spread via trading ships, and used for creating hammocks in Guatemala (Drooker, 1981: 3). The reason is that legend has it, that about one hundred years ago a Catholic Priest came to live in the town of Peb’an. He was disliked by the townspeople, and so they made him a meal out of vultures. One of the maids had pity of him, and gave warning, after which he cursed the townspeople with pests and bats. The residents fled in many

directions, taking their culture and customs with them. Today, descendants of this community live in the mountains of western Guatemala near the border of Mexico, and still create bags in the same manner as their ancestors (Kulb'il Yol Tutz Paxil: 2001) (figure 5).



Figure 5. Making a bag with the technique of linking.

While many of the bags styles have been around for a long time (the Gustavus A. Eisons 1902 collection located at the Phoebe Hearst Museum at the University of California, Berkeley has many examples that are identical to bags of today), new ideas for bag shapes and styles have also been introduced. This includes the round bag called a “glinca” and the rectangular “carista” brought with workers in organizations such as Peace Corps, *Proyecto Coop Espanol*, and *Association Soliridario Dessarrollo Integral* who have infiltrated the countryside, working with villagers in economic development projects. As better transportation eliminates the need to walk long distances with heavy loads, and knapsacks became preferable to *morrales*, there has been a decrease in the desire to create them. This could be because it is seen as old fashioned, and symbolize life in the country, one that many young folks want to escape. Many of the international aid organizations are giving students knapsacks for school, and now on buses they crowd the overhead rack, in place of the *morral*. With the end of the civil war, and a general increase in the movement of people there has also been an accelerated influx of new products and materials effecting bag production. Bright green, pink, blue and yellow

plastic is rapidly replacing maguey as the material of choice. It is interesting that this plastic is bought unspun on big spools that are carried from market towns to villages, and spun on the same spinning wheels that spin maguey! One interesting side note is that during the thirty-six year civil war, the military required the peasants to use net bags while walking in the countryside so that they could see the contents more easily than if the bags had been made from a solid material!

My desire to learn how *morrales* were made took me around the country and in and out of diverse regions not normally crossed by locals. Until recently most *morral* makers and users stuck pretty close to home, and did not see other styles of bags unless a trader happened to bring one into the neighborhood. I learned the technique of cross-knit looping in a community near the Mexican border, where it was used quite extensively at the turn of the century. Today only a few people remember the process, and as luck would have it, I met one of them, who taught me. Months later, in a village located close to El Salvador, an elder was interested in the technique, and so I taught him. Returning ten months later for a visit, I was amazed to learn that he taught his entire family, who made bags in maguey (the elder), plastic (his son), and wool (his daughter-in-law), and interesting observation in gender and generation adaptation! There was great interest from other villagers to learn the technique, and I would not be surprised that if in five years there will be many bags made using cross-knit looping.

Using readily available materials and simple techniques, the ancestors of Guatemala's present population made beautiful bags. The necessity of walking long distances through mountainous terrain for weekly markets, visiting family and friends, yearly fiestas, and to work in the fields required this utilitarian object. When horses and mules were introduced, *redes* or cargo nets became the perfect way to carry bulky heavy loads, and to enclose chickens, turkeys, and produce in large bamboo baskets. The influx of new people, ideas, techniques, and tools became incorporated into bag making and led to a transformation from looped to include knit, crochet, linked and woven. Today these bags can be found around the country where they are sold in many markets (figure 6).



Figure 6. Bag seller in the Chichicastenango market.

Because of the mountainous terrain, many communities were isolated from each other, and styles developed independently. I had the good fortune to travel across regions for comparison and contrast, and by sharing my findings with the very same people who were teaching me, I have also contributed to the cycle of bag transformation in Guatemala.

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Note: Much of the information gathered for this paper came from the many people that I was in contact with in Guatemala. All photos taken by Kathy Rousso.