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## **TEXTILES AS HISTORY: CLOTHING CLUES TO 500 YEARS OF MEXICAN ACCULTURATION**

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### INTRODUCTION

The history of peasant peoples all too often is sparsely recorded and poorly understood. This paper suggests that sometimes there are clues in the clothing of certain present-day groups that can provide insight into their past experience. To demonstrate the point, a group of contemporary Mexican costumes are examined that reflect the sixteenth century collision of the Old and New Worlds and the subsequent melding of these two disparate civilizations. This, then, is a study of the acculturation process through an analysis of peasant clothing viewed against a time line extending over almost 500 years, from Spanish Conquest to the present day. Seven acculturative principles are discussed: 1) Replacement, 2) Adaptation, 3) Persistence, 4) Introduction, 5) Innovation, 6) Mimicry and 7) Survival.

### BACKGROUND

#### History

When, in 1519, the conquistador Hernan Cortés first came ashore in the New World he entered the area scholars now refer to as Mesoamerica, that region of Mexico and Central America where the great pre-Hispanic high cultures flourished. At the time of Spanish contact, Central Mexico alone contained more than twenty million people. By 1620, due principally to the devastating impact of newly-introduced European diseases, this number had declined to around one million, the most dramatic population loss in recorded history.

Faced with a rapidly declining labor pool, the Spaniards instigated a new settlement policy, congregación: relocation of surviving ethnic groups "...within the sound of the bell," the better for missionary conversion and control. The effects of this resettlement are to some extent still evident in that portion of Central Mexico known today as the Sierra Norte de Puebla, a rugged, mountainous region where the present-day states of Veracruz, Hidalgo and Puebla join (Figure 1). This remote, outlying area was slow to feel the full impact of European contact. Following Spanish Conquest, the Sierra initially received Franciscan and Augustinian missionaries whose task was conversion of the "heathen". However, due to the almost continual conflict between the two mendicant orders, the natives were spared much of the friars' proselytizing zeal. Colonization of the Sierra by Hispanics did not begin until the last decades of the seventeenth century.



century.

Frederick Starr (1901:179), the first American anthropologist into the Sierra, noted that in the area there were "strange interminglings" among the region's diverse peoples. This still remains the case today. In fact, my colleague Frances Berdan and I chose the Sierra Norte de Puebla for our research into clothing acculturation precisely because it was home to four ethnic groups--the Nahua, Totonac, Tepehua, and Otomí--all living in close juxtaposition. Also, each group still produces and wears clothing styles that reflect varying stages of the 500 year acculturation process.

### Technology

This study of half a millennium of costume change begins at the time of Spanish contact. The Mesoamerican concept of clothing construction was based on the backstrap loom, a versatile weaving device still in use today. It produces webs of cloth with four finished selvages, and hence a completed web can be immediately utilized. However, the width of a backstrap-woven cloth is limited to the extension of the weaver's arms. To attain wider garments, webs are joined by sewing together two selvages.

In sharp contrast to the pre-Hispanic approach was the Old World concept which involved the cutting and sewing together of various shapes of cloth to form garments that followed the lines of the body. Such tailoring was dependent on the wide widths of material produced by the European treadle loom.

The introduction of the treadle loom had a profound impact in the New World. Whereas in Mesoamerica women always had been the producers of cloth, now it was men who were taught to weave and put to work in the infamous obrajes, the colonial weaving workshops that were often operated almost like prisons. The social ramifications of the treadle loom--accompanied by the introduction of wool--were far reaching. Although pre-Hispanic cloth production methods continued, they now were augmented by European additions (Anawalt 1979):

<u>Pre-Conquest Mesoamerica</u>		<u>Post-Conquest New Spain</u>
backstrap loom	vs.	treadle loom
cotton and bast fiber	vs.	wool fiber
female weavers	vs.	male weavers
household production	vs.	workshop industry
generalized abilities	vs.	specialized skills
subsistence output	vs.	wage labor for profit

The pre-Hispanic weaving technology resulted in a costume repertoire of flat, untailored garments. Women wore wrap-around skirts and unfitted tunics or shoulder shawls. Men were dressed in loincloths and capes that tied over the shoulder. The conquering Spaniards viewed the women's clothing as adequate but the men's pre-Hispanic apparel was not deemed acceptable. As a result, a change of male dress was mandated, which brings us to the first of the seven acculturation



principles. Although each of these principles is applicable to all areas of material culture, here they are expressed in terms of clothing.

### Replacement

The initial process is Replacement, the substitution of a new type of apparel for a prior mode of dress. The enforced costume change had a memorable effect on the Mesoamerican males. Many years after the Spanish Conquest, the natives looked back and wryly noted that they had been dressed in white. These European-derived garments were long-sleeved shirts, camisas, and pantaloons, calzones. But Replacement was not instantaneous--the indigenous cape continued into the colonial era (Figure 2)--nor has the process ceased; today white calzones are increasingly replaced by Western attire.

Vestiges of sixteenth century European tailoring methods are still evident in certain of the men's calzones. The construction of breeches observable in extant sixteenth century paintings (e.g. Matthias Grünewald's 1503 Alte Pinakotek; Hans Raphon's 1506 The Crucifixion) find their counterpart in trouser seams from the Sierra Norte de Puebla. In the area around the town of Cuetzalan, Puebla, the seat of the men's calzones is formed by the joining of two panels, resulting in three distinctive seams identical to those visible in a number of sixteenth century paintings and drawings.

Returning to the continuing impact of the treadle loom, to this day it is mainly men who weave on these looms, which are often housed in tight, rather airless enclosures with bad light and limited space: big looms crowded into little rooms. The fiber used is usually wool--or a synthetic substitute--and the garments produced are mainly male clothing, including a sleeveless jacket with an intriguing past.

### Adaptation

The jacket brings us to the second acculturation principle, Adaptation: the gradual adjustments of a garment style to social conditions. The principle of Adaptation is made manifest in the present-day cotorina, a sleeveless jacket with a fringed hem. This ostensibly prosaic garment actually has a long and illustrious history. Clay figurines from the Maya lowlands, dating circa AD 400, wear recognizable examples of this venerable jacket, as do Aztec deity effigies and sixteenth century depictions of priests. The Aztec, who used the Nahuatl term xicolli for the costume, referred to it as their "Godly Jacket" because the garment was restricted to sacred occasions, including use by priests when performing human sacrifice.

Given the xicolli's connection with human sacrifice, and the friars' aversion to every aspect of that practice, wearing of the "Godly Jacket" may well have been curtailed early in the colonial period. However, at least one actual garment survived. Around 1846, a bast-fiber xicolli (Figure 3) was found in a cave near the famous rock-hewn Aztec temple of



Malinalco, located southwest of Mexico City. It was purchased by a Herr Seiffert, the Prussian General Counsel to Mexico from 1846-1850, and later given to the Museum für Volkerkunde in Berlin, where subsequently it was destroyed by fire in 1940. The dimensions of this xicolli were almost identical to those of many of its twentieth-century cotorina descendants.

Although the garment's size and shape have remained the same, the xicolli no longer bears its Nahuatl name; today the jacket is known by the Spanish term cotorina. Also, whereas pre-Hispanic women wove the costume from cotton or bast fibers on backstrap looms, now men working on the European treadle loom create these wool jackets to wear in cold weather.

Here, then, is a pre-Hispanic garment style that has continued into the present day as the result of a series of social adaptations: a change of name, of weaving technique, of fiber, and of producer gender. What had been the Aztec's "Godly Jacket" has become a working man's utility wrap.

A postscript must be added to the adaptive saga of the xicolli-cum-cotorina. We discovered this pre-Hispanic garment being woven on backstrap looms by Totonac-speaking women in a tiny hamlet located in the mountains above the town of Xicotepec de Juarez, Puebla. These weavers cannot afford a treadle-loom cotorina so they reproduce the garment on backstrap looms using wool from their own sheep. Here is yet another adaptation of the "Godly Jacket" which now has gone full circle back to production via the indigenous technology.

### Persistence

But not all of the Sierra's pre-Hispanic garment styles have undergone such changes. One costume has continued into the modern era with its pre-Hispanic name and structure intact. In fact, it has even retained a faint trace of its ancient, powerful religious aura. This garment exemplifies the third acculturation principle, Persistence: the continuity of a clothing item despite historical changes and social pressures that might have eliminated it.

An example of Persistence is the pre-Hispanic quechquemitl, a female upper-body garment that can be traced back to the Gulf Coast lowlands where it appears on a ceramic goddess effigy made around AD 400 (von Winning 1965:plate 246). Although this garment was--and still is--an item of daily wear among the Huastec-speaking women just to the north of the Sierra, today it still is known by its pre-Hispanic Aztec name, quechquemitl, which appropriately translates, "neck cape" (Molina 1970:88v). World wide, the garment's structure is unique; no similar costume has ever been found from any period. This is strange given the quechquemitl's simple construction of two rectangles of cloth joined at the selvages so as to form a triangle when the garment is worn with its points to the front and back (Figure 4).

The fact that the quechquemitl persisted through the Spanish Conquest is impressive considering that the Aztec pictorial codices and Spanish chroniclers make it clear that the garment was a special-purpose costume worn only by



effigies of goddesses and their impersonators, who served as sacrificial victims. Despite the Aztecs having limited the costume to religious ritual, in the Sierra today women in all four of the Indian groups still wear some form of the ancient quechquemitl though their fabrics and design motifs differ.

Although the quechquemitl is no longer the Sierra's principle upper-body garment--that distinction is held by the blouse discussed below--the neck cape is almost always worn over the blouse when a woman goes out into the community. In addition, quechquemitl made of commercial lace sometimes adorn statues of the virgin that grace altars in Sierran village churches.

The Otomí women of the town of San Pablito wear three distinct types of quechquemitl. Two of these styles are still woven in an ancient pre-Hispanic manner employing a complex technique involving the turning of the warp threads to become the weft so as to create a rounded corner at one end of the web (Christenson 1979). Joined, the two rounded webs form a quechquemitl that--when worn in the San Pablito manner with the "points" to the side--drapes over the shoulders in a gracefully curving contour.

One of these rounded styles is of particular interest to this study, the animalito quechquemitl (Figure 5). The women of San Pablito embroider--in red and black, the ancient Mesoamerican color combination denoting wisdom--a series of animals on this quechquemitl. These creatures, both real and imaginary, include the two-headed eagle, traditionally San Pablito's monitor of good and bad behavior. It is the animalito quechquemitl that is still believed to have the power to provide an amulet-like protection to its wearers (see below).

## Introduction

Sierran costume change involves not only the retention of indigenous styles but also the adoption of certain European clothing traits. The fourth acculturation principle is Introduction: the bringing of a foreign garment into a costume repertoire for the first time in order to fill a new need.

The Introduction principle is exemplified by the colonial-style blouse (Figure 6), variations of which are worn today by all of the Sierra's four ethnic groups. Prior to its appearance, nothing was worn underneath the quechquemitl. There is no question but that the blouse's antecedents are European; its construction is based on the Old World concept of cut and sew. The garment appears to have derived from the sixteenth century chemise. The tell-tale trait is the embroidery panel that extends across the chest, shoulders and back. An embroidered portion of the chemise is visible in many portraits of sixteenth century noblewomen (e.g. a circa 1540 ceramic tile portrait of Isabel of Portugal, wife of Charles V, Kunstgewerbe Museum, Berlin; Hans Holbein's 1539 Anne of Cleves [Payne 1965:Fig.322]). It is this same section of the modern-day blouse that provides the display area for the creative talents of Sierran needlewomen, whose



fascination, nay passion, is embroidery.

When we initially embarked on our research into Sierran clothing change, we assumed weaving would be the consuming concern of our informants. Not so. While weaving continues and is still highly regarded, today the overwhelming concern of craftswomen is embroidery. Detailed and often innovative needle work occupies and fascinates most of the women involved in garment production. In the case of the blouse, these embroideries are made to be used as the four panels that subsequently are sewn by machine around the neck and sleeves of these European-style garments.

Conventional wisdom has maintained that the indigenous women were taught embroidery by Spanish nuns in the early colonial period. This may have been the case in the sense of instruction on European techniques and designs, but such an assertion implies the lack of an embroidery tradition in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica. A careful study of the detailed work of the sixteenth century missionary, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (1950-1982)--the Aztec's most encyclopedic chronicler--reveals that in the capital, Tenochtitlan, there existed a well-defined group of embroiderers who were an established part of the society, complete with their own feast days and acknowledged beneficial or malevolent birth signs.

At first glance, the present-day Sierran embroidery motifs appear to be principally designs derived from commercial pattern books. A study of the indigenous names of these motifs, however, is very enlightening. In the course of our research we have found that vestiges of pre-Hispanic belief reside in seemingly conventional Western designs (see below).

### Innovation

A consideration of the blouse's embroidery panels brings us to the fifth acculturation principle, Innovation: the carrying out of a task in a completely new manner; in the case of clothing, producing new motifs and techniques.

In the Sierra, Innovation takes place at different levels. First, there is the local concept. Anthropologists refer to this type of explanation as the Emic: what a people say of themselves. Initially the Sierran view of innovation was quite confusing because women were claiming to have "invented" (inventar) such familiar motifs as Pepsi Cola logos and flags of assorted industrialized nations. Slowly we came to realize that what an embroiderer claimed as a personal invention was actually her ability to duplicate an admired motif: she saw it, she reproduced it, it was hers.

But innovation in the anthropologist-observer's sense--the Etic view--indeed does take place. For example, in the village of San Miguel Tenango, Puebla, some clever woman figured out how to take advantage of the two-fold thickness of polyester double knit by running embroidery floss between the fabric's two layers to create geometric motifs that display a stunning, machine-like precision.

On the locally famous blouses of the Nahuatl-speaking



community of Chachahuantla, there is also innovation evident in the motifs created by the town's sewing-machine embroideries. These designs depict modern-day corn and plant symbolism, motifs as richly evocative and iconographically sophisticated as those of ancient Mesoamerica.

The town of Chachahuantla is located in a steep valley separated from the main highway by a series of increasingly difficult dirt roads. Despite this impediment to travel--and perhaps because the town has no market day of its own--Chachahuantla women are a common sight in the weekly markets of large Sierran towns such as Zacatlan, Puebla. Although these vendors offer fruit and cheese for sale, what they are particularly known for--and excellent advertisements of--are their colorful and dramatic blouses (Figure 7). These bright red creations are distinctive because of the machine embroidery that surrounds the ubiquitous Sierran hand-embroidered panels: the entire blouse is assembled and then further enhanced with repeated rows of closely-spaced machine stitching.

### Mimicry

Chachahuantla has mastered the use of the manual sewing machine to the extent that the community is now headquarters for reproduction of their local blouse style, copies of which are keenly desired by women from the surrounding Sierran Nahuatl-speaking villages. This brings us to the sixth of the acculturation principles, Mimicry: the copying of an original garment style or design motif.

In the Nahuatl-speaking communities surrounding Chachahuantla, women carefully save money so as to have their own hand-done embroidery panels incorporated into a blouse by the Chachahuantla seamstresses, using their distinctive sewing-machine style. The fact that these commissioned garments are seldom as thickly decorated with the colorful red machine stitching as the originals does not seem to daunt the eager buyers. Not all Paris gowns equally reflect the heights of haute couture; sufficient that one's own derives from the heartland of fashion. The Chachahuantla imitators are a tribute to the power of Mimicry.

### Survival

The final acculturation principle displayed in the Sierran costume repertoire is Survival: the continuation of certain clothing traits despite all historical and social pressures that logically should have eliminated them. The survival of the pre-Hispanic concept of the nahual in textile motifs is a case in point.

In the Nahuatl language, a nahualli is a spirit companion capable of leaving its host's sleeping body and setting off on adventures, either good or bad. The concept also includes sorcerers capable of transforming themselves into animals, including owls or jaguars as well as mythical beasts. Such creatures are now referred to as nahuals. Although ethnologists have confirmed that this belief is still strong



in village life, no one had ever recognized that nahuals appear as textile motifs. In fact, the conventional wisdom of the textile establishment was that designs on present-day Indian cloth and clothing no longer has any meaning, either pre- or post-Columbian. Our research demonstrates this is not the case.

During the 1985 field season, we were interviewing an older weaver in the Nahuatl-speaking town of Atla, Puebla, a community known for its guarded and covert attitude toward witchcraft. The weaver kindly agreed to identify the designs on the gauze fabric she was weaving. Several of the animal motifs on her partially-completed web were easily recognizable hence their names came as no surprise. However, when the weaver turned to a four-legged creature in the rampant posture of an heraldic animal, she startled us by referring to the image as a nahualli. Frances Berdan, an authority in sixteenth century Nahuatl, caught the word instantly and quietly began to explore its meaning, but to no avail. The weaver not only denied she had ever used the term, she immediately and determinedly changed the subject. It is of interest that over the years, this attitude toward the use of the term nahual has relaxed somewhat in Atla. By 1991 the word was far more casually mentioned but nonetheless, no clear explanation has ever been forthcoming.

As we learned more about Atla's sensitivity concerning the survival of pre-Hispanic beliefs, we realized how unusual and fortuitous it was that we had stumbled onto this example of ancient symbolism in a village known for its secrecy and covert nature. In sharp contrast, a completely different attitude prevails in a neighboring Otomí-speaking village no more than five air miles away. On a subsequent field trip, we decided to investigate nahuals there.

The town of San Pablito, Puebla, is famous for paper-making, the unabashed practice of sorcery, and open admission of pre-Hispanic beliefs. These factors are nowhere better combined than in the bark-paper screenfold books produced by San Pablito's most famous curer, Don Alfonso. To date this well-known healer has produced four different manuscripts, each dealing with some aspect of the ritual round, including rainmaking and curing. An example of the latter is Senor Nahual, which involves a family dealing with a curse placed on their child by an evil spirit companion.

Having noticed that the San Pablito women's blouses sometimes display tightly-packed, brightly colored images of various animals around neck and sleeves, we decided to consult Don Alfonso concerning their symbolism. Not only did he agree to discuss the subject with us, he sanctioned the interview being taped and subsequently published (Anawalt-Berdan field tape, Side A, September 14, 1989).

The story begins in 1916 when a San Pablito peanut vendor set off for the lowlands to sell his crop. After long and convoluted wanderings, he found himself in a strange area where he inadvertently offended a group of witches who placed a curse on him. After a painful and frightening trip back to



the highlands, he sought the aid of San Pablito curers for revenge. Two of these sorcerers returned to the offending village disguised as turkeys, placed a spell on the compound by surrounding it with the hair of a woman recently killed in an automobile accident, stole a new-born baby, and then returned to San Pablito inside a rainbow.

When the lowland villagers discovered the baby was missing, they called forth their nahuals to do battle with those of highland San Pablito. The ensuing battle was of epic proportions but after a Herculean struggle the nahuals of San Pablito prevailed. The animals that now appear as textile designs are said by Don Alfonso to commemorate the valiant nahuals who saved the community.

This account was initially recorded in 1989 and at that time we assumed the animal motifs to which Don Alfonso referred were those on San Pablito's colonial-style blouses. However, when we again discussed this matter with the curer in 1991 he insisted that the only commemorative animal motifs were those embroidered on the community's animalito quechquemitl (see Figure 5).

Although it would seem logical to us that all of San Pablito's animal designs should convey the same commemorative meaning, it is nonetheless culturally consistent that a pre-Hispanic belief would be made manifest not on the introduced Spanish-colonial blouse but instead on the ancient, persistent quechquemitl.

#### DISCUSSION

This paper has presented seven acculturation principles observable in Indian clothing from the Sierra Norte de Puebla: Replacement, Adaptation, Persistence, Introduction, Innovation, Mimicry and Survival. These distinctive phenomena clearly demonstrate that the process of costume change is not simplistic but rather is made up of many strands, each responding uniquely to culture contact situations, and each reflecting the different forces and processes that collectively make up 500 years of acculturation.

In summary, it is the contention of this study--based on the research presented above--that the clues in peasant clothing not only can illuminate the shadowy history of such peoples, these garments also can provide insight into how the underlying illusive, complex acculturation process actually works.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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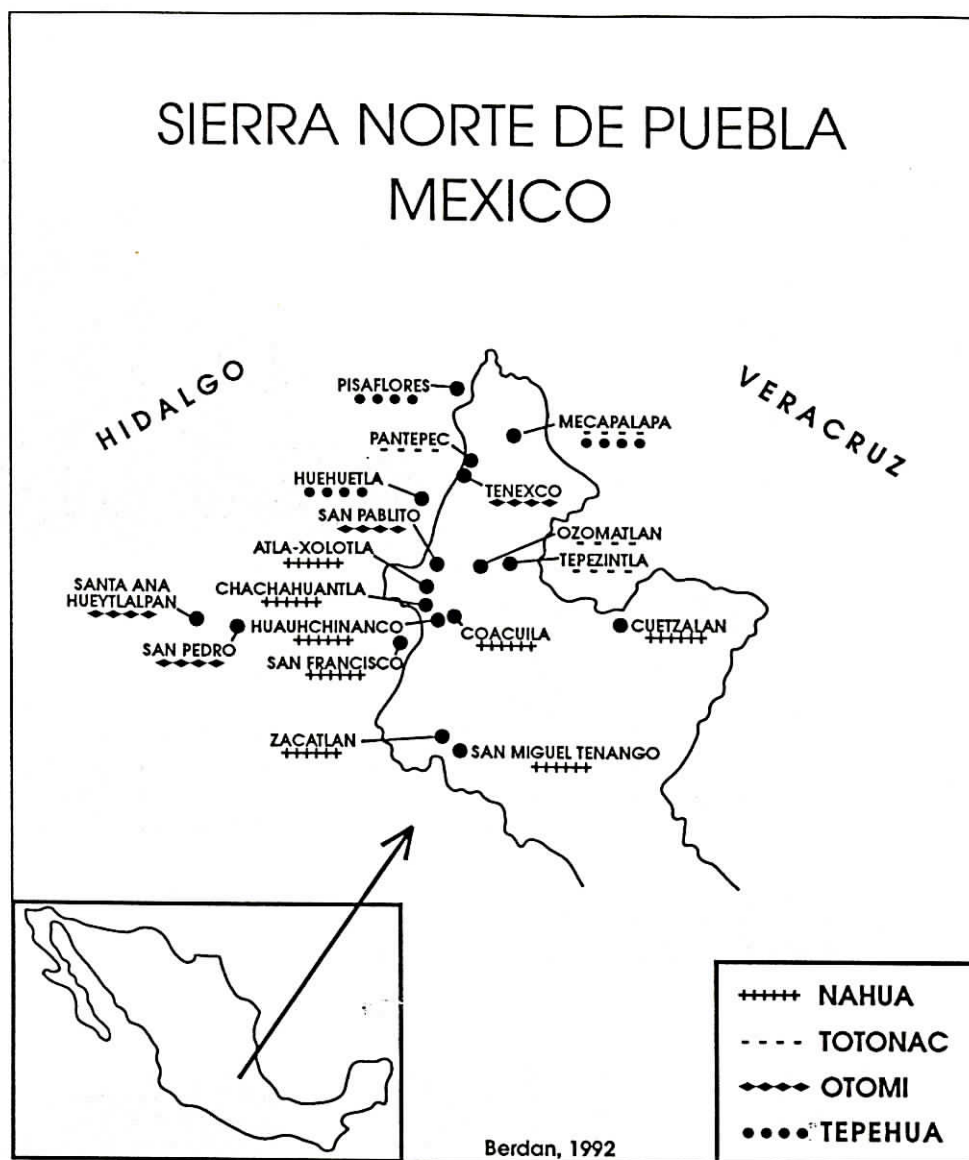


Figure 1: Map of the area discussed.



Figure 2:  
Camisas, calzones,  
and the pre-Hispanic cape  
(Sahagun 1979:Bk.10:23r).

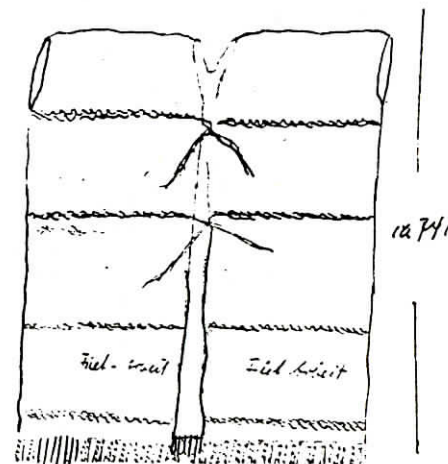


Figure 3:  
Xicolli catalogue card  
from the Museum für  
Völkerkunde, Berlin,  
Germany (Anawalt 1981:42).



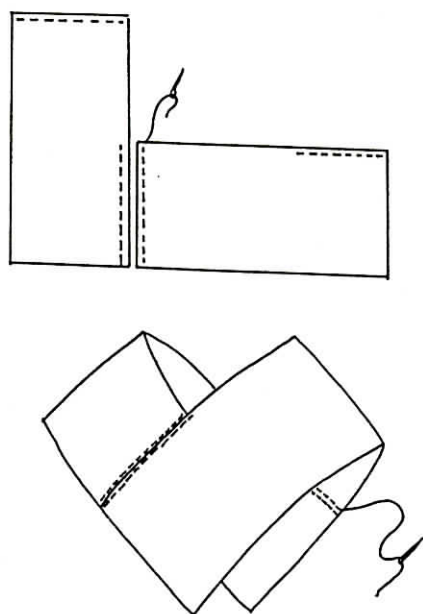


Figure 4:  
Quechquemitl diagram  
(Lechuga 1982:153).

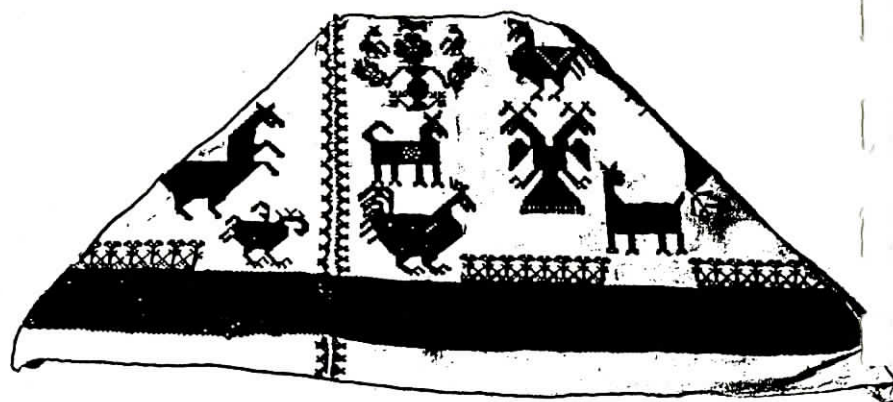


Figure 5:  
Animalito quechquemitl  
San Pablito, Puebla, Mexico  
(photo: Denis Nervig)

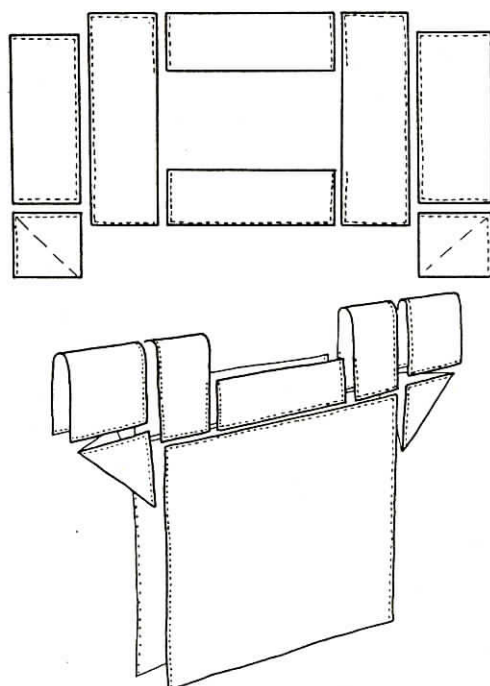


Figure 6:  
Blouse diagram  
(Lechuga 1982:155).



Figure 7:  
Chachahuantla blouse,  
Chachahuantla, Puebla, Mexico  
(photo: Denis Nervig)