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## Textiles In The Tourist Trade: Woollen Textile Production In Momostenango, Guatemala

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TEXTILES IN THE TOURIST TRADE:  
WOOLLEN TEXTILE PRODUCTION IN MOMOSTENANGO, GUATEMALA

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INTRODUCTION

Textile production in Guatemala has been the focus of a considerable amount of twentieth century literature in the English language. Guatemalan textiles have been avidly collected by museums, universities and private collectors in North America and Europe. Our belief as researchers and collectors is that we are recording and preserving the valuable textile traditions of the indigenous people of Guatemala.

What we often don't realize is that collectively, over time, we are saying as much about our own perspective as outsiders as we are about the Guatemalan people and their textiles. Our choices of what to document and what to collect reflect our own biases. As important as what we choose to study and collect is what we do not select.

One type of textile which is ubiquitous to the region but consistently overlooked is the woollen blanket of Momostenango. Because their format and function are familiar to outsiders and because they are routinely sold to tourists, the blankets and related woollen textiles have not been considered worthy of research or collection. By examining this example of omission, this paper considers our collecting and research practices, particularly as they relate to tourist textiles. The long term impact of our attitudes may be to limit the capacity of the literature and collections to record the full range of textile traditions in Guatemala.

THE MOMOSTENANGO BLANKET

For the purposes of this paper, I am using the Momostenango blanket as an archetypical example of what has generally not been collected among Guatemalan textiles. This paper is not about Momostenango woollen textiles per se but more about our collective attitudes to trade goods, particularly widely distributed items and more particularly, items included in the tourist trade.

For anyone not familiar with the ubiquitous Momostenango blanket, I will provide a brief visual and verbal description. Most blankets commonly seen by visitors are made of a weft faced brushed wool either on a wool or cotton warp. Patterns are created by the use of discontinuous wefts using a dovetail join, or by double faced supplementary wefts. Blanket patterns can also be formed using warp striping, weft striping or twill checks and plaids, although these latter techniques are more common in blankets not aimed at the tourist market.

Patterns include versions of many of the images found in other Guatemalan textiles such as munjecas or human forms, animals such as horse or deer, assorted birds including the tourist industry favoured quetzal, various plant forms and geometrics. Colours include natural whites, blacks and

grays as well as a variety of commercial dye colours such as blue, red, yellow, brown, purple or green. Natural dyes were used before commercial dyes were available.

In addition to bed blankets, Momostenango woollens have been woven for men's carrying blankets, ponchos, ponchitos and rodillera (hip wrappers) as well as fabric for cut and constructed garments such as jackets. As use of these various garments by Guatemalans has decreased, the tourist market has expanded with garments targeted to this consumer.

Momostenango, in the departamento of Totonicapan has always been acknowledged as the major centre of wool textile production within and beyond Guatemala's borders. Sheep, which were introduced by the Spanish, are well suited to the countryside while the nearby animal and wool market in San Francisco El Alto provides a source for obtaining raw materials and initial marketing of the end product.

Momostenango is endowed with sulphur springs which provide the perfect combination of hot water and flat rocks for foot fulling the newly woven blankets. Natural teasels are used to give the blankets their soft napped finish.

All the stages of production from fibre preparation, spinning, dying, warping, weaving, fulling and finishing can be carried out in a home using intergenerational task sharing, most often male. Some stages such as dying or commercial spinning can also be done outside the weaving unit. Weaving on the large treadle floor loom requires the greatest experience, while smaller tasks such as bobbin winding are left to younger learners. Women are sometimes involved in the yarn processing but more frequently take on other responsibilities within the household.

#### LITERATURE AND COLLECTIONS

Within the literature, O'Neil (1945) has provided good descriptions of Momostenango wool textile production in 1936 including an excellent time/task analysis of a blanket producing household. Osborne (1935, 1965) included brief information on production, designs, use and trade as well as a sketch of blanket vendors. Lemos (1941) included photographs and brief descriptions of blankets while Atwater (1946) included drawings and technical information. More recently Anderson (1978) has provided some additional documentation and fresh insight into innovative blankets entered into local competitions. Market economy issues have been touched on by such authors as Tax (1953), McBryde (1933, 1947), Hagan (1970), and Smith (1972). The majority of publications on Guatemalan textiles touch only briefly or not at all on wool treadle loom production, concentrating instead on backstrap weaving and clothing. McEldowney's (1982) work on treadle loom weaving of cintas in Totonicapan is an exception. Institutional collections seldom include Momostenango blankets although they do include some clothing items.

#### REASONS TO REJECT THE MOMOSTENANGO BLANKET

Again, using the Momostenango blanket as an archtypically rejected textile for collection, the following reasons for rejection might be given:

1. The blankets are produced on treadle floor looms which were introduced by the Spanish and therefore represent a weaving tradition quite separate from the indigenous backstrap weaving.
2. The blankets are made of wool from sheep which were also a Spanish introduction.
3. Momostenango woollens have always been trade items rather than being produced directly for individual or family use.
4. The large blanket form is not used as an item of clothing and lacks the communication value so obvious in clothing.
5. The technical and aesthetic value of Momostenango Blankets does not equal that of backstrap weaving.
6. The Momostenango Blanket is most visibly a tourist item, aggressively marketed by itinerant vendors in large numbers, and unavoidable for visitors.

All these reasons for rejecting the Momostenango blanket for collection have validity, and if you need one more reason - they are also large and bulky to store. It is important, however, to know why and how we are making these collection decisions and what the collective impact might be. Numerous questions come to mind.

1. Are we denying Guatemalans their post European contact history and contemporary reality?
2. Are we avoiding the image of ourselves as members of North American or European society, and especially that sub species, the tourist (although we are all inevitably tourists in someone else's backyard)?
3. Has the tourist image of the blanket eclipsed for us its domestic use?
4. Are we unwilling to study and collect textiles which are too similar in form and use to textile products in our own lives?
5. Do we consider rarity always more important than commonness?
6. Has our focus on women's backstrap weaving limited our considerations of gender issues?
7. Are we undervaluing the long standing importance of trade within the region?
8. Does the long standing resilience and continuity of production of this particular tourist textile provide possible insight for maintenance of viable handcraft industries, and therefore deal with the reality of Guatemalans living in a contemporary world?

#### CONCLUSION

I have used the Momostenango blanket as a stepping off place to question some of our possible biases in collecting. I am certainly not advocating that all institutions with Guatemalan textile holdings immediately rush out and buy up Momostenango blankets before Ralph Lauren remarkets them all. But I am suggesting that we might better understand the collections that have been made by re-examining those that have not.

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#### FIGURES

All photographs are by Anne M. Lambert



Figure 1: Blankets from Momostenango for sale in the market at San Francisco el Alto, 1975.



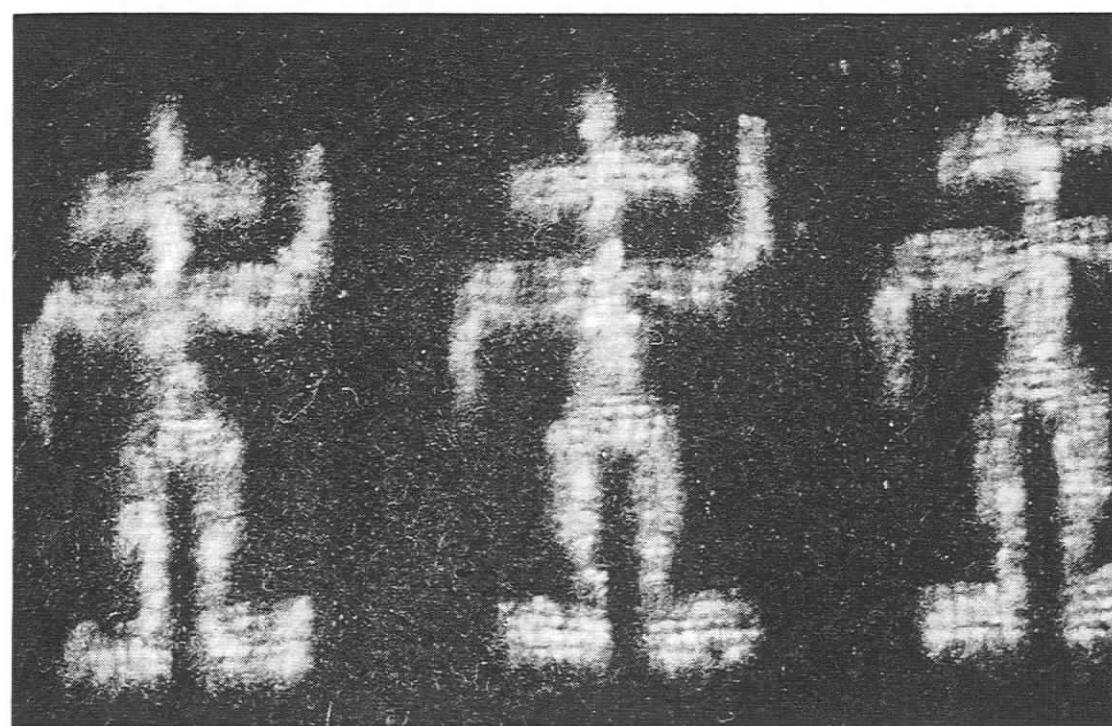


Figure 2: Selling Momostenango blankets in the market at San Francisco el Alto, 1976.

Figure 3: Human figures woven using two faced supplementary weft, Momostenango blanket woven in 1976.



Figure 4: Quetzal bird motif woven in discontinuous weft with dovetail joins, 1973.

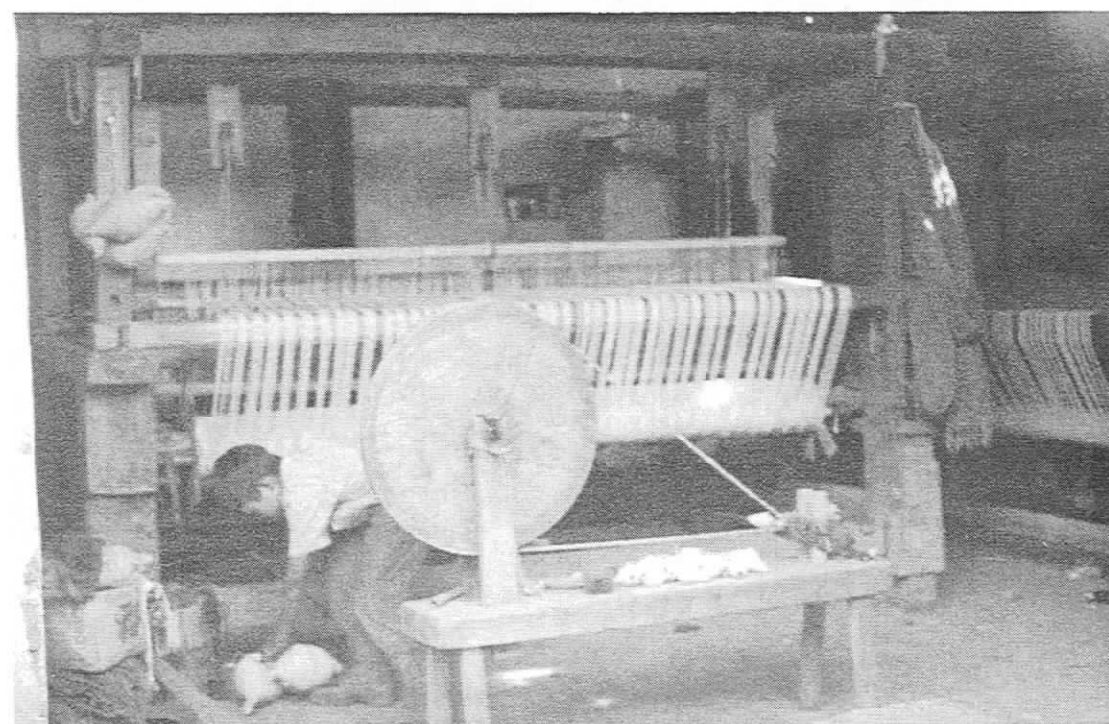
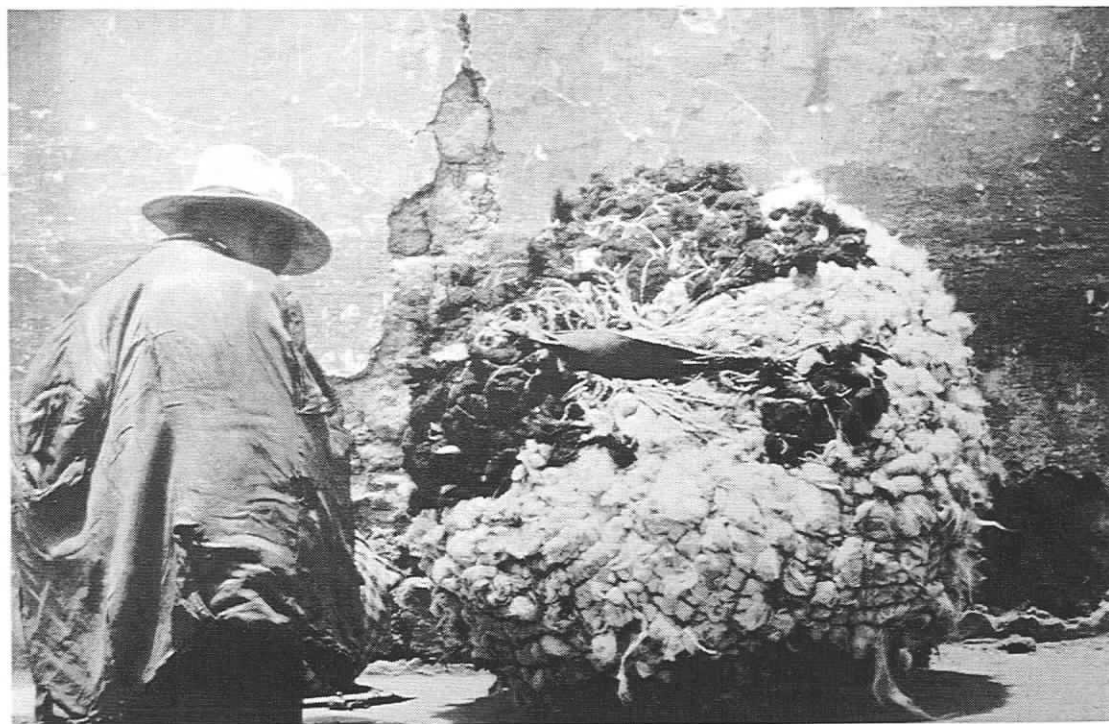


Figure 5: Wool in the market at San Francisco el Alto, July, 1977.  
Figure 6: Foot treadle loom and bobbin winder, Momostenango, 1975.

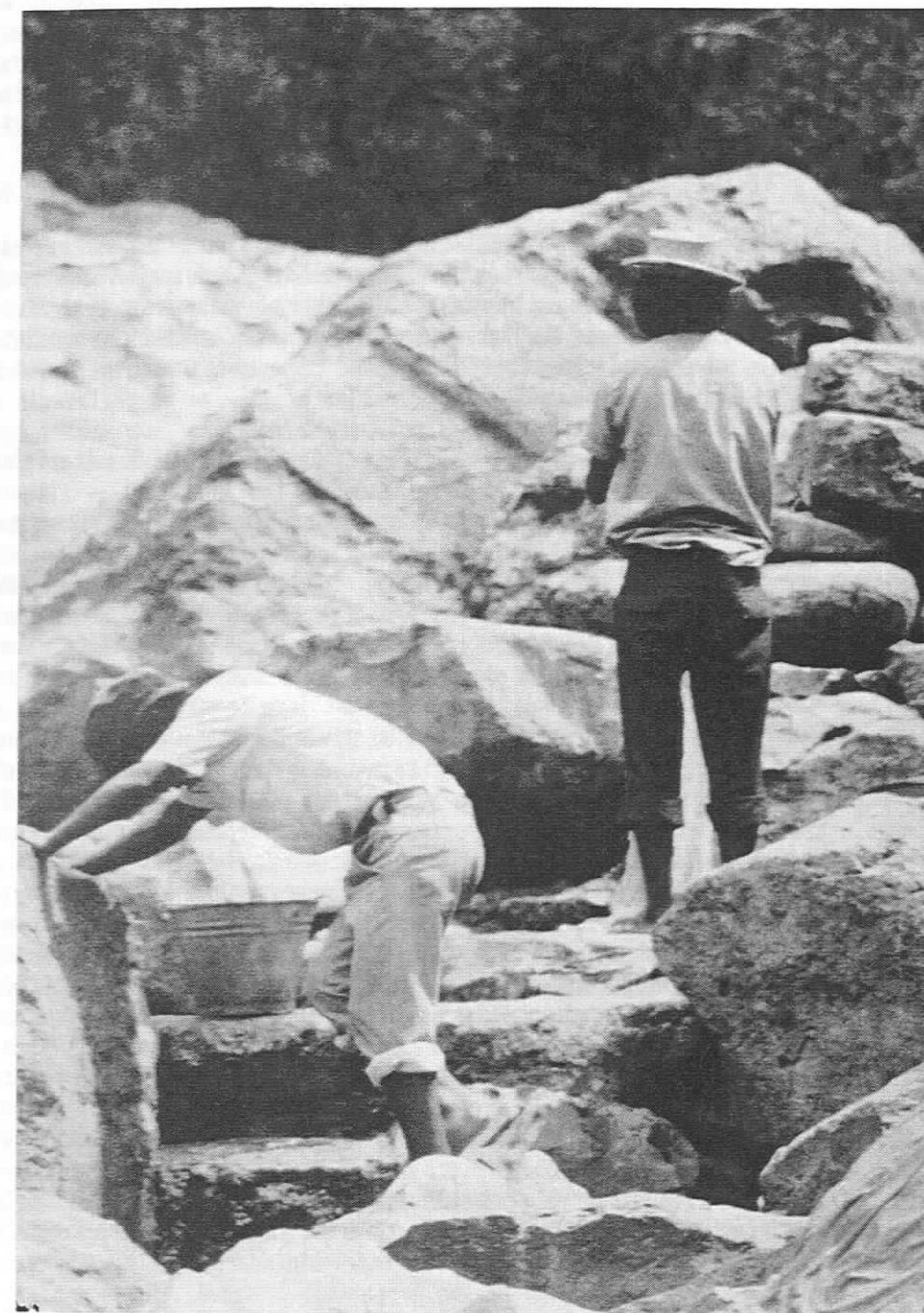


Figure 7: Foot fulling of blankets in sulphur springs, Momostenango, July, 1975.