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## THE MEXICAN JASPE (IKAT) REBOZO: COMMENTS ON ITS HISTORY, SIGNIFICANCE AND PREVALENCE

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The rebozo is a multi-function shawl worn by women in Mexico, 6 to 12 feet long and 24 to 34 inches wide. Approximately three-quarters of the length is woven; the remainder is fringe, most often elaborately worked: usually by half hitch or overhand knotting or by finger weaving. Place and identity are communicated by the yarn, the color and design of the weaving, the style and technique of fringe finishing, and by the manner in which the rebozo is worn. My particular interest is the ikat rebozo. The Spanish for ikat is jaspe. Jaspe, (ikat), a system of resist dyeing a pattern on threads before weaving, was possibly known in pre-contact Mesoamerica. There is definitely evidence that other resist techniques, plangi and batik, were used pre-contact.

In my previous research on the jaspe rebozo which is to appear in *Cloth and Clothing in Mesoamerica and the Andes*, Margot Blum Schevill, Janet C. Berlo, and Edward Dwyer, editors, one major concern was technology - how these complex and labor intensive designs of overall cloth patterning are accomplished. The thoroughness of documentation of the Elsie McDougall archive, (McDougall 1935a, 1935b), which I catalogued, plus my experience as an artist working with the ikat technique provided a basis for a description of "how to". In executing the jaspe patterns, they are broken down into like design component elements which are grouped together to minimize the vast amount of tying, then placed back in the original order at the time of assembling the warp for weaving. Similarity of such complex technique in Peru and Ecuador may point to diffusion via trade in Hispanic America. Conceptually this process provides a good example of sophisticated non-verbal manipulation.

Beyond technique, the rebozo in Mexican culture has a strong semiotic significance in terms of national identity and religion. The twentieth century Mexican artist and folklorist, Dr. Atl suggested that as the characteristic mestiza garment which is worn throughout the population, the rebozo could be the national flag (Murillo 1922). The history of the origin of the jaspe rebozo is quite speculative; often observers and travellers speak in general terms about cloth and garments rather than discuss the nuances of technique. Bernal Díaz del Castillo speaks of seeing in the Texcoco market in 1524: "many sorts of spun cotton in hanks of every color, and it seems like the silk market at Granada, except that there is much greater quantity" (Díaz del Castillo 1956:213-16). In the history of the new world, the indigenous populations were vastly reduced by lack of immunity to diseases from Europe. The estimated population of 25 million at the time of the conquest was reduced by 80% by 1600 (Gibson 1964:6). Life expectancy was under 50 years, so the artisans working at the end of the 16th century would be the grandchildren or great-grandchildren of people at maturity whose products were seen by Díaz at the market in the 1520's. Much preconquest knowledge, which resided with elites in any case, was lost. A new syncretic culture began to



emerge. In design, the preconquest heritage could be a subtle touch such as the incorporation of the "S" symbol, "ilhuitl" which means in Nahuatl day of the week or festival to be kept. Religious practice more markedly often had a subtext from preconquest belief and ceremony (Lafaye 1976:7-139). The significant image of the Virgin of Guadalupe first appeared in 1531 imprinted on the tilmatl, a traditional cloak, of a poor indio, Juan Diego. In 1582, an ordinance of the Royal Audiencia of New Spain forbade mestizos, negros and mulattos from wearing Indian dress. This very likely was responsible not only for the preservation of indigenous Indian costume but also for the development of mestizo dress (Martinez del Rio 1971:9).

The Spaniards introduced sheep and the use of wool. In the "obraje", workshop, with its foot-powered looms and dismal working conditions, described so poignantly by Alexander von Humboldt (Humboldt 1977:188-89) at the end of the eighteenth century, coarse cotton for "mantas" was woven. Cotton, which in pre-conquest times had been a luxury material, was now the fiber for garments of the lesser classes. Obrajes did not compete with backstrap weaving, done by skillful weavers at home. There were parallel systems, "factory" and home (Gibson 1967:154; Keremitsis 1973:1-3). Juan V. de Güemes in discussing 18th century rebozo production, often illegal, remarks that the natives didn't need all the machinery of the obraje, only four sticks with which they did admirable weaving in colors and jaspeados (Nunez 1917:21-22). At specific centers, Oaxaca, Puebla, Tlaxcala, there were guilds of silk weavers, which by 1600 were using Chinese silk (Borah 1943:89). In Puebla, paños of silk were woven as early as 1539. By 1731, a silk guild complained that the cotton weavers were using silk threads in their paños de rebozo. Silk weavers were enjoined from using cotton, but the cotton guilds had no such restriction (Bazant 1973: 495-499). Von Humboldt mentions the presence of many individuals of Asiatic origin in Mexico and specifically notes Malays working in Puebla obrajes (Humboldt 1977:45). The Manila galleons, 1565-1815, brought silk in every stage of manufacture and every variety of weave and pattern. There was cloth from the Philippines, Chinese and Persian rugs and fine cotton from Bengal and the Coromandel coast. In addition, there were slaves from Malaca, Moluca Islands, China and the Philippines. It would be interesting to examine shipping lists, but since both goods and slaves were smuggled, this might not be definitive (Schurz 1959:32-50, 182).

In looking to possible Spanish antecedents of the rebozo, we may note that in the Andevalo region of Huelva, there is a small cloth worn under a hat covering the face and head as extra protection against the sun, which is indeed called a rebozo. More relevant is the "rebocillo" of Mallorca customarily worn as a headcloth framing the face, going around the shoulder and crossing on the breast. Ikat is not a feature of the rebocillo of Mallorca. But none of these Spanish garments had the dimensions of the Mexican rebozo (Foster 1960:98-99). In Capt. John Stevens' Dictionary of Spanish and English, 1726, reboço is a muffler, a veil or hood over the face to avoid being known. The Academia Española, which formulated the oldest Spanish language dictionary in Mexico, 1737, gives this: "rebociño" - a mantilla or short headdress which women use to cover their mouth (bozo). The small Illustrated Larousse dictionary written under the direction of Toro and Gisbert attributes the word to Ecuador saying that "rebozo" is a "shawl or cloth which covers the shoulders". Perhaps this etymology is connected to the theory that the rebozo developed from the need for a head covering in the church, it being easy and inexpensive for a mestiza to weave at home on a



backstrap. Incidentally, the very popular typical rebozo, blue with a white overall speckled pattern known as "palomas" or "palomitas", has both the color and imagery of the Virgin. Thomas Gage, an English Dominican traveling in the new world in 1624, describes a mantle of cotton of "divers" colors. However the mantle he describes for the mestiza was of white lawn or cambric with lace. It was worn over the shoulders or head, crossed over the breast with one end over the left shoulder. Sometimes the ends hung free. The garment described by Gage in the 1620's, was worn like the rebozo, having roughly the same dimensions (Gage 1969:111). Francisco de Ajofrín, a Capuchin friar, in 1763, comments that almost every woman, even if she follows Spanish fashion will have a paño de rebozo (Ajofrín 1964:65-66).

Although the end of the viceregal period (1821) marked the beginning of Mexican national independence, identification with a distinctively "Mexican" culture had been developing since the end of the seventeenth century. Sometimes this took the form of romanticization of the "Indian" and disregard of mestizo elements. But by the 19th century, if the rebozo wasn't the mode of stylish women looking to European fashion, it was firmly recognizable as an element of female folk costume throughout the population, with an accompanying place in folk dance and poetry. One of Frances Calderón de la Barca's first impressions of Mexico in 1839 is of the women of Veracruz with rebozos, "long colored cotton scarfs, thrown over head and crossing the left shoulder". However, she says that ladies wore mantillas. In describing the poblana costume she says "overall is thrown a rebozo, not over the head but thrown on like a scarf" (Calderón 1982:40-63). Later on when Frances attempts to go to a costume ball dressed as a poblana, falling in with the tradition of the upper classes adapting servant or folk garb for play, she is dissuaded by a committee of local people who convey to her their perception of this costume as that of the demimonde (Calderón 1982:88-89). However in the course of the 19th century, the "china poblana" dress gained stature as a national costume (DeWar 1963:18-19). Another account from 1851, published in Guadalajara by D. Vicente Munguia on the origins and fabrication of the rebozo is somewhat self serving. He wanted to justify a grant for the exclusive production of both knotted pattern dyed and false (brocade patterned) rebozos. Munguia vaguely says he learned from a foreigner in 1819 and practiced the technique long and hard (Munguia 1851:8-11). The rebozo did not lose popularity through the 19th century. Indeed, a fine silk rebozo in its inlaid box was a very appropriate wedding gift. Unfortunately, surviving nineteenth century examples of rebozos are rare and 18th century examples extremely rare.

I would like to discuss some examples of jaspe rebozos, all warp ikat, beginning with a few from the Elsie McDougall Collection at the American Museum of Natural History. This collection made in 1935 is particularly valuable because of its careful documentation. These are from Tenancingo. First, there are four superfine "doscientos" with a silk like hand (65/5183-86). They are made from an English cotton #200. The one with the date 1890 knotted in the fringe has a sett of over 300 epi (65/5183). Another late 19th century one with a geometric pattern called "Aztecas" (65/5186), is no longer made in this scale. From the collection of the San Diego Museum of Man, another (1970-22-86), of uncertain provenance, but dated late 1920's or early '30's, shows the "Aztecas" design. A very anomalous rebozo created by Augusto Mendoza was collected by McDougall in 1935 (65/5181). Not only are the motifs unique but also there is a mix of cotton and rayon in this rebozo. Another very



unusual rebozo (3-555) was sent to the Lowie Museum in 1905 by Zelia Nuttall, acting as a field representative for the Crocker-Reid Research Fund. This rebozo, of typical size, bears no designation other than "Southern Mexico". The yarn is a Z ply of 6 strands of cotton, sett 128 epi. In various regions of Mexico there is a marked preference for a specific type of rebozo. In the state of Oaxaca, the dark blue cotton with flecks of white is very popular. There is some indication, based on my observation in 1987, that jaspe rebozo production in Oaxaca has severely dwindled, almost to the vanishing point, since the 1960's.

Today cotton rebozos are woven in talleres (workshops) in Tenancingo. In the 1980's, design quality of these rebozos remains interesting and sophisticated.

Rayon has replaced silk in another type of jaspe rebozo, yet to be thoroughly studied. A very interesting rayon rebozo from Tehuana (San Diego Museum of Man, 1964-27-8) collected in 1963 by Anita Jones, is said to be worn about the shoulder or tied about the waist. However, most rayon rebozos are woven in Sta. Maria del Río. In 1953, Dr. Daniel Rubin de la Borbolla, then director of the Museum of Popular Arts, brought weavers from Tenancingo to Santa Maria to teach young women and men the art of weaving ikat rebozos (Irmgard Johnson, pers.com. 1987). In my observation of rebozo wearing in the Yucatan, women seem to prefer rayon rebozos from Sta. Maria del Río in colors that match their huipiles.

The continuing commercial production of such a beautiful, highly crafted quality, labor intensive object for internal mass consumption is quite remarkable, and indicates its importance for women of all social classes in Mexican society. Thus, the rebozo is significant as a symbol of Mexican woman and as a unifying element in expressing national identity.

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