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Perpetuating Ritual Textile Traditions: A Pueblo Example

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For over a thousand years, textiles have played a vital role in Pueblo ritual and social identity, linking past and present and reinforcing cultural bonds between widespread Pueblo communities. The group known collectively as the Pueblo Indians of the southwestern United States includes the Hopi people of northern Arizona, the Acoma, Laguna, and Zuni people of western New Mexico, and a string of Pueblo communities located near the Rio Grande in the vicinity of modern-day Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Taos. Contemporary Pueblo people use virtually the same styles of ceremonial garments as those worn by their ancestors five to six hundred years ago, decorating these fabrics with motifs derived from ancestral textiles, ceramics, and other media (Dutton 1963; Hibben 1975; Keegan 1999; Kent 1983; Mera 1943; Roediger 1941; Smith 1952).

European colonization of the American Southwest brought dramatic changes to Pueblo societies, first in the form of Spanish tribute and labor demands and later with the transition to the American cash economy. These changes led to major shifts in the production, use, and exchange of Pueblo textiles (Webster 1997, in press).¹ Five aspects of Pueblo textile production were affected: 1) the gender of weavers, 2) the scheduling of production, 3) the settings of production, 4) the materials and tools of production, and 5) networks of textile exchange. In this paper I look at changes to three of these systems--the sexual division of labor, the incorporation of labor-saving materials and techniques, and changes in regional exchange--to see how each contributed to the survival of the craft into modern times.

Pueblo loom weaving was primarily a male activity at the time of contact, with men weaving most if not all of the cotton textiles used in Pueblo rituals. After contact, Pueblo male labor was diverted almost immediately to Spanish agricultural and construction projects. As Spanish tribute demands increased, Pueblo women came to perform many of the spinning, knitting, and weaving tasks required for tribute. This involvement of women in tribute textile production relaxed the cultural mores associated with the division of textile labor, paving the way for women's eventual participation in the production of ritual textiles.

In Spanish times, women's textile labor supplemented but did not replace the textile labor of men. Later, women's involvement in the production of ritual textiles grew to include the application of embroidery to fabrics woven by men. For the New Mexican Pueblos, the turning point came in the late nineteenth century, with the increasing role of Pueblo men in the American cash economy and the growing participation of Pueblo women in needlework and weaving programs sponsored by U.S. government and mission schools. Today women are the principal weavers, embroiderers, and seamstresses among the Rio Grande Pueblos, producing all manner of textiles for ceremonial use. Although a few men are still involved in these activities, it is women who are the major producers of ceremonial garments in this region.

An entirely different situation occurred among the Hopi. Situated 150 miles west of the Rio Grande and major centers of Spanish population, the Hopi were much less impacted by European economic pressures until World War II. In the Hopi villages, men continued to dominate all aspects of textile production into modern times, just as they had in late prehistory. Although Hopi women are beginning to play a greater role in the embroidery and knitting of ritual garments, loom weaving at Hopi remains the domain of men.

This relaxation of traditional gender roles in the production of ritual textiles is one of the most important factors in the survival of the craft. Among the Rio Grande Pueblos in particular, this gender shift is largely responsible for a resurgence of textile production in this region during the twentieth century. It remains to be seen whether Hopi women will increase their involvement in the craft, or if weaving will remain primarily a male specialization among the Hopi people.

A second important factor in the survival of Pueblo textile production is the increasing use of labor-saving materials and techniques. In Pueblo cosmology, cotton serves as a metaphor for clouds and rain, and cotton was and still is the fiber of choice for Pueblo dance costumes and wedding textiles. Within a century of European contact, Pueblo peoples in the Rio Grande had lost much of their prime cotton-growing land to Spanish settlement, and by the early nineteenth century, cotton was being grown in quantities sufficient for textile production only at the Hopi villages and at those Rio Grande Pueblo villages in the vicinity of Albuquerque. Even at these villages, cotton was being grown in decreasing quantities by this time.

Despite efforts to maintain supplies of native-grown cotton, the supply continued to decline, leading Pueblo textile producers to seek out new sources of cotton for their ceremonial garments. One of the most ingenious solutions involved the use of commercial cotton sacking, which the Pueblos acquired in the form of grain sacks in the late 1800s. The relatively coarse weave was well suited for embroidery, and the Pueblos quickly adapted this fabric for use in their ceremonial kilts, breechcloths, and shirts. This use of sacking paved the way for the use of other commercial cotton fabrics, including canvas and later monkscloth. Today nearly all ceremonial kilts, breechcloths, mantas, and shirts made by the New Mexican Pueblos incorporate commercial cotton cloth in their construction.

Commercial cotton string, cotton batting, and bales of raw cotton became available to the Pueblos in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Access to these new cotton supplies led to a resurgence of loom weaving, especially among the Hopi. Pueblo weavers used the cotton string as warp in their kilts and mantas and as a braiding element in their sashes. Employing the traditional stick-and-whorl spindle, they spun commercial cotton fiber and batting into weft. It is rare to find a Pueblo cotton textile made after 1900 that does not contain either commercial cotton cloth as the ground fabric or commercial sources of cotton as warp and weft.

The Spaniards introduced sheep to the Pueblos in the late 1500s, and within a century the Pueblos had substituted wool for cotton in most handwoven textiles except those intended for ceremonial use. In a desert environment, it is much easier to shear a sheep than to grow the same quantity of cotton. With its superior affinity for dyes, wool was used not only to weave blankets, shirts, and mantas, but also to decorate ceremonial cotton fabrics. Eventually commercial woolen yarns, including the well-known Germantown yarns, replaced handspun ones in belts, garters, and embroidered textiles. Today commercial acrylic yarns, more affordable and easier to obtain than woolen yarns, are widely employed. Black and dark blue commercial cloth of wool or synthetic fiber has also largely replaced handspun woolen fabrics for women's manta dresses.

Changes have also occurred in the traditional techniques of production. Knitting was adopted soon after contact, first for tribute production and then for the Pueblos' own use. Later, the European techniques of knitting and crochet were substituted for the more labor-intensive precontact techniques of weft-wrap openwork, interlinking, and looping to produce traditional styles of openwork shirts and leggings. Some time after the adoption of wool, probably in the late 1700s, the Pueblos began using a different type of embroidery stitch, a modified backstitch that replaced the simple running stitch. This new stitch, possibly adapted from Spanish *colcha* embroidery, was more far economical and labor efficient than the earlier stitch because it confined most of the yarn to one face of the fabric, enabling an embroiderer to cover large areas of design in a relatively short period of time. Applying these same principles of economy and efficiency, Hopi weavers also developed a loom-woven analog to embroidery, probably in the late 1700s or early 1800s. This technique, known to textile scholars as "Hopi brocade" (Kent 1983:76), is a supplemental weft-wrap structure related to soumak. At Zuni, appliqué was used in place of embroidery in some turn-of-the-century garments. Today, appliquéd textiles and cotton cloth pre-printed with traditional embroidery designs are becoming increasingly popular in the Rio Grande Pueblo communities, a trend likely to continue in the coming years.

Although Pueblo peoples were put to work in Spanish weaving workshops in the 1600s, there is little to indicate that the European treadle loom was adopted by the Pueblos in Spanish times. It is only in the last century that Pueblo use of the treadle loom has become more widespread. Today weavers at San Juan, Isleta, and Laguna, among other villages, are using treadle looms to weave certain styles of woolen dresses and shawls, notably the black wool manta dress and the white manta with red and blue borders, or "maiden shawl" (Kent 1983:61). Coarser in weave and lacking the complex twill fabric structures of their traditional counterparts, these treadle-loom versions can be produced in only a fraction of the time. To my knowledge, the more complex woolen mantas with the diamond-twill borders are no longer being made to any extent at any of the Pueblo villages. Nonetheless, a need for these styles of garments continues, and these simpler versions now fulfill that demand.

Hopi weavers still use the traditional upright loom to produce their handwoven textiles, but by and large, the trend is for Pueblo textile producers to incorporate ever more modern, labor-saving materials and methods in their work. Contemporary Pueblo

people are full participants in American society, subject to the same competing demands on time and labor as the rest of us. Although Pueblo textile artists continue to produce virtually all of the traditional *garment styles*, doing so has required a progressive streamlining of the production process. The ultimate intent of these producers is to meet the demand for new garments for public ceremonies as the older heirloom pieces are retired from use. In the process, many traditional techniques and weave structures have been lost. Without recourse to modern fabrics, yarns, techniques, and looms, it is unlikely that modern Pueblo textile artists would be able to meet the continuing demand for these garments.

Finally, I wish to discuss changes in networks of exchange. Within two hundred years of contact, Spanish political disruptions and other factors led to a general decline in textile production among the Rio Grande Pueblos. As production declined in this region, Hopi male weavers stepped in as the specialized suppliers of ritual textiles to the New Mexican Pueblos, a role they served well into the mid-1900s and still serve to some extent today. With the growing participation of Hopi men in the American cash economy after World War II, the number of Hopi textile specialists decreased markedly. As the supply of imported Hopi textiles declined in the Rio Grande villages, local weavers picked up the slack. Today most styles of garments formerly acquired from the Hopi in exchange are locally made in the Rio Grande Pueblo towns, albeit using commercial cloth or treadle-loom woven fabrics. A few styles, such as the brocaded sash, continue to be important trade items from Hopi.

Now, in a fascinating reversal of centuries-old trade patterns, certain ceremonial garments made on treadle looms in the Rio Grande are making their way west to Hopi. Hopi weavers no longer make the more labor-intensive woolen mantas, but these items are still needed for Hopi ceremonies. So, Hopi consumers are beginning to use the treadle-loom versions imported from the Rio Grande Pueblos. The most common of these imports is the manta with red and blue borders, or "maiden shawl." These shifting patterns of exchange underscore the flexibility of Pueblo textile networks and their success in keeping critical ritual garments in circulation. Throughout the centuries, Pueblo textile exchange has continued to link producers in one region with consumers in another, ensuring the perpetuation of ancient textile traditions and cultural beliefs, and maintaining critical lines of communication between widespread Pueblo communities.

¹ Much of the historical information presented in this article is extracted from my dissertation (Webster 1997), which examines the effects of European contact on Pueblo textile production for the period A.D. 1540-1850. A book manuscript based on this study is currently in preparation. Information about more recent changes in Pueblo weaving comes largely from my own work with museum collections and personal observations in the Pueblo villages. I recommend Keegan (1999) as a particularly good source of information about the appearance and usage of ceremonial textiles by contemporary Rio Grande Pueblo peoples.

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