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Traditional Innovation in Oaxacan Indigenous Costumes

Hector Manuel Meneses Lozano

Introduction

The *Museo Textil de Oaxaca* (MTO) is established at the heart of a very rich and diverse textile region. However, the museum does not only show local textiles, for it aims to present topics and objects from throughout the world, including contemporary textile art. Whenever visitors face an exhibition that does not include Oaxacan textiles, a question inevitably arises: “Where are the traditional textiles of the region?” My question in turn is: “What does *traditional textile* mean?”

Many different indigenous communities from Oaxaca have been exposed to trade routes that have been active even before the first Europeans came into the continent. Such exposure has led to a “global market” that has influenced the way in which these communities behave. Textiles (from fibres and dyes to yarns and finished cloths) have been a part of this very active exchange. What could be considered *traditional* now, was in fact very avant-garde at the beginning.

An example of this was on display at the MTO in September 2013. The exhibition’s title: *Silver, glass and cotton: the city reflected on indigenous attire in Oaxaca*, meant to demonstrate the impact that urban goods (both locally made and imported) had on different textile traditions that were carried out in the countryside. The following image illustrates a female ceremonial costume from the Zapotec community of San Pedro Quiatoni.



Figure 1 Quiatoni's Female Ceremonial Costume, ca. 1930. Image courtesy of Museo Textil de Oaxaca. Image by Fidel Ugarte.

While this costume's description could include the word "traditional", its construction evidences quite an array of materials. The wrap-around skirt is made out of hand-spun wool, probably dyed with natural dyes, and woven on the back-strap loom. This skirt, as opposed to the *huipil*¹, was not made in Quiatoni: it was woven in Mitla, another Zapotec village, who produced at least two different wrap-around skirts for communities in the mountains.² The *huipil* is made out of hand-spun cotton and after being woven on the back-strap loom, it was embroidered with reeled silk dyed with synthetic dyes, finally, it was decorated with a silk-brocaded ribbon. Both the silk used for embroidery as well as the silk ribbon were most likely imported from Europe or Eastern Asia.³ The *rebozo*⁴ that is shown as a head-cover was also woven on the back-strap loom using hand-spun cotton with stripes of cotton dyed with purple shellfish (a resource only available in the coastal region) and locally-raised silk. This silk, unlike the one used for embroidery or the one found on the ribbon, is dyed with cochineal. To complete the ceremonial costume, Quiatoni women wore up to three strings of glass beads. The most commonly accepted provenance of such beads is Venice, Italy, although Stephen Johnson suggests that these might have been produced in Puebla, neighbouring state north of Oaxaca.⁵ In any case, we can clearly appreciate the amalgam that this one single costume represents.

Silk as an Agent of Transformation

Silk is one of the products that have transformed the appearance of Oaxacan textiles: it is soft, it is easy to dye, it offers a very bright and diverse range of colours, and it gives a sheen that contrasts nicely with other fibres, such as cotton and wool. Silk has been dyed with natural dyes, but it has also been widely used with synthetic dyes. Some of the most appreciated wrap-around skirts from the coast of Oaxaca, said to be dyed with cochineal, consist of hand-spun silk dyed with fuchsine. This aniline has been used to create and develop different techniques of ornamentation. Silk satin or embroidered ribbons have also been used to complement fabrics woven on the back-strap loom. Some communities discontinued their weaving tradition and favoured the use of imported silk satins, taffetas, and velvets... all of these by the end of the 19th century. Silk, therefore, is a raw material that allows us to understand the ever-changing taste of indigenous communities, forcing us to broaden our mindset when referring to this category of textiles.

Locally-raised, but Synthetically-dyed Silk

San Bartolo Yautepec, Zapotec community located in the Southern Mountains of Oaxaca, is home to weavers whose distinct costume used to be an extremely fine white cotton *huipil* woven on the back-strap loom with silk supplementary weft motifs. The following image shows one of such garments, however, the opening on the upper border is an alteration that was made to the original textile. This *huipil de tapar* did not have an opening for the neck; instead, it was used as a head-cover.

¹ Female tunic.

² Alejandro de Ávila, exhibition booklet, "Plata, vidrio y algodón: reflejos de la ciudad en los atuendos indígenas de Oaxaca", p. 19; September, 2013; Museo Textil de Oaxaca (Oaxaca, Mexico).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Shawl.

⁵ Stephen C. Johnson, "The Intriguing Mystery of the Quiatoni Beads", *The Bead Journal* 4 (1975): 13.



Figure 2 Huipil (HUI-0162), San Bartolo Yautepec, first half of the 20th c. Image courtesy of Museo Textil de Oaxaca. Image by Jorge López.

Irmgard Johnson, pioneer in the study of Mexican textiles, mentioned that the silk used in Yautepec was locally raised.⁶ However, Alejandro de Ávila interviewed a group of weavers from that village in 1995 and all of them remembered hearing that silk was taken to Yautepec from somewhere else; sadly, they did not know where it was taken from.⁷ As for the provenance of the dyes used in silk threads, Francisco “Chico” Ortega – Johnson’s informant and supplier of community textiles – told her that people in Santo Tomás Quierí (village close to San Bartolo Yautepec) mixed anilines with natural dyes and mordants, such as brasilwood and ash.⁸ Analytical tests, however, have only demonstrated the use of synthetic dyes, although further analyses of old samples are required.⁹

It is interesting to note the process of silk-dyeing, for Irmgard Johnson documented two different ways of doing it. In the Mazatec town of Huautla de Jiménez, even though the tradition of silk-spinning was dying in 1941, Johnson was still able to interview some silk-spinners in the 50s. Some women said they

⁶ Irmgard W. Johnson, note fields on spinning silk, p. 45; box 25; Biblioteca de Investigación Juan de Córdova (Oaxaca, Mexico).

⁷ de Ávila, Kirsten Johnson, and Demián Ortiz, *Irmgard Weitlaner Johnson – Una vida dedicada al textil* (Oaxaca: Museo Textil de Oaxaca, 2014), 85.

⁸ Johnson, note fields on cultivated silk, p. 3; box 25; Biblioteca de Investigación Juan de Córdova (Oaxaca, Mexico).

⁹ Arie Wallert, “Análisis de los colorantes en los textiles históricos de Oaxaca” in *El hilo continuo – La conservación de las tradiciones textiles de Oaxaca*, ed. Kathryn Klein (Singapore: The Getty Conservation Institute – Fomento Cultural Banamex, 1997), 77.

spun the fibres first and dyed them second in order to avoid white spots in the thread. Another spinner, however, dyed the cocoons before these were spun.¹⁰ Though from a different location, there is evidence of this process at the American Museum of Natural History. Elsie McDougall, while travelling in the Zapotec village of San Francisco Cajonos, purchased silk cocoons dyed in green and bright purple.¹¹ This shade of purple can be found in the old warp-patterned sashes woven in Cajonos, but also on the brocaded motifs of the *huipiles* of San Bartolo Yautepec.

There is another colour that can be found in several textiles from Oaxaca: fuchsia. The costume of men and women from the Mixtec town of Santiago Ixtayutla use locally-raised silk from San Mateo Peñasco, where silk is dyed with fuchsine, a magenta dye invented in mid-19th century which chemical composition is rosaniline hydrochloride. Since these dyes arrived in Mexico during the second half of the 19th c., weavers started using them: they were quick to use and cheap to obtain.¹²



Figure 3 COTÓN (COT-0004), Santiago Ixtayutla, early 1970s. Image courtesy of Museo Textil de Oaxaca. Image by Josué Concha.

Even though silk in San Mateo Peñasco was dyed with a synthetic dye, symbolic meaning was assigned to these new materials. Alejandro de Ávila mentions that a textile artist from Estetla (a Mixtec town) only used these dyes when there was a full moon, otherwise, according to the artist: *the colour remains tender, that is to say, colours are not saturated; we already own that which we know.*¹³

Fuchsine has a particular behaviour: it bleeds. Nevertheless, such bleeding has not been regarded as a flaw. Moreover, this characteristic has been used to the advantage of master weavers. In Ixtayutla, once the fabric is finished and off the loom, weavers carefully fold the fabric and leave it soaking in water and

¹⁰ Johnson, note fields on spinning silk, p. 51; box 25; Biblioteca de Investigación Juan de Córdova (Oaxaca, Mexico).

¹¹ Inventory numbers: 65 / 5245 A and 65 / 5245 B

¹² de Ávila, “kutiere, titia’a: historia y simbolismo en los tejidos mixtecos” in *Las rutas de la tierra del sol*, comp. Reina Ortiz (Mexico: Universidad Tecnológica de la Mixteca, 2012), 106.

¹³ de Ávila, *Ibid.*, 107.

soap. After a while, the designs created with the supplementary wefts transfer (through bleeding of the dye) to the white background, thus creating a stamped pattern. Other times, they would rinse a new skein of fuchsine dyed-silk and weavers would daub the fabric with their fingers.¹⁴

The bleeding quality that fuchsine owns is not shared by cochineal, not if cochineal is well-used. However, several fuchsine-dyed indigenous textiles have been said to be dyed with cochineal. Besides the Ixtayutla textiles, the wrap-around skirts (*posahuanques*) from the Mixtec coast towns of Oaxaca are usually said to be dyed with cochineal. More often than not, this is not the case. It is true that these skirts display the three main colours obtained through natural dyes in Oaxaca: blue, purple, and red. For the first two colours, cotton has been used to receive the colours provided by indigo and the purple shellfish. The red stripes are made out of silk yarns generally dyed with fuchsine.¹⁵ Apparently, only the old ceremonial wrap-around skirts worn in Jamiltepec have silk dyed with cochineal.¹⁶



Figure 4 Wrap-around skirt (detail - ENA-0182), San Pedro Tututepec, first decades of the 20th c. Hand-spun cotton dyed with indigo and purple shellfish, locally-raised hand-spun silk dyed with a synthetic dye (prob. fuchsine), and industrially-spun cotton dyed with a bright red synthetic dye. Image courtesy of Museo Textil de Oaxaca. Image by Jorge López.

Silk-imported Materials

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Wallert, Ibid.

¹⁶ de Ávila, Ibid., 106.

Indigenous costumes, just like our own costumes, are not always made out of local materials. We have seen how locally-raised silk was used in combination with new dyes, but silk was also used as an entirely imported material.

The *huipil* worn by women from the Zapotec village of Villa Hidalgo Yalálag is known, among other features, for its coloured braid and tassels located under the neck opening. The MTO holds in its collections a *huipil* from this area from the 1950s.



Figure 5 Huipil (HUI-0141), Villa Hidalgo Yalálag, ca. 1950. Image courtesy of Museo Textil de Oaxaca. Image by Jorge López.

The *huipil*'s braid, tassels, and embroidered motifs are made out of a two-ply rayon thread dyed in bright colours. The lustre of this threads resembles that provided by silk, which suggests that such elements were done in silk before they were done with rayon. This was confirmed after examining a *huipil* from the same village currently held at the *Musée du quai Branly* in Paris.¹⁷ That textile, ca. 1880-1890, has the same pattern of braid, tassels, and embroidered multi-coloured squares that may be observed on the MTO's example. The only difference is that such coloured elements were made out of a two-ply reeled silk thread. Irmgard Johnson noted that the Otomi people from Tolimán, in Querétaro (central-north Mexico), used a "German silk", "which was a very fine 2-ply thread brought imported

¹⁷ Inventory number: 71.1897.52.1114 .

from Mexico City. Nowadays, the weavers have been using ‘silk of the country’ [...] which, they say, is not as fine and its weave not as pliable.”¹⁸

The incorporation of imported silk has not been a novelty, not in the past 400 years. For example, *huipiles* from different villages in Oaxaca have incorporated ribbons since Colonial times, as attested through numerous caste paintings. The *Relaciones Geográficas de Oaxaca 1777-1778* mention towns where imported ribbons were used. The account of San Miguel Quetzaltepec, written in 1777, describes that: “[...] women, [...] wear trimmings of silk, ribbons, and of wool, which they call *tlacoyales* for their hair, [...]”.¹⁹

Once again, the collections held at the *Musée du quai Branly* allow us to imagine what the *huipiles* with imported silk ribbon may have looked like. There are two *huipiles*, ca. 1880-1890, from the Mazatec region, probably from Huautla de Jiménez, that are beautifully ornamented with imported silk ribbons dyed with synthetic dyes in magenta and blue.²⁰ This colour combination is still in use by the women of Huautla, however, ribbons are now made out of rayon or polyester. It has been said that these ribbons were imported from Europe. An interview with Inti García, from Huautla de Jiménez, confirms this, for he has recently found old rolls of ribbon with a label that tracks their origin to Spain.²¹

Not only silk yarn and ribbons were imported, silk fabrics were imported as well and these were quickly embraced by some communities. Once again, the *Relaciones Geográficas de Oaxaca 1777-1778* describe several towns where imported fabrics and lace were used. The account of Santa María Jalapa del Marqués, in the district of Tehuantepec, mentions that in 1777: “Women, for festivity occasions, even wear cloth from China for cotton and silk petticoats and *guipiles* dressed up with lace, ribbon, sequin, although the headdress is badly-proportioned for it is made out of black wool cords that are known as *tlacoyales* in this area.”²² This very last comment indicates that the *tlacoyales*, a distinctive headdress in several communities in Oaxaca, was out of place when compared to the imported fabrics that came, namely, from China. What is not out of place is to remember that wool, too, was an import to the Americas in the 16th c.

The attire of the Zapotec women from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec is a conclusive example of how these imported materials were quickly assimilated. Beginning in the 19th c., women incorporated the new fabrics available in the region. Five textiles from this area, currently held at the *Musée du quai Branly*, were acquired by August Génin in the 1890s: one *huipil*, two ceremonial *huipiles* (**bidaaniró’**), and two skirts.

The *huipil* consists of a synthetic blue-dyed silk taffeta with a silk-brocaded ribbon.²³ The size of this garment (16.5” x 25.4”) suggests it was used like a very short tunic, similar to the one depicted in a lithograph by Désiré Charnay in 1888.

The ceremonial *huipiles* are made of different ground fabrics.²⁴ One of them is made out of industrial tulle and the other one is made out of hand-spun cotton woven on the back-strap loom. Fake sleeves and

¹⁸ Johnson, note fields on spinning silk, p. 54; box 25; Biblioteca de Investigación Juan de Córdova (Oaxaca, Mexico).

¹⁹ Manuel Esparza, ed., *Relaciones geográficas de Oaxaca 1777-1778* (Oaxaca: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, 1994), 258.

²⁰ Inventory numbers: 71.1897.52.1106 and 71.1987.52.1107 .

²¹ Inti García, interview by autor, Oaxaca, Mexico, October 23, 2014.

²² Esparza, *Ibid.*, 173.

²³ Inventory number: 71.1897.52.1230 .

a ruffle on the neck were added to both examples, as well as a ruffle sewn onto the bottom edge. Over the joins of the sleeves and the bottom-edge ruffle, imported silk ribbons were sewn, as well as over the join of the neck ruffle of one of these *huipiles*. These ribbons were dyed with synthetic materials in blue and red.

The skirts are made out of imported silk satin dyed in bright red, yellow, and a soft pink.²⁵ Both skirts include a waistband made out of silk ribbons dyed with synthetic red and yellow, as well as silk-velvet ribbons dyed black.

It is important to notice that all these five textiles (plus the other ones mentioned referred to the *Musée du quai Branly*'s collections²⁶) show machine-made stitches. This means that the sewing machine had made its way to remote villages of Oaxaca before the 1890s. Today, in 2014, getting to some of these villages takes up to six hours of driving departing from the city of Oaxaca. Technology, along with the new materials provided by it, found its way across the mountains fairly quickly.

Tradition vs. Constant Transformation

We have seen how indigenous textiles, far from being described as traditional, have constantly evolved. New materials, increase of availability of resources, and technological advances have changed what we, as humanity, wear on a day-to-day basis. Aesthetics play a strong part as well, for vivid, bright, and saturated colours have called our attention ever since before we applied pigments on cave walls.

Silk has enriched our textile history, for it provides tactile and visual qualities that cannot be replicated by other fibres. Inhabitants of Oaxaca know this and that is why silk was been a good on demand. It is true that it has never been an inexpensive material, however, that is part of the reason why silk textiles from Oaxaca are so exquisite. It was not only a financial matter: if people were willing to invest in silk, they were also equally willing to invest time, patience, and great skill into their work.

The examples that I have referred to blend local and foreign materials with a deeply rooted identity. The availability of new materials and colours and the incorporation of these into people's attire do not necessarily imply a setback or a detriment. In fact, "updating" local attire so that it still means something to the current generations is probably the key to preserve a cultural identity. An example of this is what has happened in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Before silk fabrics were imported to the region, Zapotec women's costume was completely different. When such fabrics became available, women embraced them and reconfigured their costume within their own aesthetic. Silk fabrics eventually gave way to rayon and polyester, while continuing the "traditional" *huipil* and skirt look. A few years ago, this look was slightly modified after translucent fabrics with sequins and ribbons were employed and even in 2014, such costumes adopted the neon-coloured palette that dominated this year's apparel worldwide. It seems to me that the traditional human behaviour is constant innovation.

²⁴ Inventory numbers: 71.1897.52.1218 and 71.1897.52.1219 .

²⁵ Inventory numbers: 71.1897.52.1216 and 71.1897.52.1217 .

²⁶ All notes on the textiles from the *Musée du quai Branly*'s collections are personal observations made on-site in 2010.

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