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The Textile Tradition The Fabric Of Meaning



The art of spinning and weaving among indigenous communities in Mexico is complex, not only in terms of the processes, skills, and technique involved, but also because of its meanings and symbols, which date back to pre-Columbian times. The textile arts remain inextricably linked to femininity and the private space and have been cherished by ancient and contemporary societies alike.

The connection between women and the thread can be gleaned across precolonial pictographic documents, as well as in religious iconography, sculpture, ceramics, and throughout Mesoamerica's creation myths in general. To the Nahua people, masculine and feminine tasks were defined from the beginning of time: men would till the land, while women would spin and weave with the backstrap loom. The first indigenous couple to populate the Earth did so, as did those who followed: "Then they made a man and a woman: the man was called Uxumuco and she was called Cipactonal. And they were sent to till the soil, and she, to spin and weave . . ." ¹

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As such, the textile arts were part of the life and destiny of pre-Columbian indigenous women: their threads and tools accompanied them from birth to death, and even after death. Adults would give newborn girls the tools associated with their gender, symbolically instructing them in their use: “If the one being baptized was a female, she was paired with all the womanly treasures, namely the tools needed to weave and spin, like a spindle, shuttle, sewing chest, and a cup for spinning.”²

By age fourteen, girls had already learned how to weave, and at about sixteen, they would fully master the task. At that point, they were ready for marriage, permanently joining their village’s community, economic, and sociocultural life. From then on, a woman would be charged with clothing her consort and offspring and, if she were to die in childbirth, she would ascend to the western part of the universe, Cihuatlampa, where, among other tasks, she would devote herself to spinning.

Furthermore, when an elder woman felt that death was nigh, she would don her best attire and be buried in it, embarking on

her journey to the other world with her main “weapons”: her loom and spindle. Archaeological evidence shows that pre-Hispanic indigenous women were buried with their domestic tools, including those associated with textile dressmaking. Even today, in contemporary Amuzgo communities, funerary trousseaus include the weaving models from which spinsters copied their designs.

Appreciation for the invaluable textile mastery among indigenous communities is far from fortuitous: their clothing has not only proven practical when it comes to covering the body; it constitutes a sacred talent that the gods gave women at the beginning of time. Indeed, we may find one or more goddesses with ties to femininity and textile work in all Mesoamerican cultures: the goddesses Xochiquetzal, Ixchel, Chicomecóatl, and Cicpactonal are renowned for having originated the art of weaving and for protecting the women who take up the task. Likewise, multiple documents preceding the arrival of Hernán Cortés portray these goddesses as seated before a cosmic tree, weaving plant-based threads on a loom or spinning cotton on a *malacate*, or wooden spindle, highlighting the textile arts’ sacred nature as well as their instruments’ superhuman origins. In contemporary indigenous communities, this significance persists within collective memory, although the goddesses’ roles have been delegated to patron saints and the Virgin Mary.

For the Nahua indigenous people of the Zongolica mountain range in Veracruz, the backstrap loom possesses a magical-religious dimension linked to Tonantzin, or the Virgin of Guadalupe. The

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weavers concur that Tonantzin was the first deity to weave and share her knowledge with the women in the area. While we may find many versions of the legend, all of them include a level of syncretism between the Nahuatl religion and Judeo-Christian Catholicism, revealing the art of weaving's sacred nature in the region:

The oldest, most grandmotherly women would tell us that there didn't used to be clothes like there are now. Before, everyone would walk around the mountain naked, tormented by the cold and getting wet. Then, Tonantzin saw that her son, Jesús, was suffering a lot, but she didn't know what to do to



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keep him warm. One day, she noticed that the sheep had wool and thought that maybe they weren't cold, since their fur covered them, so she snipped a little bit of wool and put it on the boy. And, in fact, he did stay warm, but since he was quite a mischievous boy, he'd go running around the mountain, and when he'd come back, he'd be naked again.

So, the *virgencita* realized that all her wool kept getting caught in the branches on the mountain and he'd come back with nothing on. The next day, she spoke with Saint Joseph. He was a carpenter, so she asked him to make some little sticks for her, since she wanted to try to weave.

When night fell, she began to weave the wool, and then she set up a loom with the little sticks that Saint Joseph had made for her. She tried to figure out how to weave, but didn't know how. However, since she is highly miraculous, she man-



aged to make linen with her woolen thread. And with it, she dressed Mary's boy Jesus, and he was never cold again. So that nobody would suffer from nudity again, the *virgencita* taught our grandmothers how to weave, and they taught their daughters, too. That was the gift that Tonantzin gave us women. We have all woven clothing for our families ever since. (Matilde García Tenzohua, weaver from Tlaquilpa, Veracruz)³

This statement proves highly valuable for understanding how myths help create representations that legitimize the tasks assigned to each sex, demarcating gender spheres and distributing resources and the handling of technologies; it helps us link the image of the Virgin Mary to the backstrap loom, legitimizing textile labor as a woman's activity, while logging, personified in Saint Joseph, pertains to men. Thus, the maternal image surrounding the *virgencita* (or Tonantzin) that persists in the indigenous imaginary today demarcates and legitimizes the domestic space as belonging to women, along with reproduction, shepherding, childrearing, animal husbandry, and service to others. Meanwhile, Saint Joseph might harken us back to the non-domestic space (to field work, carpentry, logging, and the handling of certain technologies such as the saw and the hoe, which, in this context, concern men).

In other parts of Mexico, the textile arts are believed to have been passed on to the eldest women through dreams. This is the case in Tenejapa, in the state of Chiapas, where embroiderers



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claim to have learned their craft from Our Lady of Santa Lucía. In central Mexico, Our Lady of the Agonies is considered the patroness of those who weave the traditional Mexican shawl known as a rebozo, while in Aldama, Chiapas, where the Tzotzil indigenous people live, Our Lady of Magdalena is said to have woven from the beginning of creation, standing before a tree, and to have initiated women in the textile arts.

Just as before the time of Hernán Cortés, textiles still mark transcendent moments today, both individual and collective. Among the Nahuatl communities in Cuetzalan, in the state of Puebla, godparents are charged with "dressing" their godchildren soon after birth. Male newborns receive a cotton poncho called a *cotón* (also known as *gabán* or *jorongo*). Handwoven on the backstrap loom, the *cotón's* colorful embroidery resembles a *quahquahuini*, or bagworm, a caterpillar that lives on coffee plantations, forging its cocoon with bits of wood and sealing it with its own silk as it undertakes its metamorphosis. According to oral tradition, this little caterpillar is quite industrious, as it chops and gathers several little sticks for its cocoon. By recreating the caterpillar on the *cotón*, godparents wish their godson to become a hardworking logger when he grows up, someone capable of providing food and shelter to his wife and children.





When the infant being baptized is a girl, godparents gift her a huipil, a slip, and a sash, to be complemented by a broom, a small water vessel, and sticks and rods for a loom. The girl is expected to fulfill her domestic chores unflinching and, of course, to be a good weaver. According to oral tradition, if godparents fail to perform suitably in the “dressing” ceremony, when they die, they’ll be barred from embarking on their journey to the afterlife: their godchildren will undress them before they can even leave.

Another highly relevant moment in the sociocultural lives of indigenous peoples with direct ties to textile work is the “fiesta de mayordomía,” a religious community festivity celebrating a Catholic patron saint as the village’s protector. Traditionally, these protecting saints are paid tribute and honored according to the Catholic calendar. In Tlaquilpa, Veracruz, for instance, the Nahuatl people hold a mass for Saint Mary Magdalene in the municipal parish every July 21. The night before, the women offer her garments that they started handweaving on their backstrap looms ten months prior. Weaving for a saint is considered a privilege that demands that the weavers work night and day so that the patron will look kindly upon the gift. If the weavers fulfill their task, they receive a divine blessing, allowing them to keep weaving to the benefit of their communities and families.

Among other garments, the women offer Saint Mary Magdalene a *cuétil*, a handwoven woolen skirt colored with natural dyes, as well as an artisanally woven cotton rebozo, a sash dyed with cochineal, and a satin and lace blouse. According to local oral tradition, if the saints aren’t clad in customary attire, they might be offended and lash out with a number of punishments, especially affecting crops and unleashing an array of natural disasters.

Final Thoughts

As we may observe, the textile work undertaken by Mexico’s indigenous communities encompasses a number of cultural meanings associated with gender and ritualism. It transcends the technical and aesthetic through its intricately interwoven symbolism, which dates back thousands of years. In this fabric of meaning, indigenous women reaffirm their belonging to a certain ethnicity and community, while expressing their world views, histories, origins, and sociocultural realities. This complex art deserves to be recognized and reclaimed, as the great contributions of indigenous women to art and culture in Mexico and the world remain invisible and underestimated today. **NMM**

Further Reading

- Ramírez, Rosario, “El ciclo de vida femenina,” in *Arqueología Mexicana*, special edition, no. 55, April 2014, p. 68-69.
- Turok, Martha, *Cómo acercarse a la artesanía* (Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés, 1988).

Notes

- 1 Ángel María Garibay, *Teogonía e historia de los mexicanos* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1985), p. 25.
- 2 Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1979 [1577]).
- 3 Interview with the author in 2011.