Artist from the women weaver's collective K'uxul Pok', La Magdalena, Aldama, Chiapas. Photo courtesy of Graciela Martínez-Zalce.

Graciela Martínez-Zalce*
Teresa Jiménez**

Weaving From Beyond the Hand: A Conversation With Two Textile Artists

When you weave, you speak to the thread, and it absorbs all your energy.
If you're angry, the thread will break; the embroidery won't come out as planned.
The loom is a part of us weavers,
with all our thoughts and emotions passing through it as we work.
Great tales by the light of day.
Alberto López Gómez

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Photos by Gretta Penélope Hernández.

Araceli Ramírez and Alberto López.

Araceli Ramírez and Alberto López Gómez are textile artists from the Tzotzil region of Chiapas. She is from San Andrés Larráinzar and he, from La Magdalena, Aldama. Araceli leads the Yólotl women weavers collective, while Alberto stands at the helm of the K'uxul Pok' group. We spoke of technique, colors, landscapes, symbology, identity, community, fashion, and art, but also about their feelings, fears, challenges, successes, and dreams — in sum, of everything that unfolds in the process of weaving fine thread.

Teresa Jiménez: Araceli, Alberto, tell us about how you got started in the textile tradition and how you built your respective weaving communities.

Araceli Ramírez: During the weavers' reunion that took place at the Faculty of Architecture within the UNAM in the year 2000, I became familiar with other techniques, such as the backstrap loom and embroidery, and I also met many people who shared the same dream as I did: to weave and to create. I became excited about the fact that we shared a collective dream, and that, as a group, we could grow that dream by sharing experiences. It's not just about weaving for the sake of it, because creating textiles influences the context in which you live as a person and as a people.

Alberto López: It was very enriching. At the time, I was just learning to speak Spanish and was very shy when it came to participating. Still, I could share my community's experiences with other communities. Back then, I'd started working with the loom, and we were only just learning how to recover the techniques, embroidery, meanings, and history of our ancestors — everything my mother had taught me.

TJ: Alberto, you mentioned that you were starting to recover this symbology. Had it been lost?

AL: Many young men know nothing about all this. They're not interested. And it's not only them — I noticed that the women in the community would buy fabric and barely embroider it. My mother is still keeping the tradition alive: she weaves her own clothes, from start to finish. That's when I understood the risk of losing everything, so I set out to recover the symbology of our ancestors, because that is the most important part of our textiles: the stories in them hold the meanings of everything we feel.

AR: Each community's identity is woven into their textiles, even when the colors or style of embroidery might change. For instance, our towns use colder tones, perhaps because of the cold and damp forest climate, whereas in Almada, people work with pinks and reds, and in Chenalhó, they use very bold blues. And some embroidery styles are simpler while others are more detailed, depending on the community.

Graciela Martínez-Zalce: But some motifs are shared throughout, right? Within the iconography, certain symbols recur, even though they might be portrayed differently.

AR: Exactly. Even when the technique is different, as you said, the motifs in the symbology can recur, but they're associated with different things. For instance, in Aldama, huipiles — blouses

that indigenous women wear — portray the Lord of the Earth at the base, and he must be placed there at the very beginning of the weave.

AL: Yes, because he sustains the Universe. That's why he's portrayed at the base of the huipil. And the women are placed in the middle because they're the givers of life. They're the most important, at the center of the universe.

TJ: Do you make certain pieces for yourselves, and others for sale?

AR: It's complicated because sacred pieces have another kind of value — not a commercial value. In my group, I noticed that the women often don't want to spend a lot of time on a piece, which is why they rarely make ceremonial huipiles. They aren't paid for all the time and work they have to put into it. However, to recover and preserve our traditions, we've had to go beyond the community to offer our work, but we don't succumb to intermediaries — they'd had us trapped before. We must think and act as a collective, and this has been good, since we wouldn't be able to do anything as individuals.

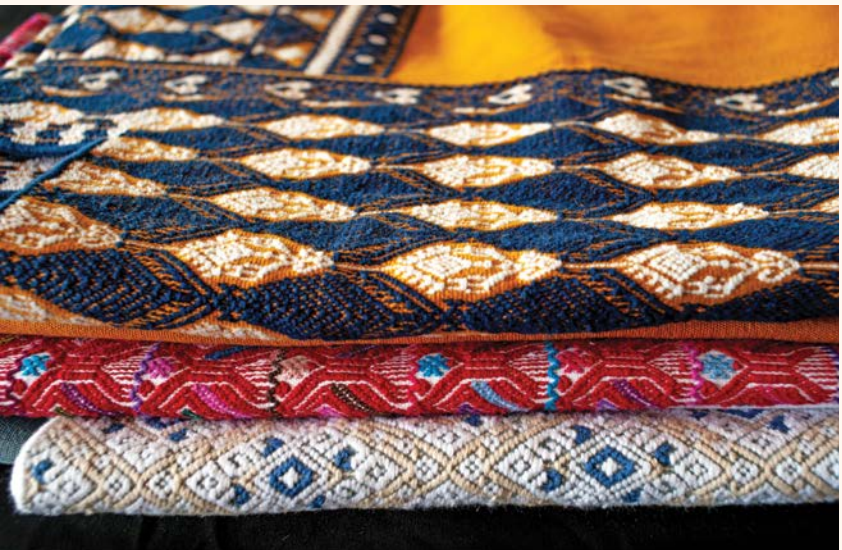
TJ: Do you think there's still a need to disseminate information and raise awareness around the artistic value and significance of these pieces?

GM-Z: There's controversy in that idea, too. I've heard people say that it's disrespectful to value a ceremonial piece for its artistic worth. As if any artistic value were detrimental to the symbology and iconography. I think it's about both things. On the one hand, there's the intricacy of every symbol, which is associated with beauty, and on the other, the latter is sometimes misunderstood or not fully grasped. In the exhibition *La grandeza de México* (The Greatness of Mexico) I heard people ask why there was popular art at the exhibition when there's a museum for that, the Museum of Popular Cultures. And I think those people didn't get it at all. The way in which those pieces were presented next to pieces by great artists — like Rufino Tamayo — who have indigenous roots, was meant to highlight the continuity between one piece and the next, regardless of whether some artists use thread while others use stone, or clay, or paint. At the end of the day, there's continuity in the symbols and aesthetic references.

AR: I think that the main thing is for society and the government to respect our work. Another problem we face is cultural appropriation. Artists from other countries are taking our art for their collections without giving us our proper credit or value. They're only interested in fashion. If anything, they might say the design is inspired in Mexico.

GM-Z: Alberto often says that a huipil is like a book. What is that you write in each book, in each huipil you design?

From the times of our ancestors, everything we've portrayed in our huipiles has been inspired in nature, the stars, the sky.



AL: Drawing from all these lessons — in my case, from my mother — we already know in our minds what we want to do, so we count the thread and start shaping the figures in the embroidery. It's as if your inspiration is being laid out on the loom. It's like a book in which you start weaving without a predetermined design. My huipiles hold my dreams and the inspiration of my ancestors.

AR: Even though it's not sketched out anywhere, you have it in your mind's eye. In fact, to figure out the width of a textile, you count all the threads in the weft, including how many threads you're going to cross, and you think about how you want to do the work — whether you'll combine colors, for instance. You already know that for a ceremonial huipil you need to use white as a base, and then the colors you choose for the weft, that is, for the embroidery, are what varies.

GM-Z: So, as you go, you're thinking "here I want there to be a universe, a corn husk, a serpent . . ."?

AR: It's just that, from watching your mother work, you know how to start, because she knows how our ancestors did things. So you put in the Lord of the Earth, the deity upholding the Universe. But like we said, symbology is different in every place. Some people put corn at the base, which is also very important.

AL: Or a frog, known as the Lord of Water, who brings water, which is life. The singing of the frogs is what announces the rain, which makes the corn grow. That's why, wherever corn is grown, you'll find many frog varieties. In Aldama, we work with the Lord of the Earth.

GM-Z: And what about the two-headed serpent?

AL: Right, the one connecting the sky to the earth. That's the mother of corn, and just like there are varieties of corn, which come in many different colors, there are varieties of serpents, and that's why we shouldn't kill them. From the times of our ancestors, everything we've portrayed in our huipiles has been inspired in nature, the stars, the sky. That's why we have to recover the stories of our ancestors — what they did, what they felt, but also their dreams. I started weaving through my dreams. My mother said that those revelations meant that I had the ability to weave on the backstrap loom, and that's why my ancestors were teaching me. In dreams, I saw the threads, the materials, the *pepenador*,[1] the machete, the *guillote*[2] shuttle. This means we're connected.

AR: What you can create starts being revealed to you through your observation of nature, but also through your mood. Sometimes the colors come together according to how you're feeling — whether you're sad or happy . . .

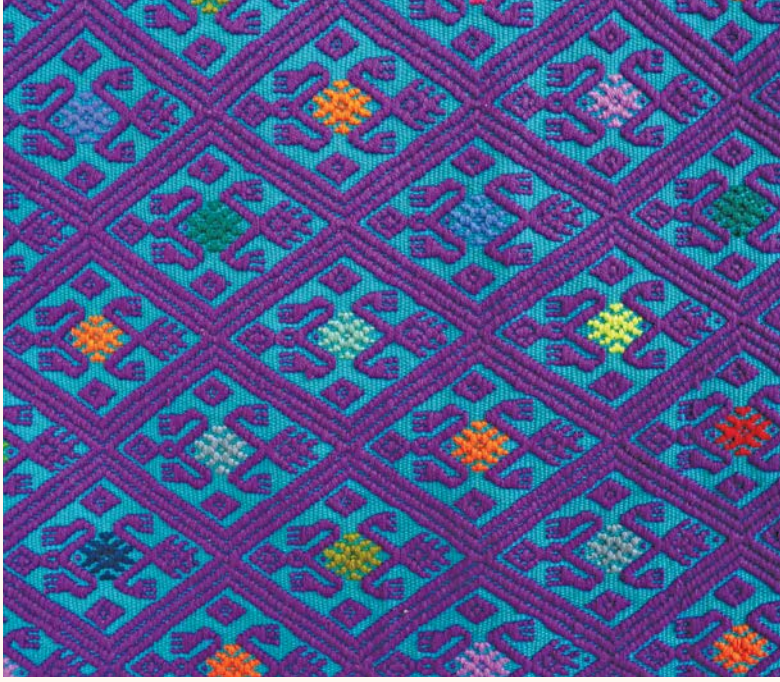
GM-Z: Of course. There's something of your own in each of your pieces.

AL: Your mood can even influence the way you knot. Sometimes, if you aren't in the right mood, the thread will break or get tangled. You have to leave your loom for a while, and if you're in the right mood when you come back, the thread will untangle on its own.

TJ: Given everything you've said, it seems that even if a single weaver tries to replicate the same piece, it'll never be the same twice.

AR: That's right. These pieces are unique, and the threads won't be the same color either — especially if they've been dyed by hand using natural dyes.

GM-Z: I'd like to ask something because there's immense controversy around this. When huipiles are worn on a runway, is the huipil being robbed of its identity? Are the culture and identity woven into each piece being sacked? What's your opinion on this?



AR: It is controversial. I've spoken to some of the women in the group about it, and they have divided opinions — especially when men started wearing clothing that has traditionally only been worn by women, we didn't like that. And we thought it wasn't right for them not to consult with the community and with the people who made the pieces.

AL: Meanwhile, that's exactly what we want to break away from, because regardless of gender, we all have the same rights. When I take male tourists to my fellow women weavers' communities and the men wear the huipiles, the weavers say it's an honor to dress a man, because that means their work is being valued. We have different mindsets and ideas on this topic.

GM-Z: I think that's beautiful and very interesting because what we wanted to highlight in this conversation with you is how, for you, the creation of pieces is directly related to community life. So I think what both Ara and Alberto are saying is that the weaver needs to give her consent about the destiny of her piece.

AR: And another important point is that in our group — in my group — most of us have positions in the church. That also influences our responses because we're more traditional. Unlike Alberto's group, which is composed of more than 100 weavers, my group has 40.

GM-Z: Right, of course, and you're answering to a group of women. And Alberto is ground-breaking, because, among a group of women, he was the first one to wear the backstrap loom, and now he's answering to a group of women. And why shouldn't he? He's part of the community.

AL: Exactly, that's the point, right? We're all different, but we all have the same rights. Sometimes, when young people stare at me because I'm wearing a poncho, a shawl, a scarf, or a purse, I don't feel ashamed, because that's what I like.

TJ: To wrap up our conversation, I'd like to ask, in a two-way relationship, what do you give the world and what does the world give you?

AL, AR: Well, we've given our work, our inspiration, our identities, and the art that our ancestors — our mothers and fathers — passed on to us. It's an honor to weave the history of the places we're from. We share our experience, our history, the process and technique we use for our work and our art . . . not just the art we make, but also the art that the great masters of our community make.

GM-Z: And like you said, by sharing your traditions, culture, identity, and art, the world is opening its doors so that you can take it anywhere you can and will. VM

Notes

1 The pepenador is where threads are counted in order to make the figures in the embroidery.
2 The guillote is the shuttle that holds the thread. The thread is separated on the guillote to start creating the shapes and figures.