

WEAVING BEAUTY:

Persisting Concepts of Feminine Beauty In a Highland Maya Town

Monica Diaz
March 05, 2006
Professor Jerome Levi
SOAN 252 Guatemala
Carleton College

Abstract

Despite the pressure for the Maya of Guatemala from the ladino community to adapt to their styles and customs, in our present day we still see indigenous women in their traje. In a country where often times the archetypical women dressed in traje is exploited for economic means, the importance of traje for the preservation of femininity is explored. This ethnographic study discusses how feminine beauty in a highland Maya town of Guatemala is expressed through *traje*. It also attempts to interpret the nuances for the continuing and changing vestiges of traditional perceptions of beauty, with the goal of understanding what is considered beautiful for the women residing in the highland Maya town of Zunil. It outline the reasons for change, as well as the ones that have maintained the cultural expression of Maya identity through traje.

Homestay in Zunil

After a long walk up the *callejon*¹, I arrived at Clara's house. My host mother was very shy at first, and spoke minimal Spanish. Upon entering the second bedroom of the newly constructed house, I was delighted to see I would be sharing the room with a large *telar* for a month. My project, after all, was centered on the preservation of *traje* in these women's lives. My host father, Domingo had just arrived a month ago from a five-year stay in the United States. Their six-year old son, Juan and Clara were still getting used to his presence. At times I attributed this to the sometimes hostile behavior of their son. I realized it was a very delicate situation that I was living with the family. At the termination of my stay, my host mother cried a few times before my departure. She said she had grown accustomed to me, and I feel that perhaps my stay brought some comfort to her. She had just left her mothers house to move into a new home, and her husband had returned after five years abroad, it was a difficult adaptation for the entire family.

As I explored ways for me to understand the notions of beauty through *tejido* for the women of Zunil, I became excited at the prospects of learning how to weave at the Santa Ana Cooperative². I realized however, that I would have more opportunity to learn about women's conceptions of beauty, dress, and *tejido* by weaving with the women who would be surrounding me during my homestay, such as my host mother and my neighbors. On my third day in Zunil, Clara let me observe her using the *telar* as she threaded the *altaseda* to form the *jaspe* on a little girl's *corte*. She then allowed me to thread the *altaseda*³ through the loom, and instructed me how to use the different pedals on the loom to alternate the threads (see appendix for Jaspe Cadena design).

¹ Small street

² A weaving cooperative established in Zunil in 1970 to help empower women with socio-economic needs.

³ Lustrous, elegant silk thread, more expensive than *sedalina*

My third week, I had formed a strong friendship with Ventura, one of our neighbors, and she agreed to teach me how to use the backstrap loom, known in Ki'che as *cha'nali kiem*. After completing the su't, I have not looked at any textiles in the same manner. I appreciate every thread and amount of dedication put into every textile so much more. I completed my su't at 11 pm the Friday before I left. That night, Ventura shared with me her entire collection of su'ts. She explained how each one had its use, how she had obtained them, and the beauty she saw in each one. It was at this point that my theory that the women's conservation of their evolving textiles was one way in which Maya women evidenced their notions of beauty.

Methodology

This study was a four week ethnographic study of the persisting concepts of feminine beauty in the highland Maya town of Zunil, Guatemala. In my attempts to understand the notions of feminine beauty, I felt it was necessary to participate in the daily rituals of the women I shared my time with. The women I was surrounded by embraced me and allowed me to participate in their everyday lives, accompanying them to *el mercado*, walking to *el molino* or the bakery, cooking and making tortillas, and most importantly weaving. I observed that through all of these daily acts, women incorporated their textiles, whether to carry dough from the *molino*, cloak themselves with a su't, or by transferring their creativity onto a beautifully woven *corte* or *huipil*. In this paper, I will discuss how feminine beauty in a highland Maya town of Guatemala is expressed through *traje*, as well as interpret the nuances for the continuing and changing vestiges of traditional perceptions of beauty. My goals were to understand what was considered beautiful for a Maya woman in Zunil. I had four weeks in the field to grasp these notions, and since it was evident that there was a connection embedded between *tejido* and Maya identity, I figured one of the most effective ways for me to

accomplish my goals was to learn how to weave. I also conducted personal interviews, as well as some more informal observations and questions. The last two weeks of my home stay, I conducted a “beauty” survey, which gave me insight to the current concepts of physical beauty of Mayan men and women.

Learning to Weave

As previously stated, I felt that by learning how to weave, I would be able to relate to the women who worked so diligently on their textiles. While in many parts of Guatemala men weave for a living and as a way of life, in present day Guatemala it is the women who have preserved the use of the *traje*. Take for example the Santa Ana Cooperative in Zunil. While many establishments have surged to help empower those with scarce means, a weaving cooperative was fashioned to help the women who needed it most. The fact that the driving force behind this idea was weaving, is a clear example of the lasting importance of textile for Maya women.

Personal Interviews

I conducted personal interviews ^{with} ~~to~~ young women and men of Zunil. The questions I asked were for the purpose of understanding the general view of feminine beauty (see appendix for survey questions). Aside from the formal interviews, I had many informal ones. I had conversations with a few women while I was on the chicken buses to and from Xela, and once from the San Francisco market. Some unexpected events, such as weddings, and family gatherings also gave me a fresh perspective on certain roles and modes of expression for Maya women. It was interesting how different women manifested the use of *traje*. Some did not speak *Ki'che*, yet they still wore their *corte* and *huipil*.

Survey

It is impossible to capture all of the beauty in a country as diverse as Guatemala. In the final two weeks I formulated a questionnaire with photos of various women from Guatemala. The women chosen for my survey had a connection to Guatemala in one form or another (see appendix for pictures and reasons for choosing each picture). I had males and females rank the six featured women by beauty preference (see index in back). While the survey was invalid due to an insufficient number of participants, the responses received from them were very interesting. All male and female participants were between the ages of fifteen and thirty.

Tangles Encountered

The direction of my research changed its course as I immersed myself in the community. My investigations in the beginning were somewhat disjointed. There were many aspects of Maya femininity which I wanted to explore. I was placed in Zunil with the goal of establishing a beauty dialogue in the K'iche language, and capture the quintessential notion of beauty. In the process, I was bombarded with numerous ways in which the *traje* had evolved and the many influences affecting its change such as media, foreigners, transnational migration, and technology. Despite these influences, women in Zunil have continued their use of the *traje*, and the practice of weaving is very much alive within the community. Many women have *telares* in their homes, and the presence of the Santa Ana Cooperative seemed to be a big influence on the preservation of the *traje*. The kinship formed among these women, is perhaps what makes the cooperative so much more successful. Aside from providing women with the tools to learn how to weave, they offer a store with school and office supplies for the needs of students in the community.

Weaving and *Traje*: Threading Them Together

There is a lot of pride in being able to make your own *traje*, as well as being able to provide some income to the family from the textiles a woman has produced. A woman gains a sense of independence when she can illustrate to the world the genius of her own creations. As I participated in a woman's daily routines, I had an insiders look into what is instrumental in constructing femininity. I had the opportunity to learn how to weave on the *telar* as well as the backstrap loom. I realized while doing this that the use of *traje* is a defining trait in the life of a woman, it is synonymous with conserving and declaring your indigenous identity. Weaving is integral to the completion of Maya Femininity. Despite the continuation of the use of *traje*, it has gone through numerous changes in the past twenty through thirty years.

Change

Change is an expected reality, and that is what I found out after inquiring about past styles and customs in Zunil's *traje*. The *traje* for an indigenous woman in Zunil consists of six key articles of dress; the *corte*, *huipil*, *liston*, *faja*, jewelry, and *su't*. As my bonding with the women became stronger, they shared many ways in which their dress had changed in the past twenty to thirty years (see picture in appendix). Women in Zunil tend to keep a very traditional and conservative style of dress. I hardly saw any women without the complete *traje*, at most they would be without *liston*.

Corte

The *corte* has gone through a "lengthy" change, in that its length increased from past-knee to above the ankle. When I asked the women what was the reason for this, they had no explanation. There is a possibility that the large Catholic influence in Zunil is the reason for the more conservative length. Another possibility could be more material on which to show off new designs and colors, which just a few years back has flourished.

Other explanations I have heard could be that women needed to cross the river, and therefore needed a shorter *corte* to prevent it from getting wet.⁴

Huipil

Traditionally, the huipil was mainly white, with vertical stripes, and very minimal bordado. The huipil has gained more colors, as well as more extravagant embroidery around the neckline.

Liston

The liston, which is wrapped around the hair and then placed liked a crown on the woman's head, has become more colorful, but the balls, or chiribolitas that adorn it have decreased in size. It is said to be worn for elegance and signifies respect in a woman (padre).

Faja

The traditional faja was thicker and a brighter red. Younger girls nowadays use a thinner one, because it isn't as bulky, wrapped around many times at the waist.

Jewelry

Women used to use different kinds of beads made out of stone to make their necklaces. Today they have changed to plastic, however the practice of using silver coins still persists for the wealthier women.

Su't

The importance of the su't was evident. The su't had many uses in a woman's daily life. Perhaps what has changed the most is the su't tapado. Many women are seen wearing bath towels. The uses of these towels originated as gifts, and were originally sent from family members in the United States. Women became accustomed to them, as well as because they were cheaper.

⁴ Professor Jay Levi, Guatemala 2006

While footwear is an important function in present day Guatemala, I did not include it as a central item in Maya women dress. Traditionally, women in Zunil used to walk barefoot. Today women wear flat sandals and some wear high heels.

Some reasons for the inevitable change in *traje*, is the obligatory migration women faced to cities beginning in the 1980's, to escape from the army. Some who were not able to escape were displaced after they were used for sexual labor, and were forced to work for the men. "These Maya women and their families took refuge in poor, working-class areas of the capital, but typically did not give up regional dress, though their *traje* underwent considerable changes because the women could no longer weave as they had done in their own community" (Nimatuj, 5).

While this may not be the case for the women of Zunil, there were other factors which have affected the changes in their dress, which are discussed in the following section. Otzoy explains that for the Maya, their "weavings are not museum artifacts or exotic collectibles but rather manifestations of continuing experiences, hence the constant creativity" (Otzoy). It is perhaps why these changes occur in the *traje*, and new designs emerge every fourteenth through twenty sixth of November for the Santa Catarina de Alejandria celebration⁵. Similarly, Nimatuj expresses, "Maya textiles are "folklorized", meaning they are presented as something totally separate from the social, political, and economic context in which they were made. As if economic pressure had no impact on the making of regional dress...As if the political effects or pressures on the regions concerned were not reflected in these garments" (Nimatuj, 4).

When describing her frustration with the westerners fascination with the "natives, "exotic savages" or "Indians" which are still seen in our modernized world, Nimatuj states, "The policy is to show visitors a static and unchanging native culture, as if the

⁵ A celebration of the saint Catarina de Alejandria, held November 14 through 26. Women are the primary attendants, and girls wear new *traje*, the majority embroidered with the newest designs of the year.

indigenous people of Guatemala and elsewhere did not have an evolving culture that is constantly being renewed” (Nimatuj, 3).

Irma Otzoy describes “stable” and “modifiable” elements in Maya weavings. Despite these continuing changes, the traje still maintains its essence and purpose. Even though many women did not know what the designs signified, “In creating forms for preserving, producing, and reproducing that which has value to them, the weavers are thus designing for survival” (Otzoy).

Body image and Influences

I was told by a seventeen year old young lady that men her age were in search of a woman who was thin, and had light complexion. When I asked women if they felt the traje had any sexual allure to it, they stated no. They looked down upon the body-fitted clothing of ladino women. I asked them about the use of the faja, whether it was used to hold the corte in place, or if it was meant to accentuate a women’s waist. They would tell me that that was how the traje was utilized, and there were no. Half of the males surveyed at the internet local chose picture B.

When I asked women if there was a physical attribute they would change about themselves, approximately one third wished they could be thinner. The responses I received from the women interviewed concerning the most influential aspects to the changing face of the traje, were the media. During my homestay, the women also kept themselves entertained by watching novellas, or soap operas. Many times the novela would repeat itself three or four times a day. I was told that about five years ago families did not own their own television. Until the recent influx of dollars from migrants, families have been able to fill their home with these means of technology. These novelas, according to a young female I interviewed, have given the younger

generation ideas about pre-marital sex, and have influenced the wearing of westernized clothing, causing some girls to be ashamed of their dress, or alter it in extreme ways.

Two internet businesses have been developed in Zunil approximately two years ago.

Two thirds of all the young men I surveyed chose between choice A and B.

When I asked people in Zunil what they thought was beautiful in a woman, I was told by a young male that there were two kinds of beauty the sentimental aspect and the physical aspect. A young female told me that it was very hard nowadays to find young men who were concerned about the girl's personality. She said most guys looked at your physical beauty, which after they were married resulted in broken homes.

Hendrickson received very similar responses when she inquired about physical attractiveness in Tecpan. She found out that Maya women were concerned about "not having thick, shiny black hair with no split ends, clear skin without pimples, or nice teeth, and turn to consumer products to aid them" (Hendrickson). As Hendrickson also realized, the young women in Zunil were not fond of wearing cosmetics. I did receive remarks from a male about the use of makeup from Avon catalogs, which is apparently very popular. He said some girls did not know how to apply it. Their morning routine consisted of combing their hair, making sure their traje was nice and presentable, cleaning their face and some showering.

Beauty Pageants

A celebration occurs every fourteenth through twenty sixth of November in honor of Santa Catalina de Alejandria, which is followed by the coronation of the Reina del Pueblo. A young girl is selected from the town, although in Zunils case the girls selected are influenced primarily by the wealth of their family. Despite of the wealthy prerequisite, what is perhaps most important in the representation of these reinas is the preservation of the traditional traje. Schackt writes "Indian queens are elected not so

much on the basis of their looks as on their aptitude for representing cultural 'authenticity' ...the beauty pageant has increasingly been troubled by a tension between a traditional folklorist type of orientation and a more recent and politicized Mayanist one" (Schackt). The liston for example is the style which was used thirty or forty years ago in Zunil, as well as for priests (see appendix).

Another interesting thing that occurs during these pageants is the emergence of new designs on the cortes and huipiles. While it is common practice to buy new traje for important ceremonies and celebrations, the women in town go all out and apart from buying new traje, they make sure to buy some with the newest designs. As explained earlier, the traje has become more colorful with the progression of time. New threads are used, and sedalina and altaseda decorate the cortes of the girls with butterflies, turkeys, bouquets, and flowers.

Preservation of Indianess

"As the maintaining of outward signs of Indian culture and identity has come to depend more on one of the sexes, ethnicity has taken on a gendered dimension" (Schackt).

Perhaps what all of these changes have in common is the increase in the amount of colors and threads used in the fabrics. What does this say about Mayan woman's changing dress? With the recent Maya resistance movement, the Maya population as a whole has become more determined to express their "indianess". The increase in the abundance of colors and designs can be a form of resistance, and the brighter and more obvious form of traje is a proclamation of their indigenous identity. Otzoy affirms, "Thus the historical, artistic, and cultural aspects of weaving and wearing Maya clothing are an expression of Maya resistance" (Otzoy).

One of the interviewees gave me an interesting response concerning the distinct form of dress for Zunil women. He believed that since each town had been under different rule from the Spanish conquest, these rulers had to find a way to distinguish their workers. Even the fashions depicted in *Zunil: Costume and Economy* have changed a considerable amount, with research which was conducted approximately six years ago. Perhaps what is central in this definition of beauty for Maya women, is the concept and notion of identity for them. Carol Hendrickson for example sets the background for her research on the building of identity for the Tecpanecos through dress. Our western perspective makes it difficult to see the direct relationship between traje and identity, which correlated constitute a notion of beauty for all the women who continue to dress in traje.

Continuity

What is the biggest incentive for these women in continuing to wear their traditional traje? Perhaps the most important thing in this observation is not the fact that throughout the course of time, dress of a population changes. We see western fashion change a considerable amount in the course of a year. Instead of observing and questioning the reasons for change and accusing indigenous people of becoming victims of “ladinization” for changing their dress, it would perhaps be more appropriate to consider the reasons for its continuation. Oztzy describes the traditional use of a huipil, “While some Kaqchickels explain that the popularity of the xilon huipil was due to its beauty, others attribute its use to a sense of respect toward their Maya heritage.” In my opinion, I feel that to use it as a sense of respect toward their Maya heritage is what makes the huipil beautiful. It is an external offering to their ancestors, an ongoing harmony with what it means to be Maya. Change does not strip the indigenous person of their indigenous identity, on the contrary it perpetuates their continuing creativity,

which they express through their dress, which still serves its purpose to this day. That purpose is to identify one as Maya. It is an announcement to the world, “this is who we are, we are not ashamed of it, and we feel it is beautiful”.

“Just as the recognition of the Maya as a people with human rights is a prerequisite for justice, wearing and weaving Maya dress is an artistic observance of, and a demand for socio-cultural liberty. Socio-cultural liberty includes respect for and understanding of the changes and continuity expressed in Maya weavings and the recognition that both the changes and continuities result from acts of self-determination” (Otzoy, 150).

What does this say about Maya society, the fact that women continue to wear traje in Zunil? Nimatuj says “Whenever we are seen in regional traje, the ruling classes are reminded of the failure of their efforts to make us disappear, which have ranged from genocide to ideological coercion. Five centuries of humiliation have not succeeded in bringing the Maya people to their knees”. After the many rich experiences I shared with those who cared for me in a month, I realized wearing traje in Zunil is a way of life, it defines femininity.

Rethreading

If given the opportunity for a more in-depth study of the women and their traje, I would perhaps like to have more participants take part in the “beauty” survey. I would have liked to further explore the differing perceptions of beauty among gender and age.

When I would say I was from the United States I would receive looks of surprise. I was told that my Spanish was very good, and was also told that I could pass as being from Guatemala. My parents are of Mexican descent, and people made a connection when they realized this. My female gender was perhaps an influencing factor when conducting interviews and surveying. On the other hand, since I am not indigenous, they may have kept certain perspectives to themselves to prevent hostility from my part.

Some anthropologists have established their own perceptions of Maya women body image by saying, “This exclusion is clearly a concern for me as a white woman hoping to save brown women from being blacked out of both ethnography and of actual practices of nation building, “modernizing”, and “ethnic rights movements” (Nelson). I feel it is preposterous to believe that indigenous women are being “blacked out” of “ethnic rights movements”, and that they need to be “saved”. On the contrary, the preservation of their traje speaks more heavily than anything. Take for example Irma Alicia Velasquez Nimatuj, who has taken a stand on the capitalization of Maya women for economic profit of the state. When a restaurant refused Irma Nimatuj entrance due to her dress, Nimatuj recalls “taking a hold of my perraje (shawl) and wrapping it around my bosom, as if looking for strength to resist such racial discrimination in the 21st century” (Nimatuj). For indigenous women. While we see many “modifications” in the outer appearance of Maya woman’s dress, the traje still serves the same purpose

The Finished Textile

Beauty is an intangible concept which has for centuries been interpreted distinctly by varying socio-cultural groups. The interesting thing about beauty is the way it is perceived as a population evolves, and how outer appearance has so much weight on the final attitudes towards beauty. For Maya women, beauty is not a visible facade, an erotic pose or sexual allure. It is the endurance of tradition through the use of traje “as a sign of historical day-to-day resistance that Maya women have put up to maintain and pass on their culture” (Nimatuj). To preserve your traje is what I have observed to be beautiful, it is the essence of Maya femininity.

Works Cited

- Hansen, Karen Tranberg.
1996 *The world in Dress: Anthropological perspectives on Clothing, Fashion, and Culture*. Guatemala: Museo Ixchel del Traje Indigena de Guatemala.
- Hendrickson, Carol.
1995 *Weaving Identities. Construction of Dress and Self in a Highland Guatemala Town*. University of Texas, Austin.
- Hopgood, James F.
Identity, gender and Myth: Expressions of Mesoamerican Change and Continuity.
- Miralbes de Polanco, Rosario. Saenz de Tejada, Eugenia. Mejia de Rodas, Idalma.
1996 *Zunil: Costume and Economy*.
- Nimatuj, Irma Alicia Velazquez.
2003 *Transnationalism and Maya Dress*. GSC Quarterly.
[http://www.ssrc.org/programs/gsc/gsc_quarterly/newsletter8/content/velazquez.p
age](http://www.ssrc.org/programs/gsc/gsc_quarterly/newsletter8/content/velazquez.page)
- Otzoy, Irma.
Maya Clothing and Identity. Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala
- Schackt, Jon.
2005 *Mayahood through Beauty: Indian Beauty Pageants in Guatemala*.
-

Appendix

Jaspe Cadena design from Clara's notebook

Survey Questions

How do you define the beauty of an indigenous woman?

What is the most beautiful thing in a woman?

How has the use of *traje* changed since your youth?

Was there a time when you did not use *traje*, or thought about not using it?

What do you think of the women who do not wear *traje*?

What are the biggest influences on the changes seen in *traje*?

What is the ideal woman?

What are the different ways of expressing a woman is beautiful in the Ki'che language?

What are the five things you consider most beautiful in your life?

What is the beauty you see in *traje*?

Why is weaving so important for a woman, and what determines who has the resources to weave?

What are the physical attributes a woman aspires to have?

If you could change something about yourself, what would it be?

Pictures of women in survey ..why chose them

Picture of woman in party at Cooperative
