

PREHISPANIC TRACES IN THE SYMBOLISM OF MAYA WEAVINGS FROM GUATEMALA

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The costumes worn by the modern Maya in Guatemala, as well as the different weavings that are an integral part of their everyday and ceremonial life, constitute a collective language both tangible and intangible, with a remarkable diversity and complexity. In their character of human expressions, they are imbued of symbolism, as they carry within a wealth of meanings. Among females particularly, the costume is silent but a most eloquent medium through which local, regional, general or pan-Mayan identity is transmitted.

In the case of traditional costume, the combination of features like colors, materials, techniques, style of the garments and ways of wearing them, are signs of municipal or intra-municipal identity, as is the case, occasionally, between the municipal capital and the villages and/or hamlets. Likewise, other characteristics are echoes of the user's identity, his/her status within the community, the specific occasion that he/she is involved in, like everyday chores or ceremonies requiring a special attire to interact with the gods.

Elsewhere, as seen in the South Coast, costumes worn by females who inhabit different townships, present a greater homogeneity between them, in a way that the most significant distinctions are of a regional nature. More modern modalities of dressing, such as the "generalized" and "pan-Mayan" costumes, convey messages about ethnic identity that reach beyond the township or regional sphere. The first consists of a blouse made of a commercial, machine embroidered fabric and a speckled cut, for instance, and the second combines distinctive garments of different places. This latter type of attire at times conveys a message allusive to the brotherhood and the ethnic pride of the Maya as a group, to mention just a few.

Beyond the ethnic dimension, the Maya outfit embodies multiple meanings of a cultural, social, economical and political character. It's complexity has been approached in different investigations, among which that of the Tecpan costume conducted by Hendrickson (1995) stands out, together with those carried out by the Ixchel Museum of Indigenous Costumes (*Museo Ixchel del Traje Indígena*) on the same subject at Comalapa, Sololá, Colotenango, Santa María de Jesús, San Juan Sacatepéquez, San Raimundo and Tecpan (Asturias de Barrios 1985; Mayén de Castellanos 1986; Mejía de Rodas y Miralbés de Polanco 1987; Asturias de Barrios *et al.* 1989; Asturias de Barrios 1997). The economic code and its links with religion represent an enlightening contribution, as seen in San Antonio Aguas Calientes (Annis 1987). Pancake (1988, 1996), in turn,

initiated studies around the systematization of the findings produced by these types of studies on local traditions that echo the “textile languages” of each one of them. And finally, the political significance and other related matters have been subject of analyses conducted by Otzoy (1996:36) and Velásquez Nimatuj (2003).

Those studies, however, have paid less attention to other types of cultural messages conveyed by traditional costumes: their cosmological symbolism; in other words, all those concepts related to the Maya cosmovision. Such concepts were expressed through oral or ritual tradition and transmitted from one generation to the other. This article is aimed at answering the following question: is there a survival among contemporary Maya of the traces of the prehispanic cosmovision in the symbolism of both the garments and the fabrics they use?

As a background to respond to this question, studies conducted on several communities such as Santiago Atitlán (Carlsen 1997; Christenson 2001) and Momostenango (Cook 2000) are enlightening. They have revealed that at the heart of traditional local cultures, an important degree of prehispanic influence is still preserved, showing the strength and vigor of cultural continuity since those earlier days that comes to life through the so-called *costumbre*. The latter gives shape to a collective memory that includes cosmological features and that in turn dictates the traditional way of enacting the cultural practices of the Maya, particularly those of the syncretic Mayan-Catholic religion.

That is why the search of prehispanic traces in regard to the cosmological symbolism of the current Maya weavings, has been the focus, in this work, on that “cultural reservation” that the Altiplano represents. The work is complemented with data containing primary sources somewhat closer in time, and which reflect the prehispanic cosmovision, as is the case with the Postclassical codex, the *Popol Vuh* and the *Book of Chilam Balam de Chumayel*.

CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Taking the linguistic model as a referent, a symbol includes two features: the signifier and its meaning. The first is expressed in the sphere of the visual, that is, it is constituted by an image, which in turn includes traits such as shapes and materials used in the elaboration. Thus, the signifier may be composed of a full costume, a garment or even one portion of such garment, such as a stripe or a figure.

The meaning corresponds to the sphere of the contents, and may be an idea or a concept (Barthes quoted in Asturias de Barrios 1985:4). In a weaving, it is possible to intertwine several signifiers at the conceptual level, as they are a part of an important assemblage formed by a myth, a legend or a story.

There are places where weavings include figures with no special meaning. They rather seem to fulfill mostly an aesthetic function, having been adopted as a

consequence of their chromatic impact or technical complexity, as is the case with the figures known as “markers” that in places like San Antonio Aguas Calientes were reproduced after cross-stitch magazines. Occasionally, the same garment may intercalate horizontal stripes used to separate images containing some cosmological meaning, as happens with the so-called “separators” of the *huipils* and *over-huipiles* from Comalapa and San Martín Jilotepeque. They are equivalent to the period mark in a sentence, a sign that denotes a different notion or concept.

The study of symbols may be focused with two approaches: the “emic” one, and the “ethic” one, as proposed by K. Pike in his linguistics studies (Pike 1966: 152-63). The first is based on descriptions and explanations that reflect the inner vision of the informants, with criteria that are a part of their cultural system. The “ethical” one focuses on criteria and categories that belong to the researcher.

It is important to make a distinction on the type of focus used to study the symbols present in weavings, as this might yield different results. Besides, the “ethic” interpretations may bring forward an inscrutable difficulty, namely its empiric substantiation. For example, how could we prove, as proposed by Neutze de Rugg (1986: 67-69, 78, Figs. 3 and 9), that a stripe of diamonds and diagonal lines woven in the tablecloth of the Quetzaltenango brotherhood symbolizes the route of the sun during wintertime, and that a row of stars in the same weaving could be representing the Milky Way. Following the same line of thought, this author considers that the masculine figures called dolls seen in the fabrics or *sut*'s from Panajachel and other weavings, are usually depicting Chac, the rain god.

On the contrary, in the thorough study of the prehispanic roots found in several contemporary textile symbols of the Maya, it has been argued that the dolls shown in a napkin from Santa María de Jesús are representing *Xpiyacoc* and *Xmucane*, the couple of grandparents alluded to in the *Popol Vuh* (Montoya 2003:107, Fig. 4.27). Even though this author is fully aware of the huge difficulties involved in obtaining empirical substantiation for symbolisms in weavings, it seems right to say that at the “emic” level in this study a different interpretation of the same symbol was obtained. According to three informants from Santa María de Jesús, the dolls woven in weddings and brotherhoods *over-huipiles* represent the man and the woman who, by joining together in matrimony, become a couple. This local interpretation is consistent with the fact that in traditional Maya culture, husband and wife constitute the crucial unit that represents the essential values of society, like for example complementarity.

A different case would be the meaning of the zigzag form, also present in the napkin mentioned earlier from Santa María de Jesús. According to the same author it is the representation of the serpent. Although in other villages like Santo Domingo Xenacoj and San Juan Sacatepéquez it's meaning refers to the serpent, that is not consistent with the “emic” interpretation offered by five informants from the first village. The latter have identified it as *kix* in Kaqchikel, which stands for “thorn”, while they emphasized that the signifier of the serpent was a different one.

In this work, therefore, “emic” interpretations constitute the objective point of departure for searching the prehispanic antecedents. To that purpose, we conducted a workshop with 40 weavers from the Textile Committee of the Museum, *Pro-Teje*, to proceed later with several open interviews of 20 women, focused on the meaning of the figures they weave. To elicit the information we used photos of pieces of the textile collection housed at the Ixchel Museum and from private collections. The name of symbols were requested in the Maya language spoken by each particular weaver, as they are major conceptual anchorages, particularly in a matter that may be open to subjective interpretations both from informants and the researcher involved.

The majority of the weavers that participated in the workshop, demonstrated limited knowledge of the symbolism of their weavings, though in later interviews conducted individually some of them revealed additional information. These results confirmed the difficulty involved in working on a subject like this, something that has been previously noted by other researchers (Jongh Osborne 1966:23; Schmidt de Delgado 1963:114; Schevill 1985:18). Morales’ posture (1990:ii) is even more extreme, when he states that in *“Conversing with weavers, one may very quickly become aware of the lack of myths or arcane meanings of these names, at least as far as crafters are concerned. The only histories disseminated by a number of groups are the product of pressure exercised on the crafter (or interested person) by curious people and consumers, of both fairy tales and weavings”*.

During some visits made to several communities from the Altiplano, we could confirm cases of weavers that convey to their weavings meanings that may be appealing to the tourist, to better market their products, derived mainly from their imagination, particularly in those locations with a stronger demand of textiles, as is the case with San Antonio Aguas Calientes. Nonetheless, there are conceptual loopholes we should not lose sight of.

Interviewed informants were requested to give information on the meaning of the symbols pertaining to their community only because they represent cultural expressions of a local nature. They emphasized that those were ancient symbols, as opposed to others they consider modern. Also, in many cases they refrained from providing any further explanation, simply indicating that they do it in that way because that is what the “*costumbre*” dictates. A good number of young females did not know the symbolism of the figures. In addition, we should bear in mind that as expressed by Annis (1987:116): *“[the weavers] do not always have... the words to explain it. Their graphic compositions are a product derived from their collective knowledge”*.

Thus, both at the workshop and during the interviews, thanks to a small number of mature or elderly persons, we succeeded in going more in depth on this subject. We should emphasize that the members of the brotherhood and the women that in their childhood participated with their parents or grandparents in the ritual practices dictated by the *costumbre*, were those who contributed a larger amount of cosmological data.

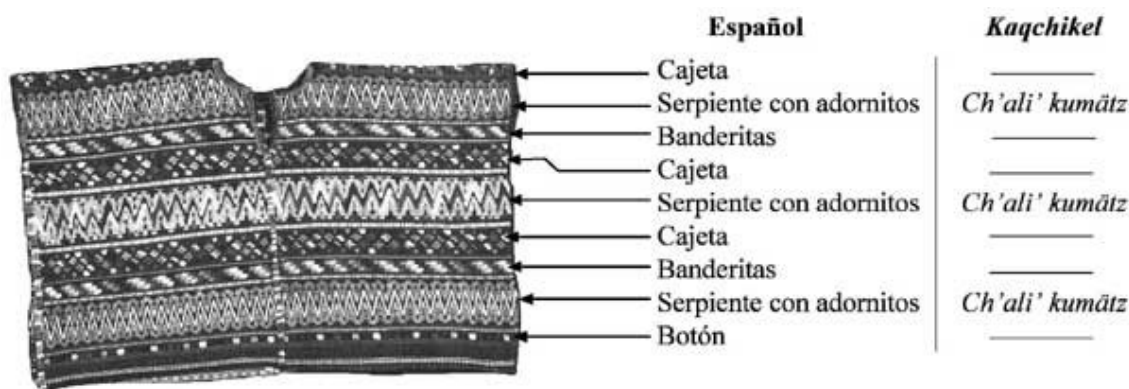


Figure 1. Over-*huipiles* used in festivities, San Martín Jilotepeque (Ixchel Museum collection; Photo: Anne Girard, Ixchel Museum Photographic Archive).

Before going any further we should emphasize two factors that have played a crucial role in the loss of the cultural components of prehispanic origin. The European influence in the first place, which reached beyond the Spanish conquest and colonization occurred between 1524 and 1821, a subject studied by Arriola de Geng (1991). Her work includes photos showing European weavings similar to those woven today by women from different communities, with special emphasis made on those of San Antonio Aguas Calientes and San Martín Jilotepeque. Her findings have been confirmed through the current study, as three informants from San Martín Jilotepeque identified in Spanish each one of the motifs they usually weave in their backstrap looms whenever they create an over-*huipil* to be used in festivities (piece MI-5870), with exception of one. As seen in Figure 1, the piece displays a predominance of motifs alluding mostly to the form of the figures, for example the *cajeta*, the little flags and the button. Only the so called “arch or serpent with little adornments” is known in Kaqchikel as “*ch'ali' kumätz*”, and will be described later. Also, we must point out that between each figure there are separated insets identified with the name of the technique used to make them (“*pepenado*” in Spanish [*scavenged*], and *poroj* in Kaqchikel).

A similar situation was encountered by Schmidt de Delgado (1963:114), forty years ago, in several villages where she conducted investigation. As she has noted, the average weaver is able to identify with a descriptive nomenclature many of the geometrical designs used, as is the case with those they denominate scissors, comb, sweets, speckled, among others. Therefore, they are devoid of any cosmological meaning.

An additional factor that has heavily impacted the traditional sphere of the Maya culture is the religious conversion that took place in many villages, particularly during the second half of the XX century, both among the Catholics and the Protestants. Annis's study (1987) illustrates significant changes in the view that Catholic and Protestant women have towards the *huipils* from San Antonio Aguas Calientes, reverberating in the symbolic dimensions associated to that particular garment.

PREHISPANIC TRACES IN TEXTILE SYMBOLISM

As inferred from the annotations presented so far, the study of symbolism in weavings is not an easy task; therefore, we wish to outline that the examples that follow represent only the starting point of a long path to be followed. We are now presenting some examples of symbols that have preserved cosmological features with a prehispanic origin. They represent only a minimum sample, considering the large amount of images that are woven, embroidered, or applied and used in Maya weavings. Future studies will probably focus on symbols we have left aside at this time, such as the two-headed eagle and the portal, both highly significant in the garments used to converse and interact with the gods, as a part of the ritual cycle of the *cofradías* (brotherhoods) of several villages at the Altiplano.

FURROWS

For the first time, it has been noted that the epistemological Maya system comprises an expansive matrix of meanings (Barbara and Dennis Tedlock 1985). An apparent heterogenic variety of objects and notions give shape to a *gestalt* through correspondences or metaphors. That's why the different realms of Maya culture, including agriculture, literature, music, divination and textile tradition may be conceived as a text. There is inter-textuality among them, while these forms of cultural expression do share remarkable similarities. That explains that within the Maya cosmivision during the Classic period, some hieroglyphic interpretations revealed that the stelae were planted (Coe and Van Stone 2001:134), while the *Popol Vuh* said that the "ancient word" was planted (Tedlock 1996:63). In the same sense, we must point out that some traditional Kaqchikel persons from Tecpan Guatemala, Chimaltenango, are accustomed to conducting a ceremony nine days after the birth of an infant, with the purpose of "sowing" or "planting" his umbilical cord or *ku'x* (which in English stands for "heart, essence or center"; Fischer and Hendrickson 2003:80).

As far as the textile realm is concerned, in a good number of village's women weavers say they are "sowing" (*tikoj* in Kaqchikel). By that they refer to the action of beginning to intercross the threads of the supplementary weft with the vertical threads of the warp to initiate a stripe of figures during the process of weaving with their backstrap looms.

In a similar sense, the Kaqchikel from Sololá refer to *b'olaj po't* or "the *huipil* furrow", to the row of figures that are brocaded, while the fabrics that give shape to this garment are gradually woven (Mayén de Castellanos 1986:59). On the contrary, the Kaqchikel from Tecpan (Asturias de Barrios 1997:42) identify as *cholaj* to the furrows represented by the vertical stripes of warp of natural brown cotton or *cuyuscate* intercalated between the red stripes of the ceremonial over-*huipil* (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Ceremonial over-*huipil* from Tecpan Guatemala (Ixchel Museum collection). Note the fringes of natural brown cotton that symbolize the furrows in the land (Photo: Anne Girard, Ixchel Museum Photographic Archive).

“CENTER”

In places like Tecpan, *ruwa ruk'ux* (“on her/his heart” or “on her chest”) stands for the central portion of the *huipil* or over-*huipil* (Figure 3). Women from Tecpan consider that it is precisely in this section where the oldest and most beautiful figures are woven, for being considered the most important one (Asturias de Barrios 1997: 41-42). An identical symbolism is featured in *huipils* and over-*huipiles* from other villages, like Comalapa. An intertextual expression of this notion reflects in the *costumbre* of conducting ceremonies at the heart of the milpa, as part of the cycle of planting and harvesting corn, still in vigor in different places at the Altiplano. The prehispanic antecedents are abundant, though it is worth mentioning the allusions found in the *Popol Vuh* both to the “heart of heaven, heart of the earth”, and to the construction of the temple at the “center of the higher part” of Gumarcaaj (Recinos 1975: 103, 139).

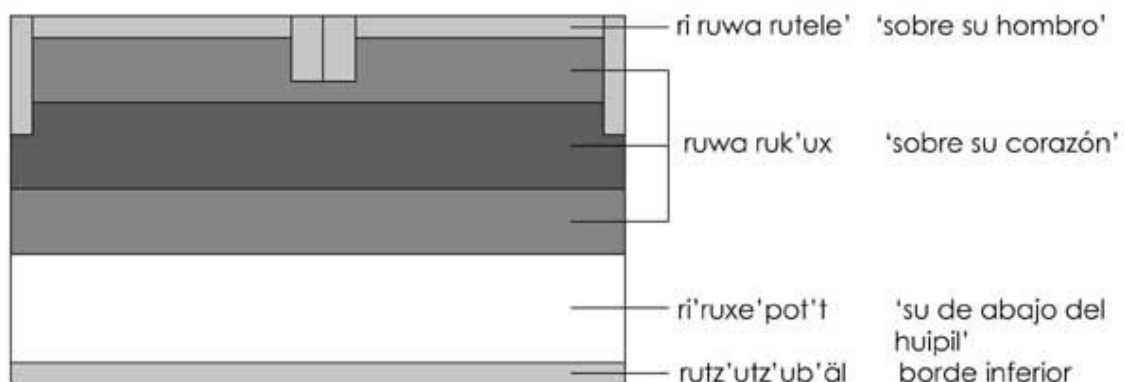


Figure 3. Portions of a *huipil* from Tecpan Guatemala (adapted after Asturias de Barrios 1997: Drawing 3.1).

Similarly, among the Mame female from Colotenango, the central fabric of the *huipil* is given the name of “mother [of the *huipil*]” (*ttxuu klob’j*), while the laterals are the *tq’ab’ klo’j* or her arms. This notion denotes the higher significance given to the central portion, as is also the case of the *nim po’t* or over-*huipiles* worn in weddings and brotherhoods of places like Santa María de Jesús in Sacatepéquez (Figure 4). Right on this space, as seen in Figure 5, a symbol is woven called the “heart of the village” (*ruk’ux tanamit* in Kaqchikel), which makes us think it represents its navel (*ku’x*).

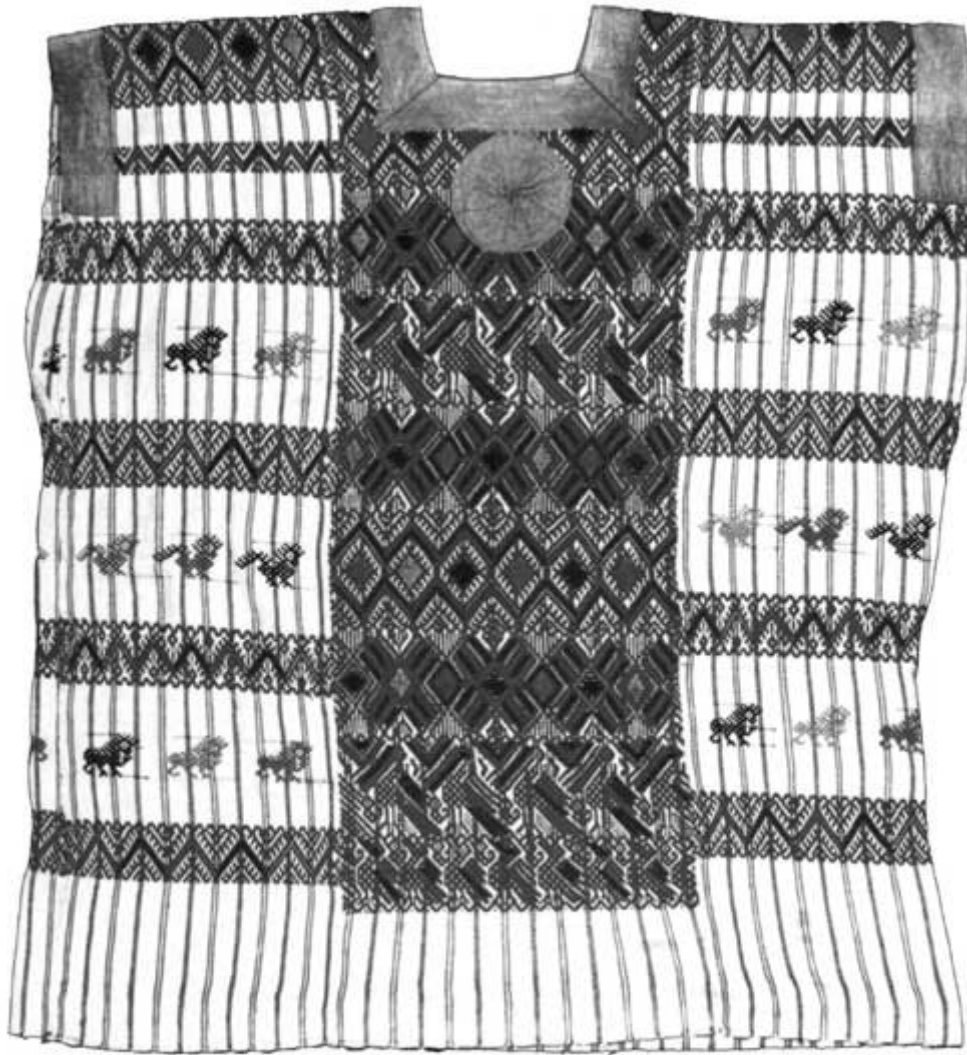


Figure 4. Ceremonial over-*huipil*, Santa María de Jesús. Note the abundance of symbols within the central section, the most important one (Ixchel Museum collection; Photo: Anne Girard, Ixchel Museum Photographic Archive).

Like one of our informants explained, the center is the place where the entire village gathers to conduct ceremonies that are celebrated jointly, like Masses, followed by processions. Besides, at the center, is a primordial sacred space for the community, namely the Catholic temple. The *ceiba* tree, sacred to the Maya, is also planted there.



Figure 5. "Village center", a symbol woven in ceremonial over-*huipiles*, Santa María de Jesús.

We should note that this concept has very ancient backgrounds in Mesoamerican culture. Among the prehispanic Maya it was part of the quadrilateral concept of the cosmos, which includes the center and the four cardinal directions. The origins may be traced yet farther back in time to the days of the Olmec people (Juan Antonio Valdés, personal communication 2004).

Likewise, only in the central area of the ceremonial over-*huipiles* used to attire the image of the Virgin of the Rosary at San Pedro Sacatepéquez, Guatemala, are the most important symbols present, such as the *alaj kotz'ijan* (big, significant or beautifully adorned tree that blooms). This tree of life, as noted by Barrios (1983: 67-69) is exclusively used for this garment. The term *alaj* provides an additional significant dimension because it also conveys the meaning of "reverence", according to data provided by two Kaqchikel informants. In turn, it is applied to other symbols present in this garment, in the central cloth or at the sides, being therefore defined as *alaj*, no matter if they are "refilling" designs –like baby chickens, "small *chompipes* (turkeys) scratching themselves", horses, monkeys or dogs. Therefore, it is feasible to assert that the symbols in this garment, and from the "emic" point of view, have achieved a sacred connotation.

STAFF OR TREE OF LIFE

This symbol is used mostly in ceremonial over-*huipiles* from San Pedro Sacatepéquez and Chuarrancho, Guatemala. Its signifier was brought to Guatemala by the Spaniards with the cultural baggage of Muslim influence, as noted by Arriola de Geng (1991:119). As to the meaning, it is widely spread throughout the world, including the Maya region. Named *kotz'ijan* in San Pedro Sacatepéquez, it is considered a very ancient figure. It represents a blooming tree. According to one female informant there, it is "like the life of a woman, who gives flowers, has branches who are her children... life is endless, that's why it is called 'staff of life' (*palo de vida*). From the "ethic" viewpoint, it represents the

regeneration of vegetal and human life, a concept applicable to the life and habits of the people, as this symbol is shown as a part of the attire used by females in their wedding ceremonies and rituals of the *cofradía*. An identical idea is expressed in the Atiteca cosmovision, because the “world tree” (*árbol del mundo*) represents both the origin and the end and core of everything, it is the *axis mundi* that renews and regenerates the village and is tightly linked to females (Carlsen 1997: 47-67).

With unquestionable prehispanic roots, the tree of life is certainly one of the pristine and ancient symbols, because it has been present since the days of the Olmec people (Wagner 2000:69). The strength of its continuity is maintained throughout time, as evidenced in the *Book of the Chilam Balam de Chumayel* (Roys 1973:104). This work refers rather frequently to the ceiba as the cosmic tree placed at the center of the world and of the four cardinal directions. It is also referred to as the tree of abundance and has been related to other cosmological features, particularly birds and flowers.

PLATE WITH RITUAL OFFERING

The *rupan läq* or *rupan* plate is a highly prestigious symbol, also placed at the central area of the *huipils* or *over-huipiles* from Comalapa (Asturias de Barrios 1985:32; Figure 6). This author specifies that there are a variety of figures denominated *rupan* [*läq*], all of them with rhombus or rhomboids-like shapes, one of which is a rhombus containing four small lozenges in the inside, while another one is a rhombus surrounded by a series of rays. She adds that the translation of its Kaqchikel name is “the inside or content of the plate”. This latter is deep, made of *mayólica* and frequently displays peculiar symbols such as that of the tiger, which is also considered an ancient one by the people of Comalapa. It contains a ritual offering that includes fruits and bread, which the brothers carry to the church as part of their sacred rituals, to be distributed latter. Thus, local women weavers have incorporated into their symbolic repertoire an image whose meaning is special in the ritual life of the townpeople, who stick to their distinctive traditions.



Figure 6. Over-huipiles from Comalapa displaying the symbol of the *rupan* plate in its central portion (Ixchel Museum collection; Photo: Anne Girard, Ixchel Museum Photographic Archive).



Figure 7. Ceremony of New Year, Dresden Codex (page 26, Villacorta, 1930:62). Note the ritual features that accompany the deity: serpent, tree of life, bird offering, and plates with offerings.

Also, this is a very ancient symbol in the textile tradition of Comalapa, as noted by the same author and confirmed by several women weavers interviewed throughout this study. Witnesses thereof are some representative pieces of this community found in the textile collection housed at the Ixchel Museum of Indigenous Costumes.

In regard to the prehispanic backgrounds of ritual offerings, cases are abundant. It has been noted that several scenes in the Dresden Codex show plates with ritual offerings, either including tamales, birds or other foods (Villacorta 1930:60, 64, 66). Page 26 of this codex shows the dishes as part of the features used by a deity to celebrate the ceremony of the New Year (Villacorta 1930:62; Figure 7).

CHOMPIPE (TURKEY) FOR THE PARTY, DEAD CHOMPIPE OR KAMEQ PI'Y

This symbol is seen in over-*huipiles* in San Pedro Sacatepéquez, Guatemala (Figures 8 and 9), as part of the distinctive wedding dress and for the women integrating the *cofradía* (brotherhood) whenever they participate in ceremonies and rituals. It represents the offering that the groom's parents present to the parents of the bride on the wedding day. In this occasion, a *chompipe* or turkey is killed in the groom's household, where it is cleaned and refilled with *olotes* (corncobs), while the legs and beak are tied with *sibaque* (tule) and adorned with flowers. It is placed in a basket, with chocolate, cigars and liquor, and taken by two men to the home of the bride's parents. The *chompipe* is very carefully eaten, trying to maintain the entire skeleton as whole piece. It is hanged and smoked in the kitchen, and kept there (Barrios 1983:67).

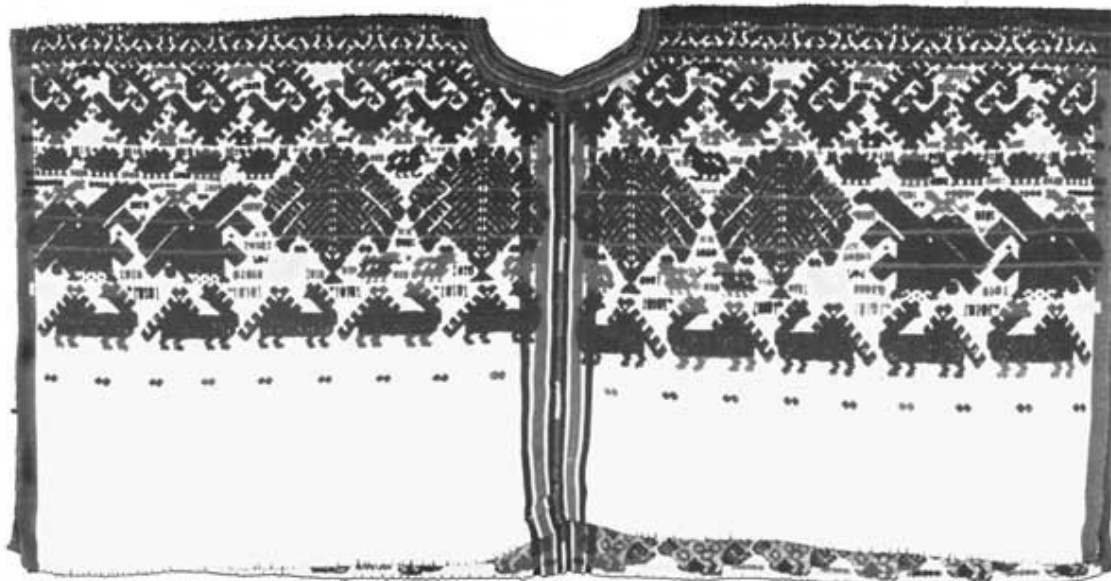


Figure 8. Ceremonial over-*huipiles* from San Pedro Sacatepéquez in Guatemala (Ixchel Museum collection; Photo: Anne Girard, Ixchel Museum Photographic Archive).

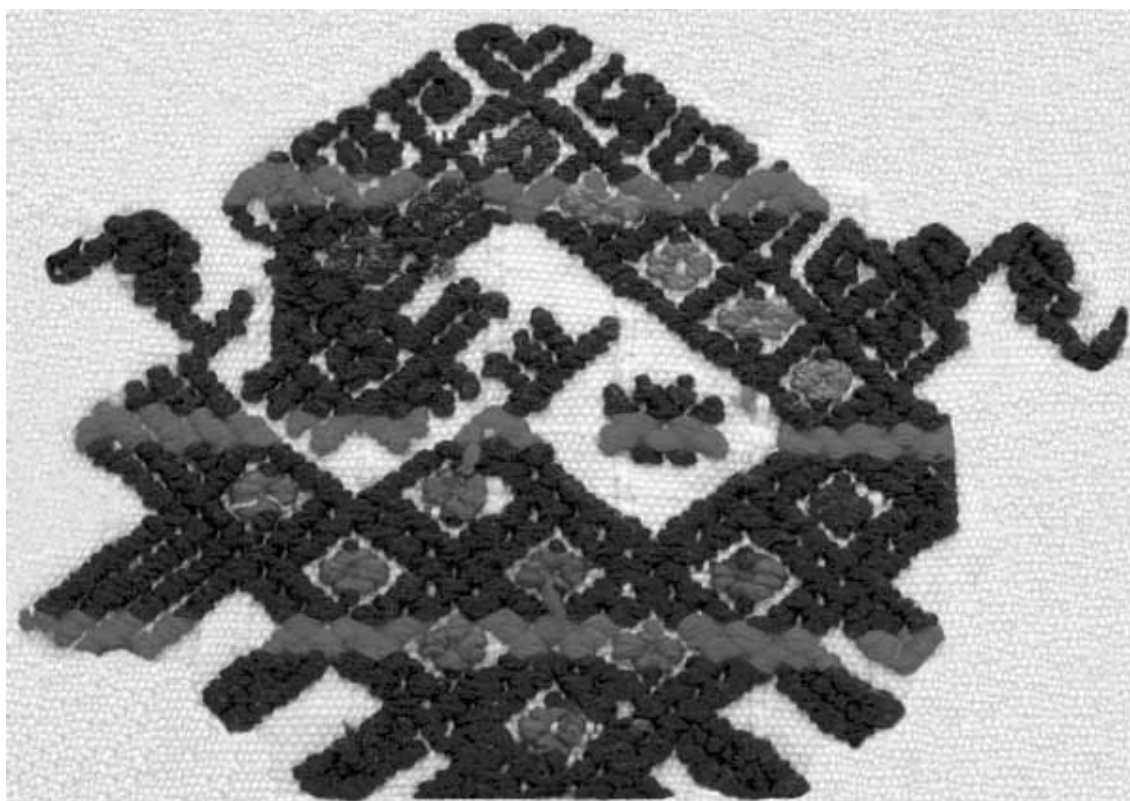


Figure 9. *Chompipe* or turkey for the party, dead *chompipe* or *kameq pi'y* shown in the over-huipil of Figure 8.

SERPENT

The serpent is one of the most widely spread cosmological features in the Guatemalan textile tradition. In several villages it is represented in the ribbons

used to ornament the head and it is also woven in *huipils*, *over-huipiles* and sashes. The prehispanic roots of its symbolism are several representations of female deities whose heads are adorned with one coiled serpent, seen in pages 30 and 49 of the Madrid Codex, and in page 39 of the Dresden Codex (Villacorta 1930). The serpent is always associated to weaving and rain and consequently to fertility, as is the case of the moon goddess *Chak Chel*, who is depicted as midwife, weaver and rain deity (Looper 2000). Such characteristics express the feminine essence in that which concerns females' life generating capacity of humans, and by analogy, of the agricultural cycle through water that allows the seeds to sprout.

The *tupuy* ("its wrap" in Q'eqchi') is the name of the distinctive headdress that is part of the ceremonial attire used by female members of the brotherhood at Cobán. It is red and traditionally elaborated with wool, though it may be decorated or entirely made with acrylic thread. Its signifier, which includes the coiled form and the use of wool, is of European origin, as stated by Arriola de Geng (1991: 82-83). The headdress represents the serpent which is consistent with the Q'eqchi' cosmovision. A legend says that the *tzuultaq'a*, owner of the mountain, dwells in caves and rests in a hammock woven with poisonous snakes, like coral snakes, and jaguars, as they are his agents. Similarly, there are *tzuultaq'a* women, associated with rain (Quirín 1984:24-25; Wilson 1999:57, 65).

In Palín, the members of the guild used to adorn themselves with a ribbon with similar characteristics, red in color and made of wool; the ribbon is given the form of a roll and represents the serpent. They call it *tun* (Figure 10). Even the way of putting it in place is somewhat different and it may be elaborated with cotton fabric; at Tamahú – Alta Verapaz – it is also said that the red headdress depicts the coral snake. They believe this to be the protector animal of the village.

The ribbon typical of Santiago Atitlán (*xk'ap* in T'zutujil), used mostly by elderly women and members of the *cofradía*, is imbued with strong symbolism. It represents the rainbow that produces the breath of a large snake and protects the world from evil; it is the rainbow-serpent of heaven. In turn, it symbolizes the umbilical cord that ties the sacred women to heaven. *Yaxper*, the midwives patron, was the first to use it (Christenson 2001: 199-200).

On the other side, it is worth noting that in certain communities where heads are adorned with rolled ribbons, they are not associated with the serpent. Such is the case with the ceremonial headdress of San Juan Sacatepéquez, as has been confirmed by several female informants. This ratifies that at a certain level of expression the cosmological symbolism should not to be extrapolated from one village to the other, because it is a part of the traditional cultural flow.



Figure 10. *Tun* or ribbon symbolizing the coiled serpent, at Palin (Drawing: Pili Garín).

As indicated, the serpent or *kumatz'in* is also represented in individual images that are woven in a number of Kaqchikel and K'ich'e villages. It is a widespread symbol that echoes its significance in the prehispanic cosmivision. Although the feathered serpent was an important symbol in the prehispanic cosmivision of Mesoamérica, it has not been confirmed that such modality was a part of the "emic" notions of the informants, who have emphasized that it only bears "adornments" but no feathers. Therefore, this variant of the serpent symbol is not showing ancient roots.

For the ancient weavers of Tecpan, the *kumatz'in* is one of the most important and ancient figures (Asturias 1997:42). It also represents the hills (*juyu*) or the ups and downs of a woman's life. The *nim po't* or over-*huipil* from San Martín Jilotepeque also bears the symbol of the serpent (*kumät'z*), identified in Spanish as an arch, a rainbow or a path. It is worth noting that not all the zigzag forms stand for serpent icons, as at Santa María de Jesús there is a similar figure known as *kix* or thorn, which the locals emphatically state not to represent a serpent.

FINAL COMMENT

At the beginning of the XXI century, the Maya costumes that are part of the traditional culture of some villages from the Guatemalan Altiplano still maintain cosmological features with ancient traces, as their origin may be traced to the rich prehispanic cosmivision, particularly the one used as a part of the ritual involved in the action of conversing with the gods. Such is the case of symbols

such as the furrows, the center, the staff or tree of life, the plate of the ritual offerings, the *chompipe* or turkey of the party or a deceased person and the serpent or the action to sow figures that are brocaded or woven as they are gradually elaborated in backstrap looms, of a pre-Columbian origin. However, when taking into account the universe formed by the huge amount of images depicted in contemporary weavings, the occurrence of such traces achieves feeble shades. Many factors derived from continued processes of cultural change have left some imprints of their own.

On the other hand, it is confirmed that women weavers are fond of depicting images whose symbolism is not of the cosmological type but instead, one that is within the framework of traditional culture, as expressions where the esthetic, technical, economical or social dimensions achieve a greater importance. The ancestral wisdom characterizing the symbolism in traditional weavings appears to be the privilege of a small number of older or mature individuals and of ritual experts. Each day the number of females who wear modern modalities of the costume, who have abandoned their local textile tradition and consequently the old associated concepts that were transmitted from one generation to the other throughout time, is increasing. In general, young women ignore and do not show an interest for the cosmological content of the garments they are wearing.

Therefore, it is indispensable to go on salvaging what we still have regarding the meaning of symbols that are a part of the Mayas' collective memory, whose roots go deep into the long-lasting warp of its history.

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