

A Silent Strategy

"The Clothes that We Wear"

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"Our Maya humanity has a beginning, a start, an origin. We have a history." Aj Pop

For us, the Maya people of Guatemala, the clothes we weave and wear are an eloquent representation of our historic continuity. Within them, we record abstract and cosmic principles in mathematical and geometric figures, some simple, others so complex as to be unidentifiable, all presented in extraordinary colors.

The ideas represented in our clothes, beyond their aesthetic sense, carry a central theme which corresponds to the Cosmos, which brings us to the basic source of Maya thought. It gives us a formula to interpret humankind, our relationship with nature, and with God. We use this formula for connecting the present and the past, and to remind us of our uncompromising decision to be free and original, like our ancestors.

Our clothes are genuine, well-defined, and revealing of our philosophy, customs, value system and collective consciousness. The fact that we wear them daily makes them an instrument for historic projection; it is a powerful social discipline.

The main idea behind the clothes we wear has its roots in the original reflections of our civilization which can be traced back five to six-thousand years ago. The idea is that when a human is born, s/he is completely integrated into the Cosmos. Humankind and nature only make up tiny

parts of the total Cosmos. While conserving this cosmovision in our clothes, we are complying with our people's mandate.

So the beauty and colorfulness of our weavings are not merely aesthetically pleasing, but a brilliant way of keeping our writings and fundamental symbols alive.

However, there is also a desire to protect these symbols from the greed of outsiders. Thus, in our weavings we often present these symbols for the world to see, but they go undeciphered and overlooked. They remain mute for those who don't understand their meaning, but they are evocative elements when you know how to interpret them. Often, their main message remains hidden to those whose narrow vision impedes them from tuning into the ancient expression of our collective art.

It must also be mentioned that our art is not "art for art's sake," which would be absurd. Our woven messages are a silent strategy, within which is found a deep and fruitful knowledge which promotes respect and searches for equilibrium among people and

nature. This equilibrium guarantees human survival.

Thus, with our colors and designs, we have been struggling for five centuries against the destruction of our historical, social, psychological and mythological concepts.

With plants, flowers and vegetables, we attempt to form consciousness of, and appreciation for the natural environment, in which everything has great value. It was nature's interaction with humankind which gave birth to our civilization. Our weaving is our way of admiring the world, but at the same time, we are transformed each day,



Photo by Jane Mintz.

as the entire world is, even though it appears the same each dawn.

Our clothes carry symbols that teach one to respect one's place of origin, social status, and mythology. Some symbols, like those of Cobán, tell of the romance between the Sun and the Moon in the framework of a magic scene of leaves, birds and clay pots. In this legend, the Moon wove for the Sun, a gift which told of the day's events. In this way, we learn that life is nothing more than the weaving of time.

We have suffered since 1524, when the invaders arrived. Our clothes have served as an expression of our solidarity and identification wherever we go. This is why we have kept our Native dress.

For a very long time, the colors and figures we use have been chosen carefully without arbitrariness. They are the result of systematic observations. The four cardinal points illustrate this well. North is represented by white, because the clouds are believed to come from there. The moon is also symbolized by white and the North. The South is symbolized by yellow, in tribute to the fertility of corn and the legend of the Cosmic Tree which bore fruit in the union between the Sky and the Earth. The cross, in our ancient tradition, represents the four winds, the direction of the heavens, the four sides of our corn fields, and the four cardinal points. When the cross has leaves on it, this symbolizes a very tall tree which, according to the Pop Wuj (Popol Vuh - the sacred book of the Quiché Maya), bore the fruits of life. This cross is clearly visible in the sky on starry nights in the South. The East is symbolized by red, the color of hope. It represents sunrise and eternity. West is symbolized by black, the death of light and the restive period begun at day's end.

So we see it is no coincidence that in our lives today, the link between people and their clothes remains ever strong, prevailing in Maya thought, because they bring us physical comfort and spiritual satisfaction.

Archeology confirms the development of our garments. The murals of ancient Maya ceremonies in Bonampak provide testimony of how leaders, priests, chiefs and others of historical standing wore many kinds of precious jewelry, deerskin sandals, and woven clothes. The lower body was covered by an apron-like garment embellished with brocade, embroidery, feathers and jewels. The upper body was covered with a huipil, shells, necklaces, beads, jade, metal and gems.

Today, the huipils of Chimaltenango, San Pedro Sacatepéquez, and San Pedro Ayampuc display a design

called "rush mat," which is the same as the one which appears in the sculpted figures of Stele 'H' of Quiriguá. In most huipils, the square is brocaded in a diamond position. This can be seen in Lintel 24 at Yaxchilán. Similarly, the jacket which appears in the woman's outfit at Yaxchilán is found stylized on many of the weavings of the Western and Central Highlands.

Figure 54 of Codex Trocortesiano clearly shows Ixchel, the goddess of the Moon, weaving at her loom. The loom is tied around her waist and to a tree, exactly like Maya women today. Weaving has always been a sacred task. Usually, when a new piece is begun, a prayer is offered to the heart of the sky. And still, as before, our people value the role of the Maya woman as a historical thread that carries our deepest cultural roots.



Our mythology states that Itzamná, founder of Uxmal and Chichén Itzá, had Ixchel as a consort. Ixchel was the one who taught us to weave, and also taught embroidery to her daughter, Ixchebel Yax.

Spanish colonists gave vague, foggy descriptions of our clothes. Of course, this had to be the case; how could they understand a culture they ridiculed and discriminated against?

We are sure that if we had abandoned wearing our clothes, they'd have been instantly hoarded away in museums. Today, wearing our cherished clothes makes us the focus of discrimination, humiliation, scorn and persecution in our country. The children of the invaders want to destroy the Maya culture. Our children are prohibited from wearing their own dress to school, yet the invader portrays as quaint our abstract vision of the world and of life. The selling of our clothes is a very big international business today. The majority of the merchants are ruthless non-Indian people who do not understand, nor care to understand the ancient symbolism.

However, after 500 years of oppression, our custom of weaving our clothes is still going strong. As time goes on, we find our designs and colors more beautiful, and they introduce us to a vast universe of composition which reveals the chronicles of Maya Life, from the earliest times to the brilliant future. They are the testimony of our legitimate right to exist as a civilization, as a culture, and as a people.

