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**Mayan Women's Organized Weaving Projects in the Guatemalan Highlands:  
Narratives of Struggle and Resistance**

ANTH 380 Global Connections

Dr. Adam Kaul

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Competition

A long history of oppression against Mayan people has left its mark on the physical and cultural landscape of Guatemala. More recently, however, development projects aimed at addressing the consequent needs of Mayan people have undermined their established ways of organizing themselves and have caused unintended cultural damage. As Western ideas of development flow across the globe, they sometimes do more to disrupt than to improve the lives of local people. In the altiplano—or highlands—Mayan widows weave *huipiles* and other textiles for a non-governmental organization that sells them to international tourists. Though formed with positive intentions, the NGO's small-scale economic development project has weakened the connection that once existed between Mayan material and cultural production processes and has undermined the agency of the women in the community. While small-scale, place-based projects have been presented as more effective in economic development, the organizations who facilitate them often fail to recognize the power dynamics that affect the local people with whom they work. As people, goods, and ideas cut channels across the cultural landscape (Tsing 2000: 338), they inscribe new meanings on local ideas, such as cloth and weaving, often influenced greatly by Western ideology. While cloth and the process of weaving has specific and significant meaning to local Mayan women, global forces have changed their meaning in a way that does not align with Mayan understanding. For this reason, Mayan women have been forced to find new ways to conceive of their roles as women and as weavers within their community, and to forge new relationships between each other and with their cloth. Whether these changes are positive or negative, Mayan women are forced to react to them and have found creative ways to do so in the altiplano.

Within the past few decades, Guatemala has become an important site for development projects as the country's indigenous majority deals with the lingering effects of the conflict they

refer to simply as *la violencia* that lasted from 1960 to 1996. The state-sponsored terror attacks first targeted Ladino students, peasants, union organizers, politicians, and revolutionaries until 1981 when the army launched its scorched-earth policy against Mayan communities. Within one year, the army had “disappeared” more than 100,000 Guatemalans as they committed more than 400 massacres torturing and murdering Mayans from more than 400 communities. In the altiplano, or rural highlands where a number of Mayan communities resided, the Guatemalan army torched entire villages without sparing the lives of any individuals (Menjívar 2008: 118). Many Mayans fled from their highland villages in order to escape the violence, not to return until 1983 when the first wave of relief organizations entered the region (Green 1999: 131). In the Chimaltenango region, the establishment of PAVA, or el Programa de Ayuda para los Vecinos del Altiplano (Assistance Program for Highland Neighbors), provided Mayan people with basic necessities needed for rebuilding their homes and lives in the altiplano. At the same time the Berhorst Foundation of Chimaltenango received special governmental permission to send a team of experts from various fields to facilitate projects for impoverished women and children in the altiplano regions. The team consisted of professionals in public health and agriculture. It also included team members sent specifically to organize weaving projects among Mayan women and children who were mostly widowed and orphaned as a result of military violence (Green 1999:131-132).

Weaving projects grew in popularity among development organizations and spread rapidly across the altiplano. They were praised for their grassroots approach, opposite of the top down development model of the Mundo Maya Project and others like it that exploit Mayan handicraft vendors through intentional juxtaposition of “modern” tourists and amenities and “traditional” Mayans and marketplaces (Little 2008: 87). The low costs in establishing and

sustaining the projects in addition to the organizers' assumptions that the project would preserve the unique cultural tradition of weaving among Mayan women made it seem like a harmless option for economic development (Green 1999: 132). Furthermore, Western tourists' growing demands for "authentic" material goods from Latin America made the project's prospects for success even more promising. Despite the growing pan-Maya movement seeking justice and recognition of indigenous identity, the scholarly writings of the movement's leaders have been more widely read by foreigners than by Guatemalan Mayans (Little 2004: 47). While foreigners' increased awareness of Mayan struggles have promoted more ethical habits of consumerism, an essentialized idea of Mayan women and weaving has prevailed resulting in misconceptions about the links between material and cultural production. Renée Sylvain might attribute such essentialist ideas to the "[globalized] idea of culture that proves useful for generating income and securing recognition" (Sylvain 2005: 356). In Guatemala, the manifestation of this theory and the increased demand for textiles from the weaving project has caused unintentional harm to Mayan women and culture. Ethnographic accounts of women's lives and experiences as part of these weaving projects reveal in many ways the perpetual suffering by Mayan women as their capacity for creativity and ability to organize themselves have been undermined by Western development (Green 1999: 8).

### **Significance of the *huipil***

Mayan men and women are known throughout Latin America for their *traje* or traditional dress, consisting of intricately woven pieces abundant with meaningful symbology. The most well-known and significant piece for Mayan women is the *huipil*. Not only does the *huipil* form part of a woman's Mayan identity, but it expresses her individual identity through a number of symbols that can represent municipality, urbanism, economic status, family tradition, age, and

the weaver's prestige (Macleod 2004: 683). Women also gain inspiration from dreams or from their *nahual* (each Mayan's spirit or totem) and incorporate them into the *huipil* as artistic details (Macleod 2004: 682). Because of the spiritual significance embedded in the cloth through this weaving process, many Mayan women believe that *huipiles* enclose them in a sacred space from which they emerge at the center when wearing them (Trout 1991: 119).

Though the spiritual significance of both the construction and use of the *huipil* has deep meaning for the weaver personally, it is also an important educational tool used to teach younger generations of Mayan women about cultural traditions. Generally, it takes women between one and three months to weave a *huipil* (Green 1999: 128). With younger women observing at their sides, mothers weave together stories about Mayan mythology and tradition while weaving corresponding designs into the fabric. This active lesson in weaving techniques and cultural knowledge also provides opportunities for women to strengthen the relationships between them. As women become more knowledgeable about weaving, they learn to "read the text of the weaving" (Macleod 2004: 683) giving them the ability to recognize different markers of identity by the designs in a woman's *huipil*. However, weaving and wearing a *huipil* goes beyond simply expressing one's identity symbolically; it expresses their identity physically as well because it creates a literal connection to the body. When asked how much weaving has been completed, women will describe the position on the body at which the *huipil* would fall. For example, if the chest had been woven, a woman might say that she had made it to the heart (Green 1999: 141). In this way, women imagine their relationship with the cloth as cultural, spiritual, and physical.

In contrast, the weaving projects established in the altiplano require the Mayan participants to weave textiles based on template designs and according to a rigid schedule. Many times, the project requires that the women weave fragments as opposed to entire *huipiles* so that

the pieces can be shipped away and incorporated into various types of textiles. Because of the way that Mayan women imagine cloth in relation to its use on the body, the creation of simply fragments disengages women from the cloth and its connection to the physical body. In other words, the cloth can no longer be understood nor imagined in the same way (Green 1999: 141). The designs required by the project are dictated by the project manager and limited to the thread colors she chooses and supplies. They do not reflect the complexity and creativity of the women's own designs and lack cultural and spiritual significance for the weaver as she can no longer create designs inspired by her own dreams and experiences. Linda Green explains that "the knowledge and expertise of the weaver [becomes] secondary to the demands of the market" (1999: 141).

Market demands create other cultural and personal conflicts for weavers as well. Because the NGO's leaders and the majority of international consumers who purchase these textiles have only limited Mayan cultural knowledge, their well-intentioned attempts to promote local development do not translate into successful projects on the ground. The schedule created by project managers requires women to meet a production quota each week. Not only does the schedule require an exhausting amount of weaving, but it also interferes with the social organization of the women in the community. Many mothers worry about the lack of time the project allows them to teach their daughters weaving techniques and significant designs. Additionally, the women worry that their daughters do not have enough time to experiment with these skills on their own. The amount of weaving time required to meet the weekly quota leaves little time for personal weaving and interactions with other community members. Some have trouble even meeting the project production schedule as it interferes with the women's commitment to their families and neighbors. The sense of mutual aid and obligation that Mayans

feel toward their other community members make one person's problem the entire community's responsibility. Though normally a woman can halt her own chores to help a neighbor or family member in need, the high demands and tight schedule of the weaving project make the consequences more serious. The difficult choice between addressing their own individual needs and the needs of their community is not one that the Mayan women are used to making (Green 1999: 140). Furthermore, the needs of the entire community still suffering from the impacts of violence and poverty are ignored when the weaving projects employ only Mayan *widows*. The labeling of these women and their categorization as "most needy" separates them from others with similar challenges and weakens the community's ability to organize itself (Green 1999: 140).

Women are further separated when the project's leaders select a *presidenta* to represent the rest of the weavers. Not chosen by the participants but rather by the project leaders, the *presidenta* is usually selected because of her ability to speak Spanish in addition to the local Kaqchikel language. The egalitarian decision-making process that typically characterizes Mayan life is disregarded in the choosing of this leader. The women's inability to be part of the decision often leads to doubts about whether the appointed *presidenta* truly represents the entire group (Green 1999: 139).

For the Mayan women of the altiplano, the weaving projects change their relationship with cloth and weaving. While cloth was once a space for expression and weaving a process of spiritual exploration and relationship building, the women's growing dependence on the cloth for economic survival degrades its cultural significance. This case study demonstrates clearly how global flows create unequal effects on the ground. Using the Western notion that development means progress and building on existing local gender dynamics as well as the cultural



importance of weaving, the leaders of the weaving projects are able to promote economic development as a universal benefit. In other words, the NGO frames the project in a way that makes failure impossible. However, as Sally Engle Merry and Rachel E. Stern demonstrate, framing often ignores the way local people understand ideas promoted as universal—in this case, the benefits of economic development (Merry and Stern 2005: 388). This Western notion of development as it is applied in Guatemala results in cultural disjunctures (Appadurai 1996: 51) that damage existing social and cultural structures. The power dynamics inherent in the processes of development and commodification create ironies across cultures. Despite the importance of traje and most specifically the *huipil* for Mayan women, the demands and low wages of the weaving projects force many women to purchase low-quality, mass-produced clothing as they do not have the time nor the money to weave for themselves. However, in the Western world, women wear *huipiles* produced from the weaving projects to make a fashion statement or to represent their loyalty to “ethical consumerism”. Because of the connections made via globalization, the same objects—in this case *huipiles*—can be found in Guatemala and throughout North America and Europe, but they are understood in completely different ways. Additionally, it is those with the most power—the project organizers and Western consumers—that dictate how they are used. So, as the processes of development and commodification flow across the globe, it is clear that this movement of ideas is not as smooth as it appears from the global scale. Using Anna Tsing’s notion of scale-making to compare the global circulation of cloth with the stories of the local Mayan women who produce it, we are able to highlight the “missed encounters, clashes, misfires, and confusions” that often result when things and ideas are spread globally and imposed locally (Tsing 2000: 338). While typically described as flows, Tsing prefers the image of channels to illustrate the disruptive and unequal nature of these types

of movements (Tsing 2000: 338). Examining such global processes from the smallest of scales reveals the intensity by which development and capitalism affect the daily lives of Mayan women.

At the same time, the study of globalization also continues to reveal the universal characteristic of human resiliency. Despite uneven flows of power that can cause significant damage to local culture, people continue to assert their agency and to find ways to resist or to manage the chaos of globalizing forces. In the altiplano, women found ways to build upon the foundations of the weaving project and to improve the conditions and the outcomes of the selling of their products. One small group of women organized their own local buying and selling group. Instead of weaving for the development project, they pooled their money and bought their own thread in Guatemala City. They wove *tzutes*, napkins, *fajas*, and *huipiles* in the traditional styles and colors. The items appealed to both tourists as well as other Mayans and as a result they were able to sell them locally and at larger markets. They used a variety of marketing techniques to promote their products, spreading news locally by word of mouth and taking advantage of tourist populations by selling their textiles at the entrance to the Mayan Kaqchikel ruins of Iximche. While these methods were no more economically beneficial than those of the weaving projects, they allowed the women to regain control over the production of cloth. With the freedom to create their own designs and work according to their own schedules, women were able to express themselves and claim control of their lives amidst the powerful effects of development that were altering their family structures and indigenous identity. Weaving outside of the project also provided women the opportunity to express their emotions, particularly those of pain and suffering, through the use of strong colors and specific symbols. These small and personal efforts to oppose the circumstances that cause physical and cultural

violence on their lives have been called “everyday forms of resistance” by James Scott (1989: 33) and describe perfectly the ways that local people deal with globalizing forces. In demonstrating these everyday resistances, women have also formed new relationships with each other. While typically Mayan women would have few opportunities for interactions with others outside of their kin group or community, the weaving projects and the establishment of local women’s weaving and selling groups allow for new possibilities. The connections made through these groups give women the opportunity to explore new forms of marketing and selling as well as to expand their networks of reciprocity (Green 1999: 147). The women of this case study not only demonstrate incredible resiliency in the midst of horrible violence, but they also complicate simple conceptions of globalization and its forces through their ability to reimagine and reinvent their relationships with cloth and with each other.

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