

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

1992

Maya Weavers Of Guatemala: Implications For Marketing And Development

Annamma Joy
Concordia University

Kathryn Lipke
Concordia University

John McKay
Champlain College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Joy, Annamma; Lipke, Kathryn; and McKay, John, "Maya Weavers Of Guatemala: Implications For Marketing And Development" (1992). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 575.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/575>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

MAYA WEAVERS OF GUATEMALA:
IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETING AND DEVELOPMENT

Dr. Annamma Joy, Assistant Professor
Department of Marketing, Concordia University
Kathryn Lipke, Associate Dean, Faculty of Fine Arts
Concordia University, 1455 de Maisonneuve Blvd., West
Montreal, QC H3G 1M8
John McKay, Director of Visual Arts, Champlain College,
Montreal

Video: Daughters of Ixchel: Maya Threads of Change
28 minutes, 1992
Producers: Kathryn Lipke & John McKay
Director: Kathryn Lipke

This video/presentation focuses on the active participation of women in the development process in Guatemala. Development is viewed as a larger process of socio-economic change that takes into consideration issues of self-determination and self-reliance (Joy and Ross, 1989). Modernization theorists generally assume that there is a general improvement in women's participation and status due to urbanization and capitalist development (Quinn, 1977) while dependency theorists emphasize the detrimental effects of the development process on women. In this video we provide a context for examining the causes and conditions that allow for the participation of women (Nash, 1981).

For more than a decade, war and clashing ideologies have left deep scars in the rural communities in Guatemala. According to Smith and Boyer (1987:206) "hundreds of villages have been eliminated, and thousands of people have been tortured and killed." Consequently, many Maya women have been socially and economically displaced. In this video the focus is on these displaced women weavers and their cooperative efforts to forge a livelihood through transformations of their traditional textiles. The footage documents the lives and efforts made by these weavers to become self-reliant through their work (weaving) while also examining the long-term and strategic issues that will draw them not only into the regional and national markets but also into the international arena.

The harsh realities of eking out a living based on weaving has necessitated a shift in attitudes and behavior regarding the products that Maya weavers create. Historically, handcrafts were produced in order to fulfil functional and ceremonial needs within the craftsperson's community. Textiles have served as deeply rooted indexical codes of social status and differentiation as represented by the use of "Huipiles" in highland Guatemala (Schneider, 1987). Indigenous demand for such products, however, has declined given the penetration of mass produced items to even the remote villages and political

chaos, such that local weavers have had to seek out new markets in order to survive. But such transformations in economic production has occurred at a cost. Producers know local aesthetic and product preferences but are at a disadvantage when their products have to be tailored to consumers from other cultures.

More recently external demand for local products have come primarily through three types of social contacts: tourist interactions, through dealers who help in the design and production of specific products for large-scale markets either local or foreign, and through the demand for products by collectors and art-oriented consumers. Further, even though our focus is on the contemporary situation, the impact of Spanish colonization on Maya textiles, the acquisition of artifacts for ethnographic museums and their classification of such items as "primitive," and the more recent internationalization of art and the discovery of aesthetic and cultural value in paintings, pottery and weaving by artists, collectors and fashion designers forms a backdrop against which the present situation is analyzed (Schneider, 1987:437).

Although each of the types of demands generated from the outside have existed simultaneously, one can argue that there seems to be an implicit development process that involves negotiations between insiders (Maya weavers) and outsiders (fashion designers, collectors and owners of cooperatives). In addition, the traditional costume, a mark of communal identity still flourishes among the Maya in the highlands. It constitutes a cultural memory reaching back to a period of the classic Maya cities.

For many weavers, modifying traditional products to induce purchase by tourists is a common occurrence. The clothes woven by women are sold as such to tourists who visit the village. In such items traditional colors and patterns continue to be used although experimentation with design and colors has also occurred. In some instances instead of producing an item of clothing, the product has been redesigned to become an item of household decoration. For collectors, one-of-a-kind products have been created and its traditional functionality altered in the process. For fashion designers, production of traditional and exclusive designs has contributed to their incorporation within western apparel created for both local tourist markets and markets in the U.S. Thus an indigenous handcraft had been modified from an article of clothing to a decorator item suited to the tourist market.

The owners of cooperatives or dealers that facilitated the creation of handcrafts for external markets also created a new product-expansion phase. The increase in volume of business and changing aesthetics led to the use of synthetic fibres such as acrylic as well as synthetic dyes. The colors and patterns also changed, for western, industrialized markets,

primarily in the direction of earth tones and pastels. The products were also household and decorator items. In Guatemala today, this is one of the markets that incorporates many Mayan women weavers.

A third phase is in the making with an increasing demand from specific international markets such as the U.S., Canada, Germany and other European countries. It is not quite clear whether these markets require further specifications of product quality, design and color, but it is highly likely that they will do so. While quality may be a common concern, colors and designs might vary given variations in consumer preferences in these markets. However, even in such instances, handspun and hand-dyed items are higher priced for a selective art-oriented market.

In all instances, these Maya weavers had to be willing to change markets, to interact with clients in the new market to ascertain aesthetic and product preferences, and to act on the information through product development for new clients. They had either direct interaction with the tourists themselves or indirect information through intermediaries such as dealers and collectors. Yet, even such intermediary functions are fairly recent and not well established. According to Ortiz-Buonofina (1987:17), "traditional markets (mercados), small shops (tiendas), and ambulatory vendors continue to thrive."

In early 1991 and 1992 Kathryn Lipke and John McKay travelled to the central highlands of Guatemala and documented the situation of these Mayan weavers. The focus in the video, "Daughters of Ixchel," is the textiles of Guatemala, the weavers of Mayan descent and their co-operative efforts to forge a livelihood through their traditional textiles. The footage documents the lives and efforts made by these weavers to become self-reliant through their work (weaving) while also examining the long-term and strategic issues that will draw them not only into larger regional and national markets but also into the international arena. To quote Hank Duflon from Antigua, a collector of Guatemalan textiles for the past 35 years, "change is occurring in the textile arts of Guatemala:some of it good, perhaps some of it bad. The Guatemalan Indian has demonstrated over many hundreds of years a superb sense of color and design and continues to show great skill in weaving. Much of the new weaving is as fine as the old pieces and if given the means to supply their needs and continued freedom to express themselves, the Guatemalan weaver will contribute creatively and with great diversity to the textile arts of the world."

The aftermath of war and civil strife that many of the Guatemalan Indians have experienced can be devastating, but in this video we see the strength and persistence of these women as they forge new venues for their textiles while honoring and perpetuating an ancient cultural tradition. Yet it is clear

that many of these women are unprotected, as their counterparts who have resorted to selling family and heirloom "Huipiles" first to producers of "gringo shirts" and more recently to merchants in Mexico where they have migrated as refugees (Schneider, 1987). Thus the autonomy and self-determination that is portrayed in this video has its dark side as well.

References

- Joy, A. and Ross, C. (1989), "Marketing and development in Third World Contexts: An Evaluation and Future Directions" in Journal of Macromarketing, Vol.18, p.17-31.
- Nash, J. (1981), "Ethnographic aspects of the World Capitalist System," Annual Review of Anthropology, Vol.10, p.393-423.
- Ortiz-Buonofina, Marta (1987), "The Economic Efficiency of Channels of Distribution in a Developing Society: The Case of the Guatemalan Retail Sector," Journal of Macromarketing Vol.7, no.2, p.17-25.
- Quinn, N. (1977), "Anthropological Studies of Women's Status," in Annual Review of Anthropology, Vol.6, p.181-226.
- Schneider, J. (1987), "Anthropology of Cloth," Annual Review of Anthropology, Vol. 16, p.409-448.
- Smith, C. and Boyer, J. (1987), "Central American since 1979," Annual Review of Anthropology, Vol. 16, p.197-221.