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Containing Tradition, Embracing Change: Weaving Together Plant Materials in Northern Latin America

Kathryn Rousso

www.kathrynrouso.com, Kathy_Rousso@hotmail.com

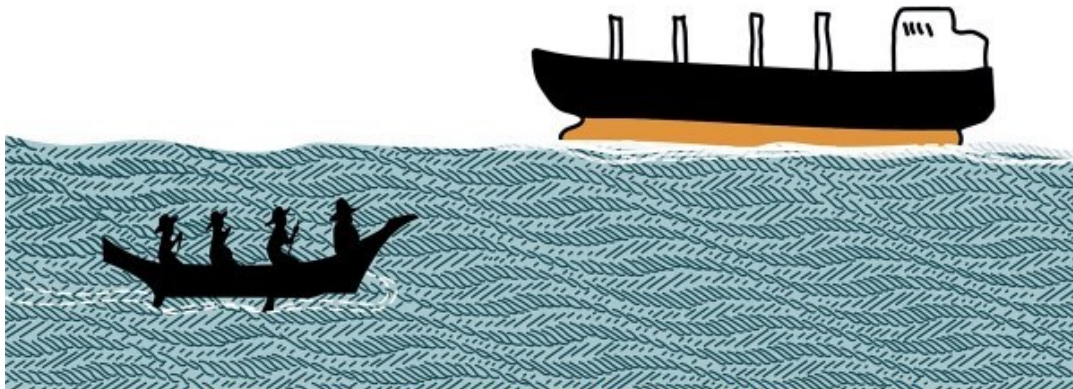
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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global



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Containing Tradition, Embracing Change: Weaving Together Plant Materials in Northern Latin America

Kathryn Rousso

Introduction: Native plants provided valuable food, shelter, drink and pliable materials for creating woven artifacts necessary for daily life worldwide. The knowledge of which ones had usable fibers, how to harvest and prepare them for suitable weaving materials, and the techniques required for transforming them into strong, durable objects was handed down for generations. To the casual observer these utilitarian objects are often taken for granted and overshadowed by more colorful weavings and thus undervalued for their cultural and social significance. As a basket-weaver, a curiosity and desire to understand these unique textiles has led me into countless villages, markets and forests, where I now know many artists who create plant-material textiles. While still mostly a non-mechanized cottage industry, a few influences have impacted these traditions. This presentation focuses on agave, wild pineapple, palm, rush, reed, cane and wild bamboo woven items from central Mexico to northern Colombia.



Northern Latin America

Agave/Furcreau is called maguey in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, and fique in Colombia. The discovery legends that usable fibers existed inside of the thick leaves vary and include a priest, who cut a leaf after being scraped by it, and when a bolt of lightning struck a leaf exposing the fibers. Evidence of historical significance can be seen in the Nahuatl's "God of Maguey; Mayahuel" as depicted on the Códice Barbónico, and archeological remains from the Loma Calderás 600 CE eruption which preserved maguey gardens and spun fibers in the city of Joya de Cerén, in present day El Salvador.



Harvested agave plants

Methods to extract the inner fibers vary, but usually involve cutting, trimming, pounding and scraping the thick leaves. Ancient spinning methods include on the leg, between the hands and drop spindles. *Taravillas* or rope-makers were introduced by traders, who used them aboard ships for emergency rope-making. Large and small spinning wheels were introduced from Europe.



*Pounding
agave, Mexico*



*Spinning with
taravilla*



*Spinning,
Guatemala*

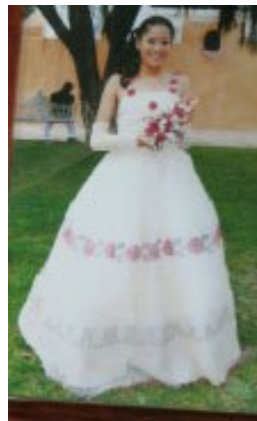
Bags are the most common agave fiber item, as traditional clothing does not have pockets and the need to carry things to markets, fields and other communities led to their creation. Another way to carry things is with a cloth or *ayate*, woven by the Otomi of central Mexico. In pre-Columbian times simple agave-fiber clothing was worn by the lower class and today agave-fiber clothing is uncommon, but one master-weaver made this beautiful contemporary-style wedding dress. Proximity to hot springs creates a modern day market for agave fiber washcloths and scrubbers which are exported internationally.



Todo Santos, Guatemala 1988



*Linked bag, Oaxaca,
Mexico*



*Agave fiber wedding
dress*



agave scrubbers

Most Guatemalan, Honduran, El Salvadorian and Colombian bags are made with the age-old techniques of simple-looping, figure-eight looping, single-interconnected looping and cross-knit looping. The technique of linking is common for bag-making in Mexico and in one Guatemalan community, as their ancestors fled southern Mexico and “took” the technique with them. Knitting, crocheting, braiding, ply-split darning and braiding, interlacing, sprang and macramé are a few other agave fiber techniques. North of Bogota, the Guane are known for their unique sprang *carpatero* bags



Linking, Mexico



Linking, Guatemala



Macramé bags, El Salvador



Carpatero

Agave fibers are woven on back-strap, horizontal, fixed-vertical, vertical-frame and floor looms. Floor looms were introduced and are common where “breathable” sacks were needed for products such as coffee, which was imported in the mid-1600’s from Ethiopia when the market fell out of the natural dye industry, mainly cochineal and indigo.



Horizontal loom, Guatemala



Fixed-vertical loom, Guatemala



Vertical-frame loom, Guatemala



Floor loom, Colombia

Other products include rope, tumplines, hammocks and equestrian gear, such as halters, cruppers, saddlebags and cinches, needed when the Spaniards introduced horses. In Colombia *alpargatas* (sandals), were widely produced in the 1850's, exported for about twenty years, and are still found in a few tourist shops. In one small community a family is famous for their brightly colored coiled baskets, probably developed for the tourist trade.



Basket-weaver, Colombia



Cargo nets and crupper



Saddlebag combines loom-weaving, braiding and sprang techniques, Guatemala

While in many areas synthetic materials and dyes replace natural ones in contrast a few economic development promoters have retaught natural dye methods and introduced product designs for the international consumer. For example, in Olopa, Guatemala the organization Amor Ch'orti' sell products through the web-site NOVICA, an affiliate of National Geographic. In Curiti, Colombia is Ecofibras, a small factory where items such as contemporary bag styles, furniture, shoes and placemats are produced. They have a large store, give tours and a web-site



Amor Ch'orti', Guatemala



Ecofibras Colombia

The popularity of agave fiber is probably attributed to the fact that plants are readily available, easy to propagate and provide long, strong fibers. The Otomi referred to it as “Mother Maguey”, because besides providing weaving material it gave them shelter, drink and food enabling them to survive in their harsh environment. In one Guatemalan village young girls had to master the skills of creating a net bag before they can marry. In the Yucatan it was referred to as “green gold” and the Nahuatl called maguey a miracle plant.

Wild Pineapple (*Aechmea magdalenae*), in the Bromeliáceas family is called *kiga* or *pita* and is harvested much like agave, the fibers leg-spun and simple-looped into *chácaras* or net bags by the Ngöbe-Buglé of northwest Panama. The origin of this craft has many possibilities; introduced by the Mayan, a spider teaching a woman named Mesi, or a snake. It is common knowledge that *chácaras* have a long tradition and hold great cultural and social significance. In some communities they are part of a woman's rite of passage called *Mogön*, when among other important things she learns how to make a string bag. Nylon is now often used, which began in the early 1980's when nylon cord was smuggled out of United Fruit Company warehouses. Today organized groups such as ASMUNG (Asociación de Mujeres Ngöbe), FORNB (Organizaciones Artesanales Ngöbe-Buglé) and Medo promote and empower *chácara*-makers with instruction and marketing. In contrast to agave fibers, wild pineapple is not domesticated and the fibers are much softer, hence there are fewer uses for it.



Harvesting wild pineapple



Scraping pita



Thigh spinning pita



Chácara detail

Many varieties of **palm** are harvested for baskets, mats and hats, all important for rural life. The part of the palm utilized is the unopened new growth, which after removal from the plant is hit on a hard surface, exposing the young, tender leaves.

In one Guatemalan community twenty women in the group *Asociación de Mujeres Artesana de San Jacinto* (Association of Women Artists of San Jacinto) with the slogan “*Mujeres tejiendo el presente con fibras del pasado*” (Women Weaving in the Present with Fibers from the Past) weave coiled baskets, a technique introduced to them in the early 1980's. They use palmetto (*Sabal mexicana*) and coconut (*Cocos nucifera*) fronds for the natural colors of grey (green palm), white (dried palm) and brown (coconut palm).



Palm, Guatemala



Coiled basket lid

In the same area due to the popularity of Zacapa Centenario Rum 900 women put their plaiting skills to use and create hand-woven palm “*petate*” bottle bands. They can make 40-50 of them per day in their remote communities.

Guatemalan, Salvadorian and Panamanian hats are made with the technique of plait-coling, and in the Eastern Poqomam Mayan empire community of San Pedro Pinula, Jalapa their origin myth states that God looked down and declared that Pinula be known for palm hats, thus began this tradition. Today San Pedro hats are sold in nearby Esquiluas, a popular pilgrimage site where thousands visit yearly. An innovation in one small El Salvadorian factory is taking recycled soda bottles and melting them down into thin threads, which are braided and machine-sewn into plait-coiled hats.



Palm braids, Guatemala



Hat-making, Guatemala



Recycled soda bottle hat-making, El Salvador

Honduran palm is known as *junco* (*Carludovia palmata* Ruiz and Pav.), and in Nicaragua it is called *palma de pita*. The hat-weaving technique in Honduras, Nicaragua and Colombia is the same as the famous “Panama hat” (which is actually made in Ecuador and earned the name for a couple of reasons. In the mid-1850’s travelers passing through Panama to the U.S. Gold Rush bought hats which Ecuador marketed in Panama and when President Roosevelt visited during the construction of the Panama Canal in 1906 and he was photographed wearing one). Baskets are also made from palm in Honduras, Nicaragua, Mexico, Guatemala and Colombia. Sometimes colorful synthetics replace plant materials in many locations as seen in a market near Oaxaca, Mexico.



Palm, Honduras



Hat-making Honduras



Basket-weaver, Oaxaca



Baskets, Oaxaca

In Panama and Colombia *chunga* (*Astrocaryum standleyanum*) and *toquilla* (*Carludovica palmata*) palm fronds are woven into coiled baskets by the Wounaan and Emberá of the Darien region and hats in the Santa Fe area of Panama. Basket patterns have evolved from geometric to floral which appeal to an international audience.



Chunga is the tree palm and toquilla is the smaller palm



Basket-weaver, Panama



Hat made from Chunga palm

The spiny palm (*Astrocaryum malybo*) grows in the Colombian lowland Caribbean region and traditionally used by the Chimila to weave mats on horizontal frame looms. In the town of Chimichagua there are seven organizations with about 200 women who make two styles of mats. Traditional mats have simple designs, few colors and are in low demand whereas the “modern” ones are colorful with geometric designs are in high demand and much more profitable. Natural dyes have been used since the 1980’s. The woman who demonstrated the process to me was honored as a “master artist” by Artesanias de Colombia, a national organization who support and recognize artists. They sponsor workshops, competitions, publish books and have several shops where artisan work from around the country is sold.



Spiny palm



Master mat-weaver, Colombia



Mat

Rush or *tul* (*Typha angustifolia* L.) and **reed** or *carrizo* (*Arundo donnas* L.) provide material for plaited mats or *petates*, one of the earliest forms of weaving in Mesoamerica and an important utilitarian and ritualistic item. They were a symbol of power, especially among the Mayas, and ancient calendars were painted on mats, *Pop* (mat) is the first month of the Mayan calendar. Once considered a royal tradition, each woven strip represented the reality of time and space, or the Mayan cosmo-vision, and one of the Maya Quiché's ancient traditions dictated that their leader, called Ahau Apop (king of the mats) sit on a mat.

The mat-weavers of Nahuizalco, El Salvador were well known for their excellent quality mats, and up until a 1917 earthquake "*petates de sala*" were woven in this location and exported to Guatemala City where they were common floor-mats in large colonial homes. After the earthquake destroyed homes new safety requirements and architectural standards meant low demand, which ended production of these special mats.



Rush, Honduras



Nahuizalco examples

A couple of Honduran women's groups in a community near Santa Barbara weave mats, cut them up and use sewing machines to make contemporary style bags, purses, computer, tablet, cell phone cases or whatever market demands.



*Mat-weaver,
Honduras*



Contemporary items

Another material is the soft, spongy inner heart or *corozón de tule* (*Cyperus camus* Presl.) which is used to weave fire fans or *sopladores* and other contemporary items such as this ceramic covered container.



Sopladores



Ceramic "Basket"

Wild Bamboo (*Poaceas Chusquea*), philodendron and other materials are woven into baskets and sold to visitors in Chajul, Guatemala, an important pilgrimage site. This basket was so important that the “Dance of the Baskets” was performed once a year until at least the 1960’s with the principal dancers wearing locally made baskets as their ceremonial headgear. The entire tradition ceased in the 1980’s when the civil war made it too dangerous for travel outside of the community to harvest materials in the nearby cloud forest. As for the origins of these baskets, an elder explained to me: “A long time ago a few local (Maya) Ixil were in the forest harvesting food and upon returning to their camp midday to prepare their meal, they discovered that it had already been cooked. After this happened three times, the culprits, a few visiting Lacadóns, revealed themselves and then taught the Ixil the secrets of basket-making.”



Wild Bamboo



Basket-weaver, Guatemala



Chajul market

In Santa Clara la Laguna, Sololá similar baskets were also made from wild bamboo until the nearby cloud forest was designated as a preserve and now weavers are prohibited from harvesting within its boundaries. Weavers adapted and still make baskets but use cane instead, which they plant near the community. Around this same time COPIKAJ (Cooperativa Integral de Producción Artesanal or Comprehensive Cooperative of Handicraft Production) was formed and organizes weavers who make quality multi-sized baskets, and lampshades, which are sold in their shop near the main plaza.



Cane, Guatemala



Basket-weaver, Guatemala



Cane baskets in Santa

Cane (*genus Phragmites*) (Poaceae) is also woven into large market baskets in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Colombia.



*Basket-weaver,
Guatemala*



*Basket with chicks in Market,
Guatemala*

In Colombia *caña flecha* (*Gynerium sagittatum*) is plait-coiled into *sombrero vueltiao* (hats of braided rows), a cultural symbol originating with the Zunú people of the Sinú river region. The pride of this national symbol is illustrated by the 2004 Olympic team who wore them during the opening ceremony, and as gifted to Pope John Paul II in 1986 and President Bill Clinton in 2000 for their Colombian visits.

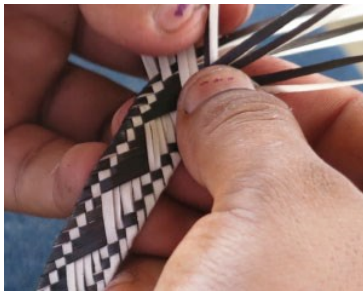


Caña Flecha



Sombreros Vueltiaos

Once a year a festival is held in Tuchin, Córdoba where several days of competitions are held, from splitting cane, braiding strands to making hats. Lectures on the importance of natural dyes and the history also occur. In the large artisan market vendors sell *caña flecha* hats along with computer, tablet, phone cases and bracelets. Murals depicting the process are all over town.



Braiding caña flecha



Braiding competition, Tuchin flecha



Murals in Tuchin, Colombia

Conclusion

While plant material woven items developed independently in remote communities, outside influences occurred when traders and settlers came in contact with artisans exposing them to new tools, techniques, materials and products. Spanish colonization beginning in the 1500's, the introduction of coffee, civil wars, economic development programs, natural disasters, globalization, ecosystem sustainability, and difficulty in obtaining materials due to changes in land designation or lost to disease have all made impacts. Also a lack of interest because of the time involved and perceived low value, plus new technology, and other opportunities in and outside of the communities, all infiltrate even the most remote villages. The examples cited illustrate the importance of many plants and their place in the history and cultural identity of the people who discovered and continue to use them, with the challenge of keeping these traditions alive while embracing change.

All of the photos were taken by the author. Field work was conducted between 2001 until 2017, partially funded by Fulbright and Rasmuson grants.

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