

THE LANGUAGE OF WOVEN IMAGES AMONG THE TZOTZIL

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ABSTRACT/RESUME

The author examines weaving and design among the Tzotzil of Chiapas, Mexico. Many traditional designs and patterns on cloth have persisted over centuries, with some elements used today found in pre-Columbian times. Although many of the design elements of today were found in the past, it is possible that their meanings have changed over the years.

L'auteur étudie le tissage et le dessin chez les Tzotzil de Chiapas, au Mexique. Beaucoup de dessins et de modèles traditionnels sur étoffe existent depuis des siècles, et certains des éléments qui sont employés aujourd'hui existaient déjà à l'époque pré-Columbienne. Bien que beaucoup de modèles d'aujourd'hui aient existé au passé, il est possible que leurs significations se soient modifiées au cours des années.

The Tzotzil of highland Chiapas have been studied extensively by anthropologists, but the analysis of their material culture has been largely ignored until recently. However, it is the form of dress of these people which constitutes one of the most extant signs of the persistence of indigenous tradition and in particular it is the designs on cloth which have meaning for those who weave and those who wear the cloth.

In order to understand the significance of the woven motif it is important to consider the iconography in its historical context and with reference to the culture as a whole. I have thus had to draw both on the analysis of historical sources and on the work of current anthropologists. My own evidence is derived from knowledge accumulated while collecting textiles in the region, and I have had substantial help from Walter Morris who has worked on deciphering textile motifs for the last fifteen years. Following his lead, which establishes a relationship between the textile designs of the present and symbolic matrix of the ancient Maya, I attempt to define what this relationship may consist of and also to point out the dangers of such a juxtaposition.

It is somewhat surprising to find that despite the strong inducement for change that has occurred through the centuries in Highland Chiapas, the Maya population have maintained cultural elements from the past. There is no doubt that the area, protected by mountainous terrain and often hostile people, has received less impact from the outside world than other areas of Mexico. Nevertheless every community has a Catholic church, and the political hierarchy of the Tzotzil communities follows the pattern of the cofradia system of Spain. Many cultural aspects of European civilization have been adopted since the conquest. These include participation in cash labour schemes, dependency on the central market, the celebration of Catholic festivals, changes in domestic relations, for example the introduction of the compadrazgo system and changes in clothing styles.

However the woven motif remains one of the most conservative mediums of expression. Knowledge of weaving techniques has survived where other artistic skills of the pre-Conquest Maya have been forgotten. The designs of pattern on cloth are also comparable with the few representations and *examples* we have of ancient pre-hispanic weaving. To quote George Kubler (1969), "symbols change less than themes, but when the cultural symbols change, the culture has changed". The persistence of an iconographic system suggests that somewhere cultural roots are surviving. These roots are also evident from the study of other cultural facets, but often difficult to isolate after years of fusion with the culture of invading populations.

The first source of information for the interpretation of textile motifs must be the weavers themselves. The fieldworker encounters a number of problems when trying to gather material of this nature. First he must find an informant who is willing to talk about what is essentially a sacred domain. There are also many weavers who are unable to fully explain the significance of their work. To reach any conclusions the researcher needs a very large number of examples, so that information can be cross referenced. Weavers also assign a variety of names to different motifs according to whether they are emblemic or descriptive terms. It is necessary to have a subtle understanding of the language to appreciate the wider connotations of these names. Analogical parallels exist between the figurative and spatial relationships found in weaving and the expression of similar concepts in ritual as well as perceptions of the cosmos in oral tradition. This shows that the inability of certain weavers to interpret their own designs does not mean they are without significance.

The interpretations and explanations of motifs in the woven medium provide ample indication of the survival of indigenous concepts from classic Maya times. However motifs of traditional form are confined to those articles of clothing which were once part of the costume repertory of the people living in Classic times. Such items of clothing as the traditional huipil, formed from a rectangular length of cloth, folded and with a square hole cut for the head, the ceremonial sash derived from the loin cloth and items of head gear have existed throughout history. In the modern context many garments worn for formal occasions are woven and decorated with brocade work.

The festival of Carnival which takes place in February in Tzotzil communities reenacts the history of conflict and culture contacts of the area. Analysis of the costume of carnival can also provide a potted history of fashion in clothing in Chiapas. Wives of cargo holders and religious officials bring out their best huipils for fiestas. These are woven according to strict semiotic rules. These motifs are also incorporated into male ceremonial wear. The huipil of the saint is the most important item of clothing produced in the community and must therefore be iconographically correct. It is a great honour for a woman to weave the saint's new huipil. This rare event has in the past helped to revive a declining weaving tradition.

In the late nineteenth century, the dream of a woman in Magdalenas caused her to undertake the extended period of study needed to relearn the art of weaving. The patron saint of the community appeared to her and ordered her to make a new huipil for the saint's image, kept in the church, which should be exactly like the old one, now almost one hundred years old. Her painstaking efforts to reproduce the old motifs, which would indi-

cate the insured integrity of the community's future, soon inspired a burst of weaving activity which even spread to other communities, where experts were brought in to teach the old techniques and revitalise the ritual order.

Other garments worn in the highlands today are either derived from European influence or represent a convergence of pre and post conquest influences. The tubular wrap-around skirt may derive from various influences. From the time of the conquest, men were obliged to wear trousers at least when entering colonial towns. The court sleeves and breeches are another feature of clothing which appear in the modern ceremonial context particularly in Zinacantan, worn by high officials and the mythological characters of Carnival. For the most part articles of clothing which require the cutting and tailoring of cloth are a Spanish innovation. The reluctance of Indian women to cut woven cloth is possibly related to the reverence with which woven material is regarded and this has affected the form of traditional clothing.

There are very few surviving examples of pre-Columbian cloth. Elizabeth Benson has recorded the finds of fragments of painted woven cloth from Chiptic Cave, near Comitan. A few fragments also survive from the ceremonial well of Chichen Itza. Indentations of cloth, where it was used to line the walls of tombs are useful for the more accurate analysis of warp and weft counts and illustrate clearly the technique used for introducing pattern. Beyond this however it is a question of building up the picture from other sources.

Depictions of garments worn by the Classic Maya often appear to defy the forces of gravity. In these ancient Maya texts, it is apparently most important to show the woven pattern in full, rather than accurately represent the draping of the cloth in order to accentuate or complement the shape of the human body. Cotton cloth for the production of Colonial Style clothes, adopted by indigenous communities, is manufactured in the Ladino centres and embroidered with motifs taught by the Spanish nuns: crosses, flowers, coats of arms, etc. These items have remained an integral part of indigenous fashion long after the Colonial population have ceased to wear them and are still subject to fluctuations in fashion.

The weaving tradition appears to have waxed and waned through the centuries. To ascertain the origins of brocade motifs we can look to the pre-Columbian context for evidence of their first appearance. Most comparable to modern weaving designs are the rhomboid patterns that appear on the huipils of the women sculpted in stone at Yaxchilan. Brocaded glyphs also appear along the edges of representations of huipils from the Usumacinta Valley.

Isolation of motifs from the pre-Columbian context shows that of the matrix of symbols which have been categorized as glyphs, only a selection appear on the examples or depictions of Classic or post-Classic Maya cloth. Of these a majority appear to be related to the glyphs found in the so-called skybands.

Costume is often thematic and may be stamped with glyptic elements rather than entire glyphs, to mark the identity of an individual. The spots of a jaguar pelt exist both as a glyptic element or may be used to mark the skin or clothing of an elitist Maya. The depiction of God number 13 in the Dresden Codex has this glyph inscribed on his forehead.

George Kubler writes in *Studies in Classic Maya Iconography* (1969): "The word and the image usually perform different tasks and it is useful to know when their functions overlap or interchange in departing from these strict limitations." Furthermore he writes, and his words should no doubt act as a warning: "Bands or fields of motifs assembled for decoration, as on pottery or textiles may often be supposed to have no meaning, beyond their use as emptied ornament, especially when the suggestions of narrative association are lacking." However it would seem that even though a motif is removed from the context where it originally had meaning, it will maintain its connotations in a different location for those who perceive it, provided that they have the same cultural background.

One system classifies modern brocade designs into four groups. The first are diamond shaped designs, which include the rhomboids that cover the main expanse of the huipil and smaller inserted diamonds of ranging colour; secondly, sinuous designs of worm or snake form; thirdly, designs with multiple vertical lines, which usually represent the basis for various anthropomorphic designs and, lastly, representations which constitute zoomorphic beings.

Each kind of design, according to the compiled evidence of informants, constitutes a thematic category. The diamond designs in their most complex form are representations of the cosmos, simple diamond shapes may symbolize stars, the planets or the sun. The many variations on sinuous designs appear to have the general connotation of fertility and aspects of the earth. Designs of anthropomorphic form with central vertical elements relate to mythological history. Zoomorphic designs are generally widespread in Chiapas. Most common on Tzotzil huipils are images of saints or toads who are said to be related to the earth lord. It is thus apparent that the only areas of expression which overlap from both ancient and modern contexts are the themes of cosmology and time, fertility, death and descent, and some aspects of ritual.

To consider again the iconography of the Classic Maya, it appears that correspondingly it is the Skyband glyphs which are frequently used to decorate the costumes and ceremonial paraphernalia of the Maya elite, often serving, as some writers have noted, as frames, borders, bases and platforms. The elements visually represent scales or segments of the bicephalic dragon. These transformational elements appear to have association with the 365 day solar or agricultural year. Textile designs of the Classic Maya were not limited to rectilinear forms, as is the case with modern brocade work. Painted designs were used to create curvilinear forms and in some cases cloth appears to have been cut away to form a pattern. For example the quincux sign may be cut from the clothing of a royal ruler, with the pop sign or motif inserted to indicate his high status. Interestingly the resist-dyed textile found at Chiptic cave displays a curvilinear design which is cited by Irmgard Johnson (1954) as being similar to glyphs which appear only on celestial bands and was thought by some earlier writers such as Forstemann to represent a constellation. A similar Aztec glyph exists in Skybands from the Mexican highlands and stands for day or festival.

The crossbands design is common in Classic Maya textiles, for example on the Yaxchilan lintels and Copan stelae. In the post-Classic context it is notably this design which is found on the cloth fragments retrieved from the ceremonial well at Chichen Itza and which decorates many of the capes of individuals depicted in the Dresden Codex. This element which is particularly frequent in celestial bands, is usually associated with the meaning sky. It is also sometimes an element of the "serpent segment."

The crossed sign is the basis of many other designs in the matrix of past and contemporary symbols. Cross-hatched signs would seem to derive from this. The meaning of this design in the Classic context still eludes us, but explanations are forthcoming for the interpretation of the design found in modern huipils. Within the cross-hatching are found the symbols for the seed and the name of the design is sprouting corn. To cut a cross section of a row of such diamonds is to form the undulating pattern named "path of the snake". Similar derivations of designs are found in the pre-Columbian context and may indicate a similar pattern of associations.

Sky glyphs in Classic Maya hieroglyphs are all four-cornered designs. Correspondingly the vertical lines which join the diamonds of today's weavings, represent the rising and setting of Venus on the sun, which is depicted as a central diamond. A yellow diamond at the top of the rhomboid in a huipil from Magdalenas probably represents the easterly position of the rising sun and the black diamond at the bottom is correspondingly the western setting sun. The *resemblance* of the motif to the symbol of the sun from the Dresden Codex is very striking. The diamond shape in its simplest form, found

in isolation without an inner cross, is the symbol for a star. The glyphs for "kin", day of the sun, and "Lamat", day of Venus, are both four-cornered symbols, as is the symbol for heart of the sky. In Mitontic the symbol translated as "my heart" is very closely related to a cosmological symbol with the essential four-cornered element at the centre and again with the connotation of the life-force or the very essence of being. In San Andres the same symbol is elaborated to look like a butterfly with its four wings, and this symbol is again synonymous with the cosmological sign or the sun, although mythologically portrayed as a messenger for the gods, which may be another Aztec concept. In Chamula myth it is said that butterflies will change colour with the seasons, which again illustrates the association of the movement of the heavenly bodies with agricultural fertility and shows that the interaction of the two domains is thought to be inextricably related.

To accurately interpret the motifs in a huipil it is necessary to be familiar with the layout of the design and to understand changes of meaning related to changes in context. There are parallels in syntax to the rules of Ancient Maya glyphic formation, in that the core symbol is used to express a number of different ideas by elaboration and increasing complexity. Alternatively the core may change to enter a different domain of meaning, but variants within this domain are expressed by the addition of the same elaborations. Differences in anthropomorphic designs are expressed by the depiction of contrasting hand and foot positions. This may reflect an emphasis on the importance of gesture in verbal communication, which is also evident in Ancient Maya artistic representations of human interaction. A variety of hand gestures are commonly found as elements of glyphs and compound glyphs. The method of adding signs to a basic symbol in order to vary meaning is similar to the system of glyphic formation, where a glyphic element becomes a compound word with the addition of affixes and postfixes. As with glyphs the ideographical connotations of a motif refer to the most complex metaphorical system.

Among the contemporary Tzotzil there are about 100 different basic symbols. However there are about 1,500 variations in the way they are represented. This makes the precise analysis of designs difficult, although the theme may be evident. The same motif has a number of associated names, some of which may have greater significance than others. There are also patterns for the order and positioning of motifs. Individualization, however, is not only accepted but expected, and a weaver will never reproduce a design exactly. Weavers can recognize each other's work from differences in skill and technique and also from the choice of predominant motifs. A weaver may also choose to adopt a particular design as indexical for her signature. Through the matrix of weaving a woman reiterates common

values, but is also in a position to choose which values she will express and it is to this extent a personal interpretation of the cosmos.

This freedom of expression or what might be termed poetic licence is also evident in the context of Classic Maya glyphic formation. It is one of the features which has confounded the decipherment of particular texts. These deviations or the use of original language, may be one of the ways that fixed meanings, established by the repetition of symbols according to precise rules, can gradually change in form. It is unlikely, as Kubler points out (1969), that intricacies of meaning will remain intact after about 1,000 years.

The structure of repeated symbols, however, may withstand the passing of time. Many of the sacred number systems have maintained their significance through the centuries. The numbers nine and thirteen often occur in curing ceremonies and are associated with nights and days, and with the underworld and the skies respectively. The mountains around Chamula where the earthlord Anhel is thought to reside and guard over the animal companions to people's souls, is cognitively divided into thirteen layers associated with different deities. These numbers as well as the sacred number combinations of the eighteen calendar months of twenty days with the five extra unlucky days, and the number fifty-two of the fifty-two year cycle, are all found in the repetition of weaving motifs.

The numerical arrangement in a saint's huipil from Magdalenas accords the ancient system of sacred numbers. The rhomboid design is repeated nine times vertically on the front and back of the huipil. There are in total fifty-two toads reproduced in a ceremonial huipil and the earthlord is found reproduced nine times in each sleeve. Parallels are found in curing ceremonies where nine, thirteen, twenty or fifty-two flowers are used to signify different associations.

An iconographic representation taken out of context, for *example* where motifs have been adopted or learnt by outside communities, may lose its original meaning. Cross-referencing the interpretation of symbols is therefore dangerous and even where motifs are inherited, meanings may become redundant or evolve through time. Tenejapa had no weaving tradition until relatively recently, when they asked some weavers from Chenalho and San Andres to teach them how to weave, as they were under Holy edict to produce a new huipil for their saint. However the design from Chenalho termed spiny, took on a stylized form in Tenejapa and was renamed dog's paw simply because of the resemblance. Its former association with a cosmic symbol was lost. In a historical perspective the same thing may happen. The toad symbol has lost some of its associated meaning since Classic Maya times. The toad was not only the symbol for one of the twenty day

names but was also associated with the ascension of a new ruler, as in the depiction of Bird-Jaguar taking the throne in Yaxchilan.

This specific meaning has now been lost, but the association of the toad with fertility and growth is still recognized. The toad emerges for mating at the beginning of the rainy season and its croaking heralds the rain at the end of the dryest months. In the context of kinship relations, the toad takes the role of younger brother alongside his elder brother the saint, usually depicted as a larger more elaborate toad motif with ears. It is the little brother toad who sings in the rain and jumps in the cornfield, to show his brother in heaven the power and value of rainmaking. This brotherly relationship features predominantly in Tzotzil myth and is important cognitively and practically in their society.

The message inherent in a woman's huipil is manifested at one level as a plea for rain. In a myth from Magdalenas the scorpion bites the penis of the rain god Anhel and causes the lightning which changes the white cotton into the clouds which bring rain. The daughters of the earthlord fluff the cotton for spinning and weaving inside the caverns of the underworld and the toad guards the cave entrance. This is why the very whiteness of a woman's huipil is thought to attract the rain.

Animate symbols often derive meaning from mythological contexts. The same symbol may be used to express different ideas according to its position and relationship with other symbols in the woven matrix, where different aspects of the cosmological system are spatially divided. The serpent form is one of the most commonly repeated motifs in Tzotzil huipils and has an obvious association with Quetzalcoatl, or Kulkulchon as he is known by his Tzotzil name. He is sometimes represented as he is most characteristically depicted in Middle American iconography as a plumed serpent. He is representative of fertility and growth and also traditionally a benefactor of intellectual and cultural pursuits. In weaving, his association with fertility is displayed where the pattern named "path of the snake" is combined with seed and flower symbols to form one single design meaning sprouting corn.

A woman's huipil is often described as field of flowers at the centre of which the woman resides. Metaphors of flowers, which may derive from Aztec influence, are evident in verbal expressions from Zinacantan, where people are said to be "in the flower of life", or to be "at the flower of the house" where we might say "at the heart of things". In certain myths, the earthlord's daughter portrayed as a snake is said to be able to transform herself into flowers. The metaphor is extended to the domain of human fertility, where the pattern named "hikol" or "squiggly" is elaborated to symbolize veins of blood or vagina, by combining this motif with the symbol for path of the snake. The snake's path in the earthly domain is thought to be

mirrored in the heavens; the symbol for a seed closely resembles that for a star and the serpent's movement is also a metaphor for the path of Venus across the sky. In Zinaoantan serpent designs are never used to decorate burial clothes, because it is believed that the motif will come to life.

A distraction from the true theme of a motif may occur where an informant gives an explanation of a motif which describes what is happening, without identifying it. In San Andres a certain repeated pattern is termed *Hoypin* which literally means that which "revolves" or "turns round".

The revolution being referred to is that of the sun or Venus. Similarly, contradictory associations may occur because of the association of one element with another in nature. It is ironical in San Andres that the pattern which has the same sitting-birds is similar to that for a cornfield. In San Bartolomé de los Llanos birds are always depicted above the cornfield because of the threat they represent to the crop. The association thus becomes merged so that ultimately the symbol for birds lacks the infix that would indicate the presence of planted seed.

Other names which may be given to a motif may refer firstly to the position of the design on the garment or secondly to the weaving technique used to produce the image. Thus the name for a toad motif can also be "support" referring to the position, or "seven weave" because there are seven warps between the first two points of weft inlay.

These number counts are one of the ways in which the method of reproducing designs is remembered. Samplers are also inherited through generations and patterns are relearnt from wornout huipils. A young girl will normally produce a number of practice samplers before she is ready to weave her first huipil. A woman will never weave the same pattern twice, but rather sees the learning of new motifs as markers of the stages in her life, which parallel the path of development which a man follows in the ceremonial arena, where he absorbs ritual knowledge as he is promoted in the cargo system. The depiction of motifs in what is essentially a geometric medium affects the form of the motif. However it is possibly true that the medium is attractive precisely because it requires the weaver to memorize mathematical formulae and number sequences, which is very apt in a culture that has throughout the *centuries* revered the magical quality of numerical relationships.

The Tedlocks, in their article on the analysis of Guatemalan Quiche textiles (1985), show the dialectical relationship that exists between language and technology, in terms of the similarity of cognitive process found in both activities. They seek to prove that the most simplistic representation in art from the earliest times in prehistory, is never purely iconographic but always a symbolic message, operating in the same way as a writing system. As with

speech where utterances can only have meaning because of context and common understanding, so it is with technology. The Tedlocks attempt to show that an intertextuality exists among cultural activities, such as oral tradition, divination, weaving, housebuilding and horticulture. In ritual speech, the Quiche use rhythmic stress and syncopation, which operates according to a set of rules similar to a poetic metre. This is shown to be mirrored in weaving techniques, where there is a rhythm to the appearance and disappearance of coloured weft patterns. The Tzotil also use chants and rhythms when coordinating activities such as the counting of threads, although a detailed analysis of this practice in the woven medium has not been carried out.

This approach, however, does help to revealw here metaphorical parallels exist, in the way different activities are conceived. Thus the terms for mapping out a milpa are similar to those for setting up a loom; each is its own square universe. On a huipil the brocaded cross, which is exhibited when the huipil is laid out as a flat piece of cloth, marks out the sacred area at the centre of which the hole is cut for the woman's head. A loom is attached to a weaver by a belt which passes around her back. The top end is fastened to a tree, traditionally a ceiba, which was thought to hold up the heavens and thus symbolically brings the woman into the sacred domain.

In the ritual context, different modes of expression, including impersonation of mythological and historical characters, dancing, the repetition of chants, sometimes with musical accompaniment and the weaving of ceremonial clothing, are combined to express the common beliefs and experience of the community. The audience or participators have a background of traditional knowledge with which they interpret ceremonial events. The beliefs manifested in a huipil are often explicitly enacted in ritual. In Chamula, the primary of maleness is expressed by the positioning of male saints in the eastern and northern parts of the church, associated with power and the rising sun, whereas females are found in the westerly or southern areas. When processions take place at the climax of major fiestas, the male saints trail the path of the sun, being carried around the atrium in an anti-clockwise direction. The female saints, however, start off in a clockwise direction, until they meet the male saints at the halfway point, where they bow to their male superiors and turn to follow them, as the moon follows the sun.

Ritual is also used to express the contradictions and conflicts which have threatened traditional culture throughout history. In a culture which has inherited the remnants of so many ancient beliefs and customs it is hard to remember that detailed historical memory only extends back a few generations. The huipil has helped to conserve a core of ancient belief and mean-

ing. In sixteenth century Guatemala, a Spanish royal warrant decreed that no native should be seen wearing a brocaded huipil, which may reveal that the conquistadors saw the woven medium as as much of a threat to their domination as ancient written texts. The mythological beings depicted in weaving are often elaborated in the ritual context to take on new roles, which fit their traditional characters. The max or monkey is one such example. In mythology the monkey is thought to have existed since the second creation, when the gods created man out of wood. When these beings failed to live up to the expectations of their creators they were transformed into monkeys. Monkeys, which therefore represent deviance from normal human behaviour, have taken on associative roles in ritual and have come to represent different groups which have threatened the community in history. The characters that dress as max in Carnival are Jew impersonators, as well as imitating the French grenadiers who occupied Chamula in 1868. They wear a conical hat *made* of monkey fur and a pair of breeches and a tail coat. These characters imitate wild monkeys by swishing their tails and making animal noises.

Death has both positive and *negative* connotations: as the destiny of the ancestors it represents the divine place from which the ancient knowledge is derived which ensures the community's future. In huipils from Magdalenas, a pattern which combines motifs for cultures and bats is also a death symbol. A distortion of the Bible story relates how, when Noah sent the dove to look for dry land and the end of the flood, the starving bird eats the corpses of the dead in order to survive and become a vulture. The vulture represents easy gain and sin, and is a black magic symbol. Tzotzil in fact means "place of the bat", so this associated symbol has positive connotations. The bat was a pre-conquest god of the Zinacantecos and the conquistadors recorded that they destroyed a stone bat found in this community. In Magdalenas the bat is also a symbol of the earthlord and lives in the sacred mountain taking care of the animal spirit companions of the people. Symbolically the monkey is represented by a reversal of the motif which signifies death.

To conclude, it would appear that although themes, thought structures and even precise representation of iconography may persist through time, this does not provide sufficient evidence to surmise that the message either given or received has remained constant. It would be unnecessary in this paper to summarize all the obvious parallels that exist between types of representations from the ancient and modern context.

To quote George Kubler once more (1969), let it suffice to say: "that motifs may persist with changes of meaning, themes persist with changes of form: but cultural symbols carry the aspirations of whole civilizations."

The particular relevance of the brocaded motif lies in the fact that the indigenous people themselves would say that weaving displays the highest aesthetic sentiments of the community. It is the pure expression of ethics and sentiments which, as they would say, "lie at the very heart of the matter."

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