

Thoughts on future of weaving in Guatemala... by Sue LaRue

These are my wonderings about the future of back-strap weaving of huipiles by Guatemalan Maya women as more women are able to continue their education beyond elementary school. I met several women who are involved or know a lot about projects by NGOs to support and encourage young Maya girls to remain in school as long as possible. These projects provide monetary support and counseling for families and the girls tied to their remaining in school. The families (especially the fathers) must agree to keeping the daughters in school - otherwise the young girls drop out and become helpers for their families, taking care of younger siblings, cooking, cleaning etc. while the older children and parents work outside the home. These families are usually desperately poor and need the financial support the NGOs provide, as the daughter remains in school for her expenses. One is called Starfish, One by One which provides after school counseling and support for May girls who wish to continue on in school. The woman I met who is involved with this commented:

"...the hope for the Starfish girls that for their future they don't have to rely for a living on weaving but that it can become a hobby, passed down from their moms, so it won't die. It is the struggle I have trying to decide about getting funding for the weaving benches for the families of the girls. Since the purpose of the bench is to get the elder women off their knees while weaving, the bodies of the weaving mothers would certainly be appreciative but the mission of Starfish supports the kids' education."

We also learned about Wings, which provides services like Planned Parenthood to help women limit the size of their families.

Another aspect of education is the drop in the birth rate, since in the generations prior to this one families of 6 or 8 or 10 or even more were the norm. (There is no social security for these self-employed Mayan families who are engaged primarily in agriculture at a subsistence level, and with a high infant mortality in past generations, many children were needed to help on the land and also to provide some measure of security for elderly parents since few survived to adulthood.) As a result of this and other factors of poverty, the incidence of malnutrition and stunted growth is high among the Maya.

When young women finishes high school, study after study shows a decline in the birth rate, leading to better nutrition. In country after country around the world, the link between higher educations levels for women is linked with fewer children, a lower infant mortality rate, an increased standard of living and thus higher nutrition levels for the population, and higher intellectual levels for children, raising the entire standard of living for a country. But it comes at a price: much less time for the traditional activities of weaving and creation of the beautiful textiles of Guatemala. There are quite a few women's cooperatives which hand-dye and weave beautiful fabrics for international trade. These cooperatives are encouraging the traditional crafts. But there is a strong trend away from the hand woven huipiles to be seen in the villages we visited.

This year I noticed many of the younger Maya women, who live in the villages surrounding Lake Atitlan, were wearing a purchased blouse for the village Holy Week processions which is similar to a huipil but definitely not handmade. These blouses were lovely - a colorful lightweight poly with heavy machine embroidery around the neck and shoulders; the skirt and belt of machine-loomed ikat yardage were color coordinated with the blouse. The sets come in orange, green, purple, blue, red etc. These costumes cost so much less in time and effort for the wearer that they must be worth the cost of purchase....but what happens to the traditional village costume? The same type of purchased blouse is being worn in many villages, instead of each village having a unique huipil design.

Maya women who work in shops, offices, schools, banks, colleges etc. already dress for work just like other women all over the world - skirts, blouses, slacks, jeans etc - and the traditional costumes are worn for village celebrations only.

Guatemala is a 3rd world country with great people and great potential. Education for all, especially women, is vital to its becoming a more healthy, safe and wealthy country.

Vivian Harvey who guided the trip I took to Guatemala says:

"I (sitting in my comfortable bed with my dog who is better fed and cared for than many children in Guatemala, in my three-floor condo with lots of food in the refrigerator) surely have no answer for this. My home is full of Guatemalan textiles, and I appreciate the work, the talent, the intelligence, and the creativity which goes into them...but at a terrible cost to Guatemalan families. I am told that the creation of the textiles will become an art form rather than a necessity, but surely much will be lost in this change. But much more will be gained for families. "

Maybe, as in Japan, the world and Guatemala will acknowledge at least some of these women as master craftswomen and national treasures thus not having the marvels they produce lost in the future.