

IRIS Report Summer 2022

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My research explores the dichotomy between tradition and modernity within indigenous textiles these include the oppositions of costume and fashion, artifacts and commodities, handmade and machine. In Guatemala handwoven textiles inform Maya identities, convey historical and cosmological meaning, and act as a commodity in the tourist trade. With the support from the IRIS Graduate Summer Fieldwork Award, I was able to travel to Guatemala to begin my dissertation research, primarily using methods from Participatory Action Research (PAR). This methodology aims towards creating more horizontal relationship between the researcher and the communities in which they are working. PAR requires trust and time to form strong relationships. While I originally received funding to conduct fieldwork in the summer of 2021, IRIS allowed me to defer the use of the awards until the following year when it became safer to travel due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Between June and July 2022, I fostered relationship with multiple grassroots organizations in Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala, which has a population just over 40,000 with 97 percent identifying as Maya. The three following vignettes demonstrate points of departure for the research and relationships I will continue to foster.

The cooperative called Cojolya (pronounced Co-hol-ya) is one of the older cooperatives in the Santiago. They began organizing in 1983, during a difficult time, as community members were isolating to avoid violence caused by the ongoing genocidal civil war. One of Cojolya's requirements for beginning any relationships with outsiders, either as volunteers or potential research partners is for the outsider to take a backstrap weaving class—as a weaver

myself, I was thrilled. This was an invaluable experience for understanding local conceptualizations of weaving. Like other indigenous groups, an object is not believed to be an inert object, but a living being. For instance, in the warping process two crosses are created to form the heart of the textile.¹ While only one cross is required for the practical technique of weaving, two form the heart. Giving an object a heart provides it with life, and perhaps an agency of its own. This framework presents an alternative argument, shifting the meaning of textiles from a focus on symbols in the design to finding meaning that is embodied in its creation. In my continued exploration of the deep meaning of textiles beyond the surface-level semiotic analysis, practice informs theory.

Another, more radical weaving cooperative I got to know was Trece Batz' (Thirteen Threads). They are comprised of twenty families from around Santiago and formed in 1991. Trece Batz' is the only organization that is not primarily focused on women, but also has a workshop dedicated to the *jaspe* or *ikat*² and floor loom work that men do. Diego Petzey Quiejú, the son of the founders and now a leader within the organization, informed me that he has met educated young men who have been unable to find work in their field without migrating elsewhere. They come to Diego seeking employment with the cooperative because artisan crafts have been a relatively stable industry in Santiago. My conversations with Diego sparked a curiosity about the gendered dynamics of textile production. Scholarship around textiles has mainly centered on women, possibly because the nonprofits and grassroots

¹ Warping is the process of winding the threads to form one half of the woven textile. These are the threads that are vertical to the position of the weaver. Putting the threads in order allows the weaver to divide the threads in half so that when woven, they form the common under-over structure known as plain weave or tabby. The cross is the point where this division is marked.

² Ikat is more commonly known for English speakers, though the word comes from Indonesia. It is a process of resist dye, in which threads are tied tightly before being dyed to create designs on the fabric.

cooperatives mainly focus on women's issues. Trece Batz' offers a unique perspective to the meaning of textiles by including men's voices in the history of Mayan textiles. This is especially significant for Santiago because it is the one of the few places where men continue to wear their "traditional dress" or handwoven clothing.

Santiago is also the center for beadwork in Guatemala. Beaded souvenirs from jewelry to keychains to Christmas ornaments are sold in tourist shops all across the country, and each item was likely made in Santiago. A group of beaders I worked with are part of ANADESA Association's Proactive Women Program. Their director expressed some of the challenging of contributing to a market for outsiders and was interested in connecting with an American designer to help innovate their product designs. Following this question, I proposed to do a workshop with some of the beaders to provide them with some of the tools design students in the United States might have. During a workshop on color theory, I noticed most of the women made designs using colors in the same hue, rather than choosing complimentary or contrasting colors. This was also true for their outfits. Color within *traje* in other Maya communities is often associated with a particular town. This is not the case for Santiago, color is not a defining characteristic to announce their association with their home, but rather an individual choice. However, keeping the hue consistent within an outfit seemed to be important. This detail informs how fashion is viewed within Santiago. By thinking about handmade clothing not as costume or traditional dress, the concept of fashion helps break the tradition/modernity divide.

Finally, I worked with university students who participate in Ruk'ux, a local scholarship and academic support program. Four of these students took turns teaching me Tz'utujil. Often after my class my teacher, I'd invite them to a cup of tea and we'd talk about their lives, their relationship to textiles, and other ways for me to get involved in the

community. When I return in summer 2023 to continue my fieldwork, I am hoping to hire them as research assistants not only to work on interviews and transcription in Tz'utujil but also to inform the research overall, in line with PAR methodology.