Changes in el Traje Típico of the Chicas of San Lucas Tolimán, Guatemala

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Abstract

Traditional dress is a reflection of the Maya culture, more specifically to their Maya identity. But things are changing and so are their traje típicos. In the summer of 2008, I participated in the North Carolina State University Ethnographic Field School in Atitlán, Guatemala, where I examined the changes in traditional dress among the young ladies in San Lucas Tolimán, and if these changes were a reflection of their increasing sense of their sexuality. I collected my data using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The majority, almost all, of the female participants in my research, ages 11-33, wore el traje típico; yet they wore alternate forms of the traje típico. In this paper, I will examine the reasons for these changes/alterations made to the traje típico and focus as to the whys.

Introduction

It was six in the morning and I was already up, ready to begin the day. My host mother had woken me up so I could accompany her on her daily walks and then afterwards to el Mercado. As soon as I stepped foot out the door, I was greeted to a sunny morning and the family’s dogs were barking, hoping to get fed. Birds were chirping and the smell of wood burning from the nearby house filled the air. Tires striking the gravel pavement could easily be distinguished among the calm morning. As soon as we step food out the gate of the house we encounter some individuals who are already up. All greet each other as they pass, and we are not exception. As we make our way down the hill we pass a Molino de Maiz, and many Maya women are lined up to have their maiz milled. We also pass men who are heading up to El Cafetal to chop and gather some wood; each carrying their machetes in their encasing, the Baina, and their morrales where their meal for the day is stored. We encountered more individuals as we made our way all over town. And around 7 we made our way to el Mercado.

The Mercado was chiefly located in la Calle Principal, where many stalls and vendors had lined up against buildings to sell their goods. Some did not even have official stalls but sat around on the floors in any space and had on display what they were selling. People were there purchasing goods already, making their week long purchases till the next Mercado day, which was Friday. And as we made our way through the streets and crowd of people, I noticed that the vendors were mostly Maya, which is no big surprise because the 89% of the people in San Lucas are Indigenous. And as I made this observation I began to notice the many different colors of the traje típicos that were worn by the women of San Lucas. I noticed that they were all very different, and that they wore their skirts in different manners, yet there were two styles that were most repeated. I also noticed the many different styles of huipiles and blusas that were of different designs and materials. I asked my host mother if she could tell where each person was from just
by looking at the traje. She responded with a yes but that it did not necessarily mean that individual was
from that pueblo. I was confused as to this but yet my spark for the fashion of the Luqueño Maya woman
was lit.

San Lucas Tolimán, the official name of the pueblo that I lived in, is located in the highlands of Lake
Atitlán, and it has a backdrop of the Atitlán and Tolimán Volcanoes, not to mention it has an excellent
view of the lake; reason perhaps it is the location with the most Chalets in the lake. Apart for being home
to the most Chalets, it is also home to many Kaqchikel Indians.

The majority of the women still wear their traditional trajes, yet in altering versions; while the men
have donned their trajes all together many years ago. The Maya of San Lucas are known to wear other
pueblo's trajes besides that of their own. They all wear a variety of colors and wear their cortes in
different manners, as well as their huipiles and other “típico” blouses.

Traditional dress in Guatemala is very important to the Maya. It reflects their long surviving culture,
their artistry and craftsmanship; as well as their identities as Maya and Luqueños. “Traditional clothing
connects the Maya to their past and is also a major part of their present-day identity” (Vaughn 2007). Each
traditional traje reflects the individual’s taste and creativity.

Purpose of Research

Maya history has always intrigued me, since I was first read to by my mother a children's myth book
about one of the twin heroes from the Popul Vuh. Since then, I have tried to devour as much information
about the Maya as possible. Even my Senior Thesis was on the present-day Maya. Not to mention that I like
fashion so I thought it was quite fitting to do a research project on Maya fashion; more specifically on their
traditional dress. This was not my original topic but due to some complications with my other topic, and
possibly an even greater interest, I switched over to traditional dress. The first time I noticed the different
styles of the woman’s traje típico, was in San Lucas and it was here that my interest was intrigued and I
wanted to find out what these different styles were. The sole interest of this paper is the women’s traje
because as mentioned earlier men no longer wear el traje típico.

Being placed in San Lucas was perfect because there were many ways that I could go with my project
that had to do with the traje típico. San Lucas was ideal to examine the different styles of the traje típico
because the majority of the women wore the traje típico and were mostly part of the younger generation
who were involved in the changing process of the traje típico. San Lucas is home to 22,217 inhabitants,
where 51% are female and 48% are male. Of that population 57.3% are under the age of 20, while 3% is over
the age of 60. San Lucas is a friendly and very open community, which I think has a lot to do with why young
girls are changing the way they wear el traje típico as well making alterations to it. “Women’s costumes
today differ little from those of pre-Conquest times. Only a handful of Indian communities have adopted the
European gathered skirt or added sleeves to their guipils.” (Deuss 1981) In a lot of pueblos this is probably
ture but in San Lucas this is not the case. The traje típico of young ladies today probably do differ a great
deal. The contemporary traje típico of a Maya woman in Guatemala contains a güipil (blouse), corte (skirt),
faja (belt), and perraje (shawl) [see Figure 1]. In particular, the most interesting of styles belongs to the
young ladies due to the immense difference of styles between them and older generation women who wear
the traje típico. Though the traje típico has deep and important cultural meanings, there are some factors that contribute to young ladies wearing western-style clothing; sometimes along with their traje típico.

Some of the changes that are being made to the traje típico include combining el corte with a regular western-style top. Some of these tops are very revealing and tight fitting. A woman is able to show more of her figure this way, as well still combine the Maya traditional dress with that of western-style dressing. The corte itself is being altered in ways that resemble a western-style skirt; for example, with slits high up on the sides, tight, or cut up high in the front to show some skin, or the assets that they have. And now-a-days, young ladies are wearing high heels with their traje típicos instead of sandals that are seen worn by older generation ladies; so even the footwear has evolved.

Furthermore, as it is with most cultures, the way an individual dresses says a lot about the culture they live in and shows the ties they have to it. In Guatemala, the traditional traje reflects this connection, thus why each pueblo has their own colors and designs; yet the manner the contents and styles are consistent. But in San Lucas it seems the younger generation of young ladies are straying away from the styles that have been worn by their mother and their ancestors; and making their own. I was intrigued as to know the reasons for this and so set about to find out. Therefore, the sole purpose of my project is to find out the reasons why the traje típico is changing among young ladies; and what these factors have to do with their identity.

Before fully getting on board with my actual research I had come up with a few hypotheses as to why young ladies’ trajes were changing. One included that it had to with them wanting to show more of their figure, since with the traditional traje they tend to hide this. Another idea I had was that it had to do more with fashion, and that they wanted to fit into “la moda” yet not fully discard their traditional dress. Another hypothesis I came up with was that young girls are finding a way to somehow adopt the styles of western-style clothing, while still using material típico. Fajas are still being worn by everyone who wears the corte or the falda; however la perraje is no longer used by the young ladies, only older generation women are seen wearing them.

Background Data

For my background data I used two sources that were provided by North Carolina State University, through the Summer Ethnographic Field School Study program’s official website and by the directors, Tim Wallace and Carla Pezzia. In the summer of 2006, a student by the name of Angelica Lopez, who also participated in the same Ethnographic Field School Program in Lake Atitlán, conducted a research project on “The Identity and Change in Traditional Dress in Guatemala.” Her main focus was Santiago Atitlán. There were many theories, ideas and factors that applied to my own research project and so her paper was the main source of background data that directly pertains to what I myself am trying to do.

Another important source that was important to my research was “Indian Costumes from Guatemala” by Krystyna Deuss. This book helped me understand the historical importance and information about the traditional dress of the Maya in general, though not specifically by pueblo. It made me understand how exactly the trajes were made, what a lot of the designs meant or symbolized.

Research Methods
In conducting my research observation, unstructured and structured interviews, a debate and pile sorts were used to gather information. Through my observations I was able to see the different styles of dress that the women wore. I placed myself in four different focal points around town, and jotted down everything I noticed about a particular individual(s). For instance, the type of típico skirt or blouse she wore, her age, etc. These observations helped in opening my eyes to the different styles and the difference these styles are among the older and younger females in San Lucas. If anything it trained me to automatically notice the differences between skirts, huipiles, the designs, the colors, etc.

The unstructured and structured interviews were all conducted at the beginning through the help of my host mother. She would help me get interviews with friends who wear el traje típico or who she knew wore it, and then I would get interviews with their friends or relatives. I interviewed 15 females, all ranging from age of 14-33. Through my interviews I was able to get a personal insight as to what these individuals thought were the reasons as to why young girls were changing the traje típico and exactly how they were changing them. Some of the interviews were set up between me and the individual while others just happened to come up on the spot.

Through the help of a family’s friend’s daughter, I was able to set up a debate between five girls, ages 14-17. Different topics were discussed and all pertained to the changing of the traje típico. Sexuality, identity, economics, coquetry were some of the themes discussed. The other method used was pile sorts, in which I had 15 female participants placed pictures of different women dressed in different variations of the traje típico into three categories. These three categories included: Traje Típico, Típico/Ladino, and Non-Típico. From the pile sorts I learned what individuals considered traje típico.

Due to the time constraint I believe that more information could have been collected and a more in depth research could have been conducted. Not to mention that not enough confidence was built between me and participants to fully discuss in greater details about some of the issues pertaining to the reasons of change in dress among the young girls. Because of the time constraint I was forced to focus my project on one issue rather than weave together a thorough investigation as to the many factors that I know are responsible for the changes, instead of focusing on what the two predominant factors: sexuality and identity.

Data

Cold Hard Facts

The traditional dress among young ladies has altered a lot in the past years in San Lucas Tolimán. El corte is still being used, though how it is worn has changed. Now a new term has been made to describe the skirts that are made out of materiales típico and fashioned to resemble a western-style skirt, this term is falda. A falda is still made of the same material as a corte but is usually fashioned to fit the individual more tightly. Often these faldas contain slits that go up the thigh, depending on the individual’s taste, or fashioned another way. It is important to note that the majority of the females in San Lucas buy the material and fashion the skirts themselves, to their liking of course, thus reflecting her taste. Others though it was no longer a traje típico, despite it being made from the same material. Those who agreed with this also agreed that the reason for this was because the style had altered dramatically and been led astray from
the traje típico that has been used by their ancestors. The corte has always been worn as a wrap-around skirt in which the woman steps into, and then ties it around with a faja; or worn as a scrunched up skirt that is held together by the faja. Both these styles require different layers of the material; while the falda only requires one.

On the other hand, individuals do still make their own huipiles, however how often they make them is their choice and not too probable. Also, the huipil is being used less by the younger girls who are opting to wear western tops. I often would see young girls wearing a traditional corte but with a Gap tee-shirt or the like. That is the least to say that they have all donned the huipil and opted for these tops instead. It was not also uncommon to see young girl wearing a falda with a huipil. The huipil is not the only blouse that is used by the woman. There are also blouses that are especially made to go with the corte that are not so thick and are used for hot days. They are made of a thin cloth, and embroidered with different designs all over or just on the top and kept simple. These blouses still resemble the huipil, in that it is large, not form-fitting at all and have round necklines. They are transparent and worn with a loose tank top underneath.

From the interviews, debate and questionnaires answered, 31 out of 35 who participated answered that they still wore a corte and a falda. 15 answered in total who wear la falda tipica and a huipil; while 28 answered wear the corte and a regular western-style top. Twenty-seven also wear la falda tipica and western-style top. I found out that the majority of the younger generation, about 86%, considered wearing a falda and a huipil still traditional. As one girl explains:

“Usando la falda y el huipil todavía es traje típico. La falda es hecha de la misma material que el corte, solo que no esta al estilo corte sino diferente. Y como el huipil es típico, igual que la faja que también todavía usamos. Es por esas razones que es traje típico.”

On the other hand the thirty-three year old woman who I interviewed, as well as other individuals didn’t consider it traditional. In fact, by speaking to older generation woman, those who are ages 35 and up, did not consider wearing a falda, no matter if paired up with a huipil or a western-style top, part of the traje típico. They explain that the falda has strayed away from what is the traditional corte and that it is just a falda like any other worn by the Ladinas and other patojas.

From my data I was able to gather information regarding the reasons for the changes of the traje típico. Thirty-one out of the 35 participants responded as the desire to show more of the body figure to be one of the reasons behind the changes. Twenty-five thought it also had to do with the young ladies wanting to be more coquetas. Twenty-four thought it had to do with fashion and 14 thought it had to do with economic reasons.

**Sexuality as a factor**

The fact that most of the participants agreed that the desire to show the body is one of the main reasons for the change in dress is incredible. From my debate I was able to explore the topic of sexuality even further. Most of my informants would hint that there was a growing sense of sexuality among the youngsters now-a-days, and because of this they wear wearing revealing clothes. As one 22 year-old put it:
“Las patojas de hoy son mas atrevidas. Solo están pensando en los muchachos y de lo que se van a poner ese día. Ellas quieren mostrar sus figuras, porque al usar el corte y huipil, ellas esconden sus figuras. Si Ud. mira a una muchacha que regularmente usa el corte y huipil usando una falda, o hasta veces pantalones, se sorprende a mirar que tiene un bonito cuerpo. Y claro, ellas lo saben y entonces lo quieren demostrar.”

Another 17 year old girl explained it as such:

“Conozco a muchachas que viven aqui [en San Lucas] que se visten con falda tipicas que son muy apretadas. Ellas les gusta que los muchachos las miren, y es por eso que siempre se mantienen en el parque caminando para arriba y para abajo, tratando de agarrarse a uno. El corte es muy dificil para ponerse, imagine se tratando de quitarselo.”

These were just some of the few responses I would get from my interviewees, though when I asked for them to go into further details, they would giggle and say no more.

There was this one instance where I was able to observe a rather awkward yet interesting spectacle concerning the traje típico and ...

[Editor’s Note: Ms. Del Valle only completed her paper to this point. I thought that there was sufficient useful data in it to include this partial paper in this compilation. I hope Ms. Del Valle completes the paper some day.]