

My Mayan Teachers: Weaving (through) time



Guatemalan *huipiles*, the traditional blouses of Mayan women, have surrounded me since I moved to Toronto in the mid-1970s, hanging in my living room, my bedroom, my closet, and sometimes on my body. Their exquisite geometric designs, the strong primarily colours, the textures—all ground me, comfort me, and stimulate my imagination as a visual backdrop for my days. I think I often choose to hang textiles as visual arts rather than paintings, because the handiwork, the presence of hands, is so obvious, so tactile. But what do I know about the actual hands behind these weavings?

I only have to tap my memory and return to the time 50 years ago when I sat in the backyard patio of Rafaela, a Mayan woman who taught me how to weave with a backstrap loom tied to a tree. I look at the wall hanging I created during those two weeks and wonder how I did it, because the warp is not like a traditional loom, but has three layers of threads, resulting in a solid colour back. It is still a mystery to me as I was never able to set up the loom again on my own back in Canada. Though never able to recreate the unique patterns of Rafaela's village, I still wear one of her exquisite and finely woven *huipiles*. Reminding me of a master weaver, reminding me of a time that taught me a lot about time.



While wearing one of Rafaela's huipiles, I find similar patterns in the weaving I made in her patio.

What took me to Guatemala in 1974? Following [a dramatic almost-wedding in Ottawa](#), I found myself in Antigua, Guatemala with my almost-husband, Bob. He had been sent by the Canadian Agency for International Development (CIDA) for language training to prepare for his assignment to represent Canada at the Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) in Santiago, Chile. The charming colonial city of Antigua was the home of the Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín, famed not only for its promotion of Indigenous languages, but also for its school that offered one-on-one classes in Spanish conversation. One day I noticed a flyer on the school's notice board advertising weaving lessons in a nearby community. So, after six weeks of intensively studying Spanish, I decided to take advantage of the classes offered in the municipality of San Antonio Aguas Calientes.

Ironically, the town was one of five villages I had studied for my Master's thesis six years earlier. I am embarrassed to admit that I had never set foot in Guatemala while writing about it, and that my most intimate connection was through 710 IBM cards, all based on primary research carried out by my advisor in the early 1960s. He offered me the opportunity to do a secondary analysis of questions related to the time consciousness (experiences with clocks and calendars) and future time orientation of the Indigenous and Ladino populations of five different sized towns in Guatemala. I spent the summer of 1968 feeding those punch cards through an enormous computer

(the size of a SUV) to analyze what factors had influenced their time consciousness. The larger study focused on what I now understand as colonial notions of “modernization” and a linear notion of time always moving upward toward “progress.” Not surprisingly, exposure to western dominant media and education, urbanization and travel, had increased the modern (clock-based) time consciousness and future time orientation of many in the sample population of Indigenous peasants.

In the acknowledgement section of my 1968 thesis, I note that the origins of my interest in conceptions of time came from “living with French students, [Negro ghetto dwellers](#), and [rural Appalachian](#) farmers.” Even then, I had started to question the assumptions underlying this study. In fact, I found myself so drawn to the more organic time of my rural past, my recent cross-cultural experiences, and my encounter with the Guatemalans as “data,” that, when completing my thesis, I removed my watch and stored it in a dresser drawer. My wrist was bare when, seven years later, I arrived in Guatemala for the first time.



On the bus to the Indigenous village of San Antonio Aguas Calientes, I was mesmerized by the Acetenango Volcano with its two peaks, one called *Las Tres Hermanas*, or Three Sisters, and linked to the *Volcan de Fuego*, the Volcano of Fire. Volcanos spoke to me of deep history, the formation of the Earth over centuries, reaching back even further to what is sometimes called “time immemorial.” As well as the deep history of the Mayans who inhabited this mountainous land for millenia before the Spaniards arrived to establish the first colonial outposts in the 1500s.

This dramatic landscape against a blue sky only fueled my excitement about finally going to a community that had influenced my thinking about time, a sense of time that was more in tune with the natural world. I had come to a source of inspiration. A perfect opportunity to learn a new skill while meeting the people beyond the punch holes on the IBM cards.

Guatemalan indigenous peoples are well known for their diverse and intricate backstrap weaving of *huipiles* or traditional blouses, each village with its own motifs, patterns, and colours that carry very particular ecological and cultural meaning. They are brilliant examples of diversity, of peoples and of land. The colours traditionally came from natural dyes, so deeply connected to insect and plant life. While backstrap weaving technique is built on centuries of tradition, there have been many influences on the forms it has taken in the past century: new synthetic threads, new chemically produced colours, and new designs reflecting contemporary life, such as airplanes and cell phones. Mayan weavers now produce for a burgeoning tourist market and teach backstrap weaving.



A diverse array of huipiles, each from a different village

I descended from the bus into the village plaza, with its requisite colonial style cathedral facing symbols of the cross alongside a statue of an Indigenous peasant woman holding a ceramic vessel for carrying water.



The cathedral and statue of a peasant woman in the central plaza of San Antonio Aguas Calientes

This juxtaposition was a common sight - the churches, museums and tourist shops filled with images of both European Catholic icons alongside Indigenous masks of jungle animals used in fiestas both celebrating AND mocking the moments of first contact, a syncretism that persists today.



Inside a store selling religious icons and masks in San Cristobal de las Casas

I looked for my weaving teacher Rafaela, who was to meet me in the plaza. A young boy hesitantly approached me, holding up a piece of paper that said “Deborah.” Since I was the only *gringa* on that bus, he guessed correctly that I must be the one his mother had sent him to fetch. This was the start of a special relationship with Edgardo, the 12-year-old who would accompany me through the two weeks of weaving lessons. In fact, he was my mentor at the loom more often than his mother, who was often preoccupied with other tasks.



Edgardo led me to the outskirts of town, along earthen paths, and close to the countryside where peasants grew their corn and vegetables in *milpas*. When we approached their adobe house, Rafaela came out to greet me and offered me a Coke (the “drink of choice” in Latin America since the early 1900s). Then she took me to the back patio, which was clearly the site of the action. Peasant patios usually include all sorts of animals who are both part of the family and ultimately destined for dinner. In this case, there were about ten chickens and roosters chasing and pecking each other, and the odd rabbit or two scampering from sunny spots to the shade of an avocado tree.

The human activity in the patio included drying beans and shucking corn for tortillas, as well as weaving, a skill as essential to Mayan identity as growing and cooking food. Rafaela brought out a collection of different sized sticks, a half belt of woven reeds and a basket of multi-coloured threads. She proceeded to set up the loom with not two but three purple threads to create the warp, tied the loom to the branch of a lemon tree, instructed me to sit down on a woven palm mat, and wrapped the belt around my lower back. Picking up a spindle and a beater or sword, she began to show me how the threads are introduced from the side to create the weft and then batted down to form a tight weave.

I've kept this beautiful wooden beater for almost five decades; it is a symbol of my brief weaving adventure but also my connection to the tropical rainforest and its hardwood trees, such as the walnut, essential for creating the force and rhythm made by strong hands pulling the threads downward in an effective loom.



I have photos from a return trip to Guatemala in 2015 which show the setup of the backstrap loom. This is similar to my experience, except that my loom was attached to a tree, instead of a wall hook in a tourist shop.

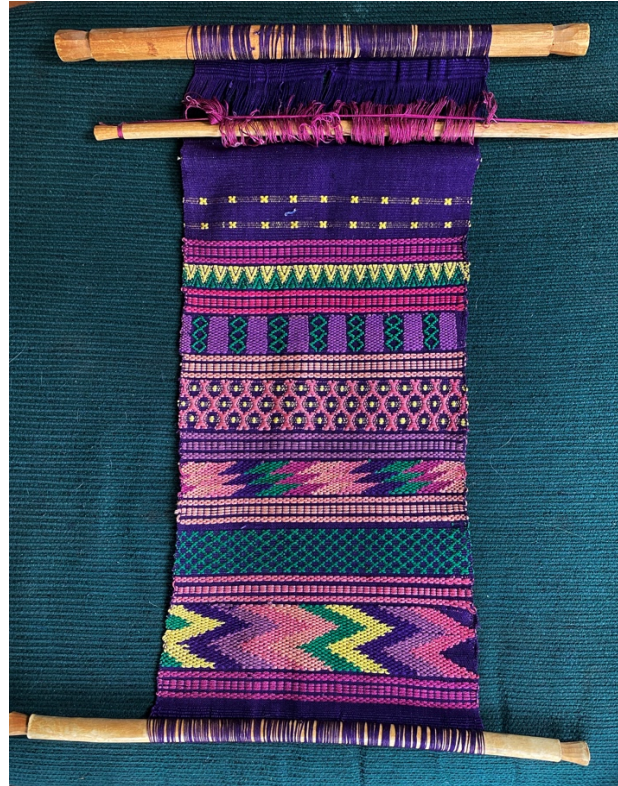


A Mayan woman demonstrating hip strap weaving in a Museum in San Antonio Aguas Calientes

San Antonio Aguas Calientes has its very own distinct designs, and over the next two weeks, Rafaela introduced me to a few of these intricate geometric patterns, seen in one of her finely woven *huipiles* (below, left). Slowly getting the feel for the spindle moving threads of my favourite colours in and out of the three-layered warp, I tried to imitate her design in my first woven wall hanging (below, right).



Huipile made by Rafaela



The weaving I made while studying with Rafaela

Although Rafaela was the master weaver and my official teacher, she rarely sat with me. As she was busy in the house with her other children, going to the market, or negotiating new classes, Edgardo became my more constant companion. Lunch was included with my weaving lesson, and I was as interested in learning about their foods as I was about their textiles. What I didn't expect was how the daily lunch break was announced. Rafaela would come out to the patio, point to the watch on her wrist, and proclaim, "*Son las doce – hora del almuerzo!*" (It's 12 o'clock – time for lunch!) Then, at the end of our class, she'd appear again with the watch, saying, "*Son las cuatro – hay que regresar a casa!*" (4 o'clock – time to go home!)

Wait a minute, I thought. Weren't you and your *comadres* and *copadres*, your fellow Mayans, the very people who inspired me to abandon my watch?? Here I am—sitting amidst the volcanoes, the mango trees, the chickens and rabbits, the creators of weavings that carry a 1500-year history – and my Indigenous teacher is dictated by clock time?! My romantic notions of living a different kind of organic time in harmony with nature dissolved before my eyes.

Then I slowly began to recognize the terms of our relationship: I was her client, her source of income, and her weaving classes with gringa tourists like me thrust her directly into the market economy! How could I be so naïve as to think that she could survive without paying attention to the time of labour that paid her bills, fed her family? Some aspects of her life surely still followed organic time: ways of knowing when the corn was ready to harvest, when the rabbits were about to be born, when the rains were

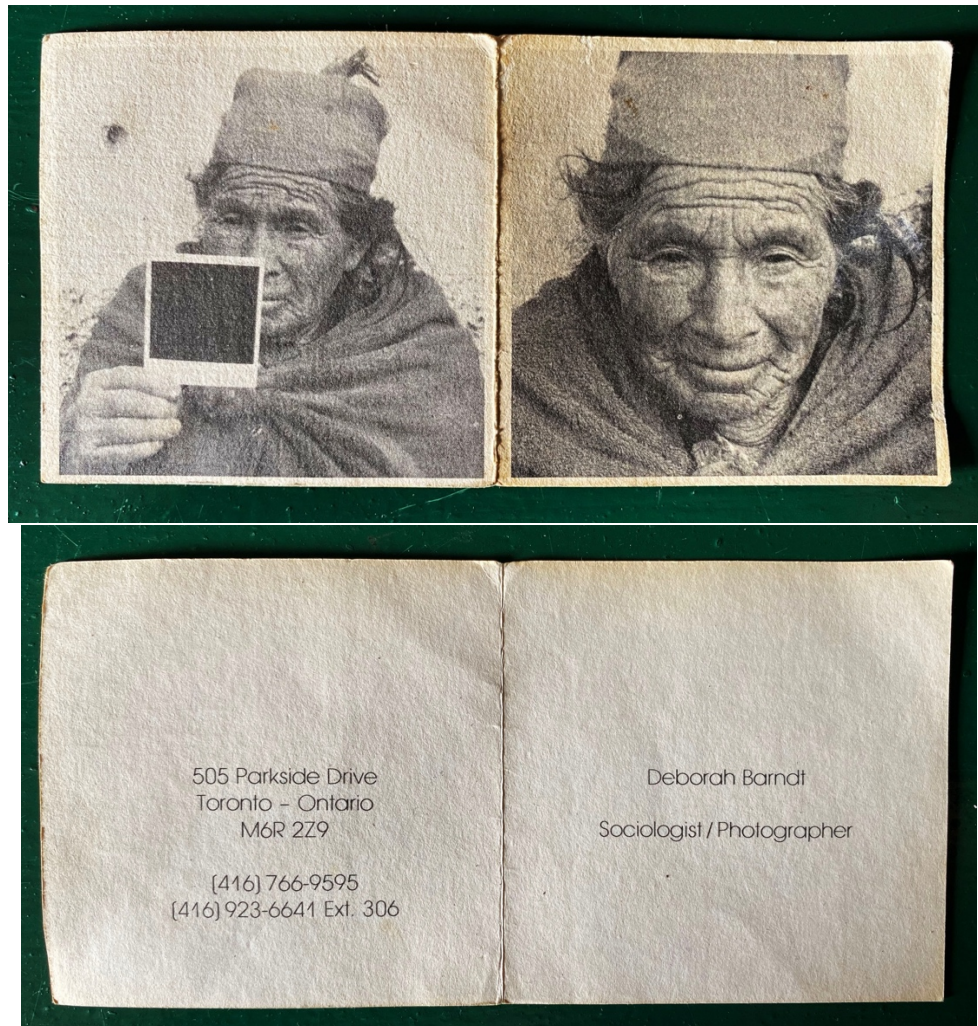
about to fall, when a volcano might erupt. But for the goods that she had to buy for her daily survival, she also needed money, and as the capitalist mantra goes, “time is money.”

At that point, I was forced to confront my own hypocrisy: even if I had refused to wear a watch, I was still glancing at clocks on the wall, still needing to get to class or to the airport on time, still planning future adventures by the calendar.

And so it was also with this class: my *two weeks* of weaving lessons were nearing an end on a certain *date*, and I was *scheduled* to return to Canada very soon. In the final days, I was finishing my own weaving, often with 12-year-old Edgardo, an accomplished weaver in his own right, spending his mornings and afternoons with me in the patio. He helped me when I got stuck, or sometimes had to unweave and reweave a row or two. When not assisting me or running an errand for his mother, he would play with the chickens and rabbits, endlessly entertaining and entertained.

The day before my final class, I asked Rafaela, if I could bring my camera to take some photographs to remember them by. I had deliberately left the camera behind throughout the two weeks of my weaving lessons, not wanting to perpetuate the image of the photo-snapping gringo tourist and seeing it as an obstacle to developing more casual and natural relationships. She gave me that permission, so I came the next day with my trusty Nikormat. I framed the memories I wanted to hold and carry home: the adobe house, the iron pots full of *pozole* soup hanging over a fire, the plants in *masetas* or recycled cans, dogs stretched out for siestas in the sun, volcanoes rising majestically above the village, the patio that had become our weaving workshop, and of course, Rafaela and her children.

Most often when travelling during those years, I carried a polaroid camera so I could take pictures of people I met and leave them something immediately, in an act of reciprocity. It would sometimes get me into trouble, as a group of 10 or more children would crowd together to be captured in my lens, but then all of them would want the photo memory for themselves. One of my favourites photos was of an older Guatemalan woman who expressed both disbelief and delight on seeing her face on the shiny square surface. I used these two images when I returned to Canada to make a business card for myself, identifying at that point as a “sociologist/photographer.”



As I had gotten to know Rafaela's oldest son Edgardo pretty well over the two weeks, I asked him if he would like to take some pictures with my camera. This was something I would continue to do over subsequent years, committed to giving others the opportunity to document their own lives, to show me how they see their world. The cameras of that era were heavier, and I had to demonstrate how to hold it still while clicking the shutter. I set the exposure, aperture and speed for him, and then he was off, excitedly moving around the patio, clicking away. When there were no more clicks to be made, he handed me the camera, and I removed the film cassette, adding it to the growing collection of exposed rolls in my camera bag. There was no instant feedback, like we can get with cellphones today.

Back in Canada, I took my rolls of film to my local camera shop for processing. When I returned a few days later to pick up the photos, I was curious to see what Edgardo had focused upon. Of a 24-shot roll of images of Rafaela's house and family, almost half were ones he had taken. At first glance, it seemed to me that they were identical, as he had taken many images of the same subjects – the patio animals: roosters, chickens, and rabbits. But as I examined them more closely, I could see that, no, they were not identical at all. Each photo portrayed the backyard animals interacting with each other in

different ways. Edgardo had captured his playmates with an eye to their unique characters, framing them to portray their relationships, their social life. This was a perspective that I never could have offered, because I did not have the same kind of intimate relationship with them. He had given me a glimpse into his world, and into a human-animal connection that was integral to his daily life. (Note: I still have to find these photos!)

I ordered a second set of those photos and mailed them to Rafaela in Guatemala, but never heard from them; hopefully they arrived.

I also brought along a super 8mm camera to [capture the weaving process on](#) my last day with Rafaela and Edgardo. Rediscovering that footage 50 years later, I realize that Edgardo also turned into filmmaker, capturing Rafaela teaching me the intricacies of hip strap weaving.

I had a chance to revisit Guatemala in 2015, when my partner John Murtaugh and I embarked on a four-month road trip from Toronto to Panama. We stayed in Antigua for a few days, and I insisted that we drive out to San Antonio Aguas Calientes so I could show him the site of my special weaving and photographing adventure.



Cemetery in San Antonio Aguas Calientes

We visited a cemetery where I could imagine that perhaps Rafaela, who was older than me, might be buried. Some 41 years later, the town reflected the multiple effects of “modernization.” The local weavers who now demonstrate and sell their craft in a two-story museum-like shop held a wooden beater in one hand and a cell phone in the other. Weaving is even more commodified, and the threads no longer made locally with natural plant dyes, but often with garish synthetic threads. The *huipiles* that carry in their patterns the stories, cosmologies, and ways of thinking of an ancient people are more bound than ever to a global market of imports and exports.



Basket of coloured threads, made synthetically

Like today's weavers, I now tell time on my cellphone rather than a watch. And while I am ambivalent about how much the tourist economy dominates the national market, I have to acknowledge my own role as a tourist who can buy an exquisitely woven huipil from a weaver, contributing to the local economy.

One woman shows me a huipil with the distinctive designs of San Antonio Aguas Calientes, very similar to the one woven by Rafaela that brightens my Toronto home.





I choose one with the same patterns of the village but in my favourite colours of purple and green, the colours of the women's suffragette movement a century ago, another historical connection in a different context.

Now, in 2021, I can reflect on those two moments – 1974 and 2015 – on who I was then, and then, and now. I can use the luxury of my retirement to revisit photos and weavings and volcanoes and meanings of time. It's humbling to see myself through this lens of deep time: years, centuries, millennia. To see the past, present and future in this one moment of reflection.

(Photo credits: Deborah Barndt and Jon Murtaugh)