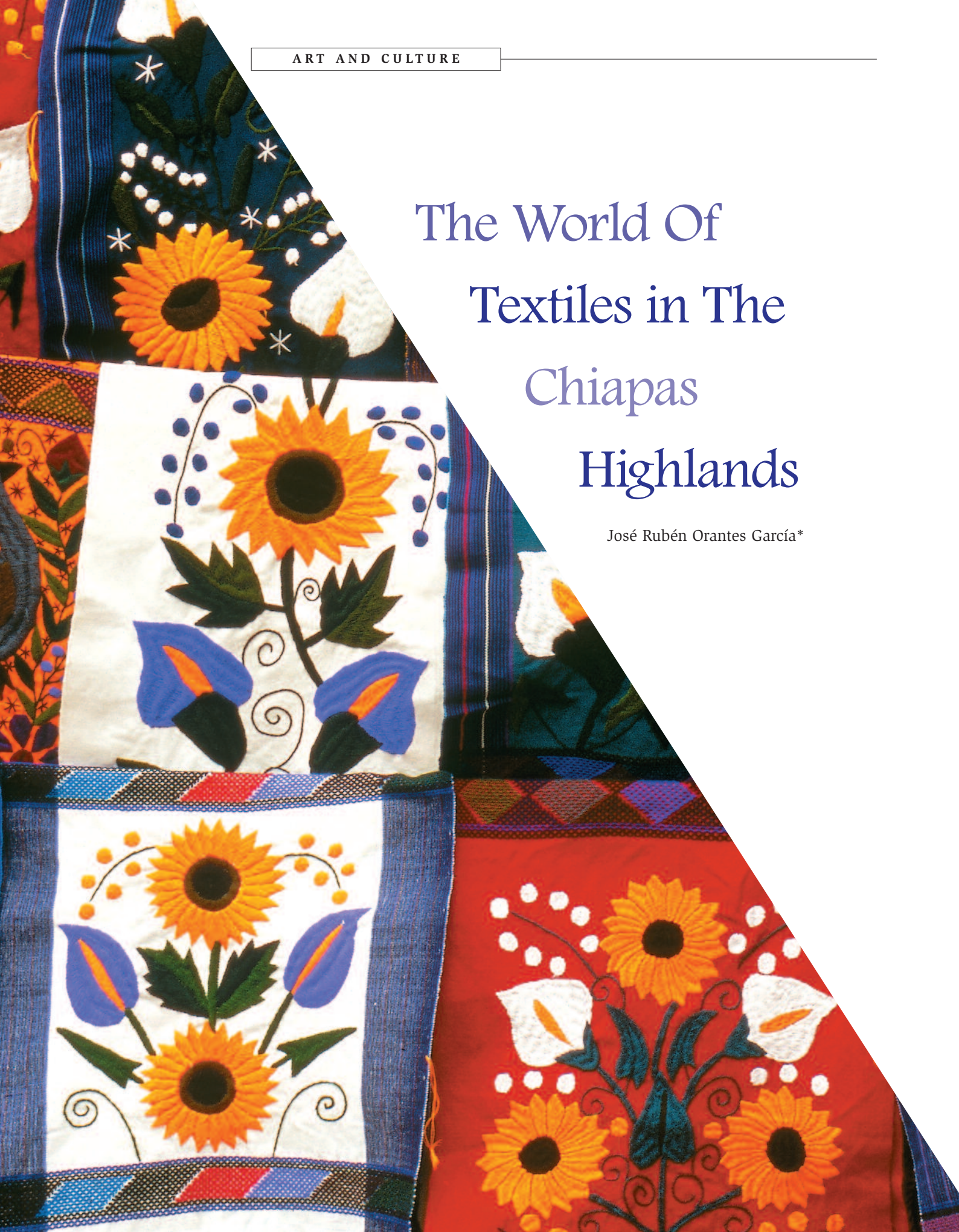


# The World Of Textiles in The Chiapas Highlands

José Rubén Orantes García\*







In the Chiapas Highlands, each town has its own textiles, distinguishing Tzotzil or Tzeltal Indians according to their marital status and the political or religious posts they hold. Clothing has been a symbol of social status that reflects the virtues that women and men have acquired in service to their communities. Each drawing, each color, each figure, each technique is selected not because they are beautiful or fashionable, but because the maker, seduced by the gods while asleep, feels the need to create a piece of clothing with the products of his/her land, which proudly expresses his/her world view.

---

FROM COSMOGONY TO  
PRODUCTION FOR THE MARKET

---

Craft production has its origins in the transmission of knowledge down through many generations. This happens orally and is reproduced by imitation. Undoubtedly, the great teacher of all artisans is the family into which they are born, where they grow up, and where listening and repeating is the most solid basis for their abilities.

In the Chiapas Highlands, textiles have been a significant element in the cosmogony and social organization of Tzotzil towns. Even their original raw material, wool, was considered a gift from the gods to men to protect them from the cold; a divine mandate banned killing or eating the flesh of the sheep from which it came. And in the

---

\* Researcher at the UNAM Institute for Anthropological Research Program of Multi-disciplinary Research on Mesoamerica and the Southeast (PROIMMSE). jrorantes@correo.unam.mx

Previous page: Photo: Elsie Montiel

same way, woolen clothing has served to identify the holders of certain posts within the community.

Making textiles has traditionally been a female activity done within the family, alternated with housework and agricultural labor. Technical weaving ability has allowed Tzotzil craftswomen to make complicated drawings with different colored thread and yarn which also play a very important part in their peoples' world view. The production of an object is insolubly linked to their ability and rhythm. Tzotzil women impose their own personal mark on textiles, from the preparation of the wool to the finished garment.

When the craft market grew in the 1970s, traditional textiles stopped being worn exclusively by Chiapas Highland Indians and became goods produced mainly for sale. At the same time that making clothing reproduced an identity and a cultural tradition, it became another way to satisfy economic needs.

In this process, craft production had to adapt to the demands of a market that gives the objects produced another type of value, assigning them a different use than that given by their producers. One example is the traditional waist loom, used by the Tzotzil indigenous women to create a piece of clothing, but used by purchasers as an ornament.

Craft production had to adapt to the demands  
of a market that gives  
the objects produced another type of value.



Elsie Montiel



Rubén Yáñez





This activity began, then, to depend on an external market made up mainly of Mexican and foreign tourists that pushed it forward and without which its aims were lost. This brought important changes in the trade passed on from generation to generation of craftswomen. Thus, in a single family, we can see the differences between a piece of cloth made by the oldest woman (with figures that refer to the cosmogony of her people) and one made by the daughter (which does not necessarily contain figures referring to the cosmogony and is more adapted to the market's changing demands).

Figures, techniques, forms and tools began to be constantly enriched and/or exchanged for others that made production easier and allowed for better marketing.

Nevertheless, the benefits of this activity have not been particularly clear or long-lasting. The majority of indigenous families in this region are extremely poor and lack the necessary resources to work commercially. For that reason, both individual and cooperative production (regardless of the many or few institutional support programs) almost always enters into commercialization circuits at a disadvantage and struggles to survive the innumerable shifts in the market.

---

#### THE LIFE AND ADVERSITIES OF HIGHLAND TEXTILE CRAFTSWOMAN

---

After breakfast, once the sun has dissipated the fog, women begin their work by tying and plaiting the waist loom to a post, tree or pilaster. If the day is rainy, they will have



Technical weaving ability allows Tzotzil women to make complicated drawings with different colored thread and yarn. Photos: Elsie Montiel

to stay indoors or on the little porch that some houses have. Bad weather, like rain or fog, hinders their work: not only does it determine where they will work, but it also slows down the already drawn-out process of creating a piece of cloth.

If the woman belongs to a cooperative, many times she will have to finish the piece of clothing in the shortest time possible, working many more hours a day than if she worked alone. Unorganized women work on the waist loom fewer hours a day because the sale of their goods is not guaranteed and they do not have to deliver the product at any specific time. They are the first to seek out supplementary activities to satisfy their basic needs.

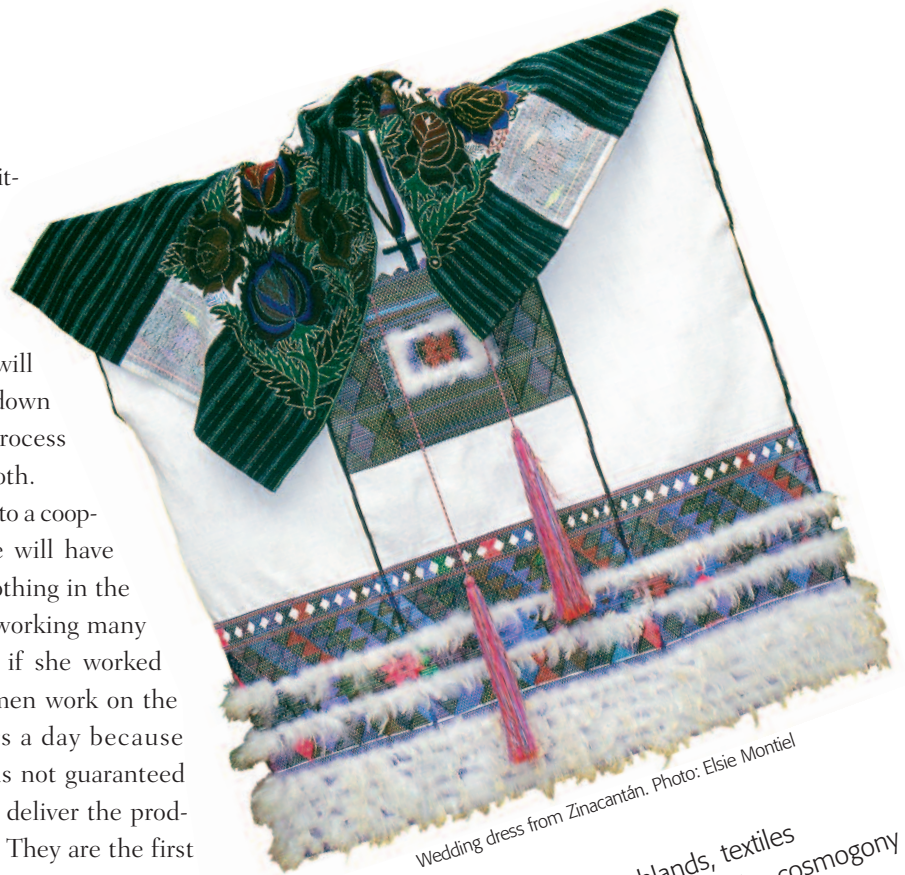
Today, Tzotzil artisans no longer use sheep's wool as their main raw material for making clothing. One reason for this is that working with wool is difficult, tiring and badly paid; so, both affiliated and independent women have decided to use other, more easily manageable materials, facilitating the sale of their products. The few artisans who use wool buy it—if they do not have their own flock—in the San Cristóbal de Las Casas markets, where it comes from places as varied as they are far away.

Recent research frequently mentions artisans who make woolen clothing, emphasizing the hard work it takes to turn it into yarn, dye it and weave a piece of cloth not only beautiful and durable but also a living reflection of the indigenous world view.

However, if we ask ourselves where these Tzotzil women are who produce clothing classified as “traditional”, the answer is not at all encouraging. In highland indigenous towns only a few craftswomen still work with wool, and although some members of the community like the traditional authorities wear woolen clothing, most of the population no longer makes nor wears it.

Wool has been replaced with industrially processed cotton and natural and synthetic thread and yarn obtained in the San Cristóbal de Las Casas markets, in specialty stores in the municipal seat, or through the cooperatives that supply their members on credit.

Despite the transformations and adaptations and the women's ancient dexterity in weaving and embroidery, the benefits of work-



Wedding dress from Zinacantán. Photo: Elsie Montiel

In the Chiapas Highlands, textiles have been a significant element in the cosmogony and social organization of Tzotzil towns.







Tzotzil women leave their own personal mark on textiles, from the preparation of the wool to the finished garment.

ing in textiles have been neither clear nor lasting. The majority of artisans are extremely poor and lack the resources to work commercially.

---

#### THE LABYRINTHS OF MARKETING

---

There are several ways to commercialize production in the local market. In the case of independent workers, one way is to wait until a buyer comes into town to purchase the textiles directly. Another is to take their products to San Cristóbal de Las Casas and sell them personally, whether in the atrium of the Santo Domingo Monastery or to the merchants in Real de Guadalupe Street.

In the case of artisans organized in cooperatives (the Chiapas House of Crafts, the Sna Jolovil Group or the Mayan Cultures Women Weavers Group), someone responsible for the organization visits the community and deals with the members, “purchasing” a fairly large amount and later reselling the items in each of the cooperatives’ shops in San Cristóbal.



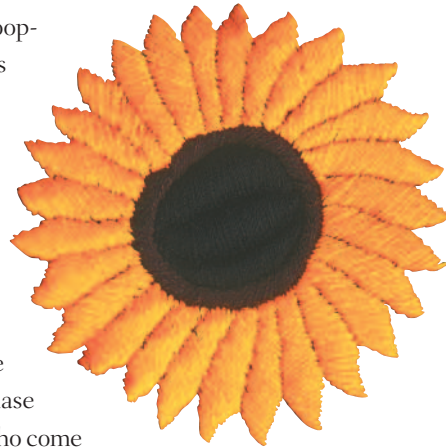
It is hard for a Tzotzil craftswoman who does not belong to a cooperative to sell her products outside her locality, basically for economic reasons. Most of the artisans do not have the means to enter extra-regional markets. The few attempts at selling in other markets without the backing of a cooperative have not made money for the weavers.

Only the Institute of Human Development through the Chiapas House of Crafts has managed to sell crafts from different municipalities throughout the state in other regional markets, and the nation-

al and international markets. The Sna Jolovil cooperative, which initially, with Fonart's support, was the only one that sold outside the local market, has now stagnated because it has not been able to open other markets for its products.

Given the lack of incentives, in places like San Cristóbal many artisans have stopped producing either because they cannot get credit or they have gotten no support from institutional sources, or simply because they can make more money selling crafts than making them. Many purchase crafts from their fellow artisans or from merchants who come from Guatemala with much cheaper products. In their free time, the craftswomen of Santo Domingo produce woven bracelets while they sell clay dolls and/or cloth representing figures from the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN).

Despite efforts to keep their products in circulation, Chiapas Highland weavers lack markets. And while the cooperatives seek immediate ways for Chiapas craft production to continue to play an important economic role, being a middleman and producing other items have become an alternative source of income. **MM**



Given the lack of incentives many artisans have stopped producing, and prefer selling textiles from Guatemala which are much cheaper.  
Photo: Rubén Vázquez