Hilán Cruz Cruz*

HILÁN, *HILO*: STRINGER OF STRINGS

WEAVING WISDOM FOR A LIFE PROJECT[1]

To Sew, or to Sow

My name is Hilán Cruz, and I was born in a Nahua community in Tlacomulco, Huauchinango, Puebla, 24 years ago. In my community, traditional textiles are key to our self-recognition as indigenous peoples who speak a native language, and our traditional clothing not only serves to protect us from inclement weather, but also lets us showcase our origins, our way of perceiving the world, and, more importantly, the way we see ourselves in it.

I'm an anthropologist-in-training at Mexico's National School of Anthropology and History, and I hope to graduate with a thesis on the textile processes and pieces that make up my culture's identity. I decided to study social anthropology because of my thirst to understand how and why studies on the ways we interpret our environments, territories, families, and cultures came about.

As a young child, certain elements of my culture caught my attention, and the fact that I spent my childhood with my grandmother on my mother's side has left its mark on my life. Thanks to her, I understood that traditional textiles are more than just clothing, but a complex system guarding the wisdom of my people.

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Photos courtesy of the author.

This wisdom manifests through technical understanding of the backstrap loom, as well as in the embroidery adorning our garments. In fact, my first encounter with the textile world came through embroidery. In my village, the traditional blouses decorated with small stitches known as *pepenado hilván* boast embroidered geometric animals and plants, as well as mythical creatures and small depictions of human beings, all of which reflect our traditional aesthetic.

Spinning

One day, as I walked down the street, I caught a far-off glimpse of an elderly woman weaving a shawl known as a rebozo. Its blue thread quickly piqued my curiosity, sparking my interest in the weaving process and its significance in my community. When I got home, I asked my mother about what I'd seen. She explained that weaving held profound significance for women, as taking up the backstrap loom was not only a way of crafting a garment, but a legacy our grandmothers had passed along from the days of yore. Unfortunately, I realized this practice was nearing extinction.

Thus, I decided to learn to weave. The path was chock-full of difficulty: I couldn't find anyone to teach me, and my father was upset at my initiative. But after a while, I found someone to teach me how to weave and started making small canvases, which I still keep today. Soon enough, I started taking on larger cloths, and a few rebozos and cotton ponchos known as *cotones* or *gabanes*. Though the road was hard, it brought me great learning. I understood that creating a piece on the backstrap loom involves great responsibility, since, to put it plainly, we make these pieces with our histories and family stories, not just through a creative

or artistic process. The pieces I'd come to create would require straight lines, completion, and propriety. They would not stand as mere pieces of a culture, or worse yet, as folkloric objects or patches for foreign fashions.

Weaving

This is how Yolcentle was born, a small textile workshop where we share our people's intricate knowledge of the weaving and embroidery adorning the clothes of Nahua men and women. We also showcase the myriad, complex backstrap-loom techniques used to create fine muslins, known as *mantas*, with wool, cotton, and natural dyes, which I believe helps us understand each piece's structure and symbolism. We've also created small backstrap loom weaving workshops for the girls and boys in our community, since we believe in the importance of preserving this tradition that our grandparents passed down to us. Our workshops have ushered in gratifying experiences, sparking interest among children and the elderly in our community,

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who want to understand the processes involved or to share experiences that have enriched the practice of weaving on the backstrap loom.

The Curve

One of my personal projects involves reclaiming curved weaving on the backstrap loom. With various techniques, curved weaving is used to craft the textile known as *quechquemitl,* a poncho or shawl composed of two canvases sewn together at the ends to create a small, pointed cape worn exclusively by women. This piece's uniqueness lies in that part of its warp ends up being used as the weft, elongating the border to create an ornamental fringe. My interest in reclaiming the *quechquemitl* stemmed from my quest to materialize the memories my grandparents shared throughout my childhood and adolescence: the idea of conceiving, capturing, and materially envisioning a piece they deemed aesthetic to the eye and complex to the mind. Filled with curiosity, I challenged myself to recreate it. Thus, after spending a year researching, pondering, imagining, dreaming, and idealizing a piece, I started down the path and began to work, thread by thread, using everything from wool to cotton, including taffeta, piping, gauze, and reciprocal warps and wefts. Add to that my resolution to finish what I'd started, and I managed to finish my first *quechquemitl* using curved weaving. When I showed my grandparents, I didn't expect them to say anything, as usual. I simply took in the gleam in their eyes and made out the smiles on their faces. That was enough for me. I also showed my piece to people studying the textile arts. Their awe was easy to sense; the joy they felt at seeing a recent piece moved them, since curved weaving was thought extinct in my region. Little by little, friends and strangers flocked to see my work, and that's how the sharing began.

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It's been years since my first curved *quechquemitl* and Yolcentle's earliest pieces, but my drive to know more about my people through our textiles is as strong as ever, inspiring me to keep working. To keep sharing the breadth of the cultural inheritance our ancestors passed down through their linens, which were meant to cover and protect people of all ages, but also to be admired by those seeking to understand textiles beyond their structural complexity and aesthetics. I've gathered many flowers on this path: prizes, commendations, work, and multiple lessons. I must admit that seeing myself as a custodian of this knowledge that has been jealously guarded by the women in my community is a beautiful thing. It fills me with pride and long-term purpose (and, sometimes, with a little bit of conceit, too). In the end, what keeps me fighting is the certainty that in the near future, society in general, and especially the children in my community, will understand the importance and value of keeping our cultural inheritance alive, appreciating the Nahua textile legacy given to us so that we might protect it and extol it, and never turn it into mere folklore. VM

Notes

1 This text is the result of a conversation between the author and Renata Schneider, a restorer specializing in the conservation and restoration of goods from rural Mexico and indigenous communities. She founded the project "Un huipil al día" (unhuipil.wordpress.com). [Editor's Note.]