

Culture



Margot Blum SCHEVILL, Janet Catherine BERLO, and Edward B. DWYER (Eds.), *Textile Traditions of Mesoamerica and the Andes: An Anthology*, New York: Garland Publishing, 1991, 503 pages (hardcover)

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This anthology consists of a collection of papers presented at a symposium held at the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, Brown University, in Bristol, Rhode Island, in conjunction with the exhibition of the museum's collection of textiles from Mesoamerica and the Andes. It is also one of the "Studies in Ethnic Art" publications edited by Judith Betelheim, a series which, in her words, "Under-scores all the important diversity in art production worldwide and supports academic revisionism in the writing about cultural production" (p. iv).

In her introduction to this volume, Margot Blum Schevill notes that the importance of textiles as an index for understanding human culture and history has only recently been recognized. The contribution which this compilation of scholarly papers makes to the emerging field of textile studies is both welcome and significant. The fact that it deals with the textile traditions of Mesoamerica and the Andes is timely, since it marks the quincentennial of Columbus' voyages to the Americas most appropriately: as an opportunity to explore the history and culture of native peoples, as well as reassess the nature and politics of the relationship between the research community and native peoples.

The crucial and multivalent role of textiles in the pre-Columbian societies of the Maya, Aztec and Inca empires has been the focus of much archaeological and ethnohistorical research. The research on the physical, social and cultural violence endured and resisted by native peoples during colonial and post-colonial times, and the complexity of consequences evident in textile production, exchange, and consumption, has been ample but certainly not exhaustive. The papers in this volume further our understanding of native history, and at the same time expand and enrich the ways of knowing it.

Several papers examine diachronically the persistence or decline of some pre-Columbian designs and technologies, as well as the introduction of new dyeing technologies through intercultural exchange.

For example, S.D. & G.G. McCafferty show how, in pre-Columbian Mexico, the symbolism associated with spinning and weaving tools served to define female power, which in turn was related to control of reproduction. Following the Spanish Conquest, female control over reproduction was suppressed, thus altering gender roles and relations. While indigenous textile production continued, and therefore spinning and weaving tools that were functionally necessary continued to be used, the decorative spinning whorls which were symbolically potent, yet functionally not essential, were quickly abandoned. Therefore, by studying material culture diachronically, "we have a means of monitoring relationships not otherwise available in the historical record" (p. 22). This is particularly relevant for the study of women, where the lack of written documents forces us to find new ways of "reading" history.

The majority of papers, however, deal with contemporary production, exchange, and/or consumption of indigenous textiles. It is in this area that the authors most obviously respond and contribute to the recent academic revisionism in defining non-Western cultures and traditions. At last, the native cultures are perceived as dynamic and not static; living and historical rather than a poor remnant of the (once denounced as savage, and later romantically redeemed as glorious) pre-Columbian past. Translated to the study of textiles, this approach allows the whole range of new materials (such as synthetic yarns or industrially woven cloth), technologies, textile techniques, and designs (such as machine embroidered fiesta outfits or even ready made clothing), to be rightfully incorporated into the indigenous textile traditions of native peoples. More importantly, this approach brings the whole range of new social processes and politics to light. Thus, R. Ackerman reports that the use of factory cloth or ready made clothing in the town of Abancay, Peru, reflects status, wealth and a change of identity from *mestiza* or peasant to the city dweller. In the nearby rural area both *mestiza* and peasant women use factory cloth to make multilayered dresses in the particular local style. What distinguishes a *mestiza* from a peasant woman is the quality and origin of factory cloth, and the amount of ornamentation. Hence, in the rural areas of Abancay province, factory cloth has a function of reinforcing the traditional dress and social order. This is only one of many examples which show that the use of Western technologies and materials does not necessarily signify the abandonment of tradition.

At the other side of the spectrum are the hand-made textiles made by native peoples for the tourist trade or for export to the West. Stephen explores the local politics and values surrounding the *production* of textiles for intercultural trade by Zapotec Indians in Mexico. Morris, by contrast, describes the process in which outsiders like himself attempt to teach Indians in Chiapas, Mexico, about the politics surrounding the *consumption* and creation of value of Chiapas textiles in the West (politics in which he, as a researcher, figures prominently). We can look forward to further research into the politics surrounding the totality of production, exchange and consumption of textiles (both in local and intercultural exchange), for that is the context in which various social groups engage in contests for power, and where gains and losses can be measured not only in terms of economic, but also symbolic capital.

In the concluding essay of this anthology, J.C. Berlo addresses the subject of the aesthetics of indigenous Latin American textiles. Berlo develops a rich and powerful analysis of the characteristics of the indigenous aesthetic system, such as appropriation, intertextuality, accumulation, diachronicity, and improvisation. We can indeed read these colourful and vibrant textiles as "active texts in an ongoing dialogue about gender and history, as well as cultural hegemony and self-determination [and] acknowledge their makers as active creators of their own culture" (p. 459). However, I do not agree with Berlo when she attributes our interpretation of native aesthetics, as observers, to the deliberate aesthetic strategies employed by native women. These textiles lend themselves equally to Morris' analysis of connections of modern Maya textiles with their classic period ancestors, and Berlo's analysis of Maya textiles with our concepts of appropriation, intertextuality, and improvisation in a collage medium. Both types of analysis are valid and enriching, but the logic of neither should be mistaken for the 'logic of practice'. I would suggest that the above mentioned politics of various social groups involved in the totality of production, exchange, and consumption of textiles, in many ways determine the aesthetic strategies and the resulting style of these textiles. If we can unveil these politics, we can probably also explain why certain textiles are aesthetically more complex or elaborate than others. Perhaps we can then (without falling back to ethnocentric definitions of art) cease to label every ethnic object — ethnic "art".

In conclusion, I believe that the value of a scholarly work is not only in the answers it provides, but also in the questions it explicitly and implicitly poses. Evaluated in this light this anthology is truly valuable, for it is both informative as well as engaging and polemical.

Jeffery W. BENTLEY, *Today There is No Misery: The Ethnography of Farming in Northwest Portugal*. Tucson & London: The University of Arizona Press, 1992, 177 p.

Par Sharon R. Roseman

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L'étude de Bentley vient encore enrichir l'importante documentation ethnographique sur le Portugal. Elle intéresse non seulement les spécialistes de la péninsule ibérique, mais aussi les anthropologues, sociologues, agronomes et économistes européens préoccupés par les conséquences des politiques actuelles de la Communauté économique européenne pour les petits agriculteurs et les paysans-ouvriers.

Cette étude fait partie des Arizona Studies in Human Ecology publiées par Robert McC. Netting. Bentley y démontre clairement comment les anthropologues écologistes doivent inclure dans leurs analyses de l'écologie agraire une critique des orientations que les agronomes, les économistes et les gouvernements donnent à leurs politiques. En fait, c'est en qualité de membre d'un groupe d'économistes qu'il a réalisé son étude sur Pedralva, une paroisse du Minho. Les conclusions de l'équipe, y compris Bentley, ont paru dans une collection d'articles en 1987 (Pearson et al. 1987). Les commentaires de Bentley sur son expérience de travail d'équipe, sur les différents aspects des méthodes de recherche économique et anthropologique, et sur la vision du monde sont fascinants et auraient pu être élaborés davantage dans le livre. En conclusion, il laisse entendre que bien que les divergences d'opinions soient inévitables, les différents points de vue n'en sont pas moins corrects ou précieux. Les économistes se servent de modèles prévisionnels, alors que Bentley s'intéresse à «l'économie rationnelle liée aux coutumes et à la prise de décision locales» (p. 135).