

Despite extensive research on Aztec art history, little attention has been paid to Aztec textiles. Given the importance of textiles in defining social status and as tribute offerings, further research is necessary to develop a more nuanced understanding of textiles. The climate of the central valley of Mexico and the burial practices of those who lived there are not conducive to preserving fiber materials; however, the rich manuscripts of this region preserve many images of the fiber arts created during the Aztec empire. Early colonial manuscripts, many of which are copies of pre-Conquest manuscripts that no longer exist, preserve images of textiles either explicitly, as in the tribute sections of the Codex Mendoza and the introductory section of the Codex Magliabechiano, or implicitly, as in the many images of the clothing of rulers, nobles, historic figures and others. These images do not reveal the materials or creation processes of the textiles; however, the images provide context for textile designs.

In this presentation, I compare images of textiles depicted in the tribute sections of the Codex Mendoza and the Codex Magliabechiano in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the textile designs in use during the Aztec empire. I will use the ethnographic sections of the Codex Mendoza and the Florentine Codex to further our understanding of the images as these manuscripts provide contextual information on the function and status afforded certain textiles. By comparing the origins of tribute textiles and to whom these textiles were redistributed to, I develop the argument that particular designs were autochthonous to certain regions, and indicative of a certain status. Textiles with designs of conch shells and jaguar pelts are represented in the Codex Magliabechiano, the Codex Mendoza and the Florentine Codex, and are particularly

revealing in terms of the designs origin, social significance and representation of broader cultural features.

Regionalization

Patricia Anawalt's theory of regionalization, as described in her article "A Comparative Analysis of the Costumes and Accoutrements of the Codex Mendoza," analyzes the tribute list as a means of correlating specific textile iconography with geographic regions.¹ Her main argument focuses on a specific textile with blue tie-dyed circles that eleven provinces gave in tribute. These eleven provinces correlate directly with the area previously part of the Fourteenth century Tepanec territory, and thus provide evidence of a common heritage. The maintenance of this design motif deals with two ideas concerning identity. First, it served as "a genealogical statement, a heraldic device that declared the Aztecs' claim to a genealogical heritage."² By disseminating a design that was associated with a previous central Mexican power, the Aztecs were associating themselves with the Tepenac legacy and legitimizing their claim to their own empire. Secondly, textiles assume the role as a primary means of identifying an individual's cultural identity. Textiles have been recognized as both a means of communicating ethnicity and social status,³ but in order for the status and ethnicity to be communicated, the observer has to first be aware of the significance of the symbols. Thus, observers during the time of the Aztec empire, would have been aware of this

¹ Patricia Rieff Anawalt, "A Comparative Analysis of the Costumes and Accoutrements of the *Codex Mendoza*" *The Codex Mendoza*, Translated and edited by F.F. Berdan and P.R. Anawalt I: 103-150 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) 139.

² Anawalt, "Comparative Analysis", 139.

³ Margot Blum Schevill, *Costume as Communication* (Seattle: The University of Washington Press: 1986) 2 and 8.

motif's connections to the region, and would have identified the wearer as a person of status within the empire.

Conch Spiral Motif

The conch spiral motif is located on folio 3 verso of the Codex Magliabechiano and on folio 52 recto of the Codex Mendoza. The gloss of the Codex Magliabechiano identifies this textiles as the “tilmatl, or mantle, tecuciztli” which means a mantle with a conch shell. In the Codex Mendoza's tribute section, the gloss does not provide any indication of the subject matter of the textile, only stating “80 loads of rich mantas.” According to the tribute section of the Codex Mendoza, the areas giving this motif in tribute were along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. While it may seem obvious that textiles with a seashell motif would come from areas that border the sea, and not from the highlands of Central Mexico, it seems to indicate that design motifs generally represented objects from the regions from where they came. According to the introductory gloss of the first section of the Codex Magliabechiano, the purpose of the inclusion of the textile illustrations is to show “the mantles or garments that the Indians used in the festivals.” This would suggest a ritual importance for these textiles.

The later section concerning the feasts includes two images of an individual wearing the conch shell motif. The illustrations depict Quetzalcoatl as the Wind God and Quetzalcoatl and the Creation of Flowers. In both depictions, the conch shell motif is worn as a pectoral by the deity impersonator. The conch shell in relation to Ehecatl, the Wind God, is not surprising, as conch shells have a natural function as a horn when air is blown through it. The shape of Ehecatl's mouthpiece has a slight repetition of the form

of the edge of the conch shell, perhaps mimicking the use of the conch as a horn. The conch shell's connection to the creation of flowers links the symbolic qualities of conch shells to fertility. Interestingly, the original publication of the Codex Magliabechiano by Zelia Nuttall purposefully deleted the text accompanying the Creation of Flowers image, as it offended Nuttall's Victorian sensibilities, which she described as unfit for publication.⁴

That this Quetzalcoatl, while washing, and touching with his hands his virile member made semen with, and he let it drop on top of a rock. And there was born the bat whom the gods sent to bite a goddess that they called Xochiquetzal, which means flower, that the piece of flesh she has between her feminine member might be cut.

The story continues, with the basic outline being that from this piece of cut flesh came flowers. This story alludes to in the accoutrements accompanying Quetzalcoatl, particularly the bird smelling the flower, and ultimately links the accoutrements of Quetzalcoatl with fertility. The conch shell, as one of the accoutrements, is thus also imbued with this connotation.

The third part of the Codex Mendoza describes the rites and customs of the Aztec. It includes a section describing advancement within the military, which equates capturing a captive with receiving a manta of a specific design from the emperor. Most relevant to our discussion here is the rank after capturing three warriors. According to the gloss, "this warrior [receives] the style he is wearing and this rich worked manta as a sign he has conquered three enemies in battle."⁵ He is depicted alongside the manta he has been given, a manta with conch shell designs. This manta also appears in the *Matricula de Tributos*, where it is identified as *yecacozcayo*, meaning 'jewel of Ehecatl', the Wind

⁴ Boone, 17.

⁵ Berdan and Anawalt, *Essential Mendoza*, 133.

God [Yecatl- wind or air; cuzcatl-jewel]. Clearly this design is associated with high status in the military in addition to its ritual associations.

Folio 65 recto depicts the “valiant warriors and captains in the Mexican army and persons who serve as generals in the Mexican army.” They have a higher status than the warriors depicted on the previous page. In hand, their textiles are more sumptuous and higher status, and the designs included would also connote this status. The first general is shown wearing the *yecacozcayo* manta, further alluding to the high status associated with this design motif.

According to the Aztec sumptuary laws, achieving military rank enabled a warrior to wear more prestigious garments. The glosses imply that the garment is given to the warrior, probably by an agent of the emperor. Collecting the textiles as tribute places the textiles in the emperors supply to distribute them to deserving members of Aztec society

Conch shell motifs came from four tribute regions, Atlan, Tuchpa and Tochtepec all of which are along the coast. While again, it does seem obvious that the shell motif would be from a coastal area, there are certain implications concerning the textiles originating from this region. The association of this region would imply that it originated far from the Valley of Mexico, and hence is a reference to the far-reaching empire that the Aztecs conquered. The glosses from these tribute pages refers to the conch shell textiles only as “rich mantas” and the design was to imitate the illustration. There is no mention of the design by name or the type of material to be used. It is likely that these textiles were made of cotton, as the Gulf Coast is one of the few regions in Mexico able to produce cotton. James Cooper Clark has even suggested that these textiles were

woven of fine rabbit fur, a theme that will be discussed later, which would only enhance their status.

The other region that created textiles with the conch shell motif was Ocuilan. Interestingly, this region was not on the Gulf coast, but rather in northeast of Malinalco and south of the Toluca Valley, in a landlocked area of Mexico. There do not seem to be many ecological similarities between these two regions, the coast being hot, humid, and important to this discussion, one of the few areas able to grow cotton in Mexico. Contrastingly, the area represented on folio 34 recto, is generally cool and dry, with mountains dominating the landscape. Rather than cotton being able to grow, maguey plants were cultivated. This fact, in conjunction with the gloss for these textiles creates a serious problem concerning Aztec textile scholarship. Most scholars who mention textiles at all, even peripherally, discuss the sumptuary laws of the Aztec empire. According to these laws, only commoners wore maguey textiles, while nobles and higher ranking members of society wore cotton textiles. Also, the designs of the textiles were supposedly limited, as described in the previous section concerning military rank and textiles. Why then were textiles made of maguey, a low status fiber, with the conch shell motif, a high status design, especially in such large numbers? This seeming disconnect hints at the holes in the Aztec sumptuary laws that many claim to have been so extensively followed. It would seem, rather, that the sumptuary laws were more applicable to ritual attire, and perhaps these maguey textiles with sumptuous designs were part of more everyday attire for the nobles and warriors. If this is indeed the case, it would seem that the design was given supremacy over the material.

Another important product in the Ocuilan region was the production of pulque. This could possibly be the link between Ocuilan and the Gulf Coast. Upon examining the Tuchpa and Tochtepec tribute pages of the Codex Mendoza with the conch shell spiral textile, it became obvious that “*pulque* jug” textiles were sent from the same regions. Interestingly, the form of the *pulque* jar almost seems to mimic the form of the conch shell, as both designs have protrusions with three curves on either side. These *pulque*-jar textiles are only given as tribute by two regions, Tuchpa and Tochtepec, both of which include a rabbit, *tochtli* in Nahuatl, in their toponyms. The rabbit is the Mesoamerican symbol for ritual inebriation, which is not surprising given that their tribute included textiles with an alcoholic beverage design. While the inclusion of the rabbit in these glyphs is largely phonetic, needed to produce the sound “toch” the rabbit must have been specifically chosen for its association with *pulque*. Other words in Nahuatl could have lent the ‘toch’ sound, for example *tochichicauh*, meaning our bile, or *tochichiual*, meaning our breasts. Nahuatl speakers would probably not been adverse to using such refernces, as *tzintli*, meaning anus, is frequently used in toponyms in order to lend the sound for “tzin” which is frequently used in Nahuatl place names. The *pulque* textile is also associated with the generals of the Mexican army, as the role of *Ticocyahuacatl*, the ‘keeper of the bowl of fatigue’ is shown wearing a textile which is described as *ometechtecomayo*, or ‘two rabbit pulque vessel’. This military rank therefore represents elements in the ritual calendar as well, as 2-Rabbit is a day in the Aztec calendar with the implications of the ritual use of pulque.

Jaguar Motifs

Jaguar motifs were manifested using three materials. First, and most frequently, jaguar warrior costumes were made of feathers. Second, there were textiles with a woven, or possibly painted, design of jaguar spots. Finally, actual jaguar pelts were used.

Warrior costumes were given in conjunction with military rank. The jaguar costume was “in honor of having captured four enemies in battle.”⁶ Nine provinces are identified in the Codex Mendoza as giving jaguar warrior costumes.⁷ According to the glosses that accompanied the jaguar warrior costumes eight of the nine provinces annually gave “one warrior costume of rich feathers.”⁸ The gloss identifies the material, feathers, which formed the primary surface of the costume. It is likely that the feathers were attached to a cotton and/or maguey backing which provided the structure of the costume.⁹ As the majority of the provinces only gave one costume annually, this would seem to indicate that the costumes were intensive in terms of both labor and materials. Considering that none of the provinces that gave jaguar warrior costumes were feather-producing regions, this would only have intensified the scarcity of the material. The gloss for the Hueypuchtla province identifies that twenty jaguar warrior costumes were to be paid as tribute. The Matricula de Tributos differs from this account, as there is no indication of more than one jaguar warrior costume being required as tribute. Given the labor and material intensive element of the jaguar warrior costume, it seems unlikely that only one province would give more than one, let alone twenty, especially if all feather warrior costumes are considered.

⁶ Berdan and Anawalt, *Essential Mendoza*, 133.

⁷ Petlacalco, Acolhuacan, Quauhnahuac, Huaxtepec, Hueypuchtla, Xilotepec, Tepequacuilco, Tlatlahquitepec, and Tzicoac.

⁸ Berdan and Anawalt, *Essential Mendoza*, 149.

⁹ Luz Maria Mohar Betancourt, *Manos Artesanas del Mexico Antiguo* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional de Ciencias y Tecnologia, 1997) 90.

Within the depictions of the tribute items from these provinces there are several areas of variation in the jaguar warrior costumes. Given that the costumes were made of feathers, and not real jaguar pelt, the color was not limited to a primarily yellow and black. While all of the spots are black, the background colors were able to vary. Within the tribute section of the Codex Mendoza there are three yellow, one brown, one white, two blue and one red.¹⁰ There was also variability in the number of feathers included in the headdresses, ranging between five and eight. While these differences would seem to indicate a difference in status between the costumes, there is no indication of this in the literature.

There are two jaguar motifs located on folios 5v and 6r of the Codex Magliabechiano. Both can also be found on folio 31r of the Codex Mendoza. Folio 31r represents the tribute from the province of Xilotepec, a province on the northern Pacific coast inhabited by the Otomí. One of the main agricultural resources of this region is maguey, along with the processed maguey products of pulque and fibers for mats and clothing. Book 10, Chapter 29 of the Florentine Codex includes a lengthy section on the Otomí, in which Sahagun describes the Otomí weavers:

They wove; they made the wonderful capes with designs...the so-called ocelot cape... But all the Otomí women concerned themselves only with maguey fiber... Neither was the value great of what they made.¹¹

¹⁰ This differs from the tally given in the Essential Codex Mendoza, which identifies ten images of the jaguar warrior costume throughout the entire Codex. If the illustration of the jaguar warrior costume in the military rank section is removed from this count (removing a red), Berdan and Anawalt tally four yellow, three blue, 1 red, and 1 white.

¹¹ Sahagún, Pt. 11, 180.

This section of the Florentine Codex reveals the low status often afforded maguey textiles. While the design could be great, the textile was of little value. Despite the preponderance of maguey, it is still assumed that the textiles demanded in tribute were of cotton.¹² That this region was producing high status textiles in maguey fiber is further corroborated by texts from the Florentine Codex. In Book 8, Chapter 8, “in which are told the various articles with which they adorned the rulers and noblemen,” one of the capes is described as “the maguey fiber cape with an ocelot tail pendant.”¹³ Again, in Book 10, which focuses on “the People”, Chapter 20, “which telleth of the sellers of coarse maguey fiber capes” there is mention of “the cape with the ocelot design.”¹⁴ These repeated references indicate that maguey indeed was used to create textiles that included high status design motifs.

The woven jaguar motif was not associated with a specific rank, however, there are several jaguar motif textiles mentioned and depicted in the Florentine Codex in relation to nobility. While the chapter describing the articles adorning noblemen is not illustrated, there are descriptions of six different textiles with jaguar designs.¹⁵ Two of the descriptions match the jaguar textile images presented in both the Magliabechiano and Mendoza Codices. “The cape with the ocelot skin step design” and “the ocelot cape”¹⁶ seemingly describe these images. The inclusion of several descriptions of which no images exist indicates that the known images of jaguar motif textiles were not the only textiles being created with this design. While the Codex Magliabechiano identifies the

¹² Berdan and Anawalt, *Essential Mendoza*, 61.

¹³ Sahagun, Part 9, 23.

¹⁴ Sahagun, Part 11, 73.

¹⁵ Sahagun, Part 9, 23. Seven textiles are described, with the “ocelot cape” mentioned twice.

¹⁶ Sahagun, Part 9, 23.

type of textile the images come from, mantas or capes, the Florentine Codex describes and illustrates that this design was also used for loincloths and for women's skirts.

Chapter 15 of Book 8 in the Florentine Codex describes the adornment of noblewomen. In this section there is an accompanying image of a group of textiles which includes a jaguar motif textile. These textiles are described in the text as skirts, and the jaguar textile in particular is described as "the ocelot skin skirt."¹⁷ In contrast to the conch shell motif, it would seem that the jaguar motif is not gender specific, but rather a motif that was shared by both sexes of the nobility.

While jaguar pelts were collected from one province, Xoconochco, they were probably not used as a clothing item, thus falling outside the scope of this paper. The inclusion of the pelts in the tribute list still provides valuable information though, as it demonstrates the convention used for illustrating jaguar spots.

Jaguars were frequently used throughout Mesoamerica in order to exemplify the most powerful land predator. The jaguar warrior costume used the jaguar spots in order for the warrior to draw "inspiration from the jaguar, a powerful and much revered feline."¹⁸ This design motif highlights the hierarchy of materials that was present in the Aztec Empire. Animal skins, apparently even those of a high status animal such as the jaguar, were what uncivilized people wore. It is interesting to note that the jaguar patterning was created using other mediums, feathers, cotton and maguey, thus equating the high status design motif with high status materials.

Conclusion

¹⁷ Sahagun, Part 9, 47.

¹⁸ Anawalt, "Comparative Analysis," 116.

There are several layers through which to interpret the design motifs of the conch shell and jaguar pelt, based on the interrelationship of images and descriptions in the Codex Magliabechiano, Codex Mendoza and the Florentine Codex. The Codex Mendoza provides more than just a geographic location for the creation of these textiles. The ethnographic section places the designs and styles of the garments in context, enabling a better understanding of the function of the textiles. The images of textiles shown with the rank system in the Aztec military also points to the high status of certain design motifs. The repetition of design motifs in different styles and mediums also reveals the hierarchy of materials during the Aztec Empire. This nuanced understanding of textile design motifs is only possible through the analysis of the interrelationships between text and image in the codices.