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CROSS-CULTURAL CONTRIBUTIONS

CLOTHING

The clothes people wear reflect who they are. In diverse Guatemala, clothing comes in a wide variety of colors and fabrics. Mayan clothing varies in style according to one’s village or tribe. The recent westernization of Mayan clothing styles is indicative of their evolving lifestyle. Two distinct styles are visible in Guatemala: western, worn by Ladinos and some Mayans, and traditional Mayan.

Starting Points

1. What does a typical Indian wear? What do Indians do? What do you know about Central America? Was it colonized? By whom?

2. What does your clothing say about you? How does your individual style represent your individual personality? Would you say your style is American?

3. Clothing styles evolve over time. What are traditional American clothes? Have you ever felt forced to change your style to suit your environment, such as for a job or school policy? Do you feel Americans are trendsetters, or are we simply copying European styles?

Information

History

The population of Guatemala is made up of two major subgroups—Ladinos and indigenous Guatemalans. In the sixteenth century, Spaniards conquered South America and moved their way up into Central America. The Ladinos are of European or Spanish descent and live primarily in the cities. Their society tends to be very modernized and Spanish is their first language. The Ladino people make up the wealthier population of Guatemala and most of them live in the capital—Guatemala City. They wear European or American-style clothing.

The indigenous people, on the other hand, are descendants of the ancient Mayans, who have lived in Guatemala for thousands of years. They live predominantly in rural towns and villages in the highlands of Guatemala and work on small farms to earn their living. Indigenous Guatemalans speak various Mayan languages, such as K’ekchi and Quiche. Each language is very different from Spanish. They sometimes speak Spanish as a second language. Many of them still wear their traditional Mayan clothing.

Guatemalan Clothing

There is a variety of clothing found in Guatemala. The two main types are westernized or American clothing and traditional Indian clothing. The different types of
clothing represent different cultural aspects to the Guatemalan people. Westernized clothing is a symbol of the desire to be more modern, wealthy, and educated. Indian clothing is symbolic of Guatemalan heritage, ancestry, and tradition. The Indians represent their tribe by the clothes that they wear—each tribe having different colored clothing.

**Traditional Mayan Clothing**

Traditional Mayan clothing is made with fabric handwoven from natural materials such as cotton or wool. After the material is woven, it is hand embroidered with intricate and beautiful designs (see Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 1).

**Weaving Clothing**

Many of the designs in the clothing are ancient Mayan historical or religious symbols, which are passed down from generation to generation. The traditional women's blouse, or *huipil*, is especially detailed in design, and the construction of a single one can take a woman between one and three months to complete, working for hours each day (see Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 2). Indian women wear their traditional clothing every day, and it is very special to them. Little girls begin learning the difficult skill of weaving at a young age.

Indian clothing styles vary regionally. Each town has its own distinct style of clothing and design patterns. Women in some towns wear straight wrap-around skirts, or *corte*, while women in other towns wear heavy, gathered, full skirts held up by a rope-type belt. In some towns, women wear waist-length blouses, or *huipiles*, which are worn untucked over the skirt. In other towns, the huipiles are long and worn tucked in. Many of the patterns have horizontal or vertical stripes of different widths. They are embroidered with designs varying from suns and moons, to birds and flowers.

Men wear a common white shirt, but will often wear brilliantly colored *pantalones* (pants) and a *chaqueta* (jacket). Not only do these bright colors stand out to visitors, but they tell a story about the person. Traditional Indian clothing in Guatemala is known for its beautiful, vibrant colors. Guatemalans love bright colors and their clothing designs are a witness of this. Bright colors can be seen dotting the landscape as the people work in their fields. Bright colors and beauty are of great importance in the Guatemalan cultural tradition.

Because of the different color patterns, designs, and styles used in each town, it is easy to see which town a person is from merely by looking at their clothing. Each *pueblo*, or town, has its own distinct *trajes* (dress or suits of clothing). Thus, all of the women in a town wear the same type of skirt and blouse, and all of the men wear the same type of pants and shirt. Little girls and boys wear a small version of the same style of clothing (see Cross-cultural Contributions Visuals 3–4). If educated in these matters, one can determine what position in the family (for example eldest son, daughter, etc.) a person is just by looking at his or her clothing (see Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 5).

**A Changing Heritage**

Mayan clothing tells a symbolic story of an ancient culture and heritage and has
helped preserve a rich cultural legacy. It is a tradition largely responsible for keeping
Mayan culture alive. However, more Guatemalans are wearing westernized clothing
instead of their traditional clothing, showing a Guatemalan desire to be more mod-
ern. Many Guatemalans wear blue jeans, T-shirts, and Nikes. In some towns, only
the women continue to wear their traditional Indian dress. The men, who go to the
city to work, often stop wearing their traditional trajes. They begin to dress in
American-style clothing like the Ladinos. Some women stop wearing their tradition-
al dress, or do not dress their children in it, because it is so costly and time consum-
ing to make. Others stop wearing traditional Indian clothing when they go to school
in the city in order to dress like everyone else.

Cultural Behavior
The manner in which Mayans dress today is just one example of how culture is
expressed. Not only do the bright colors tell a story about the area Mayans are from,
but they also seem to express the personality of the Mayans, and Guatemalans in
general. Guatemalans are very outgoing. When foreigners visit and walk down the
street, they may be surprised by how many people greet them. Although it is perfect-
ly normal in the United States to walk by someone without saying anything, this
rarely occurs in Guatemala. Everyone seems to greet one another by saying
“buenas,” which simply means hello.

As the sun is setting, it is very common to see people sitting on their front doorstep
simply greeting people as they walk home for the evening. When Guatemalans stop
to talk to one another, they stand closer than we would in the United States. When a
lady meets a gentleman, she will shake his hand, but not firmly. A very gentle hand-
shake is a sign of respect. The youth, on the other hand, will commonly give one
another a nice firm handshake or high five and then snap their fingers together.
Close friends will greet one another with a kiss on the cheek. Each of these are sim-
ple ways to show respect or friendship to one another. The clothes worn by tradi-
tional Guatemalans, as well as other simple cultural habits, express their open
friendliness.

Activities
1. Make a collage. Cut pictures from magazines and newspapers of people wearing
different styles of clothing. Paste them on pieces of cardstock or posterboard.
The greater variety of cultures and ethnicity, the better. Discuss diversity. Have
students examine each other’s collages and try to identify characteristics of the
individuals represented based on their clothing. Show Guatemalan images to the
class and ask them to identify possible characteristics based on their clothing.

2. Make friendship bracelets. Pass out colored thread and display examples of what
the students can make. Allow them to use the colors and style they prefer, just as
different Guatemalan Indian tribes would. Encourage those who have made such
bracelets before to help those who have not. First, cut strands about two feet
long. Then, take the number of strings to be used and tie them together in an
overhand knot at one end, as described below. Then tape the tied end, above the
knot, to the desk. The following are two ways the bracelets may be made:
Braiding: (Very simple and probably familiar to many participants.)
  a. Using three strands, take the one at the left and cross it over the top of
     the middle strand. This strand is now the new middle strand.
  b. Now take the strand at the right and cross it over the middle strand and
     pull it tight. This strand is the new middle strand.
  c. Repeat this over and over, crossing from the left and then the right, until
     the bracelet is finished.

Knots:
  a. For this style, any number of strands can be used, but it is probably best
     to use four to six strands. First, take the strand on the far left (strand A)
     and tie an overhand knot onto the strand next to it (strad B). Then tie
     another overhand knot on this strand.
  b. Next take strand A and tie two overhand knots onto strand C. Do the
     same thing onto strand D.
  c. Take the new string that is on the far left (strand B) and knot it twice
     around each strand, working your way across just as you did before
     with strand A.
  d. Repeat this until the bracelet is completed.

3. Construct and wear your own Guatemalan clothing (see Cross-cultural
   Contributions Visual 6).

   **Blouse** *(huipil)*
   Materials: one yard of solid, brightly-colored material that matches the skirt
   material.
   Fold piece of fabric with raw edges together and right side in. Cut a circular
   or square opening for the head in the middle of the folded side. Then sew
   sides shut, leaving four-inch openings at the top for the armholes. Press
   seams flat with iron and turn blouse right side out.

   **Skirt** *(corte)*
   Materials: one and a half yards of a bright-colored, heavy, striped fabric.
   Fold fabric in half with the right side in. Sew raw edges together on a sewing
   machine. Iron the seams flat and turn the fabric right-side out.

   **Belt** *(faja)*
   Materials: one and a half yard strip of a bright, heavy, solid-colored fabric
   that is four inches wide. (A six-inch wide strip doubled over can also be
   used).
   The strip of fabric for the belt can be cut off of the same piece that is used
   for the skirt. The strip of heavy fabric that serves as a belt to hold up the
   wrap-around skirt is worn tied around the waist with a knot in the back or on
   the side. The excess fabric, after the knot has been tied, is left hanging down
   or tucked underneath the belt.

How to wear traditional *trajes* *(suits or clothing)*
   Step inside the loose, wide, tubular skirt. With the top of the skirt several
   inches above the waist line, pull all excess material to one side and fold it
   around the back. The faja, or strip of fabric, is then tied around the waist to
   hold the corte, or skirt, up. For smaller children the top part of the skirt can
   be folded inside so the length is mid-to-lower calf.
4. Be Guatemalan for a day. Use the directions in Activity 3 to make the costumes. Practice some of the Guatemalan phrases (see Traditions Visual 2) while wearing Guatemalan clothing. Write an essay about what you imagine you would be doing all day.

5. Write a song using your Guatemalan phrases.

**Discussion Questions**

1. How does clothing represent a culture? What does your clothing say about your culture?

2. What do you think it would be like to live in a country of such diversity of language and clothing as Guatemala? How does this diversity compare to the United States? Do we have some of the same diversity in our culture?

3. Discuss what the class is wearing and compare it to Guatemalan clothing. Does your clothing mean something to you? What does it say about you?

4. If you were Guatemalan, would you want to wear western or traditional-style clothing? Why? Do you think that we are destroying Mayan identity with our Western influence?
Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 1: Weaving Clothing
Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 2: Typical Indian Clothing
Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 4: Children’s Clothing

[Image of two children in traditional clothing]
Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 5: Typical Indian Clothing
Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 6: Blouse and Skirt

Huipil (blouse)

Corte (skirt)