

WEAVING MYTH & MAGIC

Adapted from *Nociones de Tejidas Indigenas de Guatemala* by *Cifuentes* which quotes a Mayan creation myth about the god Hunahpu who discovered the cotton plant and invented spinning and weaving.

— Submitted by Karen Searle

THE DISCOVERY OF COTTON

Hunahpu happened one day to notice the sun shining on a bundle of white fiber that grew on a simple plant. His inquisitive fingers touched the delicate fibers of this flower, and the bundle of fibers, compressed between his prodding fingers twisted around each other and became a thread which grew in his hands, to his astonishment. The thread reminded him of the fur of the monkey, *batz*, and he named the fiber *batz* also.

The thread stimulated visions of cloth floating in his mind like clouds. The thread was like the monkey's hair, and also like the hair of man. The thread was also like the twisting vines of the forest. The vines hanging from the tree branches from dense coverings that protect against rain and entwine themselves on the ground to form thick carpets covering the earth. He saw that the serpent is like an animated thread with a head and eyes, that twists and coils and mingles its colors.

His fingers made more thread, more cloud images, and the prodigious flower kept yielding more thread. This flowering plant had led him to envision vine and cloth ...could not its sister plant of strong wood inspire the end of the thread, like the head of the serpent, to wind itself around its branches? Vines do this in complex interlacements that form shelters over other plants. The thread of the cotton flower, flowing through Hunahpu's fingers could do it also, to form a covering for the body of man.

Then, the vision of the vine covered branch gave way to the image of a support for the threads, and the threads themselves intertwining with serpentine undulations, forming cloth which would cover the bodies of people because of the generous gift from the cotton plant.

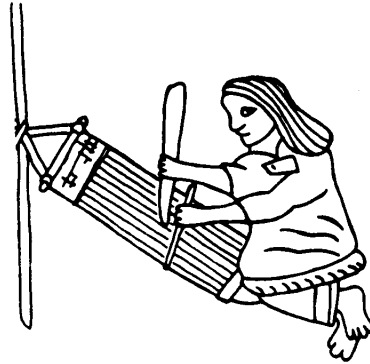
THE INSPIRATION OF COLOR

Then Hunahpu's creative mind, recalling the serpent that entwines itself and mingles its colors, wanted the thread issuing forth from his fingers to be dyed different colors, so that when he made weavings like those made by vines and branches, he would have the colors of the speckled serpent, as well as the polychrome of the countryside; the blue of the lake, the green of the leaves, and the bright, joyous colors of the flowers.

Batz, the thread from the snowy bundle of fibers, dyed with the strong color of the cedars, would cover the bodies of his men. As for his women, he would envelop their dark bodies and make them into a picture of the forest; the earth, her breast, crowded with the colors of its fertile and luxurious flora.

When the men of his village learned of the miracle from Hunahpu's fingers, they all joined in harvesting the flower that looks like a cloud and turns into thread.

Following the example of the vine that forms curtains with its tendrils hanging from a tree branch, and copying the shape of the serpent's head that guides the speckled thread of its body, the people made shuttles out of sticks, and used them to form the horizontal weaving between threads that hang vertically. Then they sought the shade of a tree. Under its branches the loom was born.

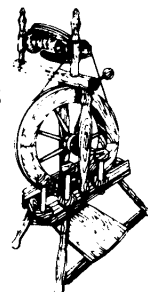


Since that time, the women of the village, following the advice of Hunahpu, have placed their looms under a leafy tree, in order to make weavings as good as those that hang from its branches. And with these threads on a shuttle that resembles a serpent's head, they weave their skirts and *huipiles*, and copy the colors of leaves and flowers, the blues of the lakes and the golds of the sun; to dress their bodies which are perfumed with those flowers, as if they were damsels and princesses in a garden of dreams that the great Hunahpu cultivated centuries ago.

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