Jacaltec Maya Ethnicity and Acculturation as Viewed Through Their Backstrap Woven Hairsashes[1]

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The Jacaltecs are one of twenty-three groups of Maya and have lived in the foothills of the Cuchumatan Mountains in northwest Guatemala since pre-Columbian times. Guatemala is part of Mesoamerica, which also includes southern Mexico, Belize, and the northern portions of El Salvador and Honduras. Since the conquest in the sixteenth century, Mayan and Spanish blood and culture have been in flux. Acculturation, which results when people of two different cultures come into intensive contact, has changed the pre-Columbian culture of the Jacaltecs and continues to exert a strong influence on them.

Jacaltenango's location on a plateau 4,600 feet above sea level, with eleven surrounding villages and thirty-one hamlets located at both higher and lower elevations, places it in an unusual ecological position, and provides a wide variety of highland and lowland foods and products. As a governmental, religious, and market center, it had a municipal population of 18,000 in 1984, of which 5,000 lived in Jacaltenango itself.[2]

A number of anthropological and linguistic studies have been completed in Jacaltenango.[3] Oliver LaFarge II and Douglas Byers lived there for four months in 1927, primarily to investigate the survival of old beliefs and customs.[4] They also documented much of the Jacaltec material culture.

At the time of the LaFarge and Byers expedition, Jacaltenango was only accessible by foot or horseback. In 1974 an unpaved road was built, providing bus transportation into the town. Other changes since 1927 include a Maryknoll Hospital (1950), electricity (1978), a Protestant Church (1979), new schools, and a sewage system (1980).

In Guatemala, today, there are more than 500 Indian clothing styles, distributed among 200 villages. Although these styles were slightly modified by Europeans and missionaries, they resemble those of the pre-conquest elite.[5] The motifs on the handwoven clothing and accessories reflect ethnicity (social identity), status, ideology, cosmology, ancestry, nature, religious ideas, and fertility; colors represent directions,[6] objects,[7] or aesthetics.[8] For example, red is associated with the east, white with north, black with west, and yellow with the south. As for objects themselves, black (obsidian) is associated with weaponry, blue stands for royalty and red is the sacrificial color.

Although Mayan women used to spin and weave all of the clothing for their families, commercial products and western styles have displaced much of the handmade clothing. Due to social and economic pressures, the male costume has been abandoned almost completely in Guatemala.[9] The female costume, however, is still popular, although parts of it are now purchased.

In Mesoamerica weaving was the sole domain of women until the introduction of the footloom by the Spanish in the sixteenth century. In Guatemala today, while men weave yardage on the footloom as a full-time occupation, women continue to weave on the backstrap loom between chores (Figure 1).

As in pre-conquest times, many young Indian girls still learn the craft from their elders. In backstrap weaving the warp tension is achieved by tying one end of the loom around a support and the other end around the weaver's back—with a strap. The loom can be easily rolled up for storage or transport. Often women will weave together and talk as a pastime. Although backstrap weaving is done in many parts of Central and South America, decorative techniques vary from place to place. In Jacaltenango, the design is woven into the cloth with supplementary threads that are wrapped completely around the warp threads, a double-sided brocade technique.

After the design threads have been laid in, the weft is passed through. Then, the shed is changed by pulling on the heddle stick, and the batten is inserted and the weft is beaten securely into place.

Only a few Jacaltec women still weave the traditional huipil (Mayan blouse). It has been replaced in popularity by a blouse made of commercial cloth. The traditional Jacaltec shawl is seldom locally woven today—since most women prefer the Mexican imported variety. Unlike the hairsashes, the design of the traditional huipil and shawl have not changed much since 1927. This discussion focuses on hairsashes because they have a rich history and continue to flourish in Jacaltenango.

The hairsash has been an important item of the Mesoamerican and Peruvian costume since pre-Columbian times. For the Maya, the hairsash symbolizes a snake, as on the head of the goddess of weaving, from the Cortesianus Codex (Figure 2). The knot where the Jacaltec hairsash is tied on top of the head is the head of the snake. The snake represents knowledge and cunning, attributes of the idealized Maya woman.

Since the climate in Mesoamerica is damp, few ancient textiles have survived. Only through statuary and paintings are we able to study what they might have been like. In the coastal deserts of Peru, however, thousands of textiles have been preserved. Many female Peruvian mummy heads have been found wearing hairsashes.

The hairsash, which is woven by hundreds of Jacaltec women today, is still stylish and an export item. Hairsashes have gone through a number of changes over time, transformed by the female artists who weave them. Before all Jacaltec women could afford to wear a woven hairsash, some used to wrap the leaves of a seasonal plant that grew in the summer months in their hair. This practice is extremely rare today.

Although many of the meanings have been lost, weavers continue to reproduce ancient motifs, as well as to add designs from other sources that appeal to them.[10]

In 1927 when LaFarge and Byers bought the Jacaltec hairsashes in Figure 3, they commented that no two were

alike.[11] This is still true, only now the variety is even greater. The hairsashes in Figures 4 and 5 were bought between 1976 and 1986.

Although the hairsashes collected in 1927 (Figure 3) have a cotton ground and silk or wool motif, similar patterns are still woven today with cotton similar to some of the hairsashes in Figure 4. The design has not changed much on these hairsashes, but they have narrowed and lengthened.

The names of the major motifs on each 1927 hairsash in Figure 3 from left to right are: "incense burner" and "spider," "layered," "layered" and "incense burner," "layered" and "incense burner" again, "chain," "spider," and "comb."

The names of the major motifs on each 1976-86 hairsash in Figure 4 from left to right are: "incense burner" and "layered," "chain," "unknown name," "diagonal," "knife," "rose," and "zigzag."

The Jacaltecs share many of their geometric motifs with other American Indians. The "unknown name" motif resembles pyramids, as seen from the top or side, and also the four directions symbol. The diagonal motif is a pan-American decorative element. The motif of the Jacaltec hairsashes in Figure 6 is called "knife," since the pattern resembles the point of a knife. The pre-Christian Maya referred to the "rose" motif as "the four directions," an important pre-Columbian concept.[12] As a popular Indian motif, it also appears on many pre-Columbian Peruvian textiles and building facades.

Pre-Christian Maya referred to the "zigzag" motif as "lightning" or "snake," both important pre-Columbian gods.[13] Jacaltecs refer to the motif as "the crooked path of life." The zigzag was also a popular pre-Columbian motif, appearing on textiles, pottery, and building facades throughout the Americas.

Within each style, individual weavers produce hairsashes uniquely their own by varying the color combinations of the warp and pattern threads. Figure 6 shows hairsashes with the "knife" motif; all are unique, but still fall into the same category.

In the 1940s, hairsashes, some of which were from Germany, began to be imported into Jacaltenango by shopkeepers (Figure 7). These hairsashes were a prestige item, since only affluent Jacaltecas could afford to buy and wear them in place of the backstrap woven ones. The German ribbons introduced another repertoire of designs.

Eventually, still using the traditional Jacaltec double-sided brocade technique, some weavers started to brocade the motifs from these German ribbons into their hairsashes. The backstrap woven Jacaltec hairsashes in Figures 5 and 8 were bought in 1980.

Innovation, creativity, and craftsmanship are highly applauded in Jacaltenango. Consequently, a hairsash with an unusual addition, such as a beautiful bird, flower, or animal is admired. Little by little, different weavers have introduced their own types of birds, flowers, branches, borders, etc. In fact, the work of individual weavers can be distinguished based on the style of these additions. Notice the variety on the hairsashes in Figure 5.

Yarns have changed, new colors have been introduced, and now some weavers are repeating the flower motif from the figurative sashes in the schematic manner of the geometric sashes. In Figure 9, from left to right, we see the geometric rose pattern, then a brocade copy of a German ribbon, then a simpler brocaded version of the German motif, then a flower brocaded in the geometric repetitive manner.

In 1970, a Maryknoll Sister helped a group of Jacaltecas form an artisan cooperative. The cooperative foments weaving by exporting hairsashes, wall hangings, change purses, and priests' stoles. The motifs on the items are both geometric and figurative. When I first started working with the cooperative, in 1976, I was dismayed by the "NOEL" wall hanging, thinking it particularly commercial; but after seeing how well it sold, and how much its sale helped the weavers both emotionally and financially, I came to like it. In fact, after a few years, I added "Peace," "Shalom," and "Love" wall hangings to the inventory.

In conclusion, we can see that the influence of the local merchants who supply imported materials (such as German hair ribbons), Jacaltecs who travel or live in cities, foreigners, and television have all influenced Jacaltec aesthetics and style. Colors, raw materials, proportions, and design motifs grow and change with time in Jacaltenango.

Through the introduction of new religious beliefs, the ancient abstract religious symbols on the hairsashes have lost their esoteric significance and have been transformed into decorative motifs. Figures from imported German hair ribbons have also been incorporated into Jacaltec iconography. Today, a variety of geometric and figurative hairsashes is popular. Whatever the motif, however, the hairsash is still backstrap woven with the same Jacaltec double-sided brocade technique and, when worn, sets the Jacaltecas apart from all other Mayan people.

Backstrap weaving is just one of many Jacaltec arts that perpetuates social identity, and group cohesiveness, keeping Jacaltec culture alive and vital. As long as Jacaltec girls continue to imitate their mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers at the loom, the art will survive and continue to flourish.

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1 Ethnicity, or social identity, is reflected in material culture. Certain changes in material culture are dependent on the flexibility of a culture, its needs at the time, and most importantly, the degree of fit between the new and old element; acculturation can change the original culture patterns of one or both groups. Either reciprocal or non-reciprocal flow occurs, based on the frequency and amiability of contact, and who is dominant or submissive; in Haviland, *Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1975) 406-407, 414-415.

2 *Estadistica* (Guatemala: Direcion General de Estadistica, 1984) 15-16.

3 Marilyn Anderson, *Guatemalan Textiles Today* (New York: Watson Guptill Publications, 1978); Juvenal Casaverde, *Jacaltec Social and Political Structure* diss., The University of Rochester, 1976; Anne Cox Collins, *Colonial Jacaltenango: The Formation of a Corporate Community* diss., Tulane University, 1980; Collete Craig, *The Structure of Jacaltec* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1977); Christopher Day, *The Jacaltec Language* (Indiana: Indiana University, 1973); Margaret Datz, *Jacaltec Syntactic Structure and the Demands of Discourse* diss., University of Colorado, 1980.

4 Oliver LaFarge and Douglas Byers, *The Year Bearer's People* (New Orleans: Tulane University, 1931) 8.

5 Bunch, *The Highland Maya* (CA: Josten's Publications, 1977) 4-5; Anawalt, *Indian Clothing Before Cortez* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981) 389; Osborne, *Indian Crafts* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965) 147.

6 "It will be seen that in every case where there is an identifiable or probable color glyph it is associated with a particular direction, so the 'red' is associated with 'east,' 'white' is associated with 'north,' 'black' is associated with 'west,' and 'yellow' is associated with 'south.' This is the way in which directions are associated with colors also in the Dresden (Codex) and in the colonial Mayan writings;" in Berlin, "The 819 Day Count and Color-Direction Symbolism Among the Classic Maya," *Archaeological Studies in Middle America* (New Orleans: Tulane University, 1970) 13.

7 "The significance of colors, however, is still generally appreciated. Black represents the color of weapons, which in the days of the Maya, were made of obsidian. Yellow symbolizes corn, or food; red is the blood of sacrifice, while blue is the color of royalty." In Oglesby, *Modern Primitive Arts of Mexico, Guatemala, and the Southwest* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969) 189.

8 Osborne 9; Morris, *Luchetic* (Chiapas: Editorial Fray Bartolome de Las Casas, 1981); Morris, "Flowers, Saints, and Toads; Ancient and Modern Maya Textile Design Symbolism," in *National Geographic Research* (Winter, 1985) 68-76; Scheville, *Costume as Communication* (Rhode Island: Brown University, 1986), 1-2.

9 Dieterich, Erickson, and Younger, *Guatemalan Costumes* (Phoenix: The Heard Museum, 1979) 25; Hearne, "The Silent Language of Guatemalan Textiles," in *Archaeology* (July/August, 1985) 55-56; Scheville 10.

10 Osborne 8, 9, 92, 101; Boas, *Primitive Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955) 53-54; Cooper, *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978) 32, 91, 198; Oglesby 189.

11 LaFarge and Byers 55.

12 Morris 13.

13 Morris 13.

Figure 1. A Jacaltec weaves an "incense burner" and "layered" motif sash on a backstrap loom. She wears a locally woven floral motif hairsash in her hair.

Figure 2. The goddess of weaving, from the Cortesianus Codex in Scheville, *Evolution in Textile Design from the Highlands of Guatemala* (Berkeley: Lowie Museum of Anthropology, 1985), p. 3. Drawing by Carolyn Shapiro.

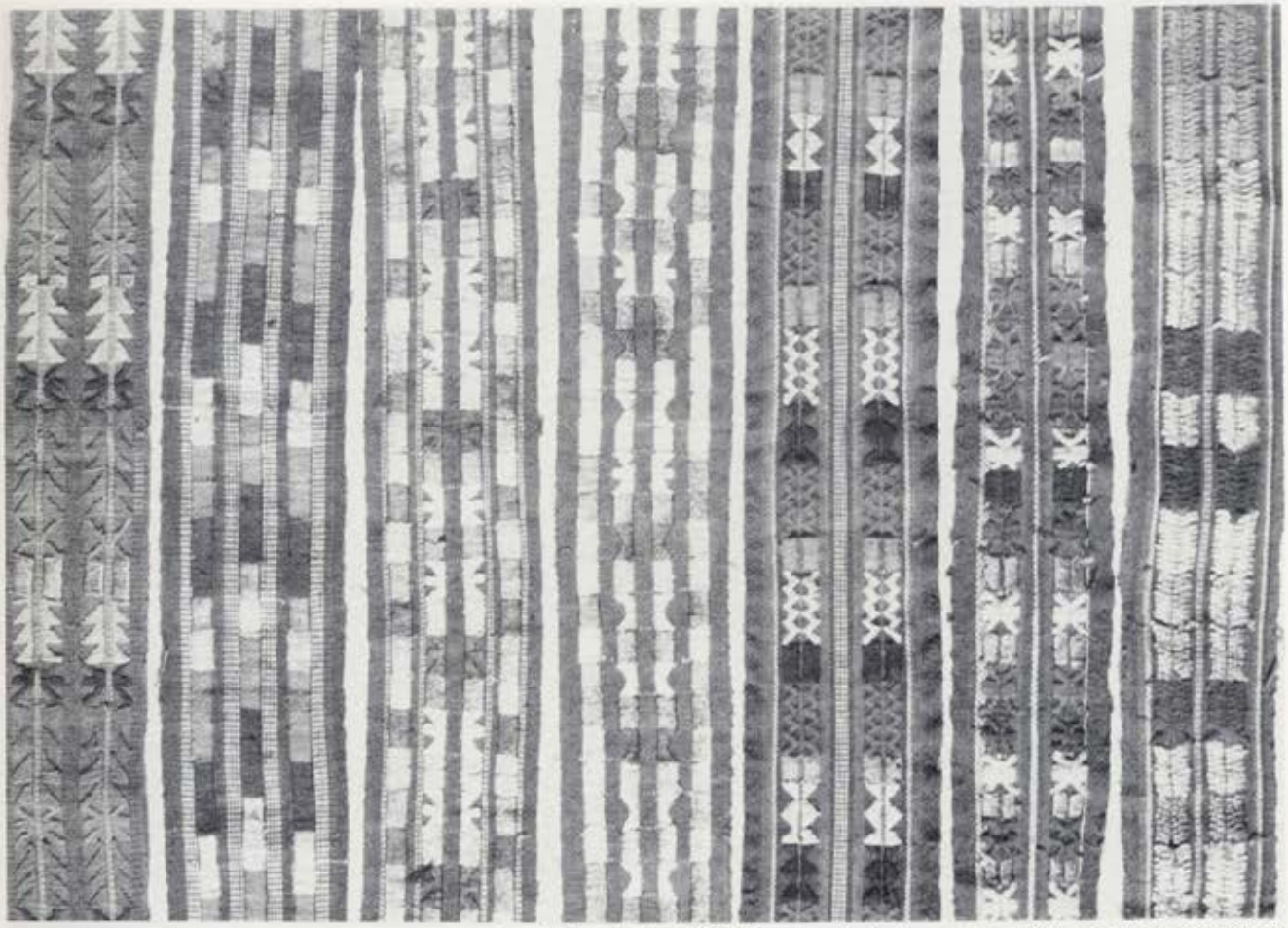

Figure 3. LaFarge and Byers bought these Jacaltec hairsashes in 1927. They are backstrap woven with a cotton ground and are brocaded with silk and wool.

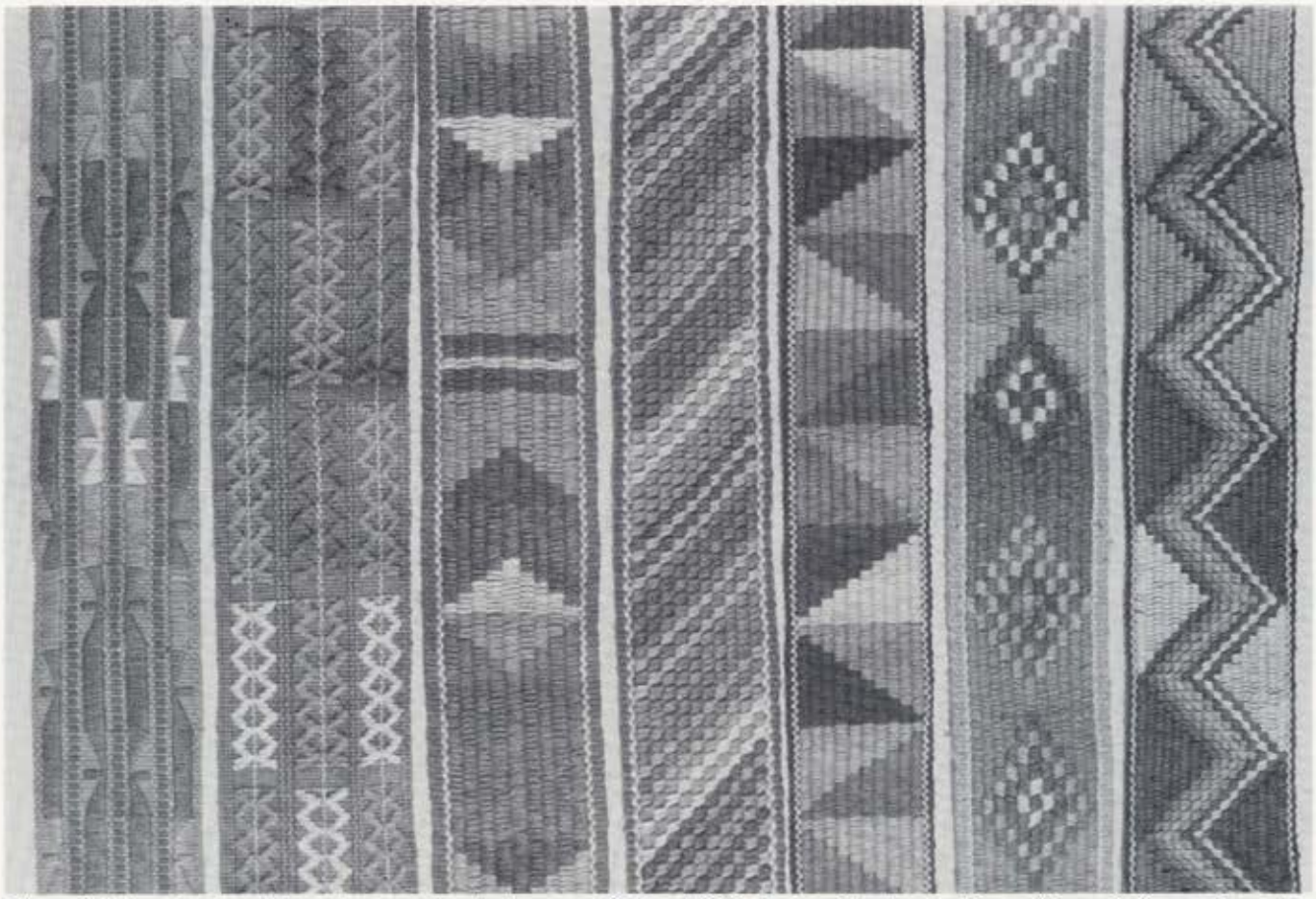

Figure 4. These Jacaltec hairsashes were bought between 1976 and 1986. Some of the brocaded motifs are similar to the sashes collected in 1927.

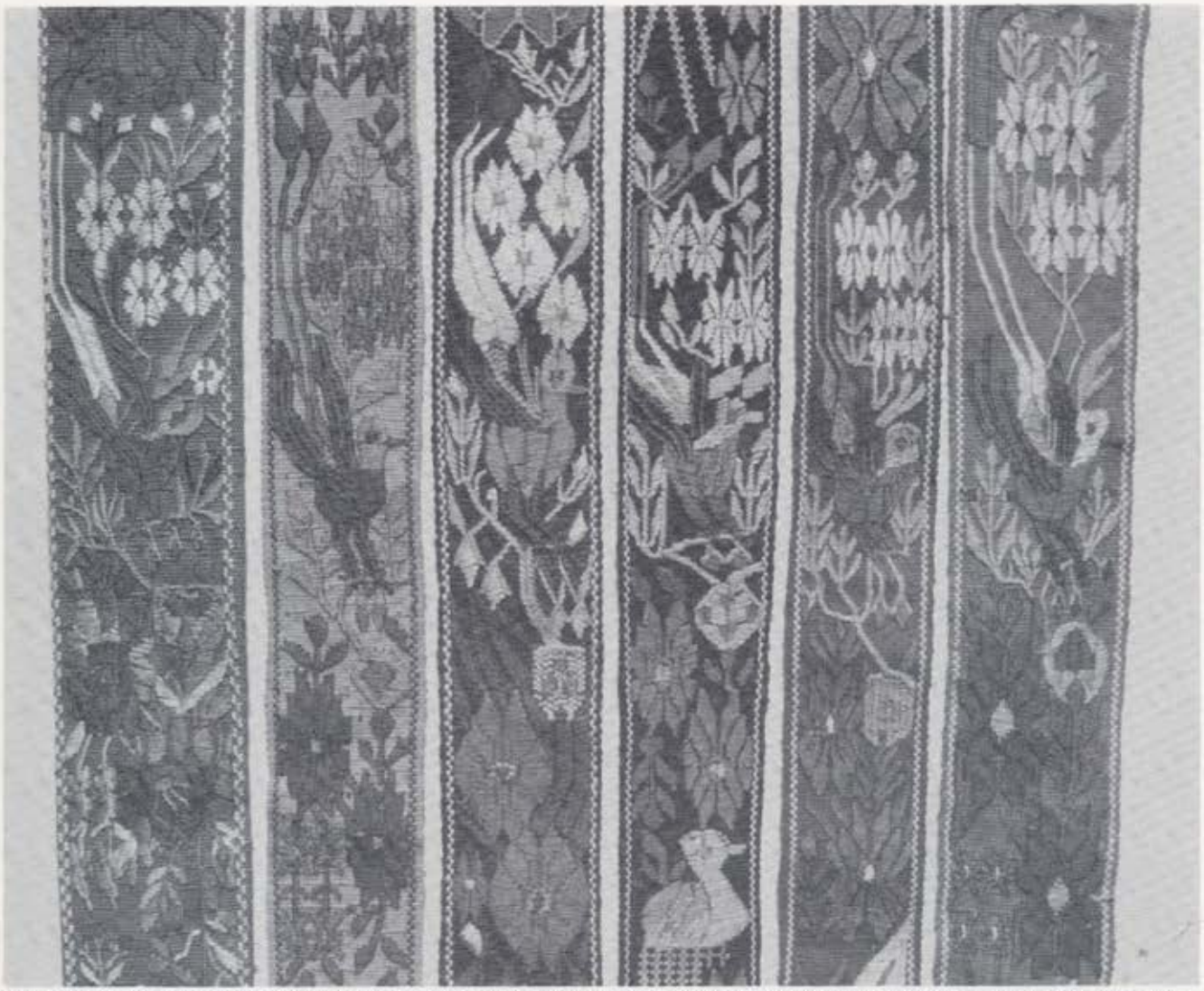

Figure 5. These Jacaltec hairsashes were bought between 1976 and 1986 and are brocaded with appropriated German motifs.

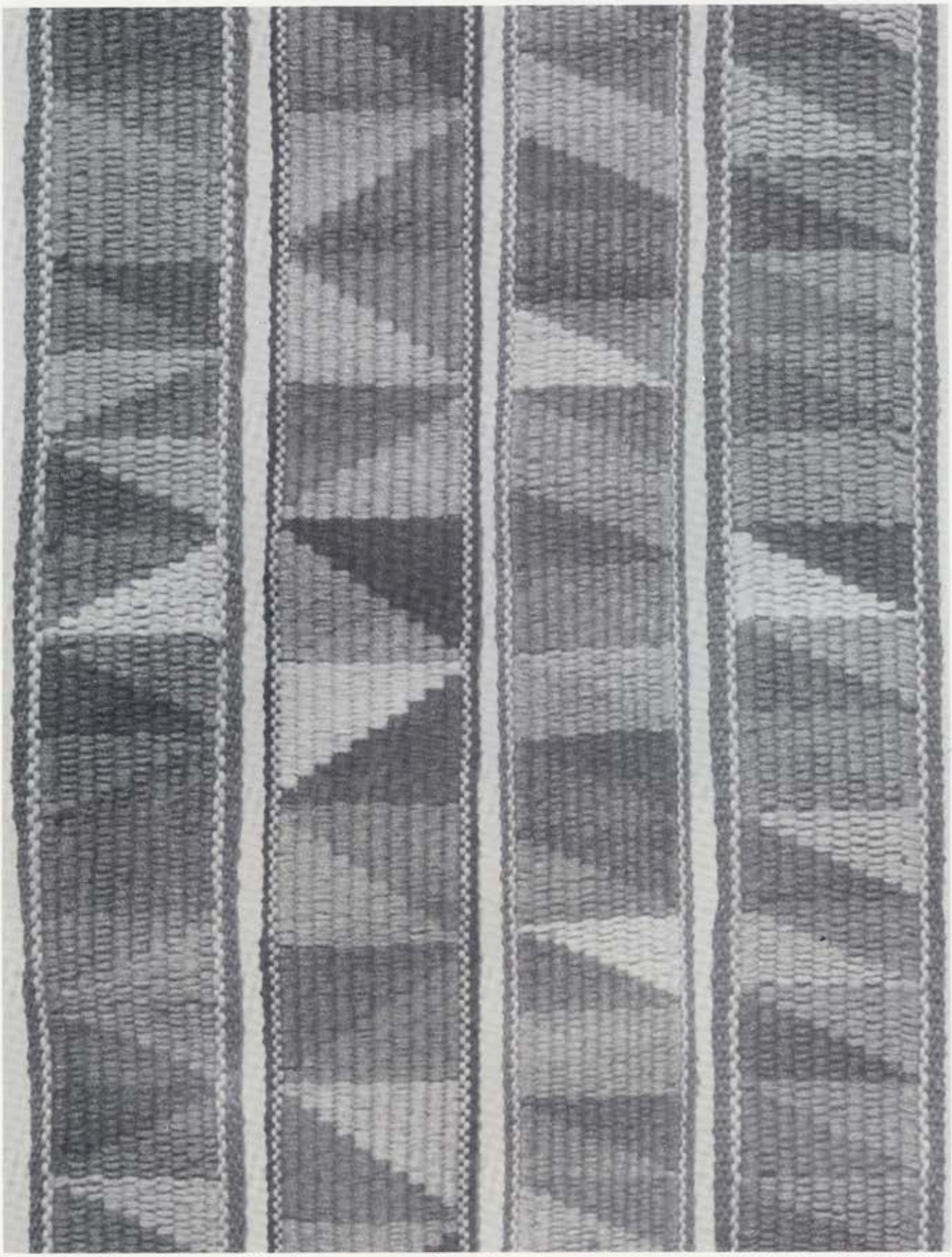

Figure 6. Within each style, individual weavers produce hairsashes uniquely their own by varying the color combinations of the warp and pattern threads. These hairsashes are all unique, but fall into the "knife" category.

Figure 7. In the 1940s, German machine-made silk sashes, like the ones pictured, were imported into Jacaltenango by shopkeepers.

Figure 8. Still using the traditional Jacaltec double-sided brocade technique, some weavers started to brocade the motifs from the German ribbons onto their hairsashes. This backstrap woven Jacaltec hairsash was bought in 1980.

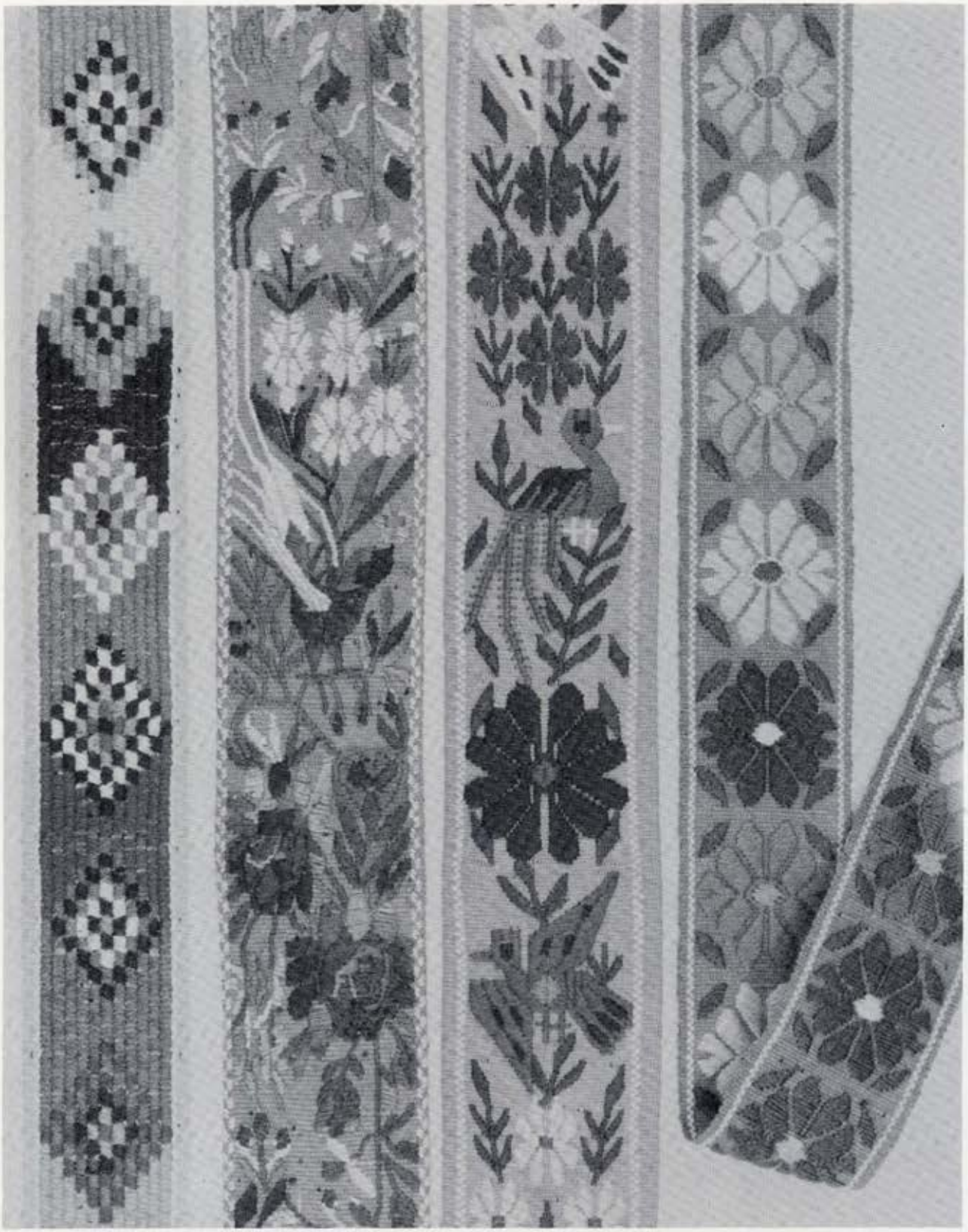

Figure 9. Some Jacaltec weavers are repeating the flower motif from the figurative sashes in the schematic manner of the geometric sashes. From left to right, we see the geometric rose pattern, then a brocade copy of a German ribbon, then a simpler brocaded version of the German motif, then a flower brocaded in the geometric repetitive manner.