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*Manuela and Esperanza: The Art of Maya Weaving* [DVD]. Paul G. Vitale and Ka Mossman Vitale, producers. Vallejo, CA: Endangered Threads Documentaries, 2009. 29

Reviewed by Carol Hendrickson

*Manuela and Esperanza: The Art of Maya Weaving* follows the production of *huipiles* (Maya woven blouses) by the weavers named in the title of this film. Manuela Canil Ren is a young wife who lives with her extended family in her community of Chichicastenango while Esperanza Pérez is the single mother of several school-aged children living in the community of San Antonio Aguas Calientes. Both of these municipalities are known for their exquisite textiles and be (Maya dress that is generally specific to each municipality), and both are tourist destinations where visitors to highlands of Guatemala can find large quantities of woven fabric for sale and Maya women weaving lengths of cloth on looms.

The story that frames this film and gives it an air of suspense is that both Manuela and Esperanza have been asked to complete a *huipil* in under 90 days. Ninety days is the length of time visitors to the country are given on their tours while the film never specifies who exactly the narrator's "we" is—the eye of the camera generally stands for the visitor and an anonymous narrator complements the comments of the two weavers—the viewer is led to understand that the people commissioning the *huipiles* are foreigners interested in documenting the production process. For the weavers, time is even less time. Manuela is contacted first and is shown choosing threads and a pattern, warping the threads and beginning the process of weaving on a backstrap loom. However, viewers are told that she has outstanding work to be completed and is pregnant, two factors that indicate preoccupations in addition to the filmmakers' *huipil*.

Some two weeks into the visa, the film crew is in the colonial capital of Antigua attempting to locate a second weaver in the neighboring town of San Antonio Aguas Calientes. A few days later, after an initial weaver decides the commission is too complex for her skill level, her mother, Esperanza, takes over and she, like Manuela, is shown measuring out the warp board, placing the threads on the loom sticks, making a heddle, and beginning the weaving process. By this mid-point in the film the viewer has learned quite a bit about setting up and starting to weave on a backstrap loom and other technical and economic insights: for example, that the textiles produced on the backstrap loom are costly and labor intensive; the threads are woven, not embroidered, into the fabric; and the double-faced designs on the San Antonio cloth require particular care. The film also said about more cultural and aesthetic dimensions such as decisions pertaining to thread and design selection, the structure of each *huipil*, the current fashions in local *traje*, and why a person might choose to weave one style over another.

Documentation of the work done in the middle weeks of the process—when the women focus on creating the complex patterns—is less abundant. Despite comments about the enormous amount of time that is needed to weave a *huipil*, watching this film the panels seem to finish rather quickly after their initial and detailed start. The filmmakers helpfully count the various scenes and visits, and paying attention to this (the passage of time from day 27 to day 47 then 73) viewers can understand this sense of speed: the weavers are working a great deal of time when cameras are present. The weaving process is again presented in more detail at the end, as the two women complete their lengths of four-s (three for the Chichicastenango blouse and two for the one from San Antonio) and the finished works are displayed.

Throughout the film viewers are given snapshots of the weavers' domestic lives and the role of *traje* in these. While the film mentioned of Maya men's dress, members of the two families—female and male—are shown wearing different types of clothes in addition to some *traje* worn by the women. What in addition to cost is at play here? How exactly do economic factors in the larger world beyond the immediate spaces where these two women weave have an impact on Manuela and her husband (who never appears on screen) seem to live happily in the household of her extended family? At the end of the film notes that their first child dies after birth, and the husband abandons Manuela and a section of the time the film is edited. Esperanza's life is also difficult because, as the narrator explains, her husband left her alone to sell her children's *traje* for income. On a more positive note, both Manuela and Esperanza have female family members who knew little about weaving on the backstrap loom when the filmmakers visited but who have since been motivated to

All of these events surrounding Manuela and Esperanza support the subtext of the film, namely that Maya weavers face challenges and, linked to this, that Maya weaving is endangered. While the weaving techniques themselves and the cloth—"the art [and craft] of Maya weaving"—might be the dominant theme of the film and more closely define the filmmakers clearly want to impress upon viewers the challenges weavers face in producing their cloth, the beautiful creations, and the general struggle that Maya face in continuing to wear *traje*.

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