

**“MAKE ANOTHER SELECTON”  
WEAVERS IN THE HIGHLANDS**

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Most people understand hand made, and most people understand artistic handicrafts, but I wonder how many really understand what it means to be “hand woven.” Weavers in the Highlands of Guatemala can explain the process, from working the threads to finding a buyer for their finished product. Those real people’s lives, those that weave in the Highlands are so very different from those that buy the weavers finished work. Hand woven means that each and every thread that goes into a piece of fabric was touched by human hands. Each strand was put into place by the fingers of a weaver that gives each finished product a character of its own. No two pieces of hand woven cloth is alike. Indigenous weavers say that each piece of fabric has a spirit woven into it; it is a part of the weaver’s own spirit. Certainly we all are human, but our cultures are so very different, not just in our material possessions, language and religious belief systems, but in the way we think and how we portray others. I think very few of us understand the toil or the symbolism that is associated with the workings of the Indigenous people that work with the threads. Much of the weaving that is done in the highlands of Guatemala finds its way to Panajachel; either for export or for the local market.

**ABOUT PANAJACHEL**

Panajachel is a small tourist town that sits on the northern edge of Lake Atitlán in the central highlands of Guatemala. Local residents know the town simply as Pana, or as “Gringotenango.” One-hundred-forty-eight kilometers from the capital, Guatemala City, with an altitude of 1573 meters, Pana enjoys the flora and fauna of the tropics along with and the afternoon heat and humidity, but its altitude allows for a crisp coolness once the sun disappears in the evening. Pana is divided by a river that separates the east side of town from the west. The tourist area, town center, Catholic Church, San Francisco the towns patron saint, market and the “well to do residents” can be found on the west side. The working class residents and a few “tiendas’s” small stores that meet the basic needs of local families are on the east side, known as Jucanya. I have heard the river called “River Panajachel” but I have also heard people call it the “Saint Francis River.” Pana celebrates the Feast of Saint Francis in October; it is a week long celebration.

Most of Pana’s streets are paved with concrete blocks that are in the shape of a backwards hour glass; narrow at the top and the bottom and wider in the middle. They are laid in place by hand, fitting neatly so that the wider section of the block fits into the narrow curves of two other blocks laid end to end. Some of the older streets are cobblestone and have poured concrete runways in the center that follows the path of motorized vehicles. Other streets in Pana are simply narrow walkways, but are also paved with the concrete blocks, and have street names and are used by pedestrians, bicyclists and motorcycles. Jucanyá also has many streets that are simply dirt paths.

According to census figures the population of Pana is roughly 10,500 people; almost evenly divided between male and female residents. The residents of Pana are 72% indigenous, Maya Indians, and about five-thousand of the total population are urban dwellers, living inside

the confines of the town. The remainder are scattered within the 22-square kilometers that surround Pana, many in hard to get to places; where secondary roads are more like paths and main roads are treacherous due to their winding and narrow construction, that hug the mountain on one side and evade the gullies on the other. The regular schedule of the “chicken buses” that travel the main roads is also a factor in the safety of travel. The “chicken buses” buses that are privately owned, painted in bright colors and often bare names of women, are in competition with each other. The bus that gets to its destination first gets the customer, so therefore speed is of the essence.

Standing on the roof top of any home in Pana, the view in any direction is remarkable. Looking toward the south, the view of Lake Atitlán in all its glory and might is breathtaking. The lake is almost 10 miles in diameter and covers an area of about 140 square miles. Lake Atitlán is almost 1,000 feet deep at its deepest point. The lake has the ability to change colors, and its attitude throughout the day. Sometimes the lake appears to be green, and then suddenly it is blue and before you know it, the lake becomes overwhelmingly black. Atitlan is known for its ability to be as calm and smooth as glass in the mornings, and its powerful “Xocomil” wind, “the wind that carries away sin” that sometimes arrives late in the day gives Atitlán a whole new face. The view of the lake with the late afternoon winds and the performance of the waters are beautiful as long as the view is from the shore. To experience Xocomil while crossing the lake is one that I won’t be likely to forget soon. Experiencing waves that can toss around an 18 foot motor boat like it was a piece of paper in the wind would best describe the force of Xocomil. The smell of fear, the sounds of prayers, and the sight of nothing but water holds memories that still gives me goose flesh.

Looking beyond the lake to the south shore stands three great volcanoes, with all the majesty of royalty; San Pedro (3020m), Atitlán (3537m) and Toliman (3158m). All three can speak volumes if you take the time to listen during any given hour of the day. Often times they rise above the clouds and I feel certain that when it rains in Pana the sun must be shining above them. San Pedro stands in the forefront and speaks the loudest, sometimes welcoming and sometimes warning. The sides of the great volcanoes resemble a patchwork, where indigenous people have moved from the lake front further up the sides of the mountains, and have attempted agricultural production. The patches of ground that have been tilled lend differing shades of green and brown to the view. Currently the lives of the people who are tilling the mountain sides depend on its production of tomatoes, beans, corn and other vegetables, but there is much evidence of deforestation and erosion. Providing another means of acquiring subsistence for the local population is in need, to keep the deforestation at a minimum. Tourism and certainly the weavers and other artisans who provide tourists with their handicrafts have provided some financial relief, but not nearly enough to stop the destruction of nature.

Looking towards the north at night, up the river from Pana is an image that mirrors fallen stars. There are a few small villages that pepper the mountain side and the lights at night are spectacular. They twinkle in the mist that rolls in in the evening and take the mind to a fantasy world.

Looking to the east or to the west is not to be discounted. The mountains that close Pana in on either side are very much alive with color and vegetation. Often times smoke arises from discreet locations that shows evidence of someone’s cooking fire, or possibly a stone griddle called a “comar” preparing the day’s tortillas.

Kaqchikel is the predominant language although almost everyone within the town also speaks Spanish. There are many people on the streets of Pana that can also speak some English,

especially if they are attempting to sell some of their artisan products. Pana also has a large and growing population of what the locals call “gringos” which is defined as anyone that is from outside of Latin America. Many of the gringos are business owners; restaurateurs, exporters, artisan buyers and hotel owners to name a few.

A stroll down Pana’s main tourist street, Santander, will put you among the more than 250,000 other people that visit Pana in a year. Day or night there is always a lot of energy on this street. Both sides of the street are lined with local vendors. Some are located in permanent stalls with weavings, carved objects or T-shirts advertising the local beer. Others are sitting behind a portable table displaying their handmade jewelry, jade carvings and other paraphernalia. There are indigenous women sitting on the street wherever they can find a safe spot selling their weavings or used clothing. What ever they are attempting to sell, the first price that is offered is going to be much higher than the actual purchase price.

Due to my inability to speak either of the local languages, along with time restraints my research was limited. Over a two day period I did conduct a tourist survey of English speakers in Panajachel, and found that most of the tourists that visit Pana don’t stay long. Pana seems to be a connecting point to other locations in the Highlands. Some people come and stay for only a few hours while waiting on a shuttle or a chicken bus to other locations, while others stay a day or two before moving on to locations across the lake. My survey also revealed that Pana is too touristy for what they came to Guatemala for. Most were looking for a quieter and more relaxed atmosphere, where Pana is always busy. There are delivery and export trucks on the streets of Pana everyday. Tour buses and shuttle buses come through Pana on a regular basis, and although you will find many back packers passing through, Pana has its share of people staying in upscale hotels with upscale prices. Economics is also a factor since most any of the other villages surrounding the lake can offer the same scenery and Latin flavor for much less than Pana. You won’t find a traffic light in Pana but there are two busy intersections where most days there will be police officer directing traffic. Some of the streets in Pana are one way to motorized traffic, although most streets are wide enough for vehicles to pass, the pedestrian traffic is usually heavy so keeping the streets one way makes it safer for both the pedestrian and the driver.

## **WEAVING**

Estimates are that 80% of the female population of the Lake Atitlán area are weavers. The back strap loom is the oldest form of weaving in Guatemala and was used by women centuries ago. It is believed that it was developed because the weaver could easily take their work with them. Because a large piece of equipment is not needed to weave, the back strap loom is economical, where several members of a family or organization can weave at the same time without a large investment. The back strap is quite portable; one end can be attached to a tree or any other stable location while the other is attached around the back of the weaver. Tradition says that only females use the back strap in Guatemala and tradition is still very much alive in the weavers circle. Males have joined the women and have also begun weaving, but they use the large foot loom. The major difference in the two is the size of the cloth that can be produced. The back strap only allows for a piece of fabric that is about two foot wide, where the foot loom is much larger and the fabric be as large as six foot across. There is an investment involved in the foot loom as well, where the back strap can simply be two pieces of wood that the threads can be attached to, to keep the workings tight and straight while the cross threads are being woven.

## **Individual Weavers**

Weavers that don't belong to an organization or have a specific outlet for their product are many. There are a lot of weavers in the Atitlán area that weave for their own personal needs, as well as for extra money. A couple weavers that I spoke with said they don't have time. One that I spoke with said she did at one time belong to an organization, but she felt the organization didn't do much for her, what they did do she could do on her own. Another problem she had was making deadlines. Being a mother of six children, having a house to keep clean, cooking three meals a day, marketing and doing laundry by hand daily took up all of her time anyway. She still does some weaving, but on her terms, and sells to the street vendors when she has product available. Her specialty is making the cloths that the women use to carry their babies on their backs. Although they can be used for many different things, since they are simply a large piece of cloth, about four feet square. They are called cargadores, and are known specifically for that use. Almost all women that I see here with children use the cargador even if they have changed other traditions in their lives, such as clothing or language, they still use the cargador. I asked one woman who wears jeans and T-shirts now rather than the traditional dress why she still used the cargador. She told me it was more convenient; she could still take care of chores, or even carry around the older child if she needed to while she had the baby on her back. She stated that it did get very hot for her and the baby, but it was important to keep the baby warm anyway.

As I was strolling through another village one day, it appeared that every woman in town was weaving. I was able to glance into courtyards and see the back strap loom being put to use all over town. There were three women in this village weaving along the road. They had their products that they had made hanging on a fence and were selling and weaving at the same time. With the help of a translator I was able to find out that none of the three had families of their own. They didn't have children and lived with their parents, but did help with chores around the house, but they had much more time to weave.

## **Cooperatives**

With the help of translators and finding some English speakers in some organizations I was able to learn about the structure and the workings of a few co-ops. The wide range of the success or failure of co-ops is evident in the information I was able to gather. The different organizations goals vary greatly from one group to the next as well. Due to issues with privacy I will not name the organizations but will refer to the different groups by letter.

### **GROUP "A"**

Group "A" was organized approximately 14 years ago, has approximately 150 contractors or weavers associated with the organization. When they are working they weave at the associations building. In past years they have produced traditional blankets, shirts, purses, clothing of any type as well as rugs and pillows. They consider themselves a woman's organization, but they do use foot weavers. As I stated earlier foot weavers are usually men, and they are in this group as well. The organization provides income for women but they also stressed that it provides money for education for their children. The operation is separated into different job responsibilities; people who wash the yarn, cutters, sewers, back strap and foot weavers. The association was started by a local woman who now studies in Antigua. She had some help with marketing by a woman from the United States. Prior to the intervention of the woman from the US their weavings were selling for about 15 Quetzales, which at today's exchange rate would be about \$1.31. Obviously there was no value given to their products, to the art of weaving, or to the time invested in weaving the product. During one of my visits to the organization I purchased a shirt paying 150Q. This is still a very inexpensive item at slightly

under \$20.00, but certainly better than the value placed on the item prior to the marketing expertise the woman from the US was able to provide.

The association started with 10 people at the first meeting. Twenty showed up for the second, about 2 months later. They started weaving *huipiles*, the traditional blouse worn by indigenous women. The *huipiles*, in and of themselves hold a multitude of information. Some would tell you they read like a book if you know the language, and the local women all know the language. Each village around the lake has its own *huipil* design. To the trained eye a woman's *huipil* can reveal not only what village she is from, but can also tell you if she is married, has children and how many children she may have. The *huipiles* obviously change over time, and events in a village can add change to the *huipil* as well as personal events. Not only the weaving but the detailed embroidery that goes on the weaving makes each one a work of art in itself. Most of the *huipiles* are embroidered with things you find in nature such as animals, birds or flowers, but you will also find many that are simply intricate designs. Old or new the *huipiles* are worn with pride and found on young children as well as older women. The *huipiles* hold their value in the area even after many years of wear. Older *huipiles* that are faded and worn can still be bought on the streets of Pana for as little as 75Q and for as high a price as one would be willing to pay. I priced some for over 1000Q from local women selling in Pana. The local women have also capitalized on the *huipiles* in other ways. Many vendors' stalls have pillows, blankets and purses made from used *huipiles* that are fit for framing.

Group "A" designed and sent six different *huipiles* to the US for marketing. Approximately six months later six people came to the village and saw the time spent in producing the weavings and instantly more value was placed on their work. Within a year the organizers had materials donated and the operation was showcased. Sixty people were now involved with the organization. Their market range included the US, Canada and China. In about a year and a half from the date they sent the original six *huipils* to the US, they had an order for 10,000Q and business looked good. Due to the women's lack of education and inability to handle money they lost over 90,000Q shortly thereafter. The women didn't know how to make it last over time, and mismanagement was blamed, but there was also a hint that money had been stolen.

Education is still an issue and the (NGO) Foundation Solalá Guatemala is working with the women to improve their accounting abilities and basic general education. Competition, delays in delivering product, and individuals and groups of weavers that have stolen the market were all reasons given for the organizations lack of work today. The organization still has a board of directors with a president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, first speaker and second speaker, all of whom are weavers and members of the cooperative.

The organization would like to build a museum near the docks to help improve their visibility and marketing, and to bring tourism to their village.

#### GROUP "B"

The second organization, which I will call group "B" is working towards some of the same goals as "A" certainly economic improvement in their lives is a factor, but this group is focusing on other aspects as well. Their purpose in creating the association is not only for profit, but also for "rescuing" the culture, and to bring back the use of the forgotten dyes. This association of only women is working out of their homes, weaving; and marketing their products in a central location in the village. This organization started in 2000 and they are only back strap weavers. The participants say the organization supports both women and children, allowing women to stay home and weave, and tend to their children at the same time. All of their cotton is

bought in a natural color, and then dyed and woven into a variety of articles. One major difference in the two groups is this organization is trying to promote natural dyes. They use both chemical and natural products to dye their cotton, but they are focusing on keeping a tradition alive with the naturally dyed threads. The process involves placing the cotton in a heated dye, leaving it overnight and then allowing it to dry for a day before it is used in weaving to ensure its colorfastness.

Some sources of their dyes are found in *saka tinta* which translates to "take out" it is a blue herb; many different barks of trees are used for dyes giving different degrees of browns. The seed of the *choote* is used for orange (and is also a food), and marigold gives a mustard color. Indigenous plants that produce other colors are *achiote*, which is a red flower, Encino, an oak evergreen that the yellow bark is taken from, *saca tinta*, which is blue, and bark from the banana tree produces yet another brown. Although they are a women's organization they depend on the men to bring tree and plant parts in from the mountain sides in order to make their dyes.

Group "B" wants no outside intervention. They want to work on their needs from within. What is most important to them is preserving the culture of the traditional weaving. The women themselves are "looking into the past" for ideas of colors and cloth. Group "B" is working with a woman from Guatemala City who is helping them to develop a manual that will put all of their recipes for their dyes and their patterns together with an explanation of where they came from and how they work together. The women are very excited about the project and all of the women are working very hard to try and find new information, the manual is coming along very quickly.

Another difference in the two organizations is the fact that the group "A" works with a "middleman" and group "B" does not, and does not want to. Group "B" is a much smaller organization than group "A". There are only about 15 people in group "B" compared to the 150 in group "A." Sources within group "B" says they currently prefer to stay in their village and perfect their product and become educated in the laws of the government, specifically taxation laws, before they even think about expanding from where they are. Currently, most of their entire product is sold right there in the village. Sources from within did say they do take product to Nimpot in Antigua once a month. (Nimpot is a large artisans market in Antigua.) They pick up what money they have coming to them from Nimpot for what they have sold and then re-supply with new product. "Even if it is only a few cents" they are happy to have made the sale.

Group "B" weavers were simply several groups of friends, maybe 2 or 3 or 4 women that got together to weave before the association was formed. The smaller groups had been working together for about 3 years before they all joined together in the larger group. The group now meets once a week on Wednesdays and all 15 of the weavers always come to the meetings.

Group "B" is not only working on the uses of natural dyes, but they are also working on perfecting the colorfast quality of the dye. That is very important now for the group, again my informant stressed the fact that they want to perfect what they have before they try to market beyond where they are. This will also be a part of their manual, how to make the dyes colorfast since they are working with natural products.

My information source from group "B" was unaware of any other benefits the women have other than the money earned from their actual weaving. The informant said that the children of the weavers do attend school, which the schools in the village are getting better, and as far as the informant knew, the children all went to at least the 3rd or 4th grade. Education is important to the weavers and that is why they are trying to educate them selves in business matters what they must deal with, as far a taxes and rules and regulations of the government are

concerned. An example my informant used was "they are concerned about being lied to by the government about taxes and they want to know what is right and what is wrong and not need to rely on someone else's knowledge."

Group "B" is working in close contact with a group in Chiapas, Mexico who are also trying to develop the same system. They are exchanging information back and forth trying to help each other in the preservation of the indigenous patterns, threads, cloths and colors.

There are other weaver's organizations in this small village and the ultimate goal of group "B" is to become one organization within the village, bringing all of the weavers together so they are working together, for the good of all the weavers. I asked my informant where the group would be a year from now. "They will be growing; I expect much more economic benefit for the weavers. I expect they will expand their market, but they want no part of a middle man, and they will have a very good understanding of their history by then, and people will understand how important it is to preserve their art." My informant also said they will be a model for other women's organizations, and that these women are "pioneers in the way they are educating themselves."

This group is also getting information from the (NGO) Fundacion Solar Guatemala in organizing their catalogue and educating themselves in legal matters.

#### GROUP "C"

Group "C" is yet another organization that offers yet another flavor. I had more in-house contact with this group due to the fact that there was more than one person who spoke English in the organization; I didn't always need a translator, and simple conversations over coffee were available rather than simply structured interviews.

This group was formed over twenty years ago; its original founders are still with the organization, they both sit on the Board of Directors and are employees as well. One is an indigenous man and the other is a woman from the US. There are 18-20 weavers and tailors combined, involved with the group. This group is also working towards maintaining the practice of back strap weaving, but is creating some of their own designs and has gone outside the realms of traditional threads. Some threads are being purchased in Italy, cashmere and mohair; and buttons and beads from the Czech Republic increase the value and the price of their products. The group has a retail outlet and an office combination in the village. Some work is done at this location preparing the threads but the actual weaving is done in the homes of the weavers.

I would like to mention that this was the only opportunity I had to visit some of the homes of the weavers within cooperatives and see the actual weaving being done. I visited eight weavers and one tailor's homes. Some homes had concrete floors but many did not. Living conditions varied from place to place, there were concrete block homes and homes constructed of bamboo, tin and plastic sheeting. Sizes of the homes also varied, I observed some families total living space consisting of one room. Some homes have a single bed; some had no bed at all, while others have only mats to place on the floor. Most did not have running water or any means of sanitation. All of the weavers had children and only about a third of the children were able to attend school. Most of the weavers and their children did not speak Spanish. It wasn't uncommon to find chickens sharing living space with the families. Four of the eight weavers did not have spouses.

I had the opportunity to be present for an interview with the two afore mentioned board members and one other member of the board of directors as well. All of the board members were to be interviewed for their thoughts by a professional organizer who was doing an organization assessment, at the request of the cooperative.

Questions being asked by the interviewer were on the members thought for the future of the organization and are as follows.

- a) What is your vision for the organization in one year, in five years?
- b) What assets does the organization have and how can you contribute personally to the organizations success?
- c) What are the barriers to achieving your vision?
- d) What personal contributions can you make to help the organization reach its potential?
- e) What role could the board play to advance its role?

Both of the following interviews were held in the office of the organization and other people were present at times during the interview. Although I felt uncomfortable having other people present during the interview, including another board member, I didn't feel I was in the position to comment on the circumstances. The person conducting the interview was translating for me for the interview with the indigenous man. I am uncertain if some of the answers to the questions that were being asked may have been answered differently if other board members had not been present.

The president of the board was the first to be interviewed and comments from this person were as follows about the organizations assets and its future.

- a) Would like to see more weavers/workers employed
- b) Feels the organizations assets are volunteers who care about the weavers and the association. Feels they have sustained because the association cares about the weavers. The goodness of the people who have been associated with the weavers is also an asset.
- c) The lack of a sense of urgency the weavers have in filling orders by specified dates. Members of the board do not have the same interests.

The local board (as well as a prior board in Guatemala City) has taken no interest in the association.

- d) Simply the time given to the association. I am here to protect the physical aspects of the business and will do whatever it takes to make the association successful. When asked if that meant as a board member or as an employee the president wasn't able to make a distinction between the two, the individual saw no difference.
- e) There is no leadership. According to the SAT tax in Guatemala, weavers, members of the organization can not be members of the board. (The interviewer clarified this comment as not being correct information and offered to provide the individual with an Organizational Chart that will show the stratification of members, the board and workers.)

This individual feels like an employee and is the legal representative of the organization. The fact that the president and the legal representative do not have to be the same person was not information this individual was aware of. Clarification was asked of another board member who was present at the interview if this were so, and it was confirmed. The president offered to do a follow up interview after time was allowed to think further about the questions. No further input was ever offered that I am aware of.

The second board member interview was done with no one else present in the room. Everyone left when the interview began. This person would like to make their establishment the tourist destination in the town. Answers were as follows for this board member.

a) would like to do tours of the weavers homes, and hold weaving classes, would like to develop a fashion and textile internship and is looking for new things for the world market, would like to involve all Maya women not just locally and teach them time management skills and quality control, has been in contact with other market areas but their weaves are so expensive and labor intensive it is hard to move their products, wants to work all across the highlands, the skills have been handed down through families, grandmothers and she is willing to provide the looms, and together with the women's talents their products can be sold, five year vision would be to expand on the same thoughts. beyond 5 years this person would like to have a silk project going to be able to produce silk for the organization, would like to diversify agricultural products, eliminate some of the tomato growers along the lake and replace them with silk worms. Copper from fungicides in the lake are at extremely high levels from the tomato growers and silk would help to clean that up. The organization could pay \$16 a pound for silk where women only get 5Q per pound for their tomatoes. There are records of silk worms in colonial days so there would be no need for a foreign species. This member is working with a university to develop the project, and anticipates one year for research, a 3 year trial period and then open the market up to the community.

This member would also like to give compost toilets to the women who are willing to grow the silk worms for the organization. The member is researching, looking for a company that can make them "cool" something that people will want bright yellow, blue, lime green and so on. There is no sanitary system in the town, everything goes right into the lake so this would not only help the environment but would also provide a means of fuel, rather than propane, which has increased dramatically in recent months. Bio-gas rather than propane will help the ecology and the women who will need to boil the silk in order to make it a useable product. "Bio digesters for human waste will get waste out of the lake and off the streets." A Japanese aid organization looked at implementing a sanitary system but said it was impossible, due to the fact that the town sits on solid rock.

b) This member feels the organizations greatest assets is that there are a number of women who know how to weave on the back strap loom.

c) This member feels the barriers are that women aren't learning to weave and would like to open classes for weavers and spinning. I asked, is this cool? How are you going to convince the younger generation that this is the way to go, that it is cool, the reply was simply with, money.

d) Personal contributions as a board member, the response was, "I can't do it all" "I really don't know what to say" then commented "I will continue to do what I have been doing for the last 20 years"

e) How can the board help your vision? It hasn't, it can't! We don't have a functioning board; one other board member is supportive with information about possible outlets. They need to help stimulate the goal of the back strap weaving and promote within the value of cultural traditions, women look at it like a job. They need to help make weaving a bridge from the past to the future. Selling weavings is putting tribal identity on display. I would like to see more connections with indigenous groups in North America. NAFTA is a hindrance; it makes it look like Guatemalan weaves are being "dumped" in the US.

When the third board member entered the room this person was told we would like to do an interview with this person as a board member, the response was "why, I am not a member." This person said they do not feel a part of the organization, but agreed to talk with us. This member has only been serving on the board for about a year. The same list of questions was presented to this person but the immediate response was there have only been 2 meetings in the last year. The board doesn't function. This person asked that we go outside the premises to conduct our interview so we went just beyond earshot of anyone in the building.

- a) This member said when there are orders there is work to be done and they need more weavers in order for the association to prosper. This person stated their desire not to be a member, they felt uncomfortable, but later said as long as there was a need and the association was active they would serve. This person would like to see more people learn to weave for the future.
- b) Where assets are concerned this member feels their greatest strengths are that they work hard, they have a good work ethic.
- c) Barriers are a need for more markets.
- d) This person's personal contribution is difficult because others have told this person they have no right to work for the organization as well as be a board member. This person has withdrawn from the organization due to due to criticism.
- e) The board could help by looking into grants or by lending voices to needs. The board should have a voice in how money gets spent. This person would like to see board members, new members given an orientation, and educated, to know how the board works.

## **Businesses**

### **GROUP A**

There is no sign for the establishment so I had trouble finding its location. From the street it looks like a home behind a nicely finished wood fence that is about 10ft tall. I rang the door bell and a Maya woman in traditional dress answered the door. I asked for the person with whom I wanted to speak and she said something in Spanish that I didn't get and she walked away. As I waited just inside the gate there were three other women working off to the left on some fabric at a table under a palm leaf shelter. The shelter had wooden poles and the palm leaves covered the top. There was a lot of other vegetation inside the gate, many nice shade trees and flowers around the house and the fence. The lawn was well manicured, cut with a mower, edged around all the flowers and around the house and other buildings. It was like stepping to a different place, from the street to the yard. The house and other buildings were made of light wood and finished with a high gloss varnish. There were at least 2 other building on the property but I wasn't able to see around the house to see what they were. There are large round stepping stones that lead to the house from the gate entrance. The path is also nicely manicured and the stones are set in sand so there is no weed or grass growth around it. (I felt like Alice in Wonderland) My informant came around the house and I introduced myself. I told her I was an anthropology student here with NC State and that I would like to be able to speak with her at some point if she had time. I told her that I had already spoken with another employee, but I would like to have the opportunity to speak with an English speaker. She was very busy working in the showroom right now but she offered to meet with me on the following Tuesday at 3:00pm. I thanked her and excused myself.

The first woman I spoke with from this organization is indigenous and I used a translator. We met in a restaurant and talked over coffee. My translator is also an indigenous man that

speaks English very well. He is also a friend of my informant so the interview was very relaxed. We could never come up with an exact title for the informant in this organization but we decided on "designer" which seemed to give the best description. Currently the organization is a business but they are working towards a foundation, and hope to accomplish this within six months. The current owner of the business is from San Francisco. My informant tells me they are open for donations. Their weaving takes place throughout different communities around the lake. The group is made up of five different groups with about 15 weavers in each group. They usually have from 75-80 women who weaver on the back strap and 3 men who work on the foot loom. They weave and crochet their products. They have five men that do nothing but crochet men's hats. They have one group that only crochets hats and purses. They do not sell on the streets of Pana or any other city in Guatemala. They export everything they make to San Francisco. Within the last year they have opened up a showroom in Pana for tourists, but it is not on the tourist strip, it is away from where most of the tourists are found.

Their designs stay the same most of the time. The colors in their designs do change but the designs themselves are old Maya design and they like to continue to use those. They are involved with "Global Exchange." They have received no government funding but may ask for some once the foundation gets going.

I asked if they had a professional designer and she said all their designers all indigenous. The local community that is doing the weaving chooses local designs. They only change designs about once every 2 years. She says they are in a constant circle of change because it takes a long time to teach the weavers new design and so once the new design takes hold it is time to start over again. All of their work is done in the homes of the weavers. Their threads are purchased in the colors needed, so there is no need for dying, they use only all cotton threads and they are bought from a co-op in Quetzaltenango, here in Guatemala. My informant appeared to be a bit on edge when I asked questions like who would follow in the weaver's foot steps, or if they were training children in the trade. She asked more than once where this information would go. Most of the interview she was quite jovial. She laughed a lot; even when I asked personal questions like was she married. She isn't and she says that many of the weavers are not. She did say that the women that are married had a difficult time in the beginning. Their husbands didn't see a need for them to be working with the group. She says that once they explained the process to the men and the men saw how it would work they haven't had any problems since. Her expression changed to a much more serious face when we talked about this issue. She didn't elaborate and I felt she was finished with this question. There are apparently 2 representatives from each group that comes in to the office for meetings. They are older members of their group and are thought to be better weavers. She says that "older weavers always mean better quality." When I asked if it would be possible for the master weavers, or the ones with the most talent, to do well on their own, trying to market their product themselves she was certain they could not. She says that most of them don't even speak Spanish and they would certainly need English to be able to market the product properly. She also said that most of the weavers are not educated at all so they would have no idea as to how to promote their products. I asked if the organization worked in any way to help the weavers besides a paycheck for their work. She said that the organization provides scholarships for the weaver's children. My informant named the woman that started the organization and said without her they would be nowhere due to the capital needed to start the operation, and the English issue.

They do have salaried employees and 2 Australian volunteers who are university students. I asked for 10 words that would best describe the company, she had to think for some time but came up with development, social projects and economic resources.

I asked if the weavers understand the urgency of filling orders on time and she said yes, she felt they did. They are given a time frame when work is sent out to them. The organization produces about 30 products, place mats, wallets, glass case are the best sellers, and they also have purses, phone holder/carrier, table clothes, runner, pillow cases, children's clothes and dolls. She says all of their products are of high quality.

They don't sell locally because they don't want their designs to be stolen. I asked about another interview with an English speaker and this informant said she would ask and get back with me, but I heard nothing else from her.

My appointment with the second person from the same organization went as follows. I rang the door bell and the door was answered by a young Indigenous man wearing western style clothing. When I asked if the person I was to speak with was in he said something in Spanish and motioned for me to come into the courtyard. He closed the door behind me and I waited for him to lead the way. It had been raining and was still a little so everything looked shinier and more beautiful than the first time I was there. The trees, flowers, and grass all sparkled. We made our way to the first building, and went up the 3 steps into a kitchen area. It is a modern kitchen and nicely furnished. There is a huge fireplace directly in front of you when you enter the front door. The table and cooking area, refrigerator and stove are off to the right. There were three indigenous women in traditional dress in the area of the fireplace sorting yarn from large bags, the size of trash bags. There were many skeins of several different colors of threads. They had small swatches of fabric that had design on it and they were attempting to match the colors of the threads with the colors in the swatches. I watched them for a few minutes while the young men went into an office to let the informant know I was there. They didn't seem to be very successful in matching their colors. The informant came into the kitchen and said she would be with me shortly. I waited just a few seconds when she came out and said we would go to the show room for our conversation. I followed her out the door I came in and around to the back of the building. She didn't have anything to say as we walked to the showroom, I mentioned how beautiful everything there was, specifically the flowers, she agreed and said no more. I told her I loved the rain because I felt it made the flowers even more vibrant, she didn't comment.

Once in the office she removed two white plastic chairs from the corner of the room and set them facing one another near a table. My informant sat in one and she motioned for me to sit in the other. I was not comfortable, she just didn't give me the impression that she was going to be one whose heart I could win over, or for that matter even get a smile from. She wore jeans and a blue blouse that was about the same color as the jeans. She had a long simple shawl that she wore over the blouse of the same color. She has a very soft spoken voice.

I first thanked her for taking the time to talk with me, and offered to trade services in-kind if she could think of anything I could do to help to please ask as I would not only be learning more about the organization, but also helping them as well. She thanked me for the offer. I offered my phone number in case she did think of something. I told that I was not here to pry too deeply and if there was something that I asked that she didn't feel comfortable in answering or if I asked something that was too personal that she should simply tell me it was none of my business and I certainly would not be offended and that I did not mean to offend her in anyway.

In order to get the interview going I told her I had spoken to another employee of the business, but I wanted to speak with an English speaker to get a clearer picture. I asked what the vision was for the organization in one year, and in 5 years. She replied that first of all they have applied for foundation status but she felt that was well in the future. What they are really focused on now is to delve deeper into the education project for children of the weavers. For early education children the organization buys their school supplies, for high school children they offer scholarships for partial tuition. Five year goals are to continue to offer more education opportunities for the children and to train an indigenous person to run the showroom, taking orders and processing orders going out. She would like to train a student who has finished high school the take over her position; she did smile when she made that comment, like she would really be proud of herself if she could accomplish that.

I asked what she considered assets in the organization. She said that their experience was a huge asset; she also said the quality of their product, reputation, longevity and loyalty to their customers and to their weavers was important. She stated that Mayas are not an "open" people and loyalty to them was important.

I asked what barriers she felt they struggled with. She said their biggest barrier was so much to do. She didn't qualify, but I felt she meant so much for the educated people working in the organization, not so much the paid staff of indigenous people or the weavers but the administration. She also said there were huge needs in communication; English/Spanish and Spanish/Indigenous languages but also communication in feelings, needs and expectations. I asked what she felt her largest personal contribution has been to the company. She said that her connections outside the company and her ability to "court" buyers have been her biggest asset.

The organization was first unofficially started in 1996 but has been operating officially since about 1988, when the owner bought weavings from the groups and took the product to the Berkley Flea Market and sold them there.

Here are some highlights of the conversation and some do conflict slightly with the other interview.

- They are currently comfortable with their workforce numbers in order to provide a balance for the weavers to have steady work and product to have a market, and they are not looking to expand.
- Weavers don't contribute to design and color, they feel they need a North American eye to see what will appeal
- They are not a factory format because "much time and care goes into giving out work and receiving product". It can take up to 4 hours to check in an order piece by piece. (I wonder if she is looking at the process from both sides of the organization.)
- The organization does all their own marketing, some 2nds go to Antigua, and everything else is shipped to the states, unless a buyer comes in to the show room and buys and ships on their own.
- They have marketing representatives in DC and Oregon but she couldn't tell me if the East Coast or the West Coast was a better market.

I asked about the benefits to the weavers beyond a salary.

- She first mentioned education for the children of the weavers; that is a family decision if they want to loose a hand around the house to send a child to high school. It also means another expense since the children will need to leave home to go to school. Currently there are no plans for help beyond high school education.

- Medicinal herbs are available to the weavers at "minimal or next to nothing cost, just something to say there was an exchange"
- They offer classes on plant education and how to make salves
- They have done low interest loans for land for the Sololá group to buy land for their building rather than pay rent (another organization gave the money through a grant for the building, through the Canadian Embassy) no dollar amount given.

Some specifics about the weavers:

- They started with about 40 weavers
- There are currently about 90 weavers
- There are some second generation weavers
- Longevity is normal with the company; once the weavers come they stay
- There are 5 groups
- Chichicastenango, Sololá, Santa Catarina-Nahuala, and San Juan are all weavers and Santa Clara crochets
- Approximate income of weavers - no answer
- Approximate piece work of weavers - no answer
- Approximate income of family or weaver - no answer
- Weavers do work some for themselves, and sell at their local markets but do respect the ownership of the company's designs and threads
- Many weave for themselves because it is a status symbol and gives a sense of pride to the woman in the community
- Weavers do not have a sense of urgency in getting product out for a specific order, "they have no grasp of urgency"

We talked a little about scholarship recipients and there are some stipulations to the recipients. The individuals must come back and work for the organization twice a year. They have worked on projects such as teaching literacy and math skills to the weavers. Recently a group of recipients developed a survey that was given to all the weavers by the students. What were their concerns for themselves and their families? Health issues were the main concern that they wanted to see addressed and second was the continuation of the scholarship program. One success story from one of the students the organization was able to help was a young man who wrote and thanked the organization for his scholarship. He is now working in an accounting office. Another was a young woman, who was able to do all the translating for the Canadian grant for the group who built their own building.

The group gets small amounts of funding from tour groups that come through and those people will usually buy from the show room. Most people who hear about the education program donate to it.

The organization employee's four people full-time and one person part time. My first informant's actual responsibility in the organization is for production and inventories. All threads are 100% cotton and all come from within Guatemala, either just outside Xayla or from San Juan. They have a system where the threads are color coded so workers don't need to read, they only need to match up the number in order to figure out a pattern. Natural dyes are too expensive due to being labor intensive so no natural dyes are used.

#### GROUP B

My first attempt to talk with this informant wasn't so successful. I went by his place and spent some time looking at his fabric. Trying to ask questions and be polite at the same time. Once I realized he could speak some English I was a little more aggressive. Finally he told me

he would talk with me if I bought something. I thought it over and decided I would go back. I really liked this man; there is just something about him that makes him pleasant to watch. He isn't very tall, probably not more than five feet, always a smile and a lot of history in his face.

This older gentleman lives in Pana. He owns a retail establishment and has been selling yard goods from his store front in Pana for 30 years. I would guess that he is around 55 to 60-years-old. This gentleman wears traditional dress from Sololá, where he was born even though he now lives in Pana. He usually needs a shave, his thinning grey hair is always a bit messed up, and he always has a nice friendly smile on his face. He works with his two children, a son and a daughter. His business is on Calle Santander, it is a small store front, all concrete with a pull down roll door. He has shelving that lines the side walls and the back wall that are all filled with yard goods. He has a few beaded items at the front of the store and he has a display where advertises that he makes robes from any fabric you choose. This informant learned English through a correspondence course, he speaks very well. I was under the impression that he bought all his fabric from weavers but as it turns out he buys all of the threads himself, all cotton, and only Guatemalan produced, and he has his own weavers do the work. He has four weavers in Totonicapan, two in Nahualá, three in Ixtahuacán. All of his weavers have been working for him for 7 or 8 years and they all work on the foot loom.

For this retailer, business is best January through April and it is really slow in Sept and Oct. He says he exports from 500 to 800 yards of fabric a year, mostly to Europe, and not so much to the states. If a custom buys 100 yards or more he will give a discounted price. He has two different price levels. He gets 23Q per yard for light weight fabric and 29Q for heavier fabric. He will discount it to 18Q and 25Q for a bulk order of over 100 yards. He says he has no problem in producing large quantities; he can fill an order very quickly. Most people that buy in large quantities only buy a few yards of several patterns but he has had people that will buy full bolts of fabric.

Upon my third visit to this establishment my friend greeted me with a huge smile and a hand shake, in Spanglish. He was sitting in the entry way resting and people watching when I arrived, at 10:30. Of course after his greeting his first comments were "make a selection." I went with the intention of buying something, but not as much as I did. Seems I can't resist his smile. After I picked out what I wanted of 2 different fabrics and told him how much of each I started asking some questions. I asked him about how many yards he sold a year and he told me many. I got the hint from that. He says that his best sellers are the brightest colored ones. He pointed to three different ones; two he said were from Pana and one from Nahualá. I had just purchased cloth from him that was from Pana and Nahualá, so I think he thought he had a fish on the hook. He answered all my questions very politely and with a smile and the statement "make another selection". I asked him how often he changed his patterns and he said only about once a year, but he has some that he has had a long time, years, because they are still good sellers. "If they keep selling, I keep making." The patterns don't seem to matter to customers, whether they are local buyers or if they are being sold to tourists or to wholesalers, he says everyone just likes the bright colors.

He has three women who currently weave for him and six men, and he reinforced that they are all very good. He has several robes hanging in the shop so I asked about those. He said his son does all of the sewing, he makes them all. I only needed to pick out a fabric and he could have it ready for me first thing in the morning. Only one day, maybe less if I need it in a hurry. The price will be the same, 175Q. I asked if he made other things but he said no, only the robes. He says that weaving is in his family, both of his parents were weavers, but only for themselves,

not for sale. They didn't teach him to weave though, he knows how, he said he can weave on "the big loom, the foot loom" he said another man, a friend taught him. I asked if I could have a photo of him, and of course he said "sure." When I left I told him I would be back with a friend and he thanked me graciously.

### **EXPORT**

Again language was an issue here but more than that people just didn't seem to want to talk much to me. I was turned away completely from one establishment and received the run around at another. According to figures published in *elPeriodico* a Guatemalan new paper, the Bank of Guatemala reports that all artisan exports are down due to competition from Mexico, Viet Nam, India and Bolivia, where wages are lower. The 2002-2003 seasons saw the lowest figures in ten years according to the article. Jorge Papadolopo, president of the commission of Agreprent is optimistic because he says that demand is currently greater than the supply.

One exporter I spoke with by phone from Guatemala City estimates that only twenty five to thirty percent of the actual handicraft product that gets exported from Guatemala goes through a governing board that maintains figures. If my informant's figures are correct and there is record of \$6 million going through formal channels, then there is probably another \$30 million leaving the country in contraband. This exporter estimates that approximately 50% of his exports go to the US and Canada, 35% to Europe and 15% to Mexico and Central America. He also estimates that Antigua is the largest export area in Guatemala as far as handicrafts are concerned, Pana is second and Guatemala city is third, keeping in mind that much that is shipped out of Guatemala City actually comes from the Pana and Antigua areas.

### **CONCLUSION**

Again I would like to stress the barriers I had in gathering my research. Lack of language ability and the short time frame in which to gather information were both hindrances in presenting more complete information. There is a third factor that I felt may well have been an issue for some informants as well. I am not a traditional student and felt that some doors may have been closed to me due to suspicion that I possibly was not who I was presenting myself to be. I have no proof of this, but feel it is quiet possible this could have played a role.

I realize that there are all levels of success, whether it is in the form of economic, personal, or social, and that success means different things to different people. I do believe that the art of weaving, both on the back strap and the foot loom will continue. My research shows that there are many people still interested in preserving that art. I think there is not doubt as to the interest in the weavings, the finished product. What I question is how much interest is there in the people that are actually doing the work. Are co-op organizers and business owners simply creating a factory without the overhead of a building, utilities and other expenses? Is it necessary to have outside intervention to make weaving a successful venture for the women of Guatemala? I have heard some people call weavings "wearable art" I question if the "artist" is compensated for the toil, knowledge and ability that goes into the art?