



Popular Tradition

*The Mengala costume, a
symbol of Guatemalan
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No. 170

Year 2007

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For much of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, mestizo people in Guatemala wore their regional costumes. This costume was known as mengala and was worn by both men and women in various locations across the country. By the beginning of the 21st century, it was already a cultural symbol on the verge of extinction, as it was used only in a few towns where some older women still wear it on holidays, such as in the hamlet of El Tablón, in Villa Nueva, and in the village of San José El Tablón, in the jurisdiction of Villa Canales, both in the department of Guatemala. Despite the short distance from the capital and its respective municipal seats, it has been remarkable that the regional costume has been preserved despite innovations in clothing, tending to adopt the prevailing fashions of the Western world.

Descriptions in the Past

One of the oldest descriptions of the mengala costume is the one made by a diplomat at the beginning of the 19th century, Jacobo Haefkens, who was in Guatemala between 1826 and 1829:

"Most of the ladies, although they do not wear girdles, wear dresses, stockings and shoes, while the women of the lower classes only have two garments, which consist of a shirt, often of white flowered muslin, and over this a very loose skirt of the same material or of printed cotton, which always has at the top a wide border of another material, darker but flowered or checked. Sometimes they also wear a kerchief around their neck and, especially in the rather cold regions, they wear, when they go out, a kind of scarf that is usually of black material, with which they cover their head. The ladies use, when they go out, a similar shawl, always of black silk and, to attend mass, they go in strict black.

The women of the lower classes They style their hair in two long braids, woven with silk ribbon and hanging like pigtales over their backs. Sometimes they also wrap these braids around their heads."¹

In Haefkens's account of the Guatemalan women's clothing she observed, she points out the difference in dress between the two socioeconomic groups she distinguished during her stay in the country: the ladies and the women of the "lower classes." According to her account, women of lower economic status wore "two garments, comprising a shirt, often of white flowered muslin, and over this a very loose skirt of the same fabric or of printed cotton, which always has a wide border at the top of the skirt of another, darker fabric, but flowered or checked." To complete their attire, "they sometimes also wear a kerchief around their necks, and, especially in colder regions, they wear a kind of shawl, usually made of black fabric, when they go out, which they cover their heads with." Their hair ornament consisted of "two long braids, intertwined with silk ribbon and hanging like pigtales over their backs. Sometimes these braids are also wrapped around their heads."

This description perfectly matches the mengala dress, but with the characteristic that it was a simpler dress. Meanwhile, muslin allowed for the iridescent look so popular in later mengalas, which was used on both the blouse and skirt. If it was cotton, the narrator indicated that it was flowered, that is, decorated. Ruffles, lace, or tucks had not yet become widespread, but a neckerchief and shawl were already in use. Hair interlaced with colorful ribbons was already in vogue.

As for the men's costume, Haefkens described the muleteer's costume with these words:

¹HAEKENS, *Journey to Guatemala and Central America*. University Press, Society of Geography and History of Guatemala, Travelers Series, Volume 1, 1969, page 32

"A short vest or shirt-front, usually made of a whitish woolen fabric with dark stripes, hangs over trousers, usually made of corduroy or so-called dark Manchester, and of a very bizarre and apparently uncomfortable style. The small buttons at the knee are not only always undone, but, because of the style of the garment, they cannot even be fastened, so they are nothing more than a bare ornament. Many of them even wear these trousers completely open at the sides and covered from top to bottom with small buttons, but in this case they wear another linen one underneath. A leather apron, split in half from top to bottom, covers the legs, and sandals protect the feet, while a large, high-crowned, wide-brimmed straw hat protects the head from the sun's rays, as well as from the downpours. Thus dressed, machete in hand, both for defense against men and animals and for cutting branches and weeds that obstruct the path."²

It can be inferred that the typical attire of mestizo men included garments similar to those described by the diplomat: "a short shirt or vest, usually made of a whitish woolen fabric with dark stripes" for the torso. For the lower limbs, "trousers, usually made of corduroy or the so-called dark Manchester trousers" were used. Since the description refers to muleteers, these trousers must have served to protect the wearer from rubbing against the back of mules, steeds, or horses, and were probably not widespread among all men, since not all of them were dedicated to transporting goods. The diplomat noted that "many of them even wear these trousers open... but in this case, they wear other linen trousers underneath." These light-colored linen trousers appear to have been the usual trousers worn by mestizos. For the head, he noted that a "high-crowned, wide-brimmed straw hat" was used.

Around the same time, the diplomat John Stephens was also present, who only described how, during a religious festival in the capital city, "people wore their best clothes, without distinction of social class," adding, in another part of his book: "I never saw a more beautiful spectacle than these rows of kneeling women, with pure faces and sublime

expressions, enhanced by the enthusiasm of religion."³

In the 1850s, the politician Antonio Batres Jáuregui saw the costumes of his time and described them years later: "The ladies of my youth, and also the serious ladies, wore crinolines, like pompous balloons of extravagant shapes."⁴ According to his account, seamstresses were responsible for making these garments, as well as tunics, *naguas* (petticoats), and petticoats. Although Batres's description refers to the attire of well-to-do women when he wrote "*las señoras serias*" (serious ladies), the reference to "*pollas*" (skirts) refers to women of lesser social privilege, who also wore full skirts. It is clear that he is referring to the *mengalas* (women in formal dress). Years later, the Guatemalan politician Ramón Salazar recalled seeing women dressed in *mengala* clothing around 1861 and recognized them by this name. In his description, Salazar emphasized the "sway" or swaying of the women's skirts as they walked. The women's attire then consisted of a "merino or indianilla skirt cut." Familiar with the fabrics available for sale in the capital city, the author identified the type of fabric the skirts were made of. He also noted that the women wore "earrings and small ropes of fake metal" and wrote the same about the stones. With these words, the politician, favored by his economic and social position, emphasized that the *mengalas* did not use metals or precious stones, as women of more affluent social standing did. From his description, he highlights that the *mengala* women wore "low-cut shirts in the Early Empire style." This indicates that Salazar recognized the European origin of the characteristics of the *mengala* costume. Finally, around 1861, women wore "shawls from the looms of Mogoyón or silk from San Salvador." At the end of his description, Salazar once again noted the origin of the fabrics found in the capital's market.

The attire of *mengala* women also seems to be portrayed by Salvador Falla in 1915: "Guatemalan women... have abandoned bright colors in their costumes,"⁵ alluding to the privileged women of the capital who were distinguished from *mengala* women because the latter continued to wear bright colors in their clothing.

²HAEFKENS, Op. Cit., p. 23

³STEPHENS, John: Incidents of a trip in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan. EDUCA, San Jose, Costa Rica, 1971.

⁴BATRES JAUREGUI, Antonio: Central America and history, 1821-1921. Volume III. National Typography, Guatemala, 1949, p. 382.

⁵Cited by VILLACORTA, Antonio: Monograph of the Department of Guatemala. National Typography, Guatemala, 1926, p. 186.

The novelist Flavio Herrera described the mengala women thus around 1935:

"Mengalas of Amatitlán. Garrulous, dark-skinned girls... A ribbon in their shining braid. A shirt of bright rags. The petticoat with a starched fru-fru held over the croup by the apron ribbon... Amatitlán belongs to the Creole mengalas."⁶

Some time later, the ethnographer Rubén Reina described the mengala costume, with its distinctive details. He conducted his fieldwork in Chinautla, a municipality in the department of Guatemala, between 1953 and 1962:

"The mengalas⁷ of Chinautla wear brightly colored colonial-style silk blouses—these blouses frequently have sleeves decorated with lace—and wide-pleated skirts with five inches of lace at the hem. They also wear indigenous-style braids with bright ribbons."⁸

The name "mengalas" was already used to designate women of mestizo origin who wore the regional costume, characterized by its bright colors, lace, and pleats, as well as the use of braids with ribbons. Regarding the men's costume, Reina indicated:

"The men wear the same type of clothing as the Ladinized Indians. Both men and women wear shoes or go barefoot, as they wish."⁹

Thus, the men's clothing consisted of trousers and a straw-colored cotton shirt. Although not mentioned, hats continued to be worn to protect the head and neck.

Among the most recent descriptions is that of Judith Samayoa de Pineda, who was able to interview several Mengala women in Amatitlán in 1977:

"Mengala was the name given in the 19th and early 20th centuries to single, young women in Central

America, although by inheritance it was also applied to married women. The Mengala of Amatitlán was characterized by being an independent lady who, thanks to the production of sweets, achieved a stable economy that was favored first: by the tourist boom in Amatitlán, with the sale of its sweets on the beach of our lake, then they are hired to do kitchen work in the vacation homes of wealthy people located on the shores of the lake and second: by the arrival of the train where a commercial exchange is established with the visitors who came to the city."

Samayoa's account adds further details:

"Mengalas were worn by people of limited means, some from the middle class, and domestic workers or servants; although they all dressed in the same fashion, some wore better quality clothes due to their social position... those who had more money... were the ones who wore the most luxurious mengalas."¹⁰

Among the stories collected in that research, the author asked the informants why they still kept their regional costumes in 1977. The answer expresses an ethnic sense:

"Because we haven't let ourselves be influenced by fashion, and also because since we were little, we've been taught to wear it and that's how we feel happy. We believe that we couldn't have worn any other type of dress: we didn't like the trends, and we also wanted to preserve our traditions."¹¹

To preserve some of the traditions of the Mengala people, Samayoa gave rise to a folklore projection group called Estampas de Amatitlán.

This entire transformation raises questions about how the Mengala dress evolved and what its probable origins are, as well as its use by the mestizo population in Guatemala.

⁶HERRERA, Flavio: *La tempestad*. Editorial Universitaria, Guatemala, 2001, pp. 23-24.

⁷Not by the author: Mengala appears to be a corruption of the word "Bengal" associated with the Muslim clothing textiles that originated in Bengal and became popular at the time.

⁸REINA, Rubén: *La ley de los Santos. Un pueblo pokomam y su cultura de comunidad*. Seminario de Integración Social Guatemalteca. Ministerio de Educación, Editorial José de Pineda Ibarra. Guatemala, 1973, page 55

⁹REINA, Op. Cit. page 55

¹⁰SAMAYOA, Judith: *Amatitlán (Traditions)*. 3rd Edition. Edition. Texdigua, Guatemala, 2004, page 181. On page 185, the author cites her sources, 13 women aged between 82 and 57 (in 1977), who were important for the garments and by 2004 had all died.

¹¹SAMAYOA, Op Cit. page 185

The presence of the Castilians in the territory of present-day Guatemala transformed all previously existing cultural forms, from food to political control. Fundamentally, it transformed the population living in the region. A large number of male immigrants arrived from Spain, but very few women. This produced intense interbreeding, both with women of native origin and with slaves from Africa, who were introduced by the Spanish over three centuries.

During the Hispanic period, people of mestizo origin were known as "castas." Castas included all forms of interbreeding, including mulattoes. Throughout the Hispanic period, distinctions were made between mestizos and mulattoes, until the concept of mestizo eventually included mulattoes.

Being a member of the castas meant social and economic disadvantages. Those who resided in urban centers, especially in the city of Santiago de Guatemala, lived with the elites and were victims of their prejudice. An example of this prejudice was written by Juan de Solórzano Pereira, who served as a member of the Council of the Indies, in a work published in the first half of the 17th century:

"Of those who are called mestizos and mulattoes, of which there are a great many in the provinces of these Indies; what I understand is that they took the name of mestizos because of the mixture of blood and nations that came together when they were engendered... And the mulattoes, although also for the same reason they are included in the general name of mestizos, took this particular name when they are children of a black woman and a white man or vice versa, because this mixture is considered more uglier and extraordinary and to make it understood with such a name that they compare it to the nature of a mule".¹²

In this fragment, the author reasons about the name of the social group and the prejudices of the elite towards them, justifying them. Furthermore, he adds religious arguments:

"And if these men were born of legitimate marriage and no other vice or defect was found

in them that would prevent it, they could and should be considered citizens of said provinces... But the most common thing is that they are born of adultery or other illicit and punishable unions; because there are few honorable Spaniards who marry Indian or black women, this defect of their birth makes them infamous, at least infamia facti, according to the most serious and common opinion of serious authors. Upon him falls the stain of the various color and other vices, which are usually as natural and suckled in milk... we see that most come from vicious and depraved customs".¹³

From this argument derived another:

"Lust should not be more privileged than chastity, but rather those born of legitimate marriage should be more favored and privileged than illegitimate and bastard marriages, as Saint Thomas and other serious authors teach".¹⁴

As Solórzano Pereira described, the majority of these unions were not sacralized by the Catholic Church, since the majority of Spaniards were not willing to marry indigenous women or slaves of African origin, although some did, especially when the indigenous women were daughters of native nobles.

Legislation limiting the rights of mestizos was extensive. In 1549, they were prohibited from receiving encomiendas, the transfer of tribute to the king that the monarch granted to the descendants of the conquistadors. In 1643, they were prohibited from being soldiers.¹⁵ In Guatemala, the Audiencia established its own legislation to limit the activities of mestizos. For example, beginning in 1585, mulattoes and people of African descent were not allowed to ride horses within the city. Furthermore, in 1634, they were prohibited from using horses or mares; they were required to use only mules or males. In 1589, mulattoes were required to apprentice their children to trades, and in 1634, they were required to work in domestic services. Regarding the use of weapons, in 1589, Afro-descendants were prohibited from using them.¹⁶ However, among the most notable features was the explicit prohibition on mestizo and mulatto women from dressing like Spanish women.

¹²SOLÓRZANO PEREIRA, Juan de: Indian Policy (published in 1647). In: Beginnings of Spanish Rule in the Indies. Editorial Universitaria, Guatemala, 1987, p. 439.

¹³SOLÓRZANO, Op. Cit., pp. 339-340.

¹⁴SOLÓRZANO, Op. Cit., p. 340.

¹⁵MÖRNER, Magnus: Hispanic American Social Stratification During the Colonial Period. Institute of Latin American Studies. Research Paper Series 28, 1980, pp. 8-10.

¹⁶AGCA A1.25 Leg. 1702 Exp. 10357. Summary of the Autos Acordados from 1561 to 1807, folios 167-172.

Due in part to these social and religious difficulties, mestizos found work in artisanal and livestock activities. Despite the prejudices of rulers and economic elites, mestizos constituted the main social element in demographic growth throughout the Hispanic period, especially in urban centers¹⁷, where they interacted with Spanish elites and came into contact with the innovations Europeans were introducing to the region. Most mestizos managed to enter a productive and working life in local and regional commerce, crafts, construction, low-level bureaucratic positions in municipal councils, and the militia. Many specialized in essential supplies for city residents.¹⁸ Thus, despite the prejudice and discrimination, thanks to their work and effort, they gradually improved their economic and social situation throughout the Hispanic period.

Among the developments introduced into the mestizo world, the use of Spanish surnames stands out. Some because they were children of Hispanic parents, those of African descent because they were slaves in Spanish households, and others because their indigenous mothers had received Spanish surnames.¹⁹ Furthermore, during the economic crisis that affected all Hispanic dominions during the 16th century,²⁰ many mestizos, as well as Spaniards impoverished by the crisis, emigrated to the eastern part of the province of Guatemala (the districts of Chiquimula and Acasaguastlán), where they dedicated themselves to cattle raising.²¹ This phenomenon caused the culture that the mestizos were developing in the region adjacent to the capital to expand eastward.

In the same century, and as another cause of the Spanish economic crisis, privateer attacks occurred in various parts of the Indies, especially in the ports. This forced the authorities to organize militias with civilian inhabitants. The only ones available to accept this work were mestizos. Thus, joining the militias became another way to rise in the social ladder during the Hispanic period.²²

There is abundant evidence of social advancement achieved through participation in the militias that protected Guatemala City. For example, in 1677, Juan de Alvarado, a "brown-skinned" (mulatto) native, who was already an ensign, was appointed captain of infantry in the Santo Domingo neighborhood of the capital, a position that would be held six years later by a Spaniard, Don Ignacio Coronado y Ulloa.²³ Other mestizos were also famous, such as the architects of mulatto origin Joseph de Porres, author of works such as the Cathedral, the churches of the Society of Jesus, Santa Teresa, and Belén in the city of Santiago; his son Diego de Porres, who designed the convents of Capuchinas, Santa Teresa, the temple of the School of Christ, the Fountain of the Sirens, and other works in the same city; his grandson Felipe de Porres, author of the temple for the Black Christ of Esquipulas, in Chiquimula; the brother of the latter, Diego José de Porres, architect of the cathedral of León, in Nicaragua, and Manuel de Porres (apparently great-grandson of Joseph), author of the parish church of Chiquimula²⁴. Among another group of mestizos was Felipe de Fuentes y Alvarado, mestizo son of one of the members of the council and brother of the chronicler Fuentes y Guzmán²⁵ who reached an important position in the army thanks to his father's influence. Furthermore, the Audiencias of Chile and Mexico accepted that mestizos whose origins were not "debased," that is, children of marriages recognized by the Catholic Church, would be on the same level as Spaniards, especially Creoles. Little by little, this phenomenon spread to other Hispanic provinces, such as Guatemala. Moreover, during the 18th century, during the Bourbon dynasty, some mestizos who had achieved economic success were able to purchase licenses called "Cédulas de Gracia," which made them legally equal to Spaniards.²⁶ According to a quote from Bishop Francisco de Paula García Peláez in the 18th century: "One sees in the pardos (mulattoes) a new, vigorous people, united in their interests, jealous of their preservation, and therefore cared for by the authorities of the land and the court itself."²⁷

¹⁷Compare with LUTZ, Christopher: Sociodemographic History of Santiago de Guatemala, 1541-1773. Monographic Series 2. Center for Regional Research on Mesoamerica, Antigua ¹⁸Guatemala, LUTZ. Op. 1982; Cit., MACLEOD, pp. Murdo: Socioeconomic History of Spanish Central America, 1520-1720. Piedra Santa Publishing House, Guatemala, 1980, and MÖRNER, Op. Cit. 266-353.

¹⁹GARCIA PELAEZ, Francisco de Paula: Memoirs for the History of the Ancient Kingdom of Guatemala. Goathemala Library, Vol. XXII. Society of Geography and History of Guatemala, 1972, page 31 productive,

²⁰This crisis was the product of the expulsion of Moors and other precious metals from the Americas to the Peninsula, the depopulation of Spain to emigrate to the West Indies and the consequent abandonment of productive activities. In Guatemala, the decline in cocoa exports to Mexico was deeply affected by competition from Guryaquil cocoa, which damaged the economy of the city of Santiago de Guatemala, especially the inhabitants of Spanish origin.

²¹MACLEOD, Op. Cit.

²²MÖRNER, Op. Cit., pages 8-19. MILLA, José: History of Central America. Central American Library of Social Sciences. Editorial Piedra Santa, 1976, pages 485-486.

²³AGCA A3.1 Leg. 798 Exp. 14803 f. 46 and A1.24 Leg. 1567 Exp. 10211

²⁴LUJÁN, Luis: The chief architect Diego de Porres. 1677-1741. Editorial Universitaria, Guatemala, 1982: pages 13-77.

²⁵LUTZ, Op. Cit. page 263.

²⁶MÖRNER, Op. Cit.

²⁷GARCÍA, Op. Cit.

After Independence, the social and economic position of many mestizos improved. According to some authors,²⁸ it was during the Conservative government, between 1838 and 1871, that mestizos rose not only in these aspects but also in the political sphere, especially because one of the presidents of that period, Rafael Carrera, was a mestizo. During the Conservative governments, most Guatemalan communities enjoyed a high degree of autonomy, probably because the main export product was grana, produced in the region of Amatitlán, Petapa, and Antigua Guatemala. Therefore, the Mayan communities developed their own cultural achievements, and so did the mestizos in the geographical areas they inhabited.

With the gradual social and economic rise of the mestizos, their clothing transformed, giving rise to a specific type, called mengala, which characterized both men and women for a long time.

Evolution of the mestizo regional costume

Numerous studies have been conducted on indigenous clothing, but few have focused on the attire of the mestizo population. As noted in the preceding paragraphs, during the Hispanic period, mestizos were required to wear clothing

distinct from that of the Spanish. However, since they were in constant contact with the Spanish, the mestizos adopted several aspects of European attire.

One of the main social aspects to highlight is that, throughout the Hispanic period, clothing became a social indicator.²⁹ The clothing worn determined their social standing. This was especially important for people of mixed-race origin, who did not wish to be classified as indigenous due to the significant tax burdens borne by natives. They could not dress as Spaniards due to legal impediments, but above all, due to the costs involved.

For Spaniards, it was essential to present a "dignified" appearance, commensurate with the "quality" of their social position, and this was demonstrated through their "good breeding," that is, through their education, affable manners, and courtesy, but above all through their opulent attire.³⁰ Some outfits were true personal treasures, especially those of women, which displayed precious stones, pearls, and gold and silver threads. Some women's dresses cost as much as two slaves or a typical house in the capital. Among the valuable objects mentioned in wills, it is common to find descriptions of the outfits and fabrics, as

as these were of great economic value. Below is a list of the valuable attire of a Guatemalan lady from the early 18th century:

Source: AGCA A1 Leg. 5343 Exp. 45044. Proceedings for divorce and separation from marriage filed by Juana Hurtado de Arria against Juan Bautista de Anciola, her husband. Year 1702.

Pledge	Value in pesos
Large filigree gold earrings, all studded with large pearls	200
Small pearl bracelets	50
A pearl rope with seven strands	76
Two strands of small gold beads	16
A gold rope with 36 emeralds and a crown in the middle with 25 pendants of large and small pearls	200
A gold and pearl breast jewel with the effigy of the Immaculate Conception	20
A gold and pearl lizard	25
Five gold rings with different stones	20
Four Flanders lace cloths, three fans, and two pairs of gloves with their headdresses	70
Eight silk footcloths of different colors with lace and lace trimmings	200
Eight Breton shirts with changeable sleeves and gathers, embroidered and drawn-thread, in different silk colors, and eight Breton and Rouen petticoats with lace edges.	160
Four unraveled half-cloths of gold and silk with large Flemish laces	120
Four linen handkerchiefs with only lace and three unraveled with laces and lace	100
Four pairs of silk stockings of different colors, six pairs of row socks	18
A quesquemil and a jacket of worked rengue of colored silk, the jacket trimmed with fine lace and the quesquemil in large laces	90
Three mantillas, green, red, lined with colored taffetas, and a cut for a mantilla with 7 yards of wool and the same of pink and green taffeta, with its lace and trimmings	100
Mantilla of Colombian baize with three trimmings of false silver on blue taffeta	45
Two mantles with laces, one small and the other large, half a yard long	112
Four new china skirts	36
A dress of double black taffeta, with a skirt and plain jacket	24
A skirt dress with black lace	50
A red skirt dress with gold and silver flowers and a green cloth jacket trimmed with white lace	160
A skirt dress made of Mexican moose cloth with gold clove flowers, a purple cloth jacket trimmed with lace and gold fringe	170
Six trunks, a dress box and four small chests with locks and keys, two ebony and bone inlaid desks with their small tables and two Baby Jesus figures	70
A harp and a vihuela	18

²⁸Among many others, see: CASAUS, Marta: Guatemala, Lineage and Racism. Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences, 1992.

²⁹SANCHIZ, Pilar: The Society of Santiago in the 16th Century. Values and Interethnic Relations. In: General History of Guatemala, Volume II. Asociación de Amigos del País, Foundation for Culture and Development, Guatemala, 1994, pages 241-243.

³⁰Among the causes of eastward migration in the 17th century, it is possible that the lack of resources to maintain a privileged status through clothing motivated the relocation of several impoverished Spaniards.

To estimate the comparative value of some pieces, the same lady owned slaves, valued at 300 pesos each. In 1711, another person received an inheritance in San Miguel, El Salvador. Among the properties, located in the main indigo producing area, were "a dwelling house on this San José estate, roofed with tiles, 30 yards long and 13 yards wide, with well-worked master walls, with doors and windows, with two tile cantilevers, one the length of the house and the other at the rear, [valued at] 800 pesos... A house covered with tiles, with adobe walls, 20 yards long and 7 yards wide, with its cantilever at the rear, which was valued by the master mason at 200 pesos, which serves as a pantry... Two indigo dye workshops, which are made up of four rooms, two for soaking and two for beating, which are water with its wheel, well worked, which the appraisers, with the master mason, valued at 800 pesos in total."³¹

Thus, a house of 27 by Six meters long, it could be purchased with part of the attire of a Spanish elite lady, as well as two indigo mills, the kingdom's main export. With these considerations, it's obvious that, even if legislation didn't prohibit mestizas from dressing in Spanish style, they could hardly have dressed like one. Something similar must have occurred with the men.

According to Pilar Sanchiz Ochoa, in the 16th century men engaged in crafts wore "a dress of colored cloth from Mexico, a cape, breeches, a jacket and boots, a hat and a doublet." Women in the trades and merchants wore "a cloak and skirt of local cloth." On the other hand, Indians and blacks dressed in the "Indian fashion": breeches and a shirt for men; and a skirt or skirt and a güipil for women."³² That is to say, there was little difference between indigenous people and mestizos.

The slaves' clothing was somewhat different³³: "The men wore a raw twine cotton and second-hand cloth breeches, lined with blanket, and a jacket. In addition, a shirt, a jerga sash, a straw hat if needed, and a headcloth. Women were entitled to receive annually two cuts of petticoat, two huipiles, two blanket fustians, a blanket, a mantilla, two linen handkerchiefs and two sashes, sandals, and a jacket." Unlike the artisans, "during the festivals

the men wore livery, velvet pants, a fine wool shirt, a red handkerchief around their necks, a wool hat, and a twine handcloth. Slaves had another dress with a red petticoat, a güipil with silk and lace bows, a silk scarf that they wore when they got married, a sash, earrings, chachales, and a piece of cloth that they wore on their heads to attend mass. In other words, slaves looked more luxurious than free mestizos and could wear exotic materials such as expensive silk on holidays. Even at that time, there was a taste for shiny fabrics and braided ornaments.

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, a transformation took place that corresponded to the economic possibilities of the mestizos and the influences they received from Europe, as well as the gradual disappearance of the condition of slavery for the Afro-descendant population. The constant introduction of clothing from Europe, as well as the arrival of elite Spanish people, such as presidents and judges with their respective families, incorporated the most recent garments in vogue in Europe and other parts of the Indian domination. Spanish costumes were influenced by various Cultural traditions. Men generally wore trousers and shirts, while women wore long dresses. For example, in Ávila, wide, brightly colored skirts were worn; in Salamanca, a silk bodice, shawl, and apron were used; in Galicia, the use of a large apron and a denque covering the shoulders and chest was prominent; and in Mallorca, the Arab influence was evident in a hood covering the head, in addition to the use of a scarf, a stiff bodice, elbow-length sleeves, and a cotton or batiste skirt. Furthermore, during the reign of the Habsburg family, originally from Austria, it is likely that Central European customs were introduced among the elites, such as the use of aprons and puffed sleeves on women's clothing.³⁴

It is likely that all these influences reached the region of Guatemala with the immigrants and were adapted by the mestizos, since the prohibition for Afro-descendants to dress as Spaniards consisted of the use of gold, pearls and, above all, mantles.³⁵

Among the elites, the 17th and 18th centuries were

³¹AGCA A1 Leg. 1578 Exp. 10222 Book of the Chancery, 1711. January 24: title of confirmation of 7 caballerías of land and 11 cuartas of it in favor of María Simona de Amaya resident of the city of San Miguel.

³²SANCHIZ, Op. Cit.

³³PALOMO, Beatriz: *Slave: Black Slaves*. In: General History of Guatemala. Volume II. Association of Friends of the Country, Foundation for Culture and Development, Guatemala, 1995, page 143.

³⁴RACINET, Albert: *History of clothing*. Editorial Libsa, Madrid, 1990, pages 290-296.

³⁵SOLÓRZANO, Op. Cit., page 444.

marked by French influence on clothing, especially when the Bourbon family inherited the Spanish throne. For example, Infanta Maria Theresa of Austria, daughter of Philip IV and married to Louis XIV of France, wore dresses with wide sleeves for official portraits, at the time when the tailors Montauron and Candale made them fashionable. In the 18th century, during the reigns of Louis XV and Louis XVI, relatives of Charles III of Spain, crinolines increased the volume of skirts and the use of the shawl became popular.³⁶ During the Independence era, European fashion became known as the First Empire, that of Napoleon Bonaparte. In keeping with the standards of the time, a direct consequence of the Enlightenment, it was inspired by classic suits, thus striving for simplicity. Men's attire saw the widespread use of shirts, trousers, vests, and jackets, and the beginning of the popularity of the tie.³⁷ Women's attire simplified its shapes, abandoning the crinoline.

However, skirts soon regained fullness.³⁸ By 1830, skirts had already regained their fullness, and after 1840, thanks to industrial processes, crinolines made them much fuller. Also around 1830, panties and bloomers appeared, making crinoline petticoats more comfortable to wear. Furthermore, the use of corsets to reduce the waist became widespread. In men's suits, English-style trousers became common.³⁹

Around 1860, during the Second French Empire, women's suits featured the fullest skirts ever,⁴⁰ and a year earlier, the use of the mantilla had become widespread. As for men's suits, by 1870 the English-style pattern of trousers, shirt, waistcoat, and jacket had been established,⁴¹ as had the widespread use of the tie.

All these influences reached Guatemala thanks to the opening of trade with England, as well as the arrival of travelers and merchants. It is assumed that the Belgian colony established in Santo Tomás de Castilla in the mid-19th century would have directly introduced these customs into local clothing, especially when, after the colony failed, many of its members settled in the capital. In addition to this significant European presence in contact with the mestizos, there were other, less numerous, migrations that settled in places inhabited by mestizos.

Furthermore, British industrialization and commercialization made the prices of many fabrics affordable to a larger part of the population. Silk, for example, was no longer an exclusive object of the elite. In addition, other fabrics became popular, with durability and quality unsurpassed by local workshops. This phenomenon included designs on certain garments, especially blouses. The influence is even found in Mayan regional costumes,⁴² so it was not foreign to mestizo people.

In any case, it is documented that Mexican women in the 19th century wore silk mantillas and skirts; mantillas of white or black silk, embroidered in bright colors, although the majority wore blue and white wool; they did not wear stockings but they did wear satin slippers⁴³, in shapes very similar to those of the Guatemalan mengalas⁴⁴.

Thus, the Spanish custom of wearing wide skirts, like those of Salamanca for example, combined with the easy acquisition of crinolines and other fabrics, the taste for colorful fabrics, the fashionable use of French-style lace and its affordable cost, the possibility of emulating the elites and the ease of contacts with other cultural groups led, among the mestizos, to the development of the regional women's costume known as mengala, which had already become widespread by 1890⁴⁵. For its part, the widespread

³⁶RACINET, Op. Cit., pp. 208-326.

³⁷According to some sources, the word "cravat" derives from Croatian, since Louis XIV's mercenaries, from that region, would have used it and the French monarch would have borrowed it from them.

³⁸It was the era of the so-called Victorian morality, because it coincided with the reign of Victoria in England, as well as with the expansion of the British Empire. Apparently, female legs were a cause of sin in men, so they tried to hide them with full skirts.

³⁹BIGELOW, Marybelle: *Fashion in History*, Burgess Publishing Co. Minneapolis, 1979, pp. 238-264.

⁴⁰It is said that during the pregnancy of the French empress, Eugenia Montijo, wife of Napoleon III, the lady concealed the growth of her belly by increasing the number of crinoline petticoats.

⁴¹BIGELOW, Op. Cit.

⁴²For example, in the second half of the 19th century in the K'iche' community of Santa Cruz del Quiché, a blouse of Western design, similar to that worn by the mengalas, was introduced at the same time as the apron, only this one was made of corte fabric while the blouses had not only the design but the fabric as well. Both garments were decorated with lace. Something similar occurred in the Ch'orti' communities of Chiquimula. As reported by DARY, Claudia: *Chortis, Blacks and Ladinos of San Miguel Gualán, Zacapa*. An ethnohistorical perspective. *La Tradición Popular Bulletin* No. 103, Center for Folkloric Studies, USAC, 1995, page 37, the informants indicated that, years ago, cortes and huipiles were used, but that the new costume became popular around 1920. According to their description, "the indigenous women of the most traditional villages - Tunucó (Arriba y Abajo), La Arada, Piedra Parada and Canaparé - made their blouses, which display many ornaments, ribbons and ribbons, embroidery, lace and ruffles," quite similar and colorful to those of the mengalas. In the opinion of the author of this article, it is likely that the introduction of these innovations among the Ch'orti' must have also begun at the end of the 19th century, when it occurred among the K'iche'. It is likely that it was introduced as a means of demonstrating the economic success of the wearers.

⁴³RACINET, Op. Cit., page 74

⁴⁴In Mexico, French influence increased during the reign of Emperor Maximilian (1864-1867), with the arrival of numerous elite people who brought French customs into fashion, especially crinolines, flounces, necklines, and hairstyles with braids on both sides of the head, as worn by the court of Empress Eugenia Montijo.

⁴⁵SAMAYOA, Op. Cit., page 183.

use of English-style garments, as well as the possibility of acquiring resistant fabrics, gave rise to the mengala men's costume.

The Mengalas, yesterday and today

According to Rubén Reina, the name mengala derived from Bengal, a city in India that would have given its name to a type of fabric. Although it could also allude to the fact that it was a gala dress, ostentatious and striking.⁴⁶ This is inferred from the fact that, according to some informants, the name mengala alludes to the voluminous sleeves, puffed out thanks to the fact that they are gathered during the sewing process of the fabric.⁴⁷ This characteristic is known in Guatemala as "agüicoyada," meaning that it is shaped like a güicoy or pumpkin. By extension, the male relatives of the mengalas were the "mengala men." In the description by the aforementioned Rubén Reina, the people who wore the regional costume were "Indianized Spaniards"⁴⁸:

"Women are dedicated to selling merchandise in Chinautla and in the city markets⁴⁹ and to sewing indigenous dresses. Most men have adopted manual skills; only a few work according to the milpero pattern"⁵⁰.

A little further on, the researcher observed that:

"Despite their differences, it should be noted that the Mengalas act naturally and freely within the indigenous social circle, and the women do not hesitate to actually join with "civilized" Indians. The Mengalas learn the Pokomam language and speak it fluently; they dance like Indians and generally act like Indians. To a much greater extent than the Ladinos, they establish a series of ties, through the ceremonial kinship system, as godparents to a greater number of Indians, and they do not hesitate to seek out a progressive Indian to serve as godfather to their children if their economic level and social status are high; these are the same criteria used by the Indians. On the other hand, the Mengalas also have cultural bases for interacting with the Ladinos by virtue of

their common Spanish heritage: they speak Spanish as their mother tongue."

In the author's opinion:

"It is significant that the Mengala families in Chinautla are ancient, and descendants of the Spanish families who lived in the town. While they were once leaders and models of progress, they were later ruined, first economically as a result of depressions and political maneuvering, and then, in the present, they have been surpassed in terms of urban sophistication."

What Reina failed to understand at the time was that the Mengalas were, in fact, mestizos descended from the inhabitants who, in the 16th and 17th centuries, formed their own culture, which expanded and strengthened in the 19th century, when they adopted their regional attire. In the mid-20th century, the researcher observed:

"Numerically, the Mengalas in Chinautla are rapidly declining, and in national terms, they are not always known or classified under the name of Mengala, but rather as the lower class Ladino or, mistakenly, as Indians who are crossing the ethnic line. What is important, however, is the fact that the Mengalas of Chinautla continue to maintain their own lifestyle and wish to die on the land they love as much as the Indians. They do not live there as 'guests,' but rather feel and act as hosts or owners."

From the second half of the 19th century to the mid-20th century, Mengala costumes were worn throughout the mestizo region, from the capital to Chiquimula, especially in the Petapa and Amatitlán regions. The women's costume consisted of several pieces:

a) A full, ankle-length skirt tied at the waist with two ribbons. It was generally made of brightly colored fabrics. Fabrics used included crepe, jersey, zephyr, crape, raw silk, shanto, and flowered-etamine and plain silk.

⁴⁶A similar opinion is held by SAMAYOA, Op. Cit., p. 181, who defines mengala as "the contraction of menga and gala, or a shiny and elegant dress."

⁴⁷Information provided by historian Manuel Morales Montenegro, November 2006.

⁴⁸REINA, Op. Cit., p. 47.

⁴⁹Author's note: The typical characteristics of the mengalas can be seen in most of the regatonas (author's bold), or women skilled in haggling who serve as merchants and intermediaries in the city's markets.

⁵⁰REINA, Op. Cit., p. 55.

shanto, and flowered etamine and plain silk.⁵¹

b) Chemise or cotton, with puffed sleeves reaching the elbow or wrist, with bibs decorated with lace or tucks. They were also made in bright colors, in fabrics such as plain or - flowered etamine, Ottoman, burato, and others.

c) Apron for the front of the skirt. They were made from bright fabrics and decorated with lace or tucks.

d) Petticoats or skirts to give volume to the skirt. Usually three were used: one starched, to achieve volume, and two for the wearer's comfort.

e) Bustle, which was the popular version of the corset, although without the whalebone, with buttons in the front. It was usually made of woven fabric.

f) Leg breeches, from the waist to the ankles. They were usually made of woven fabric and some were decorated with lace.

g) Thread and silk stockings.

h) Shawls, mantles, and scarves to cover at night or in cold weather. They were usually black. The most expensive ones came from El Salvador, Mexico, and Spain.

i) The hair was arranged in two braids, one on each side, with a path to the center of the head. The braids were intertwined with fabric ribbons or brightly colored ribbons.

j) Boots as footwear, with lugs at the front and back. Although many Mengalas went barefoot.

k) Large necklaces and earrings, preferably gold and silver.

l) Rouge or blush applied in dots to the cheeks.⁵²

The men's attire, on the other hand, was much simpler:

a) Denim or canvas trousers.

b) Straw-colored cotton shirt.

c) Cotton or cotton undershirt.

d) Long underpants, mid-calf, tied with ribbons.

e) Most people did not wear shoes.

The Western influence is more than evident when looking at the pieces of mengala clothing: the local variant of the corset, bloomers, panties, as well as the rest of the garments, which demonstrates their incorporation into mestizo culture as an adaptation of the European customs introduced in the 19th century.

Doña Ofelia Álvarez⁵³, a former seamstress in the Landívar colony, who worked making costumes for the mengalas of the Landívar colony, La Verbena, Majadas, the Hippodrome, San Antonio La Paz, Fraijanes, Amatitlán and San José Pinula, between 1947 and 1952, remembers how mengala costumes were made:

"For the skirt, three and a half yards of fabric were needed; if it was boxy⁵⁴, it could also be pleated or pleated. Satin and silk were used. They were made with a vueluda; to make it fuller, four yards were needed. They were decorated with lace and tucks. To tie the skirt, a belt was used, which was made of small bands of ribbon tied to one side, usually the left. In addition to the sash, a belt was used."

She also describes the other parts of the garment:

"For the blouse, two yards were used, with a güicoy sleeve. The fabric cost Q2.5 per yard, the simple one Q0.75. The tailoring Q0.80. In Cairo, fabrics were found for Q10 and Q12, which were the most expensive. For the blouse, lace was added to the hem. The cuff was mid-elbow wide, which closed with a button, with a güicoy sleeve, it had six buttons and reached to the hip. It was tucked into the skirt. For the sleeve, folded esparto weave shoulder pads were used; 1/4 of a yard was used. Some collars were golita, that is, a round, half-bell-shaped collar with lace. The apron was made of brightly colored or white embroidered strips. A pink dress with a white apron was worn, for example. A gabacha with wide lace straps could also be worn, with a bib and wide straps and ribbons tied in the back."

It's worth noting that the apron wasn't just a piece of clothing for practical purposes or to keep the skirt clean. It was a part of the outfit; going out without it was like going out "half-dressed." The story continues:

⁵¹SAMAYOA, Op. Cit., page 181.

⁵²It should be remembered that one of the uses for cochineal was makeup, and the Mengalas lived precisely in the cochineal-producing region. Such was the importance of this crop that even the poet José Joaquín Palma included it in the Guatemalan National Anthem.

⁵³Interview granted on September 12, 2006.

⁵⁴Cajita: way of sewing fabric to shape the hip (informant's note).

"The fustian was made from an embroidered strip and a tuck. The embroidered strip was thick with openwork and embroidered designs. The fabric was Ottoman (like Dacron). The fustian required three yards, with a tuck, plus a visible embroidered strip. Three fustians were used: two plain ones and one with an embroidered strip. Everything was bought at the Placita, in front of City Hall: the strips and the buttons."

Continuing with the underwear:

"The corset didn't have a whalebone (that's why it wasn't a corset). It was put on with buttons or ribbons, it was made of ottoman or zephyr, and the blouse was worn over it. The underpants were like seeing shorts, made of ottoman. The stockings were thick thread, in strong colors like brown, pink, black. They were bought at Mont Blanc or at the Market. The manta was bought at Cantel. Those with more money used bipiur, which was finer lace with fine little flowers for decoration, it was expensive. It was sold by Misses Arimany and Montoya on Sixth Avenue, it cost Q 0.50 a yard."

As for accessories:

"They wore low shoes with buckles, white, black, or brown. White was the favorite. Although most went barefoot or in sandals. Some wore half boots, tied in front with a leather cord, but it wasn't enough; others wore them with buttons on one side. Their hair was worn in large braids, two with colorful bows, facing forward. They wore velvet or ribbon pendants with cameos and long earrings. They also wore a brightly colored rebozo or shawl, made of satin or silk and cotton, with shiny bricho thread."

The informant recalls that: "They were made as premieres for Christmas and Easter. To have them on time, they were made a month in advance. A suit took about two days of work; first the skirt was made, then the blouse."

The men's suit was, as described, much simpler: "The men wore tight canvas pants, black or blue. The long-sleeved shirt, white or in bright colors, such as pink or light blue, was Ottoman and common fabrics.

Some had tucks. They wore a small vest, almost entirely black, made of common fabrics, with a buckle in the back. They didn't wear a tie. They wore a vicuña hat (which was similar to felt). For footwear, they wore boots, laced shoes, and half boots, but most went barefoot. Although I never made them, I saw in the markets the underpants with strings at the top and bottom (longer than shorts), with a fly, which were bought at the market, with buttons or tied with two-way ribbons."

Finally, the informant recalls that:

"The mengalas were seen at festivals, at gatherings, and especially at the brotherhoods. Of the farm employees, I remember Margarita and Guillermo, who were barefoot. Their greeting to my father, who was the owner of the farm (located in San José Pinula), was with their arms crossed, they would take off their hats, kneel, and my father would place his hand on their head; they showed great respect."

The mengalas that can be seen today have changed considerably. Some older women can be seen who still wear the mengala dress from the second half of the 20th century, such as Mrs. Marta Jiménez, her sister María Elena Jiménez, and Mrs. Adelaida García, in the village of San José Tablón, in Villa Canales.⁵⁵

From what could be observed, the dress transformed into a dress made of brightly colored printed fabrics. The part corresponding to the skirt is wide and requires the use of a petticoat. The torso still retains tuck and lace decoration, although smaller than in the old ones. The sleeves, the characteristic element that gave them their name, are still made with agüicoyadas (a type of sleeve), although with less volume than in the past.

According to some informants, the distribution of fabrics in small towns was carried out, until 20 or 30 years ago, by retail sellers who had trouble with the fabrics.⁵⁶ Thus, it was known who had the economic means to purchase the fabrics when these sellers, known as "merchants," arrived. The sellers satisfied the demand for bright colors and stocked up in the capital's warehouses.

⁵⁵There are also references to several women wearing the new mengala dress in the village of El Tablón, Villa Nueva.

⁵⁶Data provided by historian Manuel Morales, who compiled it in the village of Sansur, municipality of Palencia, in the department of Guatemala.

The apron or gabacha, an indispensable part of the attire, cannot be missing. One of the informants, to be photographed, changed out of her gabacha to look appropriate. They are still decorated with lace and are as ornate as the rest of the costume. This indicates the great importance of the garment, which demonstrates both dedication to work and feminine care. The hairstyle with a center part and elaborate braiding have been preserved. Footwear does not appear to be indispensable. Informants know of other women who go barefoot during their daily work and wear shoes on special occasions.

Among men, the use of canvas pants and plaid or solid-color shirts became widespread, but men almost universally wear footwear: boots and ankle boots, although sneakers can be seen, probably due to their cost.

The transformations that have taken place in the mengala costume are indicative of the cultural changes to which the population is exposed.

However, it's noteworthy that modern variations of the mestizo regional costume are still in use so close to the capital (no more than 30 kilometers). It's worth noting that culture isn't static but dynamic.

People cannot be frozen in time and remain identical for extended periods. Each generation and each individual introduces the cultural innovations they deem most appropriate. Thus, the Mengalas transformed throughout the 20th century, giving rise to another form of interbreeding that remains prevalent in the regions inhabited by their ancestors for almost half a millennium, as can be observed in villages in the department of Guatemala, in the eastern part of the country, in the markets of the capital, and in many other places. How can these people be identified? Easily: by the use of their regional costume, which has evolved from the ancient Mengala to the current costume and allows them to maintain the identity of a people facing the future without forgetting their past and their traditions.



1. Young women and a girl wearing a mengala dress in the late 19th or early 20th century. Note the angled lace, "Early Empire style," and the tucks on the skirt, as well as the center-parted hair, the girl's sleeves, and the lace on the doll's dress (Courtesy of REX Photo).



2. Mengala women heading to the Calvario Church, Guatemala City. Anonymous photograph, early 20th century.



3. Ancient mengala women in front of the San Francisco Church, Guatemala City. Anonymous photograph, early 20th century.



4. Barefoot mengala woman and children in an early 20th century dress, around the 1920s. By then, the women's dress had been simplified and the hemline had been raised. The men's dress features gabacha trousers and a shirt (Private collection).



5. Mengala men, wearing flip-flops or shoes, circa 1920s (Private collection).



The Mengalas at the train station. Standing from left to right: Norma Carballo, Ch., Ninette Santos A., Aracely del C. Villatoro S., Lucrecia Ovalle G(+), Corina Peralta Q. Seated from left to right: Ninette Marroquín H., Normal González, and Delia Dávila C. (Photograph by Ricardo Andrade)

6. Mengala women in folklore, taken from the book *Amatitlán* (Traditions) by Judith Samayoa de Pineda.



7. Doña Marta Jiménez, mengala woman in San José El Tablón (Photo by Anibal Chajón, April 2007).



8. Doña María Elena Jiménez, mengala woman in San José El Tablón (Photo by Anibal Chajón, April 2007).



9. Doña Adelaida García, mengala woman in San José El Tablón (Photo by Anibal Chajón, April 2007).

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