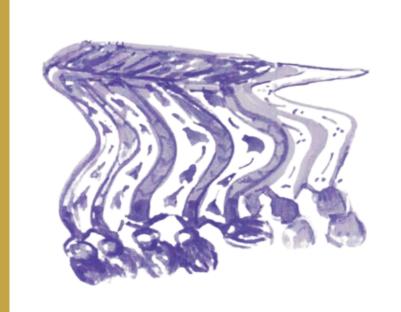


Popular Tradition

Ethnography of the perrajes. Cuyotenango, Suchitepequez, Guatemala.

Deyvid Paul Molina







Ethnography of the *perrajes*. Cuyotenango, Suchitepequez, Guatemala.



Deyvid Molina

Introduction

Geography and History



Guatemala is a rich country in the elaboration of traditional weavings made by the skilled hands of the artists and artisans from the different indigenous groups in the country.

Generally, while talking about guatemalan indigenous weavings these are associated with the region of the western highlands and the verapaces; nonetheless, in the bocacosta and the country's southern coast still have populations in which textiles are made, such is the case of the Cuyotenango municipality in the department of Suchitepequez in which they produce and commercialize cotton and wool perrajes, and it is an activity eminently carried out by women.

The main focus of this article is to show a part of Cuyotenango's popular handiwork, as it is the elaboration of traditional perrajes; also to present aspects of the life of one of the bearers of the traditional popular culture of the Cuyoteca people, such is the case of Benigna Yes Serech a woman who although is no longer directly involved in the manufacture of said clothing, for more than 50 years her job as and it is recognised as one of the best and most representative of this coastal population.



Cuyotenango is one of the 20 municipalities that make up the department of Suchitepequez, with a territorial extension of 238 kms²., it is limited to the north with San Francisco Zapotitlán as well as to the East is Mazatenango in the department of Suchitepequez to the south with Mazatenango and to the west with San Andrés Villa Seca and Retalhuleu, both municipalities of this department.

The main town is located 334 meters above sea level, with a warm climate.

The municipality is politically and administratively divided in: 1 village which is the municipal seat of Cuyotenango as well as 4 villages or



Coat of Arms of Cuyotenango

cantons which are Chacalté Aparicio, Chacalté Sis, Guachipilín and La Máquina. It is crossed by 16 rivers, among which the most important are the Besá, Icpan and the Sis; also within the population there are 16 streams, 6 gorges, 2 lakes and 5 ponds. It also has 1 region, 1 experimental center, 1 agricultural micro-parceling, 5 agricultural subdivisions, 2 estates, 66 farms and 32 plantations. It also has the archaeological sites of Cuyotenango and Trapiche Grande.

It is 8 kilometers from the city of Mazatenango, which is the departmental capital and 166 kilometers from the capital city by paved road.

Demography and Economy



According to the 10th population census and the 5th housing census, Cuyotenango has 31,465, 49.9% of whom are indigenous, and the predominant regional lenguaje is K'iche'.

This municipality produces coffee, corn, cocoa seed, bananas, zacatón, grain, fruit, sugar cane, lemon tea, citronella. Coffee is the main crop for which there are wet and dry mills for its production.

The population possess all of the basic public services: drinking water, electric energy, public and private schools, institutes, health centers, post and telegraph office, parish church, evangelical chapel, extra-urban transportation service that communicates with Mazatenango, Guatemala City, its villages and

neighboring municipalities; it also has a permanent market.

History



The old name of Cuyotenango was Ah Yabacoj, of the K'iche' "yaba" which means sick and "coj" which means lion or puma; which could be translated as "sick lion". They changed its name with the arrival of the Spaniards for the náhuatl Coyotl-tenan-co that means "at the coyote fence or wall"; with the passage of time the name was changed to what it is currently known as: Cuyotenango.

Little is known about the prehispanic past of this community; nevertheless it is mentioned in some post-conquest indigenous chronicles for example in *Título Real de don Francisco Izquin Nehaib* (Royal Title of don Francisco Izquin Nehaib), dated 1558.

The region of Suchitepequez or Xochilteetl ("flowery mountain" in Nahuatl) put up strong resistance to the Spanish conquest, which was commanded by Gonzalo and Jorge de Alvarado, Pedro Alvarado's brothers.

Once the region was conquered, the indigenous people were reduced to villages, a task in which the religious orders that accompanied the conquerors participated. Cuyotenango was promoted as head of parish in the year of 1565 and established as a village by the bishop Bernardino de Villalpando in 1567.

In the "Description of the Zapotitlán province" (as the region of Suchitepequez

and Retalhuleu were known in the colony) dated 22nd of november of 1579, mayor Juan de Estrada located Cuyotenango on the royal road that led along the coast from the city of Santiago of Guatemala to Soconusco. Cuyotenango was an important village that thrived for its big extensions of cocoa plantations.

It appears with the name of San Gaspar Cuyotenango in the official report submitted in 1735 to the King of Spain by the mayor of Suchitepequez, Mr. Gabriel Olavarrieta.

Pedro Cortés Larraz arrived y Cuyotenango in 1770 from the paris of Mazatenango, and he indicated that from Mazatenango to Cuyotenango there are 3 leagues; he also pointed out that "the town of Cuyotenango is the head of the parish is the head of the parish, with three annexes: the 1st San André, 2nd, San Martín and 3rd, San Felipe". It should be noted that these three villages are known today as the municipalities of San Andrés Villa Seca, San Martín Zapotitlán and San Felipe, all located in the department of Retalhuleu. The archbishop Cortés y Larraz indicated that in the town of Cuyotenango lived 510 indigenous families with 1851 people; and 108 ladino families with 542 members; which results in a total of 2393 people living in the municipality at that time.

In relation with the geographical and population aspect the archbishop said that "the town of Cuyotenango is located in the plain; it is grown, it has formed streets and some good houses and covered in tile; all of the territory is fertile and flat; the crops

that they produce are corn, cotton and cocoa seeds. There is nudity as in the antecedent (Mazatenango), so the men walk around naked and the women are few; they are dressed; they speak three languages, K'iche', Kaccquiquel and Sotogil, and most of them understand and speak Spanish''².

The prelate continues his tale and mentions that the main scandals that occurred in the town were drunkenness and concubinage; the indigenous people also believed in the existence of supernatural birds (nahuales). This is one of the longest colonial chronicles that refer to the historical past of Cuyotenango.

Around the year of 1800, Domingo Juarros in his work "Compendio de la Historia de la ciudad de Guatemala" (Summary of the History of Guatemala City) indicates that Cuyotenango was the head of the parish, belonging to the Suchitepequez Party, adding that this parish had 3 churches, 19 brotherhoods, 2299 parishioners and that their the mother tongue was K'iche'.

It appears along with the parish of the same name in the "Estado de Curatos del Arzobispado de Guatemala del Real Tribunal y Audiencia de la Contraloría de Cuentas" (State of Parishes of the Archbishop of Guatemala from the Royal Tribunal and Audience of the Comptroller of Accounts) with the name of Santos Reyes Cuyotenango of the 8th of july of 1806.

Cuyotenango appears as the head of the circuit in 1826 in relation to the distribution of the towns of the State of

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Ortés y Larraz, Pedro. Descripción Geográfico Moral de la diócesis de Guatemala. Tomo 1 Tipografía Nacional. Guatemala 1958, pág. 254

² *Idem.* pág. 255.

Guatemala for the administration of justice.

The municipal capital was elevated to the rank of village according to decree No. 63 of the National Constituent Assembly on October 29th, 1826.

Some aspects of the Cuyoteca Traditional Popular Culture



Festive Calendar

The community celebrates: Epiphany, Señor de Esquipulas, Holy Week, Corpus Christi, the Day of the Cross, Christmas, All Saint's Day, The Just Judge and in the village of La Máquina, St. Joseph is commemorated on March 19th.

The titular festival is celebrated from January 13th to 17th in honor of the Black Christ of Esquipulas, according to folklorist Góver Portillo this festivity is held "because years ago there was a couple that did not have kids that made a visit to Esquipulas so that He could help them and as they were granted their request in gratitude they bought a Black Christ in Esquipulas and a Virgin Mary that hey offered to the town of Santos Reyes"³.

Other festivities of major importance in Cuyotenango is the day of the Epiphany which is celebrated from January 5th to the 7th, these invocations are the patron saints of the indigenous community.

³ Portillo Farfán, Góver Anibal. **El folklore en Suchitepéquez.** Impresos F.G., Guatemala, 1991, pág. 107.

During the festivities there are folkloric, sport, social and religious activities, as well as the coronation of the representatives of the local beauty.

Dances

They practice the following dances: the dance of the conquest, the Moorish dance, dance of the Giants or Gasparines which is made during the festivity of Corpus Christi; the dance of the Tunes and the Güegüechos.

Confraternities

There are five confraternities and they are: Santos Reyes (the Three Kings day, also known as the Epiphany), Santo Rosario (Saint Rosary), Santo de la Cruz (Saint of the Cross), Virgen Santa Teresa (Virgin St. Theresa) and the Virgen de Concepción (Virgin of Conception).

Oral Tradition

In Cuyotenango stories can be heard about the Llorona, the Elf, the Siguanaba, the Cadena and the legend of the enchanted pond.

Art and Popular Handiwork

They make bricks and clay tiles, wooden furniture, leather products, rigging, musical instruments and cotton fabrics: panela, essential oils (lemon tea and citronella) chocolate and are produced. The traditional food is the chojín made from beef and beef ribs, chayotes, cabbage, flour, castile pepper, carrots, tomatoes, achiote, Cobán chilli; this dish is served in small bowls accompanied by white tamales and Suchiles drink (fermented corn and pineapple drink). They also eat iguana in *iguashte*, which is a recipe made from squash seeds and seasoned with spices.

Regional Attire

The use of traditional clothing in men has been lost almost completely; the traditional attire of the Cuyotecos consisted of large underpants made of white coarse cloth tied at the waist with pitas, a cloth or tzute over the shoulders and a sash on the waist. Women still keep their regional attire but these tends to disappear especially in the newer generations; women's clothing is composed of a mottled corte (traditional dress) in different colors, although for especial festivities a black corte with white mottle is preferred, the corte is worn overlapped with a bow or "chongo" at the waist; a blouse made in a variety of fabrics and designs, but the preferred ones for special occasions are the white blouses with puffed sleeves and adorned with lace and sequins; they compliment the attire with a perraje (which is a cotton blanket of a variety of colors) and a cloth or tzute locally manufactured; older women wear their hair coiled and tied in a knot on the top of their heads and many are barefoot or wear sandals.

Something about cuyoteco perrajes



It is known in Guatemala with the name *perraje* what in other countries is called a shawl. According to Italo Morales Hidalgo two types of perrajes exist, the traditional ones, which are those that have an indigenous origin and those of Spaniard influence; generally, the first ones usually

have a dimension of 54 centimeters wide by two meters long; they have multicolor stripes in the weft with interspersed jasper. While the latter "measure 1.75 meters long and 74 centimeters wide on average; the jaspers alternate with brightly colored stripes longitudinally, that is, only in the warp and are made on looms to the waist; they are finished at both ends with macramé knots and are decorated with beautiful balls of brightly colored wool yarn". The same author refers to Cuyotenango as the main producer of perrajes.



Mrs. Benigna Yes Serech, showing the way in which the marbled work is placed for the elaboration of the perraje.

Very little is known about the perrajes of the country's south region. In 1935, northamerican anthropologist Lila O'Neale visited Guatemala went through more than 100 communities where she researched and compiled textile pieces, The result of

⁴ Morales Hidalgo, Italo. **La situación del jaspe en Guatemala.** Sub-Centro Regional de Artesanías y Artes Populares, Guatemala, 1984, pág. 28.

her investigation, is the work "Tejidos de los Altiplanos de Guatemala" (Weavings from the Highlands of Guatemala); said author makes reference to the perrajes made in Mazatenango and points out that in not only in this population, but also in other distant communities such as Cobán and San Pedro Carchá, Alta Verapaz as well as in Santa Lucía Utatlán in the department of Sololá; a decade later while Lilly de John Osborne was studying the techniques used in the jasper she mentions she also mentioned the mazateco perrajes which were made using a very simple jasper technique, she also highlights that "In this place it is a very detailed art, that attracts the attention of those who study it, especially the *merino* perraje incorporates lots or wool"5.

Without a doubt both authors referred to Cuyotenango's perrajes that by fate were found in Mazatenango, taking into account the closeness between both communities; however, more detailed and analytical studies on this issue are needed.

Currently, the perraje is seen as a symbol of pre-eminence and it is imposed on the indigenous queens of Suchitepequez, such is the case of "Nim Ali Re Xóchiltepetl" who is the indigenous representative of the department.

⁵ Jongh Osborne, Lilly de. "La técnica del jaspe en Guatemala". En **Anales de la Sociedad de Geografía e Historia.** Tomo XX N. 1. Tipografía Nacional, Guatemala, 1945, pág. 19.

Mrs. Benigna Yes Serech (biographical aspects)



Mrs. Yes Serech was born in Cuyotenango on May 25th of 1925, her maternal language is the K'iche which she calls "natural" and she can also speak spanish.

Her mother and aunt dedicated themselves to weaving perrajes and from them she learned the trade through observation "I only saw and after that I learned, I only paid attention how they were doing it" she affirms.

When she was a child, with the company of her siblings they dedicated themselves to working on the field, while their mother during her free time dedicated herself to weaving, since the family's situation was hard and with the money obtained from the sale of perrajes Mrs. Benigna's mother contributed to the family's economy.

Mrs. Benigna started to weave since she was 12 years old, at the beginning she was paid 15 cents for a pair of perrajes; with the passage of time the price increased "when I started to work they were worthless, a simple perraje was worth from 3 to 4 quetzales (Guatemalan coin), the big ones Q4.50 and the little ones Q2.50 because everything was cheap, but now everything is bought more expensive".



Party perraje.

She got married at 17 with Mr. Prudencio Guatzín with whom she raised 10 children, 7 men and 3 women; of whom 8 are still alive to this date.

During a short period of time, Mrs. Benigna stopped weaving to dedicate herself to house chores and raising her children but with the passing of the years her husband was not fulfilling his household obligations, and therefore, and at the urging of her aunt, she returned to her old trade as a weaver "because I didn't get a good one [her husband] I started to weave again". It was her aunt precisely who gave her the necessary materials for the production of the perrajes; and from the age of 22 until not long ago she dedicated herself to weaving. With the proceedings from the sale of her work, Mrs. Benigna was able to provide for her children "I am happy because I lifted my home and provided for my children, I am happy because I have my house where I don't have to pay rent; at least I did that". Some of the interviewee's children graduated from high school and now help their mother financially.



Sale of cuyoteco perrajes in the market of the city of Mazatenango.

Out of her three daughters, only the eldest learned how to weave, she also makes perrajes, but due to health problems she had to travel to the United States for treatment and is currently based there, leaving her work in the hands of her husband and daughter. The youngest daughter of Mrs. Yes Serech who still remains single also helps her mother in the making of perrajes, she is the one in charge of making the pompons, which are the perraje's ends; her granddaughters are also learning this trade; Mrs. Benigna does not lose hope that they will continue with this artisan work "if they are smart they will take on the job" says the old weaver in a melancholic tone.

Mrs. Benigna used to dedicate herself in weaving different types of perrajes: "for parties", "for mourning", "jaspered" and "plain". To make such clothing she bought "labores" which is jasper thread, in San Cristóbal Totonicapán, although during some time she also made manually some jasper thread; she would buy the Chinese silk in Guatemala City or else she would travel to Tapachula, Mexico; once at home and with the necessary materials, she would proceed to make the garment.

Mrs. Benigna commercialized the perrajes in markets of San Francisco El Alto, Totonicapán, Quetzaltenango, Almolonga and in Mazatenango, where she sold in a space during 45 years; women in the municipalities of Suchitepequez went to the Mazatec market to buy perrajes. She would travel occasionally to Guatemala City but nowadays she no longer likes to go to the capital because of crime "now I can't go to (Guatemala City) there are a lot of thieves, you can't even walk, if you are wearing earrings they'll rip them from you, if you go with your new necklace it will be only for them, you can't even buy anymore, times have changed, it is not like before and because of that you can't even go to sell".

When her mother died, Mrs. yes Serech stopped momentarily to weave and no longer wanted to go and sell "when my mother died, Mazatenango sadness took a hold of me and I no longer wanted to go out and sell", but it was her family who urged to continue with her job; but soon after she fell ill (she now suffers from diabetes) and was confined for a long time in a sanatorium in the city of Mazatenango; currently she is still in the process of recovery. As a result of these events, Mrs. Benigna definitively stopped weaving, but her daughters continue with her legacy "as I got sick I stopped weaving, now I only explain to them how to do it".

It should be noted that in Cuyotenango in recent years there has been a phenomenon in the production of perrajes, which is explained by Eugenia Sáenz de Tejada: "The weavers buy the 'labores' (jasper thread) in Salcajá; the thread for the weave and the wool for the pompons in

Quetzaltenango. Some of them only untie and warp the thread, they send the perrajes to the cantons to weave and when they are returned to them, they make the lattice and the pompoms. Others make the process all by themselves; others have pieceworkers, they give them thread and pay only for labour costs²⁰.

In the case of Mrs. Benigna she has 5 pieceworkers (before she had more) in her charge, who come from Cuyoteco villages or cantons and even from the village of Pajales de San Andrés Villa Seca to fetch the yarn already warped and tinged with the colors that will form the piece. The pieceworkers weave them and get them back to Mrs. Yes Serech house, her youngest daughter, Ramona Giatzín is in charge of making the lattice and proceed to finally make the pompons; once the perrajes are finished Ms. Guatzín is in charge of marketing them. Mrs. Benigna youngest daughter says that "when she got sick (Mrs. Benigna) her work was left behind, which is why I chose to leave my job (as a seamstress) to go out and sell so that she could be happy because she said that if someday she died or got sick nobody would take over her work".

Although perrajes were her specialty, Mrs. Benigna would occasionally weave cloth and bands that men used to wear around their waists in the past.

Mrs. Benigna's work has been recognized on several occasions, she has had clients who have come from abroad in search of her perrajes; she is also sought after by

⁶ Sáenz de Tejada, Eugenia. "El traje de la costa sur de Guatemala". En La indumentaria y el tejido mayas a través del tiempo. Museo Ixchel del Traje Indígena, Guatemala, 1992, pág. 144.

nationals who place special orders. Mrs. Yes has participated in some exhibitions and folkloric parades in the city of Mazatenango where she has made her work known.

Raw Materials



The raw materials used for the production of perrajes are: labores (jasper thread) that are acquired in Salcajá and San Cristóbal Totonicapán or in Mazatenango; the threads that are used for the making of the weave are: cotton, artisela (synthetic thread), mercerized cotton, Chinese silk, coarse silk, silkline, lustrina, and wool for the pompons. The simplest thread is mercerized silkline whose price is quoted at Q20.00 per round; Chinese silk is the finest and irs price is very high, this is purchased in Guatemala City or Tapachula, Mexico, although according to Mrs. Benigna the thread no longer comer complete and due to the high price of this product there are few people who request silk perrajes.

Working Tools



The women work on backstrap looms, also known as "palitos", "palette" or "mecapal" looms, similar to those used in the highlands. These looms are composed of several sticks, which have a specific function: to support the warp, both at the upper end, held from a high place by a tie, and at the lower end where the fabric is wound. The lower end is tied to the *mecapal* and the weaver places it on her hip to tighten the warp. It also has a stick

with rolled threads called "peine" (comb) that holds the lower threads of the warp and that when lifted intertwine the lower threads with the upper ones. It also has an auxiliary to the comb, a cloth center which is a cane with nails at the ends that serve to hold the width of the cloth. As well as a shuttle that contains the thread that forms the weft and a sword or trowel to tighten the threads of the weft.

A stool is also used in which the weaver sits, since in the coastal region the weaving is done sitting and not kneeling as in the highlands.

Process of Elaboration of the Perrajes



Once the necessary materials for the production of the perrajes have been gathered, the workers begin with their elaboration; the process followed is as described below:

- Winding the thread, this is the act of winding the threads neatly on a spool or barrel.
- Warping, this is the process of winding the threads on the loom in an orderly fashion, which are then interleaved with jasper thread.
- Weaving, when the warp is ready, we proceed to weave the weft that will form the piece.
- Lattice or braided, when the piece is finished the excess ends are braided to later make the pompons; in some cases the pompons are left as they came out of the loom.
- Putting the ends or pompoms, a good amount of wool threads are introduced

in the lattice, they are tied with another series of threads and what is left over is shaved by means of scissors.



Women from Almolonga, Quetzaltenango, wearing perrajes made in Cuyotenango.

Types of Perrajes



There are four types of perrajes: festive, for mourning, marbled and plain. For the festive ones, between 10 and 18 labores of marbled patterns are used, in which designs such as dolls, double dolls, lyres, thorns, crabs, branches, chains, arrows, pine trees and figures shaped in the letter M stand out; in Cuyoteco *perrajes*, strong and cheerful colored studs predominate: green red, orange, blue, yellow, purple, fuchsia, turkey blue, etc., arranged in vertical and warp stripes, anternating in simple white or colored groups on a black background.

Mourning perrajes differ from the festive ones in that colors such as black, green, bottle green, aqua green, olive green and purple are used; in addition, the jasper threads are only black and white.

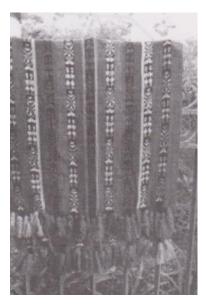
Marbled perrajes are made with a diversity of colors and their *labores* are like the

letter V, which are similar to those used by quetzalteca women.

On the other hand, plain *perrajes* are of only one color and are simpler than the others.

The measurements of the perrajes vary, the smallest measuring one and a half yards and the largest three yards. The price of such pieces varies according to their size and the material used to make them, ranging from Q125.00 for a simple one to Q250.00 for a "luxury" or silk *perraje*.

Nowadays Mrs. Benigna and her working team only make perrajes "on demand" because few are the people that use them, especially those from the coastal region, since according to the interviewee, women prefer to use the cloth woven in Samayac, and the Cuyoteco *perrajes* are very heavy.



Cuyoteco perraje.

Mrs. Benigna indicates the way in which her ancestors wore the *perraje* as the following: "people of old used to cover all of their heads and their shoulders when they entered the church... nowadays they only use it on their shoulder, women only

want to use a cloth". During the decade of 1940 the *perraje* was used in different ways "... rolled on the waist and shoulder, over the right shoulder or over the right arm". Indigenous queens of Suchitepequez wear the *perraje* in their presentations in all of the different ways described above.

The most widespread use of the *perraje* today is to carry small children on the backs of their mothers.

Distribution



The area of distribution of the Cuvoteco perrajes the markets of covers Mazatenango, Quetzaltenango, San Francisco E1Almolonga, Alto, occasionally Guatemala City and adjacent areas of the Quetzaltenango region. Due to dominant warm weather Suchitepéquez, the perraje is no longer used as frequently as in the past; while in the west, due to the cold climate, cuyoteco perrajes are in special demand.

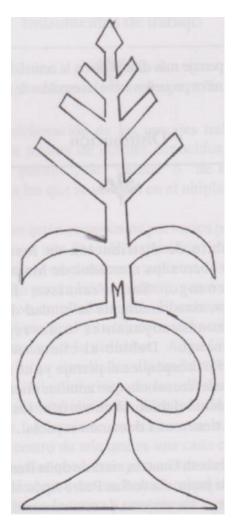
Elizabeth Guatzín, granddaughter of Mrs. Benigna says that for June 19th, day of St. Peter Apostole's day, patron of Almolonga, women of this community place special orders to "her grandmother" and her working team, in order to wear new perrajes in the different celebrations that happen in the village.

⁷ Sáenz de Tejada. op.cit. P. 143.

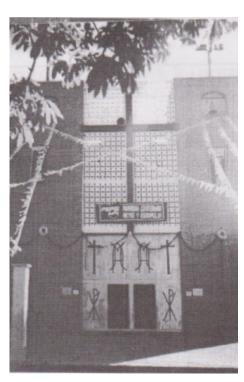
Conclusion



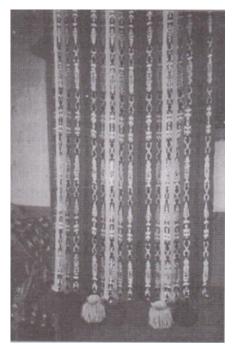
Before we finish this article, the author wishes to express his deepest gratitude to Ms. Benigna Yes Serech, Ramona Guatzín and Elizabeth Guatzín, who have cordially necessary information provided the without which it would not have been possible the realization of the project; in hopes that these lines are a kind of small tribute to the work performed for many years by a wise woman who keeps much in her being of the culture of her community; and at the same time to make a call to the Cuyoteco community to not let this handicraft tradition die, as the making of perrajes has put the name of Cuyotenango on a very high level.



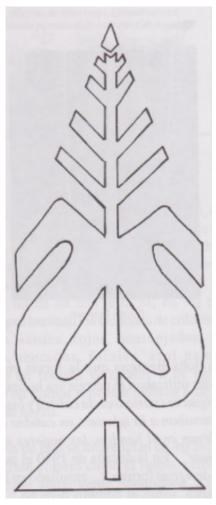
Trijara



Local church.



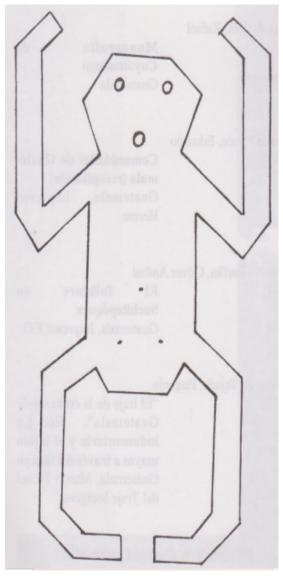
Design of the perrajes of Cuyotenango.



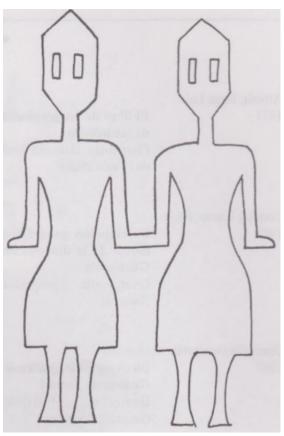
Double Jar.



Entrance to the Cuyotenango Municipality.



Crab



Dolls

The designs were drawn by Guillermo Vásquez, traced from the book **Imágenes en los tejidos guatemaltecos** (Images in guatemalan weavings) of Italo Morales Hidalgo. (Guatemala: Subcentro Regional de Artesanías, 1982).

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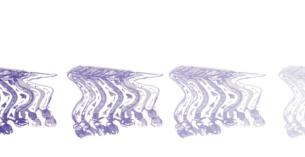
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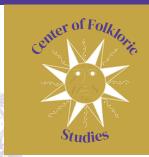
"El traje de la costa sur de Guatemala". En: La indumentaria y el tejido mayas a través del tiempo. Guatemala, Museo Ixchel del

Traje Indígena.

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