

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

Reviewed by Carol Hendrickson

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

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

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

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Documentation of the work done in the middle weeks of the process—when the women focus on creating the complex design patterns—is less abundant. Despite comments about the enormous amount of time that is needed to weave a *huipil*, for those watching this film the panels seem to finish rather quickly after their initial and detailed start. The filmmakers helpfully provide a day count for the various scenes and visits, and paying attention to this (the passage of time from day 27 to day 45 to day 59 then 73) viewers can understand this sense of speed: the weavers are working a great deal of time when cameras are absent. The weaving process is again presented in more detail at the end, as the two women complete their lengths of four-selvage cloth (three for the Chichicastenango blouse and two for the one from San Antonio) and the finished works are displayed.

Throughout the film viewers are given snapshots of the weavers' domestic lives and the role of *traje* in these. While nothing is mentioned of Maya men's dress, members of the two families—female and male—are shown wearing different types of western clothes in addition to some *traje* worn by the women. What in addition to cost is at play here? How exactly do social and economic factors in the larger world beyond the immediate spaces where these two women weave have an impact on their lives? Manuela and her husband (who never appears on screen) seem to live happily in the household of her extended family, though text at the end of the film notes that their first child dies after birth, and the husband abandons Manuela and a second child by the time the film is edited. Esperanza's life is also difficult because, as the narrator explains, her husband left her and she's had to sell her children's *traje* for income. On a more positive note, both Manuela and Esperanza have female family members who knew little about weaving on the backstrap loom when the filmmakers visited but who have since been motivated to learn more. All of these events surrounding Manuela and Esperanza support the subtext of the film, namely that Maya weavers face a number of challenges and, linked to this, that Maya weaving is endangered. While the weaving techniques themselves and the resulting cloth—"the art [and craft] of Maya weaving"—might be the dominant theme of the film and more closely described, the filmmakers clearly want to impress upon viewers the challenges weavers face in producing their cloth, the beauty of their creations, and the general struggle that Maya face in continuing to wear *traje*.

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