Weaving Words: Metaphor in Ixil Mayan Women's Discourses about Literacy

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1. Introduction

> Thus writing from the beginning did not reduce orality but enhanced it, making it possible to organize the 'principles' or constituents of oratory into a scientific 'art' (Ong, 1989, p. 9).
>
> Without writing, human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials, cannot produce other beautiful and powerful creations. In this sense orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing. Literacy, as will be seen, is absolutely necessary for the development not only of science but also of history, philosophy, explicative understanding of literature and of any art, and indeed for the explanation of language (including oral speech) itself (Ong, 1989, p. 14-15).

The West has long presumed a correlation between literacy and civilization. Even in relatively recent literature, written language has been used to define developed human culture and as a benchmark for the beginning of civilization, of history and of higher forms of expression. As Ong demonstrates, the West finds it difficult to even conceive of complex thought without literacy. The ability to read and write has become expected in order for entry into Western institutions of power and for economic accumulation. For this reason, illiteracy has come to be seen as a grievous fault, a lack of something vital. In fact, the rate of illiteracy is frequently cited as a mark of poverty and underdevelopment in contemporary societies. The West views literacy as so crucial that it is even a human right.

However, such views of literacy are not universal. In North America, for many Zuni, information represented in a book is less valuable than orally conveyed knowledge because the former is "from a piece of paper" and not from the heart like the latter (Tedlock as cited in Brandt, 1981). The Kuna of Panama, while recognizing writing as potentially valuable, refuse to privilege written language over spoken language, preferring instead to see writing as a "complement" to spoken language, as another technology, like the computer, which indigenous people can take advantage of (Orán as cited in Price, 2005).

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Likewise, literacy is not a practice that is unique to the West, even in a historical sense. Mayan languages were written as long as 2,000 years ago, long before contact with Spanish conquistadors. The classic Mayan hieroglyphic writing system is estimated to have originated between 200 B.C. and A.D. 50 when glyphs were written on stone, bone, clay, plaster, and in bark-paper books called codices. However, with the invasion of the Spanish and their burning of Mayan hieroglyphic texts, text production stopped, and knowledge of this writing system was largely lost (Sturm, 1996, p. 117). Thus the act of conquest involved both the imposition of a colonial system of literacy and the destruction of an indigenous one. This process of destruction has been so aggressive throughout the past five hundred years that up until recently, the memory of Mayan literacy in Guatemala had been largely erased.

It is fitting then, that the modern Maya have adopted knowledge and symbolic value of the glyphs as part of their reassertion of Mayan culture and political power. Many Mayan organizations have begun using Mayan hieroglyphs to represent the name of their organization or in parts of their publications. Numerous Mayan organizations have taken on the task of literacy education or language-based projects (such as newspapers, linguistic investigation, translation of historical texts, etc. to further their own political goals as Mayan people. Within these organizations, self determination, including the right to decide how to interact with Western systems and which tools will best serve the organization's purposes, has been key to maintaining strength and integrity.

The *Grupo de Mujeres por la Paz,* an Ixil Mayan women's organization in Nebaj, Quiché, is one such organization. The *Grupo* was organized in 1998 by its members with the purpose of finding collective solutions to the economic, political, and social destruction caused by the Guatemalan civil war, destruction that especially affected Mayan women. Most of the members of the *Grupo* are widows or the daughters of widows, and all live in extreme poverty. They are aware that writing their language is a form of cultural expression and one that they have used strategically in pursuing their goals. They reject, however, positions like those expressed by Ong (1982) that propose that written language is the best form of cultural expression, or in the words of the women of the *Grupo,* that only those who write have "ideas." This paper examines the social positioning of literacy in a community of Ixil Mayan women in Nebaj, Guatemala. Here I take an ethnographic approach based on five years of participation in the efforts of one community-based organization, the *Grupo de Mujeres por la Paz,* as they define for themselves what literacy means for their organization and how it's acquisition will be accomplished by the group's majority monolingual Ixil speaking members who have not had access to formal education. Prominent in the women's discussion of this process, has been the women's use of the metaphor of weaving, the main source of income for a majority of the women and a culturally significant practice.

2. TheLiteracy Project

Understanding the motives that underlie the *Grupo's* decision to pursue literacy is crucial to understanding their speech about the practice. The women believe that being able to write is vital to surviving in the current economic environment, even as projects like their agricultural and weaving cooperative and microcredit lending project seek to establish economic alternatives. However, they reject within their group those in Nebaj who have achieved class privilege along with literacy, a distinction which also corresponds to racial categories since most of those who are literate are *ladinos,* that is,

non-Mayan, although some Ixiles are literate as well. Ultimately, they pursue literacy because it is important to them in accomplishing the goals they have for their families and for their organization as a whole. Thus their reasons for pursuing literacy are deeply situated in the particulars of their contemporary circumstances and in their wartime histories.

Entonces cuando allí empezamos y solo estamos bajo la montana porque ya llegan los helicopteros, pero vamos a ver donde van a bombardear y vamos a tener el lugar donde escondernos. Despues empezamos a buscar los palitos abajo de la montana que son bien suaves y mis hermanos me decian, busquen los palitos que son suaves y vamos a hacerle unas tablitas, asi como esto, y ya vamos a empezar a traer el carbon y ya vamos a empezar a aprender a escribir porque alli no hay cuaderno ni lapicero. Entonces ya ellos ponen todas las letras que vamos a aprender, y al llenar esa tablita, ya traemos una machete, ya lo sacamos y empezar a hacer otros, y asi como ejercicios. Y alli, asi pasamos como ocho años. – Marta Cobo Raymundo

Then that's when we started, and we're only in the mountains because the helicopters would come, but we're going to see where they're going to bomb, and we're going to have a place to hide ourselves. Later we start to look for little sticks in the mountains that are real soft and my brothers told me, 'look for little sticks that are soft and we're going to make you some tablets, just like this,' and we're going to start bringing carbon and we're going to start learning to write because there weren't notebooks or pens. Then they put all the letters that we're going to learn, and when we fill the tablet, we bring a machete, and we just cut it off and begin to do others, and like that, like exercises. And there we spent some eight years. -- Marta Cobo Raymundo

Clearly literacy was important to communities like Marta's who lived as refugees in the mountains surrounding the Ixil area during Guatemala's recently ended 36 year long period of violence. These communities went to great lengths to teach their children to read and write. Many of the women in the *Grupo*, and particularly the members of the directive board, lived for years in these refugee communities and share a commitment to literacy. However, the purposes that they see literacy serving are particular to the historical, political and social conditions of the Ixil area after the war.

The women of the *Grupo de Mujeres por la Paz* see literacy as potentially useful in furthering the economic attainment not of themselves, but of their children, though even this possible use of literacy is suspect as the women educate their children to be able to sustain themselves through weaving or working the land as well. While literacy does not ensure employment for women of the Ixil area or even for their children, many members of the group argue that being able to read offers them access to information that is expressed in writing and has therefore previously been unavailable to them. Many of the women see literacy as useful in providing increased mobility and in navigating the non-Ixil world as it helps them to read signs, bus names and place names.

Additionally, within the Ixil community and within the group, there is the idea that writing something down is a way of memorializing it. It is a form of documentation and of legitimization of past experiences. This is particularly true of histories of the period of violence that the women feel need to be memorialized, and thus recognized and legitimized. After so many years of denial on the part of the state, first that the violence was even happening, and later that it had been an active campaign of genocide, the women are demanding that their experiences of suffering be recognized as they have previously

been erased. Don Miguel, an Ixil man who works with a local NGO and advises the group, reflects the desire of many in the organized Mayan population of Nebaj to have experiences of suffering during violence be publicly recognized and therefore valorized, and he proposes books as a way of doing so by constructing them as analogous to physical memorials:

Entonces y es cosa como un…muro allí que es cemento donde está sus nombres los muertos. Está allí como una historia de las exhumaciones. Entonces así está el libro. Entonces eso es una cosa, es historia ya hace años pero vivo porque ya está escrito que cualquier gente puede leerlo que año fue el conflicto, y que fue lo que hizo y cuales son los responsables, ah? Entonces igual que el libro.

Then this thing is like a…wall there that is cement where the names of the dead are. It's there like a history of the exhumations. Then that's what a book is like. Then this is a thing, it's a history that happened years ago, but it's alive because it's written so that anybody can read it, what year was the conflict, and what was it that happened, and who are the ones responsible, ah? Then that's the same as a book.

Although there are several smaller examples of physical memorials of the violence in the Ixil area, there is no one central monument to the victims of the violence that occurred in the Ixil area. For don Miguel, this void can be partially filled by writing personal accounts of that violence in a way that keeps the history alive for those who would read about it years from now. Also significant to don Miguel, is that in a written document (perhaps in contrast to a physical memorial), one can assign responsibility for the acts of violence. Namely, one can say that it was the Army who committed massacres, scorched earth policies and machinegun strafings of mountain communities targeting the Ixil population. While numerous other examples given by don Miguel and the women point to the responsibility of guerrillas in the violence, they always point to the Army as the primary agent of the destruction. This culpability can be recorded in a book alongside the resultant suffering and resistance of the Ixil population.

Those who would narrate their stories of survival envision various audiences for the written representation of their words. Such written publications would serve dual purposes of preserving historic memory and of lending legitimacy to their stories in the eyes of their children. Don Miguel reiterates this interpretation of the value of memorializing the past through literacy as follows:

Si no hay cosas escritos ante mis hijos entonces, 'Ah, así pasó nuestro papá pero saber que año, saber.' Así es nada más. Así va a platicar. Entonces como no tiene validez, pero cuando ya cosas escritas entonces 'Ah sí hay un libro de nuestro papá, bueno, ah sí allí está pues, ah así pasó tal año y así hizo.'

If there aren't things written down for my children, then, 'Ah, this is what happened to our father, but who knows what year, who knows.' It's just like that. That's how they're going to talk. Then it's like it doesn't have validity, but when things are written down then, 'Ah, yes, there is a book about our father, good, ah, yes, there it is, well, ah, that's what happened in this year and that's how he did it.'

Another potential audience for written accounts of history that the women of the *Grupo* find particularly important is people who are in control of the flow of resources. For the women, telling their stories is a way of affirming the idea that their current state of

poverty must be understood as a result of a purposeful and active campaign to eliminate them and their social organization and not as a result of their own laziness or inabilities as has been claimed by others. Additionally, they see that writing their histories down will help to legitimize their words in the view of potential funders or other outsiders. Marta notes,

Tal vez para conseguir un proyecto o algo y no van a decir que son mentiras porque ya están escritos, y también como hay foto, hay de todo, entonces yo creo que no hay vuelta de hojas allí.

Maybe to get a project or something they're not going to say that these are lies because now they're written down, and also since there are photos and everything, then I think that there isn't any changing the facts the facts there.

3. Gender Implications of Literacy – Woven Words

Antes era la idea de que mujeres no podían hacer nada porque la mujer no sabe leer ni escribir, y por eso los hombres hicieron todas las decisiones, pero los hombres no tenían los mismos ideas que las mujeres.

Before there was the idea that women couldn't do anything because women don't know how to read or write, and because of that, the men made all the decisions, but men don't have the same ideas as women.

This idea voiced by a group member during a meeting in 2001 indicates the women's awareness of the discourses about women's literacy that are used to keep women from participating in politics. Many of the women stated both to individual teachers and to the class as a whole that they would not be able to learn. Thus in teaching the classes, Marta, the project's main teacher, and the other teachers employ discursive strategies which naturalize the process of literacy for a group for whom this has been discouraged. In the following example, Marta uses traditional discourses of women's role as weavers that equate reading with weaving. In the following example, Marta draws on the examples of figures woven into the *huipil,* or traditional woven blouse, in order to explain that the women must leave spaces between words.

M: Nan, la kaytzan ax la valchaj isuuchil uva setej. Ati xo'l unq'a tzib'e'. Kam ni tokat ve' txeyel tib' unq'a tzib'e'. La kaay oksen ex, nan, kajayil axh. La val isuuchil unq'a tzib'e' setej. At ex ni alon txael tib' vi tzib'e'. At ex ni b'anon ti tuuje' va txael tib' kuxh vet tii b'ene', hasta uva as ati q'ava jajlel kuxh vet ixol (*mostrando en el pizarón)*. Jit kuxh vet tzib' tii b'ene'. Pes ni valchaj setej la ku txakonsa' kam sti la ku txakon saj kat u q'oksame' tu cheme'. Jat puul kuxh la val setej va la ku txakonsa u cheme' chin. Ni val setej, u cheme' tu nu ku b'an u cheme'. As ma'l nu kuxh txaetib' unq'a txooe' *(mostrando en su guipil)* unq'ave kajayil mo la yolon vete' va txael kuxh vet tib'. At kuxh vet vi ju' u va txiie' kajayil tii b'en vete'. Mo la yoloni?

M: Senoras, I'm going to clarify some things, I'm going to give an explanation. There are spaces between letters. What do letters mean if they are all stuck together? You will see, all of you. I'm going to explain the letters to you. There are some of you who say that you are sticking the letters together. There are some who put all the letters on their pages all stuck together, one after another. There are some that have their spaces in between (*showing on whiteboard*). It's not just that all the letters come one after another. Well I'm saying this to you, it's going to be useful to us how we use our clothes, our weavings. How many times am I going to tell you that we can use the weaving. I'm telling you, we can do weaving. And an example – if we

	put all of the animals stuck together (*showing on her huipil),* it means everything at once. If it's all stuck together and the threads come one after another, does it even make sense (does it even speak)?
Todas: Ye' la yoloni. Ye la yolon vete'. Kan chu kuxh vete.	**All:** It doesn't make sense. It didn't make sense. (It doesn't speak. It didn't speak.) You can't make anything out.
M: Ye' la ka(a)'y vet u kuq'eenaje'.	**M:** You can't make anything out in our huipiles (like that).
PM: Uch'il ch(i)t vete'.	**PM:** It's all mixed up.
JC: Ye' la q'exla vete' jab'iste uve' nu kub'ane'.	**JC:** We won't know which figure we're doing.
M: Vaya, entonces, kam sti' ve, ve ni q'a' kat ixo'l? Tan aani tok kate tan kaay uvile'**.** Txoo vila', at ib'ii (txoo?) (*mostrando cada uno en huipil)*? Ati b'ii ta' junun. Pues echete' ta' u tzib'e'. Ma'l kame' ta' uva' (*mostrando en pizarón)***.** Pues kat tzojpiyaj kat oonyu (tzi)tza. Pues eela kuxh stuk ma'l akaay ta' kata k'ujb'aala' ma'l, ma'l atxoo tu va q'eenaje', as ma't chan uva'A(xo'l)b'ey uvaa ta' la q'ale' (*pizarón)*. Tu chan vet tu viila u ma't (chan) yol un pajtej. Entonces estan kue' ta' ni val setej va **merestel** kam ch(i)t b'i'l nu val setej li teoq'a tzan u ma'l kam uvaa para que la pal ex stul porque mas facil sum vatz va in la ku txakonsa' unq'a q'aqon b'e'ne' b'aj tiu tzib'e' eela kuxh ni yolon kat. *(pausa)* Mo b'an kuxh tu?	**M:** Alright then, why are we leaving space? Because it means that this is a horse, this is a bird (*pointing out in huipil*), that's its name. Each one has its name. Well that's what writing is like. This is one thing (*indicates word on whiteboard*). Well here it ended, it came out to here. Well it's the same as if you had put a horse like a bird in your huipil and here is another one (*pointing out figures in huipil*). And that's the same, it has its path (space) here, let's say (on whiteboard). In that way we have another word, too. Then that's why I'm telling you all that it's **important** what I'm telling you – it's necessary that you understand this. Because for me it's easier when we're going to bring our work (weaving) to this – letters speak the same way. OK?
Todas: B'an kuxh tu!	**All:** OK!

The explanation that Marta gives the women during their literacy classes is important on many levels. Her use of weaving as a process analogous to writing is a useful pedagogical tool. Since the women have not understood simply from the examples written on the board that letters need to be separated into words, Marta explains it to them using examples from weaving that they are all familiar with, telling them that in the same way that they separate their stitches from each other to make distinct animals in their huipiles, so too must they separate their letters from each other to make distinct words. To further clarify this point, she reads another sentence from the board as it would sound with no spaces, with no breaks between words. The women laugh, but through these

demonstrations, one visual and played out on a *huipil* and one audio, the women understand the purpose of spaces as can be noted in their active participation in and co-construction of this lesson.

The complexity of this epistemological framework of weaving becomes clear to me hen Marta further extends the metaphor of the huipil.

M: At chan u b'i'te' ta' pajtej -- va at chen u ma'l u chem va ixkilimal ch'osti'. Txael kuxh vet tib' -- eso si yeli, yel la uch qok skatz. Kati'xh chaj axe'te' kati'xh chaj atzojpe'. Pero ech ku uva, va ech tuchene', va as eche tu tzib'e' uva. Ati xol, eche vile' la q'ale'. Ati xol. Kat tzojpuj yole' viila', la ul tzitza. La txakabex tzitza. La xet ax tziila. La til tib' kava't u tal vi ila', ve as tul axet chan axh tiu viila, la til chaj tib' tan ae ni aq'on u yole' kam uve' nu ku sa'. Exh qabite' uva. Entonces uma'l exemplo uva'. Kat ku b'an vet kat aq'on setuk'. Esta'n koe' **merestel** chit li taq kan te vi', as li til ku' tu ve tu uuje' un pajtej tul li tzib' b'aj para que li taq' q'i xol as li txeyitib' uve' jab'iste' u yole' ve txeyeltib' lab' ta'n ni alon si li txeytib' lab' as lab' ta' ni alon si li jajtib' lab'. Ma'l yol uva, ka'val uvile', oxva'l uva. (*pausa*) Palyaxh stul?

M: There's another little bit too -- there are some weavings that are *ixkilimal* let's say. It's very stuck together. That way we really can't just get in there – you don't know where to begin, you don't know where to end. But like that, it's just the same way, it's like that with letters. There are spaces. Like this, let's say, there are spaces. This word ended, it came out to here. It's going to stop/pause here. They begin here. These two are going to come together there and when this part begins, they're going to come together because this gives the word we want, like we hear this. Then this is an example that we have, and we're going to begin another task with you, but it's **important** that you remember this so that when you're going to see in your notebook the things that you've been writing down why you leave a space and stick the words together so that every word is stuck together. The words are what show us too if they (the letters) go apart or together. This is one word, two here, three here. (*pause*) Do you understand?

Todos: Uu.

All: Yes.

Whereas typical *huipiles* had figures in a line, *ixkilimal* weavings have their figures unevenly aligned, so that a weaver who is weaving from left to right, as Ixil weaving is always done, does not start any two figures on the same row as they would in a more traditional style in which all figures are started and finished on the same row. As a result, in *ixkilimal* weaving, a weaver cannot tell as she is going from left to right what figure she is making simply by the spacing of the stitches, as she normally would. An experienced weaver knows that two stitches of the same highlight color separated by four stitches of background color is the bottom most part of a bird's foot, and if she wants to follow it with a basket, she should chose a proportionate number of background stitches to separate the figures before beginning perhaps ten stitches in the highlight color to form the bottom of a basket. While she can vary the design, the first row of stitches will always be the bottom of all the figures, and the last row will be the top etc. However, in *ixkilimal* weaving, because figures do not all start on the same line, a woman may be weaving the top of a bird's head in the same line that she is weaving a horse's legs. She can no longer count on the other figures that she is weaving to give her the context she needs to weave each

successive figure. Instead, she has to keep in mind the entire schema for the *huipil* and place her stitches accordingly.

Because I initially found this example confusing, I transcribed it several times with different women and had them explain it to me. The following is the paraphrase that Marta and I constructed to explain the metaphor,

Un huipil que tiene sus figuras en una línea. Aunque vamos a empezar en medio, todavía se entiende cual es la figura. Pero con el otro si lo vamos a empezar en medio, ya no se entiende que figura es, hasta que ya se termina. Con las palabras si están bien separadas, se puede empezar hasta en medio y se entiende y se puede dar un resumen porque se puede entender.	A huipil has its figures in a line. Although we are going to start in the middle, we can still understand what the figure is. But with the other (style) if we are going to start in middle, we can't understand what figure it is anymore, until it's all done. With words that are well separated, it can be started in the middle and be understood and a summary can be given because it can be understood.

What I have come to understand from this and the many other translations of this text is that by separating the letters into words, a person can pick a word from the middle of a sentence, and it has meaning as a unit – that is, we can give a summary of it, but if all of the letters were run together or randomly spaced, we would not be able to pick units of meaning from the string of letters. In her use of the metaphor of weaving for the women, Marta defines words not only as physical grouping of letters, but also as units of meaning.

In one final example of the use of the weaving metaphor used in pedagogy, Marta frames writing for the women as a creative activity. During one of the class activities, teams of women collaborated to write words on the board for the other women to try to read. In order to encourage participation, each woman in the team had to write one of the letters on her own. However, one woman repeatedly brought her daughter to class and relied on her to help her write in her notebook. In the following example, Marta criticizes the group because several of the women copied their letters from the woman's daughter.

M: Unq'a nane' va kam kati tzib'a chaaki?	**M:** What did these women write?
J: xu'm.	**J:** xu'm (flower)
M: B'a'n kuxhtu?	**M:** Is it right?
L: Si.	**L:** Yes.
M: Solo que utz' chit tal va. Pero chaak bien kati saji ku chaak tu vi cuadernoe'.	**M:** Except that this is too small. (*corrects board*) But they looked in their notebooks.
MM: (*se rie*)	**MM:** (*laughs*)
M: Jit ti vi' chaak kat teq'o kat el tzan.	**M:** They didn't just think of it (they don't have it memorized).
JC: Ye'le ma'l tal xuak kat chusun chaak.	**JC:** No, a girl showed them.

M: Entonces ae ve, ve jit chusib' ta' nu ku b'ane' pet alel tok ta' sq'e. Por eso ni veq'o tzan u idea seti va tiaj chem (*pausa*) kam lej, kam lej b'a'n tiu va moj b'a'n u xo'le' la ooni la kuxh k'uchpik ok sqe. Tuk ab'an pensar b'axaj kam color tuk aaq' ku' kam va colore' kam ni sa' uve'. Pues echet kuxhe' ta' u tzib'e' (pausa) pues ye' kati b'an chaak costar kati tila, pero at ma'l txumb'al sti'.

M: Then that way we're not learning but rather someone is telling us. That's why I bring the idea of weavings (*pause*) that when a person comes to show you, you're going to think what is it that you're going to put first, what you're going to put, what is it that goes best. Well that's what the letter is like (*pause*). Well you saw that it wasn't hard for them, but there is an idea here.

Marta initially assumes that the women simply copied the letter that they wrote on the board from where they had written the same word in their notebook earlier in the lessons. María Cedillo Matom (**MM**) laughs when her group is called to task because they realize that they've been caught. What's more Juana Corio Raymundo (**JC**) is quick to point out that it is not only that the women copied the letters, but that they copied their letter not from their own previous work but from the daughter of one of the women. Marta doesn't criticize this as a problem in work ethic or of misrepresenting one's work, but rather she criticizes this as an impediment to learning.

Again, Marta uses the example of weaving because, she says, writing, like weaving, is a creative act. Again, the women of the group do not need the additional contextual information that I do as I am not a weaver, and I later ask Marta to explain the analogy to me. After living in Marta's house for nine months and associating closely with her for years after that, she knows that I am familiar with the work that she does in commissioning *huipiles* to be done. It is this model that she says she is drawing on. She explained to me, again as I paraphrased her words as she spoke,

Aun si vamos a mandar un tejido a hacer, se puede escoger los colores y el diseño, pero no se puede decir que va a hacer con cada color. No sale bien, es una complicación, y sale mal. La misma persona lo tiene que pensar.

Even if we are going to send a weaving out to be done, you can pick the colors and the design, but you can't say what is to be done with each color. It doesn't come out right, it's a complication, and it comes out bad. The same person has to think of it.

The women are all familiar with the idea that weavings are often commissioned to a weaver by another woman who will specify what colors and what basic design a customer wants in a *huipil*. The commissioner will then buy the weaver threads, pay her for her labor, send the completed weaving to be sewn into a *huipil*, and sell it to a customer. Marta refers to the common understanding among the women that a person can tell another woman what colors to use and even what pattern to weave, but no one can tell a weaver what color to use in what part of the design. This creative vision must be the weaver's alone, or the *huipil* will not turn out right. In the same way, she argues, a woman cannot simply copy a design for a letter, but rather she must compose it in her own head. She must create her own letters and words based on a model which she has learned but in a way which reflects her own creative work.

This series of explanations serves multiple purposes within the *Grupo de Mujeres por la Paz* literacy project. It is illuminating to the women on a pedagogical level – it provides

a model that they can understand and relate to a new and difficult process. Not only might this explanation provide clarification for the women, but it is encouraging as it relates something that is foreign and daunting to them to something that they are intimately familiar with and quite competent at. Given the women's fears that they will not be able to learn so many new skills, particularly now that they are older, the repeated use of this metaphor is reassuring and re-enforces to the women that this is not an entirely new thing that they do, and in fact that they have learned comparable complex skills in the past at which they now excel. Additionally, the particular choice of weaving as a metaphor is not incidental. It is linked to the women's identity of themselves as Ixil women as it is defined by the activities they engage in and which are traditionally important in defining their roles in the community. Weaving is the primary economic activity engaged in by women and in Mayan communities *huipiles* are worn exclusively by women.

4. Conclusion

Marta's explanation is part of a larger process through which the women are challenging dominant discourses about femininity in Ixil society. The role of women as weavers is not only widely accepted and naturalized but is also highly valued. The women of the group, being socialized into these beliefs as well, likewise see their work as weavers as an important means of providing for their families, participating in cultural acts of identity, engaging in economically productive activity, and creating art. Many of the women, however, are not accustomed to thinking of themselves as learners. Their hesitation is clear as the older women protest that they are too old to learn, or on the first day of classes when among many conversations, one woman can be heard to say that she is a little afraid. Marta's repeated use of weaving as a pedagogical tool re-enforces that in spite of the discourses that say that women, and especially older women, cannot read and write, women already engage in the "literate" activity of weaving. Her reconstruction of literacy as an act of weaving destabilizes dominant discourses in which indigenous women are constructed as illiterate. It is also a challenge to prevailing ideologies that women cannot organize politically because they are illiterate. In taking control of their own literacy project and using their own methodologies, pedagogies and epistemologies, these women confront the class and gender systems that they see as contributing to their poverty. The use of weaving metaphors is a challenge to the idea that only those with the privilege of formal education, largely non-Ixil men who inhabit particular economic and political spaces, can read and likewise only such people can participate politically.

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