Indigenous Women with Traditional Loom

By Vanderbilt Center for Latin American Studies

Weaving has long played an important role in indigenous cultures. Indigenous people are those who were the first ones to live in an area before any outside people arrived. Especially in the eras before mass-produced textiles, people usually wove their own clothing; the designs woven on the clothing are distinctive to each community.

In Guatemala (a country in Central America), the Mayans were the indigenous people who lived in the area before the Spanish arrived in the mid-1500s. Like other indigenous communities, the Maya wove their own clothing. Today, weaving is still practiced on a daily basis in many parts of Guatemala by Mayan women to weave fabric for their clothing and other needed household textiles such as shawls, baby wraps, tablecloths, washcloths, and towels. In the western highlands of Guatemala where there are mountains and many Mayans live, the women for centuries have used cotton yarn for their weaving. In some of the villages, it was a custom to dye to natural cotton yarn with natural plant dyes.