Native peoples are those who were the first people to live in a particular place. The Maya are native peoples who live in parts of Guatemala, which is located in Central America. The Maya were the only people to live in these places until the Spanish conquerors arrived in the 1520s. Today, millions of Mayans still live in Guatemala.

A huipil (we-peel) is a hand-woven blouse worn by Highland Maya women in Guatemala. A huipil consists of a rectangular piece of cloth with a hole in the center for one’s head. A design is woven onto the portions of the cloth that are visible when the huipil is worn. The huipil is tucked into a wrap-around skirt (corte) and secured with a belt. Women weave huipiles for themselves and their family, and to sell them in the market.
Huipiles are made out of cotton. In the past, the Highland Maya grew and harvested the cotton themselves, then spun and dyed the thread to prepare it for weaving. Today, Maya women purchase factory spun cotton yarn. Huipiles are woven on a backstrap loom. In a backstrap loom the warp (threads running lengthwise) is stretched out between two sticks, one of which is attached to a post or a tree, while the other one is strapped to the weaver’s back. To make a piece of cloth, the weft (threads running horizontally) is inserted in the warp. To lock the weft into place, the warp threads are lifted and crossed with the help of a heddle on every row. The heddle consists of a series of string loops attached to a stick with which the warp threads can be separated to insert the weft thread. A batten, also called or beater or sword is a heavy flat piece of wood, which is used to beat down the just woven row to create a dense and firm fabric.

The designs of a huipil are inserted together with the weft. They can be a very intricate and show the weaver’s skill. Some huipiles may take several months to complete. Since the loom produces a narrow strip of cloth, women must weave two strips and sew them together to complete the garment. The position of weaver is an honored one in the community, and the girls who are honored in the community for their skill are often invited to join the master weaver’s guild.

Each community has its own specific huipil designs. Without saying a word, a woman’s huipil could tell you which community she came from. Designs can include geometric shapes, stars and suns, and natural objects such as flowers, birds, and butterflies. Since
the highland Maya make their living by farming, natural symbols like the sun are very important to them.

The huipil designs may have religious meaning as well. The head hole may represent the sun and the center of the universe. When a woman puts on her huipil, she places herself in the center of that universe, surrounded by symbols of her family and community — in short, the symbols that are important to her and to her culture.

Thousands of Highland Maya people were affected by the civil wars in Guatemala that lasted from 1960 to 1996. The Guatemalan army killed many Maya people who were thought to be helping the rebels. In the 1980s, the army targeted women wearing huipiles with symbols that associated them with communities where the army thought rebels were based. To protect themselves, many Maya women disguised the symbols on their huipiles so that the army could not tell which communities they were from.