

Sombrero Vueltiao

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Introduction

People tend to relate to each other through family, friends, similar interests, education, and similar needs, etc. Yet we distinguish ourselves through our nationalities, customs, languages and ethnicities, and although our tastes of dressing today tends to be similar between us, there are specific garments in each culture that identify us personally. This garment can come from custom, inheritance, religion or simply taste. A garment can say a lot about a group of people, but at the same time it can also say a lot of its history that the people who wear them may commonly not know. The garment that identifies me and my culture for many reasons is called the "Sombrero Vueltiao," meaning "turn" or "lap" hat. This paper will cover a little more about this garment, its production, exchange, consumption and globalization.

Description and Relevant Background

To understand a little more about this hat it is necessary to know where it comes from and its history. The Sombrero Vueltiao is a traditional hat from Colombia and one of its important cultural symbols. It is made of *Gynerium Sagittatum*, which is commonly known in our country as "Caña Flecha," which is like a tall grass that grows up to six meters high (USDA). The first and still the main producers of this cultural icon are the Zenu tribe whose ancestral territory comprises the valleys of the Sinu and San Jorge rivers, as well as the coast of the Caribbean around the Gulf of Morrosquillo Colombia (Banrepcultural). Although we may not have heard about this tribe here in the United States, "In the museums of the United States and Europe there are testimonies in gold, stones, bones, snail shells, wood and ceramics of art and aesthetic conceptions of the Zenu culture" (Benjamin Puche Villadiego). This native tribe is kept conserved in a natural and wild environment in South America. They sell their handicrafts to recognized and specific companies, which pays the tribe a large amount of money for their hats.

This is where the Sombrero Vueltiao comes from and how it entered mainstream society.

Social Relationships Involved in The Sombrero Vueltiao's Production

The Sombrero Vueltiao undergoes a unique production. The hat consists of shapes or drawings called "pintas" woven by artisans, and each of them refers to the conception of the origin of the world, elements of the fauna and flora of the region and the differentiation of clans and Zenú families. These geometric figures include: "the passion fruit flower (triangles), the lemon flower (rhombuses), the totumo flower (circles and triangles), the orange blossom (rhombuses and rectangles), the rice granite (marbled) , the donkey's teeth (pictures with diagonal lines), the lemon flower (circles with rhombuses) and the corn spike (triangles with diagonal lines), among others "(Colombia.co). These figures are found at the top of the hat and usually at the bottom are the linear pintas that surround the hat. After the cutting and brushing process, a green arrow cane fiber is obtained. One part is placed in the sun to obtain the natural beige color and another part is dyed with natural plants, such as *jagua*, *dividivi* and banana peel, to take out the different colors. To differentiate an original Vueltiao Hat from a replica, you need to be able to fold up the hat and put it into your pocket without it being damaged when unfolding. The weave is very dense, and is soft to the touch. Moreover, there are a diversity of Vueltiao hats, which depends on the amount of cane strips used to make the braid of each swirl around the hat. With the globalization of the hat, new types of designs have been added to the Sombreros Vueltiaos, such as different colors and sizes, and now you can even pay up to \$100 dollars to braid a name on the hat. The most expensive model at the moment has 31 cane strip swirls or most commonly 27, and its production duration, since it is made by hand, is of a month. The price of the 31-lap hat is 4 million in Colombian currency, which is 2 thousand dollars in American currency.

Social Relationships Involved in The Sombrero Vueltiao's Exchange

The Zenu tribe is the producer and circulator of the Vueltiao Hat. They sell it to the community themselves or they sell it to renowned companies so that the hat can be legally sold nationally and internationally. Since the tribe is economically dependent on the production of the Vueltiao Hat, competition is created between them, which not only lowers the price value of the hats, but also makes them lose their sentimental and cultural value. This is because as it has become more popular throughout the country and world, many producers in the tribes no longer make them for tribal representation, but to gain money. Moreover, since the Vueltiao Hat is popularly recognized worldwide, China managed to produce and export an exact but not original handmade replica, which can cost \$20 in Colombia, a much lower price than the original hats. This also became an exchange problem since the foreigners who do not know about the original production and quality of the hat, prefer the price given by the Chinese hat than the original Colombian hat. The Colombian government and the community have realized over time that it is necessary to support the creators of one of their national symbols and imposed laws and fines for those caught importing or selling the fake hats, which run as high as \$ 590 million pesos (about USD \$ 320,000), a laughably high sum for a street vendor (Ed Bucley). In 2011, the organization Denomination of Origin Zenú Weaving was created that recognizes the exclusivity of this item and protects artisans against counterfeiting or plagiarism of their product (Colombia.co).

Social Relations of The Sombrero Vueltiao's Consumption

The Vueltiao Hat started off as a regional garment in Colombia, and eventually became popular worldwide. The hat was first mainly intended to be used by workers in the caribbean region since that area is known for its extreme heat and the workers there, who mostly labor in corn harvest, wore and continue to wear it to protect their head, face, and neck. However, thanks to the boxer Miguel 'Happy' Lora, who used the Vueltiao Hat in his coronation as world champion in the bantamweight category in 1985, the hat became recognized internationally. The Congress of the Republic declared it a cultural heritage of the nation through the decree-law 908 of 2004. Then "In 2006, the

Vueltiao Hat was chosen by more than 400,000 people as the national symbol, followed by coffee, the Barranquilla Carnival, the orchid and the Colombian flag" (Colombia.co). Therefore we Colombians feel identified and connected nationally and internationally with the Vueltiao Hat since it is produced and exported from Colombia, and it is our national heritage. Men, women, and children all wear this hat in Colombia and while it is traditionally used in the Caribbean regions because of the heat of the area, this hat can also be seen worn by Colombians everywhere in parades, concerts, soccer games, and national festivities. It does not matter if you are rich, poor, white, black, or a member of the Zenu tribe, or even a foreigner, because to wear the Vueltiao Hat you only need to have respect for the cultural value it has for Colombians. "This hat is not just a hat, it is an open book of what the Spaniards saw when they arrived here, it is our history and our pride in a single garment...the hat would be empty if it was sold solely for its commercial value, here is our trajectory as Colombians." These are the words of Alvaro Madera, a Colombian historian in New York who I was able to interview at the Colombian Cultural Festival. After the Spanish conquest in South America, the Spanish also admired the hat for its design and use, which further influenced the garment's first phase of mass production. In addition, as a result of the conquest, the Zenu tribe began to weave in the Sombrero Vueltiao some designs of significant animals that reflected the legacy of the Spanish, such as the donkey that was brought to South America and used by the tribe as carriage animals.

Globalization

The Vueltiao Hat's meaning and significance has transcended national borders. It is easy to recognize a Colombian abroad since at some point we will all use a Vueltiao Hat wherever we are. When we leave our country, the people who have the possibility of having this hat will always pack this garment first in our suitcase as it is a piece of cultural value that we take from our country. I am also proud to know that international personalities such as Pope John Paul II, in his visit to Colombia in 1986, Bill Clinton in 2000, and Prince Charles of England in 2014, have all received the Vueltiao Hat as a

symbol of welcome to the country. In addition, in the movie *On Golden Pond*, the famous actress Katharine Hepburn wore a Vueltiao Hat (EyesInColombia.com). Nowadays it is common to see the Sombrero Vueltiao worn in football games or on special days in Colombia, such as Independence Day. It is not common to see this hat every day here in the US, since it is a large and extravagant hat that does not match with daily clothes, but personally I have seen this hat in New York and Miami in important Colombian celebrations. Many have perhaps seen a Vueltiao Hat somewhere but did not know its exact meaning or history, or even its production. This includes people like me and most Colombians who wear this hat. This hat has a sentimental meaning as Colombians, but why? Many do not know and I am glad I could find out about this today. I used it in Colombia and even here on festivities, but I did not know the true meaning that exists in the Vueltiao Hat, or of our ancestors, our history, our economic value, and cultural diversity that is represented in a single garment. Like me in New York, there are many people in all countries of the world who have a Vueltiao Hat and who exhibit it to the world as a Colombian identification.

Conclusion

As I said earlier with this research assignment, I learned what the Vueltiao Hat is and realized that before, I was a "foreigner", knowing absolutely nothing about the production, exchange, and consumption of the hat. I realized that my hat is of 21-laps and that the production of this hat requires a lot of knowledge in mathematics and geometry. I was also surprised by the quality of the hats, knowing that the most expensive hat at the moment is that of 31-laps and that there are Vueltiaos Hats of only 3-laps. I met the largest Vueltiao Hat in the world that measures 12.30 meters and was made by 500 Zenu artisans, all handmade and with artisan materials. With all this new information I feel even more proud of being Colombian and of having tribes like the Zenu represent us, since they gave us a great human heritage. My relationship with the Vueltiao Hat changed completely since before I saw my hat as a common hat among Colombians, but now I feel an invaluable appreciation towards it when thinking about

the people who were involved in its production. Although in this project I answered questions I didn't even have, I still wonder, who exactly made my hat, a woman, an old man or a child? In what year was my hat made? I also have the uncertainty of those who used my hat before me besides the person who gave it to me. What I know is that I now have information that I did not think to find about the Vueltiao Hat. I know that the new students who will read my paper next year and further my research, and others as students who use this garment, will learn a lot about this hat as I did, and in some way or another the knowledge of this cultural garment will stay with them forever.

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