

The Cultural Significance of Andean Cloth and Implications of Its Decline

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This paper presents a collaborative analysis by an American cultural anthropologist and a Peruvian indigenous cultural promoter that examines how and why handmade cloth plays a unique role in Andean societies as the single most important medium in the longest continuous textile tradition in the world — native Andeans have created cloth in a continuous tradition for 5,000 years. In fact, Andeans independently discovered almost every textile technique known to the world. Even today, cloth in traditional Andean contexts fulfills multiple functions: practical, artistic, communicative, economic, political, and philosophical.

In the southern Andes, women create the most important textiles, weaving on pre-Conquest type Andean looms. Through cloth, adults teach both technology and values central to Andean society. However, various factors, including modernization, rural to urban migration, schooling, the collapse of the Andean agro-pastoral system, and the loss of ancient textiles to the antique ethnic arts market have led to the near extinction of traditional cloth production. There are many reasons to stop weaving: discrimination, lack of materials, time spent in school, and low sale prices.

Transformations in cloth production and uses since the late 1960s have been particularly dramatic on Taquile Island, Lake Titicaca, Peru, one of the few communities in Peru where people continue to make and wear handmade ethnic dress on a daily basis. Changes on Taquile have occurred due to commercialization of cloth formerly made for personal and family use, which started in 1968, and due to mass tourism, which started in 1976. Taquileans have been at the forefront of community-led efforts in the Andean region to preserve their traditional knowledge related to cloth and other domains of thought and practice. At present, Taquileans are attempting to see how and if this knowledge about cloth, including production and uses, can be incorporated into the academic preparation of students on Taquile, which recently obtained a high school. This is worthwhile because cloth provides potential income for artisans in a low-income country and is a key way to encode and preserve unique indigenous knowledge. In 1996 the Peruvian nation officially recognized the importance of Taquilean textiles by giving to weaver Francisco Huatta the national prize for Grand Master of Peruvian Crafts.

Zorn and Quispe were invited to give their presentation in ICIK's Walkabout Session. The poster for that session also included information about the Center for Traditional Textiles in Cusco (CTTC), a community-based non-governmental organization helping weavers

improve the quality of their textiles and market them successfully. A selected bibliography provides sources for information about Andean cloth, the Taquilean community, and CTTC. For more information about the Taquile community and their textiles, see E. Zorn, *Weaving a Future: Tourism, Cloth, and Culture on an Andean Island* (University of Iowa Press, 2004).

Although difficulties obtaining a visa and funding made it impossible for Quispe to attend ICIK, the authors are grateful for the invitation and support for the Walkabout Session from the M.G. Whiting Center for Humanity, Arts, and the Environment, and support from the Women's Research Center of the University of Central Florida, Orlando.

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WWW Site

CTTC (Center for Traditional Textiles of Cusco): <http://www.incas.org/SPChincherero.htm>

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