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Messages from the Past: An Unbroken Inca Weaving Tradition in Northern Peru

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The only documented unbroken Inca weaving tradition thrives today in the Huamachuco region of northern Peru (La Libertad Department), where females in several Andean communities weave belts chronicled in A.D. 1590 by a Mercedarian Friar Martín de Murúa. Murúa was entrusted with collecting tribute from and Christianizing the indigenous population of Yanaca in the Province of Aymarays (in modern Apurimac Department in central Peru). His contemporary Guaman Poma accused Murúa of exploitation of the Indians and drew him beating an elderly male weaver (Guaman Poma 1980 [1615]: fig. 647). In his manuscript titled, "History of the Origin and Genealogy of the Incas" (my translation), Murúa included a code of letters and numbers containing the "instructions for a famous belt of *llipi* or *cumbi* [resplendent or fine cloth] only worn by *coyas* in the fiestas called *çara* [Q. corn]; it has 104 [warp yarns] and their duplicates. Eight are at the extremities, four on one side and four on the other" (Murúa ms. reproduced in Derossiers 1986: 236; my translation).[1] *Coya* is frequently glossed as queen, but refers to Inca women who were "descended from the ruler [the Inca] and a woman of his bloodline" (Julien 2000: 311). In the later years of Tawantinsuyu (the Inca empire), when the Inca ruler married his full sister, *coya* referred to both his wife and his daughters.

Muruá's 24-line code has lines for heddles numbered 1 through 12 alternating with lines of numbers, and letters representing four colors: a, c, e and v. For example:

—Yllaba -- 1 – (*Yllaba* or *Illawa* is Quechua, hereafter abbreviated as Q., for heddle, the strings that encircle and lift selected warps)

Y x.a.3.e.a.3.c.3.v.x.c.x.a.4.c.3.a.—

— Yllaba -- 2 –

Y 7.a.4.c.3.a.2.c.2.c.3.v.3.c.3.v.6.c.8.a.3.e.3.a.2.c.—

— Yllaba -- 3 [and so on]

Although reproducing this belt would give us unparalleled insights into Inca ritual dress and the meaning of *qumpi*, the highest quality cloth (considered by many contemporary Andean scholars to mean tapestry), the code remained unbroken for nearly 400 years.

In 1984, French scholar Sophie Desrosiers deciphered the instructions. She realized that "x.a.3.e." meant pick up ten "a"-colored warps, then pick up three "e"-colored warps, etc. She wove a double-cloth sample with zigzag and diamond motifs, then found a matching pre-Hispanic belt woven from undyed camelid fibers in the American Museum of Natural History

[1] Murua's original Spanish: "Memoria de un famoso chumbi de llipi o cumbi, que solian traer las Coyas en las fiestas, que llamaban çara; lleba ciento y cuatro y los duplicados. Los ocho son los extremos, cuatro en un lado y cuatro en otro." The original is in the Galvin or Poyanne Murúa manuscript.

(AMNH) in New York. The pre-Hispanic belt, however, was a complementary warp weave with 3-span floats in alternating alignment and 2/2 horizontal color change. This also fit Murúa's code, so Desrosiers wove a second belt with this weave structure. Her detective work in deciphering Murúa's instructions was brilliant. She did not believe, however, that such belts were woven with multiple heddles (Derosiers 1986). This belt enlarges our definition of *qumpi* to include finely woven double-faced textiles of whatever technique, not just tapestry.

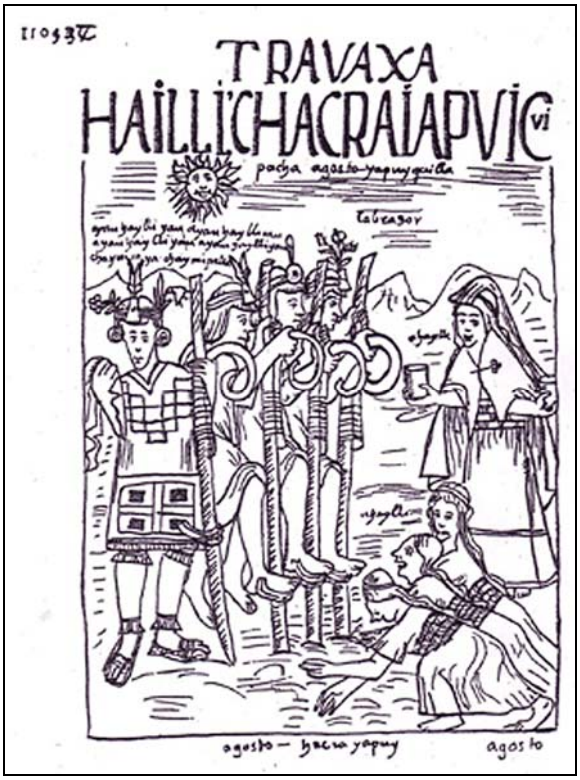
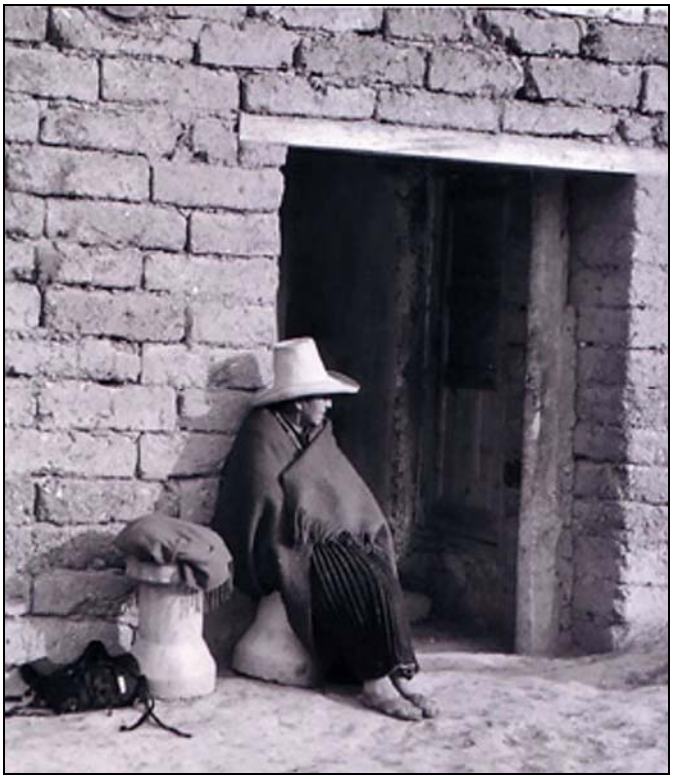


Figure 1 (left). The Incas and his nobles turning the earth with golden foot plows while the coyas plant corn seeds in the furrows. According to Murúa, the females were wearing their sara belts. Drawing by Guaman Poma c. 1613.

Figure 2 (right). Sra. Maria in San Ignacio holding sara belts she has woven.

There is no doubt the maize belts were important. Corn and potatoes were the two main crops in the Inca empire, and corn was the more highly valued. The Incas claimed they brought corn and civilization to Cusco from their mythical cave of origin at Pacarictambo. They used large quantities of maize especially for *chicha*, a fermented corn drink, consumed at rituals and festivals large and small. The extensive irrigated terraces around Cusco and the level land in the Urubamba river valley were devoted extensively to maize production. Both the harvesting and later, the planting of maize, during which the Inca and his nobles used golden foot plows, began in a field at the edge of Cusco, where according to legend the first corn was planted by the *coya* Mama Occlo. Historically, when the Inca and his nobles turned the earth to plant, the *coyas*, presumably wearing their special belts (according to Murúa), threw maize seeds in the furrows. Great state rituals involving music, dance, sacrifices, the display of the mummies of past Inca rulers and their consorts (*coyas*), and the drinking of *chicha* accompanied both the corn planting and harvest festivals.

The maize harvest was also a household celebration throughout the Andes with music and dance and the selection of a *saramama* (Q. corn mother), an unusual cob of corn, either multicolored, or two or more ears grown together. The *saramama* was considered the mother of corn, wrapped in the finest women's clothing, and kept in a special granary. The Inca emperor had a *saramama* for his household made of gold, dressed in the highest quality women's dress, which possibly included the ceremonial *sara* belt mentioned by Murúa. *Saramamas* are still collected in the fields and associated with fertility in much of the Andes. In Otavalo, Ecuador, in 1996, the mother of my goddaughter brought a *saramama* to my house as a gift. It consisted of a central cob surrounded by ten smaller ones, which she described as a mother with her children. The person who found the *saramama* "would have many children or grandchildren."



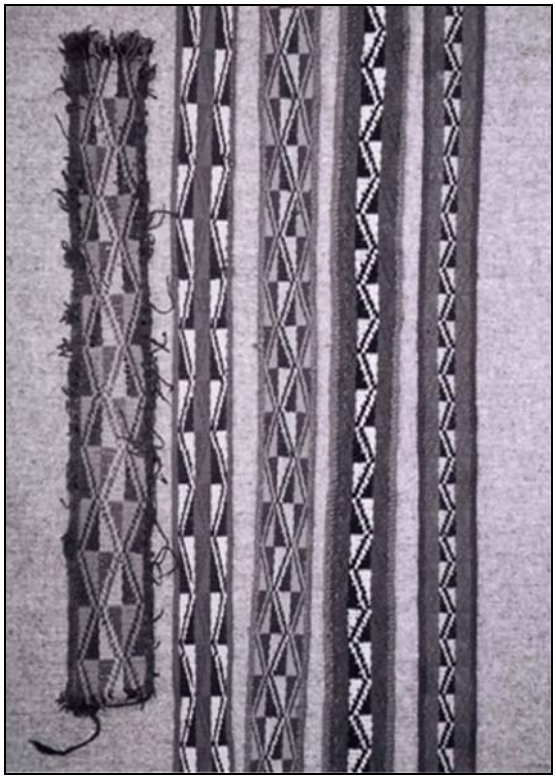


Figure 3 (left). Sra. Rosa in traditional dress. She is wearing a sara belt under her shawl.

Figure 4 (right). Sara belts. The two on the right are sara chunga or grande (large maize) belts; the rest are sara chica or chico (small maize).

No contemporary examples of the Murúa belt were known to exist until 2002, when I was in northern Peru and was surprised to see that a colleague had wrapped his sleeping bag with a belt purchased in the Huamachuco region in the 1970s that was virtually identical to the Murúa belt. In 2004, we found women in the southern highlands of La Libertad province who still weave these belts using multiple heddles, confirming Murúa's accuracy. Although Spanish had replaced Quechua in the region a century ago, people call the belts "*sarita*," (corn belts) but did not know what *sara* or *sarita* meant or the history of the belts. *Sarita* belts are used to swaddle babies, and are worn by pregnant women to support their stomachs, and by men to support their backs while doing agricultural work (Meisch and Fabish 2005, Fabish and Meisch 2006). The *sarita* belts are used by both sexes, which is typical of other belts woven in the area. It was extremely exciting to

learn that the Inca technical weaving tradition and the name *sarita* had persisted, even though the deeper meaning and gendered use of the belts had been lost.

In terms of messages from the past, several are unclear. First, the belt's diamond and zigzag motif can be produced by at least two different warp-faced techniques, one resulting in double-cloth and the other in the complementary-warp weave described above. Second, there is no way to know from looking at the belt in the AMNH whether it was woven using line-by-line handpicking or with multiple heddles. That is, we can determine the structure of the AMNH belt, but not the techniques used to produce it. Third, the meaning of the abbreviations a, c, e, and v for the four colors in the motifs is a mystery. Derosiers translated them from Spanish into English as yellow, red, purple, and green, which are colors found in Inca textiles.[2] But who was Murúa's indigenous informant, and in what language did she or he name the colors? Possibilities include Quechua, Aymara, Puquina (an esoteric language spoken by Inca nobility), local pre-Inca tongues, and Spanish. Did Murúa translate from an indigenous language and list the colors in Spanish, or are the color terms of mixed origin? I will return to colors later.

Figure 5. A sara belt weaver showing her loom with multiple heddles.

In 2006, accompanied by anthropologist Lynn Hirschkind, I traveled to a second *sara* belt weaving community, San Ignacio de Loyola, which is east of Trujillo at about 11,000 feet in elevation.[3] San Ignacio is four rivers valleys and approximately 60 miles northeast of the southern area where Inca *sarita* belts are woven. Both areas belonged to the same *encomendero*

[2] Desrosiers' colors: a = *amarillo* (yellow); c = *colorado* (red); e = *encarnado* (dark reddish purple; v = *verde* (green) (1986 [1984]: 225).

[3] In the 1970s, Peruvian textile conservator Arabel Fernández collected traditional dress, including *sara* belts, in San Ignacio de Loyola, but did not relate the belts to the Murúa ms. After the word got out about their significance, she donated one to the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C., in 2004, which Ann P. Rowe told me about.

in colonial times, so historically there was a connection between the two. In San Ignacio, too, Quechua has not been spoken for nearly a century.

San Ignacio and the other small, surrounding agricultural communities are a beehive of textile activity. In this area, spinning and weaving using pre-Hispanic-style technology is females' work, and certain females weave "*fajas de sara*,"(corn belts) identical to the Murúa code and AMNH example. Older women wear the handwoven traditional dress including a pleated wrap skirt (Q. *anaku*), while younger women use more Euro-Americanized clothing. Virtually all women wear handwoven belts, which may include a *sara* belt wrapped over their skirts but usually invisible under their blouses, sweaters and shawls. A *sara* belt that is wrapped over the traditional *anaku* has the ends hanging down in the back, almost to the woman's ankles. Many of these *sara* belts have spindle whorls, cheap finger rings, and sometimes fox feet hanging from their ties. Most people said this was "custom," although there is may be deeper meanings. People told me that the keys were to the house, and that women fastened them to their belt ties when they went out to work in the fields or run errands. But why the rings, spindle whorls, and fox feet?

As I visited spinners, weavers and the little coop crafts store in San Ignacio, I did not mention the Murúa manuscript or anything connected with corn (which is grown locally) or the Incas, but said I was researching their textiles, and brought along my own spinning and backstrap-loom weaving to show people. This made sense to them, and virtually all the females took my spindle, showed me the local spinning style, and commented on my weaving ("not bad for a *gringa*"). Women in the Sunday market, eager for sales, approached Lynn and me with many different belts to sell including *sara* ones.

There are two kinds of *sara* belts: *sara grande* or *chunga* (large maize belts) and *sara chico* or *chica* (small maize belts). The large and small refer to size of the diamond-shaped motif, called a *coco*, colloquial Spanish for a seed or the pit of a fruit, not to the physical size of the belt itself. No one knew what "*chunga*" meant; it was just a name for large *cocos*. *Chunga* (or *chunka*) is Quechua for the number ten, but in Inca times it also referred to stones or corn kernels that were used in counting. The kernels were placed in a grid, then entered on a *khipu*, a knotted cord used for record keeping (Guaman Poma op. cit. fig. 360). Holguín glosses "*Chuncachini* o *chuncacharcarini*" (Q. from the root *chunca*-) as "*Contar por diezes en montones*" (to count by tens in piles; my translation) (1968 [1608: I, 121). In many parts of the Andes, people grow corn with extremely large kernels, more like flattened grapes an inch across than the small kernels of American sweet corn. Flour maize (S. *maíz blanco*, Q. *parracay sara*), has been called "the highest evolutionary achievement in corn agriculture in the Andes" and the Hacienda Huayoccari near Huayllabamba, Cuzco, produced large amounts of this corn "with the world's largest kernels" (Gade 1999: 198). Holguín glosses "*Paracay çara*" as "*Mayz blanco y tierno*" (White and young, tender maize; my translation) (Ibid.: 279). Perhaps these larger kernels were given a value of ten and used in counting, so they were called *sara chunga*, while small kernels had a value of one.

Today in Otavalo, Ecuador, *chungana* or *chunga* is a game played at wakes in which corn kernels toasted black on one side are tossed like dice (Carlos Conterón, personal communication 1995, Avi Tuschman 2002). Gose mentions a similar game with corn painted black on one side that is played at wakes in Antabamba town in Antabamba province just east of modern Aymaraes (1994: 118). Holguín also lists this meaning: "*Chuncaycuna. Qualquier juego de fortuna*" (Q. *Chuncayuna*. Any game of chance; my translation) (Ibid.), so perhaps large kernels

of corn were used in games. The exact relationship between *chunga* and corn in San Ignacio is still unclear, but the two are undeniably connected in other parts of the Andes dating back to Inca times.

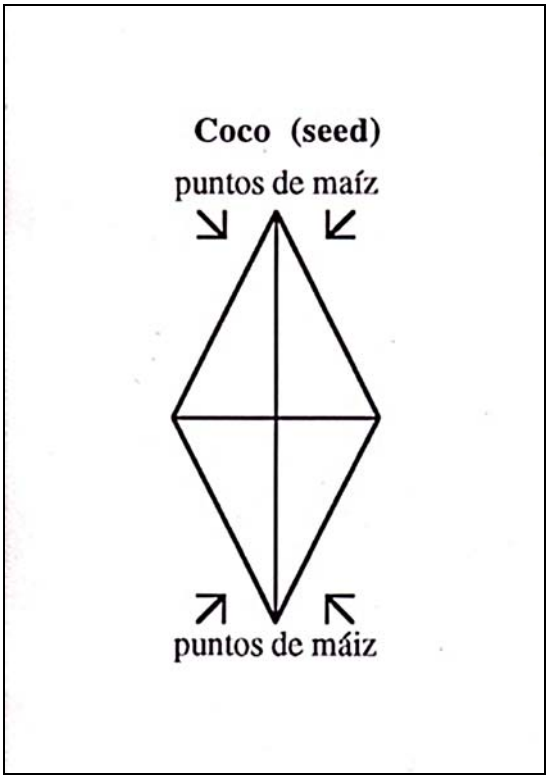
The women threw me another curve ball when they brought out *bolsicos* (woven saddle bags carried over the shoulder) and *talegas* (small woven bags used to hold food). Each entire vertical band of motifs on these textiles was called "*sara*." Within the bands were such motifs as *tijeras* (scissors). There is nothing Inca about scissors (a Spanish introduction), nor did the women claim that any individual motifs were "*sara*." Later, one woman showed me her *bolsico*, indicating that the *sara* stripes had handpicked motifs, while the plain-weave stripes that separated the *sara* stripes were the *pampa* (Q. flat area or plain); we were looking at a symbolic *chacra* (Q. cornfield, planted field).

Throughout the southern Andes, including Tarabuco, Bolivia, where I researched textiles in the 1980s, large, plain-weave sections of textiles are commonly called *pampa* (Q. plains, flat land) (Meisch 1986). The same verb, *pallay* (Q. to select or pick up by hand) is used to describe pick-up weaving and such activities as harvesting potatoes. In San Ignacio, *sara* and *pampa* fit a pattern whereby the handpicked rows, in which humans have selected or metaphorically cultivated and harvested the warps, symbolize rows of corn, while the plain-weave *pampas* represent the uncultivated spaces between the cornrows. The earth itself is considered female, and called *pachamama* (Q. earth mother). The designation of plain-weave areas of textiles as *pampa* and the association with agriculture is found elsewhere in the Quechua-speaking Andes, for example, in Chinchero, Peru (Nilda Callañaupa, personal communication 2006). The connection between weaving and food production is also true of Aymara-speakers. Aymaras in Qaqachaka, Bolivia, compare a woman picking up yarns while weaving on her horizontal ground loom to a man's plowing furrows in the earth. The plain-weave *pampa* on textiles is usually woven from undyed wool yarn, and the patterned *salta* sections, are woven from brightly dyed yarn. The weavers consider the *pampa* "raw" (natural, undyed) and the *salta* "cooked" (i.e., dyed in hot water) (Arnold 1997: 104-105, 113).

One chilly morning in San Ignacio I sat in doña Maria's courtyard as she demonstrated *sara* belt weaving and I learned the names of the colors (all Spanish) on her *sara* belts. Only certain women can weave *sara* and other complex belts that have multiple heddles, which can number 29. Rather than re-count the fine warp yarns for the heddles each time they weave a belt, the women keep heddling samplers of thickly spun wool to speed the process. I had hoped that doña Maria would give me color terms in Quechua, which would offer clues to Murúa's letters a, c, e, and v. She named the colors, but then changed the subject. "The whole is a *coco*," she told me, as had other weavers, touching the diamond-shaped motif on a *sara* belt. "But these are *puntos de maíz*" (tips of corn) pointing to the apices of the four triangles at the top and bottom of the *coco*. My jaw dropped; this was the first time contemporary Andeans knowingly associated the belts with corn. I asked her to repeat what she said and she did, touching the motifs.

The diamond-shaped geometric motifs in the *sara* belts symbolize a corn kernel with four tiny different-colored corncobs inside. This geometric, non-representational patterning is typical of Inca textiles. What is the significance of four cobs? Quadripartite and binary divisions are ancient and common features of Andean societies. The Inca empire was called Tawantinsuyu (Q. the four sectors together). What the four small corncobs in each diamond-shaped *coco* or seed represent is another missing piece of the puzzle. The zigzag motifs outlining the *cocos* are called *kengo* (Q. *kingu, k'inku*). Such motifs, found carved in boulders at Inca sites, and woven into

contemporary textiles (Meisch *op. cit*.) are often called *mayu k'inku* (Q. zigzagging river) and represent life-giving water. The *sara* belt can be seen as a series of corn seeds being watered by a flowing stream.



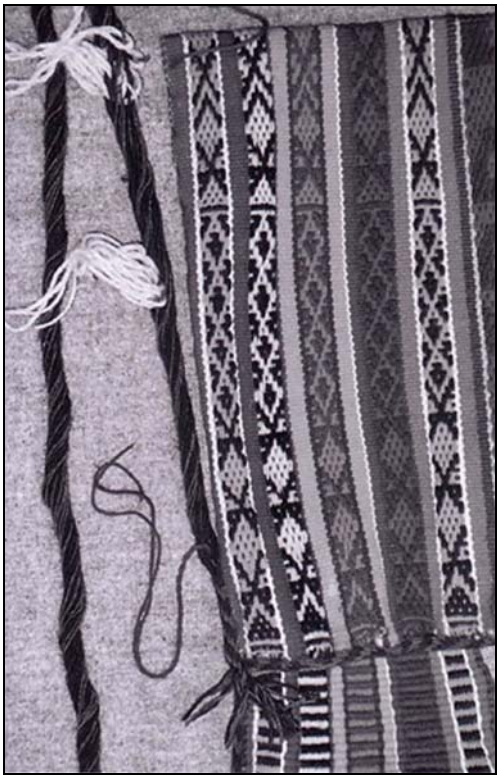


Figure 6 (left). The diamond-shaped motif (coco or seed) on sara belts, with the tips of four small corncobs inside.

Figure 7 (right). An unfinished bolsico (saddlebag worn over a person's shoulder) showing the sara rows (with hand-picked motifs) separated by the pampas, (the plain-weave rows), forming a chacra or cornfield.

Murua's colors indicated by the initials a, c, e, and v could represent varieties of corn, for which there are dozens of terms in Andean languages. In addition, some animal fiber terms are also colors. For example, the v could mean *vicuña*, which refers to the animal, its fiber, and a color, that of its tawny fleece. To complicate matters, some color terms doña Maria mentioned are the names of modern aniline dyes, *onza de oro* (an ounce of gold), or local, *flor de piscor* (*piscor* flower, yellow). In addition, some Andean communities mix their color terms, using Spanish, Quechua, Aymara, vestiges of long-forgotten local languages, and aniline-dye terms (anciently, natural dye names).

One possibility is that the association may not be with exact colors, but with varieties or categories of maize. For example, a variety of corn grown in the Huamachuco region called *maíz chochoca* (Q. *chuchuca*) is dark yellow. Guaman Poma refers to different maize varieties including "*alin sara*," (Q. maize of the first or best quality) (*op. cit*. vol. 3: 1040 [1153]), as well as *capya, chuchina, uanza, yunca, anti, chullpi, paro, arauay, ancauay, oque*, and *chochoca* maize (*op. cit*. vol. 2: 840 [910]; my translations). Of these terms, *oque* (Q. *uqui*, gray) is a color, *paro* [Q. *paru*] refers to yellow corn, but can also mean roasted corn with good color and flavor. *Yunca* and *anti* refer to maize from the *yungas* (Q. lower elevations) and *antisuyu* (Q. a sector of

the empire) respectively, *chullpi* to boiled sweet corn, and *huanza* [*wansa*] to a variety of maize. Father Arriaga, a Spanish priest dedicated to the extirpation of idolatry, wrote of corn called "*piruazara*; these are ears whose rows of kernels are not in a straight line but in a spiral like a snail shell. The *micsazara* or *piruazara* are placed superstitiously on the piles of corn and in *piruas*, or corn cribs, to be saved" (1968 [1621]: 31). Another possibility is that each of the four tiny corncobs in a *coco* represents a variety of corn grown in one of the four sectors of the Inca empire, but this is a hypothesis.

Doña Maria was weaving with synthetic, factory-made yarn, which she bought in Lima when she visited her children. All the weavers were adamant that the *sara* belts must have five colors, one for the selvedges and four for the motifs. The motif colors must contrast sufficiently with one another to be clearly visible, with red paired with blue, for example, and yellow with green, or red/green and blue/yellow or similar combinations. What appears to be local uniformity in color choice today is related not to ancient custom, but to the availability of synthetic yarn. Sometimes only certain colors are for sale in the local stores or have been brought from the coast by an individual, so a cohort of belts appears with these color combinations. I also saw *sara* belts with such unusual colors as lime green, and brown. If there was color symbolism in Inca times, I have not yet found evidence of it.

I have several hypotheses for the arrival of the *sara* belts in northern Peru. The first involves the *akllakuna* (Q. chosen women), who wove cloth for the Inca state. There was house of the chosen women (Q. *akllawasi*) in Huamachuco, probably with Inca overseers who could have commissioned these belts for use in the Cusco corn ceremonies. Linguistically, it seems clear that the *sara* belt tradition was brought to Huamachuco by the Incas or by *mitmaq* (Q. transferred populations) from the Cusco region, as *sara* is the Cusco or southern Peruvian Quechua term for maize, while in Ancash Department, south of La Libertad it is *jara* (/s/ and /j/ are phonemes), and in Junín (farther south) it is *sala*. (/r/ and /l/ are phonemes). Cusco or Southern Peruvian Quechua (Quechua II or A) is a completely different language from Central Quechua (Quechua I or B), spoken in Ancash and Junín Departments. If the belt pre-dated the Inca presence in Huamachuco, we would expect it to be called a *jara* belt.

Mitmaq in the Huamachuco region included Incas from Cusco among many others, including Sancos and Quichuas (Espinoza Soriano 1970: 80). The Sancos, and possibly the Quichua were Incas by privilege (honorary Incas). The Sancos' original homeland was the Aymarays area where Murúa was stationed as a missionary. The Spanish tended to conflate the Cusco Incas and those by privilege and called them all "Incas." Ann Rowe suggested that the belt in the Murúa manuscript appears to be provincial Inca rather than imperial Inca (personal communication 2005) because the *sara* belt has a 2/2 horizontal color change rather than the 3/1 horizontal color change that is typical of the imperial Inca textiles she has studied (1977: chapter 10; 1995-1996: 38, n. 15; 39, n. 26). I would say Inca by privilege rather than imperial Inca, meaning the belt came from the circum-Cusco region whose Quechua-speaking residents had been designated Incas by privilege, and not from the more distant provinces of Tawantinsuyu. Apparently, the tradition of weaving *sara* belts in the Huamachuco region survived among the descendents of *mitmaq* for more than five centuries, passed from mother to daughter and aunt to niece.

Augustinian friars arrived in Huamachuco in 1552, just 20 years after the conquistadors landed nearby on the coast of Peru. Although the friars made concerted attempts to "extirpate idolatry" and Christianize the natives, many pre-Hispanic household religious practices survived

- the *sara* belts are a prime example. The Huamachuco region is relatively isolated, and probably escaped the more intense suppression of Inca religion around Cusco. Women weavers in the north with their *sara* belts, a product of the home, woven quietly in the courtyard, obviously eluded the eyes of the Catholic clergy when more visible practices related to corn worship did not, and have survived for almost 500 years after the fall of the Inca Empire.

Acknowledgments

This paper was presented at a panel in memory of Andean textile scholar Edward Franquemont, whose death in 2004 left a huge whole in the fabric of our community and represents an incalculable loss to ethnographic textile studies. How I wish Ed had been there to offer his insights on my sara belt research. My thanks go to Andrea Heckman for organizing this panel and to all the participants, especially Nilda Callañaupa of Chinchero, Peru, and Ed's widow Christine Franquemont. I am also indebted to the kind and hospitable people of San Ignacio, my traveling companion Lynn Hirschkind, Dana Herrera for scanning the photos and drawings, and Saint Mary's College of California for a Faculty Development Grant that allowed me to attend the TSA Symposium.

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