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Colorful Messages: The Revival of Natural Dyes in Traditional Cuzco Textiles

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Many weavers living near Cuzco, Peru are reviving the use of natural dyes in their traditional textiles. Since the introduction of chemical dyes in the late 19th century, the knowledge and practice of natural dyeing has declined dramatically for numerous reasons, including convenience, color preference, and environmental problems that have reduced the availability of natural dyestuffs. However, in the long heritage of Andean textiles, this epoch of chemical dyes is relatively short.

Figure 1 (left). Weaver in Pitumarka, Peru (Heckman).
Figure 2 (right). Ausangate peak with herds of llamas (Heckman).

I began studying Andean textiles in the Cuzco region over twenty-five years ago. In 1979, I was a weaver/fiber artist when I visited Peru for the first time. This trip changed the direction of my life, and in 1997 I completed my Ph.D. in Latin American Studies after living for most of 1996 on a Fulbright grant in the region southeast of Cuzco known as Ausangate. My hypothesis prior to living in Pacchanta and learning to weave with the family of Maria Merma Gonzalo was that perhaps the introduction of aniline dyes and synthetic yarns were changing the cultural significance and meanings in the traditional weavings of this area. Very quickly I learned that based on local Quechua aesthetics weavers were persistently weaving their ancestral designs but using some new materials. Maria used an odd Spanish word (she speaks primarily Quechua) for their use of synthetics calling it the “moda” or style. Ausangate is the highest peak in Southern Peru at 20,800’ known locally as an Apu (Quechua) or sacred mountain spirit effecting the lives of all those who live near it, even as far away as Cuzco and Lake Titicaca. In the geographic landscape of this region with the land tones of muted browns and golds in the dry season and shades of green in the wet season, the use of color made people visually identifiable as locals from great distances and it made them “stand out.”

An unusual practice in this area is the application of sequins and white beads to waistcoats, hats, ponchos and women’s shoulder cloths (Quechua: lliclla). For local weavers, it does not matter so much where the materials come from but rather in the case of sequins it was their quality of reflecting light when the sun hit them that made them appealing (fig. 4) As
researchers, we would like to equate the practice of catching the sun’s light and reflection to the abundant use of gold and silver in ceremonial dress by Chimú and Inca weavers, but it is impossible to make that leap. Certainly sequins, gold and silver all share the attribute of reflecting light back to the viewer’s eye, and even explain the use of aluminum tin foil on costumes during some festivals today but we cannot use ethnographic evidence for such an assumption. However as ethnographers we can provide valuable clues in conversation with archaeologists to possible ancient uses of artifacts.

One day, when I asked a young girl weaving a band for skirt trim about the bright neon colors, she said “you know the boys will notice me when I’m dancing!” (fig. 3). Sometimes we get the right answers to the wrong questions. My hypothesis was quickly revised to a set of research questions which arose from direct experience thus taking me much deeper into the local cultural values regarding decisions about materials, colors and designs. The current explosion of the use of natural dyes in and around Cuzco is a fascinating phenomenon given the recent historical era of synthetic aniline dyes. This paper will explore why it might be happening now, how the dyes are remembered and who the leaders of the revitalization movement are.

Lila O’Neale stated in the Handbook of South American Indians (1963: V 5) that “natural dyestuffs are plentiful in South America and to judge by the unparalleled variety of colors in ancient Peruvian textiles, seem always to have been” (O’Neale 1937: 136-152). She further
stated “Today, however the Quechua and Aymara, once so adept at obtaining dyes from natural sources, depend almost exclusively on aniline powders. These are available in all larger highland centers. In most areas mineral and vegetable dyes are gradually being replaced by commercial products.” (1963: 23) She continued with a detailed description of *cochineal*, *achiote* for reds and she sources Lothrop (1930) who documented nine different yellow, orange and brown hues used by the Mapuche and Chilote dyers. She referred to *indigo* for blues and a “certain” shellfish for purple. She discussed some barks and other methods for obtaining black, and then notes mordants of urine or alum.

Her research however is not the source of dye information for today’s explosion of natural dyes in the Cuzco area. Many academics from Max Salzman in the 1960’s through Ran Boytner (2006) have quite interestingly documented an assortment of natural dyes but they likewise are not the color sources for the revitalization movement. One of the primary sources are the older women weavers like this elder from Pitumarka (fig. 7). She has been a weaver all her life who now helps younger weavers remember dyes and weaving techniques. Another source of colors and dye memory is the village of Chillca, four days walk up the Pitumarka Valley known for its fine weavings where natural dyes have continuously been in use through time. Timoteo CCarita of Pitumarka (fig. 8) is another valuable source of color memory. While serving as the mayor of Pitumarka, he helped the Mother’s Club revitalize discontinuous warp scaffolding techniques that date back to pre-Inca textiles such as Paracas and Nazca. When I met him in 1989, he had a hand-written book in pencil of dye recipes he had been collecting for many years from older weavers. He aspired to publish a natural dye book but instead has been able to spread his knowledge throughout a larger area by working with the Center for Traditional Textiles of Cuzco (CTTC) under the excellent leadership of Nilda Callañaupa. All of these sources and indigenous people have helped the revitalization of natural dyes to become an active realization.

*The grandparents, and their memories, endure like the stories. The elders weave with their entire heart, spirit, and strength and the memory of many generations is woven into their cloth. This is why we must revere the cloth as much as honor our elders.*

CTTT 2005: 38

![Figure 7 (left). Elders helping younger weavers remember in Pitumarka (Heckman).](Image)

![Figure 8 (right). Timoteo CCarita of Pitumarka (Heckman).](Image)

Some Cuzco region collectors have played important roles in the memory of color and design. Josephina Olivera now in her eighties is pictured here with Manuel who along with her other son Pablo, and her mother have all collected textiles brought by indigenous weavers to sell.
in Cuzco’s central market. (fig. 9) Their family’s three generations of collecting is stored in large warehouses in Cuzco. This paper chooses not to judge whether the textiles are conserved or managed for long term preservation but acknowledges their retention of samples of Peruvian Quechua textiles that might have disappeared without their collecting. Under Peruvian law, local individuals are allowed to have private family collections and museums.

Textile collections do provide some valuable color information but the renaissance of natural dyes is advancing through the knowledge of local dye masters like Nilda and Timoteo who are willing to go to other communities to train weavers in dye alchemy and perfect the recipes. They are the driving force behind the changes. Timoteo works with eight communities up the Pitumarka Valley, in addition to the village of Choquecancha near Lares (where Kathy Siebold researched and documented the distinctive red/orange and black weavings some years ago). Today weavers there continue making the same designs but are experimenting with natural dyes. Alejandro Trevisan formed the Asociacion de Ayllus Ecologicos del Qosqo (Association of Ecological Bioregions of Cuzco) who are working with twenty-five communities and hundreds of families in the Mapacho, Q’eros, and Ausangate regions. Their projects include permaculture, natural building, medicines, seed banks, along with the production and use of natural dyes. The association has rented a workshop/house in Cuzco for monthly meetings for meetings of indigenous participants. This endeavor began as Casa Ecologica Cusco but is growing rapidly to incorporate more and more families (fig. 10).

Many of us remember the familiar sight of Quechua speaking men from the villages of the Patacancha Valley near Ollantaytambo who work as porters and cooks on the Inca Trail in their red and orange ponchos. CCATCO, a project associated with the Ollantaytambo Museum, is helping them organize their textile marketing and learn more about natural dyes. This project is helped by the leadership of Joaquin Randall, one of Wendy Weeks and Robert Randall’s sons. He told me recently how Nilda gave dye workshops to the communities on behalf of the CTTC (Randall, private conversations 2006).
The success of Nilda Callañaupa and the CTTC under her leadership has made her a Quechua role model for many weavers and business people in the Cuzco region. The CTTC is a Quechua owned and operated non-profit. As Elyane Zorn, co-panelist for this session, has often said about the CTTC, “imitation is the highest form of flattery.” When communities see the success that CTTC is having in recovering dye recipes, holding workshops, prolifically making textiles, and very importantly marketing them, there is no doubt that Nilda is a source of inspiration for them. Nilda stated earlier today during this panel how she deeply appreciates the past support of Ed and Chris Franquemont and the very hard working and compassionate support of the CTTC Board of Directors. But Nilda’s dedication and hard work is undeniable in learning English, promoting and directing the center, and her extensive international travel to promote the weavers and spread knowledge about the weavers’ lives and their communities. All this she does while raising her own family (fig. 11).

Nilda and the CTTC first began in her own community of Chinchero but quickly expanded to Pitumarka, Chahuaytiri, Accha Alta, Patabamba and Mahuaypampa. Ten years ago, the CTTC opened a permanent center on Avenida Sol next to the Coricancha, the Inca’s main Temple of the Sun. In 2005 they inaugurated a permanent exhibition hall to teach foreigners, provide markets for weavers and daily traditional weaving demonstrations by Quechua weavers. Nilda and the CTTC also organized a demonstration and market center in the courtyard of the Museo Inka thus providing foreigners who have toured the Inca collections of the Universidad San Antonio De Abad with an opportunity to experience cultural continuity through time by seeing the weavers weaving with the same looms as in the past and the chance to intimately connect to Peru’s rich textile heritage. This collaboration with the university museum creates an environment of exchange of knowledge, weavings and culture.
In conclusion, clearly a key factor in the natural dye revitalization movement is the memory of dyes, the dissemination of knowledge and current use of the dyes, but also it is in the cross-cultural teaching done by indigenous leaders like Nilda and Timoteo who work to educate tourists who come to Cuzco and to expand foreign markets. Local and traditional designs persist within new forms which meet market demands related to tourism but tradition remains dynamic and adaptive without destroying the bedrock of heritage from the communities where the textiles are created. Textiles continue to be an expression of ethnic identity even as changes such as this exciting explosion of natural dyes are expanding daily. The process is ongoing, with no final conclusion. Rather it is a vital economic, social and artistic transformation that we can continue to support and observe as knowledge is passed from generation to generation.

The responsibility of the children is to receive the knowledge from their grandparents. Even though the older generation will be gone, the children will pass the knowledge along to future generations by continuing to weave and wear traditional textiles.

Nilda Callanuaupa (CTTT 2005: 39)

This panel was respectfully dedicated to the work and memory of Ed Franquemont.

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