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Clothes from Cactus? Ancient and Contemporary Examples of Cactus Fiber Clothes and Textiles in Ecuador

Lynn A. Meisch

Indigenous Andeans and the Spanish chroniclers in the early colonial era wrote about the pre-Hispanic and colonial use of what we commonly call cactus fiber for clothing and other textiles in Ecuador. In this paper I use colonial accounts and ethnographic evidence to examine the use of such fibers in clothing and other textiles and their social and cultural significance. For example, the Incas considered cactus-fiber garments barbarous and uncivilized compared to those made of cotton and camelid hair, and used this as part of their justification for conquest; they were bringing civilization to the savages. While Ecuador's damper climate prevents the preservation of pre-Hispanic textiles like those found on Peru's arid coast, there is some archaeological and ethnohistorical evidence that allows us to trace continuities in the use of cactus fiber for cloth. This practice continues today with fiber from the *Furcraea* and *Agave* plants, the former indigenous to the Andes and the latter introduced from Mexico. Although there have been changes in many of the garments and textiles produced, recent ethnographic research conducted by myself and others offers information about how *Furcraea* and *Agave* are harvested, processed, spun, and woven or looped into finished textiles, which permits us to postulate how pre-Hispanic cactus-fiber cloth may have been made. Such reconstruction is possible because of the conservatism of cactus fiber-processing techniques in the Ecuadorian Andes. Barbarous or practical? Savage or sophisticated? Cactus-fiber textiles obviously convey multiple messages.

Lynn A. Meisch is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Saint Mary's College of California, Moraga. She joined the department after receiving her Ph.D. in cultural anthropology from Stanford University in 1997. She has conducted fieldwork in Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia since 1973, and published on such topics as artesanías; traditional Andean textiles, dress and ethnicity; globalization; gender and tourism; the indigenous rights movement; and the prevention of intractable interethnic violence in Ecuador. Her major recent textile-related publications include editing, and writing the introduction for *Traditional Textiles of the Andes: Life and Cloth in the Highlands* (1997); and various chapters and sections in *Costume and Identity in Highland Ecuador*, edited by Ann Pollard Rowe (1998).