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Spinning Pattern

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Ecuadorian textiles are in general more austere than those of southern Peru or Bolivia, but there are some interesting things if you look carefully enough. The focus of my paper is a woman's wrap and carrying cloth, locally called a *rebozo*, from the Salasaca ethnic group in central highland Ecuador (Figs. 1-2).¹ It was collected in 1966 by Frances Ruddick, then a Peace Corps volunteer working in Salasaca, and given to The Textile Museum in 2004. It is a large rectangle, 2.23 meters long and 1.02 meters wide, in purple wool with some narrow white cotton stripes, mostly near the edges. This striping is restrained and elegant.

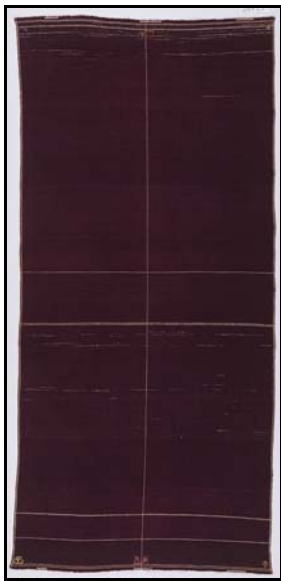


Figure 1 (right). Woman's rebozo from Salasaca, Ecuador, collected in 1966.

Figure 2 (left). Detail of the Salasaca rebozo.

The Textile Museum, Washington DC 2004.6.5, gift of Frances K. Ruddick.

One curious thing about Salasaca women's wraps of all sorts is that they are woven on a treadle loom, that is to say, a Spanish style loom. They are therefore a single loom width of balanced plain weave with cut ends. The ends are, however, very carefully finished with small darning stitches before the different shawls are cut apart after weaving. This particular shawl is exceptional in having small colored wool embroidered motifs at each end. This embroidery is also a Spanish style.² Similar embroidery was done in the 1960s on the lower edges of Salasaca festival pants, and I assume that this wrap was also worn for festivals (Fig. 3).

¹ This study forms part of a book manuscript, edited and partly written by the author, on the development of indigenous costume in highland Ecuador, with a tentative title of *History and Costume in Highland Ecuador*, that is now ready to submit for publication.

² Compare Mildred Stapley, *Popular Weaving and Embroidery in Spain* (New York: William Helburn, 1924), pls. I-II, 105.



Figure 3. Detail of men's festival pants from Salasaca, collected in 1966. Cotton. The Textile Museum, Washington, DC 2001.2.1, Gift of Bernard Fiskén.

Women's shawls in Salasaca are worn in the indigenous way, however, which probably is of Inca origin. The rebozo is folded in half, draped over the back and both shoulders, and pinned on the chest.³ There is considerable inconsistency in the terminology used for different garments in highland Ecuador, and the fact that the Salasaca rebozo is significantly longer than it is wide is the main thing that connects it to other shawls that are called rebozo elsewhere in the Americas, which are normally worn without being pinned, a style that seems to have come into use during the seventeenth century in Mexico.

The shawls are woven before dyeing. The wool takes the dye, but the cotton does not. Typically the purple color is obtained in Salasaca with cochineal dye, which is cultivated in garden plots, although the insect in question is probably a so-called wild species such as *Dactylopius confusus*, rather than the larger insect that is cultivated and gathered in Peru, *Dactylopius coccus*. The Salasaca use dye recipes that probably have pre-Hispanic elements. They use plant mordants with cochineal and obtain the purple color with an alkaline treatment of ashes and urine after dyeing.⁴

The most interesting feature of this rebozo, however, is that of alternately spinning cotton and wool in the same yarn. I have not seen another Salasaca textile with this feature, although one occasionally sees a few discontinuous cotton yarns in the center of the cloth near one end. These yarns turn at the end of the color area, either with or without interlocking with the dyed wool yarns (Fig. 4).

³ Ann Pollard Rowe (editor), *Costume and Identity in Highland Ecuador* (Washington, DC: The Textile Museum and Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), pl. VII.

⁴ Ann Pollard Rowe, ed., *Weaving and Dyeing in Highland Ecuador* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 266-277; Ana Roquero, *Tintes y tintoreros de América: Catálogo de materias primas y registro etnográfico de México, Centro América, Andes Centrales y Selva Amazónica*. Madrid: Ministerio de Cultura, 2006), 148-149.

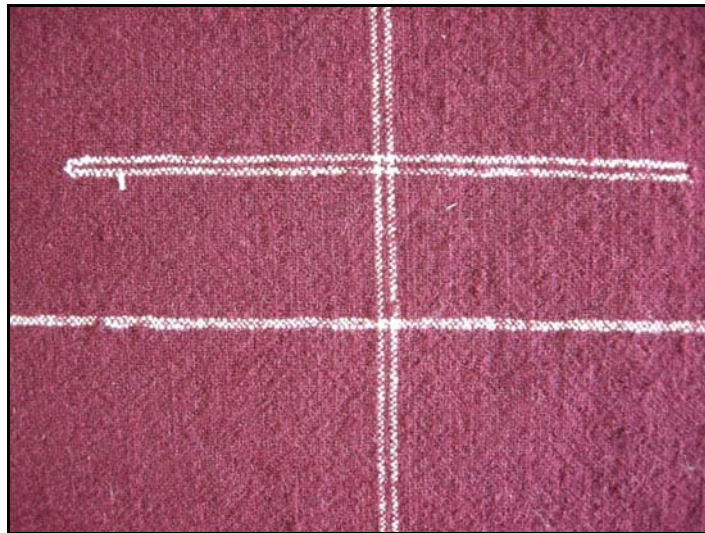


Figure 4. Detail of a Salasaca shawl with discontinuous weft linear pattern. *The Textile Museum, Washington, DC, 1988.19.138, Latin American Research Fund.*

The yarns are handspun in the aboriginal manner, with a hand-held spindle.⁵ The Salasaca use a European style hand card to prepare wool for spinning, but the spinning technique itself is indigenous. The carded wool is wrapped on a stick distaff, which is tucked under the left arm. The yarn is given an S-twist by holding the spindle horizontally and turning it in the right hand, without dropping it. The left hand drafts the fibers. Unfortunately, I can only guess what tricks the spinner might have used to change from cotton to wool and back, since this is not a technique that has actually been observed in Salasaca. Perhaps two distaffs were used, taking fiber alternately from one or the other. Spinning cotton is a rarer technique than wool in Ecuador, since cotton has to be imported from low altitudes, while the Salasaca have some sheep themselves, but historically it was more common than it is now.

The Salasaca rebozo is therefore a fascinating blend of indigenous and Spanish techniques, with a wonderful aesthetic of its own.

The only other example of changing fiber or color in spinning that I know of from the Andes is found in an Inca woman's wrapped dress that was said to have been found at Pica in highland Chile.⁶ The textile is made of three panels, woven in a warp-faced plain weave of camelid hair, and has a simple pattern of wide warp stripes in the natural colors of the fiber. It would have been worn with the warp horizontal, however. Probing the textile in order to examine the weft, however, yielded the discovery that the yarn was white in the white stripes and brown in the brown stripes. The transition from white to brown and back could be seen in the yarns at the edges of the stripes. So the idea is similar to the Salasaca piece but the yarns only change color, and not fiber, and the color change is all but invisible. It would have served simply to make the white stripes look a little whiter and the brown ones browner, although the fabric is sufficiently

⁵ For more information, see Lynn A. Meisch, Laura Miller, and Ann Pollard Rowe, "Spinning in Highland Ecuador," *The Textile Museum Journal* 42-43 (2003-2004) 2005: 89-90.

⁶ Ann Pollard Rowe, "Inca Weaving and Costume," *The Textile Museum Journal* 34-35, 1995-1996 (1997): 14-15, fig. 16. This piece has since been acquired by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, M.2003.78.

warp-faced so that the use of a single color of weft would scarcely have been visible. It is a fine example of Inca perfectionism in weaving, comparable to the invisibility of the area of terminal weaving in a four-selvedge fabric.

I do not think the Salasaca example actually has anything to do with the Inca one. It is more likely just a matter of a similar technique being used for two quite different purposes.

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