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Weaving Messages Today: Three Decades of Belts in Taquile Island, Peru (1976-2006)

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In studying the past, archaeologists examine change and continuity over time, but physical processes that affect the preservation of material remains make fine sequencing, at the level of decades, difficult or impossible. Cultural anthropologists and others who study present-day material culture frequently conduct short-term fieldwork, which makes it difficult or impossible to reliably study transformations over time. One solution to this problem is long-term ethnographic fieldwork, combining synchronic and diachronic data collection, to study processes of change and continuity in the production of individual weavers and extended families over generations, in communities and regions.

This paper is a preliminary analysis of three decades (1976-2006) of belt weaving on Taquile Island, in Lake Titicaca, Peru, based on two years of anthropological ethnographic fieldwork during a 30-year period. Taquile is one of the few communities in highland Peru where indigenous, Quechua-speaking people still produce and wear handwoven textiles on a daily basis (fig. 1). (Quechua is the Inca language). Taquile has experienced enormous changes recently, resulting from the commercialization of their textiles starting in 1968, and the development of tourism starting in 1976.

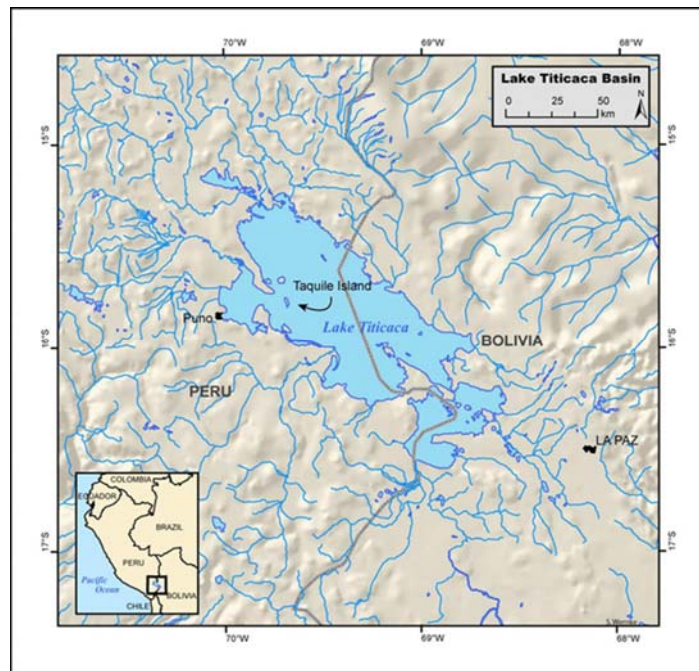


Figure 1(left). Calixto Huatta and family in Puno, Peru, to perform Taquilean music and dance. © 1987, E. Zorn.

Figure 2 (right). Map of the Lake Titicaca Basin. Map by Steve Wernke (Zorn 2004: 7). © 2004, E. Zorn.

Here, I provide a brief examination of some aspects of the textile style of this community by examining several belts woven by three generations of women in one extended family; I also document a recent modification to the traditional loom used to weave these belts. The discussion of change in one area of material culture (textiles), one type of textile (belts), woven by one

extended family, in one community (Taquile), shows that in the short period of 30 years a community style changed in the areas of technology (materials, loom type, weave structures), uses (personal and family use; sale), and meanings (internal vs. external; use and exchange vs. commodification or commercialization). Yet, there was continuity in all of these areas, such that the overwhelming majority of belts woven in the 21st century can be relatively easily identified, even by the textile-illiterate, as coming from this community. Such analysis illustrates why long-term ethnographic research is essential to understand the messages that Andean weavers communicate.

Style

Style is a central concept in archaeology (Hegmon 1992), as well as in art history, art, cultural anthropology (material culture), fashion, and design. For theorizing style in material culture, I find work by Chilton ed. (1999), Conkey and Hastorf eds. (1990), O'Brien and Lyman eds. (2003), and Peters (2002) particularly helpful. Wobst (1977) concludes that "form convey[s] information," using the example that "individuals [studied in Yugoslavia] varied their dress... to make statements about their social affiliation" (1999: 119). In a recent revision of that now-classic paper, Wobst argues that "style is that part of our artifactual repertoire that makes us human" (*ibid.*: 120). Communication is possible insofar as the "others" understand at least some of what is being communicated; there is no point changing one's dress to express hipness, for example, if others don't "get it." DeBoer examines how this might occur, characterizing style as communicational, "delightfully multidimensional" (Wobst 1977, cited in DeBoer 1990: 83), multimediated, "sensitive to context" (including interventions by anthropologists), and historical. Because people change, and change their culture, styles change. As DeBoer points out, "longitudinal 're-studies' neither test nor refute, but only track ever-changing circumstances and experiences" (*ibid.*).

Background – Taquile Island, Peru

The tiny island of Taquile (population 1,900 in 2005), located on the Peruvian side of Lake Titicaca in the Andean high plateau, is known for its stunning vistas and the suddenness and success of the *ad hoc* and *sui generis* tourism that its indigenous community developed during the late 1970s and the 1980s (Healy and Zorn 1982-1983; Zorn 2004; Zorn and Farthing In Press) (fig. 2). Taquileans are low-income peasant farmers, who grow potatoes, tubers, and other subsistence crops using rainfall agriculture on their intensively terraced island; they also fish from the lake. All islanders speak Quechua as their first language; an increasing number also speak Spanish, though women still are more likely to be monolingual. Literacy (only in Spanish) is increasing. Until tourism began, Taquile was extremely isolated, reachable only by reed boat from the mainland city of Puno.

Taquile is one of few communities in Peru today where all residents continue to create textiles and wear traditional dress on a daily basis (fig. 3). Cloth was the pre-eminent Andean cultural product for more than 3,000 years. In the southern central Andes, women create the most important textiles (Zorn and Quispe 2004; Zorn 2004). Beginning in the late 1960s, Taquile became known to some textile scholars and collectors as a place to find some of Peru's finest handweavings (Cohen 1957; Zorn 1983). Selling handmade cloth, especially to tourists, is an important secondary income-generating activity. Unlike other indigenous Andean communities who have centuries-long traditions of marketing textiles to people outside their ethnic group,

such as the Otavalos of Ecuador (Meisch 2002), Taquileans traditionally produced and exchanged textiles solely within their community. In 1968, then-U.S. Peace Corps volunteer Kevin Healy persuaded Taquileans to sell their textiles for the first time in a U.S.-sponsored co-operative (Healy and Zorn 1982-1983, 1994). In the cash-poor Andes, this was an unusual opportunity. When the co-operative collapsed in 1971, a few Taquilean men became textile merchants, selling their extended families' fabrics to foreign exporters, scholars, and tourists in Peruvian cities (Zorn 1983). Cash income, albeit modest, was significant given previous alternatives (Zorn 1997, 2004). Women earned money for the first time, causing shifts in gender relations. Initial connections with the national and international handicraft market, and experience interacting with foreigners, proved crucial when tourism began several years later. The cash earned provided money Taquileans used for capital investments.



Figure 3 (left). Natividad Machaca and Francisco “Pancho” Huatta. Huatta wears the medal he was awarded as 1996 Grand Master of Peruvian Crafts. Machaca wove their belts. © E. Zorn 2002.

Figure 4 (right). Top: Daily belt with central band woven in double weave by Natividad Machaca. Second from top: Calendar belt with central band woven in 3/1 complementary warp weave by Alejandrina Huatta. Second from bottom: Daily belt with central band woven in double weave by María Huatta. Bottom: Daily belt with central band woven in double weave by Natividad Quispe. Belts in the collection of Nan Brown and Elayne Zorn; photographed by permission of Nan Brown. © 2006, E. Zorn.

When foreign tourism to Peru tripled during the 1970s, a few hardy young backpacking foreigners braved the 12+ hours typical of voyages in Taquilean sailboats to visit the island, and stay the night or longer. Within a year, Taquileans pooled their savings from textile sales and bought used truck engines to power their sailboats, and tourist traffic accelerated. The islanders displaced boat owners from Puno who had brought most of the tourists to the island, and obtained a government-sanctioned monopoly. Taquileans created community and family-based businesses, including a billeting system offering overnight stays in Taquilean homes, a crafts cooperative/store where all islanders could sell textiles, individual- and family-owned

restaurants, and a rustic museum (Healy and Zorn 1982-83). Most enterprises were operated with traditional rotative, volunteer labor (restaurants are family-owned). Despite factional and generational conflicts, the ability to unite as a community was central to their successes.

Since the early 1980s, outsiders aggressively tried to benefit from tourism to Taquile, first by attempting to buy community land and build hotels to compete with Taquile's billeting system. The community resisted selling or renting land to outsiders. Tour operators became aware that the main draw along the Andean '*gringo* trail' was the islands in Lake Titicaca, especially Taquile. Tourist brochures began to prominently feature Taquilean dancers and weavers. As tourism expanded and co-op sales grew, Taquileans experimented with cost-cutting weaving methods and created new items (Flores and Quispe 1994; Prochaska 1990; Zorn 1987). During the 1980s, Taquileans battled outside tour operators for control over transportation, but by the late 1980s, islanders had lost the battle. While Taquile remains renowned for its "community" tourism, despite astonishing increases in numbers of visitors (from a handful in 1976, to more than 40,000 a year in 2006), virtually all tourism is controlled by outside operators. "Residential tourism" (overnight homestays) has changed to mass day tourism. Visitors spend only a few hours on the island, with little to no contact with islanders. Overall, Taquileans receive little monetary benefit from tourism, though some Taquileans are doing well (in local terms) from their restaurants. The textile co-operative earned an average of USD \$1,000/month in 2005 (Alejandro Huatta, personal communication 2006), but it sells textiles from 386 families; thus, average monthly earnings are small.

Taquileans still struggle to compete with professional outside tour operators. During the late 1990s, Taquileans, acting on their own, built a tour agency office in Puno on land they acquired decades ago, but various factors have limited operations. Taquileans refurbished and enlarged their communal handicraft store, and opened a second large co-op shop and a small shop on the main path to the dock, to try to stimulate the sale of what has become an overproduction of textiles, of varying quality. The Danish NGO Ibis/Axis/DIB initiated an integrated medium-term project on Taquile. A ticket booth was built and was operating at the Puno dock by 2006, and local guides are being trained.

In November 2005, UNESCO named Taquile and its textile arts one of 43 new Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritages of Humanity, providing a "moral recognition" that may help Taquileans press claims for a greater share of the tourism market (UNESCO Press 2005). Taquileans were told \$80,000 would be available to Peru's National Institute of Culture (*Instituto Nacional de Cultura*) for projects to help preserve Taquilean textiles (by December 2005 no plans were set). It is likely outsiders will develop high-end tours to Taquile, to little local benefit (Zorn and Farthing In press). Nonetheless, Taquileans, with their typical unflagging optimism and agency, continue to try to find solutions, though increased socio-economic stratification has meant that solutions are hard to come by. Not surprisingly, increased tourism and decreased control, including the switch to mass day tourism, has impacted textile sales, which has led Taquileans to try new designs and news plans for textile production and marketing.

Andean Textiles, Style, and Change in Taquile

An extensive literature exists about ancient Andean textiles, and about contemporary textiles in Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, with additional work (mostly in Spanish) in Argentina and Chile (for bibliography, see Zorn 2004). As a result of factors including modernization, urbanization, and migration, each year fewer Andeans weave, especially in Peru. Taquile is an exception to

this trend. On the general process of learning to weave, which encompasses learning both technology and meaning, see Franquemont, Franquemont, and Isbell (1990); for Taquile, see Prochaska (1990) and Zorn (1987). (For an interesting comparison, see DeBoer on how Shipibo-Conibo children in lowland Peru learn pottery designs [1990: 90].)

Taquileans fought and won the right for their children to wear traditional dress in their island schools. Taquileans decided decades ago to require community members to wear Taquilean dress when walking about the island and especially when going to the town/plaza, or participating in community activities. Yet, during the past decades, Taquileans have stopped making and wearing certain textiles. The most notable change has been that women no longer spend the six months or more required to weave the large pleated, fine, black alpaca overskirt or *aqsu* that I observed as the hallmark of elegant adult female attire in the 1970s and 1980s. It appears that production of smaller garments, especially mens' coca leaf purses and belts, increasingly absorbs weaving time and resources. In 2006, a professor from Puno teaching tourism courses on the island told me that some of his young male students were considering wearing western-style clothing when going to the town/plaza, in quiet rebellion against the constant tourist gaze, and frustration at the mass tourism from which Taquileans now receive little benefit.

Belts

The beautiful red belts that Taquileans still weave and wear are striking and attract the attention of tourists and other Taquileans (Zorn 1987) (fig. 3). Newborns and infants are swaddled in belts; most Taquileans wear belts on a daily basis (though these may be hidden inside the shirt), when in public, in Taquile's central town (plaza), and for fiestas. Even Taquilean women in school or busy with children try to weave new belts for themselves and for their male relatives for each major festival. Belts serve aesthetic and pragmatic ends; they provide back support when doing agricultural work, and protectively encircle the body. Belts are one of the most saleable of all textiles.

Changes in Belts

Between 1976 and 2006, I observed both continuity and change in belts. I wrote about changes between 1976 and 1986 in belts made for sale, comparing what I called "traditional" belts (pre-1975, made for personal and family use); "intermediate" belts (ca. 1975, made for sale); "altered" belts (ca. 1981, made for sale); and "innovated" belts (ca. 1983-1984, made for wear and subsequent sale) (Zorn 1987: 79, Table 1). Belts still looked "Taquilean," because most had a red background, five warp-pattern weave bands or *pallay* (with the widest band in the center), and plain weave areas or *pampa* between the bands. However, weavers experimented by changing background color (blues, greens, etc. instead of red); weave structure (in the central band, double weave instead of the traditional "pebble" or complementary-warp weave with 3-span floats aligned in alternate pairs with an irregular (abbabaab) warping order); length and width (longer, narrower belts for sale); materials (factory-spun wool or synthetic-fiber yarns instead of sheep wool and white alpaca); and imagery (designs woven in double weave that were more representational and naturalistic, and more closely spaced).

While the general trend was toward cost-cutting (weaving narrower belts), or innovations designed to enhance sales (background colors different than the usual reds), Taquilean weavers also learned a more time-consuming weave structure (double weave), which they use to weave more complex, curvilinear images. They also developed a new art object, called a "calendar belt"

(Zorn 2004), which commands a higher price. Beyond changes designed to increase sales, internal aesthetic concerns (including competition between weavers in terms of innovation and style) continue to drive weaving trends. The following lists aspects of continuity and changes I observed (fig. 4).

Dimensions of Change in Taquilean Belts (1976-2006)

Continuity

- Still weave belts, on their traditional Andean-type loom
- Belts still woven for personal and family use
- Organization of textile space the same
- Traditional weave structures still woven
- Center band still widest and most susceptible to changes

Change

- Changes in their loom (modification for portability)
- Belts woven for sale
- Addition of new weave structure (double weave)
- Development of calendar belt (*chumpi calendario/faja calendario*)
- Creation of naturalistic, representational images
- Increased number of primary and secondary images, which fill space
- Plain weave areas (*pampa*) shrink (some plain weave areas divided into stripes)
- Changes in individual weaver's work over a lifetime
- Younger weavers learned double cloth ahead of older weavers
- Only some families initially wove calendar belts; many now weave them
- Older weavers generally continue to prefer fewer images in stripes
- Older weavers still interested in and capable of change.

The Belt Loom (*chumpi awana*)

Most Andean textiles are woven. Taquilean women weave the narrow and wide belts they wear and sell on the traditional, pre-Conquest Andean staked-out ground loom (Zorn 1979). There is a gender division of labor; in this region, women weave Andean-type textiles, including coca leaf purses, shawls, and belts (which may have warp-pattern weave designs) (fig. 5).



Figure 5 (left). Lucia Huatta (sister-in-law of Natividad Machaca) weaving half a mantle on the staked-out ground loom. © 1976, E. Zorn.



Figure 6 (right). Natividad Quispe weaving a belt on the new type of Taquilean loom; working at home on a warm day, she is not wearing her headshawl. © 2006 E. Zorn.

Men weave on the European-type treadle loom, introduced by the Spanish during the colonial period. Taquileans (especially little girls learning to weave) weave narrow bands on a “toe-tension” loom, a variant of the backstrap flexible-tension loom. Women use a small, portable loom to weave tubular edge bindings; men use a loom to weave poncho fringe.

The staked-out ground loom has advantages and disadvantages compared to other kinds of looms. It is portable, and can be adapted to narrow or wide textiles. Transporting it requires untying the ropes that lace the loom bars to stakes, then pulling up the stakes. In its traditional form it is not usable indoors, because even though many rural people such as Taquileans have dirt floors, they do not ruin their floors by pounding stakes into them.

In 1994, the Taquilean traditional belt loom was modified by replacing the usual stakes with wood dowels set into pieces of wood made into a four-sided frame (fig. 6). That change made the loom less portable, but the weaver gained the advantage that the loom did not need to be set up and taken down each time it was used, as is necessary for the staked-out loom. Furthermore, and this was the reason for the modification, on this frame loom weaving can be done indoors, since stakes do not need to be pounded into the ground to set up the loom. This change was made on the occasion of a presentation at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, when eight Taquileans gave a series of presentations and workshops in conjunction with the major Lord of Sipán museum exhibition. I was translating for that group, but did not document the moment, or obtain the name of the technician who worked with Taquileans, who simply wanted to modify their loom to be able to present a weaving workshop to museum visitors. That modification was very appealing; only a few years later, I heard that weavers all over the island were adopting that form of the loom; and in 2002, it was the only type of loom I saw used to weave belts. Knowing the circumstances allows us to date this modification and, furthermore, appreciate its invention in a situation far distant from Taquile.

A Family of Weavers

Mary Frame introduces a four-generation Taquilean family “for whom cloth-making is a continual activity, from childhood to old age” (1989: 1), which well-illustrates cloth-making as an ongoing, multi-generational process. Natividad Machaca, now a grandmother in her 60s, was one of the first people I met when I went to Taquile in 1976. Her husband “Pancho” Huatta invited me in late 1975 to visit them when they hosted the February *fiesta* of Candelaria, or Candlemas (fig. 3). I wrote about her to illustrate the central role of cloth in Taquileans’ daily life and thoughts (Zorn 1993). The belts I discuss here were woven by Natividad Machaca; her eldest daughter Alejandrina Huatta (who was a teenager when I first went to Taquile in the 1970s and one of my weaving teachers; she now is a mother with married children); María Huatta (the middle daughter of Alejandrina Huatta, recently married); and Natividad Quispe (daughter-in-law of Alejandrina Huatta, who with her husband lives with his family).

Organization of the Textile Space and Weave Structures

We can observe some of the changes in Taquilean textiles by looking at specific textiles. Figure 4 illustrates four belts. At the top is a daily belt by Natividad Machaca with its central band woven in double weave. Taquilean weavers learned double weave around the same time they started weaving the calendar belt (mid-1980s), and most calendar belts are woven with double weave in the central band (Zorn 2004). During the 1980s, Machaca told me she found it difficult to learn to weave double-cloth. However, her daughter Alejandrina Huatta, like other

young weavers, picked it up quickly from her now-deceased sister-in-law, Felicianita Huatta, who I believe was the first Taquilean to weave that structure. I was impressed when Machaca sold me a belt in 2006 with a double weave band. Though classic in terms of overall organization of the textile space, red background, five warp-pattern weave bands, and colors, the central band includes images that are more closely-spaced, more curvilinear and naturalistic (the pair of birds with flowers), and more complex (including a small images woven around the main image) than the fine belts she wove previously.

Second from the top in figure 4 is a calendar belt with central band woven in 3/1 complementary warp weave by Alejandrina Huatta. Taquileans developed the calendar belt during the mid-1980s as a modification of older belts (Fini 1985; Prochaska 1990; Zorn 1987, 1997, 2004). Overall, it is very similar to other Taquilean belts, differing only in the organization of images in the central band. When first developed, it was sold to collectors with a text authored by Taquilean men, which provides a wealth of information about Taquilean society (that photocopy is not included now). The central band is woven with 12 images – one for each of the months in the Gregorian calendar. Some images are traditional (Taquile's well-known hexagon; a mother bird with babies), while others were developed to illustrate the months. Some women prefer to weave the calendar belt using Taquile's traditional complementary warp-pattern weave, as Huatta did for this belt.

Second from the bottom in Figure 4 is a daily belt with central band woven in double weave, woven by María Huatta in 2004 or 2005. She is admired as an outstanding weaver, and she lets her sister and sister-in-law borrow her belts to copy images she develops. This belt is an outstanding example of the recent changes in Taquilean warp-pattern style: increased number of images along the length of the band; elaborate images with fine detailing (bird wings, altars with designs); images arranged in scenes (pairs of non-symmetrical birds); images filled with internal designs (hexagons or diamonds inside hexagons); use of tiny images to fill the textile space in the band around larger images (the tiny birds, hexagons, and butterfly demonstrate the weaver's expertise); and experiments with color in the narrow stripes flanking the central band. Huatta also added additional narrow stripes, often in eye-catching pink, flanking the belt's pattern bands.

The belt illustrated at the bottom of figure 4 is a daily belt with central band woven in double weave by Natividad Quispe, daughter-in-law of Alejandrina Huatta. This belt uses the currently-popular pink narrow stripes flanking the central band, and is woven with the preferred double weave structure. Imagery alternates the traditional (hexagon, diamonds) with the recent (elaborate buildings, pairs of non-symmetrical birds). It is recognizably Taquilean but unmistakably contemporary, illustrating both general continuity and specific changes that differentiate it from belts woven in the 1970s, 1980s, or even 1990s.

Conclusion

While researchers are aware of the diversity of sub-styles created and used in western and developed societies, sometimes it has been difficult to see the diversity in the styles of indigenous peoples, such as the weavers of Taquile Island, Peru. While Taquileans wear "traditional" clothing and thus resemble one another more than in communities such as mine in Oviedo, Florida, it is worth recalling that diversity in western dress sometimes is limited; for example, dress at a board meeting is quite restricted in style. Conversely, stylistic diversity in traditional societies often is greater than one might imagine, as this modest paper shows. On

Taquile, no two belts are the same, even when family members such as sisters might copy a design, and changes over time have occurred in both technology and design, as the world of the weavers has changed. While individual Taquilean weavers together create a distinctive, community style, within this style diversity and change are as central as continuity. Important aspects of the dynamic aspects of style can be observed through long-term ethnographic research, which helps us understand some of the messages that Andean weavers communicate.

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