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## Nasca Needlework and Paracas Procession

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Among the treasures in the Brooklyn Museum is an ancient cloth from the South Coast of Peru: 38.121, sometimes known as “The Paracas Textile,” and now more often as “The Brooklyn Museum Textile” (BMT) (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> First acquired by a Peruvian collector around 1912, the cloth shuttled between New York and Paris in the 1920’s and 30’s, inspiring great interest and numerous studies. One of these, Raoul d’Harcourt’s *Textiles of Ancient Peru and their Techniques* (1934), has been in reprint since 1962, and continues to intrigue fresh audiences.<sup>2</sup>

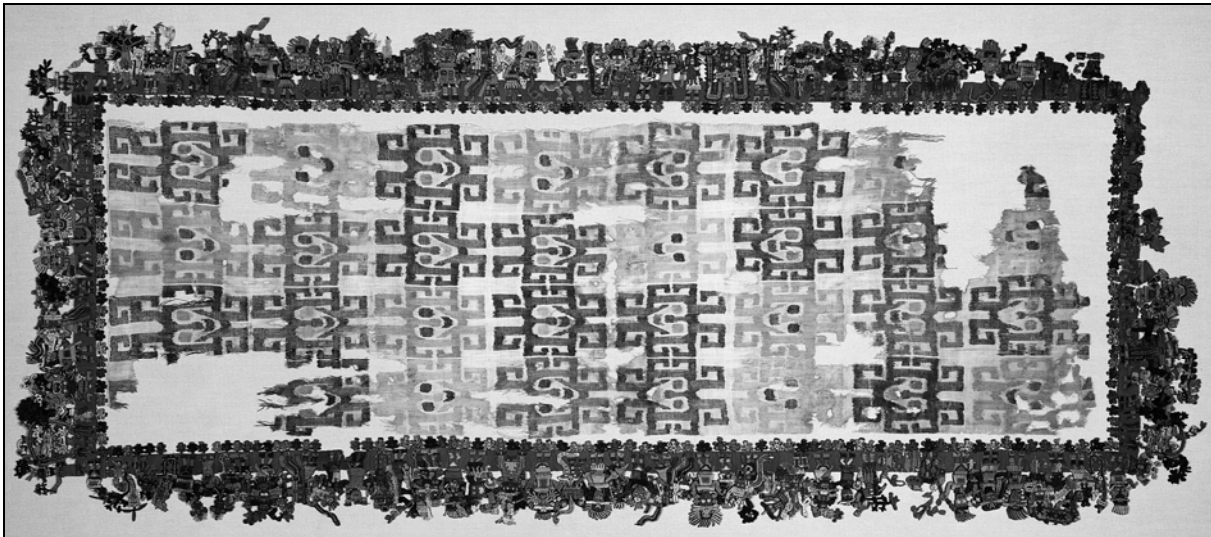


Figure 1. The Brooklyn Museum Textile (BMT).

The BMT was one of several spectacular fabrics that spurred archeological exploration of the arid South Coast of Peru, resulting in the 1925 discovery of the cemeteries of the Paracas peninsula, where wrapped “mummy bundles” contained hundreds of fabulous cloths (Paul 1990, 1991). The BMT’s imagery relates to Paracas Necropolis embroideries, but it is also closely allied in technique and imagery with art from the Nasca valley, and dated to Nasca 2: approximately 100 – 200 AD (Silverman 2002: 83).

The entire BMT is completely reversible and perfectly finished on both faces. It was made in two parts: a transparent, open plainweave central cloth with a regular design of 32 stylized faces is surrounded by a dense, sculptural cross-looped “frame” showing a parade of 92<sup>3</sup> tiny figures, each about as tall as a finger. The outside dimensions are about 2’ x 5’.

The face designs in the central cloth are “warp wrapped:” colored fleece was wrapped around sections of warps before the wefts were inserted. The border has three layers: cross-

<sup>1</sup> An early version of this paper was presented at a 2001 seminar on Paracas and Early Nasca textiles at the National Museum of World Cultures in Gothenberg, Sweden organized by the late Dr. Anne Paul.

<sup>2</sup> The textile designer Jack Lenore Larsen, wrote: “Without doubt, d’Harcourt’s is the the pivotal 20<sup>th</sup> century publication on fabrics ... When I was a student, battered old copies sold for the price of a car ...”

<sup>3</sup> I retain d’Harcourt’s numbering system, but add the frog-like figures in front of each llama as full figures (#26A & #50A). Adding in these two results in a total count of 92, and balances the quadrant lines into two lines of 21 and two of 25.

looped veneers of colored wool sandwich cotton core fabrics. A woven cotton band underlies the continuous red band that links the figures' lower bodies; their upper bodies are shaped individually over looped constructions that are attached to the band. Except for three figures that are represented on one side of the textile with a back, every border figure is identical on both sides; though since they are duplicated within the same outline, the front and back are mirror images.

The figures form four single-file lines whose feet point in the same direction. Each queue emerges from the midpoint of the short ends of the textile, and converges at the midpoint of the long sides. Some of the figures are animals; others are strange, mythological-seeming hybrids of plant, animal, and object. But many figures clearly portray humans, wearing costumes and carrying objects that be readily matched to archeological items, or plants and animals still found on the South coast today.

Some figures are unique; others are multiples; and others form related groups. Each of the four single file lines has a mix of characters. No overall order to is apparent, but there are some patterns. Several sets of “twins,” such as the two llamas, reflect each other across the textile.

Like jostling carnival-goers, the extravagant, top-heavy figures crowd and overlap each other, obscuring a clear view of individuals. D’Harcourt photographed each separately, but it is hard to make out fine details. In 1990, I produced a new, complete set of line drawings of the border figures for The Brooklyn Museum (Martin 1991). I was acting at the time as the Coordinator of the Selz Andean textile project at the museum; part of my responsibilities were to assist with scholarly study and documentation of this piece, as well as to prepare installation didactics, so I had the extraordinary good fortune to spend long hours with the textile over a period of several years. Production of the drawings required sustained study of each figure, and teased out many previously illegible details.

This study concentrates on border figures – on this cloth only – with human proportions<sup>4</sup> wearing identifiable garments. In my analysis, I plotted figures against various attributes, and found that while certain attributes were shared, other accessories and postures clustered exclusively with specific costume ensembles. Dress divides the figures quite neatly into four groups, which I call “Lords, Queens, Shaman/Sacrificers, and Unisex” (fig. 2.).

FIGURE #	FIGURE TYPE	front/back	upper body garment	loincloth/skirt	plumed headdress	banded staff	stick w/ pendants	weapon/instrument	dress	hair/ braid streamers	cat	Plant	effigy figure	fringed dress	tri-motif skirt	bare chest	long, fancy turban
8	L		1	1	1	1		1					1				
14	L		1	1	1	1		1					+				
27	L		1	1	1	1		1					+				
33	L		...	1	...	...		...									
16	L	1	1	1	1	1											
40	L	1	1	1	1												
7	L		1	1	1	1											

<sup>4</sup> The stocky figures have what a fashion illustrator would call a “4-heads” body. Some figures (of all types) have a “thumbed” foot, whose significance is unclear.



80	U									1	1		1				
68	U						1			1	1		1				
85	U						1			1	1		1				
41	U				1		1					1	1				
9	U								1				1				
45	U												1				
12	U				1		1	1					1				
38	U				1								1				
	12 UNISEX	0	0	0	3	0	4	1	0	1	4	8	0	12	0	0	0
4	S													1	1	1	
11	S													1	1	1	
54	S													1	1	1	
76	S													1	1	1	
22	S													1	1		
29	S													1	1		
46	S													1	1		
89	S													1	1	1	
35	S													1	+	...	
	9 SHAMANS	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9	8	5

Figure 2. Datasheet showing defining and associated characteristics of figure types.

Members of all groups share some costume elements familiar from the Paracas/Nasca canon: accessories like jewelry (mouthmasks, forehead ornaments, hair spangles, and beaded necklaces) are well known archeologically; other less easy to interpret items (streamers, trophy heads, and effigy figures) may relate to metaphysical ideas.

Animated streamers emerge from many bodies or garments; they range from spitting snakes to sprouting conglomerates of animal, vegetable, and object parts. These unnatural appendages have sometimes been interpreted, like haloes in Western art, as indicators of supernatural status (Silverman and Proulx 2002: 137-47). However, Townsend (1985) convincingly argues that streamers projecting from clothing may simply represent lively movement. While mouth streamers suggest ritual speech, body streamers – especially those that project from belly or neck – suggest wounds (cf. Frame 2001).

Trophy heads seem to correspond to mummified bodiless heads found in burials: sometimes with hair, with lips pinned with cactus spines, or strung on carrying cords. Whether they represent slain enemies or revered ancestors is uncertain. In art, plants often emerge from trophy heads, like sprouting seeds, suggesting agricultural fertility. According to various ethnographers, modern indigenous Andean peasant farmers believe that the bones of their ancestors can “fertilize” crops. Effigy figures are miniature figures whose faces resemble trophy heads with loose hair and pinned lips. Usually bare-chested and skirted, they often carry fans and striped staffs, and arch sharply backward at the waist. Like trophy heads, effigy figures are often held to the tongue of another figure, like a cat seizing its prey.

**LORDS:** The 33 Lords wear separate upper and lower body garments: an upper body shirt, and a loincloth or skirt. Except for the six who have lost their heads, all lords wear a headdress with plumes. Plumed headdresses from the archeological record occur both in feather and gold. Many Lords also carry horizontally striped staffs: similar staffs are found in burials; they seem to correspond to the scepters from many pre-Columbian periods, or “staffs of office” carried by leaders in prestige hierarchies in some traditional Andean highland communities still today (Paul 1990: 19, figure 2.5).

Many Lords also carry weapons. Among these are darts and dart throwers, and slings: a braided cord with a cradle in the center to hold a stone. Once loaded, the sling is whirled overhead and then one end is released to let the stone-bullet fly. They are still used today, by herders to control the movements of their flocks, and in the ritual battles known in Quechua as *tinku* -- where they can be deadly weapons. All three front/back figures, and a majority of line “leaders,” are Lords. Most Lords stand upright; few display streamers, trophy heads, or effigy figures.

**QUEENS:** The 22 Queens wear a dress with horizontal bands of decoration at chest and hem. Dresses were not among the garment types published in early Paracas studies, though the dress’s shape and draping had been surmised by some representations on Paracas embroideries, and its correspondence to continuing traditions of female dress in the Andes (Lyon 1978: 104-5). The analysis of dresses worn by some “anatomically correct” Nasca figurines (Rowe 1991, Horié 1991), as well as the study of a recently discovered cache of women’s dresses from the great Nasca ceremonial site of Cahauchi (Frame 2005) has filled in more details.

Queens wear or carry cats, plants, trophy heads and effigy figures. They show hair: either loose or in streamer/braids. Unlike the Lords, Queens never carry weapons or staffs, and never wear plumed headdresses.

**SHAMAN/SACRIFICERS:** The 9 Shaman/Sacrificers wear matching skirts with three bottle-shaped motifs. Bare-chested, they all bend forward at the waist, and have a streamer issuing from the navel: either a smooth snake or an elaborate “chain of being.” Four shield the navel’s opening with a fan that matches feather fans found in burials. All<sup>5</sup> seem to have worn a long fancy scarf or “turban” (Paul 1990: 50) suspended from their forehead ornament. Its patterned rectangular format and three-dimensional edging resemble Nasca textiles with cross-looped borders – and the BMT itself.<sup>6</sup>

**UNISEXES:** The 12 members of the “unisex” group wear a simple knee-length tunic or dress fringed at hem and elbow. Many carry or wear plants. Three wear a fox-skin and a leafy headdress; the rest seem to have borrowed headgear from the Lords or Queens: some wear plumes; others, like the queens, sport a sort of “cat hat.”

The outfits worn by Lords and Queens are mutually exclusive, and in large part follow long-lived, widespread gender distinctions noted elsewhere in the Andes (Rowe 1991, Lyon 1978). Thus, the Unisex wearing of both male-associated and female-associated headgear is unexpected.

One possible explanation for this “gender trouble” is suggested by the various indications that the border represents a “*tinku*.” The Quechua means a “meeting of balanced forces.” A confluence of rivers – where two streams join, are said to “*tinkuy*,” likewise a sprouting seed, which splits so that the twin leaves of the sprout emerge, are said to “*tinkuy*.” (Allen 2002a) In social relationships, *tinku* can refer both to a harmonious or a violent encounter. The most famous modern *tinku* are ritual battles in gala dress between kin groups, often fought with slings. The Nasca site of Cahauchi itself, at the confluence of two rivers, is a *tinku* site. (Silverman and Proulx 2002: 190) Blood shed in *tinku* encounters is considered sacrificial: a propitiatory gift to the ancestors, to ensure fertility.

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<sup>5</sup> #35’s head is missing, so it is impossible to tell whether he originally sported a turban.

<sup>6</sup> Some early accounts report that, upon discovery, the BMT was wrapped around the head of an old man in a rich burial (Montell 1929: 166).

The BMT's pronounced division into quadrants evokes traditional Andean quartered conceptions of space and society. The Inka empire, for example, was the "kingdom of the Four quarters." The quarters were conceived of as first as divisions into halves, with one dominant. Although Cusco was a diarchy, the leader of the Upper moiety was considered to be "superior," "elder," or "major" to the leader of the "Lower," "younger," "minor," "left-hand," or "wife" half. A persistent association links maleness with dominance and verticality, and femaleness with a horizontality: high (vertical) mountain peaks are considered generally male, while the low (horizontal) coast is female.

The same system of quartered geography and dual political organization marks traditional highland communities in Peru and Bolivia, where communities are divided into "upper" and "lower" moieties. Regular ceremonies, like *tinku*, bring them together, and emphasize the union of part to whole. Ethnographic accounts of contemporary *tinku*, often startlingly evoke the BMT's layout: on the eve of a Bolivian ritual battle, Cereceda describes the community "divided into four parts – one for each of the kin-groups that would confront each other in the *tinku* in the morning ... [when the battle began,] ... the men, divided by kin-groups, lined up facing each other in single file lines of 10 or 15 ... face to face..." (Cereceda 1978: 43-7).

The four parade lines create virtual "flow direction" arrows around the border whose apparent movements are repeated by the scrolls emerging from sides of each face motif in the central cloth. On the short sides of the textile, the figures emerge from a central midpoint and branch into two; while on the long side, the two groups flow together. The idea of "inward" and "outward" flow is reinforced by contemporary Andean textile terms: the heading cord is said to be at the "sprouting" end of a textile (Seibold 1992: 183) -- and it is precisely along these ends where twin figures holding a sprouting bean (#42 & #80) appear on the BMT. And the side selvages of a cloth are called its mouth, where the weft is "swallowed," and goes "inside" (Meisch 1987:51; Cereceda 1986: 161).

The movement of the four queues of border figures around the perimeter of the rectangle echoes that traced by figures engraved on a stone frieze around the perimeter of an Initial Period (1800 – 900 B.C.) ceremonial site called Cerro Sechín. Urton interprets the imagery as depicting converging moieties streaming inside a walled enclosure for ritual battle (Urton 1993: 137).

The BMT's central cloth has anomalous motifs at each outer row of rayed faces: at one end, the scrolls are topped with an extra swirl; at the other, a tiny row of stepped triangles. Folding the cloth in half would superimpose step and swirl. The step-swirl, a familiar Andean motif, has been interpreted as representing the mountain/coast dichotomy (Benson and Conklin 1981:66). Some highland Inka diarchies were divided into "water-side" and "mountain-side" (Abercrombie 1998: 153), suggesting that the step/swirl could symbolize a meeting of opposing moieties.

A famous Nasca pot with a *tinku* battle scene is modeled in the shape of a step-swirl (fig. 3.). Blood red glaze coats its sides, the winners stand with one leg submerged in the red color. Thus, it is very like the figures on the BMT, who rise up out of a blood red ribbon. On ceramics, Nasca artists represented blood without a bounding outline, in contrast to other pictorial elements (Fane 1987: 38). There is no bounding outline to the edge of the red band on the BMT: as if it symbolized the circulating, vitalizing "blood river" generated by *tinku* sacrifice.



Figure 3. Drawing by the author of a Nasca ceramic vessel in the shape of a step-swirl with tinku-like imagery. From the collection of the Amano Museum in Lima, Peru.

One of the aims of the *tinku* is to make the Yawar Mayu (the “blood river”) flow” (Allen 2002a). When the “... blows started, [opponents] struck as hard as they could, and blood began to burst from their noses and lips” (Cereceda 1978:47 [*my translation*]). What falls in the *tinku* – whether blood or casualties – is conceptualized as a food offering to the hungry earth and the ancestors, who will in turn provide good harvests for the living. (Bastien 1992: 158; Allen 2002) On the BMT, plant leaves are the only other element without a bounding outline. The simultaneous red/green contrast accounts for some of the cloth’s visual impact, and links the ideas of red blood and green growth.

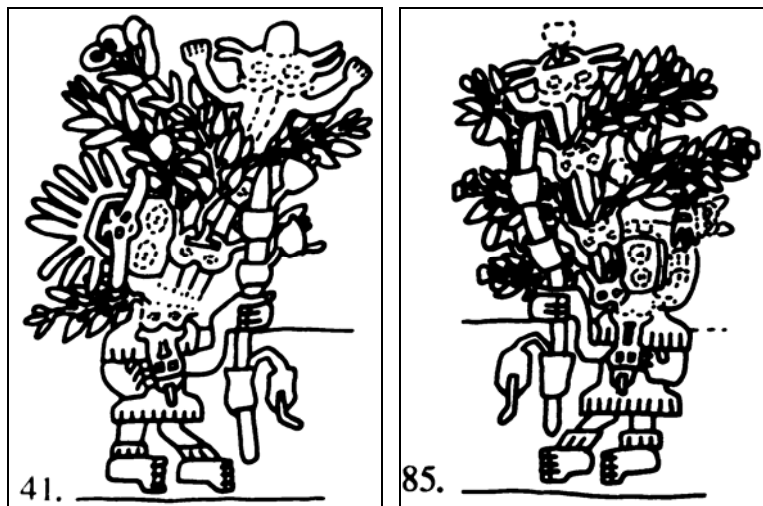


Figure 4. #41 and #85 both wear the short Unisex tunic, but while #41 wears a (Lord-associated) plumed headdress, #85 has a cat headdress (otherwise associated only with dress-wearing Queens). Both bend their heads back sharply at the neck, and a leafy branch sprouts out as if from the throat.

None of the border figures appear engaged in combat, but one pair of tiny “Unisex” figures appears grievously wounded (fig. 4., #41 and #85). Both are smaller in stature than neighboring figures. Though identically dressed in the Unisex fringed tunic, one wears a plumed headdress of the type only associated with the Lords, and the other wears a cat headdress of a type associated with Queens. Both have heads bent sharply back at the neck, as if their throat has been slashed, and a flourishing leafy branch emerges from their throat.



Many of the other members of the Unisex group bear symbols of agriculture. One trio wears fox-skins and leafy headdresses (#19, 51, 65). Paul compared embroidered Paracas figures wearing fox skins to the Colonial chronicler Guaman Poma's illustrations of fox-skin-wearing "guardians of the crops." (Paul 1990: 43) Twin unisex figures (#42 & #80) seem to almost comment on this theory. Each wears a towering cat headdress, and stands next to what appears to be a corn stalk. The headdress cat itself wears a plumed headdress, and has a trophy head in the center of its body: it spits a sprouting tuber from its mouth; sprouts a flower from its trophy head belly; and apparently excretes a bush so flourishing that its branches not only bear fruit, but, on #80, some tiny thieving animal pests as well (fig. 5.).

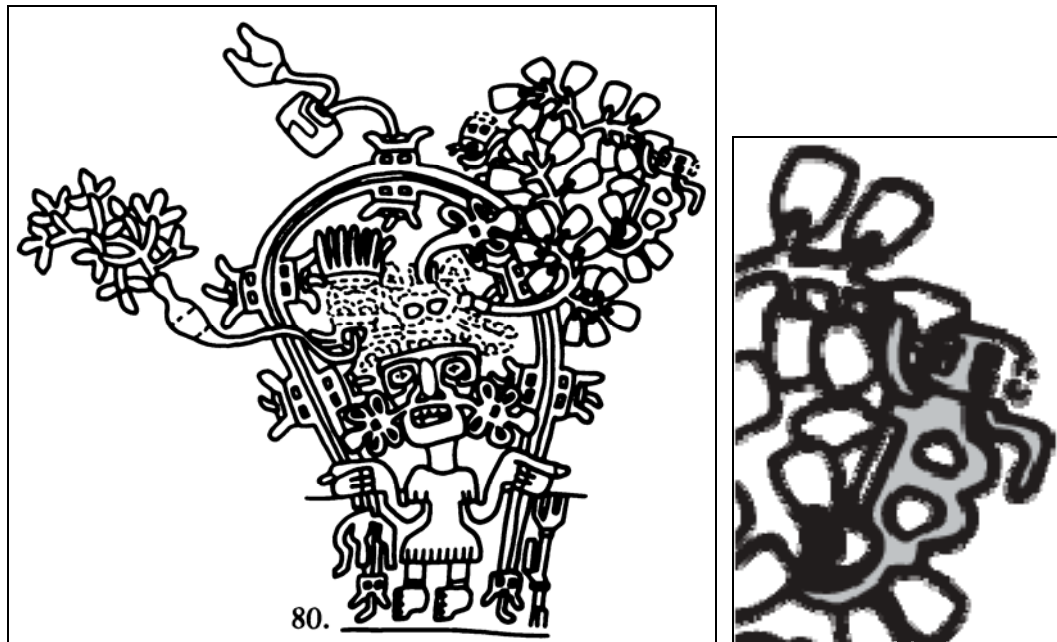


Figure 5. #80 wears the short fringed Unisex tunic, and a towering cat headdress. Hidden among the leaves are two tiny animals, apparently stealing fruit. Note the sprouting bean on top of the arch, considered a symbol of the tinku principle: one splitting into two. #80 and identical twin #42 stand on the short ends of the BMT.

The flora references on the unisex figures point to agriculture: tubers, corn, and beans. The Inca organized labor by age grades, and the chronicler Guaman Poma wrote that the very young and the elderly guarded ripening crops. He illustrated a five-year-old boy wearing a fox-skin and a nine-year-old driving birds from fields with a bola (Guaman Poma 2004: 210, 208); in recent times, "young unmarried boys" guarded the agricultural zone (Isbell 1978: 93). Minding gardens, tending flocks, and babysitting--important but relatively easy jobs--fall to young and elderly attendants in many societies. If the young guarded Nasca gardens as well, it might make sense that their dress was not as strictly gendered as that of adults in their prime.

Recent finds of pairs of Inca child mummies on high Andean peaks have confirmed what the Colonial chronicler Cobo (1990: 112) had written: "In the human sacrifices that were most frequently made, they offered children ... some boys and some girls ... they were sacrificed by being strangled with a cord or having their throats slit." Child sacrifice victims have recently been discovered as well, along with bodies of adult males, at the Moche site of Huaca de la Luna. (Bourget 2001) Benson writes: "All cultures that practice child sacrifice seem to have believed in some sort of afterlife, and the persons sacrificed were usually specially chosen for this glorification, which united them with the sacred ancestors" (Benson 2001: 18).

A preponderance of Unisex figures sport a large, stylized flower of the same shape as that which links the central cloth to the border. Sacrifice in some contemporary Andean ritual is conceptualized as a flower. Abercrombie writes of the alcohol libations given to the gods at an altar: “This kind of gift is *paq’ara* (literally, a “flower” or “blossom”), which occurs an obligation ... Gods receive liquid alcohol “flowers,” but return the debt in another kind of flower: crops, newborn herd animals, and power over men.” (Abercrombie 1998: 349) Flowers have solemn connections to blood. Prior to sacrifice, llamas are “made to flower” – that is, their ears are pierced and tied with colored string. When killed, or literally “made to flower,” their heads are wrenched back, a posture analogous to that of the snapped necks of our apparent sacrificial pair (Abercrombie 1998: 381; cf. Frame 2005: 14).

The holy sites where altars are set up and sacrifices made to ancestors are called “*paqarinas*,” “blooming places” (Abercrombie 1998), and thought of as a conduit to an otherworldly dimension. Many anthropologists have struggled to understand how this world of the dead stands not under ... but INSIDE the world of the living, in a hidden interior dimension (Allen 2002a & b; Earls & Silverblatt 1978). Sacrifices (“flowers”) given to the ancestors flow inward at *paqarinas*, but energy flows outwards as well: *paqarinas* mark the openings in the earth where first ancestors emerged, and are also sites for the exchange of miniature power objects of concentrated life force (Quechua: *illas*) between ancestors and humans (Allen 2002a).

Ancestors are said to “eat” *paqarina* and *tinku* offerings (Allen 2002a: 177). Bastien shows a “table setting” for a lineage ritual with 16 shells laid on an altar cloth: its 4 x 4 layout mimics that of each half of the central cloth (Bastien 1978: 136). On the BMT, a ring of florettes literally links the cross-looped border to the central cloth, as if connecting the solid, human world to the transparent, ancestral veil. Thus, “flower-offerings” channel exchange between realms: blood and energy flow from costumed humans sacrificing blood and energy – inward, to feed the ancestors. Sated, the ancestors will, in turn, bloom gifts of fertility and vitality – outward, to feed the people.

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