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1992

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## TEXTILES AS A DAILY OBSESSION: A DAY IN THE LIFE OF AN ANDEAN WEAVER<sup>1</sup>

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### INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on weavers and textiles from the island of Taquile, in Lake Titicaca, Peru, in the southern Andes. In my abstract I wrote that I would speak about both Taquileans and the Sakaka of Bolivia, but due to the richness and complexity of the material, I shall concentrate on Taquile.

This paper dates back to a conversation I had with Natividad Machaca (Figure 1), a matron of Taquile, on a winter afternoon in June 1984, after the festival of Saint John, which Taquilean families dedicate to ceremonies to increase the fertility of their scrawny sheep. Along with her husband and daughter, we were in the patio, more or less sitting up, suffering from post-festival, post-very-abundant-drinking hang-overs. I was trying to pack, and catch the boat to the mainland; no one was very talkative.

But when I mentioned that I might accompany my former mother-in-law to the little town of Ichu, Natividad practically jumped up. She bombarded me with questions. "Would I go?" "Was my mother-in-law going to trade alpaca fleece?" "Could I bring back fleece?" "Black fleece," Natividad emphasized. "Good black alpaca fleece," she added, spreading apart her thumb and index fingers to remind me of the requisite fiber length. "I need," she said, "two, no, three hides." Natividad reiterated that her daughter Alejandrina was spinning black alpaca for an overskirt (*aqsu*, now no longer made or worn). Natividad emphasized that Alejandrina soon would marry. "It's so hard to get alpaca fleece -- black especially," Natividad sighed. She hadn't obtained any alpaca all year. (Herders mostly raise white alpacas now, since white fleece brings a higher price in the international wool market.) Natividad said that she also needed black fleece for herself. She also needed white alpaca to weave a coca carrying cloth (*istalla*), and her sister-in-law, Regoria, was looking for a certain shade of brown to weave a food carrying cloth (*unkhuña*).

And so on, and on, and on. I felt so awful that I could barely think, let alone get excited about anything, but Natividad was keen to not lose this opportunity to get raw materials. Taquile is an island of weavers, but on their tiny island Taquileans can't raise alpacas.

The patronal festival of Saints Peter and Paul in Ichu is the occasion for an important regional wool market; peasant herders of llamas and alpacas

descend from their remote mountain homes to trade fiber for food (especially corn), which farmers bring. With modernization, few herders, or itinerant petty traders, visit Taquile to trade fleece for fresh and/or freeze-dried potatoes, or small corn. Like most peasants, Taquileans are short of cash, despite the growth of tourism to their island, and sales of their textiles.

I didn't go to the town of Ichu, so I didn't bring Natividad fleece. I introduced a member of her family to my mother-in-law, and I think they exchanged gifts of corn and fiber. I brought Natividad small amounts of alpaca fleece when possible. But it never was enough to satisfy her constant search for raw materials to create the cloth that she and her family contemplated and made in Taquile.

I will now turn to my observations of what shapes a day in the life of an Andean weaver. I will highlight moments in the life of Natividad Machaca, and her two daughters, Alejandrina Huatta and Petila Huatta. I focus on the people who make objects, rather than on the objects themselves, though we can see that these objects "behave" as "subjects."

First, I assume the opposition of daily life versus days of festival: I do not discuss the latter. Second, I locate the concept of "daily life" within the life-cycle of these weavers, for the purpose of contrasting patterns of generational differences in production that shape what a "day in the life" might be like. Third, I discuss these generational differences in the context of specific historical configurations and events of the past twenty-five years. I do this to show how textiles, and more importantly, their makers, move in and out of the market. Commoditization is not a "fall from grace," but rather, at least in Taquile, is one of many strategies that Andean peasants use to respond to global and local circumstances. Both commoditization and the dichotomy "traditional/modern" imply no turning back, but Taquileans attempt to balance traditional demands with modern opportunities.

I should say something about my title. Despite criticism, and in spite of Calvin Klein, I still feel that "obsession" describes the Taquilean attitude and practice of making cloth which, simply put, is a great part of what makes life worth living<sup>2</sup>. When I search for analogies to what textile-making "means" in Taquile, for me the closest is living in an artist's or writer's colony, where all present nearly constantly make, think or talk about "art." It seems self-evident to say that one must balance competing demands to get a full day's work done, but when one is fully engaged, "painting out of one's head," one thinks, dreams, talks, imagines the work, and thus advances the task at hand. I now turn to events in Taquile that have shaped daily life there.

#### RECENT HISTORICAL EVENTS IN TAQUILE

Taquile is one of two large permanent islands in Lake Titicaca, between Peru and Bolivia, at nearly 13,000 feet above sea level, in what is called the



*altiplano* , or high plain. Taquile, only about 10 miles in size, is densely populated by approximately 1,200 people. Taquileans speak Quechua, the language of the Inkas. Many men now also speak some Spanish; few now speak Aymara, the other principal highland Andean language. Taquileans are subsistence agriculturalists, growing potatoes, other Andean tubers, cereals, and grains. They also raise a few sheep, or cows.

Though despised by the Peruvian majority as were, and are, most indigenous Andeans, Taquileans recently have acquired a well-deserved reputation for unusually effective communal action. Taquile was the first community on the Peruvian side of Lake Titicaca to obtain title to its land, which to this day Taquileans steadfastly have refused to sell to outsiders. In the late 1960s Taquileans first sold their weavings in bulk, with the help of then Peace Corps volunteer Kevin Healy, through a Cusco cooperative started by the U.S. Peace Corps. When the cooperative collapsed, a few Taquilean men learned to market their extended families' weavings in major Peruvian cities and, in a few cases, to international exporters.

Tourists sailed to Taquile following publication of a letter in the 1976 edition of the highly popular South American Handbook, which described a virtual island paradise (Brooks 1977). Taquileans soon organized a community cooperative store, and a billeting system, and bought small motorboats (Healy and Zorn 1982/1983). I was involved somewhat as I lived on the island at the time, and helped Taquileans write a grant to the U.S. Inter-American Foundation for funding to buy motors and, on my initiative, mistaken at the time, to set up a local museum, so as to preserve antique textiles which were being sold.

Tourism brought problems, including garbage, the presence of non-Taquilean thieves and prostitutes, other disparities of wealth in face-to-face encounters, and battles with local tour agencies over rights to travel to and dock on the island. I discuss elsewhere Taquilean responses to selling textiles, including changes in the textiles themselves, the rise of intermediaries, and womens' lessened roles in new enterprises (Zorn 1983). By the 1980s, however, Taquileans had a motorized transportation system, subsidized by tourist fares. In 1989, Taquilean women shamed their men into "striking," that is, prohibiting a major Puno tour company from docking on the island, thereby regaining control of transport. And Taquileans still made textiles.

Furthermore, around 1984 young Taquilean women learned a new weave structure, warp-faced double cloth in two or three colors, which is much more time-consuming to weave than their favored complementary-warp patterned "pebble" weave<sup>3</sup>. Women wove this new double-cloth structure primarily in belts and, to a lesser degree, in coca purses<sup>4</sup>, developing both innovated and revived images. In the 1980s, Taquileans invented a new "traditional" textile, called the calendar belt, which both draws on their

traditions and responds to museum buyers' interests. A Taquilean folklore association takes credit for the invention "by committee" of this textile, which is now woven with the new double cloth technique (Zorn 1987, n.d.a, n.d.b).

Yet by 1990 tourism had declined precipitously, because of Peru's civil war. Tourist monies, if not tourists, are missed, especially since tourist fares subsidize the extremely high cost of gasoline for travel between Taquile and the Puno mainland, motorboats being much faster and usually safer than sailboats. I would like to point out, however, that early fears, including mine, of a "decline" in textile production were wrong, given the enormously complex situations of people's lives. To explain this, I now turn to textile production within the life-cycles of Taquilean women.

### A LIFETIME OF WEAVING

In the past decade, more anthropologists and textile scholars have been studying and writing about Andean textiles. Mary Frame introduces a four-generation family in Taquile, that of Agustín Quispe Mamani, and Candelaria Cruz Machaca, "for whom cloth-making is a continual activity, from childhood to old age" (1989: 1). In their moving obituary of the Peruvian weaver Benita Gutierrez, Christine and Ed Franquemont (1986) discuss textile production over a weaver's lifetime. They point out that women weave the most when they are teenagers, and again when their children are grown.

Some Taquilean married women weave a great deal, but despite their expertise, most simply are too busy with farming, festival sponsorship, and children, to do more than clothe their families. (It takes textiles made by both women and men to dress any individual.) When children grow up, marry, have children, and leave to form their own households, mature women turn again to weaving, if a lifetime of hard work in harsh conditions has not taken such a toll that weaving is difficult or impossible.

Taquilean weavers, however, never have been full-time professionals; they are peasant farmers, concerned first with subsistence. Women weave images -- of fields, crops, natural signs which forecast the weather -- which speak to the difficulty of farming in the Andean highlands. But if agriculture comes first, weaving comes second. Weaving is so important that it can be an unmarked linguistic category. When Quechua speakers say "I'm doing," they mean "I'm weaving," unless otherwise specified (Rosaleen Howard-Malverde, personal communication 1992).

### NATIVIDAD MACHACA, A TAQUILE MATRON, AND HER DAUGHTERS

Natividad is nearing the age of sixty. She was an orphan in Andean terms because her mother died when Natividad was very young; she learned to weave from an aunt. Today Natividad weaves primarily for her family. In contrast, younger, unmarried weavers spend much of their "free time," and



resources, weaving for themselves or for sale. The latter practice began in the late 1960s, when Taquileans first began to market their textiles.

Natividad is considered an exemplary "traditional" woman, industrious in a culture that prizes hard workers. Now that she is a grandmother, and well off by local standards, she is slowing down, weaving and cooking less. Like nearly all older Andean women weavers I know, she complains of severe pain in her shoulders ("*pulmon*"), which primarily is caused by using the llama bone pick (*wich'uña*) when weaving: this is an occupational injury, such as "tennis elbow." Natividad dresses 'traditionally,' avoiding any color except red or black, though she no longer wears an overskirt. She speaks only Quechua.

Both her daughters, Alejandrina Huatta and Petilla (short for Petronila, or Petrona) Huatta, are married, with children. Alejandrina is older (Figure 2). In many ways, she is more 'traditional' than her sister. In 1989, all three women still wore 'traditional' Taquilean dress. Petilla (Figure 3), however, also wore a watch and rubber-tire sandals. (Most Taquilean women, despite the harsh climate, are barefoot, unlike the men.) She also sometimes wore a sweater in a color other than Taquile's favorite blood red. Petilla was president of a church-based Mothers' Club where, she told me, she was learning how to talk in public. Andean women typically work behind the scenes; only men hold "public" political office.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, these two younger women -- especially Petilla-- produced enormous amounts of cloth both for themselves and for sale. In 1983, I finished my M.A. thesis, which analyzed changes in production and exchange due to market sale. At that time, it seemed that young people primarily were producing for the market. Now that years have passed, these same young women after marriage have returned to "traditional" production, for themselves and their families. This is why today I emphasize that "a day in the life" should be understood in the context of both the particular historical events taking place in and around the society, and in reference to individual life-cycles.

#### COMMODITIZATION AND "TRADITION"

It becomes clear that what and for whom a weaver produces depends, in great part, upon her position in her life-cycle; this applies also to male textile producers. Over the course of a weaver's lifetime, she can be seen to move in and out of the market, at different times producing primarily for herself, for sale, or for her family. We can see that objects themselves also have a life-cycle. Taquilean textiles, too, move in and out of the market. Sometimes textiles are commodities, sometimes not.

Thus commoditization, or production for exchange, is not a dichotomized event. Some of these moves (in/out of the market) are gradual,

others more precipitous. When the movement is gradual, it may be likened to strolling down a path; in other cases, it might be more accurate to speak of leaping across a ravine. But is there no turning back? Were "traditional" Taquilean weavers forever corrupted and tainted the first time they sold textiles they had woven? It seems not. Taquileans still learn to weave -- for themselves, and for the market. Nonetheless, one consequence of tourism has been to "freeze" the commoditization of both the people who make cloth, and the cloth itself.

Above I indicated why I believe that the dichotomy of "production for use/production for exchange," (commoditization) is invalid for understanding textile production in Taquile (and, I suspect, elsewhere as well). Similarly, the dichotomy "traditional/modern" also tells us little about the complexity of (post-)modern, post-colonial, rural Andean society -- and rural Andeans. "Traditional" weavers such as Natividad sometimes weave specifically for sale, but they weave what they know, and maintain their community's exceptionally high standards. A "modern" weaver, such as Natividad's younger daughter, stops weaving for sale when she has a small child or children and a husband who require clothing.

Yet Petilla occasionally still sells textiles. She does so through what has become common practice among young Taquilean weavers: she sells what she has already worn. Let us take the example of the wide belts worn by all adults. Taquileans maintain that ideally one should weave a new belt for each of the six annual festivals. In practice, this is impossible, but nearly all men and women manage to complete new textiles for at least the first festival of the cycle/year, the Virgin of Candlemas (Candelaria), on February 2nd, and for their patronal festival, St. James (Santiago), on July 25th.

Taquileans show off their exquisite new creations at each festival, hopefully to the admiration and, nearly inevitably, to the critiques of the community. Typically, a person wears the newly woven belt to the next festival, and perhaps to a third. At that point, the belt is no longer new, and it passes to the category of "good daily wear." After more use, traditionally it is either retired and stored as fabric wealth/inheritance, or used daily, becoming worn and eventually shabby.

Commoditization introduced a new alternative. After wearing a new belt once or twice, the owner sells it in Taquile's co-op. The textile, produced for use, has become a commodity. Tracing the object's lifetime after that -- to walls in our homes, to museums, to wear -- is another story. In 1978, Julio Quispe, exhibiting weavings at a school in the nearby city of Puno, told me that his grandmother didn't want to sell either old or very new textiles.

In summary, differences in responses to historical events were partly a consequence of the intersection of events and life-cycles. When opportunities



arose, younger weavers, who had more time, wove more for sale. Older weavers tended to sell their older textiles, as they lacked time to weave and/or had difficulty innovating new products<sup>5</sup>.

#### A DAY IN THE LIFE OF ALEJANDRINA HUATTA

So what of the "day in the life" I promised? As I read this, mid-afternoon in September, Taquileans probably are not weaving, but are busy planting potatoes in their terraced fields or, if it is raining, are spinning. August is a good month to find Andeans making textiles -- if there is no festival. A day when a Taquilean woman could weave might be like this.

Alejandrina Huatta wants to finish the second half of her black mantle. She planned to ply yarn for a belt, in the same color as the narrow red stripes in the mantle. She is a very fast weaver. This year, despite having three children, she wove one coca purse for her husband, a wide belt, and most of the mantle. In the past few years Alejandrina wove a few narrow belts for sale, but each took nearly a month (versus the usual five days).

Alejandrina rises around five. She went to bed late. She stayed up after her children and husband, to get a head start on breakfast. She slips quietly out of bed, lights the cooking fire, and starts cooking the morning soup, peeling fresh potatoes, pounding freeze-dried potatoes. She must constantly add fuel to the fire. Finally, everyone awakens. The food is ready, and she washes the dishes and serves, starting with the smallest child. When they finish, her husband Alejandro Huatta leaves to work on the boat he is building. Alejandrina walks her children to her mother's house. The older child will help Natividad herd sheep, and the younger will tag along. Since two kids will be with their grandmother, Alejandrina takes advantage of having only the baby, and decides to weave the terminal area on her mantle. Her husband will visit his parents that night, and eat there; Natividad will feed the grandchildren who helped her herd. Alejandrina rapidly gets her loom out of the storeroom and sets it up in the patio of her house compound.

Andeans choose to weave their textiles with four finished selvages. Rather than removing the textile from the loom by cutting the fabric when finished, Andeans remove the loom from the textile. This is possible because they have developed a loom with applied shedding devices, which can be unlashd from the loom, which leaves the fabric intact. After weaving nearly the entire mantle, Alejandrina replaced the back warping bar with another loom bar (Figure 2). She then turned the textile around, and wove from the fourth selvedge towards the center, until she reached the final few inches of unwoven warp, where it became harder to manipulate the shedding devices.

To weave the terminal area, which Alejandrina plans to do today, she must insert the last wefts with needles. Finishing in the Andean tradition requires an uninterrupted block of time, as well as concentration, good



eyesight, and enormous patience. It takes a full day, from seven a.m. until dusk at six, with virtually no stops, to weave the last inch in plain weave on a mantle, since when there is no longer room for the last narrow shed rod, and heddle placed on a cord, the final rows must be darned in.

It's not too bad of a day. The baby sleeps a lot, so Alejandrina only has to stop a half dozen times to care for it. She works steadily and advances through ever narrower shed rods and heddle sticks. She munches on some cold potatoes and corn, pausing to chew coca leaf several times. By late afternoon, she removes the cord holding the heddles. She hopes that she will be able to quickly insert the last wefts, but it's just past midwinter, and as she continues to darn in the black weft against the fine black warps, the sky darkens. Alejandrina goes inside, and puts the baby to bed, then plies yarn in the poor light of a kerosene lamp. When her husband returns, they talk and plan for tomorrow. When he sleeps, Alejandrina gets ready for breakfast. Tomorrow she intends to finish her mantle.

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to acknowledge again my debts to the Taquileans who have helped me since 1975 and, especially, to my weaving teachers: my *comadre* , Natividad Machaca; her daughter, Alejandrina Huatta; and her sister-in-law, Lucia Huatta. The Graduate School of Cornell University awarded me a travel grant that made it possible to attend the 1992 Symposium. Chris Barr provided incisive comments on earlier drafts. I thank Joanne Brandford and Sandra Harner who encouraged me to attend the Symposium.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine J. Allen (1988) discusses the centrality of coca-leaf in Andean culture in her extraordinary anthropological account, The Hold Life Has.

<sup>3</sup> As woven in Taquile, this is complementary-warp weave with 3-span floats aligned in alternate pairs (3/1 horizontal color change, diagonals of 2-span floats, *abbabaab* (irregular ) warp order (Zorn 1983:95).

<sup>4</sup> For illustrations of Taquilean textiles, see for example Rowe 1979: Fig. 125, p. 107, "Coca purse collected 1940"; Prochaska 1988: 48, 54, 55, 60; Fini 1985: 33, and publications by the author.

<sup>5</sup> I examine the process of selling old textiles in the case of the Sakaka ethnic group, in northern Potosi, Bolivia where, not surprisingly, different circumstances affecting different peoples has led to different consequences. (Zorn 1990, and my Ph.D. thesis [in progress, Cornell University] ).





Figure 1. Natividad Machaca (right), photographed in the 1960s, with her husband, Francisco Huatta (left), and then baby daughter, Alejandrina. Natividad weaves a wide belt on a staked-out horizontal ground loom, set up in a field by their home. Photographer unknown; reproduced by Elayne Zorn. The author would be grateful for any information that would help locate the photographer who visited Taquile in the 1960s, according to Francisco Huatta.





Figure 2. Alejandrina Huatta weaves a black mantle for herself. Working at the back of the loom, she lashes on a loom bar (resting atop the fabric) which will replace the warping bar. She then will turn the loom around and weave from the mantle's fourth selvedge towards the center. It is difficult to see the textile, which is rolled up. Note her llama bone pick on the right, resting on the braided ropes. Photograph by Elayne Zorn, 1978.





Figure 3. Petila Huatta, bending close to the ground, selects the pattern threads (*pallay*) in the central complementary-warp weave stripe of a wide belt. She makes the "picking cross" in between the various heddles and the shed rod. Her headshawl has fallen back, showing her multiple hair braids. Her position gives an idea of the physical strain involved in weaving. Photograph by Elayne Zorn, 1981.