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The “Aristocracy of Color” among Kolla Communities in the Andes of Northwest Argentina

Andrea Fuchs

The weavers of the Kolla Community of the Argentine Andean highlands or Puna, show strong preferences for the use of certain color combinations. These preferences seem to be more stable over time than their use of traditional technology and materials, which change more often according to utilitarian reasons. As it happens with food preferences, the use of color can show a strong sign of cultural identity that, in this case, can be traced to pre-columbian times.

During our work with traditional Andean weavers from seven communities in the Humahuaca Valley and Altiplano of Jujuy (about 800 families), we came across several interesting examples of this phenomenon. The goals of our program combine the creation of new sources of employment for these economically marginal communities with the restoration of traditional Andean textile designs and techniques, including the use of llama wool, hand spinning, dyeing with local plants and minerals, and loom weaving. We believe the best way of organizing teaching and production is by strengthening the Andean communal forms of organization and exchange.

While preparing a collection of *mantos*, shawls, and *ponchos* for the fashion market in which we combined natural llama colors with “dusty” or pale dyed tones, for example, brown with pale blue, beige with gray, brown with mahogany, white with pastel colors, and others considered by the market to be “quote and quote” *traditional color combinations*, we were surprised by the protests of the weavers who didn’t agree with the fashion taste. They would say these combinations were dull and sad. *Can’t you see this manto has no life, if we add an orange stripe to the grey and brown, you’ll give it light and life.* They really felt the textile pieces were boring and seemed dead. They considered these combinations vulgar and not elegant at all. When shown archeological or antique pieces and their colors they would complain that the textiles were old the colors had faded (the original ones must have been bright and contrasting)

When dyeing, Kolla women throw away the second tint because it gives only a pale tone. When I was around I told them that the light colors were very nice and we should not spare these valuable dyes. They laughed and told me that these were bad colors. The good ones were strong and brilliant, specially tomato red, vibrant orange and violet or dark blue.

Intrigued by this unusual behavior, I looked for some explanation in the uses of color in pre-columbian times, searching in the chronicles of the Spanish conquest and in the analysis of ancient textiles. I centered my attention in color preferences, in the use of color contrasts and oppositions, and in design structures, trying to find relations between them and the Andean construction of the cultural world.

“By the first millenium B.C. inhabitants in the south-central Andes like those from the northern Andean regions, had developed a fully formed weaving tradition. Here, camelid fiber, (llama, alpaca and vicuña) not used on the northern coast, was used for tunics, turbants, woven mantles and string skirts. Many early textiles were dyed a brilliant red color produced from the roots of a *Relbunium* species, similar to the madder family.

In the following Alto Ramirez culture, which dates to the last centuries B.C., men dressed in one of the most distinctive garment styles developed at the time. Their costume included a tall, looped headdress patterned with rows of stepped designs in brilliant green, gold, red and blue stitching...The Alto Ramirez style was discovered inland along the Azapa River valley near Arica ,Chile ,but the style appears highland in origin.

The most important Highland culture in the Southern Andes was known as Tiwanaku, from the archaeological site of Tiwanaku with its standing stone monuments ,located high in the windswept altiplano of the Lake Titicaca basin in Bolivia. Although textiles are rarely preserved on the Altiplano, Tiwanaku textiles dating from the fifth to the tenth centuries have been recovered throughout Bolivia and northern Chile. Tiwanaku was the preeminent highland capital of a vast, long-standing religious polity.Tiwanaku's cultural influence was equally expansive and enduring... Tiwanaku weavings are among the finest of all Andean textiles With yarns spun from only a few long hairs, much finished Tiwanaku cloth had the feel of a light, silk handkerchief.....Techniques of tie-dyeing and patchwork, weft-interlocked tapestry, and warp-patterned weaves of brilliantly dyed camelid fiber were all part of the Tiwanaku tradition. Red, blue, green and gold were emblematic Tiwanaku colors, and often mixed with deep maroons, pinks and violets. It is possible that the southern Andes was always the center for indigo dyeing, and blue yarns were a hallmark of the area....

Ancient Aymara textiles followed Tiwanaku prototypes. Elegant tunics and mantles were worn from brilliantly dyed and finely spun camelid fiber in warp faced, warp-striped and warp-patterned weaves Aymara garments were known for such specific colors as red, blue, and maroon and the placement of wide and narrow warp stripes using simple, warp-faced plain weave.” (Oakland 1997:18-19)

“The Aymara Caciques used *unkus* in gold, silver and *mullu* (coral red) as it is confirmed by documents showing the presents that the Inka made to the Cacique Quillaca Guarachi. The Guarachi from Machaca kept among their possessions and left through testament, a wine red “unku” donated by the Inka An “unku “ weaved with silver threads is kept in the Ethnographic and Traditinal Museum of La Paz , it has a militar style and may have belonged to an important indigenous leader of the 1781 rebellion, maybe even the brave Tupac Catari.”(Gisbert 1987:63)

By the fifteen century, the powerful Inkas were able to subjugate the southern highland Aymara. According to the Spanish chronicle of Bertonio, the *unku*, a poncho sewn on the sides, was the shirt of the Mallkus, the great lords. The Inkas' Unku is described as a sleeveless shirt or poncho sewn on the sides with blue to the knees and red at the bottom. This was the Inkas' dress called *Harputha Ccahua*. The Inkas were mostly described as wearing *unkus* and red and blue were the colors of preference, so they were considered noble colors.” (Gisbert 1987:59, 62-63)

It is worth noting that in Precolumbian times these colors were obtained from substances that are scarce and very difficult to obtain, like cochinitilla (for red and mango), añil or indigosphaera (for blue), achihuete seeds (for orange), and mullu. This could explain why these colors were associated with prestige and why their use became an effective way of communicating a high social condition.

In his study *Standardization in Inka Tapestry Tunics*, John Rowe analyzes a textile piece that is half red and half blue. He suggests that many noble tunics “may have

responded to certain color and structure codes,” for he also found similar *unkus* with black and white chessboards and red chests. This kind of design is called *Ayquipa* in Aymara... After the Inka conquest the *unku* was introduced into Bolivia... In the Island of the Sun of the Titicaca Lake, *Inka Unkus* with black and white chessboards and red chests were found.” (Gisbert1987:59) In a chronicle by Francisco de Xerez from 1535, there is an account of the first encounter between the Spanish and Atahualpa, the last Inka ruler:

“the men of Atahualpa’s army began to enter the plaza. First came a squadron of Indians dressed in a livery of colors in the manner of chessboards; they came removing the straws from the ground and sweeping the road. Behind them came three more squadrons, dressed in different manner, all singing and dancing.” (in Stone-Miller 1994:172)

When we read these documents to the weavers they were thrilled and teased us saying that they were the elegant ones not the fashion market. After that we tried not to change this type of color combination and to respect their preferences as a way of maintaining their strong cultural heritage in the creation of design and color. The market responded in a very favorable way, admiring their fine taste regarding color combinations and their exquisite sense of composition. Of course, we had to add to our marketing strategy explicit references to the Inkas and their royal habits.

Another difference of opinion with the weavers arose while trying to produce shawls with a design inspired in a Precolumbian textile with a motif representing mythical creatures of *kurus*. I asked them to use two tones of red, but they told me they couldn't make it unless the two colors were really contrasting and different, since these creatures had to be differentiated from their surroundings. Once again the idea of contrast and opposition came up, but this time in relation to the concept of creation. According to Gisbert, the forces of creation include two opposite aspects: The *Pachamama* or mother earth and the dangerous *Tio*, the Uncle or Devil that controls the mineral world. Female and male as parts of the same being: the Earth, the mother and giver of life, the *Tio* or Devil, who lives underground, who will take your life if you enter his domains without permission.

A similar situation arose when trying to produce a shawl with *Inti*, an abstract figure symbolizing the Sun. I asked them to make the shawl in browns with *Inti* in green, but they said that making *Inti* green was a really bad idea.

According to some authors, Andean textiles have also been a medium for conceptualizing the world and communicating complex ideas. Weavings with contrasting colors may embody the fundamental Andean concepts of reciprocity and complementarity. In complementary warp weaves, for example, two warp yarns of contrasting colors are always paired and essential to the structure of the fabric. Of these two basic colors, one will come out to form the design, and the other will create the background.

The process of textile production in the *Kolla* communities we are working with takes several steps, starting with the *llameros* or llama herders, from whom they obtain the wool. Then women from different *Puna* communities classify, clean, wash and spin the llama wool leaving it as soft as silk. Then, in other communities they dye the yarn using the local plants that are available during that season. At this point, the weavers

request the colors they need to produce specific designs. Only when enough thread of the right colors is available, some of it obtained through exchange with other places, the weavers will start their work.

Here is when their need to use certain combinations and ancestral preferences enter in conflict with modern Western rules and taste regarding the proper uses of color. For example, Argentina has its own rules and ideas for what is considered proper and elegant: little girls are always expected to wear pink and young boys light blue, but Kolla women prefer to use strong colors for babies so they look and feel healthier. I was even told that the use of some bright colors can prevent illness and the “bad eye” (it is believed that envious and wicked people can make a person sick by staring at her, specially babies). Men in our urban society always wear white shirts, and blue, grey or brown outfits. Kolla men love red and yellow and use these colors specially for *fiestas* and rituals, like Carnival and even for All Saints Day and the Day of the Death, on November 1st and 2nd, when they come down to the villages wearing their lively *ponchos* and colorful *chuspas* (little bags used to carry the coca leaves). Certainly they don't use these garments when they go to the city, specially if they go in search of employment .

As we mentioned before, one of the goals of our work is to strengthen the sense of identity of Argentine Kolla communities by restoring ancient Andean weaving technology and design together with the communal forms of organization and exchange. We have noticed, however, that this *Aristocracy of brilliant, lively colors and strong color contrasts*, that seems to be an important part of that identity, can be traced in the way they handle any tincture, material or technology as synthetic dyes or acrylic fibers, in the sweaters they knit with electric machines, or when they choose a lychra fluo dress or a bright-colored baseball cap. Ancient preferences for contrasting combinations, vibrant tones or primary colors re-appear spontaneously in their use of new clothing and technology.

The cultural construction of the world that differentiates Andean peoples survives in everyday choices, tastes, and preferences, even in our modern, technological, and “synthetic” society.

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Figure 1: Kolla women in Salt Desert



Figure 2: Asuncion Alancay spinning

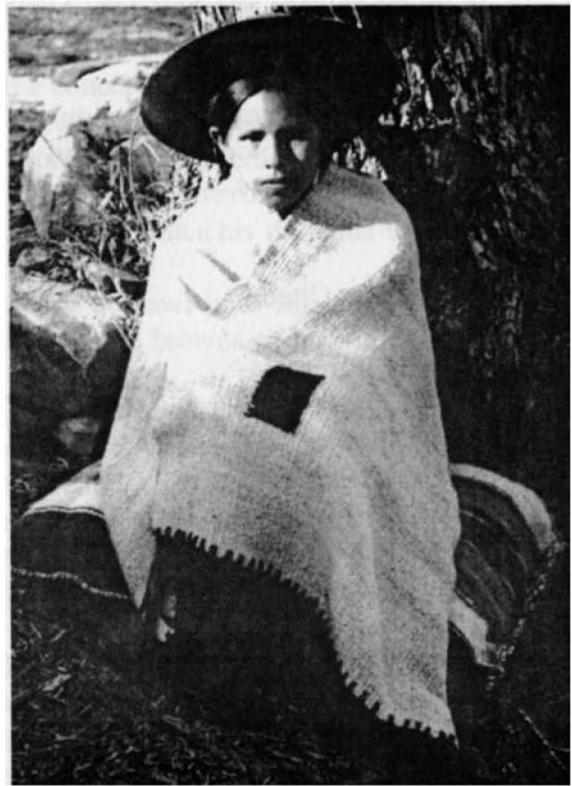


Figure 3: Vanesa Pérez in mantle with contrasting design.