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Creating the Sensible: Weaving the Colonial Aesthetic at a Colonial Obraje

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Introduction

When I was 8, my grandma tried to teach me to cross-stitch, but she gave up because every time I picked up the needle I would be stressed to literal tears. Six years later, I almost failed the sewing portion of my home economics class, because my stress level rose to the point that I hyperventilated each class. So, no one was more surprised than me when I announced that I was going to learn to weave. It's for science, I told myself. After all, how could I research Colonial Andean textiles if I did not know about the weaving process first-hand? In June 2018, I visited Chincheros in Ayacucho, Peru for a preliminary research trip to the former *Obraje* de San Marcos de Chincheros (ODC). The Colonial textile mill produced hundreds of thousands of yards of woolen cloth during its operation, from the 1570s through the 1820s. During this preliminary research trip, several community members mentioned that they had textiles produced at the ODC by their ancestors. So, in preparation for my 2019 research trip, I enrolled in a weaving course offered at Syracuse University.

Figure 1: Map of Peru, made by Maria Smith

When I arrived in Chincheros in 2019 I felt prepared to analyze the Colonial textiles that the community told me about the previous year. To my surprise, these textiles resembled neither the Late Intermediate Period (LIP) textiles that I saw in museums, nor did they resemble the textiles depicted in early Spanish Golden Age paintings. Rather, the ODC textiles had characteristics that

separated them from their ancestors, while maintaining certain similarities to ancestral textiles. Archival documents¹ related to the ODC demonstrate the diverse assortment of tools, materials, peoples, and knowledges that converged at the ODC and produced the textiles preserved by the Chincheros community.

I draw upon color, wool, and weave of these textiles to demonstrate the ways in which Andean weaving techniques interwove with Spanish weaving techniques and colonial innovations to create Chincheros' Colonial Andean textiles. Before delving into the colonial textiles, I will briefly describe the ODC and contextualize the weaving techniques and traditions that were woven together during the Colonial-era.

Pre-Colonial Weaving

When the Spanish arrived in the Andes, they encountered an exceptionally developed textile industry. Andean weavers produced textiles of arguably superior quality to that of their European counterparts.² Andean textiles sent back to Spain “excited the admiration and the envy of the European artisan.”³ Spain’s own textile industry had unraveled during the Reconquista, and Spanish textile makers were rebuilding the industry when the Spanish arrived in the Americas.⁴ Unlike in Spain, Andean textile production was well established throughout local communities, so it was not unwound by the Inca Civil War.⁵

In the LIP Andes, weaving cloth was a domestic industry that predated the Inca expansion across the Andes.⁶ Everyone was acquainted with the weaving process as textile production was communal. Camelid wool was spun with drop spindles called *p'uskas*.⁷ The wool was then woven on backstrap looms, which rely upon the weaver’s bodyweight to maintain proper tension. Most impressive to the Spanish, was the Andean weaver’s ability to create flawless double-sided brocade in vibrant colors.⁸ The diverse eco-systems located within the Andes⁹ afforded weavers a diverse array of dye agents that created vivid colors.¹⁰

¹ I have conducted archival research in person at the Archivo Regional de Ayacucho (ARA) and the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), and digitally at the Archivos de España e Iberoamérica en línea (AEI), Portal de Archivos Españoles (PAE), the Newberry Library (NL), and the John Carter Brown Library (JCB).

² Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus*, 1st ed (New York: Knopf, 2005), 95-96. Raoul d'Harcourt, Grace G. Denny, and Carolyn M. Osborne, *Textiles of Ancient Peru and Their Techniques*, American ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962).

³ William Hickling Prescott, *The Conquest of Peru* (Digital Antiquaria, 2004), 67.

⁴ Elizabeth Nutting, “Making a Living in Silk: Women’s Work in Islamic and Christian Granada, Spain, 1400-1571,” *Journal of Women’s History; Baltimore* 30, no. 1 (2018): 12–34.

⁵ Harcourt et.al., “Ancient Textiles,” 1962

⁶ Joyce Marcus, “Barcoding Spindles and Decorating Whorls: How Weavers Marked Their Property at Cerro Azul, Peru,” *Nawpa Pacha* 36, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 1–21.; Susan Kellogg, *Weaving the Past: A History of Latin America’s Indigenous Women From the Prehispanic Period to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁷ Callañaupa Alvarez, Nilda. *Weaving in the Peruvian Highlands Dreaming Patterns, Weaving Memories*. Hong Kong: Thrums Books, 2009, 49.

⁸ Harcourt et.al., “Ancient Textiles,” 1962

⁹ For a discussion on trade across Andean eco-systems please see Mary Van Buren, “Rethinking the Vertical Archipelago,” *American Anthropologist; Oxford* 98, no. 2 (June 1996).

¹⁰ For a list of natural dye agents please see Callañaupa Alvarez, “Weaving Peruvian Highlands,” 2009: 52

Spanish weaving was done by women at home or by male artisans, who underwent long apprenticeships to hone their craft.¹¹ Ovine wool was spun with spindle wheels, the predecessor to the spinning wheel. Once spun, the wool was woven on treadle looms, a technology that had been brought to Spain through Asian trade routes.¹² The large wooden loom relies upon various mechanisms to maintain tension whilst weaving. Vibrant dye agents were rare in Renaissance Europe, and thus were imported from Asia. Therefore, utilitarian cloth lacked the vibrant coloring of Andean textiles. Prior to the Reconquista many Iberian textile producers were Muslims, whose ancestors brought Asian weaving techniques and technologies to Spain.¹³ When the Reconquista ended and non-Catholics were largely expelled from the Peninsula, the Iberian textile market collapsed.

The weakened and mediocre Iberian textile industry could neither meet the demand nor the superior quality expected by Andean markets. Therefore in 1545, the first Andean *obraje*, was established in the Jauja Valley.¹⁴ In theory, *obrajes* were meant to import Spanish weaving implements to be utilized by Indigenous weavers. However, in reality *obrajes* challenged Colonial requirements. Royal requirements, laborer demands, resource availability, and economic profitability all converged at the *obrajes* and shaped the technologies and techniques utilized at specific *obrajes*. As the following illustrations exemplify, there the Indigenous and Spanish technologies and techniques were interlaced to create the colonial aesthetic.

¹¹ Nutting, "Making a Living," 2018; Stephen H. Harrison, "Textiles and the Medieval Economy. Production, Trade and Consumption of Textiles, 8th–16th Centuries," *Medieval Archaeology* 60, no. 1 (January 1, 2016): 199–200.

¹² Ann Pollard Rowe, Laura M. Miller, and Lynn Meisch, *Weaving and Dyeing in Highland Ecuador*, 1st ed (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).

¹³ Nutting, "Making a Living," 2018

¹⁴ Fernando Silva Santisteban, *Los Obrajes En El Virreinato Del Perú* (Lima: Museo Nacional de Historia, 1964).

Figure 2: Aerial Photograph of the ODC in 2018, taken by Jhon Huamani Diaz and Maria Smith

The ODC

Located 148 kilometers outside of Ayacucho, lies the former ODC, royally-licensed in the 1570s as a textile mill. The ODC was composed of a church, administrator housing, a corral and several workspaces, where textiles were produced. From there, the textiles were transported to markets in Cusco and Lima. Indigenous and mestizo laborers from across the region staffed the ODC. Individuals worked on one specific part of the textile production process based upon their age, gender, and race. While women stayed continuously at the *Obraje* for years at a time, men had to shuttle back and forth from the ODC to the mines in Huancavelica to serve their *mita*. The peripatetic nature of men's labor meant there was greater inconsistency in the fulling, dyeing, and napping of cloth, all of which were men's jobs. The spinning, cleaning, and weaving jobs, which were assigned to women and children, were more consistent due to the settled nature of women's and children's lives. In fact, women and children were often trapped at the ODC under

an illegal system of debt peonage¹⁵ that only allowed men to leave to serve their *mita*. Despite the harsh and inhumane treatment of textile producers at the remote ODC, they maintained a great deal of power over colonial society.

Textiles as Signifiers

Textile producers in the Viceroyalty of Peru determined the physical characteristics of the textiles they produced. Their labor afforded them a position of power as they exuded influence over the sensible characteristics of the textiles used in daily colonial life.¹⁶ Through their labor, ODC textile producers contributed to the creation of the colonial aesthetic. I understand aesthetic as the embodied knowledge that shapes sensorial perceptions, which “open themselves up to metaphoric meaning.”¹⁷ The sensorial characteristics and metaphoric meanings of ODC textiles distinguished *casta*. Due to the mutable nature of the *casta* system “colonial actors relied on individuals’ clothing, overall lifestyle, and social networks to perform the difficult work of translating their existence into the language of caste.”¹⁸ Clothing was a signifier of social status in the Inca Empire, so the continuation of clothing as identity marker was not an altogether foreign concept for indigenous communities. [MMS1][EM2]The continued reliance upon aesthetics to convey social hierarchy placed textile producers in positions central to the effective enactment of colonial social mores, despite their low *casta* status.

Dye Agents and Colonial Agents

Various dye agents are noted within the ODC inventories and the corresponding colors are depicted in *casta* paintings. The most frequently noted dye agent in the ODC inventories is *añil*. *Añil* is a form of indigo dye native to South and Central Americas. Its use as a dye agent dates to the pre-colonial era, and it continues to be one of the few natural dye agents that many dedicated Andean weavers insist on using, as *añil* is believed to create a blue that cannot be replicated with synthetic dyes.¹⁹ The unique vibrancy of *añil* dye explains the Spanish Colonial desire for textiles produced with it. However, the economic and aesthetic desire for *añil* directly opposed the colonial political agenda.

Añil blue was popular among Spanish elites, which encouraged its continued production. However, the success of the Spaniards in disarticulating Andean pre-Hispanic trade networks required that *añil* be imported from Central America, adding uncertainty to the procurement of the dye.²⁰ Due to the precarity of Spain’s control over long-distance trade routes, certain *obrajes* had to discontinue production of *añil* blue textiles, as was the case with the nearby *obraje* of Pomacocha.²¹ The ODC never reported a suspension in the production of blue textiles suggesting

¹⁵ In 1680 the King outlawed the use of debt peonage, or the use of debt to imprison laborers at *obrajes*, ODC ledgers show that several ODC laborers were in debt to the ODC (ARA 1798 No. 24 Fo. 220).

¹⁶ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010).

¹⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Donald A. Landes, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2012), 123.

¹⁸ Rebecca Earle, “The Pleasures of Taxonomy: Casta Paintings, Classification, and Colonialism,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (July 30, 2016): 427–66, 435.

¹⁹ Callañaupa Alvarez, “Weaving Peruvian Highlands,” 2009: 52

²⁰ Nicholas P. Cushner, *Farm and Factory: The Jesuits and the Development of Agrarian Capitalism in Colonial Quito* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982), 96-97.

²¹ Di Hu, “Labor under the Sun and the Son: Landscapes of Control and Resistance at Inka and Spanish Colonial Pomacocha, Ayacucho, Peru” (Berkeley, University of California, Berkeley, 2016), 214.

it procured *añil* from the Andean region while trade between Central America and Lima was interrupted. Alternatively, the ODC likely used Andean *añil* much earlier, and only on occasion did the ODC import the more expensive Central American *añil*. This strategy would have kept dye costs lower, while the continued importation of a sufficient amount made the budgeting strategy go unnoticed by colonial agents.

Along with the requirement to use imported *añil*, the Spanish attempted to regulate how *añil* was used as well. “In 1621, government mill regulations stipulated that every bolt of blue cloth (*pano azul*) should be dyed with not less than 2.2 kilograms of Nicaraguan indigo.”²² While this may have been followed early on by ODC laborers, by 1798 ODC documents report 2 kilograms of *añil* were used to dye cloth.²³ *Tinteros*, men who dyed the textiles, may have left the wool in the copper dye vats longer to compensate for the weaker dye, or they may have chosen to produce marginally less vibrant blue textiles than other rule-following obrajes. It is unclear how often, if ever, agents enforced *añil* related regulations at remote rural obrajes. What is clear is that the ODC did not adhere to colonial regulations related to dye. Instead, *tinteros* used a mix of Indigenous knowledges and colonial regulations to dye the cloth.

I was initially surprised that none of the textiles that I analyzed were dyed with *añil*. Rather, the majority of textiles were dyed grays and browns with local cacti. This can be explained by the cloth analyzed. Casta paintings depict women of different castas, including indias, with blue clothing, but none of the cloth that I analyzed was clothing. The cloth I analyzed had been used for utilitarian household purposes, which would rarely be dyed with the highly valued *añil*. Despite its elusiveness within the heirloom textile collection, documents depict the importance of *añil* production at the ODC.

Figure 3: Photograph of Cacti growing near the ODC 2019, Photo taken by Maria Smith

²² Cushner, ‘Farm and Factory,’ 1982, 96-97

²³ ARA 1798 No. 24 Fo. 220

Figure 4: Sheep grazing near Chincheros, Peru 2019, taken by Maria Smith

Spinning Wool under Colonial Rule

Despite the large population of camelids that once thrived in the mountainous region outside of Ayacucho,²⁴ sheep quickly replaced camelids at Chincheros. The Spanish-introduced sheep were brought to Chincheros with the establishment of the *obraje* during the late 16th century to supply the ODC with wool.²⁵ During the early 16th century diseases had decimated the camelid population. Sheep reproduced expeditiously in the highlands and quickly replaced the diminishing camelid population. Due to the rapid introduction of sheep in the region, it is not surprising that all of the textiles I analyzed were made with sheep's wool.

The transition between camelid wool to sheep wool altered the texture of the textiles. Llama, alpaca, and sheep all have differently textured wool, which produce differently textured fiber. Llama fiber is coarse and was seldom used to make textiles for clothing before or during the Colonial period. Alpaca fiber is soft and was often used to make textiles for clothing prior to the

²⁴ Pedro de Cieza de Leon, *The Seventeen Years Travels of Peter de Cieza, through the Mighty Kingdom of Peru and the Large Provinces of Cartagena and Popayan in South America*, trans. John Stevens (London, 1709).

²⁵ See Cushner, "Farm to Factory," 1982 for a similar discussion regarding the introduction of sheep to *obraj*es surrounding Quito

Spanish invasion.²⁶ Sheep fiber falls between llama fiber and alpaca fiber, which makes it soft enough for clothing, but lacks the lavish, supple texture of alpaca fiber.²⁷ Despite its luxurious feel, alpaca fiber was largely ignored by non-*indios* in the Viceroyalty, who viewed alpacas as another breed of sheep.²⁸ The ODC favored the European imported sheep, because of their familiarity, availability and the natural water-repellant quality of sheep's wool.²⁹

Once the sheep were sheared, the wool was cleaned with *saqta* root, then was sent to the spinners to be spun. The ODC implemented two different spinning technologies, spindle wheels and *p'uskas*, to exploit as many laborers as possible. The ODC imported European spindle wheels to spin the wool, but they require strength applied to a foot pedal or handlebar to operate the wheel, which meant that young children did not have the necessary strength to operate them. This was not ideal for ODC administrators, who viewed children as an exploitable source of labor. Spinning was viewed as the least-skilled labor role, and thus an ideal task for children. To incorporate children into the spinning process *p'uskas* were incorporated at the ODC alongside European spindle wheels. On a *p'uska*, "the spindle whorl is attached to a set of fibres and afterwards is suspended to rotate freely in order to provide torsion for the fibre."³⁰ The *p'uskas* took much less physical space in the workspace and could be more easily operated by children than the spindle wheels.

The reliance upon Andean technologies placed the royally-licensed mill in an awkward position, because they were supposed to destabilize Andean knowledge to strengthen colonial control in the region. Profits outweighed the awkwardness for ODC administrators, who chose to illegally³¹ exploit child laborers for their financial gain. This in turn further reified *casta* as poor, Indigenous children spent their childhood laboring at the ODC, while the wealthy, Spanish-descendent children of ODC administrators spent their childhood with tutors learning arithmetic and composition. Therefore, while lower *casta* children were raised in a system of debt peonage and illegal, exploitative labor practices, higher *casta* children were raised in a system of privilege and educative practices meant to better their future.

²⁶ Carrie Jane Brezine, "Dress, Technology, and Identity in Colonial Peru" (Ph.D., United States -- Massachusetts, Harvard University, 2011), 46.

²⁷ Daniel W. Gade, "Llamas and Alpacas as 'Sheep' in the Colonial Andes: Zoogeography Meets Eurocentrism," *Journal of Latin American Geography* 12, no. 2 (2013): 221–43, 225.

²⁸ Gade, "Llamas and Alpacas as Sheep," 231.

²⁹ Daniel W. Gade, "Particularizing the Columbian Exchange: Old World Biota to Peru," *Journal of Historical Geography* 48 (April 1, 2015): 26–35, 32.

³⁰ T. E. Ibarra, A. López Corral, and R. Santacruz Cano, "The Artisan and the Tool: A Technological–Functional Analysis of Tlaxcallan Spindle Whorls," *Archaeometry* 0, no. 0 (April 22, 2018), 3.

³¹ Child labor was technically illegal in Colonial *obrajes*, however as Cushner, "Farm and Factory," 1989, 91 and Hu "Sun and Son," 2016 discuss *obraje* administrators continued to use child labor

Figure 5: A Backstrap Loom on Display in Arequipa, Peru 2018, taken by Maria Smith

Weaving Patterns and Imported Looms

Weavers at the ODC wove on imported treadle looms. The treadle loom originated in China and was introduced to the Iberian Peninsula by the twelfth century.³² Due to the speed and efficiency of this technology, the treadle loom was quickly incorporated into commercial textile production on the Iberian Peninsula. The Spanish introduced the treadle loom into the Andes following their belief that they were more efficient than backstrap looms. Treadle looms allow for several yards of cloth to be produced in one go, whereas backstrap looms require one to sew yards together after they are woven. The textiles I analyzed were all produced on treadle looms, which alongside historical data suggests it was the only type of loom used at the ODC, as it maximized yardage production and minimized the amount of labor.

³² Rowe et.al., “Weaving and Dyeing,” 2007

Figure 6: Modern Treadle Loom that Maria Smith learned to Weave on, taken by Maria Smith

The type of loom was dictated by ODC administrators, but the weave patterns were less regulated. There was a mix of basic weaves and twill weaves amongst the textiles analyzed, which reveals variation amongst weavers at the ODC. As Hendon³³ has noted, basic weaves are common in pre-Hispanic Latin American textiles and twill weaves were more common in Pre-Colonial Europe than Pre-Colonial Americas. The use of both twills and basic weave textiles is notable, because it suggests the continuation of a popular ~~indigenous~~Indigenous pattern alongside the incorporation of a popular Spanish pattern. The combination of basic and twill

³³ Julia A. Hendon, "Producing Goods, Shaping People: The Materiality of Crafting," *Archeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association* 26, no. 1 (September 28, 2015): 149–65.

patterns may signify generational differences, stylistic preferences amongst weavers and fashion trends.

If the use of basic weave versus twill is generational, it is likely that earlier weavers preferred basic weaves while later weavers wove in twill patterns. Generational differences in weaving patterns may be the result of how weaving was enskilled³⁴, or learned, at the ODC. Outside of obrajes, children learned to weave by watching elders weave. As a result, children tended to weave in similar manners as those who taught them to weave.³⁵ As a general rule, far less innovation occurs when individuals learn as children watching elders, because there is not as much experimentation or self-education. However, in places where individuals learn to weave on their own or alongside novice peers, greater levels of innovation occur.³⁶ Due to the spatialization of laborers at the ODC, weavers were not enskilled watching older weavers. Instead, weavers at the ODC were given cursory lessons when they aged into their jobs as weavers and much of their training was on-the-job and self-taught.

Of course, the variety in weave patterns produced at Chincheros could reflect stylistic preferences amongst contemporaneous *Obraje* weavers. Throughout my weaving course I always used twill patterns when possible out of personal preference. Additionally, stylistic preferences change over time. Fashion is ever evolving, and weave patterns likely came in and out of fashion throughout the 250 years the ODC operated. Twill weaves may have been stylistically “in” one moment and “out” the next. Albeit removed from the high fashion worlds of Lima and Madrid, ODC laborers purchased textiles from the Iberian Peninsula as part of the *reparto*³⁷ system. Therefore, they would have been aware of trends within Iberian woolen textiles and may have tried to emulate them within their own weavings. Those who wished to emulate high fashion garments would have wanted affordable textiles that looked similar enough to pass as expensive, imported garments.

Further research is needed before substantiated arguments can be made about the variations seen in textile patterns. However, we do know that both twills and basic weaves were produced at the ODC on treadle looms. The variation may have been caused by the enskilment of weavers, stylistic preferences, and market values or a combination of all or some of those factors.

Conclusion

The textiles produced at the Obraje were amalgamations of European and ~~indigenous~~Indigenous techniques and technologies, which went on to influence the larger colonial aesthetic. This placed weavers in an important position of power as they influenced the sensible Colonial experience through their textiles.³⁸ In so doing, textile producers at the ODC created textiles that

³⁴ For a deeper discussion of enskillment see Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold, *Making and Growing: Anthropological Studies of Organisms and Artefacts*, Anthropological Studies of Creativity and Perception (Surrey, England: Routledge, 2014).

³⁵ Ministerio de Cultura, ed., *Textiles Tradicionales de Taquile*, Ruraq Maki. Repertorios (Lima, Perú: Ministerio de Cultura, 2014). Callañaupa Alvarez, “Weaving Peruvian Highlands,” 2009

³⁶ Patricia Greenfield, “Children, Material Culture and Weaving: Historical Change and Developmental Change,” in *Children and Material Culture*, ed. Joanna R. Sofaer (London: Routledge, 2000), 72–86.

³⁷ The *reparto* required that all ~~indigenous~~Indigenous individuals purchase goods in an attempt to boost merchant trade Daniel Masterson, *The History of Peru* (ABC-CLIO, 2009).

³⁸ Rancière, “Dissensus,” 2010

were unique to the Colonial Andes. Some textiles were then fashioned into clothing, which was one of the main markers of *casta*. Andean reliance upon clothing as a marker of *casta*, placed the mainly ~~indigenous~~Indigenous, rural, poor textile producers in important positions of power, because they created the sensorial characteristics of the textiles, which were imbued with Colonial meanings. Through the amalgam of techniques and traditions, textile producers at the ODC contributed to the creation of the colonial Andean aesthetic.

Figure 7: ODC Workspaces 2019, taken by Maria Smith

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