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Tokapu Messages

Catherine Julien

Tokapu are geometric designs that were woven into Inca tapestry garments. They were also used in the design of lacquered wooden cups, although perhaps not before the time of the Spanish arrival in the Andes in the mid-sixteenth century. During the time of Spanish colonial rule a richly narrative style of representation developed that depicted people and objects in a variety of scenes. *Tokapu* appear as abstract geometric motifs on cups that have narrative scenes in other registers. They also continue to be used on men's and women's garments, as they had in the prehispanic period.¹ Students of Andean art of the sixteenth century have argued that the new narrative style was a result of contact with European styles of representation--that Andean art did not use a narrative format.² All of the objects on which the new style appear are portable and do not tend to survive in archaeological contexts, making a study of any Inca antecedents extremely difficult. The body of materials that can be dated, even by stylistic arguments, are from the 17th and 18th centuries.³ Regardless of how the narrative style developed, *tokapu* designs themselves clearly evolved from an Inca and not a Spanish stylistic tradition.

How to interpret the meaning of *tokapu*, either before or after the Spanish arrival, has evaded those who have tried, although *tokapu* almost certainly had some kind of symbolic meaning. One native author, Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, illustrated Inca tapestry tunics in a manuscript he finished in the early seventeenth century, and sometimes represents *tokapu* schematically as numbers or letters. *Tokapu* were geometric; they did not resemble numbers or letters. What Guaman Poma appears to be trying to convey is that, like numbers and letters, *tokapu* had a meaning that could be read.⁴ A more recent study by David de Rojas y Silva concludes that *tokapu* were heraldic, that is, like European heraldic signs, they symbolized membership in a family or lineage.⁵

A reference to an Inca tapestry tunic, collected in Cuzco in the late sixteenth century, suggests another interpretation. The viceroy Francisco de Toledo collected a number of things in Cuzco to send to Philip II of Spain, sending them back with a special envoy in 1572. After Philip's death in 1598, the collection was inventoried. The description of one Inca tunic is of interest here:

Item 4767. Another native tunic that they call *cumbi*, woven of diverse colors and motifs. The motifs are emblematic of the provinces that the Inca possessed, and by which they were known; it is moth-eaten and full of holes and has no value.⁶

The description suggests that the tunic was decorated with *tokapu*, whether with bands of *tokapu* or all-over design.⁷ Some of the Inca men's tunics that have survived may bear representations of this sort, but a preliminary examination of published examples suggests that *tokapu* also had other meanings. Moreover, to make the argument that the *tokapu* on an actual Inca tunic represent provinces, particular *tokapu* on that shirt would have to be decoded first.

It may not be possible to decode very many *tokapu*, but the meaning of at least one can be understood from its depiction on lacquered cups. This *tokapu* is an abstract geometric representation of an Inca shield. It appears as both a shield in the narrative registers of lacquered wooden cups and as a *tokapu* motif on both lacquered cups and tapestry tunics. When it appears as a shield, it is held by men who are also wearing other

items of dress that identify them as Incas. This *tokapu*, then, represented an actual object, but it also signified the identity of a particular people or province.

The shield/*tokapu* has a central design space that is divided in half and surrounded on three sides by a wide band. The upper half of the central space has a rectangle, a triangle or a semi-circle at its upper edge, the edge that is not surrounded by the wide band. The lower part of the central space is most often divided again by a zig-zag line, whether with two or three points. The colors used vary, but the surrounding band is usually yellow or white. The upper part of the central space is red; the triangle, square or semicircular space is either yellow or white. The lower part is more variable as to colors and their order, but a color other than red usually appears above the zig-zag, since that color borders on the red of the upper part.⁸

What is most interesting about this *tokapu* design is the variety of contexts in which it appears. As already noted, it can appear as a shield in the narrative registers of lacquered cups, and in other registers as a *tokapu*, sometimes on the same cup.⁹ The shield is most easily identified when it is carried. When men are shown carrying shields with the design just described, they may be elaborately dressed, but their tunics do not resemble the design of the shield. They also carry staffs with a feather decoration at the top.¹⁰ Men shown carrying the shield could be shown in scenes depicting aggressive acts. When they are, the staff has what may be an axe blade hafted near the top. In other scenes, the men wear a headdress like a helmet. Some of the figures carrying the shield are involved in battle. In one such scene, the figures hold the shield in front of them, extending it horizontally. Just what purpose this posture would serve--beyond keeping someone else at arm's length--is difficult to ascertain. Still, these scenes suggest that the shields were more than decorative, and that their use was not entirely analogous to the use of shields in European warfare at the time.¹¹ Another kind of figure is shown seated, and the shield, together with the staff, is held in the same arm. The object directly above the shield may be a helmet. The person may be the Inca, as he wears what appears to be the *mascapaycha*, a headband with a fringe decoration on the forehead that only the Inca wore. The representation of the shield, the staff and the helmet together is something that usually accompanies the seated figure.¹² The shield, associated with a staff of some kind and other objects in the same position as the helmet, can also occur alone, as a motif in the register of the cup where narrative scenes usually appear. It also appears as an abstract *tokapu* design, in registers which usually do not carry narrative scenes, often in association with incised concentric squares.¹³ Finally, the design also appears as *tokapu* on Inca men's tunics, in the open field below the bands of *tokapu* that run horizontally just below the waist.¹⁴

The shield/*tokapu* appears on both Formal and Free style wooden cups, as defined by John Rowe. Formal style cups usually show human figures in a static position, sometimes both a man and a woman, but other times a single figure accompanied by flowers, beneath a rainbow. Free style cups, on the other hand, are decorated by figures in a greater variety of poses, and sometimes, with narrative scenes.¹⁵ Rowe hypothesized, on the basis of stylistic attributes, that Formal style cups were generally earlier than Free style cups. Certainly some of the costumes on Free style cups date to the eighteenth century.¹⁶ Using dress to suggest the date of the cup is difficult in the case of cups with figures carrying shields, however, since the figures shown appear to be deliberate representations of prehispanic people; with rare exceptions, these figures never wear pants.

Perhaps the earliest representations of the shield are those illustrated in watercolor drawings of the Incas that accompanied the manuscript of Martín de Morúa, finished at the end of the sixteenth or the beginning of the seventeenth century. In one drawing, the first Inca, Manco Capac, is shown investing his son Sinchi Roca with the insignia of the Inca. A shield, represented in the same fashion as the shields shown on lacquered cups, is one of these items. Various Incas carry shields of the same design, including Yahuar Huaca, Viracocha, Topa Inca and Huayna Capac. Where an Inca is shown wearing the helmet-like headdress, that Inca also has a staff and a shield.¹⁷

Tokapu designs could symbolize peoples or provinces. The shield/*tokapu* could symbolize Inca identity. But, what about *tokapu* that symbolize other groups, and not the Incas? In only a few instances can an argument be made that a shield or *tokapu* symbol symbolizes some other group. One is a figure carrying a shield that is significantly different from the Inca shield.¹⁸ The other is a composition with a shield and staff--analogous to the composition with an Inca shield--but the shield has a different design.¹⁹ The same design appears as an abstract motif.²⁰ As is usually the case with the sources or objects that originated with the Incas, we learn almost exclusively about them.

Whether the design of the shield recalls the design of actual Inca shields cannot be known. There seem to be no surviving examples of shields. Bernabé Cobo, a Jesuit who wrote in 1653, describes two different shields. One is a round shield worn on the back; the other is a somewhat bigger shield that carried in the hand. The latter, like Spanish *escudos*, were used to protect the head from blows and from hurled stones. They were elongated, lined with deerskin, and covered on the outside with a rich cloth of cotton, wool or feathers, elaborated in various colors. Cobo says that "they used to paint their devices and coats of arms" on them.²¹ Cobo may not have seen an actual shield, and his reference to wool and even feathers suggests that their "coats of arms" may have been woven, and not painted.

Since Cobo likened the Inca shield to Spanish *escudos*, whether the depictions on 17th and 18th century cups reproduce ideas about heraldry from an Inca or a Spanish tradition has to be considered. The Incas were not immune to Spanish heraldic practice, in fact, they often petitioned the Spanish crown for the right to use coats of arms, in exactly the same way Spaniards did.²² And here is where the difference appears: the coat of arms represented the noble lineage; it was associated with a particular family. The shield we have seen is so ubiquitous and--in the case of the seated figures--so obviously associated with other symbols of Inca identity that it appears to represent the larger group--a people--rather than a noble lineage. Spanish-style coats of arms, moreover, were commonly painted on banners, on cloth worn by horses and on the portals of houses than on shields. The design of shields tended to repeat the decorative treatment of armour and swords, which had designs that could not be seen from any distance.²³

Spanish practice was both understood and used. Spanish-style coats of arms could be represented on a wooden cup.²⁴ Spanish-style elements could be incorporated in what is basically an Inca motif.²⁵ The Morúa drawings that show Incas carrying shields can also have representations of Spanish-style coats of arms in an upper corner; three full-page representations of Spanish-style heraldic designs were also included.²⁶ The Incas were perfectly able to make use of Spanish heraldic practice at the same time as their own.

Tokapu design flourished on Inca wooden cups in the 17th and 18th centuries, as well as on men's tapestry tunics. A *tokapu* that represented an Inca shield was only one

of many geometric designs used as *tokapu*, but in this one instance, we can understand its meaning.

Endnotes

¹A work with numerous color illustrations of lacquered cups that will be much-cited in the present paper is Jorge A. Flores Ochoa, Elizabeth Kuon Arce, and Roberto Samané, *Qeros: Arte Inka en vasos ceremoniales* (Lima: Banco de Crédito del Perú, 1998). These cups, called *qeros*, often bear *tokapu* decoration (73, 100, 114, 161, 162 passim); For men's tapestry tunics, see *Ibid.*, 72; Craig Morris and Adriana von Hagen, *The Inka Empire and its Andean Origins* (New York: American Museum of Natural History, Abbeville Press, 1993), 150; Hans Dietrich Disselhoff, *Daily Life in Ancient Peru* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 69.

²For recent studies related to Inca symbolic representation see Thomas Bitting F. Cummins, "Abstraction to Narration: Kero Imagery of Peru and the Colonial Alteration of Native Identity." (Ph.D. Diss., University of Chicago, 1988); and Carolyn Dean, *Inka Bodies and the Body of Christ: Corpus Christi in Colonial Cuzco*, Peru. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.

³John Howland Rowe was the first to analyze the style of Inca wooden cups and develop a relative chronology. His original paper was reproduced as "The Chronology of Inca Wooden Cups" (Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, mimeographed). It was published with the same title in *Essays in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology*, edited by Samuel K. Lothrop et. al. (Cambridge, 1961), 317-341, 473-475, 498-500.

⁴Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno* [c. 1615] (México: Siglo Veintiuno, 1980) 96, 98, 100, 102, 104, 106, 110.

⁵David de Rojas y Silva, "Los tocapu: Un programa de interpretación." *Arte y Arqueología* 7 (1981), 119-132.

⁶Catherine Jean Julien, "History and Art in Translation: The *Paños* and Other Objects Collected by Francisco de Toledo." *Colonial Latin American Review* 8, no. 1 (June 1999), 89.

⁷A tunic in the Dumbarton Oaks collection has all over *tokapu* design, see John Howland Rowe and Ann Pollard Rowe, "Inca Tunics," in *Andean Art at Dumbarton Oaks*, edited by Elizabeth Hill Boone, (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996), 2: 458-459.

⁸Flores Ochoa, et. al., *Qeros*, 122.

⁹*Ibid.*, 114, 211.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 122.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 137, 161, 164, 169.

¹²*Ibid.*, 76, 100, 103, 104, 105, 106, 165, 209, 307.

¹³*Ibid.*, 51, 57, 91, 114, 211, 263, 292, 303.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 72; Hans Dietrich Disselhoff, *Daily Life in Ancient Peru* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 69.

¹⁵John Howland Rowe, "The Chronology of Inca Wooden Cups" (Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, mimeographed), 10. Formal style cups are shown in Flores Ochoa, et. al., *Qeros*, 209, 302; Free style cups appear in *Ibid.*, 163, 164.

- ¹⁶Rowe, "The Chronology of Inca Wooden Cups," 11-12.
- ¹⁷Juan M. Ossio A., *Los retratos de los incas en la crónica de fray Martín de Morúa* (Lima: Corporación Financiera de Desarrollo (COFIDE, Industrial Gráfica, 1985), III, XI, XIII, XVIII, XX, XXVII.
- ¹⁸Flores Ochoa, et. al., *Qeros*, 95.
- ¹⁹Ibid., 278.
- ²⁰Ibid., 282.
- ²¹Bernabé Cobo, *Historia del nuevo mundo* [1653], vol. 4 (Seville: Sociedad de Bibliófilos Andaluces, 1893), bk. 14, chp. 9, 193-194.
- ²²Franklin Pease García Yrigoyen, *Perú, hombre e historia: entre el siglo XVI y el XVIII*, vol. 2 (Lima: Edubanco), illustration facing 323.
- ²³Hugo Soly, ed. *Karl V. und seine Zeit: 1500-1558*. (Cologne: Dumont, 2000), 420, 428; Wilfried Seipel, ed. *Kaiser Karl V. (1500-1558): Macht und Ohnmacht Europas* (Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien; Milan: Skira, 2000), VIII-IX, 39, 158-159, 181, 185, 188, 209, 340-341.
- ²⁴Flores Ochoa, et. al., *Qeros*, 68.
- ²⁵Ibid., 57, 208.
- ²⁶Ossio A., *Los retratos de los incas*, I, II, XI, XIII, XXXIX.

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