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ETHNIC ARTISTS AND THE APPROPRIATION OF FASHION: EMBROIDERY AND IDENTITY IN THE COLCA VALLEY, PERU

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When I'm in Arequipa and I see a lady in embroidered clothes, I always greet her; she's from my land, she's my compatriot.... [When I teach embroidery] no matter how much one teaches, the motifs don't come out the same. If there are twenty embroiderers, twenty different motifs come out although they have the same name. It's like, even if you're my brother, we're not the same.

These comments by embroidery artist Leonardo Mejía neatly express the character of Colca Valley ethnic clothes: simultaneously shared and individual. Similar appearance is important in recognizing a compatriot, but an artist's style of executing the complex embroidered designs distinguishes his/her work.

Contemporary textile production in the Colca Valley, a highland region of southern Peru, occurs mostly in small workshops, where I center my study (Figures 1, 2). There, men and women embroider and tailor ornate clothes on treadle sewing machines. About 150 artisans provide garments for about 8,000 female consumers (total valley population is about 20,000). This article draws on surveys that I conducted with 110 artisans and vendors, during two years of fieldwork.¹

Textiles are important emblems of ethnic identity, as is commonly observed. However, I want to move beyond seeing "emblems" as superficial symbols, and to analyze ethnicity as a concept, as a relation of power among social groups with profoundly different resources. The rural, Quechua-speaking Colca Valley peoples are often considered "Indians" by outsiders, but they do not identify themselves as such. *Indio* in Peru is a powerful epithet that accentuates class difference and disguises it in racial terms. The social and economic roles that Colca Valley men and women play in Peruvian society have changed considerably in this century, and increasingly so in this generation. Ethnic artists have been crucial in mediating change, by producing ethnic clothes.

Through observing everyday and festival garments, discussing aesthetics with women who wear those garments, and analyzing the artisan surveys, I realized how important color and materials had become. In these domains, ethnic artists appropriate national and international tastes according to local cultural preferences, which in turn help to develop and maintain discrete ethnic identities.

Synthetic materials and bright colors are relatively new fashionable elements in embroidered clothes. The focus of this article reflects the fact that in the Colca Valley, lime green yarn is more of a fashion concern than changing hemlines. By focusing on "foreign" elements, I aim to release them from their conceptual closet, and address how and why they became firmly established in the Colca clothing repertoire. The very brightness that is exalted as "lively" by those who use it, is all too often derided as

"gaudy" by outsiders, even by textile scholars. This attitude inheres in our concepts of authenticity and identity. As scholars, we need to ask, how we are also caught up in appropriation, when we choose which textiles to analyze.

My approach challenges an older tendency in Andean textile studies, which for many decades privileged an "authentic" indigenous textile: woven, of natural fibers, in a domestic setting, using techniques traced to pre-Columbian antecedents.² Numerous embroidered garments are worn in the valley--skirt, blouse, jacket, shawl, belt, hat (see Figure 1; Figures 3 and 4 show details of skirts). All have some technical and design elements in common, but few resemble pre-Columbian models. In this paper, I provide little technical detail about the embroidery and construction process, nor do I focus on the evolution of a single garment or on design motifs (despite my interest in those topics, which are developed further in Femenías 1995). Here, I focus on the garments as embodiments of artisans's ideas about design and aesthetics. An artist's style emerges as he or she incorporates specific colors, materials and techniques into these handmade objects, combining his/her understanding of contemporary fashions as well as established conventional patterns.

When I tell non-Peruvians that I work in the Andes, they usually ask, "Are the people there Indians?" The answer is Yes. And No. There is no easy, straightforward way to answer this question. In fact, I am convinced that "Are they Indians?" is ultimately the wrong question. We need to ask, "When are they Indians? Why are they Indians?" and, essentially, "What is an Indian?" The valley's residents claim for themselves a unique identity that is not simply Indian, white, or *mestizo*; rather, this localized identity is based in specific cultural and material reality. In fact, understanding what kind of identity is Peruvian Indian identity today involves unraveling a whole series of complex, sensitive racial and political issues, which combine race, class, and gender. This paper is one small effort in that direction.

The Colca Valley: A Place within a Region

The Colca Valley is a rural area near Arequipa, the second largest city in Peru.³ Wedged between massive snowcapped peaks, terraced fields support the agricultural and pastoral lifeways in fourteen small villages. In one larger town, Chivay (pop. about 5,000), the capital of Cailloma province, most of the embroidery workshops are located. In and around the other villages, people live primarily by growing maize and other crops and by herding alpacas and selling their wool. The thick and lustrous alpaca fiber has been a major source of commercial wealth for the past century.

The ethnic heritage of the peoples is Inka and pre-Inka, including Collaguas and Cabanas groups, and Spanish. Almost everyone is bilingual in Quechua and Spanish. Archaeological and historical documentation show that outside intervention, rather than isolation, has characterized the valley's political economy for about two thousand years.

In the 1990s, low prices for crops and alpaca, severe droughts which almost paralyzed agriculture, an earthquake, and numerous political and economic factors have eroded the resource base of the mountain communities. This has accelerated migration to the cities. Since the 1950s, for example, the city of Arequipa has quintupled in population, from 200,000 to 1 million inhabitants.

In Arequipa, and in Lima, the national capital, young men and women work mostly in the informal sector: as street vendors, domestic servants, taxi drivers, and/or petty smugglers. Migrants living in Arequipa return to the valley quickly, in a four-hour bus trip. Young people in particular bring back their tastes and their money, and women spend some of their hard-earned money on the fabulous embroidered clothes.

Power and Appropriation

One phrase in this article's title, "the appropriation of fashion," may mislead the reader. Perhaps "appropriation *in* fashion," "*as* fashion" or even "fashion as appropriation" would convey my meaning better. The appropriation *of* fashion sounds as if fashion is an alien concept that ethnic artists must appropriate, having no fashion of their own. Nothing could be further from my intention. Changes in appearance and representation occur constantly among indigenous peoples as much as in so-called modern societies. These changes occur in ways that are structured in part by the power imbalances among groups. Colca Valley ethnic clothes are not survivals from ancient groups in isolated enclaves. They derive their ethnic meaning in part from the act of appropriation.

This appropriation has occurred in part through incorporating materials produced outside the valley. Lightweight polyester blouse fabric, acrylic yarn, crushed velvet, and silvery lace are now elements of traditional, embroidered Colca Valley clothes. While some of these materials are used exclusively for Colca clothes, most are appropriated from the non-indigenous domain of white, national Peruvian society, where they are featured in an office-worker's blouse, housewife's sweater, or wedding gown. On the other hand, traditional materials are no longer as readily available as in the past--alpaca wool, in particular, is almost all sold on the international market.

"To appropriate" literally means "to set apart for... a particular use in exclusion of all other uses" or "to take to oneself," that is, "to claim or use as by an exclusive right," according to Webster's Seventh Unabridged Dictionary. The Latin root, *proprius*, means "one's own."

Whatever the new owner takes to herself and makes her own originates outside the person or group, so we must ask by what right she claims it. In this paper, I argue that such a right must inhere in a shared understanding of what is acceptable and what is not, based in concepts of power and its limits. Closeness, not distance, is the crucial factor: The closer two groups are, the more important a small detail of distinction becomes. In this case, as the importance of racial basis of Indian identity decreases, that of clothes as markers increases. Clothes mark the border between dominant and subordinate groups.

For a border to be meaningful, it must be shared. Borders are challenged when subordinate groups will not agree to the same meanings, appropriate items from the dominant group, and so refuse to acknowledge that item as the dominator's "own." I believe this has occurred in the Colca Valley through a two-way process of appropriation of materials.

Discussions of appropriation usually focus on the dominant taking from the subordinate groups: by actively appropriating their material and symbolic resources, the

dominant enforce the subordination of those below them. Resistance then becomes the defiance of such appropriation. James Scott, for example, prominent among scholars of everyday resistance, defines resistance as the subordinate enacting strategies to *minimize* appropriation or to *reverse* it (Scott 1990: 197, emphasis added). Thus, small, daily "rituals of subordination," which include wearing items of clothes, gestures of deference, etc., become "rituals of reversal" (ibid.: 187-88).⁴

Appropriation in reverse, or from below, is as important as that from above, and it is not adequately treated as resistance alone. Emulation and appropriation are important strategies to establish different claims to power, not only to resist the existing power structure, as has been noted recently by Abu-Lughod (1990) and Radner and Lanser (1993). Relationships between domination and subordination are intimate antagonisms, which are never completely separate, but always contain elements of each other.⁵

Pretty Clothes, Local Custom, and Changing Materials: Results from the Artisan Surveys

To dance in fiestas, and to understand the production and exchange process, I obtained my own set of embroidered clothes. I commissioned my friend Susana to embroider two skirts (*polleras*) for me (Figure 3). When I showed the finished skirts to other people, many of them praised their quality and beauty. However, one older female artisan, Rosalía Valera, heaped scorn on Susana's choice of designs and materials. "That's already old-fashioned. Why did she use that outmoded design?" she complained, pointing to a row of lime green yarn (detail of Figure 3). I was stunned. I had looked forward so to dressing in the valley style, wearing the latest in pollera fashion, flawlessly executed by my talented friend. Yet Rosalía put them down; my skirts weren't fashionable enough!

Many North Americans have a phobia about bright colors. For a long time, I was among them. I had come to like the bright colors after a long period of rejection. I didn't always like lime green. In other conversations with artisans about tourist sales, I never hesitated to point out to them that gringos abhor this color. An internal struggle preceded my decision to let Susana embroider my skirt exactly as she saw fit; I chose only the background fabric from the options she offered. After all, she was the expert. I couldn't bring myself to tell her, I don't want any lime green, it reminds me of neon, acid, Gatorade. Indeed, lime green ended up in my skirt. I got used to it, I got to like it, I began to understand that it *is* an established element of authentic Colca clothes.

Here I want to consider seriously why such colors claim an important place in Colca textiles--and have done so for so long that, just as I begin to warm to them, they're already beginning to be considered passé! In addition, Rosalía's comments showed me that artists's opinions about embroidery aesthetics and fashions vary widely, and their critical assessments of each other's work are often sharp indeed. In this section, I also present some of those artists's opinions.

Leonardo Mejía, who I quoted at the beginning, says that embroidery is not just a business; it "is an art that should be highly esteemed. I think this way but others think only about their business. It is an artistic question and not an economic one."

Leonardo is the most adamant among those who claim embroidery as an art form, but he is not alone in recognizing the artist's role in shaping the ethnic and aesthetic

consciousness of valley residents. My analysis of color and materials is based on artists's answers to qualitative questions about preferences, tastes, reasons women wear embroidered clothes, and changes.⁶

According to Fermín Huaypuna, embroidered clothing "is part of the imagination and it's tradition, custom, and it reproduces the ancestors's creation." In fact, "custom" (*costumbre*) was the term most commonly used in explaining why women wear embroidered clothes (used by 41% of respondents). References to ancestors and relatives (*antepasados*, *abuelos*, *mamá*) were also frequent (34%), as was the word tradition (*tradición*; 17%).

Artists often state that women wear the garments "because they are pretty" (*porque son bonitos*). "Pretty" (*bonito*) was cited by 39% of respondents, making it the next most common term after custom. A related usage, *porque es bonito*, connotes "suitable, nice." By why, I would inquire, in what way are they pretty?

When artists discussed prettiness, they did so in terms of aesthetic or technical features. These features include questions of ethnic differentiation, amount and quality of materials, and innovation. To summarize brief, the first distinction is overall quality. Polleras come in different grades: the one that I commissioned (Figure 3) was second quality, gauged by the type of materials used for ground fabric and trim, number of rows of embroidery, amount of color in that embroidery, amount of other trim, kind of yarn applied. Compare this to a first quality pollera from Cabanaconde (Figure 4), which has more expensive ground fabric, polychrome vs. monochrome embroidered bands, and more detailed yarn designs. The ethnic differences are manifested in materials as well as designs: only in Cabanaconde is rick-rack used, and the monkey motif is more common there. The designs and materials are continually changing, leading to a situation in which traditional clothes are equated with the modern.

Livia Sulca, for example, maintains that "the embroidery is more modern, we apply more materials, we put on plenty of decorations." Leandrina Ramos says admiringly, more is better: "before it was simpler, now they're more adorned. The skirts are more embroidered every year." Not only are fabrics and trims more numerous to those available in the past, artisans maintain, but superior. They mention specific yarns and trims: *merino* yarn, *brillas* (metallic lace), *greças* (braids, often metallic), as well as fabrics--including velvet, chiffon, *poliseda* ("polysilk")--a daunting array too lengthy to dwell on here. I collected about 100 samples from four artisan workshops (including multiple colorways of the same fabric); this by no means exhausts all the materials. In addition to knowing techniques and designs, artists must command a huge vocabulary of materials.

When I compared the actual decorations on the garments to samples I collected and terms used for them, I could not find any sheep wool, so I was puzzled about "merino"; later I realized that here it is not wool, but a synthetic equivalent also used for weaving. It is available in many vivid colors, as well as white. The "typical" bright colors (*colores vivos*)--pink, orange, and lime green--are used in background fabrics as well as trims. More recently pastel shades (*colores aguas*) of the same colors are making inroads, but the lively colors still dominate.

One day I asked an artisan friend about the lime green, calling it light green in Spanish, "*verde claro*." He corrected me, "No, it's called *q'achu verde*." I learned that *q'achu* in Quechua, means light only in certain contexts. One cannot say for light blue,

q'achu azul. Q'achu also means new crops, forage, and by extension, freshness. A Quechua-Spanish dictionary, defines q'achu as follows: "*forraje, pasto verde; q'achu q'omer, verde claro; ... q'achu ch'uñu, chuño fresco, recién helado*" (forage, green pasture; light green; fresh freeze-dried potatoes, recently frozen; Cusihuamán 1976: 117; on q'achu as forage, see also Treacy 1994a: 191).

The emergence of young crops in the naturally dry environment of the Colca Valley is precious, and precarious. Contrasting with the gray and brown landscape, new plants vibrate very greenly indeed. The use of q'achu verde accents affirms the importance of these green growing things, which feed people and animals (see also Seibold, this volume, for a related discussion).

However, this cannot explain the apparent preference for synthetic materials. I believe this aspect of appropriation inheres more in the valley's position in the world economy. Cash crops, such as barley, the sale of alpaca fiber, and urban migration have increasingly enmeshed the Colca Valley peoples in a capitalist system. Local alpaca fiber is rarely available; it is almost always sold to the Arequipa textile factories. Likewise, the scarcity of fine-breed sheep wool, like merino, reflects long-standing extractive economic policies and lack of incentives for herd improvement.

Many artisans, both male and female, as well as their customers, are returned migrants. Their urban work experience changed both their taste and their buying power. Their understanding of fashion trends undergirds their roles as "ethnicity brokers" in their own communities. Once they return, they continue to travel. To obtain materials, artisans often venture as far as the Bolivian or Chilean border, or even to the U.S.

Conclusion

Colca Valley embroidered clothes represent both the revitalization and contestation of traditional values by all those who seek to legitimize their claims to community resources, either by participating in the production process, or by wearing the clothes in their home communities or even in distant cities. In the narrowly proscribed, racist national society, opportunities to display pride in their local, ethnic identity are rare. Clothes provide one such opportunity.

To the national society, "Indian" (and even the Quechua term *runa*) means a rural dweller, poor and powerless, living off subsistence agriculture, practicing a "natural" economy of kin-based exchange. Anyone with money or power, therefore, cannot be an Indian. Thus the kind of ethnic identity that Colca peoples claim is not Indianness. Yet, they appropriate what they can from a capitalist system, and parlay it into ethnic symbols. Increasingly, Colca peoples use their own dress to contest their subordinate position. For example, when women participate in local, and even national, politics, wearing elaborate embroidered clothes is de rigueur.

To move beyond stereotypical views of indigenous ethnic identity, we must attend to the artists's opinions and values. We cannot afford to dismiss new traditions by relegating them to the category of novelties, or denying them "authentic" status. Textile studies grounded in the analysis of power relations can explain the continued viability of clothes as ethnic symbols. Ethnicity itself cannot be understood by cataloguing distinct cultural traits of different groups. We must also examine how, and why, some groups

choose objects or processes from others, usually considered dominant over them, in order to create distinct objects that embody cultural and ethnic identities.

In doing so, it becomes clear how closely bound up fashion is with people's right to self-representation. Issues of taste, color, and materials are far from trivial; they all figure into the politics of authenticity. For this reason I have singled out lime green, and raised my defense of the gaudy.

The artists I interviewed eloquently expressed their pride in their work, and their hope that it would continue to grow and change. In the words of Fermín Huaypuna, "since it now has regional, national, and--why not say so--worldwide prestige, I believe that [our] embroidery will endure forever."

NOTES

1. Elsewhere, I have written about the regional dress (Femenías 1991), its historical development (Femenías n.d.), and articulation of symbol and economy (Femenías 1995). Fieldwork was funded by grants from the Fulbright Commission-Institute for International Education and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research.
2. For one important analysis that centers on woven textiles, see Rowe 1977; for an overview of related scholarship, see Femenías 1987.
3. Many recent publications discuss the Colca Valley; on history, see Benavides (1988), Flores Galindo (1977), Manrique (1985), and Pease's edited volume (1977); on agriculture, irrigation, and social organization, Gelles (1994), Guillet (1992), Paerregaard (1994), and Treacy (1994a, 1994b); on pastoralism, Markowitz (1985); on rituals and festivals, Valderrama and Escalante (1988).
4. My use of appropriation is broader than Scott's; he follows more closely Marxist traditions, in which appropriation relates to labor, and is connected to the process of alienation. That is, the appropriation of a person's labor into the workforce is a crucial step in establishing capitalist relations of production, and in alienating the worker from his or her own product.
5. Other authors who discuss related topics for the Andes are Rasnake (1988) and Smith (1989). Rasnake's exploration of culture as a domain of resistance veers toward a more traditional Andeanism, but he provides evidence of the resilience of cultural institutions in Bolivia. Writing about landlord-peasant relations in central Peru, Smith notes that cultural expressions and class conflicts are not completely different sorts of resistance, but that both are political.
6. Of the 110 surveys I completed in three communities, to date I have analyzed 41 from Chivay. Among these, half the artisans are men and half are women (male 20/41 or 49%, female 21/41 or 51%). The entire survey is 5 pages single space. At the end, I asked for comments, using qualitative questions.

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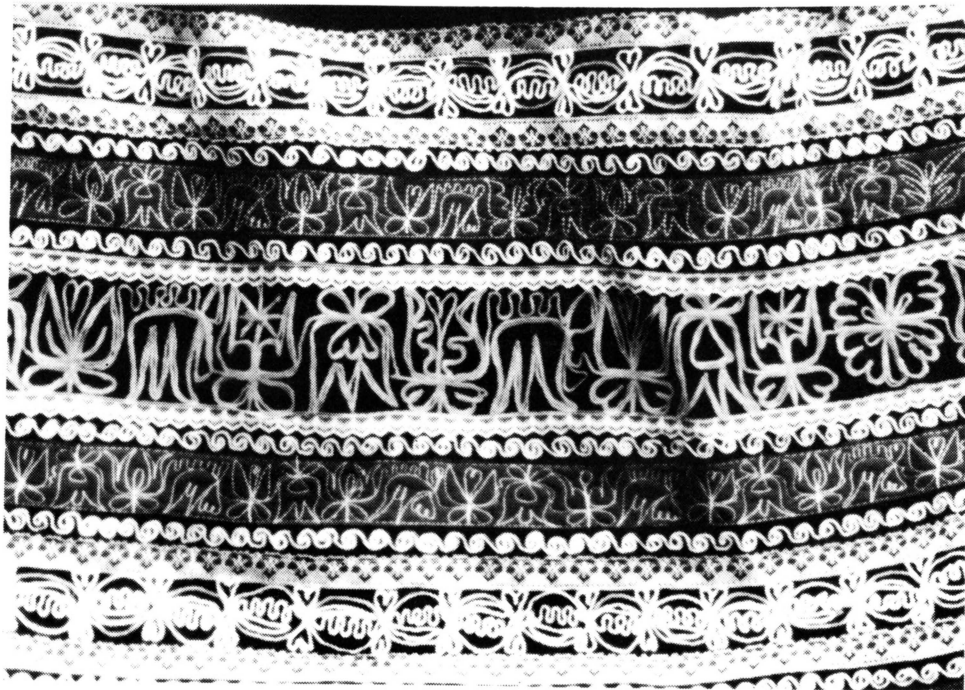


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Photographs by the author.

Figure 1. Margarita Sullca selling embroidered garments similar to those she wears, Chivay market.

Figure 3. Detail of skirt embroidered by Susana Bernal, Chivay. Collection of the author. Ground fabric is royal blue acrylic knit. Rows of trim feature, from top to bottom, lace, yarn, lace, yarn, monochrome white embroidery on red nylon ground, yarn, lace, with a wide band of hot pink yarn at center; these repeat in reverse order to the hem. The swirl pattern of the fourth row from top (repeats five times) is the design that Rosalía criticized.



3

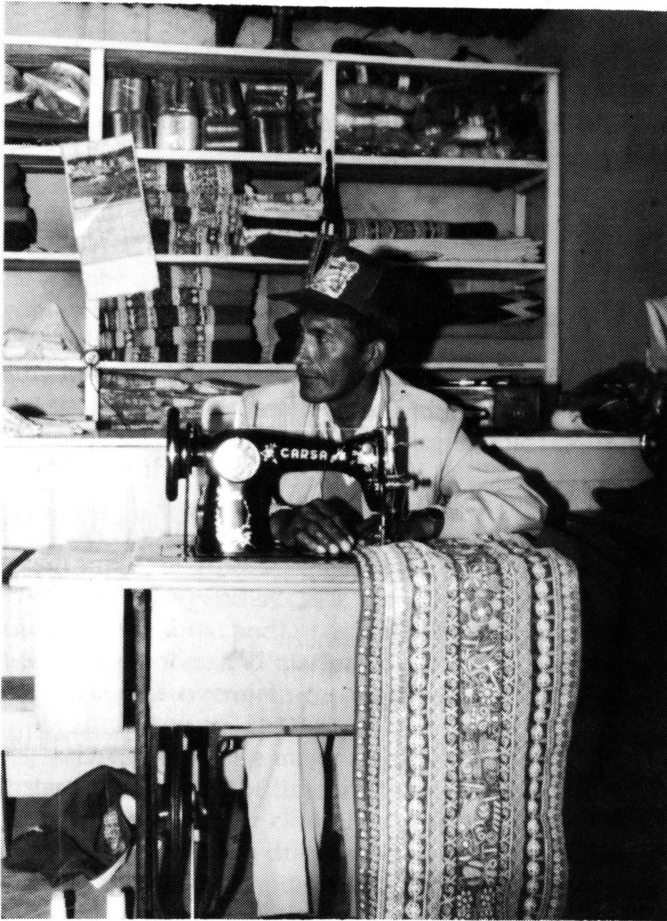


Figure 2. Felipe Condori embroidering a woman's skirt (*pollera*) in his workshop, Chivay.

2

Figure 4. Detail of skirt embroidered by Hugo Vilcape, Cabanaconde. Ground fabric is garnet crushed velvet. Rows of trim, from top to bottom, are rickrack, braid (two rows), lace, with polychrome embroidery on blue satin band at center; these repeat in reverse order to the hem.



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