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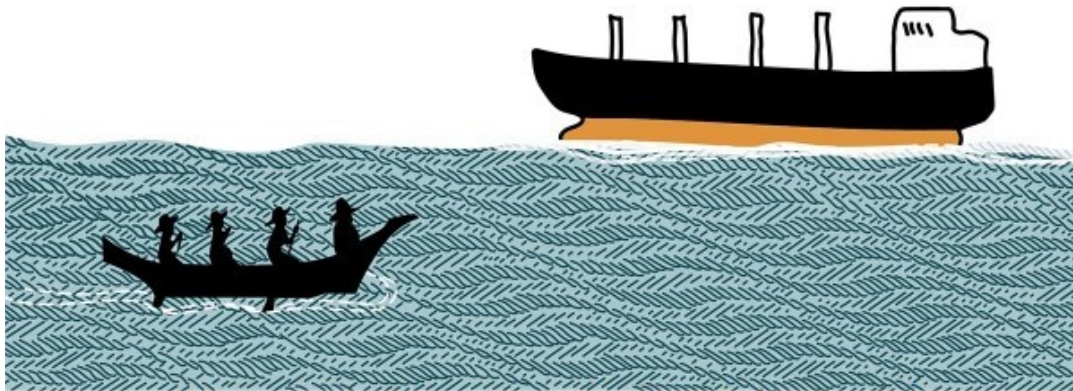
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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global



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Shipibo-Conibo Textiles 2010-2018: Artists of the Amazon Culturally Engaged

Nancy Gardner Feldman, PhD.

This paper, presented at the 2018 Textile Society of America Conference “The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global,” looks at evolving collaborative networks and art forms of contemporary Shipibo-Conibo and Amazonian artists, both in remote Amazon villages of Peru’s upper Amazon and in cities of Peru, as it explores expressions of Shipibo aesthetics Deep Local and Pan Global as Shipibo communities negotiate the 21st century world.

My work draws on recent research on Amazonian artists in Lima and my 2007-2010 expeditions with the Field Museum’s into Peru’s upper Amazon to document, collect textiles and create a 2011-released movie, partially funded by the McArthur Foundation, titled *Shipibo: la película de nuestra memoria (Shipibo: Movie of our Memories)*.¹ In this movie, one hears Shipibo-Conibo community members narrate and comment on a 1953 silent film, bringing voice to their memories of past Shipibo practices and ceremonies and expressing their hopes, dreams and concerns for their youth. Over 1000 copies of the movie were distributed to Shipibo villages, community centers, and libraries. The movie continues to be viewed today, locally in Shipibo communities and globally in museum, university, and film centers. The movie is a unique set of visual images, since neither filmed nor photographed images of Shipibo ancestors and their ceremonies had previously been seen by peoples in Peru.

This paper considers a variety of energized community responses by artists and Shipibo community members as they embrace the traditional aesthetics of their designs and collaborative textile practices to articulate through new artforms their cultural identity and the challenges and enrichments that they find in the 21st century world.

For example, in remote villages of the upper Ucayali River, one finds both artists and crafts persons working in evolving traditional practices. One woman from Culiaca de Caco creates heritage textiles and ceramic vessels. Now a widow, she offered a family heirloom textile, her late husband’s *cushma*, the traditional male garment, to the Field Museum for purchase. Another artist, working in a remote village of Caco Macaya, continues Shipibo-Conibo traditions of

¹ Scholars participating in the 2010 remote film work and expeditions included Dr. Alaka Wali, Field Museum, J. Claire Odland, Field Museum, Dr. Nancy G. Feldman, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Dr. Luisa Elvira Belaunde, Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro, Museu Nacional PPGAS, Brazil. Technical work by Fernando Valdivia Gomez, camera and Alex Giraldo Luna, audio.

harvesting cotton, spinning threads, and weaving her cloth. A young adult crafts dyes and paints her *kené* designs on cloth.²

Others chose to move from their traditional Amazon communities to Shipibo-Conibo communities in larger cities such as Pucallpa or Lima, Peru's capitol, to seek more work, education, and opportunities for themselves and their children. Here, one finds Shipibo and Amazonian artists, male and female, creating traditional and new forms of art. In cities, the work of Shipibo-Conibo artists' and crafts persons' both continues traditional textile and artistic practices and seeks new cultural expressions of "I am Shipibo" in the 21st century.³



Peru's upper Amazon, seen from a plane, 2007. In 2007 one sees only a few sections of deforestation.
Photograph by Nancy Feldman.

To most of our global population the Amazon is known and imagined as a vast, beautiful, unknown, remote, mysterious rainforest – yet it has been inhabited and cultivated by Amazonian peoples for thousands of years (Illustration One). The term Amazon refers both to the Amazon Rainforest in South America and to the Amazon river and its many tributaries carrying 1/5 of the

² For further information on these and other artists in the upper Ucayali River see Nancy G. Feldman, "Evolving Communities: Aspects of Shipibo and Andean Art, Textiles and Practice in Contemporary Peru," in *The Shipibo-Conibo: Culture and Collections in Context*, eds J.C. Odland and Alaka Wali, (Chicago: Field Museum, 2016), 51-60. And J. C. Odland and Nancy Feldman, "Shipibo Textile Practices, 1950-2010," *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*, (Digital Commons Publications, paper 42, 2010).

³ I am Shipibo (Shipibo Soy) is a popular annual intercultural festival celebrating indigenous culture in Lima, Peru.

Earth's flowing waters. This region encompasses the largest and most biodiverse tropical rainforest in the world. As accessed from the website of Amazon Watch on August 29, 2018, the Amazon produces 20% of the world's oxygen. The preservation of indigenous Amazonian communities and lands and the protection of the vast Amazon rainforest and its waters are an essential element of an effective solution to climate change. Today, its survival is threatened. Within its deep local, the Amazon communities and their many indigenous peoples engage daily as guardians and managers of their sacred rainforests and waters. Indeed, the Shipibo-Conibo's relationship to the natural world reflects both spiritual beliefs and community knowledge, and this relationship is expressed in their historical and contemporary designs and textile practices.

Throughout Peru there are approximately 35,000 Shipibo-Conibo, the indigenous peoples most closely identified with Peru's Amazon. One finds Shipibo-Conibo villages along the sides of the tributary rivers of the Ucayali, Pisqui, and Caco in Peru's upper Amazon. They are one of many indigenous Amazonian peoples who reside in the Amazon of Peru, Brazil, Bolivia.



Community of San Luis de Charasmaná in the upper Ucayali River region of Peru. Photograph by Nancy Feldman

The ever-changing flow of waters in these floodplain regions guides the place of communities (Illustration Two). Their houses are often on stilts, structurally they may be four-sided, open-on-all-sides or partially enclosed. Today, most villages have a community house for gatherings and a generator for occasional movies and charging of cell phones. Most movement between villages is by small wooden or metal boats or foot paths, there are few roads in this area nor does one see automotive vehicles.

The visionary wisdom of Kené, a Shipibo-Conibo name for their design forms, reflects both cultural memory and their relationship to the natural landscape and the spiritual world. Textiles, ceramics, painted bodies, and often exteriors of homes are covered with the patterns of Kené in a painted or stitched medium. Each pattern is envisioned or dreamed by the woman maker prior to stitching or painting the cloth. They are trained by their mothers to see the kené in dreams and bring the dreams forth to the physical world. Male shaman ayahuasca ceremonies bring forth visions of kené for spiritual healing.⁴ Shipibo cosmology reflects the belief that the world is imbued with both visible and invisible Kené. It is the act of the woman's design that brings it forth to the visible world. Kené acts as mediator between world of living and ancestral wisdom. It can be understood as a visual representation of Shipibo pathways - of the flow of cultural, natural and spiritual power, pathways on which people and communication move and flow throughout life.

The marks of kené, painted or stitched on cloth, body or object reveal pathways of the macrocosm and microcosm – the path of the Milky Way and the path of earthly man. Kené, as design, marks the symbiosis of Shipibo-Conibo peoples, plants, vines – as it represents the sap or energy of the forests flowing within man's veins and marks the path of the ever flowing and evolving Amazon river and its many tributaries. The design of Kené also reference the great primordial anaconda, the source of all life and designs.⁵

Despite over four hundred years of human and cultural devastation by the late 19th and early 20th century rubber and mining barons, and missionaries, Shipibo-Conibo cultural identity, art traditions, and language, though marked by change, is vibrant and alive. Elementary schools teach Shipibo along with Spanish, in school buildings often decorated on the exterior walls with painted kené designs. Villages remain collectively owned homelands, though this recent tentative governmental protection is a result of Shipibo organized resistance and massive violent protests and deaths. Through action their collective land rights are now recognized by Peruvian law.

Contemporary Shipibo-Conibo and Amazonian art and traditional crafts be viewed as an expression of cultural urgency as ancestral lands of Shipibo and others in the Amazon of Peru, Brazil, and Bolivia are increasingly under attack from deforestation by chocolate and palm-oil corporations, oil and mining industries, and industrial agriculture moving into the Amazon. Corporate industrial wastes and deforestation leads to degradation of water and land contamination which threatens quality of life and cultural and community traditions in the Amazon.⁶

⁴ Luisa Elvira Belaunde. "Kené: Shipibo-Conibo Design," trans. by Sara Walsh Colaianni, in *The Shipibo-Conibo: Culture and Collections in Context*, eds. J. C. Odland and Alaka Wali (Chicago: Field Museum, 2016). 81-92. Also see Luisa Elvira Belaunde. *Kené: arte, ciencia y tradicion en diseno*. (Lima: Instituto Nacional de Cultura, 2009). And Feldman, "Evolving Communities," 55-56. Carolyn Heath. "Una Ventana Hacia el Infinito: el simbolismo de los disenos shipibo-conibo," in *Una Ventana- Hacia el Infinito: Arte Shipibo-Conibo*. Exhibition catalog. (Lima: Instituto Cultural Peruano Norteamericano, 2002), 46.

⁵ Belaunde. "Kené: Shipibo-Conibo Design." 85-86.

⁶ Information on deforestation and contamination of Amazon waters in South America is abundant, the website of Amazon Watch is a good starting point.

In September 2017, six Shipibo-Conibo farmers were killed defending their land against corporate palm oil interests in the Ucayali region. It was reported as a surprise attack on the farmers by 30-40 masked men.⁷ Today, 20% of the Amazonian lands have been deforested in our global race for resources and another 20% degraded. This destruction of rainforest critical for regulating our global climate takes with it plants, trees, animals, and the abundance of the natural world as well as ancient skills and visionary wisdom.⁸ In this landscape of 21st century cultural urgency, this paper considers artistic responses, evolving art forms and collaborative networks in the deep local of the ancestral Amazon and their expanding community in cities.

In remote villages and cities of the Peruvian Amazon, the Field Museum projects strive to support indigenous voice and agency through partnership with the many strong indigenous organizations and non-governmental agencies. Drawing on our strength of our two-man Peruvian film crew for our movie, *Shipibo: Movie of Our Memories*, the Field Museum and Fernando Valdivia Gomez one of the film's directors founded a successful film school now in its 5th year for Shipibo youth in Pucallpa, Peru, a gateway city to the upper Amazon in Peru. Through the school, the voice of Shipibo youth has technology and the possibility of skills to document their own culture.

Today, museums more often question their past relationship to collecting, recognizing that previous methods of collecting of indigenous cultural objects often reflected practices of a colonial dominating culture to native populations. Working in Peru's Amazon, the Field Museum designed their recent collection project of textiles and ceramics through dialogue with members of various Shipibo-Conibo villages. "The collection project...was part of the effort to create a greater sense of value for the artistic work to generate pride in the local knowledge and practices [of land use, conservation, and material culture], reinforcing values associated with subsistence as opposed to market."⁹

⁷ "Six farmers killed in apparent land dispute in Peru's Amazon," *Thomson Reuters*, September 7, 2017 8:52, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-peru-amazon-murder/six-farmers-killed-in-apparent-land-dispute-in-perus-amazon-idUSKCN1BJ05I>.

⁸ Wade Davis. *The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World*. (Toronto, Canada: House of Anansi Press, 2009), 1-6.

⁹ Alaka Wali. "Contextualizing the Collection: Environmental Conservation and Quality of Life in the Buffer Zone of the Cordillera Azul National Park," in *The Shipibo-Conibo: Culture and Collections in Context*, eds. J.C. Odland and Alaka Wali (Chicago: Field Museum, 2016), 21-26.



Fair Trade project participants, wearing kené embellished skirts, submitting their kené embellished handbags to CIMA and Field Museum representatives for purchase, village of Manco Cápac, Peru, July 2010. Photographs by Nancy Feldman.

Several Shipibo villages chose to participate in this project of community engagement – in collaboration with a non-governmental organization (NGO) Centro de Conservación, Investigación y Manejo de Áreas Naturales (CIMA). For men, the project offers employment as publicly employed guards to defend the buffer lands of the Cordillera Azul National Park, from drug dealers, illegal logging and mining.¹⁰ Women chose to design and produced kené embellished handbags to be sold a fair-trade project. Both projects provide an active grassroots approach drawing on Shipibo expressed needs and historical community practices as villages envisioned and planned projects for conservation of their lands and new markets for textiles.

Women artisans met with Field Museum and CIMA representatives to design parameters for the process of production, sale, and re-investments of profits (Illustration Three and Four). The project reflects the basic reciprocal structure of the Shipibo communities called *minga* or *allyu* – a sharing of labor to support the broader physical and metaphysical interests of the traditional Shipibo community. Men protect and manage the jungle, the mystical force of the jungle a pathway of kené. Women stitch and paint kené bringing the invisible spiritual force visible.¹¹

Initial supplies were provided and the handbags were woven, stitched and constructed by each woman, 6 purses were purchased from each participant. In 2010, more than 900 bags collected in remote villages then traveled on boat and flew on small planes to Lima for shipment to the Field Museum's gift shop in Chicago, Illinois.¹² There were complications hampering management of operations, such as the development of a stable, on-going product market and the remoteness of

¹⁰ Ibid, 22.

¹¹ Feldman, "Evolving Communities," 55-56.

¹² Field notes, Nancy G. Feldman.

the Pisqui River region. Yet by 2012, women participants were registered as an artisan organization and new networks and markets existed in Lima.¹³

In the early 21st century, in the remote villages of the Caco rivers and the Pisqui River, one finds a vibrant craft tradition in a variety of forms. In 20th century, one more often found textiles produced by many village women in communal groups. Today, while still drawing on community to gather materials, from commercial and jungle sources, sometimes women work alone or in smaller groups, spinning, weaving and stitching and sometimes they work in larger village collaborative units where one finds both artists and crafts persons. One finds an expressed commitment to preserve their material culture traditions. When we met, Orfilinda San Augustino Couper was preparing mahogany dye to revitalize a worn woman skirt, when dyed brown she used a special mud to repaint the kené design.¹⁴ In our visit to remote villages of La Cumbre and Manco Capac, Wali and I found an abundance of carefully crafted, each unique, stitched kené handbags. Pachita, in La Cumbre, a participant in the Fair Trade project demonstrated her weaving of the straps in her open-air weaving studio.

Increasingly in 2011-12, one sees new initiatives expressing both deep local and pan global in Peru's upper Amazon and in cities of Pucallpa and Lima. In 2017, the strength of the Shipibo nation was reflected in the planning of the ancestral *Ani Xeati* ceremony in Caco Macaya, a remote riverine village. Costly preparations take over a year. Once a remote regional village ceremony, in 2017 the Ani Xeati, was publicized via emails, Facebook, posters, newspapers, and other social media.

In our film, *Shipibo: Movie of our Memories*, one sees a 1953 Ani Xeati ceremony. Here moving images show a cultural, political, and economic expression of the Shipibo identity through ceremonial components; body surfaces dressed and painted in kené, dancing, songs, and other ceremonial ceremonies. Then as today, textiles adorn participant's bodies, imbued with Kené pattern, they act as abstract visual representation of the ebb and flow of spiritual pathways and ancient ancestral wisdom. The wearing of kené reveals the signification of contemporary kené as a unifying force in both remote and city communities.¹⁵

The 2017 Ani Xeati included a film fest with 14 Amazonian films including our movie. Wearing a cushma, community leader Ronald Suarez Maynas, president of Consejo Shipibo Konibo Xetebo (COSHIKOX) proclaimed Caco Macaya's Ani Xeati an empowerment of all Shipibo people.¹⁶ His dress reflects a new pride in male ceremonial dress for men. In the 20th century, Shipibo men rarely wore traditional dress but now, increasingly, one sees the kené decorated

¹³ Wali, "Contextualizing the Collection," 30, 33

¹⁴ J. Claire Odland's interview of Orfilinda San Augustino Couper, 2010, filmed by Nancy G. Feldman, translated by Janet Chavez.

¹⁵ Feldman, "Evolving Communities," 55-56.

¹⁶ "Culminó el Ani Xeati, la más importante fiesta del pueblo Shipibo," *Servicios de Comunicación Intercultural (Servindi)*, November 11, 2017, <https://www.servindi.org/actualidad/06/11/2017/culmino-el-ani-xeati-la-mas-importante-festividad-del-pueblo-shipibo>.

cushma worn again and to express the Shipibo's community's strength and political and cultural unity.

Preferred kené ceremonial dress for these events are stitched or painted in traditional processes – a time consuming and valued process. The value of crafted, hand-made garments is recognized and celebrated. Yet increasingly one finds commercial kené printed cloth available as commodity in cities. Shipibo-Conibo artists and crafts persons in Lima have gathered together to protest the printed industrial cloth as unfair appropriation of their designs. This commercial appropriation of their kené design reveals pressures faced by Shipibo-Conibo in a world where native cultures' intangible cultural design rights are ignored or minimized by corporate culture.

Increasingly young Shipibo artists, from remote regions, move to work in the cities of Pucallpa and Lima, Peru's capital. One sees shifts in curatorial practices in Lima's art galleries and museums as they exhibit Shipibo artist's evolving aesthetic expressions of forms and media. Often, both artists and curators of galleries and museums confront and explore the colonial residue in their art world as they face a world increasing more global. As their artistic work takes on new forms, they ask their viewer to engage visually and conceptually in the beauty, the challenges and the racism faced by the indigenous Amazonian peoples. In this process, their images and aesthetics go deep local. New visual expressions of Amazonia are increasingly celebrated, though they exist parallel to existing colonial practices.

The spiritual world of the jungle, once solely expressed in the abstract work of kené on ceramics and textiles is increasingly viewed through the medium of paint on canvas, new media, multi-disciplinary art as well as the world of high fashion. Abstract traditional kené compositions have morphed to include, figural narratives of myths, memories of river life, as well as dreams forms of the Shaman and ayahuasca and the broader Amazonian world.¹⁷

Graciela Arias Salazar, Olinda Silvano, Elena Valera Vasquez, Silvia Rocopa and many other artists in Lima, draw strongly on their indigenous knowledge – as their artwork embraces kené painted and stitched traditional textiles, bead work as well as new Shipibo forms - of painted mural street art, multidisciplinary forms, stitched narratives, and paintings on canvas. Their work reflects Shipibo cosmology of jungle kené traditions as well as pictorial narratives of urban indigenous experience. These artists have immersed themselves in Lima's cultural scene, visually expressing the harmony that exists in the jungle between mystical forces, man and plants, as well as the tragedies of enslavement of indigenous men and women, past and present, in poetic abstract and figural compositions.¹⁸

Starting in 2016 and forward to today, the global art community is increasingly interested in giving voice to Amazonian artists. Indeed, the energy of the Shipibo and Amazonian artists in Lima based in the power of their ancestral jungle homeland is reaching out pan global. In 2017, at Tinkuy, the International Gathering of Weavers, an international weaving conference of artists, art historian, enthusiasts, and anthropologists, organized by the Center of Traditional Textiles of Cusco (CTTC) and Andean Textile Arts (ATA) in the city of Cusco, Peru, Shipibo

¹⁷ Feldman, "Evolving Communities," 55-56.

¹⁸ Ibid, for more information on Amazonian and Shipibo artists working in Lima.

artists attended.¹⁹ Orinda Silva and collaborator, Wilma Maynas, for the first time, represented the Shipibo-Conibo community at Tinkuy 2017.



Silvano, Olinda (Reshijabe) and Silvia Ricopa (Runin Kaysi), *Jiria Runi Kené: Living Design*, 2018, painted on site. Acrylic on panel. Photograph by Nancy Feldman. Courtesy of the Museum of Anthropology at UBC.

An exhibition titled *Arts of Resistance: Politics and the Past in Latin America* at the Museum of Anthropology, in Vancouver, Canada featured a mural installation painted on-site by visiting guest artists, Olinda Silvano and Silvia Ricopa (Illustration Five). These artists, Silvano, Ricopa and others, work to strengthen indigenous voice through active art practices. Olinda Silvano, a Shipibo-Conibo is also active in Lima's Shipibo Community, teaching kené embroidery and serving as president of *Allyu*, an organization of Andean and Shipiba women sharing cultural practices based on traditional village collaborative practices.²⁰

In 2018, Shipibo-Conibo and other Amazonian artists from Lima's art scene have traveled and participated to art exhibitions featuring artwork painted on cloth or stretched canvas and often

¹⁹ "Tinkuy 2017, Gathering of the Textile Arts, Weaving the Past, Present, & Future," Centro de Textiles Tradicionales del Cusco (CTTC) and Andean Textile Arts (ATA), accessed August 18, 2018. <http://tinkuy2017.textilescusco.org>.

²⁰ Feldman, *Evolving Communities*, 53-54.

on-site installations in Paris, France; Moscow, Russia; and China. Here in the United States of America, the Pensacola Florida Museum of Art featured Amazonia artists recent work from the collection of Peruvian curator and artist, Christian Bendayan. Today in Lima, Shipibo and Amazonian artists thoughtfully engage with practices of global contemporary art, as they evolve and transform their world view and cultural practices to meet the world around them

Through these and other artists, from either remote Amazon villages or the city of Lima, one see a continuation of traditional collaborative social practices as they create new artistic networks, shift their forms and express consistency in their spiritual connection to their natural landscape and Shipibo ancestral wisdom. In the contemporary world, Kené in its multiple forms is a cultural expression of “I am Shipibo,” the strength and endurance of their communities within Peruvian culture.

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