The status of women weavers as heritage bearers: Accounts of social transformation and empowerment in the province of Canchis, Cuzco, Peru

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Abstract

UNESCO includes heritage textile arts and the specific skills and knowledge required for their production among the traditional crafts that constitute the intangible cultural heritage of humanity. This is due to the significant links that exist between weaving traditions, local societal structures and the history and shared memories of local communities. This article, which originates in extensive fieldwork and ethnographic participant observation in the Canchis province, in the region of Cuzco, Peru, will illustrate the tradition of loom textile-making in the area, highlighting the interdependence among intangible cultural heritage, traditional ecological knowledge and local socio-economic dynamics. A number of observed relevant factors affecting the status of women weavers as heritage bearers (rigid social structures, familial organisation, relation between genders and institutional support) will be addressed in further detail to shed light on the reciprocal interactions and the tensions between cultural preservation and social inequality in relation to heritage textile art, and to reflect on the role of female weavers, on their working conditions and on their autonomy and social status within and outside their communities of origin. In the context of pressing modernisation and threatening homogenisation of production, this article identifies a number of conditions that contribute to the resilience of this form of intangible cultural heritage, preserving this creative legacy while empowering women to overcome detrimental social dynamics.

Keywords

crafts, craftsmanship, weaving, women, social inequality, empowerment, Andes, Peru, cultural expression, creative legacy, traditional ecological knowledge, resilience

The tradition of heritage textile art

Heritage textile art is a form of cultural expression through which one can appreciate the creativity of individuals and communities, and discover living expressions of identity and inherited traditions, as much as changes and innovations in design, technology and use. Beside the value of the fabrics, the importance of heritage textiles resides in the knowledge and skills possessed by weavers who, transmitting them from generation to generation, preserve this intangible cultural heritage. This continuity, in the face of the growing pressure of homogenisation brought by globalisation and the mechanisation of production processes generated by industrialisation, guarantees the preservation of the artistic, social and cultural capital of groups.

Figure 1
An aymara women weaving with a back-strap loom, depicted by Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala within his chronicle "Nueva corónica y buen gobierno" (est. 1616). Facsimile edition published in Paris : Université de Paris, Institut d'ethnologie, 1936. xxviii, 1168 [i.e. 1178] p.

Source: Memoria Chilena (http://www.memoriachilena.gob.cl/602/w3-article-74912.html)

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In particular, loom manufacturing techniques represent a case of textile-making that has conserved a significant degree of connection with ancient ways of production. Loom weavers often still master all the steps required for the full production chain: making the thread from the gross material, dyeing it with natural colourants and pigments, spinning and twining the thread, and weaving in the fabric iconographies that tell the stories of their communities. Within the realm of craftsmanship, loom weavers tend to be recognised and see themselves as artists-craftspeople, due to the peculiar work ideology, aesthetics and work organisation adopted that place beauty – and not on utility or the employer–employee relationship – at the core of the creative process (Becker 1978).

Traditional textiles are especially significant to groups who constitute linguistic or cultural minorities, because their production and use often constitute a form of cultural expression that makes tangible a sense of distinction and identity in intercultural contexts. In these instances, the practice and liveliness of intangible cultural heritage appears to be central to the continuity of coexistence of cultural diversities.

The textile tradition of Peru

Archaeological evidence suggests that Peru is one of the first places in the world where weaving developed. The dry weather along the coastal regions has allowed for the preservation of fragments of cotton, alpaca and llama wool textiles dating to 8,000 BC (Stone 2002). Most of the fabrics produced were of plain weave, made using backstrap looms, a weaving tool still used today – with slight changes – as is testified by the numerous pieces conserved in museum collections in Peru and abroad.

Textiles played a central role in the lives of pre-Columbian societies(Figure 1): while simple monochrome cloths were intended for everyday use, fabrics with complex patterns and fine iconographies were woven for ritual use, demonstrating their role as aesthetic expressions and as symbolic communicators of political norms and spiritual beliefs. The cultures that have inhabited the area of today's Peru over millennia transmitted and refined sophisticated weaving techniques and styles that flourished until Spanish colonisation in the early sixteenth century. Sensing and fearing the political value of textiles and their centrality in the transmission of knowledge (Boon and

Figure 2
Woman from the province of Canchis weaving with a backstrap loom, using a lama bone to select the warp threads.
Photo: Victor Zea (Copyright © 2021 HILANDO VICTORIA)

Mignolo 1994), the colonial rulers undertook a number of initiatives to stem the continuity of this cultural heritage: textiles pertaining to the Incan noble and religious elite were destroyed; the network of Acclawasi weaving centres was banned; weavers were prohibited from reproducing traditional iconographies; and, eventually, new designs, materials and techniques of European provenance were imposed. Nonetheless, although the quality and the richness of motifs decreased, the colonial power did not succeed in eradicating the ancient textile-making tradition, whose preservation was part of an overall effort of cultural resistance and Indigenous identity affirmation.

Today, the production of heritage textile art is still alive in various areas of Peru, with specific techniques characteristic of regional expressions. While the area of Ayacucho is renowned for its fine tapestries made primarily with a vertical tapis loom, Indigenous Amazonian groups bring forwards the tradition of colourful hand-sewn embroideries. Embroideries made with sewing machines are present in the traditional costumes of various groups in the highlands and, today, are also produced by displaced Indigenous groups living in the coastal area; the same applies for hats and *chullos*, head garments that are part of the everyday dress of Indigenous people. Backstrap looms are still in use in a variety of regional contexts: the Cuzco region shows the importance of the variety of textiles produced, in the complexity of iconographies and in the number of active weavers. The finest traditional loom-woven textiles are especially used and worn for festivities, ceremonies and on special occasions(Figure 2).

The considerations presented below emerged as result of extensive fieldwork and participant observation among traditional weavers in the province of Canchis, in the region of Cuzco, Peru, from November 2017 to October 2018.

The socio-economic context of Canchis and the condition of women

Canchis is the southernmost province of the Cuzco region, in the meridional Andes of Peru. Its capital city, Sicuani, a town with about 50,000 inhabitants, and the major villages of the other seven provincial districts – Pitumarca, Checacupe, Combapata, Tinta, San Pedro, San Pablo, Marangani – are located along the Vilcanota river valley and near a state road that links the city of Cuzco with Juliaca, Puno, the Lake Titicaca, and eventually the Bolivian border.

The majority of the people of Canchis (about 100,000

residents in total) are Indigenous and of Quechua descent, with 66 per cent of the population declaring Quechua as their mother tongue; some of these people are bilingual Spanish and Quechua speakers (INEI 2017). The average monthly salary in the province is of about 63 USD (UNDP 2009), with a significant gap between the mostly urban district of Sicuani (77 USD) and the prominently rural district of Pitumarca (40 USD). As registered in the last full national census (INEI 2007), about 37 per cent of the working population is dedicated to agricultural and animal farming, 13 per cent to trade and transport, 13 per cent to retail, 7 per cent to teaching and 5 per cent to manufacturing and the remaining to other sectors. Although situated in the most touristic region of Peru and about a three-hour drive from the city of Cuzco (which, in 2018, received 1.7 million foreign visitors, nearly 40 per cent of the total foreigners that visited the country [MinCeTur 2019]), tourism is an economic activity of little incidence for the province of Canchis.

A census by the provincial administration (PIP 2017) reports that at least 1,500 textile artisans are active in Canchis. The making of traditional textiles is mostly associated with secondary, informal, or domestic activities, often complementing occupations that have a large degree of seasonality; to a lesser extent, it is defined as primary economic activity – with textile craftspeople registered within the category of manufacturing workers. Traditional textile-making as an informal, domestic activity is especially the case for craftswomen, who are believed to represent roughly 90 per cent of textile makers in the province.

The condition of women in Canchis is characterised by a number of factors that testify to a significant persisting gender gap, situating the province below the average achievement reached at the national level. More than 25 per cent of women in Canchis are unable to read and write (INEI 2007), with the district of Pitumarca marking the sadly negative record of 50 per cent of an illiterate female population. Although over the years a positive trend was registered thanks to broader access to education by the younger generations, the number of females concluding secondary education and of those pursuing tertiary education is still considerably lower than the analogous figure for men. A further barrier to women's access to the labour market is posed by the imposition of a nearly exclusive duty in fulfilling household chores, including, among others, children and elderly care, home cleaning, and the preparation of meals for the family. This form of unsalaried labour is a prominent factor contributing to discrimination against women and hindering women's economic independence, empowerment and self-fulfilment.

In several instances, in the province of Canchis and beyond, the knowledge and practice of traditional craftsmanship plays a fundamental role in generating revenue and sustaining the livelihood of individuals, mainly women, who find themselves at the margins of the economic system. This is because it is possible to carry out the craftwork with a high degree of self-organisation, compatible with other forms of salaried or unsalaried labour, low costs associated with work tools and materials, and the ability to work from home. At the same time, the social affirmation of textile-making, and especially loom-weaving, as a gendered activity raises the risk of retaining, within such a traditional practice, gender roles that are detrimental and discriminatory for women.

Heritage textile art in the province of Canchis

In the Canchis province, heritage textile art is still widely produced by using backstrap looms and four-sticks floor looms – *pampa away* in Quechua – to weave using a variety of techniques: from the most commonly diffused of complementary and supplementary warpfaced weave to the sophisticated and rare technique of discontinuous warp and weft – known as *ticllas* in Quechua – characteristic of the Pitumarca district.

Figure 3
Valleys and peaks in the Pitumarca district, winter season.
Photo: the author.

Besides the technique and the specific iconographies of loom textile products from Canchis, they are also unique because most are made with alpaca wool, while most of the products from other provinces in the Cuzco region are now often made with sheep wool. This is specifically connected camelids and in particular alpacas in this context. Nearly 170,000 camelids are bred in the province, about a third of the whole population of camelids in the Cuzco region (INEI 2012), and they constitute one of the culturally defined keystone species (Cristancho and Vining 2004): they are especially significant for materials, traditions, histories and spiritual practices, and their presence directly influences the organisation of communities and of work. In fact, as alpacas inhabit the pastures located in the higher lands (3,800 metres and beyond), an environment with harsh and sometimes drastic living conditions for human beings, most family circles are split between the villages of the highland valleys, generally located at about 3,500 metres, and smaller communities or scattered ranches higher in the mountains, which in the Canchis province, are settled up to an altitude of 4,800 metres(Figure 3). Reaching these settlements generally requires a long journey on mud roads (with scarce public transport) and possibly a walk on trails; electricity is rarely available; telephone lines and internet are normally absent; and public services (schools, medical care) are present at minimum levels. The traditional ecological knowledge (Berkes 2017) of the communities that have lived in the area for millennia has created the conditions to adapt to such an environment, relying on alpacas as a main source for subsistence and creating a tight, spiritual connection with the Andes and the living mountain spirits – which are called *Apu*s in Quechua; the people of Canchis have fostered such a connection with the Apu Ausangate.

Figure 4
Pasture of alpacas in the province of Canchis, in the summer season.
Photo: Victor Zea (Copyright © 2021 HILANDO VICTORIA)

Figure 5
Victoria Quispe Mamani, weaver from the district of Pitumarca, preparing the alpaca fleece for spinning.
Photo: Sharon Castellanos (Copyright © 2021 HILANDO VICTORIA)

The life cycle of alpacas affects the lives and temporary displacement of people in the province throughout the year: for the regular care of alpaca herds, the presence of a few family groups or family representatives permanently living in the higher communities is sufficient. Yet, at times of cub birth (January to March) or shearing (December to March), family members usually living in the valleys migrate to the higher pastures, to contribute with their labour(Figure 4). While for a long time alpaca fibre has constituted a primary source of income for the families living in the highlands, in recent years the price paid to producers has fallen abruptly, making alpaca breeding, and consequently life in the higher lands, less and less sustainable. Progressively, it has become more convenient for breeders to keep for themselves, transform and weave part of the fleece, as has been confirmed by several of the people encountered during the research work(Figure 5).

Besides a large number of artisans operating individually, textile craftspeople generally form organisations either on a family basis or on the basis of the makers living in a specific community. Such organisations, which mainly take the form of 'associations', tend to be specialised in a specific textile-making technique, such as knitting by hand or traditional loom-weaving. Two networks exist at the local level to represent the various textile craft associations and to promote their work and interests in public institutions: the Canchis Craftsmen Network, a provincial network with which more than 50 organisations from all districts are associated; and the Craftsmen Network of the District of Pitumarca, uniting the 23 organisations of the district. In the Canchis Network, only about 20 per cent of associations are devoted to the production of loom-woven textiles; all the associations in Pitumarca, with one exception, are dedicated to traditional loom-weaving. In Pitumarca, a cluster of traditional craftspeople has persisted in preserving the intangible cultural heritage of textile art. This effort has also been recognised by the Peruvian Ministry of Culture, which declared in 2018 that the knowledge, techniques and uses associated with traditional textiles in the district of Pitumarca were part of national cultural heritage, because of their 'symbolic content deeply rooted in the culture of ancient Peru and enforced in the cosmovision, daily life and cultural identity of its bearers' (Resolución Viceministerial Nº 058–2018–VMPCIC-MC, 9 May 2018).

Textile craftspeople from Canchis generally master all steps of the textile-making process, from yarn spinning to dyeing and textile weaving(Figure 6, 7, 8, 9). From an early

Figure 6
Craftswoman spinning the yarn from the raw fleece using a *p'ushka* (drop-spindle).
Photo: Victor Zea (Copyright © 2021 HILANDO VICTORIA)

Figure 7
Spun yarn in the process of dyeing in a boiling pot.
Photo: Victor Zea (Copyright © 2021 HILANDO VICTORIA)

Figure 8
Hand-dyed yarns drying in the sun.
Photo: Victor Zea (Copyright © 2021 HILANDO VICTORIA)

Figure 9
A selection of balls of hand-spun and -dyed wool.
Photo: Victor Zea (Copyright © 2021 HILANDO VICTORIA)

age, children learn to spin the shorn fibre into threads by hand, using a drop spindle (*p'ushka* in Quechua), and then to twist the yarns to better bind together the fibres, making the thread more resistant to the tension it will undergo during the weaving process. The spun yarns are then soaked in boiling water with dyeing colourants or pigments to obtain a variety of alpaca wool colours. Although, over the last few decades, the use of convenient synthetic aniline dyes has increased, artisans have recently contributed to a wave of revival in the use of traditional, natural and locally sourced dyeing materials, including the cochineal insect for reds, *ch'illca* leaves for greens, *k'olle* flowers for yellows and indigo or tara for blues.

Artisans, and especially women, generally learn to weave by observing and helping older, skilled weavers in their family circle. The warp is prepared by tying one end to a stick of wood that is then anchored to a fixed object, often a tree, and tying the other end to a stick, which is connected to a strap that passes around the weaver's body at the height of the hips. Depending on the woven pattern to be created, the warp threads are then tied together in groups of shafts that will be lifted to allow weft threads to pass through.

The typical Andean design of textiles presents the alternation of monochrome fields – *pampa* in Quechua – and multicoloured fields where motifs are woven – *pallay* in Quechua. Among traditional iconographic motifs from the Canchis province are some shared common elements (such as mountain profiles or corn stalks) as well as a number of iconographies (such as lagoons, birds, local flowers) that are expressions of specific villages or communities and show a significant degree of connection with the ecosystem of the people living there(Figure 10).

In the Pitumarca district, the preserved technique of discontinuous warp and weft is used to weave *ticllas,* shawls created by uniting four quadrants of different patterns and colours (generally red, green, orange and purple or black), stitched together using warp threads. Beyond the complexity and rarity of such a weaving

Figure 10
Traditional iconographies from the province of Canchis
Photo: Victor Zea (Copyright © 2021 HILANDO VICTORIA)

technique, *ticllas* have high symbolic value, because each quadrant represents one of the four regions of *Tawantinsuyu* (the ancient Incan empire), and its motifs display representative elements from that region (*Apu*s, natural landmarks, famous ancestors and so on).

The social status of women weavers and the supporting framework

In the province, those who dedicate themselves to traditional loom-weaving generally share some common features. Traditional textile-making is mostly practised by Indigenous people living in the rural areas of the province, especially families who are native speakers of Quechua and are from low-income households that depend on subsistence activities such as agriculture or animal husbandry. Although, historically, as a craft practised by both men and women, weaving is mostly practised by women in the area today; men tend to be employed in salaried positions outside of the home. In most cases, women weavers in the area have little or no formal school education, and they are unable to speak Spanish; they do not receive a salary from other occupations, and they are responsible for other house and family duties alongside their craft. Overall, these factors reportedly cause an imbalance in the economic autonomy and control of property among partners within families, limiting women's possibilities for self-determination.

Among the obstacles to women's consideration of craftsmanship as an occupation, factors of primary importance are the barriers to the market and unstable product sales, which make it difficult to rely on sales for a reliable income. Most weavers either sell their products directly at local fairs or access the national and international market through trading intermediaries. In the latter case, most weavers claim the relationship with the intermediaries to be asymmetrical – putting the weavers at a disadvantage, because their ability to negotiate is diminished and their bargaining power is low. Part of the reason for this is because lower quality, mechanically produced and cheaper textile products, in part produced abroad, are available on the market. Consumers – often uneducated concerning the quality of materials, the historic significance of iconographies and the effort and time required for completing fine textiles – may opt for these inexpensive, lower quality alternatives. Several craftswomen, especially younger ones, are keen to develop entrepreneurial skills and competencies to enhance their autonomy and improve their position on the market, avoiding at least some of the intermediate passages before the final sale. Their attitude shows a willingness to change their status from producers to cultural entrepreneurs, also to support of their elder weaver companions.

In Peru, the national normative and institutional framework supports craftsmanship through a variety of laws and initiatives, mainly under the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Tourism (MinCeTur). The main programme developed by the Ministry of Culture, Ruraq Maki – *Hecho a mano* (meaning 'handmade' in Quechua and Spanish), is dedicated to researching, exhibiting and supporting the intangible cultural heritage of craftsmanship of Peru in all its forms, including textile-making. The programme organises a fair in Lima every year, for the exhibition and sale of traditional art, displaying a strict selection of the best craftspeople organisations. The fair has recently launched a virtual shopping page to support artisans' sales throughout the year. Of the craftspeople from Canchis, only a consortium uniting weavers from Pitumarca has succeeded in being accepted to the Ruraq Maki annual event; the representation of artisans travelling to the fair has been led by a male weaver.

MinCeTur primarily operates to boost the economic potential of traditional craftsmanship. It does so by supporting the internationalisation of trade in traditional arts products and by strengthening the capacity of craftspeople through innovation and quality thanks to the presence, in various localities (yet not in Canchis), of technological innovation centres of handicrafts. Since 2000, MinCeTur has organised an annual national Award for Master Artisans (*Premio Nacional Amautas de la Artesanía*). Of the 36 artisans selected in all the crafts categories up to 2019, only five have been women; six out of the 36 were textile masters, and of these six, only one was a woman.

These figures are emblematic of an overall understatement, at the national level, of the role of women weavers in the safeguarding and transmission of cultural heritage; and of a tendency to give lower visibility to women;s creative legacy, work and achievements compared to their male counterparts.

In Canchis, too, women weavers often feel undervalued by institutions and by their male peers. Although in net minority among textile makers, craftsmen are frequently in the top positions in local associations, and neither the Canchis Craftsmen Network nor the Craftsmen Network of the District of Pitumarca have ever had a female weaver as president (up to 2019). One reason can be attributed to the traditional patriarchal system, which still holds men in positions of control and leadership.

The provincial government has been supportive of the traditional textile sector. In 2017, in the frame of the project Weaving Cultures, co-financed by the European Union and implemented by the NGO ProgettoMondo Mlal, the Association Ecology, Technology and Culture in the Andes and the NGO Soluciones Prácticas, the provincial government contributed to the establishment of the Centre for Interpretation of Textile Art in the village of Tinta, in the province ofCanchis, and of the Exhibition Centre of Textile Art, in the village Pitumarca. Both centres also host a shop for the sale of textile products. To secure continuity of action, the provincial department for economic development has directly financed a project dedicated to enhancing innovation in the work of craftspeople in Canchis.

From 2017 to 2019, the NGO ASPEm implemented an initiative especially directed to supporting textile craftswomen in Canchis; this effort was co-financed by the European Union. The project Women with Talent: Organisations of Empowered Craftswomen Boost the Local Economy aimed to build the capacities of women textile artisans and contribute to their empowerment and participation in the public and political life of their communities. The project sought to raise awareness of the factors that limit the empowerment of women and their acknowledgement as skilled bearers of the cultural tradition of textile-making. Its mission was

Figure 11
Victoria Quispe Mamani, master artisan born in Pitumarca and living in the town of Sicuani. Victoria has received several awards and recognitions for her knowledge and traditional practice. Among the latest, the recognition "Weaving Art and Wisdom" by UNESCO and the Commission of Women and Family of the Congress of the Republic of Peru (October 2018).
Photo: Victor Zea (Copyright © 2021 HILANDO VICTORIA)

to give today's artisan women – as well as those from future generations – a choice: being a weaver would no longer be the only accessible option, but a choice born from talent and passion, with fairer economic pay through which women can enhance their personal autonomy and social status.

Although this article has exposed a number of factors that can be improved, altogether the institutional framework at the national level and public and private initiatives in the province of Canchis appear to strive to build the conditions to enhance the resilience of the intangible cultural heritage of textile art. Nevertheless, sensitivity towards the role of women weavers and consideration of their status needs to be placed at the centre of future actions if the risk of associating traditional craftsmanship with detrimental social conditions is to be avoided (Figure 11).

Concluding reflections

Over time and in different historical contexts, changes in the essence and processes of textile weaving have been observed (Brumfiel 2006). In the province of Canchis, these relate, for instance, to the degree of work and time dedicated to weaving within groups; the social prestige enjoyed by textile artisans; the economic capital derived from weaving; the forms of sale, distribution and circulation of textiles; the socio-cultural value attributed to fabrics; the meaning attributed to the practice by artisans and communities at large; and to the nature and significance of the woven iconographies. Over the past decades, global factors such as industrialisation and international trade have emerged, largely affecting the survival of traditional productions by making available low-cost fabrics and textile products.

Because inequality and discrimination are often rooted in traditions and customs, this article has argued that, in textile art as in other traditional productions, the continuity of transmission of intangible cultural heritage may go hand in hand with the retention of a number of elements characteristic of rigid social structures that hinder social progress and the affirmation of basic human rights and freedoms – both at a personal and a societal level. The extensive participant observation in the province of Canchis, where loom-weaving has been affirmed as a socially constructed gendered activity that relies primarily on women, allowed me to identify a number of factors linked with informal societal norms that hinder the transformation of women's social status.

These may pose a threat to the actual continuity of transmission of knowledge and practices of traditional craftsmanship – unless other factors, such as economic gratification, social recognition of the value of heritage, or a fruitful relationship with contemporary culture emerge. To this end, the ecosystem of individuals, public institutions and civil society organisations needs to embrace and promote a human-rights–based and gender-sensitive approach to safeguard heritage and economic development, contributing to the empowerment of women in order to build the resilience of heritage textile art.

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