« The Reconstruction of Remarkable Textile Traditions of the Andean Highlands (ca. 200 c.e.-650 d.e.)»

Sophie Desrosiers, EHESS-CRH, Paris

The aim of my paper was to show that it is possible, while being very careful, to reconstruct a textile tradition from several millennia in regions where textiles have not been preserved thanks to the traditions still alive in the same area or in a close area with similar material and cultural conditions. This is the case at least in Peru where early imitations of textiles on other media (stone sculpture, ceramic or wall painting, etc.), and on textiles produced with “simpler” techniques in an area with good organic material conservation, have preserved enough characteristics of the originals to be able to weave these originals and to reconstruct at least part of the decomposed tradition.

In the case of the Central Andes, the situation is very particular; as two different textile traditions supported originally by different textile fibres and contrasted weaving logics have developed in areas with opposite climates. With a wet and cold climate, the highlands have not permitted the conservation of early textiles woven mainly with camelid hairs (camelids have been domesticated there since the fourth millennium c.e.). By contrast, thousands of pre-Hispanic examples have been preserved on the south and central coast of Peru thanks to its dry climatic conditions and a well-organized irrigation system sustaining cotton cultivation (also domesticated since the fourth millennium c.e.).

In regard to the conservation of textile traditions in the two regions, the situation is almost the reverse today as quite isolated highland indigenous communities still weave with sheep wool and some camelid hairs (and more recently synthetic fibres), on the same loom as in the past, the four selvage pieces necessary to make their everyday and festival garments, while weaving traditions have almost disappeared on the coast. The obvious distance between present-day highland textiles, mainly warp-faced woven, and coastal pre-Hispanic remnants, with a marked preference for weft-faced productions, has not encouraged comparisons so far, except by a few investigators who were observing some interesting, because quite systematic, oppositions between these two distant traditions.¹ My presentation was divided in several parts corresponding to the steps necessary to compare present highland practices with early productions woven on the Peruvian south and central coast.

A first step was dedicated to the description of warp-faced weaving with two complementary warps as practiced today by the Jalq’a of Bolivia (a Quechua speaking group living in the mountains west of the city of Sucre)(Fig. 1).² The different ways the weavers use to select the warp threads of different colours to make their designs influence both the texture of the textiles and the geometric style of the designs.³ A first uneven counting system – 2/1, corresponding to a 2.1 twill – produces surfaces characterized by series of parallel oblique lines, all with the same angle to the vertical, oriented in ‘s’ or ‘z’ directions, and designs shaped by these oblique lines and some horizontal lines.⁴ Another even counting system –

¹ Rowe 1977; Desrosiers 2010 (first published in 1988).
² For informations on the Jalq’a, see Cereceda et al. 1993. Contemporary complementary-warp weaves from highland Bolivia have been presented by Rowe, 1977, chap. 10-11.
³ Desrosiers 2012 and 2013.
⁴ For the various counting systems, see Arnold and Espejo 2012.
2/2, making 3.1 floats in alternating pairs – produces surfaces animated by points or “markers” disseminated on the surface in alternate rows, and designs shaped by the same oblique and horizontal lines (Fig. 2).

Besides the Jalq’a, other highland people from Bolivia and the south of Peru have used the even counting system in different ways, so that several design styles can be distinguished according to the way the markers are linked. A special grid paper with rows of alternating markers helps to understand the three styles: the colour areas style (each area of colour has markers), the linear style (no marker visible because all are related by lines), and the semi-linear style (some markers appear between some lines). By adding other warps of different colours, the texture of the surface and the style of the designs do not change, but the number of colours available to create a single design (Fig. 3).

The second step consisted in looking among the pre-Hispanic pieces preserved on the coast, the oldest examples woven with complementary-warps weaving logics. The earliest pieces so far identified are three bands discovered on the south coast - at Ocucaje - and stylistically from the phases 9-10 of the Early Horizon (ca. 200 c.e.) - 0). They have two, three, and four warps of camelid hair and represent the three styles woven with the even counting system. Their diversity, complexity, and uniqueness prove that they have been imported from another region, supposedly from somewhere in the highlands where these weaving techniques must have been developed during several centuries before leaving this first evidence. A contemporary tunic woven on the coast with a rather simpler technique, but with the same design as the band with four colours in linear style, demonstrates that textile artists from the coast had been seduced by these characteristic designs to the point where they interpreted them with other techniques.

During the third step, I showed that an important part of the famous Paracas Necrópolis embroideries, discovered on the south coast of Peru and dated ca.150 c.e.-200 d.e., can also be considered as imitations of textiles woven with complementary warps by highland creators. The embroideries belonging to the Linear Style, as defined by Anne Paul, have a texture and designs comparable to the woven examples I have also classified as Linear Style. And part of the Paracas Necrópolis Broad Lines Style pieces whose stitches are all parallel to one another have textures comparable to the Jalq’a textiles woven either with uneven counts (with a texture showing series of parallel oblique lines in ‘z’ or ‘s’ direction), or with even counts in the Colour Areas Style (with markers regularly distributed in alternating rows)(Fig. 4-5). Their designs, geometric, have shapes limited by oblique and horizontal lines, and some vertical lines. These comparisons prove that the living weaving traditions of the south Peruvian and Bolivian highlands existed more than two millennia ago, and that they constitute important keys to decipher the relations between some early groups of the highlands and the inhabitants of the Peruvian south coast.

The fourth step consisted in showing that the last style (the Semi Linear one), not represented among Paracas Necrópolis embroideries of the south coast, has received the same attention,

---

5 This grid paper has been used by Cason and Cahlander 1976.
6 Desrosiers 2013.
7 Rowe 1977: fig. 76, 98-99.
8 Desrosiers 2008.
9 See Anne Paul 1982 for the definition of the Paracas Necrópolis embroidery styles.
but on the central coast of Peru, at a later time (during the Lima culture, ca. 200 – 650 AD), through various kinds of artefacts: painted ceramics and walls, sculpted wood, pyro-engraved gourds, including textiles with “simpler” techniques. The famous “interlocking” style which consists in variations of an interlocked fish or snake geometric design, and has been considered since the beginning of the 20th century as derived from the textile sphere, show designs in three to four colours easily identifiable as belonging to the Semi Linear Style by the markers usually located at regular intervals between the oblique and horizontal lines that structure them. Our hypothesis is that these designs were also elaborated in the highlands by a group of weavers certainly distinct, chronologically or culturally, from those who had contacts with the south coast at a much earlier date. Reconstructions woven with the same logics as those used by the Jalq’a weavers give an idea of the textiles with complementary warps which had been imported from the highlands (Fig. 6).

Such comparisons and reconstructions lead to several observations. An important part of the weaving knowledge of present indigenous highland communities was elaborated more than two millennia ago and have been transmitted in some ways from generation to generation until today. It is an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity that concerns not only the people from Taquile Island (lake Titicaca, Peru), who were inscribed on UNESCO’s list in 2005, but also all those who go on maintaining a practice that is closely related to the social, economic, and political organisation of their highland indigenous communities. These are organized according to the same logic principle of complementarity as the warp threads in a warp-faced complementary warp textile, and it is probably central to their conservation. Faced with this situation, it seems clear that it is important to continue observing, analysing and recognizing them. As a mirror effect, the reconstruction of part of their past provides them with an unexpected historical depth that should contribute to a better appreciation on the art or handicraft markets, including their revitalization, because, even if they are not all in danger, they are today often vulnerable. Such an analysis should be a significant contribution to the archaeologists who seek a better understanding of the complex relations between highlands and coast in pre-Hispanic times, and who often compare iconographic motifs without taking into account the style of their designs. A textile design is often dependent on the material and immaterial means used to produce it. It is a significant part of the motif that should be taken into account when examining its circulation and the relations between regions that can be deduced from it.

As the Andean example shows, the relations between past and present textile traditions may be very deep. There, the highland weaving tradition is closely related to the cultural context embedded in the loom (allowing the making of four selvedge pieces), and in the weaving logics (based on complementary and mathematical principles) that give shape to the designs. External influences as the introduction of sheep by the Spaniards, and more recently of synthetic fibre threads, and new fashions have changed the “appearance” but not the “essence” of weaving practices.

In the Old World, long-term textile traditions have already been identified by Marta Hoffmann with the vertical warp-weighted loom in the middle of the 20th century and much more has been observed or awaits investigation, even if the pace of changes is apparently very fast.

References


CERECEDA, Verónica, Johnny DÁVALOS y Jaime MAÑA 1993 *Una diferencia, un sentido: los diseños de los textiles tarabuco y jalq’a*. Sucre: ASUR.


