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Catherine Joslyn
Clarion University of Pennsylvania, cjoslyn@clarion.edu

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Representations of Nature in Andean Textiles

Catherine Joslyn

Andean textile tradition is rich with symbolism demonstrating the close ties of Quechua speaking people of Peru with nature. The observations of several researchers and textile production centers bear witness to the fascinating world of Andean cosmology as it is expressed in traditional cloth. This article introduces many of these important ideas, people, and organizations to the reader.

Since ancient times Andean cultures have had an extraordinary relationship with the natural environment. As shown by Spina in his studies of Peruvian anthropologist and novelist José Maria Arguedas, the native peoples of the Andes do not conceive of humans as separate from nature (Spina, 1994, p. 6). In fact, they see themselves as intended to collaborate with nature. Human civilization is based upon agriculturalism and pastoralism, which require working in close harmony with the natural world. This value is expressed in their art. When Andean people encountered forms in nature that resonated with their world of ideas, they didn’t hesitate to modify those natural objects to conform more closely with their worldview (Joslyn, 2008, p.3). For example, in a boulder atop Machu Picchu, they saw a form similar to the nearby mountain they called Huayna Picchu, and proceeded to sculpt the mountain’s portrait into the stone.

The ancient Andeans and the modern Quechua-speaking people were, and are, deeply in touch with the nature of textile fibers and what their hands and imaginations could craft out of them (Joslyn, 2008, p.1) The late anthropologist Ed Franquemont wrote,

No other people in history put so much cultural energy into fiber arts as the Andeans. Even though the superlative weavers of the contemporary Andes are only the impoverished reminder of a far more brilliant past that is gone forever, cloth remains the quintessential Andean art and the best forum to enter into a dialogue with the remarkable Inca mind. (Franquemont, 1991, p. 296)

They had a profound understanding of the animals and plants from which the fibers came: how to cultivate and care for them; how to spin and color them with plants, insects, and minerals; and how to produce ritual or utilitarian textiles for any type of need from everyday carrying bags to exquisite offerings for the gods and divine rulers. Luxury textiles for royal or divine use were made in extremely elaborate, difficult, time-consuming, and labor-intensive techniques. Schoeser writes that the ancient Andeans in the earliest known New World urban center, Caral (ca. 2600 BCE), used “knotted reed bags filled with stones to form the inner walls of buildings” (2003, p. 13). Not only clothing and the unique texts made from knotted cords called quipus, but
even architectural structures were made using textile techniques and materials (Schoe­ser, 2003, p. 13). Berlo wrote, “There are many ways in which cloth can serve as ‘his­torical text. It can be an alternative means of encoding cultural information. Aspects of ethnicity, economic relationships, and personal data are all proclaimed in cloth and clothing” (1991, p. 447). The imagery in traditional Andean textiles consists of sym­bols that can still be read by a few traditional weavers, as well as by shamans—the ones who understand the deepest meanings of traditional knowledge. The motifs (see Fig.1) communicate many kinds of information about space and time as well as history and accounting (Joslyn, 2008, p. 2).

Figure 1: Weaver with potato flower (prevalent on lower portion) and other motifs on a lliklla—a carrying cloth/shawl

![Photo of weaver with potato flower and other motifs](source: Photo by author)

It is important to realize that the meanings of textile images come from oral tradi­tion, in which details are guarded in the memory of the one who knows how to read them (Joslyn, 2008, p. 2). In the case of the knotted quipus (knotted cord constructions that accounted for stored goods among other things), Cummins points out that “the quipu also communicated through the quipucamayok [its keeper and interpreter] but in an oral form, and the information it represented could be extensive” (Cummins, 1993, p. 106 author’s translation); moreover, many Quechua words similarly convey complex meanings that take a lengthy explanation in western languages.

Returning to the topic of forms relating to nature found in ancient textile designs, a deliciously varied pattern of beans seen in a cloth from the Nazca culture of the first 650 years Common Era clearly represent the importance of farming and food supply,
but according to Mary Frame the symbolism goes much deeper. She says that beans and severed heads appeared interchangeably in Nazca imagery (Frame, 1999, p. 261). The desert culture was naturally preoccupied with water, and here she sees that expressed mythically. The Nazca people buried severed heads as an offering to ensure the water supply. Frame wrote, “This practice, and the associated blood flow, may equate with the sowing and watering [of] seeds in the ritual domain” (1999, p. 262) Euphemistic symbols were commonly used by the Maya to symbolize the gruesome acts of blood sacrifice. It’s reasonable to assume that indigenous people to the south did the same. So we see that the use of natural symbols went beyond attractive patterns into deep ritual meaning.

With the European conquest of South America began centuries of oppression during which the native Andeans were prohibited from following many of their customs. Jumping to this contemporary age, a great reawakening has taken place, and more and more indigenous groups are dedicating themselves to reclaiming their ethnic identity and taking control of their own destiny. Visitors to Cuzco, Peru, for example, can visit a museum and shop, the Center for Traditional Textiles of Cuzco (CTTC), founded and directed by Nilda Callañaupa Alvarez of Chinchero, to see how Andean textile traditions have been carried on (Joslyn, 2008, p. 1). Many of the CTTC produced textiles (see Fig.2) feature designs that point to that special relationship between humans and nature.

**Figure 2: Nilda Callañaupa at KSU, Georgia, USA, in 2012**

![Image of Nilda Callañaupa](source: Photo by author)
Callañaupa’s home town of Chinchero is a 50 minute drive from Cuzco, with over 9,000 inhabitants divided into four communities that cultivate potatoes, fava beans, wheat, and barley for the regional brewery, as well as pasturing sheep and cattle; in the higher altitudes they tend llamas and alpacas. The writer spent most weekends for one year (1997-98) in Chinchero, and had an opportunity early on to interview a weaver there, Victoria Kusihuaman of Kuper, who was an early student of Callañaupa’s; she was observed dyeing wool with black walnut in her outdoor workshop. I also attended lectures by Callañaupa at her fledgling CTTC (see Fig.3). Besides the CTTC, Chinchero has at least two other weavers associations. There is a school built around 1920, and a health center, police station, municipal office, justice of the peace, an administrator, and tiny stores. There has been more development in recent years, including the addition of a well-designed museum, lodgings, and a restaurant. Touristically, Chinchero is noted for its Inca ruins, colonial church (built in typical fashion on Inca foundations, the temple having been destroyed by the conquistadors), and its craft market. It is on the tourist trail as part of the Sacred Valley tours, which, however, give the town far too little time.

Growing up in Chinchero, Nilda Callañaupa was both typical and unique. As early as the 1920s, schools such as the one she attended in Chinchero began requiring that children wear uniforms of European design made from imported fabrics (Silverman, 1995, p. 38). Such forces diminished the use and apparent importance of traditional textiles, contributing to the gradual loss of textile traditions with which Callañaupa has been so concerned. In other Andean regions such as Otavalo, Ecuador, school children continued to wear their traditional or typical dress (traje típico) as uniforms, which have helped to retain their cultural identity (Meisch, 1991, p. 140).

Figure 3: Afterschool weavers, two still in school uniforms, CTTC Chinchero

Source: Photo by author
A skilled spinner and weaver since childhood and the first university-educated citizen of Chinchero in spite of being a girl, Nilda recognized the strength her mother and grandmothers drew from traditions—particularly textile traditions. As a result she has devoted her life to preserving Peru’s textile heritage. The writer met her during a sabbatical in Peru in 1997, when the CTTC organization was a year old. She was making trips to communities with important weaving traditions on the verge of disappearing, encouraging the weavers to return to the ancient craft, buying their weavings, and teaching them to value traditional wool, alpaca, and dyes made from plants. Now she works with at least 800 weavers in ten communities. “Community” in this case means small villages often many hours by foot or truck from nearest town. Callañaupa said that in order for a community to join CTTC they have to organize and elect a president. She shows the weavers fine antique examples, encouraging their best production, and works hard at developing the market for their products.

Through the textile preservation project Nilda has given weavers a means to support their families. She encourages excellence, and the level of quality in the weavers’ production has grown exponentially. In 2007, an astonishing fineness of handspun, traditionally dyed wool thread and weaving were coming from CTTC member communities such as Chahuaytire—this especially compared with the weavings of factory spun synthetic yarns that were the norm in Cuzco just ten years earlier. Synthetic yarn and all things new and European or mestizo are still preferred by some, but Nilda and others have taught them the value of returning to traditional quality. The Spanish conquerors long ago taught the native people to despise their own culture—and by extension themselves—in favor of European ways and norms of beauty. But as Nilda states, “The weavers...now wear their traditional garments with pride. They report that people in the cities sometimes come up to them and greet them with, ‘Brother, how good that you are wearing our traditional clothing and keeping it alive.’ If people in the cities still try to discriminate against them (for looking indigenous), they resist” (Callañaupa, 2007, p. 20). She quotes a woman of Pitumarca: “We no longer feel we have to accept...insults (because we are native Quechua people). If we hear some bad comment about us, we immediately tell the speakers that we are people equal to them and that there is no difference between us”. (Callañaupa, 2007, p. 19 Callañaupa further explains that their wearing of traje (traditional attire developed during Spanish colonial days) also contributes local color for the tourist trade in Cuzco” (Callañaupa, 2007, p. 19).

Other Peruvian artisan groups are also having success continuing their woven textile traditions. Katharine Seibold has worked since the mid-1980s with the weavers of Choquecancha (also in the Department of Cuzco) documenting their textile production, what the textiles and their motifs mean to the weavers, and how traditions are changing. The weavers of Parobamba, near Calca in Cuzco Department, are another example. Their community is situated high overlooking tropical lowlands of the Amazon region. The steamy mists rise up on a chilly morning when weavers gather from the surrounding area for a community work day. They arrive on foot with children and small animals in tow, flowers picked en route tucked into their hatbands. They weave, spin, and dye as a community, working images of plants, fields, and other images that speak of their relationship with the natural environment into the handspun and dyed...
alpaca and wool weavings they produce for themselves and for market. Crisantino Montes of Ayacucho has a workshop producing colorful tapestries with abstracted animal motifs inspired by ancient textiles (such as geometricized motifs depicted in Fig. 5), trekking to the high zones each year to select baby alpaca dyed with traditional dyes on “Spanish” mechanized looms (Joslyn, 2008, p. 2).

Figure 5: Geometricized birds from ancient Peruvian textiles reinterpreted by Crisantino Montes of Ayacucho

Source: Photo by author

The Peruvian success stories are in turn influencing and being influenced by their counterparts in neighboring Andean countries like Bolivia and Ecuador, and exchanges have been occurring in recent years. Such efforts exemplify native peoples’ determination to succeed in holding on to their culture, determining their own values, and defining success in their own terms. Again and again in these communities we see the expression of Andean concepts linking humans with nature and the cosmos. There is one old Chinchero design, luraypu, a diamond “divided into four by the addition of four smaller diamonds, one placed at the top and bottom of the larger diamond, and two found in the middle” (Silverman, 1999, p. 815). Some say it is a plant called lorapu, but Callañaupa says it is not the same word and the design does not look like the plant; she feels it is just a geometric design composed of other geometric designs (Callañaupa, 2012, p. 112). Silverman, on the other hand, said Chinchero men told her that the design referred to the four-part division of Chinchero into four suyus (regions—see earlier discussion of the division of the town into four zones) after the Inca custom, as well as denoting the water sources in each part (Silverman, 1999, p. 815). According to her interpretation, the design also shows the agricultural fields with their ridges (see Fig. 6).
Chinchero native Callañaupa catalogues numerous Chinchero designs derived from nature, such as the chili-chili, which represents a medicinal herb (Callañaupa, 2012, p. 118). It is essentially a large zig-zag, combined with additional motifs depending on the weaver. There is a ch'aska star design that resembles a snowflake, designs of shells, farming implements like hoes and rope, and myriad other plant and flower motifs, as well as geographic features such as mountain peaks and meandering rivers (the last two also are varieties of zig-zag) (Callañaupa, 2012, pp. 101-107, 120). As to animals, Callañaupa recalls,

In the mid-1970s my dad brought back weaving with the design of a horse from his travels in the area of Lares Valley. I was intrigued so I...copied the design...It was so attractive that I sold it, and other weavers also began to weave it. Now weavers create many animals with the same technique," such as rabbit, goose, llama with flowers in its ears, vicuña, deer, alpaca, rabbit, puma, bear, guinea pig, puma claw, lizard, snake, fish, and toad, as well as insects, birds including pigeon, duck, hummingbird, ibis, goose, owl, and human figures. (Callañaupa, 2012, pp. 124-133)

The Quechua don't see themselves as separate from nature, and nature in turn also includes the supernatural, especially in transitional images that bridge worlds. In her cataloging of designs used by the weavers of Choquecancha, Seibold found the largest category to be religious and cosmological designs (Seibold, 1992, p. 169). Andean cosmology was organized around sky, earth, and water deities that weavers still put into textiles, which she characterizes as “woven prayers” due to the significance of the imagery. The sky was primarily represented by the condor, the earth by the feline (especially the puma), and the water by the serpent or toad (Seibold, 1992, p. 170).
According to Seibold, the condor is a transitional symbol not only because of its gigantic size, but more importantly because it eats carrion, unlike most other birds. The Quechua of Choquecancha say that the condor flies up from Pachamama (Mother Earth/Time),

[And lives with the Apus [sacred mountain lords]...[that it] guard[s] the Incan treasure buried in the earth; that drinking the blood of a condor will make your teeth grow again; that a condor flying over the church is a harbinger of death...and that when weavers use a pick made of condor bone, their fingers fly in picking designs. (Seibold, 1992, p. 170)

Creatures considered both inside and outside the category of birds—and therefore extraordinary enough to include in weavings where ordinary birds are not—include bats, considered rats changed into birds whose blood will cure epilepsy, and owls, which like bats fly at night and rest in the daytime. The owl, like the condor, is a harbinger of death. Other transitional birds with unusual qualities worth picturing in weavings are the hummingbird, which flies and yet remains in one place; the butterfly; the duck, equally at home in water or air; and the tinamou, a large-bodied bird that can fly (see Fig.7), and yet unlike most birds prefers to run to safety (Seibold, 1992, pp. 170-179).

Of transitional power symbols representing the earth, Seibold mentions the feline as the most ubiquitous one. Several kinds of animals are considered feline that non-Quechua speakers have trouble understanding, not only including the puma and the cat, but also the Andean weasel and the fox, whose movements are cat-like and where “...felines are considered to be powerful animals because they are predators and un-
domesticatable" (Seibold, 1992, p. 175). Fig.8 depicts a cat-like figure on textile. The Inca “navel of the world,” the administrative city of Cuzco itself, is laid out in the form of a puma, with the sacred center located at its genital organs (Joslyn, 2008, p. 4). Other cities and towns are also laid out in the forms of sacred beasts, underlining the importance of the special connection with nature seen in the Andean world.

Special qualities of water animals made them magical as well, such as the snake as a symbol for the earth upon whose surface it glides, as well as for rivers, whose sinuous forms it embodies. It was thought that a magical snake could convert itself into a river. The serpent or snake also has the same zig-zag form (called k’enko) as a bolt of lightning, and this form of light, akin to the reflected light of the moon, was thought to have magical power just as important as the radiant light of the sun. In fact a person who survives being struck by lightning is automatically considered to have been transformed into a shaman, and in the Cusco region would commonly be sent to a ritual specialist in the most traditional region of Q’ero to receive initiation rites (Rowe, 2002, p. 133).

Returning to Seibold,

[The most common water symbols in the llikllas (shawls/carrying cloths) are the toad, the lizard, and a geometric zigzag line called k’enko, which represents running water, lightning, and the serpent [see Fig.9]. Rather than being water animals, they are water-bringing animals or symbols. In the arid region of the southern Andes, where crops can be grown only during the rainy season, it is the coming of the rains that is of most importance, when Pachamama awakens to nurture the crops the (Quechua) are about to plant... In planting and agriculture, water-bringing is of great importance... (Seibold, 1992, p. 170)

Water is important on many levels: for life, for ritual cleansing, and as the embodiment of magical reflected light. For all of these reasons water symbols are significant. Seibold analyzes how design motifs depict the Andean cosmology, in which water is associated with the underworld (not to be confused with the Western idea of Hell). Seibold wrote,

As one shaman explained it to me, the designs of the sky, earth, and water correspond to the three worlds of the (Quechua) universe: Kay Pacha, the world (that) the (Quechua people) and the Apus (mountain lord spirits) inhabit; Hanan Pacha, the world in the sky in which live God, the sun, the moon, and the souls of the dead; and Ukhu Pacha, the underworld, which is a great sea, the world Pachamama and the dead inhabit. Another (ritual specialist) told me that lightning and rainbows link the three worlds. The condor, as represented by the woven motif, lives in the sky above the Apus. The feline... represents the earth and live(s) firmly on this earth with the (Quechua). And the water animal motifs, the serpent, toad, and lizard, hibernate underground in (the earth,) Pachamama, returning to Kay Pacha with the coming of the rainy season. The zigzag water motif, representing lightning and the river, and the thin colored stripes, representing the rainbow, connect the three worlds together. Based on what the weavers and shamans told me, the heavy concentration of sky, earth, and water designs in the llikllas emphasizes (their) purpose as a prayer to the spirit world. By visually linking the three worlds in one textile and connecting it to a request for agricultural fertility during the dry season festivals, the weaver is directing her message to the supernatural world.
(Quechua people) sacrifice alpacas and llamas to take their messages to the gods. Llikillas, while less dramatic, are daily visual prayers to invoke the gods' favor. (1992, p. 177)

Figure 9: Child with toad and other animal motifs on lliklla

Source: Photo by author

There are few remaining cultural heirs of pre-conquest peoples that continue to have such a special relationship with their materials or who are engaged in relearning the textile techniques that their ancestors used. It is high in the remote province of Q'ero, in the Department of Cuzco, that the most traditional ways of the Inca ancestors have been preserved. Q'ero shamans retain knowledge of the oldest meanings of textile designs. Silverman speculates that Q'ero's name may be related to kero, the name of Inca and pre-Inca cups that had symbolic tokapu designs on them that could be read just like the tokapus on Inca tunics. Whether or not that is the case, one well-known tokapu design signifies a soldier, being a miniature copy of the actual tunics soldiers wore with a checkerboard design in the top area.

Ann Rowe points out that Q'ero is the only place in Peru where a special ceremony to bless textiles has been documented, indicating their high level of cultural importance (Rowe, 2002, p. 15). Her book with John Cohen makes use of his travels there, beginning in the 1950s when he was a graduate student in painting at Yale. Bauhaus artist Anni Albers and her husband Josef, head of the Design Department at Yale in the 1950s, recognized the importance of Peruvian weaving and design and encouraged students such as Cohen to study such things. Femenias mentions Albers' thinking that the lack of a written language had an influence on the development of especially strong graphic symbols in Peruvian textiles.
Gail Silverman has done extensive work with the Q’ero and their textiles. Many of them continue a complex form of weaving mostly lost in the rest of the region. The pictures that Silverman had Q’ero people draw are revealing, translating their ideas into an unfamiliar medium in which they reiterate many of the central cosmological concepts of their pre-conquest ancestors, as well as delineating the village bordered by mountain peaks which they weave as zig-zag borders in textiles (Silverman, 1994). Silverman draws some interesting conclusions from these works and their interpretations. She writes that the Q’eros’ use of three colors in a special “double faced” weave, instead of only two colors in a “single faced” weave, is significant because that way, her informants told her, one can show ideas regarding not only space but time. (The Quechua word pacha means earth and time.) For example, while many contemporary Peruvian textiles will symbolically depict a field with its crops (space), the more complex older technique allows the images to show the passage of the sun over the furrows as light and shadow changes during the day (time) (Silverman, 1999, pp. 814-15).

**Figure 10: Q’ero Inti (sun) motif**

![Q'ero Inti (sun) motif](source: Photo by author)

Silverman describes how in a Q’ero textile design (see Fig.10) called inti (Quechua for “sun”) the terraced agricultural zones scaling the mountains are depicted as follows:

First, the diamond placed inside the rectangular frame is called Inti, the sun...when referring to temporal ideas; and [village] when referring to spatial concepts. Next, the diamonds placed one inside the other in decreasing size (picture a block in a log cabin quilt) are called pata, elevated land (terraces), and pupu, time period....Q’ero weavers related pata to the three ecological zones...they exploit (puna, the highest zones above the tree line, where certain potatoes are grown and where alpacas graze); qheswa (temperate zone where maize and most other crops can be grown), and yunga (jungle, lowlands where warm weather crops thrive)....Next, the pink or red lines which radiate in from the rectangular frame (represent) sunlight...and the sun’s fields, while the black
lines which direct out from the diamond” (signify) shadow... In this way, the light colored lines refer to the rising sun...while the dark colored lines signify the setting sun...Last, the series of triangles which borders both sides of inti are called by the (women) weavers (mountain peaks), while the...men call them...Apu(s), mountain deity(ies). (1999, pp. 814-815).

Silverman reads these interpretations as alluding to spatial ideas such as the mountain peaks bordering) the Q’ero highland village, with their mountainside fields in the different ecological zones in which they live and work; secondly they denote “ideas about the rising and setting sun in relation to the mountain peaks in order to tell daily and seasonal time.” (Silverman, 1999, p. 814-15) It is interesting to note that the men she interviewed had learned a deeper level of meanings behind the images than the women who wove them.

Silverman’s Q’ero informants said that designs from other less traditional parts of Cuzco that do not represent both space and time are of absolutely no value (1999, p. 816). She further says the color change dividing the diamond is called “little heart,” and that both parts together represent the sun at midday, “the zenith,” and points out that this design not only appears on every likilka and even more of them appear on ceremonial ponchos; but also it “is one of the few graphic designs” both woven by women and knitted by men into their hats and coca bags (Silverman, 1994, p. 72). The sun and the moon were the principal deities of the Inca and previous cultures, so the importance of the inti motif can’t be over-emphasized.

Silverman believes that the Q’ero preserved the legacy of this inti motif from Pre-Conquest Inca tokapu designs on textiles and Q’ero carved wooden vessels, and that it also appeared in earlier cultures, at least the pre-Inca horizon Wari tapestries originating in the modern-day Ayacucho area, and Tiahuanaco ceramics (from the Lake Titicaca region), meaning that it has been important over a great deal of space and time.

During some 20 years of living among the Q’ero, Silverman asked informants many times why they weave motifs in the shawls, coca bags, and ponchos. A response taped in 1985 indicated that the Q’ero informant “read” information through the motifs:

“We know how to read like that.” (She asked)
“What do you read (what do you understand by looking at the images)?”

The informant responded that the image in question represented “ch’unchu (the lowlands “wild man,” with inti (sun)” (Silverman, 1999, pp. 823-826, 813).

The woven images symbolize cultural concepts. Inti is the sun god, as we have seen. The ch’unchu is a highlander’s representation of lowland jungle dwellers. Nilda Callañaupa says that ch’unchu is a “term used to identify native people from the jungle. As a design, the term refers (to) the decorations of feathers for the headdresses worn by the people” (Callañaupa, 2012, p. 114). Sometimes, as in the example pictured in Fig.11, the head is mirrored as an abstracted, truncated “body.”
Silverman further writes that in Q’ero textiles, “listas” (lists) record descriptions and quantities of goods similar to bar codes. A black stripe might mean black llama wool or a black variety of potato, and red might mean red wool or corn. She says lista is woven in other places as well. For example,

A woman living in Markapata read the listas woven in a belt sample...as denoting a color classification for corn...the yellow stripe (was) for a furrow of yellow corn...the white stripe...for white corn placed in a furrow...the red one for red corn, and so on...While the multicolored...stripes are signs for goods, the alternating white and red stripes are signs for people. (Silverman, 1999, p. 822)

In fact, white stands for males (semen), while red stands for (menstrual) blood, symbolizing women. Into a lililka with alternating red and white stripes, therefore, can be woven a depiction of how many men and women are in the weaver’s family. She has no doubt that the stripes are similar to the knots and color coding in the quipu. That is, that the textiles can be read as a book of cultural knowledge that shows how people view their world (Silverman, 1999, p. 819).

Seibold points out that an important feature of Quechua textiles is not just symmetry, which we can notice in many designs, but the principle of dualism, of which bilateral symmetry—repeating the same motif on both sides—is one aspect, and “the male-female, sun-moon dichotomies are” another. She goes on, “Andean dualism is heavily documented...[as] a cultural principle that structures the (Quechua) universe...
and life within it... In textile design... the black pampa (open field) "visually mediates the left and the right sides... The sun and moon motifs replicate the dual masculine and feminine pre-Columbian cosmological system." She continues with the example of the complementary warp weave, used to create exact duplicates of each design on front and back in reverse colors, as well as "the reversals of colors from block to block." But more importantly, dualism appears in the positive and negative patterning, where the background becomes just "as important as the design itself, the two working dynamically together to form one identifiable whole" (Seibold, 1992, pp. 194-5).

Ancient Andean cultures had (and to some degree modern ones continue), as suggested earlier, a very special relationship with textiles which grew out of a special relationship with nature itself (see Fig. 12). Their understanding of the native camelid fibers such as alpaca, vicuña, guanaco, and llama hair, as well as plant fibers like cotton, was so intimate that spinners and weavers were capable of making garments waterproof, or as soft as butter.

Figure 12: Vicuñas grazing, Colca Canyon.

Vicuñas are wild camelids with the softest wool of the modern-day New World camelids. Their wool is sold to indigenous people exclusively. Source: Photo by author

In this writer’s experience they are the only cultures that created patterns—so subtle only the textile-literate would notice—in yarn all of one color: through close observation they realized that pattern areas made of alternatingly oppositely-twisted yarns could be seen by the discerning, as well as read by their fingertips, made sensitive through lifelong handling of fibers. (Light plays differently on a yarn twisted in clockwise direction than a counter-clockwise twisted one; there is the quality of a low-
relief surface that the fingers can detect as well.) Their royal and sacred textiles were made using exquisitely labor-intensive techniques, as the investment of labor and skill gave them not only beauty but the high value that was appropriate for their sacred or royal use. Many of their favorite motifs revolved around their perceptions of their relationship with nature and the supernatural, thereby revealing that multitude of varieties of splendidly patterned bean mentioned earlier, for example, or the buds and flowers of the fields that provide other important foodstuffs (Joslyn, 2008, p. 4).

The foregoing examples demonstrate some of the ways in which textile designs can be read to understand Quechua peoples’ perception of their relationship to the natural world, a world in which they are closely bound to the rhythms and harmonies of the agricultural seasons as well as the spirits residing in Apus (mountain lords; the mountains surrounding a location are called Papa mountain, Mama mountain, and so on) as well as rivers, plants, animals, and humans. The field work of each of the researchers shows that these textile traditions carry depictions of concepts from cosmological constructs as well as the ordinary rhythms and pleasures of daily life of people deeply in touch with the natural world. Without a doubt these findings enhance the value of Peruvian textiles ancient and modern, whether they be appreciated for their astounding technical range and quality, their visual power, or the symbolism that expands our understanding of humanity’s place in the natural world.

References


