

## Andean and Amazonian Material Culture and Performance Traditions as Sites of Indigenous Knowledges and Memory

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### Abstract

In this article I argue that material cultural production and performance traditions are key sites of Andean and Amazonian indigenous knowledges and memory. I explore these forms of expression as alternative literacies and call for a scholarly commitment to going beyond talking *about* indigenous cultures and, instead, engaging *with* the epistemological frameworks, theoretical perspectives, and methodological approaches these sites of indigenous knowledge, memory, and practice, represent. The first part of the article briefly traces historical exclusions of indigenous perspectives and the mechanisms that sustained the systematic suppression of indigenous memories and knowledge. In spite of advances regarding the recognition and integration of indigenous voices, material culture production and performance traditions as literacies in their own right continue to be overlooked. The second part of the article centers on a collection of Andean and Amazonian cultural artifacts acquired by the Center for Latin American Studies at The Ohio State University in 2015. Examples from the collection enable an exposition of the significant theoretical and methodological contributions non-Western traditions bring to the broader discussion.

### Keywords

Indigenous epistemologies; Andean and Amazonian alternative literacies; cultural artifacts and indigenous knowledge; Andean and Amazonian performance traditions and memory; Andean and Amazonian Studies pedagogies and methodologies.

With vigilant eyes and mouth half open, a ceramic *coati mundi* watches over the conference room in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at The Ohio State University. Next to him, a Canelos Quichua ceramic bowl with radiating asymmetrical anaconda patterns invokes the forest spirits of Amazonia. From another corner of the room, a ragdoll representation of the festival *Aya Uma*, or spirit head, with a double-sided mask looks forward toward the past, which lies before us since we can see it, and backward toward the future which is not as apparent, reminding us of the inverse relation between time and space in the indigenous Andes. *Ukhuñas*, small ceremonial textiles from Chincheros, Peru, “Slice-of-life” Tigua paintings from Ecuador, and Andean etched story gourds find their place among other items and books. They are part of a collection of Andean and Amazonian cultural artifacts acquired by the Center for Latin American Studies at OSU.<sup>1</sup> The artifacts stand alongside academic publications as texts in their own right with distinct literary and historical narrative

forms, different types of textuality, and alternative literacies that provide a glimpse into the multi-dimensional sites of indigenous knowledges.



**Figurine depicting a coati mundi or *cucuchu*, made in the late 1970s by Apacha Vargas**  
Pastaza Province, Ecuador  
*Purchased from the Sacha Runa Research Foundation in 2015*  
*All photos taken by Abhijit Varde, The Ohio State University*

Although selective and small, the collection is a meaningful step toward the inclusion and validation of indigenous production and perspectives at our institution. More than conversation starters for *talking about* indigenous cultures (already a noteworthy advancement and trend in many departments of Latin American languages, literatures and cultures) the artifacts provide a point of entry for *engaging with* indigenous forms of knowledge and expression. They affirm, for instance, representations of information beyond conventional written texts and present us with the challenge of developing “reading” practices beyond written documents and critical assessments of Western delimitations of alphabetic writing altogether. Collectively they call for a serious commitment to the integration of approaches that are compatible with oral and non-Western traditions, raising awareness of prevailing forms and critical sites of indigenous knowledge, power, resistance, memory, self-determination and ethnogenesis, as well as the processes behind their production.

### **Part I: Historical Challenges and Contemporary Achievements**

The significance and role of the collection is highlighted against the backdrop of recent achievements and historical challenges for indigenous perspectives. Following the vision of Rolena Adorno (2000) and others of reclaiming spaces for indigenous intellectual presence, the collection is a nascent attempt at decolonizing our classrooms and our institutions. These major centers of research and learning, as Walter Mignolo (1994:309) asserts, continue to celebrate a legacy of knowledge attached predominantly, if not exclusively, to alphabetic literacy. Pointing to the suppression of diversity, orality and performativity as part of the violent agenda of European alphabetic writing in “taming the voice,” he proclaims that though the era of colonial empires may have passed, “academic colonialism” tied to Western literacy traditions persists. This institutional colonialism presents on multiple fronts: the historical marginalization of indigenous intellectuals and their scholarly production, the systematic exclusion of academic writing in non-European languages or of writing that does not adhere strictly to Western literary conventions, and the nearly complete omission of alternative literacies manifest in material culture and indigenous performance traditions as topics of theoretical engagement.

In the last several decades, we have witnessed important advances in indigenous languages and cultures programming at universities in both the United States and Latin America. These achievements have been marked by growing indigenous languages programs, academic areas of concentration in indigenous studies beyond the field of anthropology, an increasing presence of indigenous intellectuals and native speakers at our institutions, designated funding for research with indigenous populations,

and teaching emphases on indigenous themes and topics.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in the public realm we have observed forward movement such as the addition of Quichua language in an article of Ecuador's National Constitution, increasing presence and visibility of indigenous languages in regional and national newspapers and magazines, and the launching of an all-Quechua Peruvian national television newscast in December of 2016 with native-speaking anchors, reporters, correspondents, producers and cameramen.

While we celebrate these strides and build on their momentum, we are also aware that recognition of these historical achievements is painfully overdue. Indigenous contributions to conventional written legal, historical and cultural accounts are nothing new, dating all the way back to the sixteenth century. The work of Saliha Belmessous (2012) and Alcira Dueñas (2010), among others, which documents indigenous participation in colonial legal written claims since the 1500s, underscores the long-term struggle for the inclusion of indigenous voices within official narratives, institutions, and archival records. In the Andes, the Huarochiri Manuscript written in Quechua in the late sixteenth century and Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala's work as Quechua translator and scribe for colonial authorities and as author of *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno*, a 1200-page critique of Spanish colonial rule written in the early seventeenth century, similarly attest to indigenous alphabetic literacy and intellectual production. These and other important documents, nonetheless, remained largely ignored throughout history.

Western historiography has effectively severed indigenous peoples from their past, and consequently, as Joanne Rappaport points out, in *The Politics of Memory: Native Historical Interpretation in the Colombian Andes* (1998:1), from their future. It has done so, she writes, by depicting indigenous people only in terms of negative stereotypes or neglecting to mention them altogether. Whereas in some spheres of public (but also academic) discourse, these omissions and misrepresentations are regarded as an unintended historical oversight, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995), author of *Silencing the Past*, denounces the West, exposing hegemonic formulas of historical erasure and banalization that guaranteed the systematic and deliberate exclusion of subaltern experiences, memories and knowledge production from official archives. Given the far-reaching influence of what Trouillot calls "archival power" in determining not only which histories are acknowledged and what type of knowledge is preserved, but also policy decisions that affect present conditions and future opportunities, gaining representation in official narratives and institutions has been at the forefront of subaltern political struggles. As María Guzmán-Gallegos (2012:289) writes, among Amazonian indigenous communities there is the notion that written texts are repositories of power that in and of themselves can produce

reality and give shape to the outcomes of social processes. Hence, Quijos and Canelos Quichua people from Amazonian Ecuador had “the idea that learning to read and write would allow them to defend themselves better and to resist exploitation.” Nevertheless, in Rappaport’s (1998:2) assessment, the endeavor represents a “double-edged sword” since at the same time, “the power of European institutions was constituted and maintained through the spread of literacy in indigenous communities” (Rappaport 1994:217). In the case of the Nasa of Colombia, Rappaport (1998:2) indicates that participation in writing has entailed using Western conventions to communicate indigenous principles, largely contorting indigenous viewpoints to fit within Western literary and discursive norms.

At minimum, we are left with a scholarly obligation to acknowledge the imposed compromise of alphabetic writing, not to mention the requirement that it keep to European languages. In spite of occasional intellectual yearnings for hybridization to represent some form of happy medium or third space, this historical compromise has not constituted a conciliation defined by meeting half way or even aimed at cultivating a middle ground. “As usual, it is the subordinated group,” Rosaleen Howard-Malverde (1997:14) remarks, “that makes the accommodating gesture in order to set up a framework for communication in the first place.” She goes on to write that the process of accommodating European linguistic codes hazards the assimilation of the dominant culture’s values and concepts as well. This begins to underscore the profound consequences that are sustained by the seemingly innocuous mechanical details of Western writing conventions. Indeed, Regina Harrison (1994:11) wrestles with the transposition of the oral to the written in the first place, and in the second instance, insists on the violence of translation, arguing that the act of translation is more than an aesthetic or linguistic reorganization from one language or text to another, carrying the additional baggage of moral and conceptual implications. In the transposition of words from oral or written Quechua into Spanish, she sees the renewed marginalization, masking and subjugation not only of Quechua language but also of an entire way of thinking and knowing to the imperative Spanish text.

While the integration of indigenous written accounts and literatures, and translated oral narratives, is, of course, essential to redress historical exclusions, these forms of expression inevitably continue to operate within Western canons that tie memory and knowledge to alphabetic writing in a way that is antithetical to epistemologies emergent from oral traditions. In a more critical light, we are called upon to recognize a potential act of double (or rather triple) negation since beyond the historical silencing of indigenous intellectuals and the writings they produce, and the severe distortions indigenous viewpoints experience in the process of translation into dominant languages, the written word, in and of itself, as Rappaport (1994:217) states, has also been “instrumental in erasing the past as

indigenous people had remembered it.” The experience-oriented, embodied, profoundly dialogical, and often coded nature of indigenous knowledges and memories is suppressed by the linear and univocal strictures of Western written narrative and the fixity of alphabetic text.

Mires Ortiz (1996:15-16) rightly asserts the preponderance of the verb in Andean traditions, which are vested in practice, dynamic process and experience, and the impossibility of capturing the oral history of indigenous communities within static and unyielding European narrative constructs. The vibrancy, fluidity, multivocality of indigenous experience and expression that are mostly evocative rather than literal are lost to the permanence of alphabetic writing. Frank Salomon (1982 cited in Rappaport 1998) goes so far as to refer to these attempts as “chronicles of the impossible” implying the ultimate incompatibility and mutual negation of the two systems.

As we consider these historical suppressions and institutional predicaments, another absence becomes strikingly apparent: the generalized and ongoing disregard for supralinguistic forms of expression, namely performance traditions and material culture production, as repositories of indigenous knowledge and memory. Among Andean and Amazonian indigenous communities, wisdom and meaning-making was and continues to be passed down from one generation to the next by way of practice, experience, and applied knowledge of the processes behind beautifully made things, rather than through conventional written texts (see Whitten 2015 and 2016, Heckman 2003, Arnold and Yapita 2006). Far from being a “people without history” in the absence of alphabetical writing, indigenous communities throughout the hemisphere present narratives of their memories and experiences in richly inscribed tactile surfaces and performance traditions rather than on paper.

The impressions of awe of early explorers at the aesthetic quality of indigenous cultural production and their sense of admiration for the skilled craftsmanship and sophisticated technology behind the creation of indigenous art and artifacts (see Whitten 2015:40-50), and beyond this, colonial recognition of the importance and deep significance of indigenous coded systems of communication such as the Inka *quipu* (see Quilter and Urton 2002), seem to have faded over the course of time as the colonial hegemonic enterprise declared these forms of expression and expertise irrelevant. Classification of this production as “primitive art” suggested both inferiority and also carried connotations of evolutionary backwardness in contrast to Europe’s self-ascribed identity as progressive and advanced. Although the terms may have changed, today, characterizations of indigenous production as “primitive technology,” “indigenous crafts,” “folk art,” “handicrafts,” and “ethnic souvenirs” for the tourist market continue to devalue indigenous expression. It bears mentioning that the phrase “*arte primitivo*” or “*arte nativo*” continues in use with the effect of degrading

contemporary indigenous production, alongside “*cultura primitiva*” and “*natural*” to designate indigenous people themselves. Even when coveted as commodities or appreciated for their beauty, indigenous artifacts often remain simple curiosities. They are certainly not recognized at first glance as historical and cultural registers.

Elizabeth Boone (1994:9) writes that prevalent discourses such as those mentioned above based on “harmfully narrow views of what are thought and knowledge and what constitutes the expression of these thoughts and this knowledge” fail to consider the range of human experience and expression. By way of this reductionist process, “supralinguistic ways of presenting knowledge” have been summarily dismissed (Boone 1994:17). And yet, as Harrison (1994:83) asserts, more than mere aesthetic value, these forms of expression present complex semiotic systems that furthermore operate within their own grammar and conventions for meaning making (Boone 1994:15, 17). At present, there is a robust body of literature that substantiates these perspectives as they relate to Andean *kehipus*, textiles and weavings, graphic representations, Amazonian ceramic production, and performance traditions including dance, music and festival practices. Each of these practices resonates with what Peter Wogan (2003:124) perceives as a broader pattern of privileging concretely embodied memory practices among Latin American indigenous communities.

Silently, patiently, the ceramic coati mundi watches from his perch in the conference room as all of this unfolds and we come to the realization that, as William Conklin observes, the West’s most valued social, political, analytical instrument—alphabetic writing—has, in fact, created an obstacle to understanding other modes of communication and expression (cited in Heckman 2003:39). From across the room the Aya Uma looks forward into the past that lies in front of him and sees with absolute clarity these historical silencings, but also the persistence and resilience of indigenous peoples and indigenous cultures. His other countenance, facing backward toward the future, cannot glimpse quite clearly the impending outcome of what lies ahead (or rather, behind, in Andean spatial-temporal conception). We obviously cannot abandon our scholarly endeavor within Western institutions altogether, but if we are to truly engage with indigenous sites of memory, knowledge and meaning making, we must go beyond our established methods and “try harder,” as Heckman (2003:106) bids us, “to see through indigenous eyes and sensibilities.”



**Aya Uma Rag Doll**  
*Donated by Norman Whitten, 2015*

Just as alphabetic writing, historical and literary studies, scientific analysis, and Western philosophy require education and development of skillsets over a long-term period, indigenous alternative literacies, epistemologies and ontologies similarly take time and methodical, sustained effort to master. Moreover, as we consider similarities on par with Western systems, we cannot overlook that indigenous ways of knowing are *theory generative*. In other words, taking indigenous experiences and alternative modes of expression seriously demands programmatic and pedagogical changes, and theoretical engagement. None of this can happen, however, without a “new mental architecture” that escapes the tendency to simply “incorporate Andean textual practices into an alphabetic framework,” as Denise Arnold and Juan de Dios Yapita (2006:287-88) point out. Howard-Malverde (1997:9) advises that rather than continuing to theorize and represent “the other” from our own intellectual standpoint, we might consider taking our cues from cultural agents themselves and the ways by which “they engage in the chain of reception, interpretation and production of meaning.”

While it is true that ethnographic and historical accounts have increasingly accommodated and incorporated indigenous voices (*ibid*), (some, in fact, with joint publications), relatively few scholars have engaged not just the viewpoints, but also the *form* of indigenous expression. Catherine Allen (2011) immediately jumps to mind as one of these rare, unconventional examples. What we glimpse in these instances of dedicated engagement with indigenous knowledges and autochthonous forms of expression is more than additional insight about indigenous cultures. What they offer is an entry point for comprehending fresh, truly original, and often radical conceptualizations, and beyond that, creative alternatives for thinking outside the narrow configurations of our Western intellectual box. As Mignolo (1994:309) writes, these indigenous ways of knowing most certainly have the potential to “impinge on our current conceptions of knowledge, understanding, and the politics of intellectual inquiry.” As the directionality of what was up until recently a one-way intellectual avenue shifts and diversifies, indigenous perspectives and methods of inquiry and expression reveal potentially cutting-edge impetus for a broader interdisciplinary discussion, breathing vitality into debates that have arguably come to an impasse. In the section that follows, I present a series of examples from the OSU collection and try to elucidate the cultural insights but more importantly the methodological and theoretical contributions some of these alternative literacies bring to the conversation.

## **Part II: Alternative Literacies and Historiographies**

What would our libraries look like if they included Amazonian ceramics as texts in their own right alongside book holdings? How would our knowledge banks change? In what myriad ways would

our classroom pedagogies be challenged if we were to teach alternative literacies of textile production with the same diligence as we teach alphabetical writing and composition? What new methods of inquiry would we need to become proficient at? How would we go about replacing ideas of representation with theories of cultural emergence and approaches to meaning as process? These are all questions that motivate and inspire the modest collection of Andean and Amazonian cultural artifacts at Ohio State, which has become a touchstone for an array of interconnected projects and programs tied to the Quechua Learning Community and the Integrated Learning Environment for the Study of Andean and Amazonian Languages and Cultures.

Functional uses of the collection include facilitating, by way of indexical representation, Quechua and Spanish language sessions on specialized vocabulary at beginner and advanced levels. In advanced language courses, the material mediates discussions that engage central Andean and Amazonian concepts. It also serves to anchor discussions on topics such as craft production, global consumerism and fair trade; commodification of culture and cultural reification; museum studies; colonialism and indigenous resistance; indigenous cosmovision; Andean and Amazonian aesthetics and power; and cultural syncretism. Certain items in the collection challenge our notions of subjectivity, personhood and agency by way of object-centered ontologies in the Andean and Amazonian animated, transmogrifying, gendered geographical and cultural landscape where “things” have a life and mind of their own.

At the graduate level, the collection connects to curriculum on alternative literacies and historiographies of the Andes and Amazonia, and extends an opportunity to develop critical interpretive skills beyond literary analysis. A brief tour of the artifacts reveals that we are not simply dealing with stories represented in different mediums. Instead, each expressive tradition—painting, etched gourds, weavings, ceramics, performance practices—presents us with a unique method and alternative structure for documenting the history and experiences of a community:

**“Slice-of-Life” Paintings from Tigua, Ecuador**

Originally painted on goatskin drumheads, Tigua paintings from Cotapaxi Province, Ecuador, present a rich layering of pastoral, agricultural and festival activities, all taking place simultaneously and depicted in a single, multifaceted scene. Hence, they are known as “slice-of-life” paintings, a term coined by Dorothea Scott Whitten (2003:246).



**“Slice-of-life” Tigua painting by Nelson Toaquiza**  
Tigua, Cotopaxi Province, Ecuador  
*Purchased from the Sacha Runa Research Foundation in 2015*

Tigua painters began rendering their art on rectangular hides stretched over wooden frames in the mid-1970s, which made the paintings more transportable and appealing to the urban and international arts market. Arts enthusiasts were attracted to the vibrancy of daily practices and processes of community life the paintings depict, presented in such detail that Sibby Whitten (2003) refers to Tigua artists as indigenous ethnographers. The fact that Whitten comments on this production as ethnographic alerts us to the significance of the paintings beyond their aesthetic value. As she goes on to discuss in her chapter, the paintings clearly provide a medium for social critique of both national and international events from indigenous perspectives. An exquisite Tigua painting appears on the cover of the edited volume *Millennial Ecuador* (2003) reflecting the short-lived triumvirate that ascended to power in 2000 with the participation of an indigenous leader, Antonio Vargas, as one of the members of the *junta* of national power. Also described in the chapter is a painting that depicts the destruction of the World Trade Center in detail, but transposes the Twin Towers to the Andes. Christian moral-religious history, too, is re-inscribed in a rendering of the twelve Apostles as indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian (Whitten 2003:249). The paintings also document memorable occurrences in the community, record the presence of important people, and depict processes such as healing rituals. Beyond poignant critiques and reflections of the community, what is most striking about the paintings, and central to the Tigua method of capturing culture in graphic representation, is the multi-perspectival *form* by which painters document ancient, historical and contemporary occurrences, momentous events and everyday comings and goings in a single work of art. Combined with techniques that lend “greater depth perspective, much more sense of motion and action, and greater refinement in details” Whitten writes that the effect of the paintings is analogous to that of the “sequential perspective of a roving camera, changing location and adjusting focus” (2003:246-247). By way of these techniques, painters present us with a form that breaks with linear narrative and single-author or single-view approaches, guiding our “reading” of the piece by drawing attention to specific elements from multiple perspectives as they connect across both temporal and spatial planes.

The exchange and interrelation among planes of experience is highlighted by way of representation of distinct spatial zones of activity, as Mary Weismantel (1998) points out in her analysis. Typically, Tigua paintings follow a prescribed pattern presenting the sky with birds flying about and the mountains in the upper tier of the canvas; a house or dwelling often in the middle; and people, plants, and animals throughout but highlighted in the foreground of bustling activity at the bottom level. Activities, portrayed simultaneously, include festival practices, music making, and the

work of pasturing and farming; other paintings show people spinning wool and transporting things. Rolena Adorno's (2000) seminal work at the intersection of image and text in Guamán Poma de Ayala's *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno* has ensured that the profound consequences of spatial arrangement in Andean imagery are not overlooked. Guamán Poma's illustrations have provided a wealth of information about indigenous experience and culture during the early colonial period. But beyond their literal significance, the spatial organization of the drawings presents a second interpretive outlook inscribed with a moral commentary, legible only to those proficient in this literacy and hidden to those who are not.

Although analysis of the Tigua spatial zones of activity has not gone quite as far as Adorno's study in explaining the tiered representation, for scholars working in the Andes, it is at minimum clear that the layers of the paintings are indeed significant and that they evoke the inter-penetrability and coexistence of different realms as conceived of in Andean cosmivision. As sites of indigenous memory and social critique, the Tigua paintings not only present us with alternative histories and narratives, but with different historiographies, ethnographic approaches, and literacies. If engaged in this light, the expressive paradigms they exhibit in the visual realm—multi-perspectival, temporally and spatially layered, concurrent, multi-vocal, centered on processes and actions, evocative of motion and transition—could extend a perceptual model that informs Western modes of cultural transcription.

### **Andean Etched Story Gourds**

A similar division of space and activity is apparent in Andean etched story gourds, emphasizing that something important is afoot and perhaps continues to elude us in this persistent reiteration of spatial zones. *Calabazas talladas* or *mates tallados* appear throughout the Andes. The items in this particular collection were purchased either in the Otavalo, Ecuador, open market or at Galerías Latinas, Quito, Ecuador. Story gourds depict daily life and specific events, often embedded in a dense context of simultaneous, overlapping activities. Like the Tigua paintings, the top part of the gourds depicts celestial bodies and often mythic beings. In other gourds musical instruments are tellingly included in the upper level. Here a strict border separates what we assume is *hawa pacha* (the world above) from the other levels. Around the bulging center of the gourd we can appreciate dwellings and towards the bottom, human activity.



**Andean etched story gourd**

Ecuador (2000-2014)

*On temporary loan—private collection Michelle Wibbelsman, 2015*

In addition to the simultaneity of activity and interactive layers, the gourds defy linear narrative structure tied to alphabetic writing and Western logic in at least two other ways. The tactile, sonorous, organic nature of the gourd prompts us to “read” the piece using multiple senses. It tempts us to move the yolks of our fingers over the grooves as we observe the etchings, and to listen to the dried seeds that rattle inside. As such, experiencing the gourds reminds us of the inadequacy or limitations of our overreliance on only one sense—the visual—for taking in and representing the vibrant world around us. The spherical shape of the gourds, moreover, invites us to turn the piece in our hands (in no prescribed direction) and presents us with a story in non-linear form with no clear beginning, middle, or end; no introduction or conclusion; or even a clear sense of which way to turn the piece for proper interpretation. As Howard-Malverde (1997:13) indicates, linear narrative, which she points out characterizes the discourse of Western history, creates a sense of inevitability and unquestionable order

that “imposes and sustains one preferred version of events over and above all others.” In contrast, what she calls “non-narrativity” presents us with relations that are open to contestation yielding unpredictable, un-prescribed outcomes and varied interpretations. She signals that non-narrativity corresponds to the discourse of myth.

The “non-narrative” form in etched story gourds resonates with Andean conceptions of time as a circular continuum wherein the past eventually meets up with the future, and human history unfolds in cyclical fashion. This circular form is also evocative of Mary Douglas’s (2007) analysis of ring compositions that present a structure wherein the ending joins up with the beginning. Although the gourds do not correspond to all of the criteria of ring compositions, they do serve to introduce in a very palpable way conceptualizations of thinking in circles and chiasmic structures underscored by repetition of patterns and directional shifts in movement that allow for reversals or inversions in an ABBA or ABCBA formulation. By way of her analysis, Douglas also introduces the notion of “envelopment,” the importance of context, and the revelation that the meaning is loaded on the center and that even when this center is hidden or implicit, it integrates the whole. These pivotal concepts find their way back into our discussion further down.

Fine etchings on the tiniest of gourds compel attention to detail (and incidentally make us more observant of detail in other mediums). This aesthetic introduces the phenomenon of miniaturized representations found throughout the Andean region. Allen (1997:75) indicates that this is another type of Andean textuality “through which ideas and values are communicated in presentational forms.” The minuscule engravings force a different type of observation that is more deliberate and necessarily more sustained. For the gourd that appears below, we in fact use a magnifying glass. Those initially willing to engage find themselves completely absorbed in the subtle and painstakingly crafted designs, much like the way children become fascinated in their observation of tiny details in their surroundings and immersed in their imaginative play. Allen (1997:76) indicates that it is precisely by way of enthralled participation that Andean people learn and become socialized. Another curious and compelling remark pertaining to the type of behavior and state of mind miniatures elicit is Bruce Mannheim’s (1986 cited in Allen 1997:76) observation that in Quechua communities in the Southern Peruvian Andes children at play are considered to be doing *ayni* with God; in other words, engaged in direct reciprocal exchange with the divine.



**Tiny etched gourd. Artist unknown.**

Ecuador (2000-2014)

*On temporary loan—private collection Michelle Wibbelsman, 2015*

Allen’s work is on the pebble game people play on the pilgrimage to Qoyllur Rit’i with miniaturized iconic representations of houses, animals, artifacts that people hope to attract into their lives. Nonetheless, the play with dimensionality and Allen’s theories regarding miniaturization bear great relevance vis-à-vis the minute designs engraved on Andean gourds. Allen (1997:81) affirms that there is a deeper purpose to the iconicity of tiny objects beyond simple representation or delight. Drawing on Lévi-Strauss she infers that “miniaturization facilitates instant apprehension of the whole” and that this, in Levi-Strauss’s words, “reverses the normal process of understanding” (Levi-Strauss 1966:23 cited in Allen)” yielding to knowledge of the whole prior to an understanding of the parts. A similar phenomenon occurs in ritual music where *sumak-rimak* or *arawik*, master poets, guardians of

the spoken word, keep vigil over what are often single utterances that in condensed form evoke the cosmos. This is an extraordinary theoretical insight and model that advances a radically different analytical perspective. Allen goes on to explain the penchant for synecdoche in Andean cultures and how, by way of this manner of experiencing and understanding the world, every microcosm implies a macrocosm and vice versa.

To these insights, Allen (1997:75) adds the principle of “constantiability” whereby “all beings are intrinsically interconnected through their sharing a matrix of animated substance.” She argues that based on this principle and the emphasis on synecdoche wherein the part elicits the whole or the whole elicits the part, “the small and the large imply each other concretely.” The miniatures do not just encode but rather “embody and enact human thought, memory, and desire” (Allen 1997:82). Essentially, in the act of writing the world in the play of pebbles, “powerful miniatures inform the cosmos with their own form” (Allen 1997:81)

### **Andean Textiles**

The forms of Andean expression that have been most compared to Western writing are weaving and textile production. Howard-Malverde (1997:3) informs us that the words “text” and “textile” share a common root in the Latin word *texere*, which means, “to weave.” Meaningful information is communicated through cloth in the Andes. For those who know how to read these signs, local designs, preferred colors, and sewing or weaving techniques readily identify ethnic groups, distinguish members of one local community from another, function as indicators of age and marital status, and can pinpoint specific family affiliations and even individuals in some cases. The quality of cloth and workmanship often conveys information about economic class, political office and social status. As such, the complex aesthetics of day-to-day apparel constitute a readable medium. For woven cloth, everything from the spin of the yarn and the symbols woven into the textiles, to the colors used and techniques employed, conveys meaning about the weaver and the community. Both men and women in Andean communities spin yarn, and children start to learn to spin around 6 years of age. Use of contrasting colors allows weavers to create patterns of repetition, contrasts, juxtapositions, reversals, symmetries and asymmetries, as well as use of negative space to encode meaning and communicate a worldview.



**Traditional Chinchero Multicolored Belt: *chumpi* or *faja* and *ruk'i* made of llama bone by local weaver, Doña Julia**  
Cuzco, Peru  
*Acquired by Devin Grammon in 2015*

The belt in the photograph above is known as *chumpi/chumbi* in Quechua and as *faja* in Spanish. Doña Julia, the local weaver who created this belt, is originally from the community of Chincheros, Peru, and weaves daily on the steps of Qanchipata in the San Blas neighborhood of Cuzco.<sup>3</sup> The belt's patterns consist of diamonds, joined spirals, arrows and heptagons. Devin Grammon reports based on his research and interview with Doña Julia that all of these shapes have meanings connected to

Andean cosmovision and date back to pre-Columbian times. In the center ‘hieroglyphic,’ the large diamond reads a relationship to female fertility while the S-shaped spiral relates to the universe. Some patterns also record historical events that persist in the collective memory of the community. One such example, apparent in other weavings, is a depiction of the execution of indigenous rebel leader Tupac Amaru II and the foretelling of his millenarian return. The pattern illustrates four horses quartering Tupac Amaru II and four condors pulling apart the horses.

For Allen (2011), weavers arrange cloth in ways that compare to the organization of verbal compositions. Namely, she draws our attention to the chiasmic ABBA or ABCBA pattern in both Quechua linguistic expression and weaving. She does this not only through ethnographic insight, but in the very structure of her book, which is gracefully organized as a chiasmus. Following the principle of the chiasmus, where the meaning is loaded in the middle (the place/moment where the pattern “crosses over” or reverses), Allen draws our attention beyond the visible designs of weavings, to the structure of their composition wherein threads that disappear into the fabric and remain hidden *inside* the weaving actually carry the most significance and chief purpose, in effect controlling and containing the entire composition. Allen (2011:5) emphasizes that Andean textiles, melodies, and dances do not exactly “tell stories.” “Rather, they share with narrative the same kinds of organizing strategies, the same ideas about how opposites should meet up with each other, about how strands in a braid disappear into its interior and then reappear on its surface.” Allen’s accentuation of *organizing strategies* provides an important distinction that helps us expand our conception of communication and avoid collapsing varied forms of expression into narrative, storytelling or writing as we conceive of them from a Western standpoint.

Andrea Heckman (2003:36) maintains that for Quechua weavers whether Andean woven cloth is ultimately considered writing or not matters very little. “They know it communicates cultural metaphors, myths, and beliefs,” she writes. “It is their heritage.” As scholars of Andean textiles have noted, moreover, cloth communicates in ways beyond visual representation. The production of the raw materials including raising of the animals and the preparation of these materials by way of fleecing, combing, spinning and dyeing of the wool, all contribute to their meaning. Once again, an Andean counterpart that features three dimensional, tactile inscription meets two-dimensional abstract writing. No other artifact exemplifies this better than the Inka *kipu*. Previously thought to be merely an accounting system, the intricately arranged and tied series of knotted strings that make up the *kipu* represent much more. The work of Gary Urton, Frank Salomon, Galen Brokaw, and other scholars offers compelling evidence that *kipus* are complex coded narratives. Drawing our attention once more

to elements that are often overlooked, William Conklin (2002:72) concludes, “the selection of colors and general makeup of the cord constitutes the basic information of the cord—information that is then ‘acted upon’ by the process of knotting the cord. The information storage capacity of a *khipu*, previously measured only by its knots, is thus multiplied many times.”

Weaving practices, whether they are deemed writing or not, more importantly reflect pre-Columbian conceptions of material culture as “pathways of knowledge” (Arnold and Yapita 2006:275). Beyond simply musing about the questions at the beginning of this section, Arnold and Yapita (2006:289-90) actually push forward with concrete proposals for transforming education in the Andes based on this conception. What they suggest as radical actually seems quite reasonable and necessary in the context of the discussion on alternative literacies:

Databases could be designed around three-dimensional weaving structures and games could be developed to teach programming to Andean children based in the logical steps of weaving. This alternative approach to regional textual practices also demands the development of new spaces of research and debates (about philosophy, metaphysics, mathematics, religion, psychology, pedagogy, linguistics, philology, ecology) in a regional rethinking that rejects the positivist and mechanical models of the nineteenth century in favor of processual dynamics. For those who are part of this radical rethinking, rather than facilitating the instruments of an alien modernization, we offer first of all a critical reassessment of the Andean textual past (2006:290).

### **Canelos Quichua Ceramic Creations**

The symbolic language of the ceramic patterns in Canelos Quichua pottery is best documented in the work of Norman and Dorothea Scott Whitten over the course of more than five decades. In this tradition, master female potters interpret the visions of powerful shamans, bridging mythic and contemporary world events as they relate to the Canelos Quichua people in a self-empowering story of their community. They bring into physical representation spirits and beings of the forest. And through their exquisite craftsmanship they manifest their agency as *sinchi muscuyuj warmi* (strong, vision-filled women) and the careful process behind their work as proper, meaningful existence.



**Large *mucawa* drinking bowl with asymmetrical anaconda (*amarun*) diamond motif made by Marta Vargas, early 1990s**

Pastaza Province, Ecuador

*Purchased from the Sacha Runa Research Foundation in 2015*

*Norman Whitten, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology & Latin American Studies University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Curator of the Spurlock Museum, Senior University Scholar, Editor of UI Press series "Interpretations of Culture in the New Millennium," provided ethnographic information on the ceramic collection.*

Items in the OSU collection feature one of the finest ceramics traditions to be found in Amazonian South America. Canelos Quichua pottery resonates deeply with the culture, history, mythology, cosmology, ecology, and contemporary lives of the Quichua-speaking people of eastern Ecuador. In addition to drinking bowls, jars, and ceramics for daily use, the collection also includes figurines depicting dangerous forest creatures and spirits. Signature designs in Canelos Quichua ceramics include toucan, turtle and anaconda symbolic patterns.

Line patterns that appear to be similar to those of Canelos Quichua designs on ceramic surfaces can be recognized in other Amazonian traditions as well. Els Lagrou (2012) documents the materialization of indigenous memory in the construction of images among Cashinahua communities of the Peruvian Amazon, for instance. *Kene* designs are painted on the faces of initiates during a rite-of-passage ritual ceremony. Lagrou (2012: 258) reports that the Cashinahua call these designs, which can only be painted by women, “the language of the *yuxin* [spirits]” and consider the act of drawing these line patterns to be “the art of writing true things.” These conceptions of imagery and knowledge resonate strongly with Arnold and Yapita’s (2006:275) mention of Inka notions and institutionalized practices centered on “pathways of knowledge” embodied in material culture production. Indeed, the *kene* designs, according to Lagrou (2012:263) do not serve the function of social or cognitive classification. They create pathways for perceptual transformation and, beyond that, means for bridging different realms of experience. Knowledge and understanding of the *yuxin* literally penetrate the skin through the lines of the design painted using *achiote* (annato).

As it is for the Cashinahua, Canelos Quichua potters also consider that more important than the things themselves is the knowledge of how to make them. Canelos Quichua women with extensive knowledge that allows them to control the symbolism of nature are said to “play” with their designs, showing their dexterity in working with symmetry and asymmetry to create poignant cultural portrayals but also clever ambiguity of expression (Whitten 2015: 60). Through their creations, the potters render in material form the “integration of knowledge, reflection, and self-regulation” that are central, interrelated beliefs and practices within Amazonian cosmology (Whitten 2015:84).

### **Andean and Amazonian Performance Traditions**

Performance traditions such as festivals and music making are also mediums in which people represent the world around them to themselves in order to reflect upon it. In festival performances, this may involve re-inscribing events and social relations from their own critical perspectives, and symbolically inverting or challenging historical outcomes in ongoing narratives of ethnic resistance as

well as cultural adaptation (See Wibbelsman 2009). Several masks and festival paraphernalia in the OSU collection stand in representation of these practices.



**Otavalo Hacienda Overseer's Whip with Brass Dog Head Handle: *Acial***

Otavalo, Ecuador

*Donated by Norman Whitten, 2015*

For example, during the summer festivals of Inti Raymi in the areas of Otavalo and Cotacachi, Ecuador, indigenous festival dancers test their vigor in a ritual battle for the ultimate prize of symbolically taking the town square. As they trot to the music of twin flutes, they wave *aciales* (whips) such as the one in the image above. In the time of the haciendas, overseers carried *aciales* as instruments of authority and control over indigenous peasants. The polished brass handle is a representation of a

menacing dog, also a symbol of the hacienda as overseers threatened to unleash dogs on indigenous laborers. During the festival, the symbol of hacienda power passes into indigenous hands and, in an act of ritual reversal, the dancers re-inscribe history with a twist (See Wibbelsman 2009).

Festival masks similarly capture indigenous memories of the past and transform relations of power through mockery, ambiguity and disorder. Devin Grammon acquired the masks in the collection in 2015 and provided the following ethnographic information. Masks with grotesque features embodied in a black mole on an outrageously long nose and a ridiculously large mustache mock the authority of white men during the Paucartambo festival in Peru celebrating the *Virgen del Carmen*. A jaundice-colored mask of a festival character known as “el chukchu” accompanies a dance by the same name and represents laborers from highland Paucartambo communities that worked on haciendas in jungle valleys where they contracted yellow fever and other tropical diseases. Grammon (personal communication) notes that many consider this dance to reflect the historical reality of the Paucartambo poor who worked in rubber extraction on the Q’usñipata haciendas during the early twenty-first century. He indicates that today representations of “el chukchu” have expanded to include indigenous experiences of contemporary diseases such as cancer and AIDS.

Music deserves a chapter of its own as it accompanies nearly all ritual, festive and everyday events in one form or another. It is a favorite source of entertainment and is intimately connected to cultural and ethnic identity. Here I signal only a few points pertinent to the immediate discussion of music as a site of indigenous knowledges and memory. Beyond connotations of music as representation, Luis Enrique “Katsa” Cachiguango and Julián Pontón (2010) offer a compelling argument regarding the music of the twin flutes in Kotama as a special language that communicates secret knowledge about the mutual and nurturing relationship between people and nature. The authors point out that for listeners who are nonindigenous or not intimately familiar with the context of indigenous experiences, this music simply sounds like repetitive sounds (Cachiguango and Pontón 2010:71). Norman Whitten (2015) offers a similar example from Amazonia where during the *ayllu jista*, a flute and drum combination played by a musical specialist is not only a marker of ethnicity but also a symbol of power that can be used to summon forest spirits. The performance, he writes, is guarded as secret knowledge.

Andean and Afro-Andean musical instruments in the collection at OSU are not only artifacts that appear on display. The instruments are put to use in the Andean Music Ensemble class which exposes students to musical and oral traditions of the Andes by way of experiential, performance-

based pedagogies that foster applied and immediate student engagement with cultural practices and concepts, linguistic expression, and Andean aesthetics.

## Conclusion

As Latin American indigenous languages and cultures carve out more conspicuous spaces in university curricula across the United States, several challenges lie before us. It seems critical to get beyond promoting the functional benefits of indigenous languages and cultures to our administrations or appealing to students' sensitivities about rescuing "endangered" languages. I have argued that the stakes are, in fact, higher and require a more profound commitment that addresses unique methodological and theoretical contributions indigenous epistemologies bring forward. This endeavor requires a critical shift in our classroom approaches so that we may embrace pedagogies and programming that are fundamentally compatible with oral traditions and that equip us to engage *with* the alternative literacies and think *from* the epistemological frameworks and theoretical perspectives emergent from indigenous knowledge and practice systems.

Some conceptual threads still require development. The first revolves around the political implications of engaging indigenous sites of knowledges and memory, which as alternatives inherently challenge hegemonic constructs. The second brings us back to the watchful *coati mundi* and other items in the collection that introduce what Santos Granero (2012) designates "the occult life of things," the radical idea that certain objects have personhood and agency. The notion that objects can act on people's or their own behalf and influence outcomes—personal, social, local, global; that they have the power not just to represent but to actually *do* something takes us from an appreciation of how material culture and performance traditions embody indigenous knowledges and memory to an understanding of these forms of expression as contexts of agency and action. To the compelling epistemological alternatives indigenous perspectives offer, Andean and Amazonian object-centered ontologies add existential questions about the very nature of being that are fundamentally different from Western human-centered philosophical ideals and can inform open-minded discussions.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The collection was acquired by the Center for Latin American Studies with Title VI Federal Grant monies and through a series of donations in autumn of 2015. In autumn of 2016, this collection was featured in the OSU Center for Languages, Literatures and Cultures Global Gallery Exhibit “The Hidden Life of Things: Andean and Amazonian Cultural Artifacts and the Stories They Tell.”

<sup>2</sup> Other recent successes that point to increasing recognition and inclusion of indigenous perspectives and indigenous scholars in academia include developments such as the “Otros Saberes” forum at the Latin American Studies Association annual meetings dedicated to indigenous expression and epistemologies; the acceptance of two Master’s theses written and defended entirely in Náhuatl by native speakers of the language at Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas in 2016; and lately, an announcement by the Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies (LACES) that this peer-reviewed academic journal is now accepting publication submissions in indigenous languages.

<sup>3</sup> She was interviewed by Devin Grammon, Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at The Ohio State University and Fulbright-Hays DDRA Fellow, in 2015.