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CIS 106/ANTH 256

Visualizing/Peopling the Past

Final Project Text Revision

December 21, 2016

Weaving the Baures Identity

*“Today, every principle of identity is affected by fashion,”*

Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993)

Archaeologists and historians often rely on clothing to make inferences about an individual. Throughout time, class, gender, status, and even type of labor can be deduced from clothing. To an outsider, the clothing of a community can indicate a sense of uniformity and rational order, and sometimes, it conveys the opposite message. European explorers often correlated clothing with complexity and civility, perceiving many indigenous cultures as barbarous or less complex because of the typically minimal coverage. Clothing is also viewed as a critical point in understanding gender relations. Joanne Finkelstein writes that “Fashion has been seen as a device for confining women to an inferior social order, largely because it demands an unequal expenditure of time and money by women on activities which do not attract the professional attention and efforts of men” (1996: 56). Historically, the process of making clothing has been delegated to women, which seems to exemplify its symbolic nature –– just as the final product of a garment is a “confining” device, the process of making it, which is often disregarded or downplayed in early Western records, continues to reinforce hierarchical and gendered societal norms. As a powerful visual symbol, it is evermore urgent to consider the greater social context of clothing, when visualizing and peopling the deep past.

**Introduction**

Referring to a region in Bolivia, an ethnic group of the region, as well as their spoken language, the term “Baures” immediately sparks questions of identity, even at a semantic level. Early primary accounts by Jesuit missionaries and Spanish explorers paint a vivid, yet incomplete colonial image of the Baures people. In the context of colonial missions and conquest, warfare with nearby tribes, and their own complex social hierarchies, the Baures identity was ever-changing and in conflict, but this subjectivity is missing from the accounts. Furthermore, the perspective and role of women is often minimized in the narratives of their everyday life. For my final project, I treat clothing as an entry point into understanding the Baures’ complex social structures. Clothing was a distinctive part of Baures culture, and even influenced the Jesuits’ positive perception of them as “civilized” (Métraux 1948). I aim to widen the scope of our understanding of everyday Baures life by considering the time and labor-intensive role that women played in creating clothing that was so distinctive to the culture. In doing so, women in particular, become increasingly visible in the archaeological record. I relied heavily on the written and visual accounts of Francisco Eder (1791), Alcides D’Orbigny (1845), Franz Keller (1875), and Alfred Métraux (1948) to create my interpretation of Baures clothing. Using DC Suite software, I modeled 3D garments for both men and women that will be used in a hydraulic landscape model of Baures, Bolivia.

**Background and Context**

In writing about the indigenous groups of the Bolivian Amazon, Alfred Métraux (1948: 409) writes, “Missionaries described the Bauré as even more civilized than other Mojo tribes. They lived in large villages, protected by palisades, dressed in cotton garments, and had a well-organized chieftainship.” Holding “cotton garments” to the same regard as complex social systems and infrastructure is a subtle, yet powerful mark of the role that clothing plays in perceptions of a society.

Francisco Eder (1791) and Alcides D’Orbigny (1845) provide rich descriptions and illustrations of Baure clothing and ornaments, although these are notably more details for the men. Men wore long cotton or bark cloth shirts called *cushma*, often elaborately decorated (Figure 1). These would be dressed up with ropes and ornamental jewelry, but the bare garment was simple and mobile, fit for labor (Figures 2-3). In some illustrations, men are seen fastening pure white shirts around their waist with string or colorful cotton belt, which is a clear sign of colonial influence (Figure 4). In addition, men had piercings through the septum and alae of the nose, the lower lip, and ears, with the labrets often made of rock crystal. They also wore many silver bracelets, and “heavy necklaces of small shell disks, seeds, and jaguar or monkey teeth were work around the neck or over the shoulders, [along with] a silver, tin, or shell plate suspended over the chest” (Métraux 1948: 415). Métraux writes that women wore a longer version of the men’s cushma without slits along the legs (Figure. 5). They wore thick necklaces, bracelets, and ear pendants, which were even more ornate for special occasions. Both men and women tied their hair with cotton thread, while men sometimes fixed feathers into their hair (Figure. 6). Eder writes that many Mojos and Baures tattooed themselves using thorns or fish teeth and genipa as the pigment. He goes on to state that the patterns tattooed “represented caimans, monkeys, and fish” (Eder 1791: 416).

Modesty as a measure of civility was a highly western framework, and Métraux even writes that the garments became longer and were more consistently worn because of the Jesuit missionaries. This poses a challenging question when modeling the past. Even though recreating entirely accurate representation of pre-missionary life is impossible to achieve, identifying the points of colonial biases is an important step in deconstructing hegemonic narratives.

In Franz Keller’s account of indigenous groups along the Amazon and Madeira Rivers, his colonial bias is far more explicit than Métraux’s. He believes the Jesuit mission is one of the best things that could have happened to all the indigenous people in the region, who otherwise “live in a state of disheartening depression and bondage” (Keller 1875: 171). In his chapter on the Mojos, who were close neighbors of the Baure, he describes them as “totally cut off from outer world,” but does not expand on the underlying implication that they fully utilized the resources of their immediate natural environment (Keller 1875: 171). Cotton was one of the many crops that the Baures were proficient in farming. They cleared their fields in the forests that withstood the rain seasons, creating ample opportunity to use bibosi bark and cotton plants for making textiles (Figure 7). Métraux describes the textiles in detail:

Bark cloth. –– Bark cloth was fabricated from large pieces of bibosi bark measuring 3 by 12 feet (1 by 4 m.) which were beaten with a wooden grooved mallet. The bark strips were then washed, wrung out, and dried in the sun.

Spinning.—To spin cotton, the woman sat on the ground, rested the

distal end of the spindle between the large and second toe of her left foot, and rolled the spindle with her right hand along her right leg. The skein was held with the left hand.

Weaving.—Mojo textiles were of cotton. They used a variety of

cotton, naturally reddish, to produce patterns on their fabrics. Modern

Mojo and Baure weave on the vertical loom. (Métraux 1948)

From these accounts, I was able to create a pattern that represent what the Baures wore at the very least, during the period of the early mission in the 17th century and possibly earlier. Many illustrations depict a pure white fabric (Figure 4) but it cannot be assumed that Baures clothing remained the same from pre-colonial influence through the periods of Jesuit missions and Spanish conquest. Given the context of their farming and their practices of spinning and weaving, their textiles were likely a natural color with a reddish brown tint. Their everyday garments must also have fit loosely enough for the individual to work, and some even had sleeves. Many illustrations depict ornate patterns, but the details of this craftsmanship are insufficient (Figures 8-9).

**Methodology and Results**

To model 3D Baures garments, I used DC Suite software. I began by learning how to make a basic pattern. There was a bit of a learning curve because the tools, while visually similar, function very differently than Adobe programs I have used in the past., so much time was spent learning the program. I ultimately decided to make the pattern using Adobe Illustrator and import that file onto DC suite to make minor changes. I started with a very simple pattern so I could use a trial and error method and build from a dressed model (Figure 10). Once I learned how to convert the pattern lines into 2D “panels,” I was able to dress the program’s default avatar. Before the Bolivian models were accessible, the generic avatars proved to be quite a challenge because of the avatar’s distinct features. The following is an excerpt from my blog post titled “Modeling Progress (12/5)”

*“...definitely hitting some obstacles with the default avatar in the program. The woman model always has heels on, and is much taller than average. As I’m creating a garment that fits this avatar, I’m also trying to keep in mind the potential body figures of the more accurate models we will be using. Looks simple enough, but I’m struggling to make the neckline fit naturally.* (Figure 11) *The program is really great because it tests the clothing out in a dynamic replay, but as you can see, the problem arises once the arms are raised”* (Ravi 2016)

As I continued to edit the pattern based on descriptions in the accounts, I finalized the woman’s pattern. The blog post from this session, “Modeling Progress 12/7,” includes my thoughts on how I interpreted the handbooks.

*“...The program’s default body shape and high heels are frustrating to work around. Even though the drawings show plain white robes, I chose to use a raw cotton color.*

*Some points I considered along the way:*

* *Length of dress*
* *Height of neck*
* *Color of cotton*
* *Slit or no slit?*

*I approached these points by referring to images from Eder’s account as well as the Melchor Maria Mercado Album from 1841-1869 (the latter of which includes pure white robes, but taking into account the description of the fabric as having a "reddish-brown" tint, I decided to go with a more natural cotton look). Mens’ robes included slits, while those of women did not. Don’t worry, this won’t look as gown-like on our models of Bolivian women!* (Figure 12)

*\*\*\* One thing I wish I could have done is make the garments more draping, but the additional fabric paneling this requires is incredibly complex. I experimented a bit and tried to find tutorials on how to make a garment with pleats and drapes, but none translate into what’s required from DC Suite. The level of detail a simple drape or fold requires isn’t as simple as taking a large fabric and letting it fall naturally, and we are very limited with DC Suite-specific instructions. I chose an A-line and tried to make it as loose as possible, so at least it flows.”* (Ravi 2016)

I created my own textile and pattern for the fabric, and used the texturing tools of DC Suite to create a three dimensional effect. Using Photoshop I layered images of various raw cotton textiles and created a swatch that best matches my interpretations of the descriptions (Fig. 13).

My next step was to finalize the men’s garment. I made the assumption that I would have to adjust the women’s garment only slightly, but this proved not to be true. The following excerpt from the blog post, “Modelling Progress (12/10)” highlights my frustrations with the programmed differences.

*“...I was surprised by how much more challenging this was. I’ve realized that this program is very clearly meant for women’s design. For example, when choosing a default woman’s avatar, you have the options of short/medium/tall and thin/medium/large –– the large is not actually “large”, but for the man, there is only one standard option. The biggest challenge was adapting to the default male avatar and its positioning* (Figure 14)

*My lack of clothing design experience also proved to be an obstacle. I assumed that I could use a pattern similar to the woman’s as a starting point, and that I would just have to make minor adjustments (broader shoulders, larger frame, etc). Unfortunately, this sentiment did not translate.”* (Ravi, 2016)

Once we were able to import the models of the men that were to be used for the hydraulic landscape, I was able to finalize and fit the men’s garment, importing the same texture and textile I used for the women. The men’s garment pattern is distinct from the women’s due to the details in the accounts and illustrations, as well as the gendered differences inherent to the software. The final products closely resemble the garments depicted by Eder (Figures 1 and 5), yet the textile color and texture follow the details of the written accounts on the tint of raw cotton and barkcloth (Fig. 15-16). The final garments were then taken by another student and converted into usable files for the hydraulic landscape in the Unity software, so it is likely that some of my details with texture will be lost in the final landscape due to differences in technical programs.

**Conclusion**

For this project, I focused on avoiding making assumptions about what “precolonial” clothing might have looked like, because even though markers of Western influence can be identified, absolute conclusions cannot be made about a time without direct accounts as evidence. Because my sources were were written from a colonial perspective, I cannot make the claim that my garment fully represents Baures clothing before Jesuit and Spanish influence. By approaching the clothing through the processes by which women made them, and not as symbolic end products, I could uncover many of the principles that “confine women to the social order,” including Spanish and Jesuit ideals of civility and modesty, as well as the contemporary software’s programmed gendered limitations. One of the biggest challenges I faced with this project was striking a balance between depth of research and detail of modeling. I spent a significant amount of time learning how to use the software, which was necessary in order to simply start the process, but the technical limitations I faced along the way would often present a tension with the research. The DC Suite Software seemed to reinforce gender differences in clothing, making it difficult to be flexible and creative with the programmed limitations. If this project was on a larger scale, I would have perhaps created variations of the garments, potentially including shorter length dresses for the women.

Ultimately the ability to focus on clothing in the context of process made visible certain elements that otherwise might not have been. The labor of women is an important element of history that many primary accounts disregard, so it critical to build from this perspective in contemporary reconstructions. To a certain extent, I am continuing the tradition of reinforcing gender norms by making distinct garments for men and women, but my hope is that the focus on women’s laborious roles is a step in the direction of reconstructing the narrative from the Baures’ perspective. In addition, focusing on the natural environment provided critical insight into visualizing what the clothes might have looked like before colonial influences. Ultimately, it is crucial to consider both the social and environmental context of any historical artifact. In doing so, one can begin to widen the scope for understanding the complexity and dynamic nature of any culture.

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