

Patrimony and partnership: conserving the *kipu* legacy of Rapaz, Peru

Renata Peters and Frank Salomon¹

Khipu, cord objects used for recording information, are associated with the Incas; however, in two known cases, khipu survive in Peru as communal patrimony, still in ritual use. This article describes the khipu of San Cristóbal de Rapaz and a project of in situ conservation, conducted in collaboration with the local community. It was necessary to develop a strategy to protect the khipu, while allowing their continued use in sacred rituals. This challenged the basic principles of preventive conservation, but through the collaborative process compromises were achieved, acceptable both to conservators and to the community, which has now resumed responsibility for preservation of the patrimony.

Khipu, the cord objects that stored information for the Inca state, usually surface in tombs. However a very small number of Andean villages retain *khipu* as communal patrimony. The high-Andean village of San Cristóbal de Rapaz (Province of Oyón, Department of Lima) is home to one of only two known collections of *khipu* currently in ritual use (Figs. 1 and 2). They are kept in a walled architectural complex containing the old ceremonial building (*Kaba Wayi*) (Fig. 3) and the disused communal storehouse (*Pasa Qullqa*). The peasant community cares for it earnestly as a local sacred trust, independent of national cultural institutions.

For Rapaz villagers (the Rapacinos), the complex is at once the seat of traditional control over land use, and the centre of communication with the deified mountains who control weather. From within these humble-looking but venerated buildings, community officers (representatives of the corporation of commons) manage a web of reciprocity that is both divine and human. The old storehouse formerly served to protect

and redistribute the products of these labours. Some villagers say, plausibly, that the *khipu* are records of this work; but

others see them as tokens or icons of the mountain deities.

Rapaz is extremely unusual, perhaps unique, in possessing something like a functioning Andean temple. The persistence of a redistributive storehouse is also highly exceptional.² The site interests Andean anthropologists and archaeologists for its apparent relevance to Pre-Hispanic or colonial systems of worship and redistribution. However only preliminary studies had been conducted before the project discussed here began.³ When Frank Salomon first visited the site in 2002, community officers expressed concerns about the poor physical condition of the *khipu* and their complex. After detailed negotiations, the village officers granted permission to conduct archaeological and



Figure 2 The *khipu* of San Cristóbal de Rapaz in the *Kaba Wayi* during the *Raywan Entrego* of 2005.



Figure 1 Map showing location of San Cristóbal de Rapaz.



Figure 3 *Kaba Wayi* in 2005, before conservation.

ethnographic studies in exchange for in situ conservation of the patrimony. The project started in 2004 and was carried out by professionals from several areas of expertise in close collaboration with the community.⁴ As owners and users, villagers provided ongoing ethnographic explanation of the precinct. They also exercised full participation in decision-making concerning conservation.

Our task was to conduct conservation work within local cultural frameworks that make conflicting demands on the material fabric of the patrimony. Rapacinos in general are committed to protecting traditional ritual use of the patrimony. Without *Kaha Wayi*, they are sure, the rains would abandon their crops and herds. At the same time, however, they also hope their singular patrimony can attract tourism and infuse some cash into a meagre economy. So it was necessary to design a conservation strategy that would protect the *khipu* and their complex, while simultaneously allowing visitors access, and yet not disturb the *khipu* house's religious and governmental work.

The khipu

What we know about the role of *khipu* in encoding Inca censuses, inventories, genealogies, and history comes in part from early Spanish witnesses.⁵ A typical Inca-type *khipu* possesses a main cord from which pendant cords hang. Pendants usually have different lengths, kinds of spin, colours and knots arrayed in different combinations so as to convey information.⁶

The *khipu* in Rapaz are, however, of post-Inca origin and quite different from most known *khipu*. They are unilinear, bearing small affixed tokens rather than dangling pendants. The patrimony is a collection of 263 such objects (some fragmentary, others composite). In many



Figure 4 Detail of the khipu before treatment.



Figure 5 Image of specimen KR 165. A single cord redoubled on itself presenting the superficial appearance of pendant-like branching.

cases (e.g. specimen KR 165) a single cord redoubles on itself presenting the superficial appearance of pendant-like branching (Fig. 5).

The assemblage measures almost 200 by 200cm and weighs about 10kg. Most cords are made of camelid wool (probably alpaca wool) but sheep wool is also present. Rapaz *khipu* cordage has about triple the diameter of most Inca *khipu*. Some are up to 15m long. Colours, spins, torsions, and the many-ply constructions of cords are at least as complex as in Inca *khipu*, but knots play a much lesser part. A range of attachments such as danglers, tufts of wool, leather, pompoms and textiles seem to be information-bearing signs. Another unique characteristic of the *khipu* of Rapaz is the presence of 10 figurines attached to the cords (Figs 2 and 5).

The patrimonial buildings and their rituals

Kaha Wayi is the more frequently used part of the architectural complex. Walls are mortared stone, with adobe eaves. The floor of the main chamber is compacted earth. A highly revered offering table holds ceremonial vessels and a large pile of coca leaves. Dry plant remains under the table attest to past ceremonies. *Pasa Qullqa* resembles *Kaha Wayi* in overall shape and size but its more robust construction attests to its past work as a deposit. Though it now contains no sacred furnishings, it is still the scene of animal sacrifices.

It is in *Kaha Wayi* that the traditional community officers hold the important New Year's meeting, the *Raywan Entrego*. Amid the aromas of incense, coca leaf, and tobacco, they install their successors. This plant ritual at once monitors field rotation and magically fosters crops. Night-time *mesas calzadas* (sacrifices and oracles) happen through the year and dialogue with powerful mountains.

The most important aspect of the rituals is "la busqueda del tiempo" (seeking weather), when the designated ritualist invoke the "owners of water" to send rain. Offerings include *raywanes* (crop tokens), coca leaves, llama fat, incense, tobacco, liquors, flowers and guinea pigs. Only the *raywanes* and coca remain in the *Kaha Wayi* after the rituals. All the rest is either consumed or discarded. The *khipu* are never touched or handled, but only invoked during rituals. Their presence is considered beneficial to the rituals themselves and to the success of the political changeover.

Making conservation decisions

At the start of the project signs of damage were extensive. Cracks and fissures ran through the walls of both buildings and both roofs were falling apart. Stones and mortar were missing, allowing dust, water and small animals inside. The smoke of ritual candles, tobacco, burning embers and incense had darkened the interior walls and cane ceiling. The *khipu* were hung from the ceiling of *Kaha Wayi's* ground floor. The ceiling leaked and was covered with mould on extended areas.

The most obvious problem on the *kipu* themselves was abrasion of the fibres of the upper area of the *kipu*, where they were hung over a stick. This area had breaks, and had suffered material losses. Many *kipu* showed old repairs, made at an unknown past by unknown hands. Like the walls, all cords were darkened and covered with a thick layer of dust. Some cords showed signs of old insect activity but insects damaged only the ones made of sheep wool, the camelid wool cords remaining almost totally intact.

As owners and users, Rapacinos supervised and exercised crucial influence in the decision-making processes concerning the conservation of their patrimony. For example, for reasons of piety they forbade use of electricity and required suspension of the project during weeks of rituals. A series of on-site consultations was organized to discuss local needs and conservation priorities. Attending as a quorum of the Community Directorate, the village officers exercised authority in a sociable climate allowing candid debate. In many cases, compromises had to be made but the priorities of the community were always respected.

Important decisions were made in the first consultation sessions:

1. Repairs to the cords were to be as imperceptible as possible and had to be made using local wool. With the help of local craftswomen, camelid wool of all natural colours available in Rapaz was prepared to be used in the subsequent conservation work.

2. All conservation work was to be done under the supervision of a representative of the corporation of commons. Vice-President Víctor Gallardo and other officers continually oversaw it.

3. The *kipu* were to be temporarily re-housed and treated in a purpose-built conservation lab (later removed) while the architectural specialists worked on *Kaha Wayi*.

4. The *kipu* were to be placed in a display-case so as to protect them from smoke, soot, insects and unwanted handling.

Conserving collaboratively

The conservation work took 6 months. Each cord was assessed, studied, documented and mechanically cleaned. Breaks and severely abraded areas were repaired with threads of matching camelid wool in the same fashion as the earlier repairs we identified (Fig. 6).

The architectural conservation work went on concurrently. Only techniques and materials matching original construction were employed. Project staff and village workers joined forces to repair



Figure 6 *Khipu* after conservation, before being installed in new display case.

masonry, replace broken adobe, remove rubble, replace missing mortar, roof both buildings, and improve drainage. Infested and deteriorated wood was replaced but the floor was left untouched because the officers deemed direct contact with the earth essential to the ceremonies.

Putting the *kipu* in a display-case was a long-standing village concern. A display-case villagers had made (but not successfully used) in the 1980s was found among abandoned possessions in the *Kaha Wayi*. This old concern framed our discussions about the future of the cords and one of the consultation sessions was fully dedicated to the discussion of a proper way of displaying the *kipu*. It was

decided that the *kipu* should be placed on a support-mount (on a 60° slant) and installed inside a display case. This would reduce the stress on the upper area of the cords considerably and would also prevent unwanted handling. The materials used in the display case, aluminium and tempered glass, were chosen on the basis of stability and aesthetic appearance (Fig. 7), and placed so as to minimize obstruction during rituals.

Towards the end of the project, two local weavers, Mrs Lourdes Falcón and Mrs Kelly Flores, and Mr Víctor Gallardo volunteered to be trained on the basics of preventive conservation as agents of the Community Directorate. The handover



Figure 7 Mr Víctor Gallardo and the *kipu* after installation.

of responsibilities took place in time for the *Raywan Entrego* on 2nd January 2006. Project members remain in contact with the community and a July 2007 inspection showed the patrimony to be in good condition. The designated ritualist, Mr Melecio Montes, said he was delighted to find *Kaba Wayi* in better condition and more comfortable for the ritual, yet without unseemly changes.

Discussion

Many Rapacinos feel that their village would benefit by a growth in cultural tourism. Since the project began the village allowed over 300 visitors to view the patrimonial precinct. The site is presented to them as a memorial to local people's share in "Inca" greatness but they are also asked to acknowledge the site's other role, as a sacred place, by offering coca to its altar. Because our project took the villagers' requirements as its own, it had to combine conservation, scientific study, tourism, and ritual within one small space and to a tight timescale. In the process, we learned that site use is and will continue to be a historic process of negotiation and change. The same applies to our conservation strategy.

The new display case also raised interesting issues. Villagers had already rejected the former, unprotected way of displaying the *kipu* because it did not fit with their present understanding of safety and respectability. However, it did give a pleasant sense of closeness to the swaying, woolly-smelling cords. The high-tech display case distances the viewer from the *kipu*. But the villagers consider distancing proper. For the Rapacinos, installing the case meant appropriating for rural society part of the technical power of the city and its museums. It stands as a gesture against the centralizing acquisitive claims of national cultural institutions and asserts that rural societies can care for their cultural material. Ultimately, it is an invitation for museum audiences to come to the countryside more often instead of expecting to see expropriated rural patrimony in the cities.

Conclusions

Obviously, ongoing ritual use of the *kipu* challenges some of the most basic principles of preventive conservation. Rituals smudge the *kipu* with smoke from incense and tobacco, propagate fungus and insects, and bring in foreign matter. At the same time, however, rituals are the main reason the *kipu* still exist. The intangible and tangible aspects of the patrimony stand in a dynamic relationship that defies the premise of a more conventional conservation intervention. Intangible practices consume material patrimony, but also produce it.

Conservators who work with ethnography step into a moving stream; we set out to design and implement a conservation policy that would be adaptable to this changing symbiosis. After all, it was the active and changing work of ritual, hospitality and politics that had caused the patrimony to endure, and our work was a homage to its success.

Notes

- 1 John V. Murra Professor of Anthropology, University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- 2 T. Y. Levine, *Inka storage systems* (Norman (Oklahoma) and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992); J. V. Murra, *The Economic organization of the Inca state*, PhD. Dissertation (Anthropology, University of Chicago, 1956).
- 3 A. Ruíz Estrada, *Los Quipus de Rapaz* (Huacho: Centro de Investigación de Ciencia y Tecnología de Huacho, 1981); F. Salomon, C. Brezine, V. Huayta Falcón, "Los Khipus de Rapaz en casa: un complejo administrativo-ritual centro peruano", *Revista Andina* 43, 59–92, 2006.
- 4 We cordially thank the Fulbright Commission of Perú, Comunidad Campesina of Cristóbal de Rapaz, Fundación Telefónica del Perú, Instituto Nacional de Cultura, Centro Mallqui, National Science Foundation under grant 0453965, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, UCL Graduate School and UCL Institute of Archaeology. Our utmost thanks to the people of San Cristóbal de Rapaz.
- 5 C. Sempat Assadourian, "String registries: native accounting and memory according to the colonial sources", in *Narrative threads: accounting and recounting in Andean khipu*, J. Quilter & G. Urton (eds), 119–50 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Urton, G. & C. Brezine, *What is a khipu?* 2004, (<http://kipukamayuk.fas.harvard.edu/WhatsAKhipu.html>. Accessed on 09 December 2007)
- 6 M. Ascher & R. Ascher, *Code of the quipu; a study in media, mathematics, and culture* (New York: Dover Publications, Incorporated, 1997).