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Claire Odland  
jclaireau@mac.com

Nancy Feldman  
School of the Art Institute of Chicago, nfeldman1@saic.edu

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## NOMINATED FOR FOUNDING PRESIDENTS AWARD

**SHIPIBO TEXTILE PRACTICES 1950-2010**

J. CLAIRE ODLAND AND NANCY FELDMAN  
jclaireau@mac.com and [nfeldman1@saic.edu](mailto:nfeldman1@saic.edu)

In this paper, we present a preliminary study of Shipibo textiles and culture drawn from objects, filmed images, interviews and photographs from research conducted by the Field Museum from 2007-2010. The Museum conducts cross-cultural work in the area of the Shipibo people living in communities along the Pisqui and Ucayali rivers in the southwestern region of Peru's Amazon Basin. Traveling by small boat, we arrived in our base camp in the hamlet of Caco Macayo in July of 2010. Our plans were to visit villages on the Pisqui and Caco rivers to screen an historic film, conduct and film interviews, and purchase textiles for the Museum. Upon arriving at one village, the chief, elders, women, children and a baby pet anteater greeted us after we climbed the steep riverbank.

The Pisqui, and the smaller Caco River, flows into the Ucayali, which joins the Marañon to form the Amazon, flowing north past Iquitos and into the Atlantic Ocean. The rivers provide boat transportation and impede most other transport. The Shipibo people of this tropical floodplain number around 35,000. They are a strong community, maintaining much of their traditional art, dress and culture in spite of over 300 years of sporadic missionizing and contact with Westerners, Europeans and mestizos. The Shipibo language belongs to the Panoan family, and is one of the official languages of Peru. Most younger people speak Spanish as well. Traditional subsistence along the rivers is based on men's hunting, fishing, and slash-and-burn agriculture, which is supplemented with income from transient labor and logging, and the sale of textiles from the strong tradition of women's artisanal work.

This paper will focus on women's production of painted and embroidered textiles, their use and designs from several Shipibo communities in the upper Amazon basin, from 1950-2010. The beginning date of 1950 refers to a film by Harry Tschopik, Jr., Associate Curator and anthropologist with the American Museum of Natural History in New York. During Field Museum research, his film was discovered in the archives there, and the sometimes degraded and disordered footage was compiled into a viewable documentary of Shipibo cultural life. This documentary has been presented to Shipibo communities in multiple screenings in 2007, 2008 and 2010. There was great excitement among the audiences since this film is unique; no other historic film of Shipibo ancestors or early cultural life exists. Copies of the movie were constantly requested as a tool to teach their culture to their children.

Our recently completed 2010 Field Museum expedition was titled "Change and Continuity in material culture production of the Shipibo of Northern Peru." Elders, leaders, and artists narrated explanations of the 1950 film. The new documentary of the 1950 Tschopik film and the 2010-filmed images will contain their comments on Shipibo culture and daily life. The project supports efforts by Shipibo leaders to document their cultural history and make it available to teachers of youth, parents, academia and artisans as they strive to strengthen their cultural, social and political identity in modern Peru.<sup>1</sup>

Textile and ceramic arts of the Shipibo feature a distinctive all-over pattern of designs known as *kené* or *quene* designs (Figs. 1 and 2). Shipibo people frequently say that these are like the paths of life, or roads, or the meanders of the rivers where they live, sometimes they say they are the patterns and movement of

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<sup>1</sup> The 2010 team of scholars includes Alaka Wali, Ph. D. Curator of Anthropology, Field Museum, J. Claire Odland, Associate, Department of Anthropology, Field Museum, Nancy Feldman, ABD Ph.D., Art History Professor, School of the Art Institute and Luisa Elvira Belaunde, Ph.D. Anthropology Professor and researcher for Field Museum.

the anaconda or of Ronin the cosmic serpent,<sup>2</sup> and sometimes they say that these patterns are only a fraction of what their ancestors used to know.<sup>3</sup>



*Figure 1. Chitonti or woman's skirt, 61cm x 116.8 cm.  
Collection and photo, Nancy Feldman.*



*Figure 2. Detail of Fig. 1.*

<sup>2</sup> Carolyn Heath. "Una Ventana Hacia el Infinito: el simbolismo de los diseños shipibo-conibo" in *Una Ventana-Hacia el Infinito: Arte Shipibo-Conibo*. Exhibition catalog. (Lima: Instituto Cultural Peruano Norteamericano, 2002), 46.

<sup>3</sup> Research notes J. Claire Odland.

Carolyn Heath writes that the shaman's expanded consciousness and sense of cosmic vision is the key to understanding the distinctive Shipibo designs. Shaman-led ceremonies of healing, self-knowledge, and religion use the hallucinogenic herb *ayahuasca* to access cosmic visions. The patterns of *kené* are part of the heavenly world that becomes visible through the handwork of women. "The shaman tells us that the whole visible world is covered with invisible patterns.... It is the responsibility of the shaman to rescue the designs of the heavenly world and transmit them to the women. The production of these designs on all the objects of material culture gives power and protection to the home, to individuals, and to the whole group."<sup>4</sup> Through *kené* designs, the culture of the Shipibo is at once defined, decorated, and owned by both individuals and the group.

Ríos Cairuna, a Shipibo born in Paoyan, offers a collection of sketches of Shipibo designs, for the purpose of preserving them for future generations to use and understand. He credits the Shipibo shaman with discovering the *kené* during their *ayahuasca* ceremonies, and then passing these on to the women of the community. He says, "designs are an expression of Shipibo-Conibo creativity, and reveal the symbolic form in which man serves as the point of contact between the material world and the invisible forces of nature. Each time that a shaman reveals a design it should be introduced to the community for its distribution, thru representations on fabrics, pottery or whatever media can serve to make it a social consciousness."<sup>5</sup>

The use of *ayahuasca* is traditionally limited to men and it is not clear how the shaman may share his visions with the women who actually produce the art. Informants in 2010 described their own sources of design inspiration for these *kené*: the mother's teachings, the river landscape, the paths of daily life, and the dreams and visions inspired by *ayahuasca*, with reports conflicting whether women today actually take the drug themselves. One informant said that in the past, women too partook of *ayahuasca*, but that may not seem to be occurring nowadays.<sup>6</sup>

The textiles in the Field Museum collections are all garments; women's skirts, called *chitonti*; blouses; men's tunics or *cushmas*; bags for both men and women; and headdresses or crowns, known as *maiti*. In addition, there are the accessories of lip ornaments, beaded necklaces, breastplates, wristlets and belts. Garments worn by women feature a horizontal stripe or panel of designs, while men's garments present vertical stripes and panels. The word *chitonti* means literally a length of fabric, but is used to mean a skirt. It is an untailed rectangle of fabric which may be sewn into a tube or not, and is worn as a sarong. It is folded and twisted to stay in place with the further security of a piece of cord concealed in the folds and at times a heavy ornamental beaded belt over the folds as well. Older *chitontis* may be of hand-spun, backstrap loomed, white cotton, embroidered or painted in *kené* designs. The same piece of fabric, if left unsewn, may also be worn as a wrap.

Since the late 1970s, *chitontis* of a specially produced, white, basket-weave, canvas known as *cañamazo* are embroidered in geometric designs, based on what appears to be old style brocade patterns.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 46. "El chamán nos dice que todo el mundo visible está cubierto por motivos invisibles, ... Es responsabilidad del chamán rescatar los diseños del mundo celestial y transmitirlos a las mujeres. La reproducción de los diseños en todos los objetos de la cultura material daba poder y protección a la vivienda, a las personas y al grupo entero."

<sup>5</sup> Laureano Ríos Cairuna, *145 Diseños Shipibo-Conibo*. (Lima: Seminario de Historia Rural Andina, 2003), np. "Los diseños sona una expresión de la creatividad shipibo-conibo, y revelan la forma simbólica en que el hombre sirve como punto de contacto entre el mundo material y las fuerzas invisibles de la naturaleza. Cada vez que a un curandero se le revela un diseño, éste debe darlo a conocer a la comunidad para que pueda ser distribuido, mediante representaciones en las telas, tinajas o en cualquier medio que sirve para hacerlo un conocimiento social."

<sup>6</sup> Glorioso Castro Martínez, interview with J. Claire Odland, July 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Ron Weber, Unpublished manuscript, 1971 to 1989, accessioned in 2007. The Field Museum Archives, Chicago.

Commercial plain weave cotton called *tocuyo* is used for painted and/or embroidered cloths, and commercial black, polyester twill called *gabardina* is used for embroidered cloths. Old and recently collected museum pieces also include skirts and cushmas of hand-spun, hand-woven cotton. Men, in the 1950 Tschopik film, wore cushmas for both ceremonial and daily activities, even building houses or clearing and burning fields. The cushma is a full-length tunic of two panels uncut in width, sewn in the center, leaving a head opening, and sewn on the sides, leaving armholes. Traditionally it was woven on a backstrap loom, often with colorful warp stripes, in either one or two, separate warp lengths.

A still image from the 1950 Tschopik film shows women wearing traditional chitontis and blouses (Fig. 3). Two women are spinning cotton and the woman on the left is embroidering a chitonti. The *kené* designs from the older chitontis feature larger geometric patterns. The shapes are appliquéd to the hand-spun and backstrap, loomed cloth. Hand-spun and backstrap loomed cotton is seen more commonly in older embroidered skirts but there are still Shipibo women who grow their own cotton, prepare and weave their own cloth for their embroidered skirts. An embroidered skirt collected in 2008 in Lima from a Shipibo artist, is hand-spun, backstrap loomed cotton, which has been dyed a deep, brown-black (Figs. 1 and 2).



**Figure 3.** Spinning, embroidery and appliqué work, Upper Ucayali, Peru, 1950.  
Still frame from Tschopik film. With permission of the American Museum of Natural History.

Elena Mauabartavan, an older Shipibo woman from the remote village of Culiaca de Caco offered for sale an embroidered skirt and a painted and embroidered cushma worn by her late husband. Here in this image, we see her photographed in her home, with her embroidered skirt spread out in front of her (Fig.4).



*Figure 4. Elena Mauabartayan, Cuilaca de Caco, photo by Nancy Feldman.*



*Figure 5. Chitonti/skirt. 68.6 cm x 63.5 cm (folded). Collection and photo, Nancy Feldman.*

The ground fabric of this skirt is the commercially woven, twill-patterned, black polyester called gabardina (Fig. 5). A hand-stitched seam has formed the tubular skirt. The edge at the top of the skirt has been folded and finished by a row of yellow thread cross-stitches. The bottom edge of the skirt has been finished by two intertwined rows of pink thread cross-stitches. The supplies of gabardina and multi-colored threads were probably purchased by one of the villagers on a trip to the closest city of Pucallpa.

The trip from the Rio Caco by villagers for supplies probably took two days in a heavily loaded, slow boat called a pequi-pequi.

While the kené design on women's garments is worn and read horizontally, the artist may stitch the embroidered work either vertically or horizontally. On this skirt, Mauabartavan divided the skirt into five sections. The embroidery was stitched flat before the tubular skirt was formed. Three bands of horizontal linear stitches three inches wide divide the top, middle, and bottom sections. Bands or framing stitches are usually embroidered first. The multi-colored band threads are wool and acrylic. The decorative stitches of the three bands include zigzag chain, linear chain and cross-stitch. The middle three-inch band has white cross-stitch embroidered across the center of the fabric.

The kené pattern for embroidered skirts is planned in two manners. In the first method, the artist would use a piece of wax to draw the design onto the black gabardina starting in one corner of the fabric. The shapes, spaces, and lines of the design are a mirrored pattern and the artist is able to continuously fold and re-fold the fabric to allow her handwork to mirror the original pattern. In the second method the artist starts in the center of fabric expands the embroidered work from the center. This textile appears to follow the first method of starting in the corner of one end. However there are no indications of original wax lines; they could have worn away since this skirt has been worn and washed or Mauabartayan could have stitched freehand.

Kené designs on skirts embroidered in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, more frequently include both curved and geometric shapes. The design of the upper section of this skirt includes the design called "*el diseño del espíritu de ojo*" which is usually translated as "gods-eyes." The central feature of this design is the cross or *coros* kené in a central area surrounded and enclosed by other concentric lines. In the embroidered skirt, the cross is wider than it is tall, to match the space that it fills. In addition, the artist, Mauabartayan, has connected the design with a cross shape. The cross design surrounded by curvilinear lines refers specifically to the important Shipibo festival of the Ani Xeati which observes the important coming-of-age ceremony in a young girl's life.<sup>8</sup> A recent informant has stated that the Ani Xeati can also be a more general ceremonial village gathering<sup>9</sup>, which suggests that this pattern has larger cultural meanings.

Each artist articulates and interprets the patterns and combination of patterns in new and different ways. The tradition of kené and image production in indigenous culture is not a static process. Shipibo kené or design must be considered an active and constantly evolving process in which each artist, with each stitched or painted object, is constantly participating. It is a dynamic process of individual reinterpretation of their communities' traditions of artistic expression through pattern and color. The completed embroidered textile reflects the complex interplay of handwork, individual artistic creativity, and recollection or reinterpretation of traditional Shipibo kené. Shipibo women say what they most value themselves is the independent creativity and perfect symmetry of a work.<sup>10</sup>

Kené designs are painted onto many surfaces, including faces, ceramics, houses, wooden utensils, and cloth. When the designs are painted on textiles, the artist usually begins with a white, background cloth (Fig. 6). Older pieces in the Field Museum collection have backgrounds of hand-spun, backstrap loomed cotton. Most recent skirts and cushmas utilize the white, commercial cloth called *tocuyo*. The cloth is laid flat on the floor of the house or on a mat, outdoors, and the design considered. Planning the design was done freehand in the old days, but now, some people use a measuring tape in order to achieve the perfect symmetry so highly prized. Most artists interviewed began by considering the size of the textile,

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<sup>8</sup> Luisa Elvira Belaunde. *Kené: arte, ciencia y tradición en diseño*. (Lima: Instituto Nacional de Cultura, 2009), 27.

<sup>9</sup> Glorioso Castro Martínez, interview by J. Claire Odland, July 2010.

<sup>10</sup> From interviews conducted in July 2010, in the areas of Rio Caco and Pucallpa, Peru.

evaluating the center, sometimes beginning at the center, but sometimes beginning to paint their designs at the corners of the piece.



**Figure 6.** Woman painting *kené* designs. Photo by Ron Weber.

Natural vegetable and earth pigments are used as paint, dyes, washes, and fixatives, with the recipes varying according to the individual artist. Brown paint or dye is made from mahogany bark. Artists obtain the bark by trade or by hiking into the hills several hours to take it directly from a tree. The mahogany bark is boiled in water and the solution is cooked down to a brown paste that can be applied to the textile using tiny strips of bamboo as a brush. These splints easily produce a straight line, and bolder lines require several applications to reach the density desired. Then the filler lines are drawn on. The painted areas are then covered with a black, iron-rich mud fixative. The cloth sets a few minutes and then is rinsed, and the brown areas become permanently black.



**Figure 7.** Cushma or man's tunic. 118 cm x 118 cm. (Folded) 342081, The Field Museum.  
Photo by J. Claire Odland/Nancy Feldman.

The distinctive patterns of the *kené* designs are dramatically displayed on the large *cushma* (Fig. 7). The ground fabric of this *cushma* is a backstrap loomed cloth of hand-spun cotton with warp stripes in acrylic thread. It is woven in two panels, joined with a center seam, leaving a slit for the head. Usually, once the panels of a skirt or *cushma* are sewn, the designs can be painted on. Here, the center design *kené* patterns match, but the side *kené* do not. The side seams of the *cushma* are sewn after the painting is complete.



**Figure 8.** *Chitonti or woman's skirt. 70 cm x 144 cm. 342063, The Field Museum.  
Photo by J. Claire Odland/Nancy Feldman.*

A skirt from Imariachocha combines painted, kené designs, 3 bands of brightly colored, acrylic, warp stripes, and one band of black and white, brocaded, warp patterning (Fig. 8). In the kené designs are bright accent colors of unknown paint. It is backstrap loomed in two panels and not sewn into a tube to be worn as a sarong. Since both surfaces are visible and the skirt was originally white<sup>11</sup>, the light-brown color on the top surface may be due to the effects of the iron fixatives applied when it was made.



**Figure 9.** *Detail of cushma. Purchased for The Field Museum.  
No number, photo by J. Claire Odland.*

Skirts and cushmas can be given a new life as they age, by a good, brown, mahogany dye painted on one face, or fully immersed in a dye bath. One woman gave her recipe for a background dyed in the brown color: boil a piece of mahogany bark for 5 – 8 hours, and immerse the fabric 1 to 3 times depending on the depth of the brown color desired. Sometimes the kené designs must be retouched, as gradually over a number of dyeings, they are lost in the dark, mahogany color. In its final stage, a garment may be covered in the bark dye and then the mud, leaving the cloth almost entirely black with only the textures of embroidery and weaving still perceptible. In this cushma the whole cloth is over-dyed a warm brown with mahogany (Fig. 9).

<sup>11</sup> Ron Weber, Unpublished manuscript, research from 1971 to 1989, np.

In the remote villages along Rio Caco and Rio Pisqui visited in our 2007-2010 research, women are seen wearing a diversity of clothing styles in their activities of daily life. Some women and girls wear traditional, embroidered and painted skirts or chitontis and traditional, long-sleeved blouses. Some wear plain, commercially produced, black polyester, fabric skirts and some wear western dress such as jeans, shorts or cotton dresses. In the larger towns and cities such as Contamana, Pucallpa, Lima, and Iquitos, most Shipibo men and women wear western dress.

The Shipibo value their embroidered and painted clothing for gatherings, special events, rituals and celebrations. Men wear cushmas for special occasions or shirts or vests painted or embroidered in kené designs. Women's embroidered or painted skirts and wraps are worn as cultural markers of identity.

Our study of Shipibo textiles and culture from 1950 to 2010 illustrates the importance of Shipibo women's textile work with kené designs in the shaping of cultural identity. We thank the Field Museum for the opportunity to participate in this project. We hope in this way to support the efforts of Shipibo leaders to make available their cultural history to their people, especially to their young people, and strengthen their cultural, social and political identity in modern Peru.

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