Modernity and Otavalo Dress in Ecuador and Abroad

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“We Adapt to the Times without Ceasing to Be”

While leafing through the fledgling Otavalo\(^1\) general interest magazine *Runakuna*,\(^2\) one is struck by the multiple discursive layers embedded in a clothing advertisement that reads, “Welcome to Downtown Otavalo … we adapt to the times without ceasing to be (see Image 1).” This subtle reference to Otavalo’s millenarian

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\(^1\) I use the term Otavalo rather than Otavaleña/o in order to distinguish natives from mestizos who dwell in the Otavalo area although other sources use the terms interchangeably. I also use modern Kichwa spellings. Although other authors referenced throughout may use the older spellings (Quichua for Kichwa or anaco or anacu for anaku), the words mean the same thing.

\(^2\) *Runakuna* is the Kichwa term for mankind or people but may also be interpreted as indigenous people.
culture and its continuity in modern times signals one of the pillars of cultural modernity as described by Arturo Escobar: it “highlights … a dialectic of change and presence.” Modernization and globalization have been framed as forces which tend to homogenize cultures, processes by which dominant societies either commodify the cultures of less powerful ethnic groups or subsume them altogether. As a result, scholars have sometimes labeled ethnic groups who have ostensibly succumbed to dominant outside forces as inauthentic. This is due to a faulty perception that to be true to one’s ethnicity requires holding on to the past without embracing modern ways. For Otavalos, however, modernity is not the antithesis of authenticity. They have remained rooted in their culture even as they have commodified and industrialized their textile, handicraft and music production and achieved greater socioeconomic mobility. The trilingual (Kichwa, Spanish, and English) ad references some of the multiple languages and geographic locations in which Otavalos comfortably dwell and navigate. As David Kyle notes, “though Otavalans’ economic production has reached a postmodern zenith in its satisfaction of souvenir shoppers across the developed world, their identity as a sociocultural group could not be stronger, precisely because it is tied, in large part, to their business reputation.”

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Perhaps because of the strength of their ethnic social cohesion, this self-consciously Otavalo clothing advertisement does not need to contain any ethnic clothing, often a strong marker of indigenous identity in Latin American countries. Otavalo clothing has been a hybrid of native and Spanish colonial elements since the period of contact, but in the last twenty to thirty years, men have transitioned to


Because Otavalo dress has not remained static over time, following Maynard, I describe it as Otavalo or “ethnic” rather than “traditional” because the latter “implies a form of unchanging attire.” Margaret Maynard, Dress and Globalisation (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 12.
contemporary western clothes. In the ad, silhouettes of young indigenous males sport baseball caps, baggy jeans and sneakers rather than Otavalo male dress: white *alpargatas* (sandals), white pants, ponchos, and fedoras. The only way the young men may be readily identified as Indian is that they wear braids or pony tails, the latter becoming fashionable among young Otavalo males in the 1990s. During the early part of this latest transition to western clothes, Otavalo women and elders criticized Otavalo males for wanting to assimilate. Today, however, young men who adopt contemporary western dress continue to connect to and revitalize their culture. This exposes the fallacy in the notion that “authenticity” can only be achieved by preserving traditional ways to the exclusion of outside influences. Far from abandoning their culture, Otavalo male merchants disseminate their cultural productions all over the world, organize cultural celebrations both in Ecuador and abroad, and foment Otavalo culture by sponsoring, creating and participating in magazines, websites and social media networks that emphasize their culture. Their use of contemporary western clothing with a simultaneous respect for maintaining Otavalo culture embodies a form of alternative modernity that calls into question the importance of the constitutive role of ethnic clothing for Otavalo identity.

I argue that in hindsight, Otavalo males formed a vanguard which has used western dress to infiltrate into a society that has had trouble seeing past their clothing. Because non-Indians are usually not exposed to Otavalos on a daily
basis, many have preconceived notions about what Otavalos “should be.” By taking on contemporary western dress, Otavalo males have challenged non-Indians to set aside the historical weight of prejudice and encounter Otavalos as individuals first. By erasing most markers of “otherness,” Otavalo males have forced non-Indians to engage them more as equals.

While clothing often suggests the wearer’s affinities and even allegiances, imbuing it with certain qualities – whether undesirable or idealized – can easily lead to stereotyping and a perception about the limitation of another’s potential. In North America, for example, where Eurocentric attitudes equated native clothing with a lack of civilization, Native Americans were forced to adopt western clothing as part of a “civilizing” process. Ideas about Indians being noble or somehow innately untarnished are equally oppressive because they superficially exalt native cultures while limiting native peoples’ breadth of human experience and expression. This preconception manifests itself in the extent to which wearing ethnic dress is imbued with social commitment, whether intended or not. It makes sense to some degree that Otavalos, whose ethnic clothing identified them as targets of discrimination, would use ethnic dress as a self-conscious

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Interestingly, outsiders are not the only ones that expect social commitment from Indians. Mark Rogers contrasts the questions posed to contestants in mestizo pageants – which highlight romance and motherhood – with those posed by Otavalos in their own pageants – which tend to inquire about women’s views on native politics. Mark Rogers, “Spectacular Bodies: Folklorization and the Politics of Identity in Ecuadorian Beauty Pageants,” *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 3, no. 2 (1999): 65.
contestation of mainstream society and culture. At the same time, this association between ethnic dress and social conscience is problematic in light of unsustainable claims that Otavalos who adopt contemporary western dress are inauthentic or that Indians who wear ethnic dress are necessarily socially committed. I do not argue that Otavalos should or should not abandon ethnic dress. I am suggesting that there are many reasons why Otavalos choose to retain or abandon it and facile interpretations of these decisions are often inaccurate. Although ethnic dress has historically been a constitutive part of being Indian, we are in the midst of a transition period where shedding Otavalo dress does not signal a loss of Indian identity.

And yet, Otavalo dress is not just a superficial aesthetic accoutrement. The acceptance of males’ transition to contemporary western clothing belies the community’s ambivalence regarding the degree to which ethnic dress is constitutive of Otavalo identity. These contradictory feelings are evident in Otavalo comments, writings, and even cultural events. Recuperating ethnic dress has become a highlight of a newly instituted cultural festival known as Runakay, which roughly translates as “to be Indian.” This event was initiated by Otavalo youth in order to bring together different generations and to strengthen cultural identity, especially in light of the effects that globalization is having on Otavalo culture. As expressed by its founders, the
[Runakay] Movement … is aware that acculturation is a big problem precipitated by globalization and the emigration of men and women. As a result of living among other cultures, we have adopted positive and/or negative elements from them. In this process of constructing interculturality, we are becoming confused and losing some elements of our identity. We are constantly at risk of future generations forgetting who we were and are.  

Vestimenta Tradicional de Los Otavalos

Image 3. The caption reads “Otavalo Traditional Dress.” The second Runakay regulation reads “All ethnicities and nationalities are welcome and should wear their formal dress.” Source: Otavalos Online

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Runakay includes ritual ceremony, a talent contest, theatre, dance, music, and an evening gala event which makes ethnic dress mandatory for admittance (see Image 3). Runakay has seen previous manifestations prior to the 21st century, indicating that ethnic dress continues to be an important topic for debate and that a consensus has not been reached, particularly with regard to gender.

Indeed, there has been a clear gender dynamic in Otavalo ethnic dress that is potentially empowering but also restrictive. Until recently, the adoption of western dress has largely been a male prerogative. Although women have experimented with alterations to ethnic dress and are not criticized when they adopt western dress while abroad, they tend to take up Otavalo dress once they return to Ecuador. Women’s retention of ethnic dress has not hindered their study and work opportunities. In fields where their expertise relates to native culture – such as in governmental positions, academia, or at cultural events (including pow wows here in the United States) – wearing ethnic dress adds to their legitimacy. Although men who are involved in cultural activities may be criticized for abandoning ethnic dress, women are seen as leading by example. However, women have been subtly pressured to maintain ethnic dress and serve as custodians of culture. While men have been able to abandon ethnic dress and

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8At a conference I attended in Quito the late 1990s, an indigenous man who did not wear ethnic dress gave a talk where ethnic dress figured prominently. During the question and answer period, he was questioned for extolling but not wearing a poncho. His response was that the poncho was cumbersome in the course of daily activities and that one did not have to wear ethnic dress in order to appreciate it as a cultural expression.
retain their indigenous identity, women have been seen as the last hope of retaining that identity through the continued use of Otavalo dress, even as some Otavalos agree that dress is not what makes one Indian. Women have experienced Otavalo identity differently from men due to the circumscription of their freedom of expression and the expectation that the continuity of Otavalo culture lies with them. This has only begun to change in the last decade as young urban Otavalo women have begun to alternate between ethnic and western dress in public.9

Beyond questions of gender, I will also begin to explore the ways that the sartorial decisions of an increasingly heterogeneous Otavalo community are fostering multiple expressions of Otavalo identity. These are manifested across traditional age, class and gender categories as well as among local and transnational Otavalo communities. Most notable are the divergent sartorial trends between rural and urban Otavalo women in Ecuador and those who emigrate to other countries. Scholars have predicted that the cost of ethnic dress would be prohibitive for poor Otavalos regardless of gender. However, rural Otavalo women continue to wear ethnic dress on an exclusive basis while their urban counterparts have begun to alternate ethnic and western dress. Otavalo women who are born abroad may replicate males’ earlier pattern of transition toward wearing exclusively contemporary western dress, thereby creating new

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9 Toa Maldonado Ruiz, e-mail to author, June 28, 2010.
expressions of Otavalo identity.

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Part 1 of this thesis documents historical changes in Otavalo dress. It explores connections between economic and sociopolitical realities, sartorial changes, and shifting understandings of Otavalo identity. In contrast to earlier times of greater stratification between Indians and non-Indians, 21st century adherence to ethnic dress and allegiance to ethnic identity are not one and the same. Rather than interpreting the adoption of western clothing as part of an insidious process of re-colonization by western culture, Part 2 examines ways that changes in dress reflect Otavalos’ efforts to reinvest their cultural practices with meaning in a postcolonial context. Increasing heterogeneity – reflected not only in gender and economic distinctions but also in the Otavalo diaspora – are producing more varied and complex but no less authentic expressions of Otavalo ethnic identity.

Sources

For Part 1, I have drawn from colonial paintings and drawings and from 19th through 21st century photographs. While several images are not identified by ethnic group, I have used them because the clothing practices of other Indian groups indicate possible trends among the Otavalo or because the styles of dress approximate that of the contemporary Otavalo, suggesting continuities. Historical accounts and a travel diary compliment visual sources by providing descriptions
of Otavalo dress from the colonial period through the mid-20th century. Drawing on secondary literature related to trade and Indian social movements, I make connections between sartorial changes and the economic, social and political context in which they occurred.

For Part 2, which analyzes the more recent past, I use images in secondary academic sources as well as from various Otavalo-created sources, including websites, social networking sites, and the magazine Runakuna. In contrast to Part 1, which must rely on external accounts and descriptions, Part 2 focuses on Otavalos’ own understandings of and reactions to sartorial changes. My personal accounts are based on experiences with Otavalo friends in both the United States and Ecuador, where I studied and worked in 1996, 1998 and 1999 and where I have traveled intermittently before and since then.

**Decolonizing Our Lens: Hybrid as Native, Contestation as Self-Determination**

Otavalo dress has not been native in a pure sense since the Spanish colonial period when Otavalos adopted many of the accouterments of their clothing from the Spanish. As Rebecca Earle argues, the hybrid nature of what has come to be known as native clothing does not “diminish their force as markers of indigenousness.”

Rather, hybridity highlights clothing as a manifestation of

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Hobsbawm’s “invented traditions”; these

perform essential ‘adaptive’ strategies for societies undergoing rapid change by building palpable bridges to a ‘suitable’ past and creating the illusion of solidity within transitional chaos; they have also provided a sense of identity for communities that have been pulled into the political or cultural orbit of a more powerful society.”

Conceptualizing Otavalo dress as “invented tradition” elucidates its importance. It symbolizes the survival of the Otavalos as a distinct and recognizable group despite hundreds of years of oppressive colonial rule. Seen in this way, total assimilation of western dress threatens to undermine Otavalo culture. Otavalo efforts to maintain or recapture ethnic clothing underscore their desire to retain their distinct identity vis-à-vis the dominant Ecuadorian mestizo and Anglo-European cultures.

At the same time, interpreting decisions about clothing (or other aspects of culture) as mostly a response to a more powerful culture may be a Eurocentric overstatement. In other words, although it would be ahistorical to ignore the economic, political and social elements that are at play in decisions about dress,

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12 Annashay Sutherland has argued that Otavalo identity, like clothing, cannot be said to be primordial since it has been in constant flux since the Spanish colonial period. This was the result of various factors, including the policy of relocating Indians into *reducciones* without reference to their Pre-Incan kinship groups as well as the weekly Otavalo market which encouraged integration among different communities. Annashay Sutherland, “Navigating Indigeneousness in Otavalo Transnational Communities” (Undergraduate thesis, Reed College, 2004), 16.
not all decisions are made as contestations of the perceived superiority of
dominant cultures. It would be difficult to read certain historical circumstances –
the Conquest, anomie felt by contemporary Otavalo migrants,\textsuperscript{13} the economic
circumstances of poor Otavalos who may not have much choice in terms of
clothing decisions, or perhaps even the case of very wealthy Otavalos who may
have too many choices – without any reference to adaptive strategies. However,
some Otavalos decide to wear Otavalo clothing not as a contestation but rather
because they do not perceive the West as compelling in the ways that count to
them – whether this means Western individualism or mainstream health treatment.
One of the legacies of colonialism and its attendant notions regarding progress
and modernity is that we have tended to frame the world as a dichotomy between
North and South, between developed and underdeveloped. It is therefore difficult
to consider that anyone familiar with these narratives would choose to maintain
native dress not as a political act of rebellion against western modernity but as a
result of their sincere appreciation that western modernity is lacking. Various
scholars such as Maynard, Appadurai, Howes, Matthews, and Schoss question, for
example, the extent of the United States’ influence on local cultures.\textsuperscript{14}

Indians’ immersion in western modernity does not automatically equate to
a loss of their own cultural values or preclude them from creating alternative

\textsuperscript{13} Kyle, \textit{Transnational Peasants}, 183.

\textsuperscript{14} Maynard, \textit{Dress and Globalisation}, 6.
modernities. In the 1980s documentary film *Zulay Facing the Twenty First Century*, anthropologist Mabel Preloran asks an Otavalo woman named Zulay Saravino if she fears losing her roots by attending school. Zulay’s father is one of the more progressive fathers in Quinchuqui, sending all his daughters to school at a time when this raised eyebrows among community members. Zulay replies that she is not afraid because she has not lost her own culture but gained another. Rather than perceiving a struggle, Zulay felt that her ostensibly less powerful culture and the dominant one could co-exist and that her own would actually take precedence.

The contemporary transnational nature of many an Otavalo’s life requires cultural dexterity but this is not solely a modern phenomenon. During the pre-Columbian period, the Caranqui, from whom the Otavalo descended, had to navigate between their culture and that of the Inca colonizers. Seen in this light, there is historical precedent for Otavalos to embrace co-existing cultures. Today, the onslaught of visuals and messages from mainstream media no doubt requires Otavalos to make conscious decisions about continuity and change with regard to their identity. However, a non-Eurocentric way of understanding this process rejects the notion that a choice must be made between a “superior,” more

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15 The Incas also planted *mitmaq* communities in far flung parts of their empire in order to teach these new groups to assimilate Inca values. *Mitmaqs* retained their own identity vis-à-vis the communities where they settled and, in times of political crisis, returned to their original communities. So, Andean peoples are no strangers to adapting to co-existing cultures.
developed culture and an “underdeveloped” one and challenges those of us who live in the “mainstream” to view the world from a south-at-the-top map. The choice to maintain native lifeways, including dress, often signals alternative cultural values. Otavalos tend to seek ways to preserve their culture even as they adopt modern ways; the Runakay Foundation’s background webpage reads in part, “Everyday, Andean people are finding ways to revitalize, strengthen and reinvest our culture with value and to construct a path to development that is imbued with our identity.”

Why is Dress Important?

Decisions related to dress are charged because Otavalos have constructed larger frameworks of meaning around clothing. It would be impossible to ignore the historical significance of cloth and dress to Andean people. In the pre-Columbian period, native people used weavings as offerings during rituals and dress was a marker of social status and identity. Some scholars have posited that the designs on the tokapu, or mantle, worn by the Inca represented a system of communication. Lynn Meisch notes that into the colonial period, the colors and width of the embroidery on women’s blouses, the type of hat worn, the sash

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design, the *anaku* (wrapped skirt) embroidery design and the way a *fachalina* (shoulder wrap) was worn communicated one’s community of residence.\(^{18}\) Clothing has had ritual symbolism and is associated with different rites of passage. In the late 1980s, a man who wore his hat backwards signaled that he was *wambriandu*,\(^ {19}\) or looking for a female companion.\(^ {20}\) In previous generations, Otavalo men expressed their desire to be engaged to a woman by taking her *fachalina* or *rebozo* (shawl) and eventually returning it when his family asked hers for her hand in marriage.\(^ {21}\) Otavaloos (and other native groups) have also typically exchanged clothing at wedding ceremonies. Today, at baptism, godparents traditionally give their godchildren full sets of Otavalo clothes.\(^ {22}\) Boys often get their first poncho for their communion.\(^ {23}\) Sartorial changes, then, do not only affect material culture but divest clothing of its expressive function and alter


\(^{19}\) *Wambah* is the Kichwa term for youth. *Wambriandu* is a Hispanicized verb resulting from the combination of the Kichwa term and the Spanish gerund.


\(^{23}\) Rudolf Josef Colloredo-Mansfeld, *The Native Leisure Class: Consumption and Cultural Creativity in the Andes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 204. While Otavalo girls may also be given a new blouse and *anaku*, it is significant that Colloredo-Mansfeld highlights male clothing since boys no longer wear ethnic clothing on a daily basis.
rituals. In this regard, the decision to adopt contemporary western clothes or change ethnic dress has been scrutinized internally by Otavalos themselves.

The legacy of Otavalo renown in weaving and entrepreneurship has also been fundamental to the formation of the community’s identity and contributed to their continued use of ethnic dress. During the colonial period, Otavalos distinguished themselves through their skill in weaving and their *obrajes* were singled out as direct tributaries to the Spanish crown.  

Although the Otavalo suffered harsh forced labor throughout the colonial period, Vieira Powers notes that authorities treated Otavalo Indians relatively mildly in comparison to other groups because they were part of a Crown *obraje*. Because the *obraje* was nearby, Otavalos did not suffer separation from their families and community for months at a time like other Indian groups endured. As early as the 16th century, Otavalos had the freedom to weave for profit in their spare time. All these circumstances fostered kin-based migration and played a role in the social

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24 Although it does not diminish the acclaim of Otavalo textiles, I should note that Andrien simply states that the Otavalo *obraje* switched over to the Crown's domain upon the death of the wealthy encomendero Rodrigo de Salazar. Kenneth J. Andrien, *The Kingdom of Quito, 1690-1830: The State and Regional Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 21. Meisch also notes, “By 1623, the Otavalo *obraje* had become the most valuable *obraje* in Ecuador.” *Otavalo: Weaving, Costume and the Market*, 34.


cohesiveness of the Otavalo community, which included retention of a uniform ethnic dress. In the 20th century, Otavalo fame in weaving and marketing reinforced the use of ethnic dress as a legitimizing tool. Scholars note how tourists in Ecuador (or nationals when Otavalos travel abroad) specifically want to purchase from natives, who are often easy to identify by ethnic dress. Colloredo-Mansfeld remembers seeing male “indigenous music groups sweating under their wool ponchos as they play[ed] in Venice Beach California.”28 Not just for show, their “out-of-place clothes … legitimize their novelty among the attractions of the boardwalk.”29

Changes in dress patterns among Indians are important because they signal the tension between the historical significance of dress to Otavalo identity and the rupture that this association has undergone in the postcolonial period. Ethnic dress has been an integral part of Otavalo identity for political, cultural, and economic reasons. Some Otavalos, particularly women, continue to use it to indicate their commitment to their understanding of cultural survival. Other Otavalos, particularly from the older generation who did not experience the extent of Indian liberation that the younger generation has enjoyed, maintain ethnic dress less self-consciously, because it is closely tied to their cultural values. Women also wear


29 Ibid.
their dress proudly, especially during dance presentations and beauty pageants, showing that this practice is not necessarily a contestation of western culture but rather, a natural result of their esteem for their own culture. Against this backdrop, adoption of western clothing may seem like a betrayal of their ethnicity. However, this trend, when understood in historical context, challenges us to avoid facile associations between Otavalo dress and a monolithic indigenous identity. Part I will help us to understand how we got to this point and why these tensions are so meaningful.

Part 1

Introduction: From Pre-Columbian to Post-Colonial: Dress in Historical Context

Since the pre-Columbian period, sumptuary laws and changing political contexts have influenced Otavalo clothing practices. During periods of colonization, the colonial regime – whether Inca or Spanish – dictated dress practices. Adherence to these regulations indicated adherence to the colonial order; refusal to adhere to the rules demonstrated subversion of that order. I found no evidence that authorities dictated shifts in clothing styles during the republican period and as Otavalo culture consolidated within the Ecuadorian nation. Since the 1960s, Otavalos have re-politicized clothing, this time from the bottom up. Whereas the colonial and republican periods were marked by the political disenfranchisement of Indians, the 1960s were a time of resurgence of native
cultural and political power and, particularly in the decades since, an increased pride in Indian heritage. Despite generational and gendered differences of opinion, most Otavalos have thus far seen retention of ethnic dress, particularly by women or by both sexes in specific cultural venues, as important to the continued survival of Otavalo culture.

The Regulation of Dress During the Inca and Spanish Colonial Periods

During the late 15th century, when the Inca occupied the Otavalo region, the state regulated decisions regarding ethnic dress for political reasons. The Incas required conquered groups to retain their ethnic group’s hairstyle and headdress. While this may have been an inclusive gesture, as when the Inca let local populations continue to worship local deities, this measure also sought to distinguish between nationalities in order to keep track of mita (the obligatory tributary labor system) service. The Inca even regulated authorities; “curacas were entitled to wear cumbi, or very fine cloth, garments only if they had been awarded them by the Inca.”

During the early Spanish colonial period, authorities visually reinforced Spanish power by permitting only noble and, later, other Indians holding positions

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of power to wear Spanish clothing.\textsuperscript{32} During this time, Spanish women were scarce and Spanish men married into the Inca nobility to forge political alliances and gain native collaborators and cultural mediators. Indian princesses who were Hispanicized through the acquisition of Spanish language and conversion to Christianity wore skirts in the Spanish style. Elite Indian women’s clothing was made of silk from China and wool from Spain.\textsuperscript{33} Likewise, powerful \textit{curacas} wore “hat, padded breeches, shoes, sometimes even boots and doublet” like Spaniards.\textsuperscript{34} Sumptuary laws reinforced the delineation between the Indian nobility and commoners and served to curtail native social mobility.\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Casta}, or mixed race, women were not permitted to wear precious jewels and silk.\textsuperscript{36} Like their Inca predecessors, Spanish colonial authorities and hacienda owners used

\footnotesize
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{34} Wachtel, \textit{Vision of the Vanquished}, 148.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Karen Vieira Powers, \textit{Women in the Crucible of Conquest: the Gendered Genesis of Spanish American Society, 1500-1600} (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 89. Rebecca Earle has argued that requiring Indians to wear Spanish clothing was also a tactic used by colonial authorities to chip away at Indians' protected corporate status within the Republic of Indians. One of the benefits of this status for Indians was that they were exempted from paying the \textit{alcabala}, or sales tax. “Concerned individuals,” Earle notes, “… occasionally recommended that native peoples be required to adopt European dress, so as to render them less indigenous” Earle, “Nationalism and National Dress in Spanish America,” 166.
\end{enumerate}
dress to distinguish Indian groups geographically and to limit their physical mobility, a key factor for efficient mobilization of Indian laborers subject to the mita.\textsuperscript{37}

Natives, however, eluded regulations in both surreptitious and overtly political ways. Kenneth Andrien notes instances of Indians “passing” by donning Spanish dress to evade tribute or mita service.\textsuperscript{38} Wachtel also notes that many Indians, especially in northern Peru, adopted the sombrero, which permitted a freedom of migration impossible for those who were ethnically marked by

\begin{quote}
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Andrien, \textit{The Kingdom of Quito}, 43.
\end{quote}
wearing the *llautu* (headdress).³⁹

Paradoxically, while the Spanish used ethnic dress to limit Indians’ social mobility and make them easy targets for oppressive labor service and other abuses, Indians used pre-Columbian dress to assert autonomy and power. As illegal and abusive conditions within the *obraje* system intensified in late 17th century Otavalo, a resurgence of Inca nationalism⁴⁰ gave ethnic dress subversive meaning. Meisch recounts the fascinating story of Don Alonso Inca, whose inauguration as *corregidor* of Ibarra (a town north of Otavalo) in 1666 involved his donning of a version of the *mascaypacha*, or royal Inca headdress, in imitation of Inca possession ceremonies.⁴¹ Don Alonso Inca, who was accused of idolatry for participating in ancient rites and ceremonies, “emphasiz[ed] his Inca rather than Spanish ancestry, wearing an Inca shoulder wrap (Q. yacolla) and tunic (Sp. camiseta) made of fine vicuña cloth.”⁴² Later, partly in reaction to the violent Indian uprisings of 1780-82 that protested Bourbon tax reforms, the Spanish – apparently in fear of the symbolic power of pre-Columbian clothing to rebellious natives – banned males from using Inca mantels, tunics, and headbands and also

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⁴¹ Ibid., 23.

⁴² Ibid., 24.
punished Indians by cutting their hair. Maintaining native dress, then, could be more than a passive cultural survival or adherence to the law; it could also prove a potent element of active political resistance.

As the institutionalization of colonialism eroded the economic and political power of the Indian nobility, Spanish clothing that had once stood for status became a marker of ethnic identity. An anonymous 1573 account associates wearing hats with privileged status: “The caciques and principales [authority figures] and yanaconas [who were not required to pay tribute and tended to work on special projects] wear hats and the rest wear pillos which are a bit wider than an index finger, round and which fit snugly about the head.” In a late 18th century image, three lower class Indian males (judging from their workload) wear either no head gear or they wear hats, suggesting that Indian men of all ranks transitioned to wearing hats in the mid to late colonial period (see Image 4). This transition coincided with the flattening of socioeconomic distinctions among Indians. Instead, hat styles became a way to identify themselves by specific ethnic group. (Today, Ecuadorian highland Indians can generally be distinguished by

43 Ibid., 25, 243. These uprisings were part of a broader anti-colonial phenomenon known as the “Andean Age of Insurrection,” the 18th century period typified by messianic rebellions led by such prominent leaders as Juan Santos Atahualpa and Tupac Amaru II in what is modern day Peru and Bolivia. See Steve J. Stern, ed., Resistance, Rebellion, and Consciousness in the Andean Peasant World, 18th to 20th Centuries (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

44 The text reads, “Los caciques y principales y yanaconas usan sombreros, y otros, pillos son poco mas gordos que el dedo pulgar, redondos, que abrazan la cabeza.” Quito según los extranjeros, 101, 104. My translation.
their hat styles; in some groups, women still also wear hats.)

The 19th Century: Social Cohesion and Integration in Spite of Exploitation

Following independence from Spain in 1822 and their break from Gran Colombia (composed of modern day Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador) in 1830, the new Creole-dominated government viewed Indians as a problem population in need of “civilization” and integration into the nation but simultaneously effected policies that ensured their continued exploitation. While suffering from these contradictory policies, the Otavalo were uniquely positioned to emerge from this period with a strong and distinct identity.

First, Otavalo weaving skills and entrepreneurialism helped them to survive the early republican reinstatement of the tribute system.\(^{45}\) In contrast to the colonial period, Otavalos were no longer under the relative protection of the Republic of Indians, which had allowed corporate landownership and hereditary chiefdoms.\(^ {46}\) Instead of answering to caciques who understood Andean reciprocal relationships and served as mediators, Indians had to deal with government appointed officials and thereby came under closer scrutiny by the state. When the government abolished tribute in 1857, ostensibly providing Indians with greater

\(^{45}\) Tribute was a head tax that the colonial (and later, the national) government imposed on Indians in exchange for the use of communal lands, royal protection, and exemption from some other taxes. Brooke Larson, *Trials of Nation Making: Liberalism, Race, and Ethnicity in the Andes, 1810-1910* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 40-42. Indians paid the tax with money as well as in the form of agricultural products and textiles.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 106.
freedom to choose labor opportunities, it simultaneously re-instituted a four day forced labor policy for all citizens which by the 1860s had fallen to Indians only.\textsuperscript{47} During this period, Otavalos migrated for long periods of time as conscript laborers to build roadways to the coast.\textsuperscript{48} However, Larson notes that they managed to forego social disintegration by marketing their weaving, by using “defensive practices” such as endogamy and reciprocal relations, and by fostering their culture through festivals like \textit{Inti Raymi}.\textsuperscript{49} Although the end of colonial protectionist policies had a crippling effect on \textit{obrajes},\textsuperscript{50} Larson notes that Otavalos outlasted foreign competition, switching from agriculture to innovative craft production.\textsuperscript{51} Derek Williams gives another clue to their strength: while other Indians provided forced labor on \textit{haciendas} and came under increasing pressure from the Church and other landowners, the Otavalo \textit{concertaje}, or debt peonage system, was relatively weak, allowing communities greater autonomy and social cohesion.\textsuperscript{52}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 117.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 132.
\textsuperscript{49} These are Larson’s conclusions but she notes that more research needs to be done on this period in order to understand how the Otavalo were able to emerge as a strong ethnic group in the face of such policies. Larson, \textit{Trials of Nation Making}, 133-138.
\textsuperscript{50} Sutherland, “Navigating Indigenousness,” 17.
\textsuperscript{51} Larson, \textit{Trials of Nation Making}, 137.
\textsuperscript{52} Derek Williams, “Administering the Otavalan Indian and Centralizing Governance in Ecuador, 1851-1875,” in \textit{Highland Indians and the State in Modern Ecuador}, ed. A. Kim Clark and Marc Becker (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 2007), 41-42.
\end{flushright}
Second, by the late 19th century, Ecuadorian nation builders held Otavalos up as model Indians even while continuing to discriminate against them. At the turn of the century, the state showcased Otavalos at world’s fairs in Chicago, Paris and Madrid. Juxtaposed with Amazonian Indians, who were considered backward and savage, Otavalos were regarded as handsome, clean and good workers. In cases where Otavalos had the opportunity to take on western dress, their ability to maintain strong communal ties along with this external perception facilitated the retention of ethnic dress. Nevertheless, although they were held up as being closer to civilization than their Amazon counterparts, an 1892 Kichwa-Spanish dictionary evinces how they continued to be seen – and treated – domestically. Men’s braids, or huangus, are defined as the “single coarse braid in which Indians wear their hair”\textsuperscript{53} and the verb huanguna as “to comb and wear hair in one badly done braid.”\textsuperscript{54} The use of such words as “course” and “badly done” attests to the general disparaging way in which Indians were seen and treated.

The 20th Century: Struggle and Ethnic Pride

In the early 20th century, the weaving industry saw a rebirth which fostered Otavalo prosperity and further solidified their culture, including dress.


\textsuperscript{54} “peinarse y recoger el pelo en una sola mal arreglada trenza.” Cordero, \textit{Quichua shimiyuc panca}, 40.
This renewed renown is often traced to 1917, when the owner of hacienda Cusin near Otavalo bought her son-in-law, F. A. Uribe, a very fine quality poncho made by an Otavalo named José Cajas. Mr. Uribe was so impressed with the work that he provided Cajas with the faster European floor loom on which to copy tweed. Cajas’ grandson learned this technique and disseminated it to people in his wife’s community, Peguche, which together with Agato and Quinchuqui became known as skilled weaving communities. The timing could not have been more ideal. Since World War I made wool from Europe scarce, Otavalos filled this void by producing imitation Scottish tweed or cashmere (casimir) to supply the local market demand. Visitors continued to remark on the quality of Otavalo casimir; in 1934, naturalist Von Hagen’s Ecuadorian guide told him, “These Otavalo Indians can weave cloth of any style. Bring them a piece of English tweed and they will duplicate it. A very dexterous people, but sullen.” Following World War II, Otavalo textiles faced stiff competition from the flood of imported European cashmere. However, the effect of the reopened international market was diminished by the fact that Otavalos were already traveling to Colombia by the 1940s and to other parts of Latin America and to

55 Chavez, “Commercial Weaving and the Entrepreneurial Ethic,” 35. Many scholars relate this story.
56 Victor Wolfgang Von Hagen, Ecuador the Unknown: Two and a Half Years' Travel in the Republic of Ecuador and Galapagos Islands (New York: Oxford University Press, 1940), 242.
New York City by the 1950s.\textsuperscript{57} Travel helped Otavalos learn about foreign customers' preferences.\textsuperscript{58} In addition, development projects broadened their skills. A 1954 United Nations project taught Otavalos tapestry weaving\textsuperscript{59} and a mid-1960s Peace Corps project gave Otavalo weavers insight into the aesthetic preferences of tourists while encouraging experimentation in non-traditional design.\textsuperscript{60} Otavalo entrepreneurs also drew inspiration from Guatemalan and Peruvian textiles.

Although Otavalos experienced socioeconomic mobility during the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, they continued to be victims of blatant racism. As late as the 1950s, buses were segregated.\textsuperscript{61} One Otavalo man remembered having to get off the sidewalk for “people in neckties.”\textsuperscript{62} Another remembered mestizos knocking men’s fedoras and women’s head clothes off and keeping them until the Otavalos agreed to chop wood or sweep a street.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{57} Sutherland, “Navigating Indigenousness,” 22.
\textsuperscript{58} Chavez, “Commercial Weaving and the Entrepreneurial Ethic,” 174.
\textsuperscript{59} Kyle, \textit{Transnational Peasants}, 134.
\textsuperscript{60} Meisch says that it was the Salasacas (an indigenous group from central Ecuador) who were taught tapestry weaving by the Peace Corps and the Andean Mission and that the Otavalo later copied them. \textit{Otavalo: Weaving, Costume and the Market}, 157.
\textsuperscript{61} I have no documentation to prove that this was an official practice. It was more likely a manifestation of the generalized discrimination toward the Indian population.
\textsuperscript{62} Meisch, \textit{Andean Entrepreneurs}, 37.
Despite Otavalos’ newfound economic mobility, the pronounced racial stratification of this period discouraged experimentation with contemporary western dress in Otavalo. In contrast to the colonial era when Indians adopted western dress to evade tribute service and imperceptibly left their communities, mid-20th century Otavalos had too strong a connection to their land to abandon it for the temporary relief that adopting western dress and emigrating might achieve. Adopting western dress and remaining in Otavalo seemed an unlikely option since mestizos in small communities would continue to recognize them as Indian and taunt them, possibly for attempting to move beyond their perceived station in life by taking on western dress.

Not until the mid-1960s did Otavalos begin to experience as well as effect dramatic changes in their socio-cultural world. Following rural protests, the 1964 Ecuadorian Land Reform Act – which abolished the *huasipungo* system and mandated the redistribution of land - marked a political and cultural threshold. Although most Otavalos did not obtain land, reform was of deep significance to

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64 In exchange for their labor on an *hacienda*, an Indian family received a *huasipungo*, or small plot of land for subsistence farming, as well as the use of water, firewood and pasture for their animals. The majority of Otavalos opted for a more autonomous form of *hacienda* labor known as *yanapa*, or help. Laborers would work two days in exchange for pasture access but lived in their own communities. Tanya Korovkin, “Weak Weapons, Strong Weapons? Hidden Resistance and Political Portest in Rural Ecuador,” in *Democracy in Latin America in the 1990s*, ed. Jorge I. Domínguez (New York: Routledge, 2001), 208.

Otavalos in a region where land had been historically scarce and where most people were still subsistence farmers. The community's strong connection to the land is evident in the common practice of investing income from cultural production to buy land. Land reform (and the 1970s oil boom) also changed traditional labor relationships and contributed to Otavalo politicization.

In the 1960s, Otavalos experienced a cultural renaissance marked by the creation of music and dance groups and the imbuing of Otavalo clothing with rich symbolism as a tool of cultural resistance and pride. Although this revitalization process had internal roots, it was reinforced by the admiration of Otavalo culture by Ecuadorian and foreign intellectuals. Up until this point, Otavalo dress varied among communities, but the 1960s brought mass-produced ethnic clothing and a more unified Otavalo dress. Perhaps this was also ideological as the growing

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66 Sutherland, “Navigating Indigenousness,” 23.
67 Korovkin, “Weak Weapons, Strong Weapons?,” 215
68 The cultural renaissance should be understood within the context of indigenous struggles for land and other rights both nationally and in other parts of the Andes. See José Antonio Lucero, Struggles of Voice: the Politics of Indigenous Representation in the Andes (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 2008), 77-120.
69 Kyle, Transnational Peasants, 153; Meisch, Andean Entrepreneurs, 133.
70 Kyle, Transnational Peasants, 141. D’Amico notes that this era was also marked by European invitations for student exchanges. D’Amico, “Expressivity, Ethnicity and Renaissance in Otavalo,” 43. In a similar way, Sutherland discusses how contemporary transnational Otavalos compare Ecuadorian frameworks of indigenousness with international perceptions about Native Americans to arrive at their own conclusions about the possibilities and limitations of perceptions on indigenousness. Sutherland, “Navigating Indigenousness,” 47-48.
71 Kyle, Transnational Peasants, 135.
national and international prominence of various artistic groups stirred collective pride and stronger identification among communities. At the same time, Otavalos whose economic mobility had been firmly rooted in their ethnic cultural production faced less pressure to assimilate to western clothing since tourists who purchased Otavalo crafts or music saw ethnic dress as an indication of native “authenticity.”

Insistence on retaining Otavalo dress demonstrated conscious resistance to both the aesthetic and cultural biases of mainstream society and to blatant racism. During the 1960s when Otavalos started entering universities,\(^\text{72}\) wearing Otavalo clothing to school became a political act even if it was not intended as one. One Otavalo lawyer remembered having an altercation with his college professor in the 1970s after the professor demanded that he remove his fedora,\(^\text{73}\) which he refused to do on cultural grounds. Radcliffe cites another instance of cultural resistance: in the early 1980s, taunting from his Quito high school classmates motivated an Otavalo youth to return to Otavalo and to take on ethnic dress once again.\(^\text{74}\) Indeed, some saw wearing Otavalo dress as a cultural line in the sand. In the 1980s film Zulay Facing the 21st Century, Zulay Saravino’s father supports

\(^{72}\) Ibid., 132; Meisch, Andean Entrepreneurs, 73.

\(^{73}\) Into the late 1980s, most males still wore fedoras daily. Meisch, Otavalo: Weaving, Costume and the Market, 109.

\(^{74}\) Radcliffe, “The Geographies,” 17.
her education and modernization in some regards, but he is adamant that she should not alter her appearance. “Wherever she may be, let her not change our native customs by either cutting her hair or changing the way she dresses.” These poignant examples of resistance to strong pressure to assimilate illustrate the importance of context when analyzing sartorial decisions. Maintaining Otavalo dress in their forays into new spheres and spaces where they had not been welcomed previously became an explicit political act.

Mirroring adaptive strategies from colonial times, continuing discrimination has led other Otavalos to adopt western dress for practical reasons; specifically to fit or blend in with the dominant group. Meisch discusses an Otavalo couple in 1980s Bogotá, Colombia who retained their ethnic dress but whose children did not. Although the daughters wore Otavalo dress in Ecuador, they preferred to wear western clothes in Bogotá because "they didn’t want to be different from their classmates in Colombia." This is similar to the case of the Shimangeños from Chimborazo province who changed to mestizo clothing to avoid discrimination and mockery when they migrated to the Coast in the 1980s.

Discomfort or fear of discrimination has motivated others to change dress or to

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75 “Ni cortará el pelo (sic), ni se cambiará de vestido. Lo que es nuestra costumbre indígena – aunque esté en el exterior, aunque esté en todas partes (sic).” My translation.

76 Meisch, *Andean Entrepreneurs*, 75.

remove themselves from hostile situations. One Otavalo musician friend who tried working in a factory in New York City in the late 1990s went back to playing music in subways after co-workers repeatedly made fun of his braid. In contrast to the 1950s when Otavalos were just beginning to travel broadly, temporary adoption of western dress in the late 20th century mostly occurred during stays away from Otavalo and were therefore perceived as a practical response rather than a distancing from ethnic identity (except in the case of men). “Passing” is seldom enticing or necessary except in a few cases, such as when Otavalo men are selling wares illegally and want to be able to make a quick getaway by blending in.78

As Indians became more politically active, Otavalo dress became a symbol of political consciousness. Sutherland notes that the indigenous movement was instrumental in re-framing ethnic cultural events from an Indian perspective by emphasizing the Inca origins of certain festivals and in such acts as redirecting roosters (normally awarded to church authorities during fiestas) to native communities.79 One of the most significant political protests in Ecuadorian history was the levantamiento, or uprising, of June 1990. Ecuadorian Indians paralyzed

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78 It would also be unwise and impractical for Otavalo men to wear alpargatas and mid-calf white pants while playing music or selling handicrafts on a winter street in Europe or North America due to the weather. Kyle, *Transnational Peasants*, 181; Meisch, *Andean Entrepreneurs*, 170.

79 Sutherland, “Navigating Indigenousness,” 28-29.
the country for several days, using roadblocks to impede transportation between provinces and occupying the church of Santo Domingo in Quito. Protestors demanded that the national constitution acknowledge Ecuador as not just a multicultural but a *multinational* and *multiethnic* state. The whole country took notice. Media images of masses of once dispossessed Indians from all parts of Ecuador signaled the arrival of the native population as a force to be reckoned with. Ethnic clothing was newly reinvested with subversive power and tied to concrete economic and political victories. The 1998 election of Nina Pacari, an Otavalo woman, to Congress and the 2000 election of an Otavalo sociologist, Mario Conejo, as mayor of Otavalo both reflected and advanced the cause of integration and full citizenship for native Ecuadorians. These politicians and other college educated Otavalos continue to wear ethnic dress. In a recent interview, Luz Maria de la Torre Amaguaña, an Otavalo professor who teaches at UCLA, discussed the significance of her use of ethnic dress. For her, ethnic dress is an important symbol of ethnic identity and Indian struggle:

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80 An interesting reminder of the fact that no people can be seen as a monolith is the fact that while this uprising has been seen as a symbol of indigenous solidarity, wealthy Otavalos, while not exactly opposing the uprising, were concerned that the road blocks would impede business. Kyle, *Transnational Peasants*, 141. D’Amico, “Expressivity, Ethnicity and Renaissance in Otavalo,” 45.

81 The 2008 Ecuadorian constitution recognized Ecuador as a multinational state.

82 Incidentally, in terms of the cultural renaissance, Nina Pacari’s given name is María Estela Vega Cornejo. At least one other Otavalo intellectual has taken an indigenous name: Jacinto Conejo is now Ariruma Kowii. It is more common to see Kichwa given names now that it is not banned by the Church.
Our clothing is very important; it is more than a symbol of our spirit. It characterizes us and has permitted us to be recognized throughout the world. At first, many people felt great shame at wearing these clothes. Yet they are integral to the struggle, a feature of our presence, a means to always be flag bearers of this identity. For the men, the ponchos and hats have signified something else, which in the past, was the focus of our denigration and humiliation. The mestizos would throw our hats on the ground, or snatch them away, dismissing the Indigenous men as inhuman. Now the hat is raised as a standard to say, “Here we are; this is how we are. We are different, and being different we want to live together in this great planetary unity.”

Amaguaña’s understanding of dress is characteristic of the generation that came of age in the late 1960s and the early 1970s; for them, dress is partly a symbol of success in overcoming blatant racism. More than this, it is an act of “subject-formation” that embodies the multi-national state they have fought to create. Use of ethnic dress, through its connection to a pre-Columbian ancestry, epitomizes patriotism and expands notions of good citizenship by valorizing Indian traditional communal solidarities over the mestizo/modern ethic of rationality and individualism.

The trajectory I have been describing has profoundly impacted Otavalo youth. Like younger generations of minorities in the U.S. who have reaped the

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benefits of the battles fought by their parents and other ancestors, Otavalo youth enjoy more opportunities and more freedom to experience culture in a less politicized way. While not entirely surprised when they encounter discrimination, they are also not emotionally scarred like previous generations who learned their “place” in the spacial order the hard way – whether on the sidewalk, or in buses, or in classrooms. In contrast to the musical groups of the 1970s that were necessarily more politically conscious about uplifting native culture, the inter-generational musical groups of the 1990s, which Meisch credits with helping to instill pride in “urban Indians” to resist acculturation of dress or hair, are rooted in another social and political reality. While some of their music touches upon issues of social justice, its content and style are not based solely on a social justice imperative. The previous generation’s more overt cultural activism is now manifested in less political ways. Although perhaps their cultural commitment disappoints some, Sutherland notes that Otavalo music groups like the famous Charijayac have increased teenage interest in learning to play Andean music and instruments. In so doing, they foster cultural pride along with economic

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85 Meisch, Andean Entrepreneurs, 138.

86 Sutherland, “Navigating Indigenousness,” 63. Interestingly, Charijayac, who used ribbons to tie their loose hair in the 1990s album called Cielo Rosa, inspired many young Otavalos to begin wearing ponytails instead of braiding their hair. Meisch, Andean Entrepreneurs, 142. Although to a western eye, wearing a long ponytail or braid is just a stylistic decision, cutting one’s hair short is currently a much greater transgression than adopting western clothes, at least for Otavalo males who were raised to wear long hair. Its importance may be gauged by the fact that the military service does not require Indian men to cut their hair. I should note that while I do not personally know any Otavalo men who have cut their hair, they do exist. These men do not deny
Prosperity.

Personal experiences in this new and presumably more plural period show that perceptions take a long time to change. In 1996, while shopping at the supermarket, a female Otavalo professor at an upscale university in Quito who wore ethnic dress was approached by a mestiza woman who offered her a job as a domestic worker. Not one to turn down good work, the professor let the woman know that if prepared to pay the equivalent of the salary she was earning at the university, she might consider her offer! On campus, the professor’s clothing only further legitimated her as an authority on Andean culture. In the supermarket, however, the mestiza woman automatically associated the professor's Otavalo dress as a marker of lower socioeconomic class and offered her servility. Otavalos who are still seen as marginalized, as Other, undoubtedly experience a full spectrum of objectifying behaviors on a daily basis.

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Part 1 of this thesis has analyzed the hybrid and changing nature of Otavalo dress as shaped by sociopolitical context. Roces and Edwards' argument that dress can be viewed as a text, to be interpreted in different ways even within a given historical period, is especially valid for the Otavalo. Because they have

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long straddled and navigated different socioeconomic, geographic and intellectual realms, Otavalos' decisions about dress have meant different things to those who came of age during the *huasipungo* era, during the 1970s when Otavalos were involved in pan-Indian struggles to revalorize their culture, or in the 1990s when traveling abroad had become commonplace.

Part 2 will explore how the increasingly heterogeneous Otavalo community of the 20th and 21st centuries has interpreted the constitutive role of dress vis-à-vis Otavalo identity. Otavalo males' adoption of contemporary western dress, which is widely accepted, permits them to integrate into other cultures. Paradoxically, it signals not a loss of their Indian identity but greater freedom to express that identity. Until recently, Otavalo women have not had the same freedom. Although they frequently adopt western dress while abroad, they tend to take up ethnic dress when they return to Ecuador. While Otavalo women choose to maintain ethnic dress as a constitutive part of their identity, it is not a decision made in a vacuum. Unlike men, women have been expected to serve as cultural custodians and consequently have faced community disapproval when they have altered their dress. According to some Otavalo women, gendered standards of dress are indicative of the greater leeway that men enjoy in terms of participating in intercultural romantic relationships. However, in the past decade, urban Otavalo women have begun to alternate between ethnic and western dress in

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public. Part 2 will discuss women’s ethnic dress as a form of alternative modernity and social control.

Part 2 will also discuss the dress practices of an increasingly heterogeneous Otavalo population. In the last decade, young urban Otavalo women’s sartorial practices have begun to challenge the male-female sartorial divide. Their adoption of western dress on the streets of Otavalo as well as abroad indicates that the traditional dichotomy between men and women is not sufficient as an analytical tool since womanhood is experienced differently based on context, location and economics. In some cases, urban women’s sartorial expressions may bear more of a resemblance to men’s than to rural or older women. Although an “Otavalo community” does exist in general terms, there are actually several communities based on locality and affected, however subtly, by local transnational communities and by socioeconomic distinctions.

**Part 2**

**Male Dress as Alternative Modernity: Reframing the Debate on Authenticity from the Inside**

Rather than debate the false dichotomy of “authenticity” versus modernity, Otavalos are engaged in a discussion about how to maintain a meaningful Otavalo identity, or cultural authenticity, within modernity. The role that aspects of culture, like dress, play in a modern Otavalo identity is complex. The adoption of western clothing is not necessarily an insidious process of re-colonization by western
culture; nor does the use of ethnic clothing necessarily signal authentic respect for and commitment to indigenous identity. Years ago, I listened as a group of Otavalos censured an Otavalo woman who admitted to wearing ethnic clothing only because it gave her legitimacy and allowed her to stand out in her milieu of non-Otavalos. Her true intentions exposed her as opportunistic and if not ignorant, then at least disrespectful of her culture. In contrast, someone who opts to wear contemporary western clothing may be steeped in indigenous culture in other ways. I know several young Otavalo males who wear contemporary western clothing, speak Kichwa, have studied at or worked with an alternative indigenous school in Quito, practice native spirituality and maintain close ties to kin in Otavalo or live there themselves. One cannot assume that Otavalos who visually blend into mainstream culture by wearing contemporary western clothes have abandoned their indigenous identity. While ethnic dress constitutes part of culture, wearing this dress does not invest one with cultural authenticity. This section examines how Otavalo men retained cultural authenticity even as they have stopped wearing ethnic dress on a daily basis.

During the 1980s, Otavalo males who adopted western dress were criticized for wanting to assimilate. Although Kyle claimed in 2000 that “there is no great sanction against those who want to adopt non-traditional lifestyles as
long as they maintain respect for some of the core values and mores,” other indicators betray more complex feelings about change, particularly dress. Colloredo-Mansfeld remarks that in the late 1990s, “teenage girls … claimed that boys want to dress like white-mestizos.” Some migrants from the community of Peguche who moved to Otavalo or Quito were seen as “preoccup[ied] with new clothes and consumer goods” and called “indios plásticos,” plastic Indians. This kind of internal differentiation might have resulted in a fracturing of Otavalo identity along lines of region, class, gender or urban/rural residence.

Today, however, an Otavalo man wearing western dress is no longer considered an “indio revestido,” a derogatory term for Indians who try to deny their culture by dressing as mestizos. Wearing a braid (or at the very least, a long ponytail) marks Otavalo men who have crossed over sartorially as having resisted full assimilation. Whatever their initial reasoning for abandoning ethnic dress on a daily basis, when pressed, men sometimes defend their cultural authenticity. For example, one Otavalo male who was accused of losing his culture when he


90 Ibid., 205; Kyle, *Transnational Peasants*, 180-1. Interestingly, this antagonistic back and forth plays itself out between different Indian groups as well. Cutting one’s braid marks “decultured” indigenous men. The terms *mocho* and *guangudo* are insults traded among Indian groups: *mocho* referring to Indians who have short Western style hair and *guangudo* to those with long braids. Colloredo-Mansfeld, *The Native Leisure Class*, 86.

abandoned ethnic dress protested that “indigenous identity depends more on *shungo* or heart than white pants and a poncho.”

Otavalo males have been able to cross over sartorially because of the close ties that Otavalo culture has to markers of modernity. As one would expect in a community that has embraced modernity’s call to accelerated economic growth, a walk through some Otavalo villages is filled with the sounds of heavy machinery in place of traditional looms. Otavalo cultural productions that are made with this modern equipment, however, are inspired by pre-Columbian designs and local scenes as well as designs with more of a western aesthetic like the patterns of Escher. Newer technology has accustomed Otavalos to modernity's “disembedding of social life from local context,” where absent relations are sometimes more important than face to face ones. They travel and settle abroad regularly and they are a notable presence on the Internet and social networking sites like Hi5, Facebook and Otavalo Amigos, the very first social networking site for the Otavalo community, which debuted in 2009. Otavalos use such new technology to foment their own culture by posting news, pictures of cultural events, cultural information and Kichwa lessons accessible to all without boundaries of time or space. Their success as international entrepreneurs and migrants makes it seem more natural for them to adopt contemporary western

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dress than it would be for Indian men who come from isolated agricultural communities.

In hindsight, Otavalo males who adopted western dress in the late 20th century were at the vanguard of shaping a new vision of Otavalo identity. Rather than reading men’s western dress as a denigration of ethnic dress, one might consider the ways in which it has allowed Otavalo men to integrate into mainstream society and challenge notions about indigenous people. If western society has habitually stereotyped Indians due to their dress, the act of shattering those preconceptions by using western clothes is actually radical. Although I personally like Otavalo dress and do not think it should be necessary for Otavalos to change their clothing in order to effect this change in perspective, their wearing western clothes challenges westerners’ colonized gaze, making them more familiar and less Other. This can be interpreted as an act of decolonization, not of themselves but of outsiders whose preconceived notions about Indianness have not let them see past dress.

By visually blending into mainstream culture without the intention to assimilate, Otavalo men have also been – perhaps unconsciously but nonetheless actively – engaged in a process of normalizing diversity. Normalizing diversity requires going beyond mere incorporation of marginal populations to challenging stereotypes and valuing differences. Ethnic dress can present an obstacle to challenging stereotypes in a world where these run the gamut from denigration of
Indians as inferior to exaltation of them as nobler than other groups. It should not be necessary for any ethnic group to change dress in order to normalize diversity. However, I am suggesting that the act of blending obviates the “othering” tendency and accelerates the process of mutual understanding between cultures.

It is important that Otavalo men themselves made the decision to change dress (unlike in Indian boarding schools in the United States which forced western dress on Indians). Their steadfast association with the larger Otavalo community and their continuation of cultural practices show that adoption of western dress may actually be a positive form of alternative modernity which embraces modernity in select ways and to the extent that it fosters their community’s strength and well-being.

Paradoxically, the success of two generations of Otavalos in crossing geographic, economic, and cultural boundaries has given rise to renewed interest among today’s teens in preserving ethnic dress. In the 1990s, some young Otavalo migrants blamed the older generation of males for abandoning ethnic dress. Kyle wrote that young people “feel like something is being lost but at the same time, no young man is willing to be the only one wearing the full traditional garb, what may be considered, in another cultural context, as being ‘square’.” To overcome this reticence among males to wear ethnic dress, in 2000, a group of


95 Ibid., 181
young people organized a gala ball billed as a celebration of Otavalo culture and they required Otavalo youth to wear ethnic clothing. The first year many young men were at a loss. Those who were denied access because they had not taken the requirement seriously scrambled off in search of ethnic clothing. The mad dash was prompted by the fact that today, many young Otavalo men do not own the white pants and poncho that constitutes male ethnic dress. As reported in *Runakuna,*\(^6\) having to resort to borrowing these articles of clothing from elders made these young men acutely aware that they had lost their connection to a hallmark of Otavalo identity: dress. One of the coordinators of the ball noted that the loss of Otavalo dress and the concomitant need to borrow these items made the event seem “like a costume party.”\(^7\) The ball was a shrewd experiment in cultural revitalization which has now become an annual event.

In subsequent years, party-goers realized that they had to wear ethnic clothing and on the fourth year, Foundation Runakay youth baptized it with a Kichwa title – *Runakay.* Organizers added artistic and cultural components, including a ritual ceremony, a talent contest, theatre, dance and music. The website OtavalosOnline.com posts photographs and information about this event to its website just as it would for festivals that are based on pre-Columbian

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\(^6\) *Runakuna* is the Kichwa term for people or mankind but is also used to identify Indian peoples specifically.

equinox and solstice festivals. This is significant because this “black tie” event is being treated in the same way as age-old events, which were reinvested with meaning in the 1980s.\textsuperscript{98} It is also significant that, through discussions about these formal events, the editors of Runakuna discovered that there was at least one similar event held 15 years ago in Ibarra. Loss of certain aspects of Otavalo culture has led Otavalos to compensate by revitalizing other aspects of their culture. In the late 1980s, Prelorán notes how a loss of Kichwa language skills on the part of upper class Otavalos resulted in an increased usage of ethnic clothing:

Students who are more proficient in Spanish than Quichua tend to emphasize their ethnic markers; this tendency has an integrative function. For example, all eight of my informants wore the “poncho” and the traditional Otavaleño hat, two ethnic markers that are less often used among rural teenagers who are fluent in Quichua.\textsuperscript{99}

Runakuna editors end by saying

…what is important is that the young people continue to have this type of activity which demonstrates their concern for maintaining their culture as well as adding fresh new elements. These may include foreign elements that adapt themselves to new traditions without interfering with established practices that form part of our proud runa culture.\textsuperscript{100}

\textsuperscript{98} Wibbelsman notes that while Otavalos celebrate equinoxes and solstices, the designation of these festivals as raymis is borrowed from Bolivian and Peruvian Inca sources. For example, Pawkar Raymi, which coincides with the spring equinox and with carnaval, which is celebrated throughout Ecuador, was not known as such until late in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Michelle Wibbelsman, Ritual Encounters: Otavalan Modern and Mythic Community (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 50-51.


\textsuperscript{100} Redacción Runakuna, “Los wampras ponen su parte,” 35.
These words echo Kyle’s statement about adaptations being allowed so long as they respect traditional Otavalo culture. While this sounds inclusive, there is obviously a limit to what would “interfere with established practices,” however elusive it is.

**Audience Appropriate Attire**

Negotiation of standards regarding ethnic dress is especially complicated when played out in public realms for outside audiences. Articles of clothing that signify one thing inside the Otavalo community sometimes symbolize very different things to Otavalos themselves when they are worn in front of an outside audience. Blunders point to the lack of sartorial consensus in a heterogeneous population that, due to its millenarian history, is frequently homogenized.
Some Otavalos perceive the mixing of western and ethnic dress as distasteful in certain venues. In the late 1990s, an Otavalo commented that he thought the congresswoman Nina Pacari, who sometimes wears sweaters instead of or underneath her fachalina, did not look elegant enough for her very public profile (see Image 5). While fleece sweaters or jean jackets have been in vogue among younger women since the 1990s, some Otavalos may feel that it is more appropriate for a publicly visible woman of her stature to represent the culture more formally by using a fachalina.101


101 Other ethnic groups also make sartorial decisions based on their audience. (East) Indian women in America, for example, note that they use more traditional clothing for Indian get-togethers and more Westernized attire when meeting American friends. Mary A. Littrell and Jennifer Paff Ogle, “Women, Migration, and the Experience of Dress,” in Dress Sense: Emotional and Sensory Experiences of the Body and Clothes, ed. Clay Johnson and Helen Bradley Foster (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 129.
The same sentiment might be expressed about a man who wears fedora, white pants and _alpargatas_ but finishes off his ensemble with a jean or business jacket. This would be the equivalent of a western woman wearing formal attire with sneakers instead of dress shoes.

Sartorial decisions at mixed (_mestizo_ and Indian) events that reinforce outsiders’ impression that native cultures are static also come under scrutiny. In the late 1990s, a middle aged man attended a cultural event where the Otavalo woman who served as MC wore a style of felt hat used in the early part of the 20th century (pictured in Image 6). When pressed, the man, who himself retained ethnic dress, remarked that he thought this touch smacked too much of “folklorizing” of Otavalo culture. What may appear as “authentic” to an outside audience that conflates authenticity with a “traditional” or “unchanging” culture was to him something of a “masquerade or performance of identity.” On the other hand, he would presumably not object to the use of “traditional dress” at _Runakay_ since it is an event geared toward Otavalos who are celebrating a revitalized, not static, Otavalo culture (see Image 6).

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102 This phrase was used to describe (East) Indian women who took up an idealized extravagant Indian dress in the 1980s. Maynard, _Dress and Globalisation_, 80.
Contradicting interpretations expose the breadth of opinions about sartorial decisions and the complexity of interpreting use of ethnic dress. For example, some have seen men in Otavalo musical groups who normally wear
western dress but are featured in European newspapers with ethnic dress as “folklorizing” by taking advantage of an exoticized elegant look for westerners. In contrast, Sutherland critiques the “instrumentalist analyses” of scholars who reduce Otavalo use of Pan-Indian or Inca imagery to economic self-interest and argues that their transnational experiences allow them to negotiate aspects of their culture. Moreover, rather than trying to meet Western expectations that they dress “traditionally,” Otavalo music groups may simply consider it appropriate to wear their “best” for performances.

**Mujercitas: Women as Custodians of Culture?**

Despite the elaborate nature of women’s ethnic dress, the *Runakuna* article about *Runakay* does not liken women’s attire at the event to a costume party. This is because young or old, Otavalo women tend to retain ethnic dress

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103 Sutherland, “Navigating Indigenousness,” 44.

104 Women’s clothing is composed of the *anaku* (a set of wool wraps – one inner white one called a *yurak anaku* and one outer dark one called a *yana anaku* – which fold into each other on the sides) held together by a set of sashes called *chumbikuna*. The *mama chumbi*, which is usually wide, sturdy and red, holds the *anakus* in place. It is covered by a narrow, longer and more flexible *chumbi* called a *wawa chumbi*. Incidentally, since the word *wawa* means baby, it is the same size as the *chumbi* used to swaddle infants. Although material may differ, blouses are always white with single-toned, two-toned, or multi-colored embroidery in a semicircle along the chest and back as well as around the circumference of the sleeves. The collar and sleeves are made of a wide layer of lace or eyelet that, like the *chumbi* and embroidery, allow for variation. Women usually wear cream or dark colored *fachalinas*. Women wear dark synthetic (or, more rarely, *cabuya* soled) blue or black *alpargatas*. They wrap their hair in a *cinta* which looks like a narrow *wawa chumbi*, although some women opt to braid their hair or simply wear a ponytail. Jewelry varies but it is rare to see an Otavalo woman without *wallcas* and *maki watana*, although young women tend to wear fewer strands of *wallcas* and shorter *maki watana* than older women. Baby girls wear the same outfit as their mothers except for the *mama chumbi* which they begin wearing around age seven (Meisch, *Otavalo: Weaving, Costume and the Market*, 143) and the *cinta* (which they cannot often wear because their hair is still growing out); instead, colored yarn is used to braid their hair until it grows long enough to don a *cinta*.
even when they add western twists and even if they wear western dress while abroad. Neither this nor women’s notable absence from the clothing advertisement discussed above means that women are marginalized from modernity. Although women have less opportunity to travel than men, Meisch notes that “Otavaleñas are not shrinking violets…” They hold positions of power in academia and politics; they actively participate in social media networks and indigenous media; and they study, work and live abroad. Despite some instances of sartorial transgression, the expectation that women retain ethnic dress has been indicative of a double standard for men and women in terms of the freedom to express their Otavalo identity. In the past decade, however, most young urban Otavalo

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105 Sutherland, “Navigating Indigenousness,” 79. Sutherland attributes this to women’s gender roles and the difficulty of obtaining visas while Meisch notes that women are often chaperoned during their stays abroad. Meisch, Andean Entrepreneurs, 215-216. This has not been my experience. While three of my Otavalo female friends have a family network in the United States, they all live on their own.

106 Meisch, Andean Entrepreneurs, 217.

107 The gender issues I will discuss do not negate the fact that retention of women’s dress is also facilitated because it is widely admired on an aesthetic level. As has been discussed, Otavalos have historically been held up as the model native group due to what is perceived to be their clean and elegant appearance and entrepreneurial work ethic. Both contemporary scholars and tourists alike remark on the elegance and “quiet dignity” of Otavalo clothing. In the film Zulay Facing the Twenty First Century, anthropologist Mabel Preloran remarks, “I think those skirts of yours are so beautiful; they are so elegant.” Zulay Facing the Twenty First Century, produced by Jorge Prelorán, Mabel Prelorán and Zulay Saravino, Hollywood: Sunset Digital Video, 2000, videocassette. Unlike the ethnic dress of other indigenous groups, such as the pollera worn in southern Ecuador and other parts of the Andes (which in terms of shape resembles the western “poodle skirt” that was popular in the 1950s), the Otavalo anaku is closer to the western aesthetic where long gowns, generally used for more formal occasions, are considered elegant. Otavalo women’s clothing also has historical cachet because it is said to closely resemble that of noble Inca women. Another western influence on Otavalo women’s clothing relates to the aesthetic of the hour glass shape. Older women wrapped their chumbis over their hips while younger teenage women began to wrap their chumbis around their waist in order to “show off a ‘whiter’ feminine
women have begun to alternate between ethnic and western dress in public, although it is still rare for them to completely abandon ethnic dress. The fact that rural women still adhere to ethnic dress and that some emigrant Otavalo women tend to wear ethnic dress only during special occasions problematizes the analytical category “women” when dealing with a heterogeneous Otavalo population.

Toa Maldonado Ruiz, e-mail to author, June 21, 2010.

108 Toa Maldonado Ruiz, e-mail to author, June 21, 2010.
In Ecuador, Otavalo women have long worn altered forms of ethnic dress in circumscribed venues. During *Inti Raymi*, men wear a variety of costumes - from the attire of Mariachi musicians to cross-dressing as women. Otavalo women do not stray too far; they may wear masks and fedoras with ribbons (see Image 7) or use the ethnic dress of another indigenous group, the Cayambeñas.

Image 7. Otavalo women bringing in the *castillo* at the 2009 *Inti Raymi* in Sabadell, Spain. *Castillo* provisions are given out during the festivities. Although men also help to make *castillos* and share its bounty, women tend to guard the communal food spread and make *chicha*, or corn beer, for the occasion. Source: Otavalos Online
Similarly, in dance groups, which Otavalo women usually dominate, they wear historical Otavalo ethnic dress (as pictured in Image 6) and that of other ethnic groups (mostly Cayambeñas).

Weddings have also historically served as spaces where special or non-traditional female clothing were allowed, subverting the implicit rule that men are the only ones who can radically alter their dress. In the 1940s, for example, grooms wore ikat, or traditional tie-dyed, ponchos while

109 Interestingly, there tend to be more mestizo men in dance groups than Indian men, who usually accompany as musicians.
brides took on the *chola* skirt and blouse.110 Up until the 1960s, brides wore *anakus* but the 1980s saw a rise in rented white western wedding dresses. This trend was possibly used to demonstrate an increase in the community’s international travel and wealth. While some brides still wear plain ethnic dress with a white veil, since the 1990s, many brides wear a hybrid wedding dress: white non-wool *anakus* (see Image 8).111 The hybrid style is interesting because it is another example of how Otavalos have adapted to co-existing cultures. The veil and the bride’s dress suggest that the Otavalo value the Christian association between the color white and virginity. Yet, their ethnic dress emphasizes their ethnic identity and indicates that their faith is most likely syncretic. For example, once the marriage has been consummated, it is likely that the couple will partake of the *ñawi mallai*, a native cleansing ceremony in which the godmother will wash the bride’s face, hands, arms and legs with rose petals and stinging nettle and the godfather will do the same for the groom while counseling them on how to be a good husband and wife.112

110 Meisch, “He Gave Her Sandals,” 164.

111 Ibid., 166.

Since at least the 1990s, the most dramatic use of western dress by Otavalo women in Ecuador has been in basketball. Women may be seen on public basketball courts wearing western jogging suits. If they do not wear *cintas* to wrap their hair, they have no visible identity markers. During *Inti Raymi* and *Pawkar Raymi*, women wear western uniforms in basketball competitions (see Image 9). Visually, the female basketball players achieve equal footing with men due to their common dress styles. They also achieve some level of parallelism because they are competing based on sports skills while the team’s godmother, who wears
formal ethnic dress, may take part in a competition against other godmothers based on aesthetic and cultural criteria, the way they do in beauty pageants. Image 10 reinforces this parallelism because women take center stage based on skill and men’s roles are reversed as they become passive onlookers.

Other than these venues, public opinion has limited the extent to which Otavalo women are able to feel comfortable altering ethnic dress. Meisch cites

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113 Rogers, “Spectacular Bodies,” 63.

114 Gendered language also influences women’s predisposition to wear ethnic clothes. Otavalo men sometimes refer to young Otavalo women in ethnic dress as mujercitas, a Spanish diminutive that translates as “little women.” The term evokes a pride and tenderness toward the women. At the same time, this term may highlight the obverse; that an Otavalo woman who does
the example of a young woman who, in 1989, wore a green *anaku* in public and was “met by stares and murmers of disapproval from other *indigenas* as she walked in Otavalo. The thought of ‘what will people say?’ is a powerful mechanism of social control.”

In the early 2000s, Sacha Rosero, a young Otavalo male who resides in Barcelona and founded the website Otavalos Online, said that women in the Diaspora who feel trapped by tradition are just experiencing personal complexes. It’ll always be tougher for the women. But really, they’re the ones who really guard our culture. They wear the clothes, they raise our kids, they speak Quichua. You know if they stopped wearing the vestimenta [ethnic dress] at our celebrations, we wouldn’t be Otavalos anymore. [But] they have to do it because they want to. It has to come from them, they have to want to … much of our culture is riding on the women.

Although Rosero’s comments seem conservative, the fact that he qualifies his remarks by saying “at our celebrations,” shows that he does not think Otavalo women must restrict themselves to ethnic dress all the time. However, his comments remain contradictory on two levels. First, women’s decision to adopt not wear ethnic dress may not be considered a *mujercita*. As such, she is distant from Otavalo cultural norms and may not be shown the same deference as a woman in ethnic dress. I do not mean that Otavalo men mistreat Otavalo women who wear western dress but that the use of the term for *anaku*-clad women may implicitly marginalize the former.

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116 Sutherland, “Navigating Indigenousness,” 79.
ethnic dress, if only at celebrations, will not be totally voluntary if they feel that it signifies their commitment to preserving Otavalo culture. Although it is not unreasonable for women to wear ethnic dress during celebrations, the fact remains that except for ceremonies or events like Runakay, men are not expected to do the same. His matter of fact assertion that “[i]t’ll always be tougher for the women” supports Marisol de la Cadena’s claim about the subordinate role of women. She writes, “indigenous women are the last link in the chain of social subordination: they are the least ethnically or socially mobile, and their Indian identity approaches closure.” Secondly, if men’s abandonment of ethnic dress did not result in the annihilation of Otavalo culture, a similar trend among women would presumably not have such dire results. Rosero’s comment suggests a facile underestimation of the breadth of Otavalo cultural expression, which is surprising given that I consider him to be part of the vanguard I discussed earlier. A more recent attempt to alter Otavalo dress is framed as modernizing but illustrates some women’s continued hesitation about taking up western dress. Noticing that more Otavalo are wearing western clothing as a result of their transnational lifestyles,


118 I collaborated with Sacha Rosero on the Otavalos Online website in the past and he has been very helpful to me whenever I have needed references for my research. I would have liked to ask him about his comments and interview him further about this topic but this would have required Institutional Review Board approval and I did not have enough time to carry this out in time to submit this thesis.
designer Rebeca Arellano recently started an ethnic clothing line that includes dramatic changes in color and textiles (see Image 11). Although the cost of these new designs are prohibitive (up to $800 while women’s ethnic dress normally starts at $130), tradition also impedes their adoption. Thirty year old Rocio Teanga says it is not "very normal" to wear these new styles.\textsuperscript{119} Runakay’s emphasis on ethnic dress also demonstrates that retention and revitalization of culture is at a peak and that too much variation or change may not be welcome.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image11.jpg}
\caption{Women wearing Rebeca Arellano designs. The wedding dress appears to be an \textit{anaku} made of satin or silk. Source: Runakay.net}
\end{figure}

Until very recently, Otavalo women’s experiences with dress have supported Marisol de la Cadena’s argument that it is more difficult for women to acculturate because their identity is more fixed. However, Otavalo women are unique because they feel pressure to retain ethnic dress even though they are socially mobile. Although this seems paradoxical, it relates to the fact that Otavalo social

Image 12. Tantajuy Ñusta at the 2003 Pawkar Raymi ceremony. Source: Otavalos Online
mobility has been linked to their cultural production,\textsuperscript{120} which is in turn legitimated by ethnic clothing. Otavalo dress has also had semiotic importance for women who have established themselves as cultural authorities in academic and political realms and is reinforced by Otavalo beauty pageants and other celebrations where women in ethnic dress are given the title of ñusta, or princess (see Image 12). Since young Otavalo men have abandoned ethnic dress except for special occasions, women’s use of ethnic dress becomes an even stronger symbol of Otavalo identity.

The expectation that women act as culture bearers reflects other limitations on their freedom to experience the world. As Sutherland notes, the “gendered division of culture-bearing labor means that it is seen as positive for men to change, progress, and adapt, while some women are explicitly encouraged not to do so.”\textsuperscript{121} One of Sutherland’s informants noted that women are more sheltered in terms of their romantic partners and are encouraged and expected to marry Otavalos while men often have romantic encounters with foreign women and are not admonished to remain endogamous.\textsuperscript{122} Meisch notes that since 1985, when the

\textsuperscript{120} Kyle, \textit{Transnational Peasants}, 177.

\textsuperscript{121} Sutherland, “Navigating Indigenousness,” 80.

\textsuperscript{122} Notice that these intercultural unions are with foreigners, not mestizos, about which even less is written. The wife of the native mayor of Otavalo is mestiza and I know of at least two marriages between mestizo males and Otavalo women. In one remarkable incident in the 1990s, I remember hearing that a young mestizo male had been assaulted by the family of his Otavalo girlfriend because the family did not approve of their intercultural union. This incident surprised me because of its rarity and because it was a case of Otavalo-on-mestizo aggression.
“post-wasipungu” generation came of age, there have been a significant number of romantic relationships between Otavalo men and the foreign women who come to Otavalo to have romantic or sexual encounters with native men. Otavalo men who travel abroad also date foreign women who are sometimes seen as economic resources when they pay for outings or provide housing. While Meisch asserts that fleeting relationships are prevalent, there are permanent unions, mostly between Otavalo men and foreign women. In Ecuador, it is not as common for foreign men to have romantic relationships with Otavalo women (the literature does not discuss the experience of Otavalo women abroad). Despite having more relative freedom than mestiza women, Meisch notes that the Otavalo community has protected women due to the fear that they may be taken advantage of sexually or become pregnant. While some women clearly feel inhibited, it is a testament to the heterogeneity of Otavalo culture that some families are in favor of giving their daughters the same freedom of association as men. While Kyle notes that women are expected not only to be the Otavalo “cultural anchor” but also to accept their partners’ romantic relationships with foreign women,” he tempers this by noting that most of his informants would not mind either their sons or their

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123 Kyle, Transnational Peasants, 178; Meisch, Andean Entrepreneurs, 170.
124 Meisch, Andean Entrepreneurs, 214-216.
In addition to these issues of gender disparity, women’s more conservative sartorial practices indicate hesitancy about how to integrate tradition and modernity. As Otavalos become increasingly transnational – succeeding in arenas unrelated to culture and making permanent homes in other parts of the world – they struggle to decide what aspects of their culture they should maintain. The outdated language used in one Otavalo online article demonstrates the difficulty of translating the symbolism of ethnic dress for a non-agrarian, postcolonial generation of Otavalos. The author notes that women wear the *uma watana* "in a pyramidal shape in order to protect themselves from the sun when they go to reap a harvest or work the land" and that the *maki watana* gives "women power in their hands so that they can work the land."  

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A Runakuna article entitled “Fashion Takes Hold of Kichwa Women” illustrates how women’s limited sartorial range is translated into a type of alternative modernity.

The first half of the article discusses how Otavalo travel abroad has allowed them to transform the landscape of the city of Otavalo by buying homes or building them using modern architectural styles. The article goes on to note that Otavalo men have also transformed local dress by importing western styles. While women have not drastically altered their dress, foreign influences have helped them “to improve and re-create” female ethnic dress by

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using new fabrics, colors, and combinations of each. These western adaptations result in a variety of adaptations to ethnic dress: “sports, casual, traditional, urban, formal, festive, among others,” although no examples of these styles are shown. The article, written by a woman, concludes by earnestly emphasizing how women’s changing fashion demonstrates their integration into modernity:

… one can see that fashion is not static; that Otavalo women’s clothes are not fossils; they are in continuous change and transformation. Native women’s clothing begins to reinvent itself and adapt to a global world. This is one form of cultural subsistence by which women continue to wear traditional dress while adopting the aesthetic tendencies of global fashion.

By explaining their integration of global fashion onto “traditional” dress as a culturally sustainable practice, Maldonado Ruiz frames ethnic dress as an alternative modernity and avoids discussing the societal pressure to serve as cultural custodians. To some extent, women’s use of ethnic dress certainly qualifies as an alternative modernity. It expresses the primacy of their cultural values over those of western culture.

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128 Ibid. My translation.

129 Ibid. My translation.

130 The image that accompanies the article is a stylized photograph of an Otavalo woman who, but for the sunglasses, purse and graphics, is wearing ethnic dress (see Image 13). Like Blackfoot women in the nineteenth century who used calico and trade cloth with traditional patterns and designs, until recently, Otavalo women have been more comfortable making subtle changes but not abandoning ethnic dress altogether (see Image 14).

However, the use of such language hides the disparity between men and women’s cultural expression. Given the earnest way in which the author discusses women’s fashion innovations, I believed her unaware that the title of her article suggests the lack of control women have over sartorial decisions. Her use of the word “takes hold” (apodera) implies that women have been possessed by a fashion craze rather than that they are consciously forming an alternative modernity. While men are described as importing foreign styles as part of their transformation of local culture, women’s adaptations are conservative in comparison. Once again, it is women who must be mindful of shepherding ethnic
dress safely into a globalized world.

Maldonado Ruíz’s apparently uncritical take on women's ethnic dress became more complex after I found her Facebook profile where she is pictured wearing both ethnic and western dress. Not only does she wear western dress on the streets of Otavalo, but she wears ethnic dress on a snowy evening in a foreign country. She even wears Shuar\textsuperscript{132} ethnic dress at a Shuar wedding, which is even more startling because it indicates something more than the typical performance-related assimilation of another ethnicity (although I have never seen Otavalo women take on Amazonian ethnic dress even in dance performances). I e-mailed Maldonado Ruíz, a college student who has been involved in intercultural youth activities, about her varied dress styles and her decision not to include these alternative choices in her article. She explained that she had written the article a while ago and consciously wrote it to counter static anthropological interpretations of Indian dress.\textsuperscript{133} She also noted that the editors chose the accompanying photograph and title, which she originally remembers including the phrase “women’s aesthetics.” She explained that she was raised wearing both western and ethnic dress and has experienced criticism from all sides as a result.

At the turn of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century when she was in high school, Otavalo girls were critical of her decision not to wear ethnic dress even though this had been her

\textsuperscript{132} The Shuar are a native ethnic group from the Ecuadorian Amazon.

\textsuperscript{133} Toa Maldonado Ruiz, e-mail to author, June 20, 2010.
practice since she was a child when relatives who lived abroad gave her western clothing as gifts. In 2000, at the age of 18, she moved to Canada and continued alternating styles, but Ecuadorian mestizos offended her by exoticizing her use of ethnic dress, expecting her to participate in a cultural presentation when she was only expressing an aspect of her identity. After her two year stay in Canada, she decided to stop wearing ethnic dress and use it only for special occasions, which she continues to consider important for Otavalo cultural identity. Rather than a conscious obligation to serve as cultural custodian, Malonado Ruiz interprets continued use of ethnic dress as a symbol of ethnic pride, noting that other native groups have copied aspects of Otavalo dress or have grown their hair long like Otavalo men. Interestingly, her decision to abandon ethnic dress on a daily basis was related to her weight gain and pale complexion which led Otavalo to joke that she now seemed like a “costumed gringa” in ethnic dress. She says that today, most urban Otavalo women wear both western and ethnic dress to such an extent that the streets of Otavalo really are a fashion show of sorts, although it is still very rare for women to completely abandon Otavalo dress. As for her Shuar dress, Maldonado Ruiz explained that she and her Shuar friend exchanged clothing during that wedding, assuring me that it was a very special moment that was possible only due to the very close relationship she has with members of the

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134 Toa Maldonado Ruiz, e-mail to author, June 28, 2010.

135 Toa Maldonado Ruiz, e-mail to author, June 21, 2010.
Shuar community. When I pressed her about feeling pressurized to retain ethnic dress, Maldonado Ruiz only noted that while she has heard that Otavalo men prefer women to wear *anakus*, women are not criticized for taking on western dress since they do so by alternating it with ethnic dress. Maldonado Ruiz’s story is a remarkable example of why it is impossible to speak of “women’s dress” in a general way given the varied experiences of Otavalo women. Although they share a common gender with some concomitant expectations, women constitute a heterogeneous population that uses clothes differently depending on residence and socioeconomic status as well as other highly personal circumstances.

Transnational Otavalo women’s experience with ethnic dress must be understood in light of their experience as migrant women, not just as women. If they work fairs and pow wows regularly, it is likely that they continue to wear ethnic dress since these are spaces which welcome Indian ethnicity. On the other hand, some women who work nine-to-five jobs at retail stores or who enter colleges must make a decision about whether to maintain ethnic dress or adopt western attire. Whether they adopt western dress for more flexibility and ease or in order to blend in with their counterparts, this act obscures their identity, even if they do not seek to deny their heritage. Photographs of Otavalo women in western dress on social networking sites, which are easily viewed by many others

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136 It may be awkward, for example, for a saleswoman to reach for boxes in high places on a constant basis while dressed in *anaku*. Also, wool *anakus* can be uncomfortable to wear during the summer months, particularly in humid areas.
in the Otavalo community, demonstrate that they are not attempting to sever ties to their culture.

However intimately connected dress may have been to notions of femininity and as transnational and young urban Otavalo women are proving, it is not necessarily an inextricable part of future Otavalo identity. Speaking of the 1980s, Meisch noted that dressing infants in Otavalo clothes was a way not only of reinforcing their Otavalo identity but also their gender roles. She describes how young boys and girls would mimic the work of their fathers and mothers, respectively. As Otavalo women move farther away from traditional tasks and duties like spinning cotton or washing clothes by hand and into non-traditional fields like education and law, the perception of women and their duties will change. As women take jobs and emigrate on a more permanent basis to other countries, their perception of Indian identity may also be more strongly influenced by local culture or by Native Americans in the United States who by and large do not wear ethnic dress or regalia daily but rather during ceremonies or pow wows. They will probably trade the large white cloth they use to carry their babies on their backs for western-style baby carriers and not necessarily expect their own daughters to wear ethnic dress. Indeed, this is already happening among the Otavalo diaspora in the United States.

**Dress and Socioeconomic Status**

Although Otavalos encompass various socioeconomic groups (poor
farmers; moderately well off weavers and textile producers; wealthy merchants), studies tend to focus on their unique standing as prosperous Indians, making it difficult to ascertain the meaning of dress for lower class Otavalos. It is apparent that while wealthy Otavalos have the choice to change their dress, poor Otavalos are limited by economic and related lifestyle considerations, whether because they cultivate land or are not in social circles that debate the politics of dress. Although all identify as Otavalo, to some extent, socioeconomic differentiation has manifested itself in dress practices.

Some scholars predicted that the high cost of Otavalo dress would lead to abandonment of ethnic dress along class lines. They maintained that wealthy Otavalos would have the money to buy elaborate ethnic dress while poor Otavalos would have to adopt cheaper western dress. Sutherland notes that in the 1970s, entrepreneurs were purposely using ethnic dress to highlight their ethnicity while poor Otavalos were starting to abandon dress due to its cost. Indeed, ethnic dress can be prohibitive; in the 1980s, a hand-spun poncho made on a backstrap loom sold for 3,500 sucres, or $134.61, something only well-off Otavalos could afford. In the late 1980s, Prelorán observed that native dress was becoming a


139 Sutherland does not qualify whether the “indigenous peasants” she refers to are Otavalo. Sutherland, “Navigating Indigenousness,” 26.

status symbol:

Upper class Otavaleños have begun to show interest in cultural preservation; some Otavaleño intellectuals who had partially abandoned their traditional dress and the use of the Quichua language now show signs of reversing that tendency. They consider wearing a traditional costume, which now costs between two and three hundred dollars, is a sign of economic improvement and prestige.141

A decade later, Colloredo-Mansfeld also predicted lower class abandonment of native dress:

In the urbanized/suburbanized future of Otavalo, a clearly marked indigenous identity could become the property of the middle class. Only those with steady and higher than average incomes will consistently wear ponchos and anacus, celebrate baptisms and weddings with feasts of milled-corn soup, pork, and guinea pigs, insist on bilingualism in the schools, and invest in the other more costly trappings of indigenous life. Meanwhile, working-class Otavaleños will make do with mixtures of cheaper mestizo garb and indigenous clothing, attend abbreviated family fiestas, speak “chawpi shimi” (half Quichua-half Spanish), and depend on subsistence plots that have been reduced to kitchen gardens.”142

By and large, however, the literature does not mention that loss of ethnic dress among poor Otavalos has materialized. Since some scholars have noted in passing that poor Otavalos have recently started to abandon western dress, the void in the literature may indicate lack of interest in documenting this trend.


However, the experience of Otavalo males and Maldonado Ruiz’s assertion that urban Otavalo women are now beginning to add western clothes to their repertoire counters scholars’ predictions. Instead of maintaining ethnic dress as a symbol of wealth, the trend has been for transnational and urban Otavalos who have the means to maintain ethnic dress to instead adopt or integrate western dress because it is indicative of a cosmopolitan lifestyle.

There are subtle but real sartorial distinctions between poor and wealthy Otavalos who wear ethnic dress. In the early 1980s, Chavez noted that while Otavalos maintain ties across economic classes, they paid attention to distinctions based on economic attainment, with farm workers perceived as unable to adapt to new ways and commercial weavers associated with upward mobility and versatility.\textsuperscript{143} Chavez noted that commercial weavers wore “clean, very white calf-length pants and a nice poncho” while their women wore elaborately embroidered blouse with fancy lace on the sleeves and across the chest, … [anakus] … made of expensive wool cloth, sometimes imported from Spain, rather than coarse, locally made wool cloth, and shoulder wraps are often velvetine. Instead of plastic or glass beads to wrap around their wrists, many women wear strings of antique coral beads which are highly valued. Village Indians, particularly the agriculturalists, wear basically the same looking dress, but use less expensive materials.\textsuperscript{144}

In the late 1980s, women from prosperous weaving communities wore items

\textsuperscript{143} Chavez, “Commercial Weaving and the Entrepreneurial Ethic,” 88.

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 68-69.
made of velour, velvet or fake fur and sported watches in addition to their *maki watana* – all things which wealthy Otavalos used to communicate their prosperity.\(^\text{145}\) Even wealthy children had more than the two outfits that poor children owned.\(^\text{146}\) The differences may be somewhat less pronounced today but given Maldonado Ruíz’s distinction between the sartorial expression of young urban and rural Otavalo women, the distinctions still seem to be palpable.

**Conclusion: Reflecting on Cultural Authenticity**

On a recent visit to the Runakay website (http://www.runakay.ec/), I was intrigued to find a communication which read, in part:

> One of Runakay Foundation’s objectives is to carry out work in the spiritual/religious realm. Because this has not been emphasized, this objective is in need of strengthening. After six years of consecutive Runakay events, which the Runakay Foundation has brought to fruition, the Foundation thinks it is necessary to enter into a reformulation stage. We would like to use this time to evaluate our cultural and philosophical aims and the impact that these have had since only by evaluating can we enter into a more dynamic process that will enable us to improve and return even stronger next year.\(^\text{147}\)

Demonstrating their concern for how the event is contributing to the substance of Otavalo culture, organizers scheduled a morning event (for February 14, 2010), which included a ceremony and pedagogical session for children, but canceled the

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\(^{146}\) Ibid., 144.

night time event, which would normally emphasize ethnic dress and dancing. Through emphasizing the spiritual/religious realm, this communication expresses the perceived need to valorize non-material aspects of culture. It is possible that the sartorial practices of young urban and transnational women have caused the community to reflect on the importance of wearing ethnic dress on a daily basis and therefore its importance at the event. I will venture to guess that planners will require ethnic dress at next year’s event, especially since women still consider it important for special occasions. However, the communication signals that Otavalos are continually reflecting on true cultural authenticity and building an Otavalo identity that does not begin or end with dress.

\footnote{This emphasis on the spiritual may be understood within the context of Ecuador’s new constitution (adopted in 2008), the first in the world to accord legal rights to \textit{Pachamama}, the Kichwa term for Mother Nature. This act is in turn related to the Andean principle of \textit{Sumak Kawsay} (meaning to live well in Kichwa), which advocates for socioeconomic development that prioritizes a harmonious relationship between mankind and nature, and the broader post-neoliberal movement that shares a similar philosophy and in which indigenous peoples are playing a crucial role. For more information on this, see: Gerardo Rénique, “Latin America: The New Neoliberalism and Popular Mobilization,” \textit{Socialism and Democracy} 23, no. 3 (2009): 24-26.}
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