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William Gilbert

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Quichua Pottery: Cultural Identity and the Market

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Abstract

This paper examines the current attempt by the Quichua people of Ecuador to strengthen traditional culture through the development of a market for their ceramics. It begins with a brief analysis of contemporary Quichua culture and the factors that must be addressed to revitalize traditional values. This is followed by a discussion regarding the choice to specifically focus on ceramics as a marketable aspect of traditional culture and, finally, an investigation of the internal and external factors that will effect the success or failure of this endeavor.

Keywords

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William Gilbert received his B.A. from Pitzer College and his MFA from the University of Montana. He currently holds an appointment as head of Ceramics at the University of New Mexico where he is an associate professor. He has curated the exhibitions "Quichua Ceramics" for the South Broadway Cultural Center, Albuquerque, NM and "The Potters of Mata Ortiz/ Los Ceramistas de Mata Ortiz" for the University of New Mexico Art Museum. His articles "Mata Ortiz: Traditions and Innovations" and "Juan Quezada: Mexican Potter" appeared in *Ceramics Monthly* and *Studio Potter*. His sculpture has been exhibited internationally since 1978.

William T. Gilbert
Associate Professor, Ceramics
University of New Mexico
3358-C Highway 14
Cerrillos NM 87010
505-473-2819

In the fall of 1995 I spent three months in Ecuador on a Lila Wallace Reader's Digest grant studying the ceramics of the Quichua people of Pastaza, Ecuador. During my residency in Ecuador I met with the Organization of People Indigenous to Pastaza, OPIP, to discuss the possibility of establishing a market for Quichua pottery in the United States. I then visited several communities situated near Puyo and others located along the banks of the Bobonaza river.

Quichua culture is under pressure from the dominant Hispanic culture and has been for a long time. There are a number of aspects to this pressure, however, cumulatively they create a situation in which traditional Quichua culture is in a downward spiral. Any discussion of the pottery tradition must take place within the context of larger cultural factors.

Traditionally the Quichua people have practiced a form of subsistence farming. This swidden agriculture consists of clearing a field in the jungle for farming and then moving their homes and communities when the soil in a particular site had ceased to be fertile. In recent years, permanent communities have been established along the major rivers. As the fields adjacent to the communities become depleted it has become increasingly difficult for the people to grow enough food to support their families.

The communities are situated along the rivers because the rivers are the jungle's highways. Proximity to the river provides access to Hispanic culture and market. The market in this case being the cash economy and the wide range of products and services it offers. Remaining in permanent communities means both a dwindling local food supply and an increased reliance on the capitalist market. The fact that the market is based on cash has required the Quichua people to become increasingly involved with nontraditional forms of work. In the search for paying jobs the men, in particular, increasingly leave the community. This weakens the family unit and the community and leaves the women in an ever worsening situation with no real power to address their condition.

To break this cycle OPIP is attempting to re-empower

traditional values and life styles. Central to their approach is the goal of finding a way for Quichua people to remain in their jungle communities and earn the cash that is now a necessary part of survival in contemporary life. If Quichua culture is to survive, the rapid exodus from the jungle to the border towns must stop. This migration is a phenomenon that is prevalent throughout the world wherever first world and third world economies exist side by side. In the United States we are familiar with a similar situation on our border with Mexico. It is a difficult tide to stem. What seems obvious in the Quichua situation is that if their culture is to survive it will not be enough to merely find a way for people to stay home and make money. It is essential that the occupations engaged in reinforce traditional practices rather than replace them.

The definition of work and the concept of an occupation (used here to mean a "job") are culturally based. In societies based on non-cash economies there is often no idea of an occupation as separate from other aspects of life. In the absence of this concept, these cultures may also lack a designation of specific activities as work. Therefore, the movement of these people into the wage economy is more complicated than merely an exchange of labor or material for cash. Embedded in the work process is a set of cultural codes which either reaffirms a culture's identity or subverts it. The process of entering into an occupation is loaded with cultural assumptions that get reinforced through the doing of the work. For example, hierarchical or egalitarian models of social interaction, notions of gender identity, the relationship between culture and environment, and the cultural definition of time are all expressed and reinforced through the act of working.

To merely provide cheap labor for the Hispanic market will do little to sustain the Quichua identity. In fact it may hasten the dissolution of that identity. What is needed is an expression of the traditional culture that will be sought after in the cash economy. Even on this basis there are major pitfalls to be avoided.

In their effort to support Quichua culture OPIP has focused on promoting the traditional ceramics. Developing a viable market would reinforce the practice of pottery making which is currently in danger of dying out and in so doing re-value the traditional world view expressed in the pottery designs and process. It is important to remember that ceramics belongs exclusively to the female side of the culture. Only women (and occasionally gay males) are involved with ceramic production. In traditional Quichua culture each woman makes the ceramic ware for her house and the ceramic *mucagua* is the ritual vessel of

greeting presented full of *chicha* (a fermented beverage), to visitors to her home.

In addition, the designs painted on the pottery are expressions of important entities or spirits. In Quichua culture the shamanic practices are primarily a part of the male experience. In one of their rituals the men gather for a ceremony in which a hallucinogenic drug is ingested. This drug imbues the participants with telepathic powers that enable the participants to share a collective journey in the vision world. In these experiences various entities in the form of jungle animals are encountered. The designs on the pottery represent these entities and serve to present the shamanic experiences to the community as a whole.

The potential for traditional crafts to be a factor in maintaining identity has already been demonstrated in the indigenous cultures of the U.S.A.. In my talks with Native American potter Mary Lewis Garcia at Acoma Pueblo she has discussed these issues in very similar terms. She sees her identity as an Acoma woman as being totally interwoven with the physical place of Acoma. The gathering of her materials for the making of pottery requires her to revisit various places throughout her territory and in so doing reacquaint herself with the place that provides her identity. Mary insists on using only traditional Acoma designs on her pieces. Through the use of the ancient designs she reconnects herself and the present with her ancestors and thereby keeps the chain of cultural identity intact.

A major factor in OPIP's decision to promote ceramics is that so doing would put economic power in the hands of the women and redress the current economic imbalance created by a cash economy more interested in male attributes. In traditional society women are in charge of the fields and men the hunting. This specific separation by gender maintained a balance of power between males and females in the pre cash economy with respect to the all important aspect of food. As reliance on the cash economy has increased, females have experienced a distinct loss of economic power. Developing a market for their ceramics would make a strong contribution towards reestablishing this balance.

What can easily be overlooked in this equation is how powerful a force the market can be. There are numerous examples throughout the world of revivals of indigenous traditions that began as very powerful positive forces in their communities only to degenerate and lead to a great deal of internal strife. Probably the greatest danger facing the Quichua community in their attempt to revive their ceramic traditions and revitalize their culture is a certain naivete and even

arrogance with regard to their ability to limit the influence of the market. Their interest in our culture is solely as a source of cash. Their intent is to sell their crafts while restricting any cultural contact or exchange to a minimum. They envision a simple relationship in which their crafts are sold directly from jungle communities to galleries in the United States with no intermediaries. To date they appear unaware of the two sided nature of any market relationship. In particular there is no understanding of the definitions the market will seek to impose on their pottery practice.

One factor in the long term success or failure of a revival is exactly which market the work engages. If the market the work enters is too low priced often the revival degenerates. In this low priced market the artists adjust the complexity and finish of the work to meet the selling price which in turn leads to an even lower pay scale and finally to work of neither financial nor cultural value. To a certain extent this can be witnessed in Puyo. OPIP is operating a store to sell indigenous crafts as a means of reinforcing the ceramic tradition and providing an income to Quichua women. Because they are situated in a border town, their market is primarily sales to tourists. To date, unlike the elevated market for pueblo pottery in the U.S.A., there is not a strong interest or high value placed on indigenous crafts in Ecuador. Therefore, OPIP wants a large volume of small scale works at cheap prices to service the tourist "momento" market. The result is that from the entire spectrum of Quichua ceramics the aspect receiving support is the smallest, least ambitious, most disposable forms. To produce a sufficient quantity of this level of ceramics to earn the necessary cash requires that the women spend a large portion of their time at this piece work occupation and therefore less time with their traditional work.

In one of my visits with families in the Quichua communities I met a woman who was selling her ceramic turtles for 30 cents. I bought a few from her and her disappointment was quite obvious. When I asked what she had expected she and her husband expressed an interest in an order for 200 or 300 turtles a month. When we discussed the amount of time it would take her to produce this volume it became obvious that she would be unable to maintain her fields and other aspects of her traditional lifestyle. In short, she would be trading her present multifaceted traditional work for a low paying piece work occupation. In this form the practice of ceramics would only hasten the demise of traditional culture not reinforce it. To OPIP's credit they are very aware of the need for markets outside of Ecuador and are interested in the possibility of exporting to the U.S.A.. What will be critical to the success of this transition

will be the marketing of the work at a price that both reinforces the production of high quality ceramics and compensates the women for their time.

Another potential problem inherent in marketing Quichua ceramics is the issue of individual versus collective identity. Traditional Quichua culture is communal. The group identity comes ahead of the individual. OPIP labels the ceramics in their store by community rather than by artist. At the same time there are several Quichua artists who have moved to Puyo and started to produce an individual line of ceramics. Estella Dagua is perhaps the most accomplished. Her work far excels the other work in OPIP's store from a Western art perspective. Her pieces are larger, her designs more complicated, her figures more animated and the final presence of the work more finished or resolved. By all formal standards her work is superior and will easily command much higher prices in the first world markets. And yet, she is shunned by the Quichua community as a capitalist who is out to distinguish herself from the community.

There are others with the artistic potential of Estella Dagua. Should OPIP be successful in engaging higher priced markets these artists too will be separated from the group by the market. Name recognition is a major driving force in the art market. Collectors want to buy the name as much as the object. There is still resentment at Acoma Pueblo over Lucy Lewis' decision to break with tradition and sign her pottery. Maria Martinez at San Idelfonso Pueblo took great advantage of her name recognition by signing other potters work in her Pueblo so that they would receive the higher prices afforded to objects with her signature. Perhaps the Quichua potters will prove equally inventive at subverting the market. In the long run, however, the will of the market is towards individualism and, as such, directly contrary to the goal of reinforcing traditional Quichua cultural identity.

An additional consideration is that of the effect of the market on the evolution of the ceramic work itself. Part of the importance of maintaining an artistic tradition is that an art form is an expression of a cultural aesthetic and the stories contained in the designs are a form of written history in an otherwise oral culture. In order for the craft then to serve as a cultural anchor, rudder, or sail the artist must be expressing the community's aesthetic not the market's. Already in the Quichua communities there are two styles of work being produced. There are traditional vessels such as *mucahuas* and *tinajas* (jars) being produced by the women for daily and ceremonial use. This work is well formed, simply decorated and

elegant. These same women produce a much more elaborately decorated, more brightly colored ware for the market. The designs placed on these works do not tell a story or express a vision that has importance to community life. They are placed on the pot as part of a formal decision making process that is primarily about decoration.

In several of the homes I asked if they would sell their traditional *mucahuas* and with only two exceptions the answer was no. Whether that answer reflects a desire to keep what is meaningful away from the tainted influence of the market or merely a preference to sell the more elaborate, unused work is unclear. For the sake of the survival of the culture we may hope this is evidence that the Quichua people are very aware of keeping what is meaningful separate from what is marketable. If the goal is to reinforce the culture this distinction is crucial. In reviewing the mature revivals of Pueblo pottery it is easy to see a distinct evolution in styles in response to the market. Over time the Western aesthetic predilection for symmetry, an elevated bearing and exact craftsmanship have come to dominate the aesthetics of pueblo pottery. At the same time the daily use and internal commerce in ceramics within the Pueblo have very nearly died out. Today the aesthetics of Pueblo pottery are market driven. Although the pottery

remains an important source of income and cultural pride, the discourse created is primarily an external one with the world outside of the Pueblo community and as such is not particularly effective as a force to maintain the traditional world view.

The Quichua people face a very real challenge as they attempt to maintain their traditional culture in a period of increasing involvement with the cash economy. There are aspects of the cultural identity, formed during a previous era of isolation, that will certainly change and ceramics has the potential to play an important role in this period of adaptation. The decision to promote the female-based ceramic tradition may help to redress an internal economic imbalance resulting from an increased involvement with the cash economy. The relationship of the pottery process to place and environment empowers the traditional inter-connection of culture and nature. The existence in other countries of elevated markets for finely made indigenous crafts is evidence of the potential for the successful marketing of Quichua ceramics. As yet, the promotion of Quichua crafts is still in its infancy. What is necessary is a very careful handling of the relationship between the Quichua culture that produces the pottery and the industrial cultures that consume it.