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The *Danzaq* of Southern Peru in New York

Crossed Scissors at the Crossroads of Immigration

BY TOM VAN BUREN, PhD

The scissors dance of Southern Peru, which was inscribed in 2010 on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, is rooted in a distinct local culture and yet has evolved into a transnational practice (UNESCO 2010). Widely regarded as a manifestation of pre-Columbian Andean culture, the dance has survived colonialism, religious persecution, Peruvian nationhood, and migration. Based in a practice of ritual competition within the *fiesta patronal* system of Andean cultural sponsorship in the south central Peruvian Chankas region, dancers evoke spiritual forces and bring communities together around a common ancestral identity. This article discusses, from the perspective of transnational cultural studies of performance-based symbolism, the practice of New York-based dancers, who learned the tradition in urban migrant communities in Lima and have practiced the dance there, as well as in the rural settings of their origin and now abroad in the US.

Walter Velille and Luis Aguilar are Peruvian scissors dancers who live and practice in the United States. For almost a decade, they have lived in White Plains and Port Chester, NY—towns with large Peruvian populations—and perform at festivals and community events for the Peruvian and general audiences in the New

York metropolitan area and before wider audiences across the US. The scissors dance is a hybrid folk tradition that has roots in a 16th-century movement of indigenous resistance to Spanish colonialism. The dance embodies Andean cosmology and spirituality, but in its outward forms of costume, performance practice, and setting, draws from many Spanish influences as well. Known as *danzaq* in the Quechua language, the dancers are mainly descended from a hereditary caste of professional performers who traditionally competed during summer festivals in south central Peru, as well as in rural-to-urban migrant communities in the capital city of Lima. Dressed in carnival-inspired costumes, the *danzaq* take turns performing sequences of acrobatic dances to the accompaniment of duets of violins and Andean folk harps. The performance, which has evolved to appeal to urban and global audiences as an exotic spectacle, traditionally served a higher spiritual purpose of restoring, through the dance ritual, the order and balance between the human and natural worlds.

I first met Walter and Luis in the course of fieldwork for a folk arts project at the Westchester Arts Council, for which I produced five events. They performed in these productions between 2008 and 2014. In the spring of 2014, I interviewed them

to explore the subject of their experiences of bringing this dance to the US. I was interested not only in their experience of maintaining their practice of this tradition and their physical condition to be able to perform it, but also their experience of recognizing the significance of the practice to audiences in new contexts. Although both dancers had some involvement with cultural institutions in international contexts, their practice in the US was mainly community-based until 2012, when they were invited to join the roster of the National Council of Traditional Arts. Since then, they performed at the American Folk Festivals in Maine and Virginia in 2013 and in Montana in 2014. Thus, they have assumed a role that touches upon what theater and dance ethnographer Jason Bush has described as “commodified objects of multicultural spectacle...of indigeneity” (Bush 2013, 124). Despite this characterization, I found in them a compelling sense of devotion and integrity, as they have followed a trajectory from ancestral Peruvian roots in Lima, through the Peruvian community in New York, to festival stages around the US.

On the Origins of the Dance

Walter and Luis perform under the title *Los Chankas del Peru*, named after the



Walter Velille and Luis Aguilar performing at the Emelin Theater in Mamaroneck, October 8, 2006, shortly after they had arrived to settle in New York. Photo by the author.

Chankas ethnic group that have inhabited, since before the Inca Empire, the south central area of Peru between the modern capital of Lima and Cusco, including the departments of Huancavelica, Ayacucho and Apurímac. The *danzaq* are said to serve as a ritual bridge between the upper, middle, and lower spiritual forces, embodied in the mountains, wild animals, human agrarian areas, and underworld realms. Their dance is thought to restore order and balance to the world—an order often symbolized by the flow of water (see Nunez Rebaza [1990] and Strong [2013]). The spirits of the earth are called *bua'cas* and include *Pachacamac*, also known as *Pachamama* or 'Mother Earth,' and other spirits embodied in the natural

environment. This ritual function of the dance has been traced to the beginning of the colonial period, as a response to the catastrophic disruption of indigenous society and of the natural order itself.

Following the conquest, Andean peoples were forced to convert to Christianity and made to work in gold and silver mines in a colonial slave labor system that disrupted native agrarian economic and social structures. Following centuries of exploitation, the prevailing view in colonial and post-colonial Peru was of a society bound by a race- and language-based class hierarchy that left little room for alternative narratives. Native Andeans were relegated to the bottom rung of society and thought to have had no valid culture of their own, nor

a literature or religion of significance to the post-colonial Peruvian state.

For centuries, the primary historical record of native resistance, other than the better-known 30-year Incan rebel movement¹, appeared in the writings of Spanish priest Cristóbal de Molina (1494–1580). Molina had learned the Quechua language and preached in it during the mid-16th century. In 1574, he wrote *Relación de las fábulas y ritos de los incas*, a treatise on Andean beliefs, cataloging indigenous spirits and religious practices. At the end of this work, he describes “the apostasy of 1565,” a movement in the region east of Cuzco, and noted that a dance called “*Taqui bongó*,” that was practiced by members of this resistance movement (Molina [1574] 2010). This dance is more commonly known as *Taki Unqay*, which in Quechua translates to “dance of sickness.” Like the Ghost Dance of the 19th-century Native Americans on the Great Plains, it may have involved a form of trance to counter the trauma of conquest (Strong 2013). The sickness of the dance may also have referred to the epidemics of smallpox, measles, and influenza that raged through the Americas during the conquest.

In 1964, Peruvian historian Luis Millones discovered corroborating historical evidence of this movement in the Spanish colonial archives in Seville. An account written by 16th-century cleric Cristóbal de Albornoz, the deputy of the Bishop of Cuzco and a contemporary of Molina, described his efforts to suppress the Andean resistance. According to Albornoz, the resistance movement began in Ayachucho and quickly spread throughout the Chankas Region, into Cuzco and even to La Paz, Bolivia. He further recorded that the movement was led by shamans, including a noted leader, Juan Chocne, who was said to have traveled among the people and proclaimed that the *bua'cas*, associated with places of indigenous worship destroyed by the Spanish, were still alive and that they had returned not to the land itself, but directly into the hearts and souls of the people—in order to encourage them to reject the language, clothing, religion, and culture of the Spanish and to

reclaim the traditional agricultural activities and spiritual practices that would return them to a state of harmony with nature.

By 1574, this resistance movement had been fully suppressed. However, throughout the colonial period, through independence from Spain in 1821, and into the 20th century, native traditions persisted, despite daunting odds, and evolved into newer forms of expression. As a part of this persistence, the scissors dance developed as an amalgam of native and Spanish folk practices. As the position of the Catholic Church had always been to reject rituals and customs that did not align with Church doctrine, the

scissors dance was widely considered to be evidence of diabolical intervention through which the dancers acquired their unusual and considerable acrobatic skills. Over time, the dance came to be tolerated and was often permitted, but only during festivals honoring Catholic saints and in sanctioned spaces, such as the plazas in front of churches. This syncretism allowed for the practice and development of this dance and its associated belief system through the 19th century and into its present form.²

Millones' research and revelations ignited a lively debate among scholars (see, for example, Milones [1964]; Núñez-Rebaza,

[1990]; Castro-Klarén [1989]; Turino [1995]; Mumford [1998]; Bush [2013]). The discovery of firm evidence of indigenous cultural resistance in the historical record shifted the interpretation of native culture, history, and regional folklore practices, including the scissors dance itself. This reappraisal of indigenous history is reflected in the rise of political movements that have evoked indigenous identities. However, the strongest resistance movement in the 1980s and early '90s, the Maoist Shining Path, rejected indigenous culture and through violence, spurred migration to the capital, leaving many communities depopulated. With the accelerated rural-to-urban migration, the scissors dance was also urbanized. Since the defeat of the Shining Path, there has been an active effort to preserve the scissors dance tradition through the revival of local festivals, as well as a campaign to promote this and other ostensibly indigenous cultural practices (Bush 2013). In 2010, after a five-year campaign of advocacy by the *Asociación de Danzantes de Tijeras y Musicos del Peru* and the *Asociación Folklórica de Danzantes de Tijeras y Musicos de Huancavelica*, and with the help of the National Institute of Culture in Peru, the scissors dance was inscribed in the UNESCO list of practices of the World's Intangible Cultural Heritage.³

Elements of the Modern *Danzaq* Practice

The scissors dance is a blend of movement and music, in which the pace, phrasing, and cadences are set by an improvised consensus of the musicians and dancers. Although the indigenous musical instruments of the Andes were mainly flutes and percussion instruments, in current practice, the violin and harp are used exclusively to accompany the scissors dance. The Spanish introduced these instruments, but in the *danzaq* practice, the musicians claimed these for their own purposes. The harp has been modified to allow it to be played with its tune arc on top in the traditional way, or inverted and carried with strap during processions. The violin is the signature melody instrument, whose



Map of Peru, with Chankas region outlined. Image based upon open source material, www.mapsofopen.com



Image of Cristóbal de Albornoz with captive from *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno*, from a book by Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, a native chronicler who documented the abuses of colonial rule in an unsuccessful appeal to the Spanish crown for intervention, ca.1615. Image courtesy of the The Royal Library, Copenhagen, GKS 2232 4º: Guaman Poma, *Nueva corónica y buen gobierno* (1615), p. 1121.

melodies and accents signal and respond to the dancers' movements.

The dancers' own musical medium, through which they interact rhythmically with the violin and harp, is the percussive sound of two halves of detachable scissors blades struck together in a jingling, castanets fashion, to keep time with other instruments and to influence the phrasing and pauses in the flow of the performance. The sound of the scissors blades are thought to evoke the sounds of rushing water and support the *danzaq* ritual function of bringing harmony and life to the land (Strong 2012). According to both Walter and Luis, the original instruments to play this role were very hard stones, or "*castinelas*," that rang when struck together. They

trend to using bigger and heavier 'scissors,' perhaps to evoke the swords mentioned in the interviews (Walter Velille, personal communication).

The Costumes

The costumes of the dancers are characterized by colorful embroidery and patchwork. Walter said that contemporary costumes were modeled on clothing worn by itinerant clowns of the 19th century, figures whose presence was sanctioned by the colonial and Catholic authorities. The key elements are loose-fitting tops, calf-length trousers, and athletic sneakers, which allow freedom of movement.

Contemporary costumes bear lettering with the spirit names of the dancers,

agreed that the roots of their dance practice preceded the conquest. Walter recounted a legend repeated among the *danzaq* that the first dancers of the *Taki Unquy* used two steel swords as percussion instruments, in order to symbolize the taming of their original deadly purpose. As steel scissors, along with other European tools, were introduced to the Andes, they were adopted by the dancers, as the looped handles stayed securely in the right hands of the dancer during acrobatic flips and turns. During performance, the dancer keeps a steady beat to the music of the violin and harp, regardless of what he is doing in the dance, while the rhythm of the scissors and dance steps are carefully coordinated. Among some contemporary *danzaq* in Peru, there is

corresponding with the *bua'cas* (nature spirits). Topping all this are large, inverted conical hats, or *monteras*, a term derived from Spanish bullfighters' caps, but which is used to describe a wide variety of hats for both men and women in Peru. The *danzaq monteras* are often made of rainbow bands of color (an indigenous symbol in southern Peru and Bolivia), with streamers hangings off the sides and fringes across the brow. These fringes partly obscure the dancer's human identity, while the symbols on the dancer's costume accentuate his spiritual identity.

Some dancers make their own costumes, while specialists have emerged who supply costumes for purchase by dancers, or for them by sponsors. Each dancer may have three or four costumes—he uses the best one on the first day of a festival, for the processions and introductory sections. By the second day during the competition, he brings out the older more worn costumes, as the increasingly acrobatic feats take their toll on the material.



Drawing of a scissordancer in Cusco by Edouard Riou in Marcoy, Paul: *Voyage à travers l'Amérique du Sud*. Paris, Librairie de L. Hachette et Cie., Paris, 1869, p.291. English Translation: London, Blackie and Son, 1873, p. 29. Public domain, courtesy of Google Books.



Ignacio Velasco, performing on violin with Alejandro Velasco on harp, held in the inverted position during the *Passacalle* opening portion of the *Tijeras* dance performance. Photo by the author.

Performance Practice

The scissors dance is performed in towns and villages throughout the Chankas region during the dry season, May to August. Each town takes its turn hosting competitions, known as *atipanakuy*. A local sponsor is chosen, or steps up to the obligation of hosting the festival, providing food and drink for the dancers and the wider community. This honorific sponsorship follows the pattern found in many mountain communities of *Fiestas patronales*. In the spirit of competition, towns and sponsors also compete to see who can put on the

most lavish festival, with the best food and drink and the best performers. The *danzaq* travel to the villages in teams of *cuadrillas*, with at least two dancers and accompanying musicians, to compete over the course of a week—dancing through the night and into the following morning, with as little as an hour of rest between sessions.

The opening events often coincide with the *Fiesta de las Cruces*, which takes place on May 3. In some regions, the dance is performed on the saint's day of San Isidro Labrador, the patron saint of farmers and laborers—an important figure because of

his associations with the agricultural cycle and to the class of workers represented in the dance. During the opening ceremony, either the sponsor of the festival or a political figure honors the saint, gives thanks for the blessing of the elements of Mother Earth, the sun, water, wind, and fire, and introduces the dancers to open the festival. Following this, the *cuadrillas* lead a procession through the towns to the plazas where the real competitions occur. During the ensuing days, the dancers and musicians perform a sequence of artful and increasingly difficult dances, culminating in daring and often

dangerous tests of courage and skill (Walter Velille, personal communication).

One member of *Los Chankas* is a veteran of this experience. Luis Aguilar was born in Sucre, Ayacucho. His grandfather was a scissors dancer before him, but when his parents moved to Lima, while he was still a child, they discouraged him from learning the scissors dance. Nevertheless, he was drawn to the practice that he saw in Lima, and began studying at the age 14, under the guidance of one of his grandfather's protégés—so that in effect, the tradition was passed from his grandfather to him. Luis excelled in the dance and became a top competitor, returning often to Ayacucho to participate in the scissors dance festivals there. In the summer of 1997, he was one of three finalists in the festival and competition in the community of Huacaña in the department of Apurímac, and he is featured in a Peruvian documentary titled *Encuentro Ritual: Los Danzantes de Huacaña* (Uriarte 1998). The film documents the sequence of the festival, from the preparations to the blessing ceremonies, and through the days of competitive dances that follow.

As Walter outlined in our interview, the dances follow a specific sequence that evolve from slower and more ritual practice to overtly acrobatic and competitive sequences. The opening of the festival begins with a procession into the town, through the main square and to the church. The music and dance are titled *Passacalle*, from the Spanish traditional form. Following a blessing of the dancers before a statue of the patron saint, which is brought out for the occasion, the dancers and audience move to the plaza where most of the competition dances will occur. The following is a list of the dances, with brief descriptions as related by Walter and Luis:

- *Quatro Esquinas*—the four corners, representing the four directions of the world. This dance is part of the ritual opening of the festival;
- *Tonada*—a song form, with many variations of melodies used to accompany a light, playful dance;

- *Sirsau*—a song that evokes the spirit of the wind, and that originally was played on the *taurias* flutes before the introduction of stringed instruments to the Andes;

- *Tinya*—a song evoking drums and sometimes larger brass instruments, in the tradition of the brass *banda*;

- *Huallpabuaqay* (Quechua) or *Canto de Gallo* (Spanish) —performed in the early hours before dawn, to mimic a rooster crowing, with dance steps to match;

- *Patara*—a toe dance. Each group will try eight to 10 times to do different dances on tiptoes, sometimes while carrying heavy objects or even other people. Walter describes how dancers have danced while carrying the harpist and violinist on their shoulders, or with children from their audience stacked on top of each other;

- *Escobia*—a dance mimicking the sweeping motion of a broom;

- *Alto Ensayo*—when the dancers use high steps and leaps, or on alternate days, the *Alba Ensayo*—which uses melodies of a sweeter sound;

- *Ante Alba*—a dance which includes the same elements as the *Alto Ensayo* but is performed at night;

- *Pampa Ensayo*—a dance that is performed from a prone position, often using the back and thigh muscles to propel the dancer across the dance floor or plaza;

- *La Prueba del valor*—a dance exhibiting feats of strength or agility. “The trial of courage—you need free hands to do what you want and might not use scissors for this dance”—Walter Velille;

- *Yavar Mayo* (in Quechua, “a river of blood”) or *Agonia* (in Spanish)—dances that involve feats of endurance, especially to pain, including sword or knife swallowing, piercing of flesh and the suspension of large stones or other weights, or walking on coals. There is no specific musical accompaniment to this part, other than sometimes the making of crying sounds on the violin. Usually performed in the early evening; and

- *La Campana* (the bell)—A final dance which has become more popular in recent years, in which dancers descend cable or

rope stretched from the tops of bell towers to the far side of the plaza, below where the ends are held by large groups of men. According to Walter, many dancers have died in falls during this ‘dance’.

(Walter Velille and Luis Aguilar, personal communication).

The Scissors Dance in Transnational Context

While it continues to be practiced at local festivals in the Chankas region, the *Danza de Tijeras* has also thrived in migrant communities in Lima, following the rural-to-urban migration of people from the Chankas region to the capital. Like Peruvian communities in the US, the barrios of Lima were settled by smaller communities of migrants from specific regions, who gather for mutual support and among whom local cultural practices are nurtured (Turino 1993). From these internal migrant communities, the dance has traveled to other parts of the world, following migration abroad. The members of *Los Chankas del Peru* are exemplars of this pattern of migration and the reaffirmation of tradition.

Andean music and dances of the Peruvian, Ecuadorian, and Bolivian communities have been a focus of my fieldwork as folklorist for the Westchester Arts Council. The first scissors dancer I met in 2003 was Isaac Milares, whose sister had founded a community dance group, *El Conjunto Revelación* in Port Chester. Isaac performed an abbreviated solo version of the scissors dance to recorded music, as a complement to the colorful and playful regional group dances of the larger ensemble. In 2005, Walter arrived in the Port Chester community to share this tradition.

Walter Velille grew up in Lima in the migrant community from the Apurímac department of southern Peru, where the scissors dance originated. His father had also been a scissors dancer, but retired to play violin for other dancers. Walter learned the dances from his father and others in the community. Later, he had the opportunity to teach apprentices at the Museo de la Nación in Lima. Through this recognition, he was



Walter Velille demonstrates *Alta Ensayo* leap over the sound engineers, Port Chester Fest, June 2013. Photo by the author.

invited to perform in Europe, China, and Japan. He first visited the US in 2002 to participate in a Native American gathering in Seattle, where he began building bridges between his and North American native traditions. He settled in the New York area in 2005, living first in the Sound Shore village of Port Chester, which has a large

and thriving Peruvian community, but more recently in North White Plains. He has worked for contractors doing flooring, roofing, and gutter work.

In 2005, Luis immigrated to the US and settled in Port Chester as well, where he works as a house painter. Soon, he joined Walter in forming *Los Chankas del Peru*.

They performed under their stage names of *Quesqento* and *Paccaricha*. Scissors dancers are given spiritual names by their mentors when they attain a level of mastery of the dance. In Quechua, *Quesqento* means “cicada,” and *Paccaricha* means “daybreak,” or dawn. In 2008, the pair joined with two musicians. Brothers born in Apurimac, Andean harpist

Alejandro Velasco performs as *Signarcha*, (the name of a small bird) and violinist Ignacio Velasco uses the stage name *Chirapa* (meaning “rainbow”).

Rarely seen in the US before the late 1990s, the *Danza de Tijeres* is becoming more common, especially in areas with larger Peruvian populations. In the New York area there are other dancers, but *Los Chankas del Peru*, among the best known, perform throughout the region at community festivals, or at events as small as community concerts in church basements, as I have witnessed in Port Chester. In addition, *Los Chankas* have performed annually at the United Nations Conference on Indigenous Peoples. At most events in the US, performances tend to be short, certainly in comparison to the festivals in the Chankas region. They can be as short as

20 minutes, with an opening duet dance based on the *Passacalle* procession, typically followed by one continuous melody accompanying, by turns, the two dancers who engage in a friendly and often choreographed exchange of dance sequences, which gradually escalate into acrobatics. At the end, a final duet is performed to close the performance. In the larger festivals, the group will enact a version of the blessing of the elements, using an embroidered blanket with ceremonial objects, and the sounding of a conch shell trumpet for dramatic effect. Even in the expatriate Peruvian community performance settings, the performances are not generally longer, because, as Walter explained, many Peruvians migrants come from other regions of Peru, where few know of the scissors dance tradition.

Conclusion

Across Peru, dance affirms community through participatory practice of a complex language not only of local cultural symbolism, but also of the dramatic interplay of actors representing or commenting upon the social order. Carnival and *Fiestas patronales* are occasions in which teams of dancers represent their own classes or social groups, or mock others in competitive dance events (See Turino [1992] and Mendoza [2000] for examples in Puno and Cuzco). Unlike the amateur carnival and festival dancers, the *danzaq* are a professional caste of specialized dancers who, through a process of migration and recontextualization have adapted their practice to embody a deeply historical identity apart from the everyday social fabric—but also one that



Los Chankas del Peru performing at the American Folk Festival in Bangor, Maine, August 2013. Photo by the author.

has become a transnational symbol of Peruvian indigenous identity. In the migrant communities of Lima, others have learned and practiced the scissors dance, as it has entered the realm of popular national culture. Likewise, where traditionally the *danzaq* were always men, women are now learning the practice as well.

Within the transnational context of a community such as in Port Chester, NY, the dance also serves an important role in creating a virtual space for the affirmation of the Chankas regional identity and evoking its spiritual associations within migrant communities. As such, the practice of Walter Velille, Luis Aguilar, and the Velasco brothers serves to situate migrants from their home region as a virtual sub-community among Peruvians living abroad, even as they earn at least part of their livelihoods outside the community as a “commodity” of their partially reimagined culture. ▼

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- description of a scissors dancer in the modern sense, but one whose role he identified as a clown among many street performers (Marcoy [1869] 1873).
- 3 The text of the nomination of the Scissors Dance is as follows:
- The scissors dance is performed by inhabitants of Quechua villages and communities in the south-central Andes of Peru, and now in urban settings... during dry months coinciding with the main phases of the agricultural calendar. The scissors dance takes its name from the pair of polished iron rods, resembling scissors blades, wielded by each dancer in his right hand. Together with a violinist and a harpist, a dancer forms a *cuadrilla* (team) that represents a given village or community. To perform, two or more *cuadrillas* face each other, and the dancers must strike the blades together in time to the rhythm of the accompanying musicians, while performing a choreographed duel of step-dancing, acrobatics and increasingly demanding movements. The competition or *atipanaky* may last up to ten hours, and physical ability, quality of the instruments, and expertise of the accompanying musicians, are all evaluated to determine the winner. The dancers wear outfits embroidered with golden fringes, multi-coloured sequins and small mirrors, but while in costume are forbidden from entering churches because of the tradition that their abilities are the result of a pact with the devil. Regardless, the scissors dance has become a popular part of Catholic festivities. The physical and spiritual knowledge implicit in the dance is passed on orally from master to student, with each *cuadrilla* of dancers and musicians giving pride to its village of origin. (UNESCO 2010)

Notes

1 Ending in 1565 with the execution of its leader, Tupac Amaru, the nephew of the Inca ruler, Atahualpa, who was ransomed and murdered by the conquistador Pizarro and his men 30 years before.

2 French naturalist and travel writer Paul Marcoy witnessed scissors dancers in Cusco in the 1860s and his two-volume narrative of his journey across South America included a clear

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