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Standard Insignia: Function, Evolution, and Legacy of the Unku in the Inca Empire

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The unku is a traditional man's garment from the pre-Columbian Andes. Under the Inca Empire, it became highly standardized and charged with symbolic meaning, serving as a visual marker of identity and function within the imperial administrative system. Most accounts of Inca governance originate from colonial-era texts. Without indigenous written records, these sources can only partially illuminate how Inca society operated. Therefore, unku must be treated as primary material evidence and read alongside the governing practices described in documentary sources. Only through this combined approach can the underlying logic of the Inca imperial administration become clearer. Existing scholarship has paid relatively little attention to how unku changed and was transmitted during the colonial period. Therefore, a more thorough examination of the cultural legacy is required. This study applies documentary and iconographic methods, drawing on museum digital collections and a range of relevant sources, to trace the evolution and defining characteristics of unku. It further investigates how the Incas transformed it into a standardized symbol, analyzes its function as an identity marker in imperial governance, and examines its trajectory throughout and beyond the colonial period.

Keywords: unku, Inca empire, standardization, symbolism, identity markers

The origins of unku—a traditional man's garment from the pre-Columbian Andes—can be traced to the late Early Horizon period, around the beginning of the Common Era (Pillsbury, 2002, p. 96). Garment construction is relatively straightforward. It was typically composed of a single rectangular piece of cloth with a central opening for the head. The fabric was folded along its long axis, and the side edges were sewn together, leaving arm openings. Embroidery, feathers, tassels, and tie-dyed ornamentation could be added, as desired. A typical unku is longer than a wider one. When worn, the height fell somewhere between the waist and the knees. The loose cut required a belt at the waist to prevent the garment from interfering with everyday movements, which is why the unku was also called a belted tunic. Paired with sandals and a waistcloth, this ensemble constituted the most basic form of dress among the ancient Andean people. The unku was worn across a wide social spectrum, from commoners to rulers, and ranked among the most common garments of its time.

Evolution of the Unku in the Pre-Columbian Era

The Incas did not invent the unku; rather, they inherited and systematized it. By around 900 BC,

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Indigenous communities across the Andes commonly maintained two camelid species, llamas and alpacas (Fagan, 2020, p. 401). Camelid wool became a primary raw material for clothing. Cotton and agave fiber were also in use (D'Altroy, 2026, p. 463). Before new materials arrived with the colonial settlement, the raw materials used in indigenous garment-making remained essentially the same. Early Indigenous weavers used simple backstraps or body tension looms. Although technically simple, these garments were sufficient to meet the practical demands of daily life. Over time, sophisticated looms were developed, enabling the production of finer and more complex textiles. This relatively stable combination of materials and weaving techniques shaped the structure of the unku to a considerable degree, keeping it in a consistent basic form across generations.

The earliest known unku recovered through archaeological work dates to the Paracas culture, from approximately 200 BC to AD 200. A Paracas-period example in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art is made of black cloth, and its upper section is decorated with geometric embroidery in red and yellow camelid wool (see Table 1). A comparison with examples from other periods clarifies that the unku's basic form had already been established by at least the Paracas era. A Moche-culture tunic in the Metropolitan Museum of Art features a distinctive red zigzag geometric pattern across its surface. Stylized monkey motifs run along the hem with an openwork detail set between them. The garment also has sleeves, giving it an overall silhouette close to that of a modern t-shirt (see Table 1). The principal innovation of Wari culture unku lies in its surface decorations. Patterning is based on the work of modern abstract expressionists. Wari weavers were exceptionally skilled at deconstructing images and stylizing representations, and this garment reflects a sophisticated level of design thinking and creative invention (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.). Tiwanaku and Wari were contemporaneous cultures in close geographic proximity, and the two share notable cultural affinities. Likewise, Tiwanaku's geometric design exhibits a pronounced tendency toward stylization (see Table 1). Chimú-culture unkus frequently combined multiple production techniques. Chimú weavers favored tassel decoration along the hem. A Chimú tunic in the Metropolitan Museum of Art bears abstract geometric human figures across its surface. Constructed from two panels joined at the center, it is woven in vivid red, white, yellow, and ochre camelid yarn. A repeating geometric bird motif runs along the lower border (see Table 1). The final example is an Inca tunic whose square decoration is known as the "Inca key checkerboard" pattern. This category of geometric square design is called toqapu and typically indicated the wearer's social rank. A tunic with this pattern was one of the standardized types produced in specialist imperial workshops (see Table 1).

Beyond physical examples, primary visual sources also shed light on the early forms of unku. A Moche-period vessel found on the northern coast of Peru bears painted mythological scenes around its rim (Museo Larco, n.d.) (see Figure 1). One mythological figure, clad in a checkerboard-patterned unku, is shown alongside other figures, a scene that may suggest an association between the checkerboard motif and military activity. Comparable forms resurfaced during the late Inca period. The figure's unku extends only to the waist and has two sleeves reaching midway down the upper arm. A row of triangular ornaments runs along the hem. The same vessel also depicts a "bird-headed figure" wearing a knee-length unku with vertical stripes, a black-and-white checkered belt at the waist, and a cloak over the shoulders (see Figure 2). This dress combination remained common throughout the later Inca Empire. Taken together, these cases elucidate that the unku retained a relatively consistent structure from its earliest appearance. As noted above, weaving techniques likely shaped the structure of unku. Local climatic conditions were also a contributing factor, as were the exchanges of ideas and practices among indigenous Andean cultures.

Table 1

Unku Examples From Different Periods

Date	Cultural period	Dimensions	Materials and construction	Figure	Image source
c. 300 BC-AD 200	Peru, Paracas culture	94 × 83.8 cm	Camelid fiber, plain weave with embroidery and tassels		Cleveland Museum of Art
AD 100-200	Peru, Nasca culture	125.1 × 84.5 cm	Camelid fiber with tassel embellishment		The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.
AD 500-850	Moche culture, Huarmey Valley, Peru	87 × 147.3 cm	Camelid fiber and cotton, with sleeves		The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.
AD 600-1000, Middle Horizon	Tiwanaku culture, Bolivia	86 × 89 cm	Camelid fiber		Brooklyn Museum, n.d.
AD 650-1000	Wari culture, Peru	103.5 × 101 cm	Cotton and camelid fiber		The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.
AD 800-1300	Lambayeque (Sicán) culture, northern Peru	Unknown	Cotton and camelid fiber		Larco-Lima, Peru
c. AD 1460-1540	Chimú culture, Peru	55.9 × 101 cm	Cotton and camelid fiber, with tasseled hem		The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.
c. AD 1400-1532	Inca culture, Peru	86 × 74 cm	Camelid fiber		Brooklyn Museum, n.d.

Figure 1. Moche-culture vessel (detail), AD 1-800, northern coast of Peru. The painted mythological figure wears a checkerboard-patterned unku (Museo Larco, n.d. Note: The image on the right is a line drawing copied by the author).

Figure 2. Moche-culture vessel (detail), AD 1-800, northern coast of Peru. The painted figure has a bird's head (Museo Larco, n.d. Note: The image on the right is a line drawing copied by the author).

Inca Inheritance and Development of the Unku

The Inca Empire inherited the cultural traditions of numerous indigenous groups that preceded it across the Andes, building on those foundations to develop its own character. The basic structure and manner of dress of the Inca unku continued the tradition of the earlier belted tunic, typically a sleeveless rectangular garment cinched at the waist with geometric motifs as the primary decorative element.

What distinguished the Inca unku was the extent to which its design was shaped by Inca governance. The Inca Empire operated under a system resembling a "planned economy". The state directed the distribution of all resources (land, housing, and food), leaving little room for a market economy. Some scholars, drawing on how the empire actually functioned, have classified its system as a "socialist empire" (Baudin, 1961, p. xviii). This collectivized communal system, with its strong emphasis on order and uniformity, required a standardized dress system to support the imperial administration. Consequently, the Inca unku took on standardized features that distinguished it from comparable garments of earlier periods. The warp threads are typically woven along the shorter edge of the cloth, and the size variation among the tunics fell within a narrow range. Setting aside smaller examples made for metal idols or ritual use, a standard Inca unku was generally longer than it was wide, with lengths ranging from 79 to 100 cm and widths ranging from 72 to 79 cm. The neckline was preserved during weaving rather than cut afterward, reflecting the high value the Incas placed on woven cloth and their reluctance

to trim or alter it. The garment edges—arm openings, necklines, and hems—were reinforced with embroidered borders to protect against wear (Correa-Lau et al., 2023, pp. 5, 17). In terms of decoration, the Inca unku developed a comprehensive design system that translated power, rank, and function into legible visual symbols. Anyone familiar with this system can read the wearer's social identity at a glance. Incas narrowed the permissible range of unku dimensions, holding specifications for strictly standardized parameters. This kept the labor required for each garment highly consistent, tightened control over the production process, and made it easier for the state to reproduce the unku as a symbol of authority, giving these garments an unmistakably imperial character (Correa-Lau et al., 2023, pp. 4, 8). Concurrently, Correa-Lau et al. (2023) observe that the Incas recognized the cultural diversity of the various Indigenous groups within their realm and allowed other peoples to maintain their own ways of life. Consequently, state-standard unkus made in communities far from the imperial center could still reflect certain local characteristics. This suggests that Inca standardization was not a rigid prescription but a dynamic process that accommodated local realities through flexible adjustment.

Standard Insignia: The Inca Empire's Shaping of the Unku

Under the Inca Empire's centrally planned administrative system, unku production embodied the traits of standardization and symbolic meaning. The garment form was clearly regulated; it was produced in quantity by designated craftsmen in workshop settings, with established norms governing both size and color. An observer could read the wearer's occupation and social rank based on the tunic cuts and decorations. This made identity legible at a glance, even in the absence of a written language and contributed to the smooth operation of the imperial system.

Centralized Production and Social Stratification

Hierarchical distinctions were embedded in the Inca unku from the moment of its production, reflecting the collective labor character of the communal system. Textile production was organized by the state and operated independently of market demand. All the wool and cotton used in tunic production came from fields and pastures controlled by the ruling class. Local officials estimated regional needs and allocated raw materials based on the fiber quality and available labor. In some cases, more than a thousand households across a single region were mobilized for weaving. Each weaver had a prescribed output quota (D'Altroy, 2026, p. 470). Ordinary materials for everyday garments were distributed among female weavers across the empire. This lower-grade category of unku was the most widely produced and typically received only simple dyeing and minimal ornamentation. Women likely took primary responsibility for weaving because they participated less in physically demanding labor such as warfare or public construction projects. Spending more time within domestic and household contexts than men, they were better positioned to dedicate sustained effort to producing ordinary tunics in large quantities. Finer tunics were the work of male weavers and were reserved for members of the privileged class: government officials, military commanders, and their peers. Ordinary people were barred from wearing such high-quality unkus unless a senior official presented them as gifts, or military service made it appropriate (Correa-Lau et al., 2023, p. 4). This shows that the Inca ruling class held a dual monopoly over raw materials and access to high-status symbolic objects. Both forms of control worked together to entrench the Empire's hierarchical order. Simultaneously, the Incas drew a tight connection between gender and social rank. Ordinary female weavers were aligned with the qualities of everyday life and non-privilege, whereas their male counterparts were associated with power and elite status. The finest unkus destined for the royal household were woven inside the

strictly enclosed House of the Chosen Women (Acllahuasi), where acllas worked collectively under the direction of the institution's head (see Figure 3). They wove gold, silver, and shell ornaments into their clothes. The emperor's personal unkus were sewn by the head of the Acllahuasi herself (see Figure 4), and no noble tunic was permitted to rival the emperor's quality or refinement (D'Altroy 2026, p. 197). The Acllahuasi also produced tunics for rituals. These garments were delivered as tributes to the Temple of the Sun and offered to the Sun God during religious ceremonies (De la Vega, 1996, pp. 234-238). According to the Royal Commentaries of the Incas, the community of acllas typically exceeded fifteen hundred (De la Vega, 1996, p. 235). Their combined output would have been substantial and more than adequate to supply both the royal household and temples with high-grade unkus. Thus, the unkus produced within the Acllahuasi were far more than symbols of power; they were also the most sacred religious objects. Each provided a tangible expression of the emperor's singular status and his divine bond with the Sun God.

In this way, the gradations of the unku are mapped onto the pyramid-shaped social hierarchy of Inca society. Lower-grade tunics clothed ordinary commoners, whereas higher-grade examples went to temples, nobilities, and royal households. This arrangement satisfied the population's basic need for clothing, reinforcing a rigid social order, making it legible and thereby contributing to the structure and coherence of imperial governance.

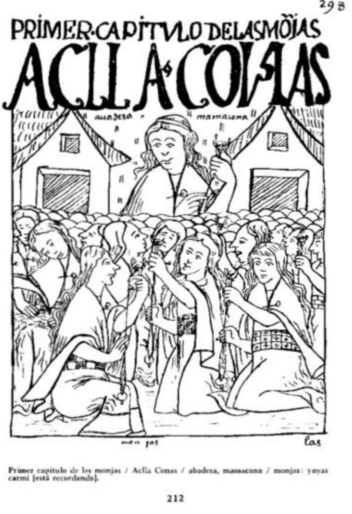

Figure 3. Illustration from Primer Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno (The New Chronicle and Good Government), depicting the head of the House of the Chosen Women and the acllas engaged in weaving (Guaman Poma de Ayala, 1936, p. 212).

Figure 4. Unku fully covered with tocapu motifs, reserved exclusively for the Inca ruler (Scher, 2015).

The Unku as Identity Marker Within the Imperial System

Under this unified model of governance and production, the unku emerged as a defining visual symbol of social identity and class standing in the Inca Empire (D'Altroy, 2026, p. 465). Scholars have identified several standardized unku types produced under the Inca Empire (Table 2). The first is the Inca key pattern, the most prevalent type, generally worn by individuals associated with the military or elite. The second pattern was the black-and-white checkerboard pattern, named after its resemblance to a chessboard. Similar to the Inca key, this design served as a symbol for the military and elite, rendered in red with black and white squares. The third is the diamond key pattern, typically composed of banded rows of diamond-shaped geometric motifs and restricted

exclusively to the nobility. The four boundaries of the diamond motif may represent Tawantinsuyu—the Inca name for their own state, meaning "the land of four quarters" (Correa-Lau et al., 2023, p. 17). The fourth and final type is the tocapu waistband, a mark of royal status (Daly, 2013, p. 2). The unkus worn by Inca royalty typically displayed a horizontal band of tocapu motifs at the waist, although some examples were covered with tocapu designs across the entire surface.

Table 2

Four Standardized Inca Unku Design Types

Date	Type	Dimensions	Materials and construction	Figure	Image source
AD 1400-1532	Inca key pattern	86 × 74 cm	Camelid fiber		Brooklyn Museum, n.d.
AD 1400-1535	Black-and-white checkerboard pattern	87 × 76.5 cm	Camelid fiber		The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.
AD 1460-1540	Diamond key pattern	73.7 × 88.9 cm	Camelid fiber		The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.
AD 1600-1700, colonial period	Tocapu waistband	36.8 × 27.9 cm	Camelid fiber		The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.

Chronicler Guaman Poma filled his early seventeenth-century work, Primer Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno (The New Chronicle and Good Government), with illustrations, including several portraits of Inca royal figures. Their faces were products of imagination, but the garments they wore reflected the historical reality. Emperor Viracocha Inca, for instance, is shown wearing an unku covered entirely with tocapu motifs (see Figure 5). In this chronicle, unkus of this kind, whether fully covered with tocapu or displaying a tocapu band at the waist, appear only among members of the royal family. The Inca emperor wore the unku alongside a set of other accessories: a square cloak, known as the yacolla, and a corded cloth pouch, called the chuspa, carried for coca leaves, bearing a close resemblance to a modern canvas shoulder bag (De la Vega, 1996, p. 238). Guaman Poma's chronicle provides illustrations corresponding to both items. The cylindrical dress (aksu) of the first empress, Mama Huaco Coya, likewise bears tocapu motifs at the waist, providing evidence that tocapu patterning was neither exclusive to men nor limited to unku as a garment type (see Figure 6).

Figure 5. Illustration from Primer Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno (The New Chronicle and Good Government), depicting Viracocha Inca, the eighth Inca emperor (Guaman Poma de Ayala, 1936, p. 76).

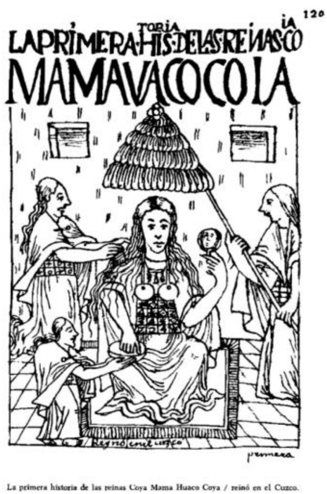

Figure 6. Illustration from Primer Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno (The New Chronicle and Good Government), depicting Mama Huaco Coya, the first empress (Guaman Poma de Ayala, 1936, p. 87).

Figure 7. Illustration from Primer Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno (The New Chronicle and Good Government), depicting Huascar, the twelfth Inca emperor, shown in captivity (Guaman Poma de Ayala, 1936, p. 84).

Figure 8. Illustration from Primer Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno (The New Chronicle and Good Government), depicting a messenger known as a Chasqui (Guaman Poma de Ayala, 1936, p. 252).

Among the Inca elites, unku was regularly used as a uniform to communicate rank or function, making it a legible marker of identity within the empire's administrative apparatus. The chronicle portrays Huascar, the twelfth emperor, following his defeat in the civil war. He is shown wearing an unku bearing a tocapu-patterned waistband (see Figure 7). According to the annotations in the original illustration, the two figures flanking the emperor are the senior military commanders Quisquis Inga and Challcochima Inga. Challcochima Inga is depicted as sounding a conch shell and wearing an unku decorated with a black-and-white checkerboard pattern, a design that identifies him as a high-ranking military officer. This tunic style was first mentioned in 1532 by Francisco de Jerez, secretary of the conquistador Francisco Pizarro, in his account of the encounter between the

Inca emperor Atawallpa and Pizarro's forces at Cajamarca, Peru. The record notes that the first regiment of the Inca army wore uniforms patterned like a chessboard (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.).

Beyond these standardized categories, a large number of unkus resist easy classification, likely because their design variables span a much wider range. Nevertheless, each garment corresponds to a particular social identity. One notable example is the Inca messenger, a profession known as the chasqui. Messengers conveyed information and goods by running relays along the roads of the Inca network (Figure 8). Scholars have noted that Inca messengers wore specially made uniforms, although the precise form has not been described in the surviving sources. Their unkus may have carried distinctive markings (Prescott, 1996, p. 75)—ornamentation that would have allowed a messenger to be identified at a glance, giving relay runners time to prepare, and enabling bystanders along the route to step aside. Among the empire's highest-ranking officials, provincial governors wore unkus entirely covered with vertical stripes (Guaman Poma de Ayala, 1936, p. 249). Lower-ranking administrative officers typically wore plain tunics with simple striped decorations confined to the area around arm openings (Correa-Lau et al., 2023, p. 9).

As a marker of identity, the unku supported the smooth functioning of the Inca Empire, a state without a written language. It lent order to governance and helped regulate conduct at all social levels. Through a uniform system applied across the empire, people of different occupations and ranks could establish their identities at a glance through visual cues embedded in their dress. The standardization of dress helped to forge a shared identity among indigenous peoples across different regions, reinforcing a sense of the empire as a unified whole.

Tocapu Motifs on the Unku

Scholars have offered working definitions of tocapu. The term refers to geometric designs with square or rectangular outlines that constitute a standardized system of visual symbols. They appear most commonly on textiles connected to the Inca elite or ceremonial contexts; however, examples also exist on wooden objects, metalwork, and ceramics. These motifs are not unique to the Inca. Tocapu patterns, or closely related pictorial symbols, appeared in Andean culture before the Inca period.

What exactly tocapu motifs on unku communicate remains an open question; no consensus interpretation has emerged among scholars (Cruz, 2020, p. 66). Thus, certain fundamental properties are established. First, tocapu functioned as a form of heraldry, likely representing lineage, region, or social rank. Tocapu motifs serve both everyday identification and ceremonial purposes (Daly, 2013, p. 2). De la Vega (1996, p. 420), for instance, records in Royal Commentaries of the Incas that during the festival of the Sun—intip raimi (Quechua for "the festival of the Sun's birth")—local chiefs carried their own distinctive insignia to Cuzco to participate in the celebrations. These insignia were in all likelihood a variety of tocapu motif. Second, tocapu motifs are closely linked to members of the royal family. In Guaman Poma's chronicle illustrations, unkus with a tocapu waistband or fully covered in tocapu designs appear only in the royalties. All such garments were produced within the House of the Chosen Women (Acllahuasi), whose weaving techniques were closely guarded. This secrecy confirms that tocapu patterns of this kind—each built from a set of geometric units—were an exclusive prerogative of the royal household (Correa-Lau et al., 2023, p. 9). Third, tocapu motifs appear to encode the abstract concepts of time and space. Several scholars examining Guaman Poma's chronicle have noted two illustrations depicting agricultural work in August in which the figures wear an unkus bearing a quadripartite square tocapu motif. This design symbolizes the sun's movement and agricultural activities tied to that month. Motifs from the "All-Tocapu Unku" in the collection of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection were copied and examined,

revealing 23 distinct structural types (see Figure 9). Many of these motifs feature square frames divided into two or four sections by geometric elements—a structure that may have additional associations with time and space. Such designs reflect the Inca concept of yanantín (complementary opposition) and may simultaneously evoke the empire's four provinces (Suyu), four seasons, and four cardinal directions (Pino Matos, n.d., pp. 373, 385).

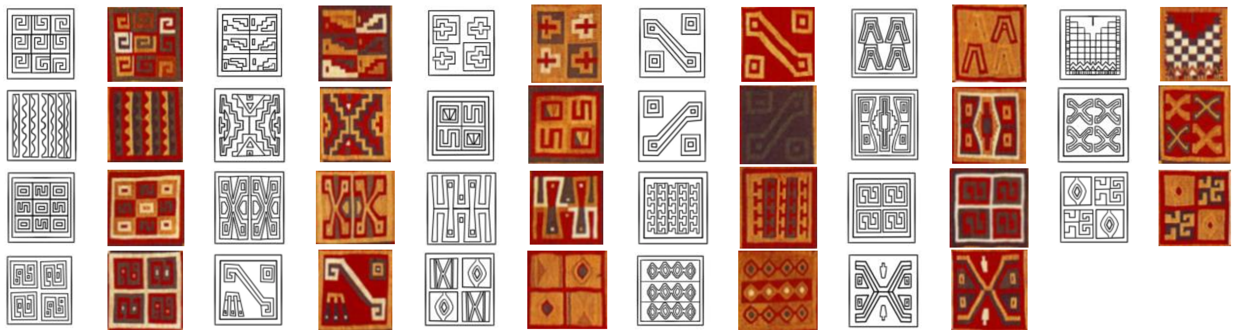

Figure 9. Motifs from the unku fully covered with tocapu designs, reserved exclusively for the Inca ruler (Scher, 2015. Note: The image on the right is a line drawing copied by the author).

Prohibition and Transformation: From Imperial Emblem to Cultural Symbol

Following the Spanish conquest of the Inca Empire, many indigenous traditions gradually faded. The collapse of indigenous political structures deprived the unku of its original purpose as an instrument of state governance and marker of social identity. Colonial assimilation policies further accelerated the process, and the true Inca unku eventually disappeared from indigenous communities. In its place emerged modified garment forms that came to embody a transformed continuation of Inca cultural traditions.

From Unku to Poncho

Conventionally, the defeat in 1532 marked the end of the Inca Empire. However, in practice, the collapse was far from instantaneous (Lane, 2025, p. 210). The Incas continued to resist the Spanish rule throughout this period. The gradual disappearance of the unku reflects how slowly the empire was unraveling. Even after Spanish colonial rule had been in place for some time, the Andean peoples—the Incas among them—retained their traditional ways of life. A group of colonial-period Inca cups, known as qero cups (Quechua: qero), have been found in Peru. Among them, the example cataloged as No. 42.149, now held at the Brooklyn Museum, is painted with an Inca scene in unkus plowing with oxen alongside warriors clad in the classic black-and-white checkered unku engaged in combat. Both the oxen and the plow were Spanish introductions. The imagery thus reflects a blend of indigenous American and European elements (Brooklyn Museum, n.d.). Museum records date this qero cup to the 17th or 18th century. This suggests that at the time of its production, more than a century after the Spanish first entered the Inca Empire, the unku may have been worn by a substantial number of people. Indigenous persistence in traditional practice was seen as an impediment to colonial rule. In response, the Spanish began forbidding Inca descendants from identifying as Inca, speaking indigenous languages, wearing traditional dress, and using traditional musical instruments. Such prohibitions were likely among the factors that hastened the unku's decline. A document preserved in the Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, dated 1781, records the official final criminal sentence issued by José Antonio de Areche, the royal inspector of the colonial administration in Peru, in response to the Túpac Amaru II uprising. The verdict stated explicitly: … For the same purpose, it is strictly forbidden for the Indians to wear pagan garments—particularly those ceremonial robes once

reserved for heathen nobility, the distinctive attire formerly worn by their Inca rulers to display rank and status. Such garments would only rekindle memories of their former days, and those memories would have no consequences beyond deepening their resentment toward the ruling nation. Moreover, such attire appears utterly absurd and laughable (Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, 2011).

Under these conditions, maintaining an indigenous culture became exceedingly difficult. Unku persisted only in certain indigenous communities and even changed in form. It grew shorter, gained sleeves, and acquired slits at the hem to allow horseback riding, a modification that broke the longstanding tradition of leaving the woven cloth uncut. New motifs with distinct European characteristics began to appear in garment decorations, including stylized birds, botanical designs, double-headed eagles, and confronted lions (Pillsbury, 2002, p. 84). Over time, a man's outer garment known as the poncho came into widespread use and displaced the unku. Its construction closely resembles that of unku, differing mainly in that the two long edges are left unstitched, making it roomier and more enveloped, with the fabric falling freely over the arms. The poncho was not an invention of the colonial era. It already appeared in pre-Columbian Andean textiles produced by the indigenous peoples of the Americas, although its precise point of origin has not yet been established. A 1934 photograph by the Peruvian photographer Martín Chambi (Figure 10) shows an indigenous Peruvian family. The man in the far left and the child in the far right wear ponchos. By this point, unku had vanished entirely from their everyday dress. De la Vega (1996, p. 432) observes in Royal Commentaries of the Incas that "the Indians of Peru were generally accustomed to having their arms and legs uncovered". In contrast, in the photograph, the man and child wear shirts beneath their outer garments and trousers below—a shift in everyday dress that reflects the lasting impact of the European colonial settlement. The woman at the center wears clothing that remains close in form to that of the Inca period. At that time, women were typically dressed in a tube-shaped skirt paired with an upper shawl, known as a lliclla. However, her skirt already shows signs of European influence.

Figure 10. The Indian Family of Tinta Conches, photographed by Martín Chambi, 1934 (Lane, 2025, p. 226).

Figure 11. Poncho, worn by the Araucanian Indians and gauchos of Chile (Racinet, 2021, p. 155).

Changes in the Post-Colonial Era

Today, the true Inca unku is no longer worn in everyday life. It is only occasionally adopted within indigenous cultural revival contexts as a deliberate statement of identity. Given how closely the poncho resembles an unku in both form and developmental history, the former may be understood as a transformed continuation of the latter. The poncho has become one of South America's most recognizable garments, embraced by indigenous groups, including the Quechua, Aymara, and Mapuche. Its combination of practicality and visual appeal has made it a symbolic marker of indigenous Andean identity, and its reach extends to Mexico and the United States. In many American Western films, the poncho serves as a recurring visual element, evoking rugged independence and frontier spirit associated with cowboy culture. As the inheritor of the ancient unku, the postcolonial poncho converted what had once been a marker of imperial authority in the Inca Empire into a broadly shared cultural symbol. An indigenous Andean person wearing a poncho (see Figure 12) illustrates how garment patterns differ across indigenous communities, while the forms and decorative motifs of these garments continue to carry traces of the earlier unku tradition.

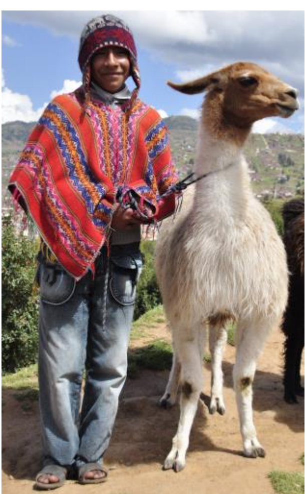

Figure 12. An Andean indigenous person wearing a poncho (Peru, mammal, andes by Yolanda, n.d., Pixabay https://pixabay.com/photos/peru-mammal-andes-lama-height-143872/. In the public domain).

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that unku was far more common than men's garments with a long history in the Andean Region of South America. Beyond its prevalence, it functioned as a material embodiment of the administrative order of the Inca Empire, lending support to descriptions of Inca governance found in colonial texts. The empire's administrative system drove the standardization, regulation, and mass production of garment design and manufacturing. In this context, the unku operated as an identity marker that facilitated coordination across institutional structures. The consistency of its form may also have contributed to a shared sense of belonging, reinforcing the state's experience as a coherent and integrated entity. Despite the collapse of the Inca Empire and the subsequent imposition of colonial rule, the unku did not disappear entirely. The poncho carried forward certain qualities of the unku and, in doing so, developed a cultural reach of its own that has extended well beyond indigenous identity to global popular culture. These garments remain living vessels in the Inca civilization's legacy, reflecting the endurance and adaptation of indigenous material practices over time.

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