As alienated moderns, we hunger for reconnection with our presumably purer ancestral selves. This longing takes many forms of ethnic nostalgia, including our postindustrial fascination with low-tech artifacts created in the few remaining places where DSL, Paris Hilton, and los Arcos Dorados (the Golden Arches) have not yet intruded.

Weaving a Future: Tourism, Cloth, & Culture on an Andean Island by Elayne Zorn both kindles and satisfies this yearning. Quite remarkably, in a modest paperback without a single color photograph, she not only evokes the sophisticated riot of color and pattern of Peruvian weaving, but also places the act and tradition of weaving as an expression of cultural identity into a compelling contemporary context.

Zorn, an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Central Florida, has been enchanted by the textiles of Taquile, an island located in the midst of Lake Titicaca at nearly 13,000 feet above sea level, since 1976, when she first arrived as a backpacker. Zorn’s visit was prescient, since waves of First World tourists have followed ever since, seeking quaint folkloric souvenirs and perhaps something more.

Part of the Taquilean ability to preserve “lo Andino”—the culture’s Andean-ness—is based upon an unbroken 3,000-year relationship with the loom. Zorn writes, John Murra (1962, 1995) concluded that in the Inca Empire, no important event took place without cloth playing a prominent role, which in other societies was filled by objects made in other media. She also describes weaving as a “holy act,” which requires supernatural as well as human assistance and transforms the textile into a living being.

And she takes it a step further:

Taquilean involvement with cloth begins at birth … a newborn is not considered entirely human, … and cloth is key to turning the “pre-human” into a runner, or human being.

In a tone of cool appraisal, Zorn demonstrates that handwoven cloth has been and remains laden with highly idiosyncratic, specific local meaning about cosmology, wealth, ethnic identity, kinship relationships, and gender. She fully explores the contradictions of the “commoditization” of Taquilean cloth, pointing out that weaving now is an important source of income for the astonishingly financially impoverished Andean people (a portion of the royalties of Zorn’s book sales goes to the education of Taquilean youth on and off the island of Taquile).

The idea of leaving the island still is new to many older Taquileans; until the backpackers arrived, they had only delicate reed boats for transport. Zorn describes Taquileans donning machine-made western wear over their cherished ethnic garments as they approach the Peruvian mainland, since wearers of ethnic dress often are subject to discrimination, a risk that first began with its prohibition under Spanish colonial rule. In spite of these challenges, Zorn’s prognosis is ultimately positive, so we are spared the usual guilt-ridden, doomsday moralizing that generally follows a brush with an endangered species, in this case los Taquileanos.

In her Weaving Generations Together: Evolving Creativity in the Maya of Chiapas, Professor Patricia Marks Greenfield, who received much of her anthropology training at Harvard, forays into related but ultimately very different territory. Living and weaving with the Zinacantec people of rural Nabenchauk in Chiapas, Mexico, over the course of two decades, Greenfield uses the traditional arts of weaving and embroidery as a means of taking the cultural temperature, with specific attention to gender roles, mother-daughter interaction, and the individual’s relationship to Zinacantecan society at large.

One of the principal areas of her study is the culture’s attitude toward innovation and change within its textile arts, and how “creativity” in the Western sense is viewed in what, like the culture of the Taquileanos of Lake Titicaca, has been in effect a closed society for many centuries. Instead of rigidity, Greenfield (and Zorn) as well encounter receptivity—the antithesis of fundamentalism. Both the Taquileanos and the Zinacantecanos are portrayed as successfully navigating two worlds, flexible enough to modify and integrate outside influences without caving to assimilation.

Greenfield begins with provocative observations about the body and its rhythms, whether inherited or acquired in very early life. She refers to research conducted by pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton and others, comparing Euro-American babies born in the United States and Zinacantec infants. The Zinacantec infants, the research revealed, displayed an overall lower level of motor activity and a higher level of visual attention from birth. Their characteristic of resting the arms close to the upper body was especially striking in comparison with Euro-American babies, who displayed more expansive arm movements.

Physical characteristics—a marked stillness of the upper body, long visual attention span, superior physical balance, and a propensity, learned, inherent, or both, for extended kneeling and squatting—create the … “innate foundation for the use of the body in backstrap weaving,” according to Greenfield. Zorn, on the other hand, seems to feel that her Andean companions experience her own physical suffering (“lower backache from bending over, shoulder pain from beating down the weft, blisters, calluses, hand strain”) in the form of “back strain and, sometimes, repetitive-motion injuries.”
Overall, Greenfield’s multidisciplinary approach is primarily concerned with how society shapes an individual’s psyche, perception, and creativity. For instance, one of the exercises she poses to her subjects, who are often girls in their teens or younger, is to simply create “something beautiful,” using colored rods that are set into a frame, suggesting textile patterns. Even more intriguing is Greenfield’s seemingly straightforward request that her subjects replicate textile patterns representationally with the rods in another exercise. The Zinacantecano eye clearly perceives space, color, sequence, and form differently than Greenfield expects, and the origin of this difference finally remains a mystery. In the end, we cannot articulate what defines “beautiful”—in fact, we cannot even fully agree on a definition of “red.”

Like the Taquileanos, who now modify old weaving patterns and even create new items such as a “calendar belt” as the result of contact with the First World, the Zinacantecano weaving culture also is fluid and responsive to change. For instance, writing and drawing skills (not to mention pens, pencils, and paper) acquired by children in Western-style schools have made young girls skilled pattern-makers in an artisan society that never used printed patterns previously. In this way, daughters have become teachers to their mothers, reversing the centuries-old practice. According to the author, both mothers and daughters seem to embrace this twist with pride and tenderness.

Excellent photography reminds us that the subjects are more than statistics and cause-and-effect probabilities. Saturated hues that make the structures of the human eye rattle with energy—fuchsia, magenta, hot pink, blistering lipstick red—bring the brainy text to life, beginning with an image of brilliantly shawled families selecting from equally brilliantly colored plastic bowls at an outdoor market. Many comparative photographs throughout the book show how an idea is replicated and reinterpreted through the eyes and hands of successive artisans, making the process of creation emphatically human.

There are lots of interesting ideas and images in Tiwanaku: Ancestors of the Inca, a lush guide to a museum exhibition of the same name. The format of this book is problematic, since various individual essays introduce and reintroduce the same ideas and the same photographs in a fragmented and often redundant fashion, without cross-referencing. The text is further confused by the (apparent) insertion of special brief essays, printed on black paper stock. This practice, combined with the strangely repetitive handling of the material, seems like simple disorganization.

So just look at the pictures. The pieces, in media ranging from hammered gold to camelid (presumably alpaca or vicuña) fiber, were collected throughout Bolivia, Chile, and Peru, some dating as far back as 200 B.C.E. The strong linear attitude of many pieces, such as the ceramic skeletal effigy vessel, Wari style, dated 500-800 C.E., appears to be so in tune with modern design that it would be right at home in a contemporary gallery. Old stoners will chuckle at the array of snorting paraphernalia intended for various local hallucinogenic substances, as well as the scholarly gravitas applied to the subject. And the superbly four-cornered hats in the Tiwanaku style, made of knotted camelid fiber, would have done Latifah proud in her crown-wearing days, proof that some ideas wear well on any continent, in any century. How much more appealing it would have been for the reader if, say, the photographs of all the snuff and snorting gear were grouped and discussed in one essay, instead of scattered throughout the book, and likewise for the four-cornered hats.

For lovers of textile art, the ceramic Wari piece, Figure in a Tunic and Four-Cornered Hat really says it all. The squat, stylized figure, dated 500-800 C.E., wears a richly patterned garment, and his face also is patterned with the diamonds, crosses, triangles, and step patterns that characterize textiles from the same time and place. The message: Both man and tunic are literally cut from the same cloth.

—Victoria Thomas