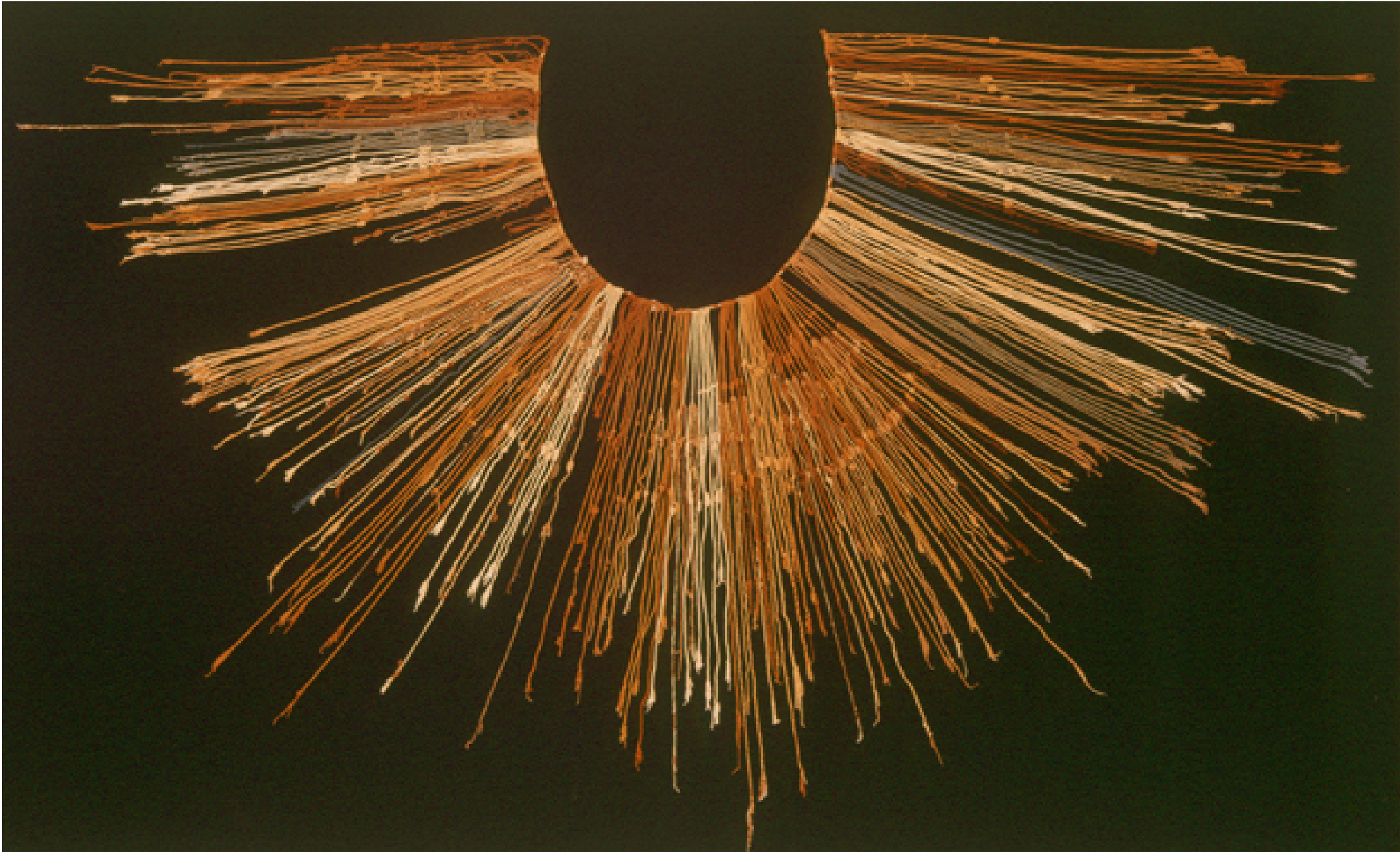


Incan Khipu: The Ancient Binary Script



In this picture, note the different colored cords, the knots and their positions. Upon close inspection, you may be able to see the different twists in the cords, the diverse assortment of knot types, the combinations of multiple colors into a single cord, and the varying ways in which they are combined. Each of these things changes the meaning of a khipu in crucial ways in the same way a comma might crucially change a sentence in English. "Let's eat, Grandma" is an entirely different sentiment from "Lets eat Grandma." Each of these "commas" play a pivotal role in the narration the khipu makes.

Much is yet unknown about khipu. We know it was the system Incans used for writing, but most of it remains undeciphered. Part of the difficulty with khipu is that it is so unique when compared to all other writing systems. Scripts as we know them are like the one you are reading now. Yes, there are some major differences between, say, English and Japanese script, the former being alphabetic and the latter being a combination of multiple syllabaries and a simplified logographic script.

However, the point stands that they are created with similar mediums; they are both two-dimensional. Even looking back in history to more primitive scripts, the

Why Is Khipu Special?



two-dimensional rule holds. Cuneiform, the first script ever invented, was written by pressing reeds into clay. In fact, one of the only scripts that is as three-dimensional as khipu is braille, the writing system invented for the visually impaired. This sets khipu apart from all other scripts. Because of its unique form, translation attempts so far have been rendered fruitless.

The history of khipu is also fraught in a way many scripts are not. When the Spanish invaded South America, they destroyed the Incan way of life. Khipu was intrinsically tied to Incan culture and society, and the Spanish targeted it. Destruction of khipus made dismantling the Incan empire that much easier.

How does Khipu Work? Learn By Doing!

Color	Meaning
Black	Majority
Brown	Horror/Thriller
Green	Documentaries
Pink	Entertainment
Purple	Anime
White	Minority

First, identify the colors in the khipu below. Can you figure out the basic subject of each cord? Some will have two colors, some will have only one. The cords with multiple colors have multiple subjects. This is the most basic step in reading a khipu. All of the following steps in your burgeoning khipu literacy will build on this.

Position	Meaning
Primary	Determines the subject
Pendant	Subtopics
Subsidiary	Offshoot of connected subtopic

Next, let's talk about cord position. The primary cord is the biggest, and the one from which all the pendant cords are hung. It's the "title." Subsidiary cords do not connect to the primary cord. In this way, one khipu can cover multiple subjects. Check the colors again. In Step 3, you'll be able to determine the subject of this khipu.

Texture	Meaning
Fuzzy	Class
Cotton	Object

Now it's time to identify the textures of each cord. The texture of the primary cord is fuzzy. Combine that knowledge with what you know from the two previous steps.

Ply	Meaning
S	Dislike
Z	Meaning

S Ply means the cord is twisted clockwise. Z Ply means the cord is twisted counter-clockwise. Take a look at the direction of each individual cord.

Combination	Meaning
None	No additional meaning
Barber Pole	Not embarrassed
Mottle	Embarrassed

Last step! The combinations are mostly self-explanatory. If the two colors in a cord are twisted in such a way each is clearly defined, that's the barber pole combo. If the cord has a spotty color combination, that's mottle. Now, keep in mind that all of these steps have changed the meaning of each cord and the overall khipu. Do you know what it says? Look under the flap to find out!

What Was the Purpose of Khipu?

Khipu actually had a lot of uses!

- Accounting/Bureaucracy
 - The Incan Empire stretched across much of South America at its height. An empire that large, that spanned so many previously distinct cultures, needed a complex governing system to maintain control over all its citizens.
 - There were a lot of numbers for government officials to keep track of: who had paid their taxes, which harvests had been successful, which cities were nearing population capacity. It would be nearly impossible to manage such a large empire, such a vast bureaucracy, without a writing system.
- Narrative
 - Like most writing systems, khipu was born out of necessity, not out of desire. However, what originally was intended to document trades of goods and services developed over time into a writing system complex enough to record narratives of battles and the like.
 - Khipu used for narrative records are distinct from those used for accounting to a trained eye.

Subject: Class Entertainment Preferences
Results:

- Majority enjoy Horror/Thriller, not embarrassed of preference; minority dislike Horror/Thriller, not embarrassed of preference
- Majority enjoy Documentaries, not embarrassed of preference; minority dislike Documentaries, not embarrassed of preference
 - Majority enjoy Anime, embarrassed of preference; minority dislike Anime, not embarrassed of preference