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MODERN TRADITIONS: THE IMPACT OF THE TRADE IN TRADITIONAL TEXTILES ON THE SAKAKA OF NORTHERN POTOSI, BOLIVIA

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An elegantly dressed woman, wearing the handwoven clothing characteristic of her ethnic group, stands in front of a vendor displaying the latest machine-woven shawls from Bolivia's capital city, La Paz. The woman, her daughter, and friends have just walked five hours from their rural home to attend an annual festival in the region's only town. The merchant, a young man of indigenous origin, wearing jeans, a jacket, sneakers, and a baseball cap, urges her to try on his merchandise. Glancing at her women friends for support, she opens the large safety pin holding closed her handwoven shawl and deftly slips it off her back. She hands it over to the merchant while he passes her the cheap shawl on his shoulder she eyed. He spreads her weaving open and, studying it, offers a deal: hers for his. Spectators gather. The poised woman momentarily hesitates, then makes up her mind. She takes the factory-woven cloth and quickly wraps her purchases in it. Looking pleased, she slings it over her shoulders and strides off to enjoy the festival, wearing her new acquisition. The merchant neatly folds up her shawl and places it on the ever-growing pile on the stone bench behind him, smiling slowly. If he's lucky, he can sell her shawl for \$20, about \$15 more than he paid for the industrially-woven one she took. Another handwoven textile has left the mountain communities of Bolivia, bound for the streets of La Paz and, eventually, our homes or museums.

THE TRADE IN TRADITIONAL ANDEAN TEXTILES:

Since the mid-1970s an uncalculably enormous quantity of fine textiles from indigenous Andean homes and communities in Peru and Bolivia have been sold to tourists or collectors. Except for a very few well-publicized exceptions - Taquile, Peru, and Otavalo, Ecuador - marketing "traditional" Andean textiles is extraordinarily disadvantageous to its indigenous weavers. Profits, tiny

to great, go to merchants. Few producers know how or where to sell their textiles; high prices are paid in the U.S. or Europe, not at the source. The traffic has been so great that few fine contemporary or antique handwoven textiles remain in Peru today. Due to economic, social, and cultural changes there, relatively few communities still weave. Mounds of handwoven fabrics lie piled on La Paz streets and in stores in seemingly assembly-line quantities, but while numerous indigenous Bolivians still weave, in many "textile centers" there are few if any fine or old textiles.

The Sakaka, an ethnic group of 25,000 indigenous Andeans ("Indians") who live in northern Potosi, Bolivia, have made thousands of transactions in the past ten to fifteen years similar to the one described above. The exchange or sale of their traditional textiles for industrially-manufactured objects – aluminum pots, machine-woven shawls, factory-spun yarns – whether done in their homes or at fairs was inevitably unprofitable. The Sakaka were ignorant of the monetary value of their weavings, and received in return for them objects or cash worth only a fraction of the textiles' value in La Paz, itself small compared to their value outside Bolivia.

Almost without exception the old Sakaka textiles are gone; their makers and owners lament their loss. Yet while Sakaka homes no longer contain old textiles, the textile "tradition" thrives. Young Sakaka women and men still dedicate much time and tremendous energy to create what they consider beautiful textiles. In the past five years the young Sakaka have developed a clothing style distinct from that of previous generations (Zorn n.d.b). While the weavings of the older generation are sought by textile dealers for sale to tourists, contemporary Sakaka textiles are not. The young Sakaka have created a new textile style that is "unsaleable" (Figure 1).

THE BOLIVIAN TEXTILE TRADE:

Most textiles are sold in La Paz, the capital. Merchants hawk handwoven textiles in tiny stores, on the street and, occasionally, in tourists' hotel rooms. Textiles come from Bolivia's numerous ethnic groups. Merchants seek textiles that are old and finely handspun, of sheep wool or alpaca

fiber, colored with natural dyes. Women weave these shawls, overskirts, purses, belts, and ponchos. The clothing that men make (shirts, pants, dresses, etc.) almost never is sold to tourists. Prices depend on the particular textile and on the ethnic group from which it came. To increase sales La Paz merchants often modify textiles. Complete cloths are cut and sewn into knapsacks or vests; small cut-up sections adorn wallets and handbags. This widespread practice, which produces many textiles out of one, obviously increases profit. Vendors claim that they only cut up old, worn-out, unsaleable textiles.

It is impossible to estimate the volume or the value of this textile trade. It is difficult to even determine the exact origin of street textiles. Reasons include: the blurring of styles on the regional ethnic boundaries of producers, the lack of documentation of Bolivia's varied textile traditions (especially of changes over time which now cannot be completely documented), and the ignorance or unwillingness of vendors to provide information, especially to nonbuyers. In the late 1970s and early 1980s foreign dealers or Bolivian intermediaries went directly to communities to buy in quantity. Many Andeans first sold their old textiles during 1984–84 because of poverty during those drought years. Today the principal route for commercialization is via small scale peddlers who attend regional festivals, trading skeins of acrylic yarns or cheap machine-made shawls for handwoven textiles (Figure 2). Some textile peddlers sell wholesale to La Paz dealers; others retail directly to tourists. The golden age of trafficking in Andean textiles is over, though, as few extraordinary old textiles remain in Andean homes. The merchants are reduced to buying and selling "average" textiles in volume, waiting and soliciting the unusual find.

THE SAKAKA OF NORTHERN POTOSI AND THEIR TEXTILE TRADITION:

Many of Bolivia's so-called "textile centers" are in northern Potosi. (What dealers call textile centers are regions with high concentrations of "Indians.") Most of the population of northern Potosi are native Andeans (*runa*), who belong to large ethnic groups (*ayllus*). Between 1987 and 1989 I studied textile production among the Sakaka, an *ayllu* of Quechua and/or Aymara speakers

who live in Alonso de Ibañez province in the north of northern Potosí. The 500 Sakaka communities are located at 3,000–4,000 meters above sea level. The Sakaka are poor peasant farmers who primarily grow potatoes and wheat; some herd llamas. Hamlets lack potable running water, sewerage, electricity, irrigation, roads, and transportation. Opportunities to work are limited and wages pay only \$1 a day. Many young Sakaka go to the Chapare – Bolivia's principal coca-growing region – despite the dangers inherent in the coca/cocaine business. One of the distinguishing, and constituting, characteristics of the Sakaka ethnic group is a particular "style" of clothing (actually a sub-style of northern Potosí dress). Certain Sakaka handmade textiles appeal to tourists – thus the trade in their traditional weavings.

Sakaka men and women, from the time they are preteens, are passionate about weaving and embroidering cloth. Teenagers produce the greatest amount of textiles, and are the region's fashion leaders. While ancient, inherited Sakaka weavings are gone from their communities as a consequence of the textile trade, the Sakaka textile tradition continues. This tradition is surprisingly dynamic. The Sakaka have altered their characteristic style of dress every one or two generations in the past hundred years, though their clothing continues to be composed of the typical Andean mix of pre-Columbian and Spanish peasant style garments. Women weave Andean type textiles – sacks, shawls, ponchos, overskirts, belts, purses – on the Andean loom. Men weave Spanish-style clothing – pants, shirts, vests, jackets, scarves, dresses, headshawls – on the European-type treadle loom. Women knit mens' caps, and men embroider.

The "classic" Sakaka style was woven primarily by today's middle-aged Sakaka women. Since handwoven womens' shawls exemplify generational changes, and are the primary garments sold in the tourist trade, I will examine them more closely. Women usually use two or three shawls; one for warmth and decoration, and one or two to carry burdens (Figure 3). Andean shawls are square-ish four-selvedge warp-faced weave fabrics, composed of two separately woven rectangles seamed together. Women weave them on the four-stake continuous tension Andean loom, from two-ply

handspun sheep wool or llama fiber yarns, colored with aniline dyes. Daily shawls have brown or black plain weave fields; festival shawls have bright-colored fields. The major pattern stripes in "classic" Sakaka textiles are woven in two- or three-color complementary warp weave, separated by solid color stripes. The images in the pattern stripes are either geometric, or of abstract serpent-birds. As the weaver manipulates the colors in the weave to reverse figure and ground, the images appear enclosed in little boxes.

Some young Sakaka still weave this way, but most prefer a new style that they have created and refined since about 1985. Teenagers and people in their twenties consider what they weave and wear "beautiful," and the older textiles "ugly." While many young women say that they weave because they don't have the money to buy industrially-woven shawls, it actually is cheaper to buy a machine-made shawl than the factory-spun yarns needed to weave a shawl. However, while one skein costs a day's wages, yarns can be purchased incrementally. Current Sakaka fashion (*mada*) incorporates diverse influences: textiles are woven with new materials, new images, and new warp-patterned weave structures. Materials come from new sources, and the textiles' aesthetic principles incorporate influences as diverse as the traffic in traditional textiles, and working in the Chapare. Sakaka dress both illustrates and constructs social change.

The most extreme sub-style of contemporary fashion rejects handwoven dress for industrially-woven "pan-Indian" peasant style clothing, though young Sakaka women add handwoven hatbands and shawls. Contemporary "traditional" Sakaka dress is based on handwoven garments made by both women and men from respun acrylic yarns. Men weave Western-style vests and jackets in wild plaids or in black, and black pants, dresses, and skirts that they decorate with increasingly elaborate embroidery. These textiles copy and seek to improve on a recent northern Potosí fashion of embroidered jackets, vests, dresses, and skirts, developed around 1985 by the Laymi, another Aymara ethnic group. (The Sakaka are not the only fashion innovators in northern Potosí.) Young Sakaka women weave Andean type shawls, overskirts, belts, and hatbands; they also knit mens'

caps. They mostly fill these textiles with images that are modern and representational – lions, motorcycles, flowers, tigers, parrots – rather than geometric and abstract. To do so, young women have learned two new warp-patterned weave structures: two- or three-colored warp-faced double cloth (cf. Zorn n.d.a) for shawls, overskirts, and belts, and supplementary-warp weave for hatbands. (A few older women have also learned to weave double cloth.) The inspiration for these images is as likely to come from school primers as from printed currency.

Whereas older style Sakaka textiles have solid color stripes between pattern stripes, women now weave and knit textiles with gradations of thin stripes between pattern areas. In a small space these tiny stripes achieve the effect of a "tiny chromatic scale" of two opposite colors, which meet as each smoothly shades from light to dark or vice versa. This concept of the encounter of smooth gradations of opposite colors is vitally important in many Aymara weavings (Cereceda 1987), but does not occur in Sakaka textiles. It is taken from and re-interprets the factory-woven shawls from La Paz traded for older textiles.

SAKAKA CLOTH IN THE TEXTILE TRADE:

Among the mounds and mounds of Bolivian textiles from numerous regions piled on La Paz streets are many Sakaka shawls and, in smaller quantities, overskirts; coca purses or belts rarely appear. Sakaka textiles are priced at the low end of the Bolivian textile trade, which in La Paz means \$10 to \$20 for a shawl or overskirt. Higher prices go to textiles woven by other northern Potosi ethnic groups, such as Macha shawls and Jallq'a (Potolo) overskirts. "Better" textiles sell for \$20 to \$30, and "expensive" ones cost \$50 to \$75. In the U.S., Bolivian textiles typically cost \$75-\$500, though some are priced in the thousands of dollars.

Nowadays there are few textiles older than ten to fifteen years in Sakaka homes. A decade ago roving Bolivian peddlers regularly visited the remote Sakaka hamlets seeking old weavings. There are stories of an occasional visit by jeep of *gringo* (white, foreign) buyers. Older Sakaka say they

sold their textiles for small sums of money or, more commonly, traded them. Today few peddlers bother to walk out to communities to seek fine older weavings. Sakaka who still have textiles left to trade find merchants at the annual festival/fairs in the town of Sacaca. I found two basic Sakaka responses to the textile trade, which differed primarily by generation. Middle-aged and elderly Sakaka lament the loss of the textiles they had sold or traded so cheaply. They feel that they made a bad deal, that they were ignorant of the monetary value of their textiles. The objects they received in trade are no longer any good. In short, the older Sakaka feel cheated.

Why did the Sakaka sell or trade their old textiles so cheaply? Like other Andeans, the Sakaka have always participated in trade and commerce, but at least in recent memory they did not exchange "traditional" textiles. The Sakaka were unaware of the mercantile value of their textiles. The monopolistic practices of dealers also eliminated bargaining. In long-term trade relationships Andeans sometimes make exchanges that are disadvantageous in the short run, but these usually balance out over time: the trade in traditional textiles tended toward one-time transactions.

Surprisingly, teenage Sakaka do not seem concerned about the loss of older textiles. Perhaps this is an effect of the disintegration of Andean culture: young people have Chapare on their mind. Perhaps this is only the short-term view. This attitude, however, is not simply indifference by a younger generation that spurns handmade cloth as emblematic of impoverished Indianness. New Sakaka handwoven textiles are not wanted by textile dealers. At the regional festival-fairs, I saw that merchants did not trade factory-made shawls for new "style" Sakaka weavings, nor did I see them for sale in La Paz. Dealers say that they don't want these textiles because tourists don't buy fabrics woven of factory-spun acrylic yarns in the neon colors preferred by the young Sakaka (though tourists do buy brightly-colored knit caps).

Despite the young Sakaka's stated indifference to the traffic in traditional textiles, the creation of their new fashion – intentionally or not – may be a form of resistance to the commercialization of

their ethnic group's old weavings. This paper argues that the new style of Sakaka dress subverts the textile trade. If this interpretation is correct, then the new style handwoven Sakaka textiles signify the opposite of textiles altered for sale (Zorn n.d.a).

CONCLUSIONS:

Sakaka clothing proclaims a separate ethnic "Sakaka" identity, but the influences on the newest style of Sakaka dress cross ethnic and class lines. In doing so, Sakaka textiles rupture the traditional/modern dichotomy. They illuminate the dynamics and complexity of Andean textiles and, thereby, of Andean society.

Current Sakaka dress uses traditional Andean textile technology, clothing forms and, in part, aesthetic language. Women weave Andean style garments on the handmade Andean loom in the four-selvedge forms present for thousands of years in the archaeological record. Men weave Western-style garments on the European-type treadle loom as they have since the Spanish invasion in the 16th century. Much of the aesthetic language of the Sakaka textiles draws on an ancient Andean vocabulary, which each generation and weaver reinterprets.

Most of today's traditional-type textiles are nevertheless woven with industrially-spun acrylic yarns produced in Bolivian factories. The Sakaka need cash, or older textiles that they can trade, to obtain yarns. Buying acrylic yarns ties weavers to the market system and makes them dependent on wage labor, and the art of Andean spinning is being lost, but the Sakaka use the time they gain from not having to spin to produce more textiles.

One sub-style of contemporary Sakaka fashion substitutes industrially-manufactured peasant-style (*cholo*, *cholita*) garments produced in Bolivia and circulated nationally for handwoven clothing. These clothes are usually worn by young people who have worked in the Chapare. Young Sakaka who wear national peasant dress modify it with the handwoven shawls and hatbands typical

of their ethnic group. The prevailing fashion of handwoven clothing worn by most young Sakaka, however, incorporates or copies garments produced by the Laymi of northern Potosí. Their cottage industry of woven and embroidered peasant-style clothing, which began about 1985, has its own small market circuit outside of the dominant national system. While some Sakaka consumers still buy Laymi textiles, young Sakaka now produce their own versions.

Though much of the aesthetic vocabulary in new Sakaka textiles is "traditional," textiles now incorporate a key Andean aesthetic form, chromatic shading, which previously was not part of the Sakaka textile language. The mediating vehicle for this is the mass-produced factory-woven shawl that older Sakaka traded for their fine textiles, whose shaded stripes young Sakaka weavers now copy. These machine-made shawls, woven for an urban Indian clientele by urban Aymaras in La Paz, imitate the traditional handwoven textiles of the Lake Titicaca region.

The young Sakaka consider their current dress, which draws on the complex influences hinted at here, fashionable and beautiful. To us, their weavings appear ugly examples of a declining tradition. We consider them inferior to older "traditional" weavings, because new Sakaka textiles are made from respun acrylic yarns in garish neon colors, with modern images of motorcycles and Diablada dancers. Young Sakaka weavers are not concerned, however, with whether their handwoven and embroidered textiles are "traditional": in fact, they seek to produce clothing that is "modern" in its stylishness. In the case of new Sakaka fashion, which textile dealers do not want, what looks to us like "altered" textiles are actually the most "traditional," outside the circuit of the tourist trade. Thus the young Sakaka may be said to subvert the trade of their traditional textiles by placing their textiles and, by extension, themselves outside of the national and international market – though using factory-spun yarns reinforces ties to the market and their role as wage labor. Yet the issue of "traditionalism" goes far beyond textiles. The Sakaka are well aware that producing and wearing their own clothing firmly locates them as native *runa*, or "Indians," within the dominant Bolivian society.

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Fig. 1. Young Sakaka women singers at the 1989 Ayllu Samkha music festival. The shawl visible at left is patterned in warp-faced double cloth, separated by stripes of chromatic shading.



Fig. 2. Textile dealers at the August 6th, 1989, festival in the town of Sacaca. The men on the left and right hold up handwoven Sakaka shawls; the man in the center holds up a factory-woven shawl.



Fig. 3. A Sakaka mother and daughter look at industrially-spun yarns sold at the festival of Tata Sak'ani in Torokari, Potosi. The older woman on the left wears the handwoven fashions of her generation, including a headshawl. Her topmost shawl is woven with pattern stripes of 3-color complementary warp weave, separated by solid color stripes. The shawl on her back (covering her dress) is woven in warp-faced double cloth. The young woman on the right also wears two shawls. The upper one (for burdens) is similar to her mother's shawl. The inner shawl has stripes of chromatic shading between the warp-faced double cloth pattern stripes, of flowers and motorcycles. The dress's hem is heavily embroidered; her hatbands are tasselled with pompoms.