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QUECHUA TEXTILES: PRESERVING A LIVING TRADITION

By Nilda Callañaupa

Quechua Weavings as living art in the Andes today represent the contemporary textiles as result of transition of Pre-Colombian textiles of South America a textile tradition at least 2000 years. In Peru, after the Spanish arrival of 1532-33, many traditional arts were systematically replaced or mixed with European art styles. Fortunately, however, the strong tradition of backstrap loom weaving has survived.

Many changes have occurred in our traditional patterns, but a wide range of warp-patterned techniques have today developed into the richest and most extraordinary dress that Andean villagers have known. Indigenous people living in outlying communities today wear even finer and more complex woven textiles than their Inca forebears. Of course, I am not talking about the textiles woven for the Inca Emperor and nobility, but of Andean village weavings. Today we express in weavings our sacred landscape-the rituals and traditions associated with lakes, rivers, mountains, the flora and fauna of our high slopes, the shapes of our fields, our history. A few patterns now even include psychological associations.

Our Inca ideas and practices have always been comprehensive. They express contemporary world issues involving conservation, appreciation of our Mother Earth and the concept of caring for the land we are privileged to use during our lifetimes. My work relating to textile expressions strengthens knowledge of Quechua culture and history and I hope it will contribute to the wealth of world knowledge.

Since Pre-Columbian written documents do not exist and Colonial records are limited, it is important to learn what we can of our history through textiles. They hold information especially about everyday life as it links Pre-Inca and contemporary customs. Thanks to the Spanish colonial government, we lost much knowledge about our ancestors. But we are in the process of trying to reclaim as much as possible.

It is time now to recover what we can from our old people, to establish and keep records and teach our local people the great amount that is being learned. Since our education system does not emphasize or value our Inca heritage, I want to see the next generation of educated Quechua children continue to learn and pass on information to others.

Textiles can play other important roles in our society. My work in preserving textile traditions has already helped to strengthen the modest economy of Quechua families, helping many families in different regions. For example, I want to help families avoid sending their talented children to the cities to work in jobs below their abilities, as maids or laborers. Young people can use their weaving, as I have, to expand the advantages of their lives, and pursue new opportunities including advanced education. Also, if the families' economy is strengthened by the making and selling of fine weavings, husbands can avoid seeking work in the jungle where highland people are known to contract serious sicknesses; many tropical sicknesses that cause death.

Cusco is an important center in the tourism industry. It provides opportunities to market the best quality textiles. Weavers require opportunities and knowledge to avoid the excesses of middle market fees; then the makers of textiles can earn at least most of the money for their pieces. It is also important to educate tourists about authentic traditional textiles. I have been trying to make clear to travelers I meet the difference between fine works which take experienced weavers hundreds of hours to create and the simpler non-indigenous arts and crafts produced for the souvenir marketplace.

In recent years families needing money have sold the old textiles of their ancestors. This practice could be replaced if weavers concentrate on making fine new weavings.

With these perspective in mind, I have been working with a group of friends and supporters establishing and expanding the Center for Traditional Textiles of Cusco or CTTC. Our focus is on preserving and promoting the finest contemporary Andean textiles. We will soon start a capital campaign to raise funds for a textile Museum-Center in Cusco. In a few years, when we acquire and renovate an old Colonial building in the center of Cusco, we expect to have weavers coming from different and sometimes distant communities to demonstrate and teach their techniques.

In my role as President of the Center, while working on research of old techniques, I found that the rare warp scaffolding technique, still practiced in the remote village of Qeros and locations in the Pitumarca region, was also being practiced by a very few individuals in other areas of the Urabamba range. This was an exciting finding and shows the urgency of conducting studies in different Andean locations.

My responsibilities and the responsibilities of the professional people working with me at the CTTC in Cusco must be to aid local Quechua people in understanding their own weaving traditions, especially where the textiles play important roles as part of our tradition. We must become involved with broad issues relating to Andean culture. We need to create long-term projects involving local people. In addition to weaving, CTTC participants' roles must be to learn and to educate others, passing on from person to person whatever they discover about their culture.

The commercialization of our Quechua textiles must be accepted as it is and it should be understood that Peruvian textiles are the works of art from our culture. Education about this issue is very important.

The mission statement of The Center:

The Center for Traditional Textiles of Cusco was established in 1996 to aid in the survival of Peruvian Inca textiles and weaving traditions. Working with the Center, Quechua-speaking women and their families in the region of the former Inca capitol are engaged in skills-building, community networking and market development. By also researching and documenting complex styles and techniques of Inca ancestors, the Center helps to ensure that 2,000-year-old textile traditions will not be lost in the next millennium.