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Recuperating a Wealth of Women's Weavings
In the Valleys of Chuquisaca, Bolivia

by

Kevin Healy and Veronica Cereceda

Textile arts in the Andean region have long been experiencing a decline. The success of the Jalq'a textiles program, growing over the last ten years in southern Bolivia, however, demonstrates a possible alternative path for Andean textile arts.

For various reasons, in the 1970s, the beautiful and complex textiles that were the emblem of the Jalq'a communities were disappearing. The fleece spun by hand was replaced by acrylic thread, much of the arts of spinning and dyeing were lost, and with those, went the chromatic harmonies as well. The beautiful animals that had defined the Jalq'a style (often called Potolo) were thrown out and replaced by small schematic figures, and the "llamero" style from the ethnic groups located north and west of the Jalq'a infiltrated the designs, turning them into simply decorative.

A program to support the traditional arts has been in place for the last nine years and it has instigated a renaissance. These very fine textiles, made using ancestral techniques and born from the hands of more than 1,000 weavers associated with the program, are producing a true ethonogenesis—that is to say, a new creation of culture. The ethnic and spiritual content of the designs (the weaver's world visions expressed through their own aesthetic) combined with the excellent craftsmanship have created a specialized market—one for true works of art.

Due to the limited time available, this lecture will share illustrations of this process of change—transformations both aesthetic and semantic—in a long lasting tradition of visual expression. In addition, it will discuss the methodology which has contributed to this process.

Veronica Cereceda and her husband Gabriel Martinez founded ASUR in the mid-1980s in Sucre, Bolivia as a project to help restore the declining weaving tradition of the indigenous Jalq'a (Potolo) of Bolivia. It has become a model of microregional development. Her 1986 article entitled "Semiotics of Andean Textiles: The talegas of Isluga" in Murra, Watchel & Revel (eds.) is highly respected as ground breaking work in the ethnographic study of Andean textiles. Both she and her husband have extensive backgrounds in Chilean theater which lead them to a deep curiosity about the roots of Latin American identity. ASUR has grown into a nationally known organization which will soon become a legally registered cultural foundation, the first of its kind in Bolivia.

Kevin Healy is a development social scientist who works with USAID and is the Bolivian representative for Interamerican Foundation which has helped the ASUR project from its beginning. He has assisted ASUR for more than a decade. Dr. Elayne Zorn presented Kevin Healy's paper on behalf of ASUR, Veronica Cereceda, and Gabriel Martinez.