

Collectors Versus Native Peoples: The Repatriation of the Sacred Weavings of Coroma, Bolivia¹

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In early 1988 John V. Murra, one of the founders of Andean ethnohistory, sent the community of Coroma a post card that had been issued as an invitation to an exhibition and sale of ethnic art and textiles in San Francisco, California. Pictured on it was a photograph of a Coroman ceremonial *unku* or tunic taken by one of the principal dealers in Coroma textiles who had visited this community during the All Saints Day Festival in 1985. This set off an intensive international repatriation effort that only recently reached its initial conclusion.

The importance of Andean weaving

In Andean civilization textiles have played such a critical role that the Andes has been called a "textile civilization" (Velarde 1987). John Murra (1962) studied how textiles are an essential element of social, economic, and political life in the pre-hispanic Andes. He noted that no political, military, social or religious event was ever complete without offering or exchanging fabrics, or burning them as a sacrifice. The varied combinations of colors, designs, techniques, and qualities of textiles distinguished between ethnic groups and marked the social status of persons. Recent research by Veronica Cereceda (1986; Davalos and Cereceda 1991) demonstrates that, in the absence of a formal writing system, a true abstract language developed in the Andes through textiles that document the history, social organization, spatial dimensions, and cosmology of every ethnic group. Lynn Meisch (1986), Sophie Desrosiers (1985), and Cassandra Torrico (n.d.) have confirmed this through their research in the regions

of Tarabucco, Potolo and Macha, where textiles not only distinguish ethnic groups but also indicate *ayllu* divisions within a group and communicate the social and marital status of the wearer. Thought to be animate objects, Andean textiles have a soul, body, and life. Elayne Zorn (1987) found in Macusani, Peru that the *q'ipis*, or ceremonial bundles of textiles, held as family property are used in fertility rituals for animals and the earth. It is in Coroma where, in addition to all the functions described here, the *q'ipis* fulfill yet another crucial role in local social, political, and religious organization.

The Coroman people and their weavings

The ethnic group found in what today is Coroma was "reduced" or forcibly resettled by Viceroy Toledo in the late sixteenth century. Apparently they are descendants of the Sivaruyo-Aracapi, two groups that were part of the multi-ethnic Killakas confederation, along with the Killaka Asanaque and Aulagas-Uruquilla (Abercrombie 1986; Rasnake 1988). Their language is Aymara although Coromans also speak Quechua and some people can speak Spanish. As all societies in the dualistic Andes, Coroma *ayllu* is divided into two moieties: the upper half, Aransaya, and the lower half, Uninsaya, which are then subdivided into yet smaller *ayllus* making up a total of ten. Two *ayllus* make up the upper moiety and eight the lower moiety.

The *ayllu* comprising the Canton Coroma in the Quijarro Province of Potosi State have preserved *q'ipis* or ceremonial bundles made up of very old textiles passed on from generation to generation

that constitute the collective property of all the members of the ayllu. These weavings originally belonged to the founders of each Coroma ayllu who lived very near the *paqarinas* (springs and caves) that are considered sacred places because humanity emerged from them. In the settlements located near the *paqarinas* the *q'ipis* are kept by the *prestes mayores*, direct descendants of the first inhabitants of Coroma. Other *prestes mayores* keep *q'ipis* in the settlements located near the corners or milestones between ayllu and other ethnic groups; in this way they delimit the territory of each specific ayllu as well as the territory of the entire Coroma ethnic group. These textile markers constitute the boundaries between which clothing is distinguished by specific signs, colors and placement of motifs.

The *q'ipis* are made up of a variety of textiles of surprising quality and beauty which are very well preserved. They appear to have been deposited in their respective bundles during different historical periods from pre-Columbian through early and late colonial times. The bundles include tunics (*unkus qawa*), ponchos, mantles (*llaqota, awayu, llixlla*), overskirts (*axsu*), small carrying cloths (*isqayu, taris, inkunas*), and large hats (*phillus*). They are made of different kinds of wool — vicuña, squirrel, chinchilla, alpaca, llama and sheep — colored with natural dyes.

Despite having very few textiles that allow us to make comparisons we believe that the majority of the textiles in the *q'ipis* are *cumbi*, because they are made of rare vicuña wool, and feature very fine, elaborately embroidered seams. This type of prehispanic fabric was famous for its quality and fineness, often compared with silk by early European writers. During the Inca period *cumbi* textiles were reserved for use by the Inca and his lineage, and the gods. The tradition of weaving these exceptionally fine textiles may have continued into the colonial period in some regions.

The old Coroma textiles found in *q'ipis* are distinguished by designs of stripes in differing widths and colors, some invisible at a distance. In addition to their aesthetic function, these designs express very specific meanings, depending on the width, number, position and color of these stripes. These meanings are also expressed in the warps, which alternate yarns spun and plied together in different directions. This type of warp was used because of its special protective properties.²

The cultural importance of the ceremonial bundles

The *q'ipi* bundles fulfill extremely important roles in the social, political, and religious organization of the ayllu. When asked, "What is a *q'ipi*?" Coromans always respond, "They are our grandfathers, our grandmothers. They are our inheritance from those who have left us. They show us the path we have to follow." The grandmothers and grandfathers are present at each stage of the entire life cycle of the people of Coroma. The villagers conduct special ceremonies to honor them, to seek their permission before beginning their fiestas, to ask which person they should choose to be their male or female companion for life. They also ask them for health, work, humility, and kindness. If all these rites are performed properly, the grandfathers and grandmothers will send their blessings and the fertility of the soil, cattle and humans will increase. If they are not performed all kinds of afflictions will befall the community for generations.

The bundles also act as a sort of oracle. They select the community political authorities as well as those responsible for the fiestas. They have divinatory powers and through *kanchaku*, or "illumination," they choose which community members have the abilities and necessary qualifications to hold communal political positions responsibly. For this reason the *q'ipis* are called *chijllaris*, "the ones who choose." If someone attempts to occupy these positions without their "permission" many kinds of misfortunes can occur. This rite of illumination is also used when the authorities and community members consult their ancestors about the best manner to solve community problems, the most propitious date to plant the fields, and other matters regarding health.

Each religious specialist and traditional authority in charge of collecting the ritual land tax is entrusted with the care of a bundle that symbolizes the political and religious power of the ancestors vested in his person. Each authority must use at least three llamas and three lambs in special ceremonies for the *q'ipis* during his period of office. Rites are offered twice a week, during which authorities inform the souls about everything that has occurred in the community. They must also wash the textiles once a year in a ceremony very similar to one in which the clothes of a deceased person are washed nine days after death. The water with which the *q'ipi*

textiles were washed is poured in the corners of live-stock corrals to increase the fertility of the animals.

Coroman authorities also feed the souls by providing them with a different cooked food every week wrapped in a small bag placed inside the bundle. Along with the food they offer a small glass of pure alcohol and coca leaves. Afterwards community members chew this coca leaf, considering it to be the "milk" of the grandfathers and the grandmothers. Whenever these officials travel they always take two pieces called "wanderers" with them. They are chosen among those in the q'ipis and only these textiles have "permission" to accompany the authorities. While a person occupies this ritual office they gradually receive the magical and religious powers of the souls. After they finish their period of service, they are able to practice divination and become known as wise men.

The contents of the bundles cannot be viewed without first obtaining special "permission." On the 1st of November, All Saints Day, the bundles are honored all night and they are provided with a special meal as an offering. The following day the q'ipis receive prayers and each soul is summoned by name and by ayllu until all are accounted for. Shortly thereafter the bundles are opened and the textiles are distributed among the officials who dress up as their ancestors to perform a special dance that symbolizes human fertility.

Illicit traffic in Bolivian textiles

The emergence of an international market in quality textiles during the 1970s, especially in the United States, caused the numbers of people attempting to obtain old textiles to burgeon throughout Bolivia. At first the dealers were very selective. Their principle interest was in weavings with elaborate zoomorphic and anthropomorphic designs, especially from the villages surrounding Chuquisaca and Potosí. In a few years the best pieces from these regions had disappeared almost completely. The traffickers turned their attention to the so-called "great" weavings of the altiplano region that are extremely fine, very old, and characteristically elaborated with natural dyes.

At first the foreign dealers themselves travelled into the countryside to personally acquire the pieces that most interested them. Over time they began sending Spanish-speaking peasants they trained in "textile recovery" who today are their preferred agents in the illegal trade. These intermediaries

know the countryside well, they find it easier to travel to remote places without attracting attention, and they can more easily communicate with villagers in their native tongue. They deliver all the weavings they acquire to the dealers in La Paz, and only textiles rejected for poor condition eventually end up in crafts shops, specialized museums and private collections within Bolivia. The traffickers remove the best weavings from the country by passing them off as "crafts". This violates Bolivian law that protects national "cultural patrimony" and specifically prohibits the export of textiles made before 1900. Weavings purchased in Bolivia for between \$20 and \$100 and are eventually sold in the United States for \$3000 or more. This has resulted in the tragic loss of thousands of high quality old textiles that are no longer made.

The Coroma case

Coroma is one of the communities most affected by this plunder. Its ceremonial textiles have been the constant target for theft and fraudulent removal (see also Lobo 1991). Foreign textile dealers, most of them U.S. citizens, visited Coroma for the All Saints Day festival, the only time of the year that the weavings from the sacred bundles are exhibited. Posing as photographers or researchers they compiled an inventory of the most important pieces. Later they ordered their middlemen to acquire these textiles by any means possible. The Bolivian peasant intermediaries introduced weavings from other regions to replace those they desired from the bundles so village authorities would be unaware of their loss.³ Now some of the best Coroma pieces are found outside Bolivia on the international collectors market.

The loss of their textiles has created a wide range of serious problems among the Coromans who believe that their community has been weakened because the q'ipis no longer have the necessary strength to guide them. The villagers live in terror of the retributions of the grandfathers and the grandmothers because the theft of the weavings coincided with a whole array of other tragedies: bad harvests, sickness, and the death of animals. The total loss of their ancestral textiles would occasion the following: the destruction of the community's history; the erosion of their religious beliefs; the loss of the power of the traditional authorities; the destruction of the social fabric; and the disintegration of the Coroma ayllu.

Measures taken by the community

As early as 1971 villagers made the first detailed written inventories of the textiles in some q'ipis. These inventories were completed by all the ayllus in 1982 when the authorities became aware that the foreigners' visits to Coroma coincided with the substitution of some textiles and the loss of others. In 1986 the authorities made a photographic inventory of all the weavings. The Coroma authorities were prudent enough to officially register every visitor to their community and record the addresses of the foreigners. They requested copies of every photograph taken in Coroma. They also seized some textiles held by intermediaries and filed charges regarding the illegal traffic in textiles with the appropriate government officials and denounced these events to the press.

Each ayllu conducted detailed investigations of the loss of textiles and took severe measures against those found guilty of assisting the traffickers. Four Coromans implicated in the loss of the weavings were imprisoned for a year in the town of Oruro. Others were tried and punished within each ayllu. On many occasions the village successfully blocked the loss of their textiles, as in 1985 when traffickers proposed that the authorities of Coroma exchange all their textiles for one or two tractors. The authorities rejected this deal and refused to accept tempting pay-offs in dollars from the intermediaries. This did not deter the dealers who first paid between \$50 and \$100 for each weaving, but eventually raised their price so much that in 1987 they delivered a tractor worth \$7,200 as payment for the theft of one of the finest textiles of the ayllu Acchuma, a blue *axsu*.

The seizure of textiles in the United States

In February of 1988, after receiving the post card from John Murra, the legal representatives of Coroma in joint action with the Bolivian Embassy in Washington, D.C. filed a formal complaint with the U.S. Customs Service against Steven Berger. This dealer was offering the Coroma ceremonial *unku* pictured on the invitation to the above-mentioned San Francisco exhibit for \$14,000. The U.S. Customs Service, based on the 1983 UNESCO Convention for the protection of cultural property confiscated about 950 objects from this dealer. Among them were 650 weavings made before 1900 that were covered by Bolivian Law. The delegates from Coroma first identified thirty-seven textiles from

their q'ipis and this seemed to be the final number. But the grandfathers and grandmothers were directing the rescue operation. One of the delegates had a dream in which he was advised that there were more textiles. He asked the Customs Service to check all the crates again, and another one was found to contain twelve additional Coroma textiles, and the blue *axsu* from Acchuma that had been traded for the tractor.

According to the American law that interprets the UNESCO Convention regarding the cultural property of other countries, it was necessary to prove that the confiscated objects had been acquired through fraudulent means or theft. This was applicable to the Coroma ceremonial textiles because the weavings are communal property of all ayllu members and because the few who sold the textiles held positions as authorities whose precise job it was to preserve them. Therefore no sale was legitimate. It was not possible to provide the same legal proof for the remainder of the 650 confiscated textiles. According to U.S. law, the fact that they had been illegally exported from Bolivia was not sufficient to hold them and they were eventually returned to Berger. The Bolivian government was never officially advised of this action.

The forty-nine Coroma textiles were held in the Customs Service office in San Francisco until their lawyers decided to prosecute Berger for illegal trafficking in cultural property. The souls or q'ipi bundles "chose" their defenders; Michael Ratner, Jordan Eth and William Verick, attorneys for two prestigious groups: The Center for Constitutional Rights of New York and the law firm of Morrison and Foerster of San Francisco. They provided their services in representation of Coroma at no charge. Unfortunately the trial was constantly postponed. To halt further illegal traffic of Coroma textiles, the governments of Bolivia and the United States signed an Emergency Bilateral Agreement that limits the import of Coroma textiles into the U.S. This agreement was signed in March 1988 for a five year period and extended for another three years in May 1993 under the UNESCO Convention to protect cultural property.

Obtaining the repatriation of Coroma's textiles

In January of 1990 Steven Berger's lawyers presented a formal motion asking the Customs Service to return the confiscated textiles. Among the many

arguments they presented was their contention that it is impossible to identify individual textiles based on their design, color and techniques of manufacture because these elements belong to no specific ethnic group and are commonly found throughout a wide area. In response in February 1990 five delegates were chosen among the different Coroma ayllus. These true textile experts travelled to San Francisco to examine the confiscated textiles. Amid tears and rage and the fervent desire to bring them home, they again identified their "souls". Some garments had been worn by them in the All Saints Day festival; others still showed traces of the alcohol, blood, and sweets used in the rituals performed for them through the centuries. The formal legal depositions outlined the political positions held by each delegate in his or her community; his or her experience in the management and care of the weavings from the q'ipis; and each delegate's detailed knowledge of spinning, dyeing, and weaving. Each textile was then identified according to the type of garment and the characteristics of old Coroma textiles: composition, color combinations, specific weaving and sewing techniques, types of spinning. They were identified as coming from different bundles.

Threatened by two lawsuits, a civil case by Coroma and a criminal case by the U.S. government, Steven Berger began to concede that the weavings belonged to Coroma and offered to return a few of them. The offers increased little by little until finally, after more than a year of negotiations, Berger agreed to return 43 of the 49 textiles under the condition that the lawsuit would not go to trial and that the Coroman sign a private "transactional" agreement with him that was not to their advantage.

The Bolivian Embassy arranged for the direct delivery of the textiles in order to avoid signing the so-called "agreement" between Coroma and Berger. In September 1992, in a special act carried out at the Bolivian Embassy in Washington, D.C., representatives of the U.S. Government officially delivered the ceremonial textiles to the Bolivian President who immediately turned them over to the Coroma authorities also present for the ceremony. Michael Ratner, lawyer for Coroma, managed to recover four Coroma textiles from a customer of Berger in New York. Customs agents confiscated another weaving from a different buyer. These five weavings were also turned over to the Coromans. The repatriated textiles were returned to their ayllu where they will continue fulfilling their crucial

function in the social, political and religious organization of the group. The textiles finally came home after five years of struggle by the ayllu of Coroma that took many forms: village meetings, identification of textiles, providing evidence, undertaking legal actions, constant consultations with the bundles themselves, carrying out rituals to the sacred places so that the efforts would be successful, at times weathering periods of uncertainty and discouragement.

Berger attempted to block delivery of the textiles and their return to Bolivia because Coroma resisted signing the above-mentioned agreement. In light of this refusal the dealer initiated legal action against the ayllu of Coroma in the Northern California District Court. He demanded the return of the 43 textiles taken from him; substantial economic compensation for his legal expenses and for "pain and suffering." Alternatively he demanded a court order to compel Coroma to sign the transactional agreement without modification. The Bolivian officials responsible for the defense of cultural property were outraged by this and have begun legal action against Berger in Bolivia. The people of Coroma are performing rituals for the bundles asking the grandfathers and grandmothers for their protection and wisdom in confronting these new problems.

Notes

1. Translated from the Spanish by Catharine L. Good.
2. Similar characteristics distinguish ancient and modern textiles used by the Uru, an ancient ethnic group that lived in different regions of the Altiplano (Lake Poopo). This fact has led me to suspect that the Coroma were once Uru.
3. This is re-enacted in the video documentary "In the Path of the Ancestors" produced by HISBOL and the community of Coroma.

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