

# ASUR: An Experiment in Ethnodevelopment in Bolivia

The Inka Empire posted the ancestors of the Jalq'a and the Tarabuqueños, originally from several different ethnic groups, to the Andean region in present-day Bolivia to secure its southern border. The Spanish conquest, which reached the Andes in 1539, destroyed political structures, took land and liberty from indigenous populations, and altered Indian ethnic identities even further. Ethnohistorians now believe the Jalq'a and Tarabuqueños came together with lowland peoples at the end of the 19th century to form their distinctive identities. But although their group identities have varied over the centuries, a cultural constant in these Andean peoples' lives has been weaving.

In the 1960s, severe economic conditions coupled with the presence of a tourist market caused people in the region to sell some of their important sources of weaving production — herds of sheep and cherished heirlooms of fine textiles, which served as models and “dictionaries” of weaving design.

In 1982, ASUR (Antropólogos del Sur Andino), a foundation for anthropological research and ethnodevelopment, started a textile project to revitalize indigenous Jalq'a textile production and turn it into a source of income for women weavers and their families. ASUR began weaving workshops in Jalq'a communities and later in communities in the region of Tarabuco.

Communities began to weave again. Women remembered their grandmothers' designs. ASUR helped them with photographs from private weaving collections, with inventories of sketched motifs, with administrative training, and with much encouragement, while at the same time demanding high quality. These communities, on their own initiative, created new workshops with elected community boards where men and women participate.

ASUR established a store and a textile museum in Sucre where textiles produced in the workshops are displayed and sold, mainly to tourists. The project represents an important source of income in this part of the country. The best weavers earn between \$500 and \$700 annually, a cash income they never had before. ASUR is now extending the project to new communities and ethnic groups in Chuquisaca and other departments of south Andean Bolivia. It plans to diversify its workshops to include men weavers, who experiment with prehispanic techniques, embroidery, tailoring, and ceramics.

The Jalq'a and Tarabuqueño weavings have been “rescued” and are continuously being raised to higher levels of creativity. They are not only used for everyday and ceremonial occasions in the communities, but they are works of art. The recovery of textile and other craft traditions offers a solution to the extreme poverty of a great number of the indigenous peoples in this region and restores their dignity and cultural identity.

— Gabriel Martínez



*Jalq'a weavers work on their looms outside the workshop building of the Jalq'a-Tarabuco Federation in the community of Marawa. In cooperation with the Federation, ASUR has established workshops that offer courses in bookkeeping, administration, and management. Two elected representatives, one from Jalq'a communities and the other from Tarabuco, make joint official visits to regular meetings held in each workshop.*

Photo by Kevin “Benito” Healy

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