

# The Cacha Federation: An Artisan Program in Ecuador

When the *comuneros*, the people of Cacha Parish of Chimborazo Province in Ecuador, say “This is the land of the Duchicelas and of the Daquilemas,” they name ancestors who embody distinctive virtues. Duchicela was a scion of the prehispanic dynastic line that ruled this area. And Daquilema was a hero of the revolt, in 1871, during the Republican period, against a government, newly formed and dominated by *criollos* (American-born Spanish), which abolished indigenous political authority, Indian protectorates, and communal ownership of land. Indigenous roots and just rebellions are valued points of Cacha cultural identity.

Cacha insurrections continued into this century. In both the Colonial and Republican eras, Cachas were communities of free Indians and were not subject to the hacienda system. A leader of the Cacha Federation declared, “We are rebels because we refuse to submit, because we never belonged to haciendas.”

Cachas are also esteemed for their weaving traditions. Within the federation, the community of Cacha Chuyuj is known for its wool; Cacha Obraje has a reputation for making high-quality ponchos and *chumbis* (sashes); and the women of Pucará Quinche are excellent weavers of *mama chumbis* (women’s sashes). But in the 1950s textile production fell, probably because of a decline in the supply of sheep and sheep’s wool due to the overgrazing of pasture land.

In the 1960s, the era of petroleum, Ecuador embarked on a rural development program. The government encouraged artisans to produce hats, textiles, and ceramics, a project also supported by the Catholic Church and the Italian government. A federation leader states, “We had been losing our cultural identity. We saw the need to find a way to increase our income because many of us were migrating.” The plan succeeded. The number of women weaving and sewing grew, and production increased.

The Association of Cacha Artisans was formed in 1980 and incorporated in 1985. However, by the end of the 1980s, many members had left. The workshops and stores begun by the association languished from the neglect of government and church supporters and lack of local management skills.

At about the same time, in 1980, the Cacha Federation (Federación de Cabildos Indígenas Cacha) was formed to further community development through local control and management. It now numbers 19 communities and eight associations and cooperatives as members. The Artisan Association became a member of the Cacha Federation in 1992 and began to plan the renewal of textile production as a resource for local development. Weavers from Cacha come to the Festival to demonstrate their traditional skills and learn from other artisan organizations.

— Rosario Coronel



*A Cacha needleworker does embroidery on a wooden frame in a workshop of the recently reorganized Artisan Program of the Cacha Federation in Cotopaxi Province, Ecuador.*  
Photo by Xavier Moscoso

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