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with CAROLINA REYES

Quechua house in
Ipsaycocha, in the
Sacred Valley of Peru.

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History Lives in the Andean Alpaca

Anyone who knows alpacas is likely aware of their long history in South America. A quick overview of that history will tell you that the alpaca appears in the art of the Mochica civilization of northern Peru from over a thousand years ago, and was domesticated long before that. For millennia, alpacas have lived under the protection of human kind and Peru is still home to most of the world's alpacas. A grass-roots NGO (non-governmental organization) called Threads of Peru is at work with the indigenous Quechua people—descendants of the Inca—in an effort to create sustainable markets for the woven fiber of this treasured animal. A visit to the Sacred Valley with Threads of Peru offers us a rare glimpse of life with the alpaca today.

The Sacred Valley region of Peru was the center of Inca civilization from the early 13th century until the Incas were conquered by the Spanish, and the alpaca was intimately tied to the Inca culture. The Incas bestowed special religious significance upon the alpaca, sacrificing one at sunrise, noon, and sunset to appease their gods. Because of this special religious

importance, the Incas separated their alpacas from other forms of livestock and segregated the herds by color. Alpacas provided the Inca people with clothing, food, and fuel. Material woven from alpaca fleece was prized above gold and silver.

After the conquest of the Incas in the 1530s, the Spanish set out to exterminate alpacas, seeing their own imported sheep as superior animals that would make better use of available grazing lands. The Spanish were also interested in erasing Inca culture, and the alpaca was clearly central to that, so they began to eradicate them. Aware of the efforts of the Spanish, the people of smaller mountain communities moved their alpaca herds higher into the Andes to protect them. The seemingly insignificant numbers of people and alpacas were lost to the Spanish eye, hidden by the jagged peaks.

This sequestering of herds likely saved the alpaca from extinction. It is estimated that there were 40 to 50 million alpacas in South America at the height of the Incas. Today, there are an estimated 2.5 to 3 million alpacas on the continent.



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A Quechua woman in traditional dress and hat spinning on a puska or drop-spindle.

It was not until the mid-1800s that the beauty and quality of alpaca fleece was rediscovered by the outside world. This endearing animal character now lives, happy and healthy, under the care of breeders and farmers all over the world. The alpaca is known and loved far and wide. But what is life like now for the alpaca in its ancestral home?

In the indigenous communities of the Sacred Valley region of Peru today, the alpaca still plays an important role in the everyday lives of the Quechua people. It is within these high mountain places that Incas likely hid the remaining alpaca herds from Spanish eradication, and here they have remained. The majority of the world's living alpacas—more than 1.5 million—live in Peru with the ghosts of the Inca and their Spanish conquerors. Here among the clouded peaks, vegetation is measured in inches, as there is little that hasn't been chewed to the ground for centuries by the grazing herds of llamas, sheep and alpacas. If the people of these tiny, remote communi-

ties want to have a garden or a tree, they must surround it with a wall of stone to keep the animals at bay.

Although alpacas have been considered sacred since ancient times, that cultural tradition is fading. However, the alpaca is still highly valued here, as it always has been, for food and the precious fiber it produces. Even the ancient practice of burning its dung for fuel continues in the modest homes of the indigenous people in this otherworldly place. In many ways, it's as if time has slowed here to the gentle rhythm of the grazing herds, leaving the alpacas and their Quechua shepherds only slightly altered by the centuries that have so deeply transformed the rest of the world.

But changes have indeed come, and life in these remote communities is under strain. The need for economic opportunity forces people to travel ever further from their ancestral homes to find work or to sell the fleece of their herds. Too often, men leave these communities to find work in the cities and never return. If they do, the

Weaving an ankle band on a back-strap loom while the next generation looks on.





Alpaca in the dramatic
Chaullicocho landscape.

Photo © 2011 Michael Marquand

expenses and temptations of the cities have taken the money they made, and their families are no better off.

Threads of Peru is a small NGO based in Cusco, dedicated to helping these indigenous communities to sustain themselves through economic development based on traditional Andean methods of textile production. Threads of Peru founder, Ariana Svenson, has been working in the region for years, often employing locals as mountain guides for her alternative trekking company, Apus Peru. Over the years she has come to know many of the Quechua people, and she became concerned with finding ways to help them sustain themselves economically. She was specifically interested in opportunities for the women, as her studies in International Development taught her that economic empowerment of women would do more for the health and well-being of the children and the community as a whole.

Hand spinning and weaving has long been an important aspect of indigenous culture in Peru, and it was a natural place for Svenson to focus her attention. But sadly, the skills of traditional dyeing and weaving were in decline, and many of the younger people did not practice them anymore. Cheap factory production using synthetic fibers and dyes had made the old ways less and less economical to sustain.

By the 1980s, many of the traditional ways were fading. But in the 1990s this trend started to turn around, as

Peru began to realize the value of its indigenous people and their traditional crafts. Svenson saw the potential for the revival of traditional methods as a way to create sustainable economic activity. In 2006 she began work with a local NGO to bring master weavers to communities to conduct workshops on the ancient methods. Coupled with what weaving skills the elder community members still had, Svenson felt that there just might be enough to build on. For the first time in many years, the fleece of the alpaca herds was being woven by the hands of the shepherds instead of just being sold in the market. As the weavers improved their skills, Svenson set out to find sustainable markets for their woven work.

In 2008 she was contacted by Adam Foster Collins, who was teaching a university design class in Canada. The class was looking for ways to put their design skills to work for a worthy cross-cultural effort. Through discussions with the class, it was decided that the best focus for the students would be on an Internet site aimed at marketing the woven work of the indigenous women, a tool which the women had no way of exploring themselves. The design class raised funds to make a three-week research trip to Peru, and then built a comprehensive Website and online store using the material gathered during the trip. In the summer of 2009, Svenson, her Peruvian business partner Fely Callanaupa, Adam Collins and Angie Hodder of

the Canadian design team officially registered the not-for-profit, Threads of Peru, in Cusco. Threads of Peru (ToP) has since established its Website as one of the best online sources of information on the subject of traditional Andean textiles.

ToP works mainly with three remote Andean communities, Rumira Sondormyo, Chaullacocha and Chupani. Rumira is a 45-minute drive outside of Ollantaytambo, the well-known departure point for the train into the mountain retreat at Machu Picchu. Rumira is a tiny village clinging to a rocky hillside alongside a winding stream. Further on the road ends and one must then hike through mountain passes for another two to three hours to reach Chaullacocha and Chupani.

In Rumira Sondormyo, we were able to talk with a Quechua woman, Juliana Huaman Quispe, with the help of a translator. The indigenous women are often unsure of their actual age, and Juliana estimates hers at between 25 and 30. Rumira is in the mountains and Juliana's home is located even higher up, where the

animals graze. She is from one of the few families here that actually owns alpacas.

Juliana says that she personally takes alpacas to pasture during the day, to protect them from predators. Slowly, through translation, we learn that the alpaca is a very large part of her family's living. Alpaca waste is used as fuel for the home fires and their wool is used for weaving that can be sold for profit. This economic significance is the reason to take good care of the alpacas now, not because they have some sort of religious value. Juliana does not see the alpaca as sacred and says that the concept of the sacredness of alpacas is disappearing.

Our translator is a man named Urbano Huayna, born in the Quechua culture, and who now speaks English and Spanish. Urbano explained more about why the sacredness of the alpaca might be changing. As he tells it, when the Spanish first came and the Quechua and Catholic cultures first mixed, some of the indigenous customs were tolerated, or kept hidden well enough to survive



Quechua couple and their herd in Ipsaycocha.

Photo courtesy of Threads of Peru

the conservative Spanish reign. There has been a mix of Catholicism and mountain religious practices ever since. Recently, Urbano says, there has been an increase in Christian evangelism in rural Quechua communities. This has caused many changes in the culture at the social and spiritual level, and customs related to the “Pachamama” or “Mother Earth” are no longer tolerated, perhaps causing the rituals related to alpacas to slowly disappear.

These communities still display a few of the traditional indigenous religious practices that hold the Pachamama to be centrally important. Svenson tells of a trip that ToP took in the month of December to take part in a “first shearing” of alpacas in the community of Ipsaycocha.

“Anyone who has been to Cusco will still have the vendor’s sales pitch of ‘baby alpaca’ ringing in their ears,” Svenson says, “It is the finest and softest alpaca fleece, and everyone in the market claims to be selling it. We thought it would be good to learn more about it, as much of the weaving that Threads of Peru sells is

made from alpaca fiber. Baby alpaca is the first shearing of an adolescent alpaca, and we wanted to witness one of these events.

“Six families live in Ipsaycocha,” Svenson explains, “and combined, they have around 150 alpacas. Ipsaycocha is located at an altitude of about 4,250 meters, and the alpaca herds graze above that, at around 4,500 meters, or 14,760 feet above sea level. The atmosphere at this altitude is very thin, and it’s hard for outsiders to even walk there without labored breathing, let alone run around catching alpacas and shearing them!

“As we reached the herd, men in red ponchos emerged from the landscape, running to circle the alpacas. From behind us came a young woman, dressed in traditional woven clothing, with her 3-month-old baby girl on her back. From here on, the woman kept the entire herd in order as the men went about making the offering to the ‘Apus.’ For the first shearing of the alpacas, it’s still important that the earth is properly respected.



Newly shorn fleece.

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Preparing the offering to the Pachamama with coca leaves in Ipsaycocha. This ritual is performed before the first shearing of young alpacas.



Shearing alpaca with hand clippers.

Photos courtesy of Threads of Peru



Before shearing the clippers are sharpened on a rock. Right, shorn fleece bundled in a traditional woven cloth and tied with hand-woven rope.



“In the Quechua language of the Andes, ‘Apu’ refers to the spirit of each mountain, not unlike a god. In every snow-capped peak, even in the smaller hills, there is an Apu. Each Apu is different, with individual characteristics and a personality. From the Apus emerge the life-giving waters of springs, lakes and rivers, and from those come the forests and creatures that dwell in them. Like gods, the Apus possess the power of giving and taking life. Andean people look first to their local Apus and then to the Pachamama when they are undertaking a pilgrimage or enterprise.

“The offering consisted of a mix of things,” Svenson continued, “huayruro (the red seed from the jungle below), kanichiwa, various herbs, and dried blossoms, and even a dried llama fetus. Led by one of the elders, the men made kintus (three coca leaves) and blew on them, asking the blessings of the gods. Later, they filled conch shells with wine and threw the wine at the alpacas.

“Then came the shearing! Reminiscent of a rodeo, the men entered the herd and deftly lassooed the first alpaca, which struggled and fought until three men had sufficiently tamed it and then tied it up. Then the shears, previously sharpened on rocks, were put to work on the soft, fluffy fleece, whilst a couple more men went to work catching a white alpaca, which screamed in a high-pitched call the whole way through the process. Once the shearing was complete, the alpaca’s amulet (which is put on the baby alpaca around Easter time of each year) was refastened around its

neck and a blessed stone was run over its body, so that the fleece will grow well in the next year. In all, it was a fascinating and spiritual day.”

Here in the peaks of Peru, surrounded by the indigenous men and woman, their clothing dominated by brightly colored woven cloth, and the herds of grazing alpacas on the endless slopes above, one gets the sense of being in the presence of something ancient, yet very much alive. There is a flickering flame of culture and tradition between man and alpaca that has burned here for perhaps thousands of years.

Still, as the hours pass and you move with labored breath among the mud brick and stone structures of the mountain people, you see the signs of “rust” on the culture. Mixed in with the traditional hats and ponchos, you see the occasional ball cap and logo-emblazoned shirt from the marketing giants to the north. Change is here, too. But for now, the change is slow, and one can still see far into history from where ever you stand in these tiny Quechua communities.

Has time actually slowed here in the Andes? The raging pace of outside culture seems very far away when each step here is measured to the lazy rhythm of the grazing alpacas. Perhaps even time finds it difficult to catch its breath in the mountains of Peru.

Adam Foster Collins and Ariana Svenson are Co-Founders of Threads of Peru. Carolina Reyes was a volunteer for Threads of Peru during the summer of 2011. For more information, please visit www.threadsofperu.com.