

## ABOUT YOUR HAND-MADE ALL-NATURAL TOTE BAG

The complimentary bags distributed to registrants at IAU Symposium 305 are unique, and totally hand-made from natural Costa Rican rainforest materials by the Borucan indigenous people.

The art of Borucan weaving has been passed down from generation to generation for centuries. Mothers and/or grandmothers teach girls as young as seven years old the traditional techniques of this craft. For the village women, weaving is a ritual part of everyday life and is done between chores. For hundreds of years they have been weaving on back strap looms to provide their clothing and blankets for their beds (hammocks). The textiles created on this type of loom cannot be made very long or wide because the loom is tied around the waist of the weaver, while the other end is secured to a post or tree. This primitive equipment produces a narrow 45 to 55 cm fabric about the width of their bodies. Therefore, it may take two or three months to create a bedspread or blanket that must be first woven in pieces and then sewn together. Recently they have adopted the floor loom so now they are able to weave longer and wider widths of fabrics with finer threads and more patterns. The patterns seen on all woven products are not kept in written record, but are handed down over the years. Every textile made by each indigenous artist is unique and is a product of traditions born deep within the history of the Boruca Indians of Costa Rica. Today in the village school, cotton gathering and hand spinning of the yarn is taught in the second grade. In the third grade, the dyes and dying process are introduced and the fourth graders are given weaving instructions.

The Borucans begin by gathering cotton from a species of tropical tree that is native to their region. Then they spin it into yarn by hand, which is a tedious process. Next the yarn is naturally dyed by using leaves (from plants which are harvested only during the waning moon), bark, seeds, fruit, flowers, clay, ash, and the Murex sea snail. All of this is a time-consuming and costly process. Following a hot water dye bath, the yarn is cured, washed and dried; the final product takes several days of work and is then woven on the looms. Not all the members perform all the steps in the process, but they all weave. There are not many sewing machines in the village, so just a few of the women sew the woven goods into the purses, backpacks and tote bags. Weaving literally binds women to their land, as well as their culture. The weaver is an integral part of the loom, connected to her environment and at one with nature.

A Borucan ritual today, every January most of the village weavers travel by bus to the Pacific Coast beaches of Piñuela and Ventana to collect Murex sea snails. They obtain a secretion from the snails for purple coloring, a process dating back to 200 B.C. This secretion is a milky-white, but when exposed to air and sunlight, it gradually changes to a beautiful shade of purple. The Borucans are the only tribe, in the world, to continue to extract without killing the snails. Instead, they replace the sea snails individually back on the rocks. It is a laborious procedure.



*Marina Lazaro hand-spinning yarn from naturally-occurring cotton produced by native rainforest trees.*

Boruca's history has not been an easy one. Farming alone was not enough to sustain their tribe and people were experiencing extreme poverty. They were losing their pride quickly in their decaying culture. With the completion of the Inter-American highway from San Jose (the capital of Costa Rica) to the border with Panama in the late 60's, tourism began to trickle in with renewed interest in the annual 'Fiesta de los Diablitos' or 'Festival of the Devils'. Also the Peace Corps workers helped as they brought the Borucans some new designs and marketable ideas. This is when their local economy shifted from agriculture to tourism.

Daily life in Boruca now has changed to a focus on cultural preservation. Today eighty percent of the Borucans are artisans and nearly all the women are weavers. During the months of less tourism, it is a struggle to provide the things they need and that they cannot grow, such as the necessary school uniforms, books, fees, and medicines.

Life for these indigenous artists is extremely challenging as they live on a reserve high in the Talamanca Mountains, in the Southern Pacific area of Costa Rica. This is a very remote region, difficult to reach, especially in the rainy season (September to December). In addition, not many of the Borucans have cars. Therefore, it is a hardship for them to get out and sell their goods to places such as hotel gift shops, souvenir stores and art fairs.

Several of the artists got together to figure out how they could reach a larger market. As a result, they formed as a group and called themselves 'Artesanos Naturales de Boruca' naming Marina Lazaro as their leader. Marina gathers the goods of several of the artists and carpools with the school director or a few others and travels around to the various souvenir stores, hotel gift shops and art galleries in order to market their exquisitely crafted products. Recently, a few supporters are trying to get the Borucan products into larger marketplaces, which will help their economy greatly. Therefore, your attendance at IAU Symposium 305 has contributed to preserving the ancient indigenous culture of these special people.



*Marina Lazaro demonstrates purple dye extracted from the leaves of a rainforest plant.*

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