



Above:

Little is known about these rare ponchos which were made for the war chiefs, *tokis*, of the Ranquel people, renowned warriors who at the height of power in the late 18th and early 19th centuries controlled a vast swathe of territory that extended from the eastern flanks of the Andes and across the vast grassland towards Buenos Aires in Argentina. Invested with profound social and cultural prestige, the *Ponchos de Sapo*, also called *Ponchos de Luna*, had shamanistic association as well: their sacred deep blue color and boldly minimalist tie-dyed circles relate to ancestral lineage and concepts of cosmic power. This circa 1900 example from La Pampa Province, Argentina, is made of indigo-dyed woven sheep's wool. 69" x 52".

Courtesy Andrés Moraga

References: Ruth Corcuera, *Ponchos de las Tierras del Plata*; A. Taullard, *Tejidos y Ponchos de Sud America*.

Right:

This early 20th century Yi woman's ceremonial robe from Malipo County, Yunnan Province, China, is spiritually and graphically powerful. Indigo-dyed cotton fabric serves as a solid contrasting background for colorful squares of mostly triangular silk appliqué on front and back: an occasional triangle may have been replaced and some show traces of paste from prior repairs. The bib area below the neck, front and back, is embroidered with silk in a rare pattern of archaic abstract dragons. The robe is in excellent, almost completely original condition.

Front: 4'4" wide x 3'4" long.

Back: 7'6" wide x 4'6" long.

Photographs: Chadri Chinalai

Courtesy Chinalai Tribal Antiques, Ltd.

Reference: *The Clothes and Ornaments of Yunnan Ethnic Groups*, front cover and pp. 100 and 101.

Men's clothing as a reflection of status and occupation, however, particularly within militant, ceremonial, religious or spiritual realms, frequently was more diverse, elaborate and costly. This often was especially true in regard to their outerwear.

As short a time as a few decades ago, if you were to hike into the mountains or cross the desert in your Land Rover and come upon a man walking or riding his mule, horse or camel, you might be able to tell what tribe he belonged to and approximately where his village of wooden houses, thatched huts or gathering of tents was located from his outerwear. By careful observation, you might be able to calculate also what the climate was like where he came from for that time of year or at what altitude he lived. With greater knowledge, you could divine perhaps if he were married and his role and status within his community. All of this you might tell from one outfit or perhaps a single article of clothing.

Probably the first thing you would notice would be the overall shape of his outer garments. Do they cover his head and shoulders, envelope his legs, hang down to his waist or knees or all the way to his ankles? Are there buttons, clasps or hooks or does the garment hang loose, without closure? Perhaps it is for warmth; perhaps for ritual. As he grows closer you'll start to notice the patterns and colors on the clothing and this is when you will know more about this man's origin. Are there stripes, plaids, twill; what shapes or symbols catch your eye? What techniques were used to make the patterns? Appliqué? Ikat? Batik? Embroidery? Plain weave, damask weave, supplementary weft or warp? And finally, from what materials is it made? Were they found in nature, home-grown, recycled, traded? Are they rare for that part of the world? Are the buttons made from local products or did they come from a distance; are they fashioned from silver; do they include gemstones?

Now you are face-to-face and you know not only what part of the world this man is from, not only what tribe, but what sub-tribe; not only what geographic region, what village. Perhaps you can tell what class he is from and even his occupation. Perhaps you can see that he is a village elder, priest or shaman. If his status is high but his clothes are somewhat shabby, you might