

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

CRT - 15
Profile of a
Satisfied Indian

c/o American Embassy
Quito
Ecuador
March 9, 1956

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Alonzo Maenala, an indian from Peguche in northern Ecuador, now living and working in Quito, is a man who prefers to remain indian, although both his income and his experiences are such that outwardly only the cutting of his pigtail and a change to Western dress separate him from the non-indian world. His skin is no darker than that of many mestizos, his Spanish is the soft sibilant dialect common to the Ecuadorian sierra, his long narrow face with slender nose is a type common among the quiteños. He has traveled throughout the country, and in this respect is more fortunate than many quiteños, having even made the trip from Guayaquil to Quito by plane (which he describes as a "lovely" experience). With his family he is part of a weaving concern, making scarves, mantles and shawls for sale to tourists - a flourishing enterprise at the moment, commercially successful to the extent of mounting a large neon sign outside the shop. Yet despite these resemblances to the mestizos of Quito, he prefers to be what he is rather than shift to another pattern of behavior, and in conversation speaks with an unexpected pride of things indian.

I say "unexpected" because, in talking with Alonzo, I had no doubts that his approval of the indian way of life was sincere. Throughout the Andes, I have listened to indians speaking of this custom or that with enthusiasm, but with a defensive-aggressive air in front of the stranger and outsider. I have also heard them apologize for the same things, and characterize their life in a thoroughly self conscious manner as "the humble life of the indian."

There are very few out of my experience who accepted themselves and their culture for what they are, and were honestly proud of their achievements and ashamed of their failures within the framework of native life without making reference to foreign standards. Putting it another way, it often seemed to me that the indian had no belief in the integrity of his own culture, in its ability to satisfy the demands the individual makes of life. In this, he was disappointly close to the mestizo, who makes a fetish of des-

prising his indian background, and letting no opportunity slip by to let the pure indian know this.

In Cliza Valley, where the indian has become the arbiter of what life shall be (CRT - 3), it was the rare individual who would allow one to accept him for exactly what he was. Almost always, with the more articulate, there was a sense of forcing the issue, of making a demand for approval, backed, as it was there, with the blackmail of previous violence and current possession of guns. However explicable this is when one considers that the indian of Bolivia had just recently regained the self determination denied him by the Spaniards and their descendants, and, in the novelty of exercising this right, was at times naive, at times ill natured and at times greedy, I for one was disappointed in the lack of confidence in himself and his culture that this implied.

Throughout Peru, where self determination is still a thing of the future, I encountered many variations on the theme of the value of indian culture. Some indians, like those of Ichu (CRT - 7), held firmly to their native ways, although capable of disguising themselves when they entered white-mestizos strongholds. Others, such as many I encountered in the Mantaro Basin, were caught between approving and disliking their culture, and often expressed this in a simple way by wearing odd mixtures of indian and western dress. Yet others, like those of the Hacienda Mollamarca (CRT - 5), simply existed in the culture, as incapable of assessing it, and thereby being proud or dissatisfied, as the vicuña is of the life he leads on the high puna.

In Ecuador, the indian of the sierra seems inert, and with the exception of places like Otavalo in the north and Salasaca in the south, fulfills nicely the average conception of the dulled, apathetic Andean peasant. The Otavalos, whose recent renaissance is well documented (for example in The Awakening Valley by John Collier, Jr. and Aníbal Buitrón), have become, in several decades, a group still indian but utilizing and benefitting from white-mestizo techniques and concepts of business. The Salasaca, living near Ambato, is a dark being (still dressed in mourning for Charles V) whose attitude toward the rest of the world is gloomy and heavy, mostly expressed in hostility - which stops short of murder fortunately - toward the stranger. He rejects innovation simply because it is new, and is a case study of almost pathological withdrawal, on grounds of fear and feelings of inadequacy. At least, however, his reactions represent a positive statement of disapproval, and not just a lethargic acquiescence in face of ill treatment.

Alonzo Muenal, then, an "indian's indian," came as a pleasing

them materially. As I noted in an earlier letter (CRT - 3), even the politically vigorous campesino of Bolivia is something less than a political thinker, and certainly a partisan of popular men, like Juan Lechín or José Rojas, on no other grounds than personal sympathy, and the fact that such men have become identified with agrarian and social reform.

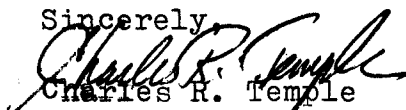
I once asked a Peruvian if he felt that the Communist party was successful in making converts among the Altiplano indians. He replied, "It depends on how you take the word 'convert.' The indian will follow any one who comes along and does something beneficial for him, and if such a person should say 'I am a Communist,' then the indian will call himself a Communist too. But let another person appear who does something bigger or better, and let him ascribe it to APRA [left wing Peruvian political party], then the indian is an aprista. The indian simply doesn't follow politics in any other way: he is, as you might say, in a constant state of readiness to be converted."

Alonzo has three major ambitions at the moment: to learn English, to travel and to continue being a successful weaver. English he feels is a necessity if he is to fulfill his desire to travel in the United States. He particularly wants to see New York, of which his aunt has told him a great deal, but also wants to travel through the West, "Redskin country." His ideal in this matter is to go abroad for several years at a time, but always coming back home for an equal or longer period. "A person is unhappy if he's away from his people for too long."

His third ambition will allow him to go on earning a substantial income, and will maintain his status among the only people who count with him at the moment: other indians. These two items are restraining factors against personal change for Alonzo. He knows no other trade besides farming and weaving and doesn't particularly care for the former, so that earning a living outside weaving would be difficult. Also, if he leaves weaving his position as a skilled artisan among his own people disappears, and since this profession confers prestige, he's not apt to give it up lightly. In general, the upper class indian has much to lose as an individual if he decides to cross the line separating him from the non-indian world.

Alonzo knows this, and admitted his need for personal distinction when I asked him why he didn't wear a suit and shoes for living in Quito. "I don't want to - then I'd be just like everybody else here."

Sincerely,


Charles R. Temple

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