

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

CRT - 18  
Notes from Colombia

Cartagena  
Colombia  
April 27, 1956

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

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The indian population of Colombia is 7% of the whole, with a heavy concentration in the south centering around the city of Pasto, and various small groups scattered throughout the rest of the nation. In the cities and towns, therefore, the traveler fresh from Ecuador or Peru misses the indian types and costumes which are an integral part of street scenes in Quito or Cuzco. Because of this, it is at first hard to realize that Colombia is intimately related historically, geographically and spiritually with Ecuador, Bolivia and Peru. The absence of the indian in great quantities is explicable when one knows that the Conquistadores encountered relatively small indian groups in Colombia, and that most of these were either assassinated or assimilated quickly. Still, there is a disquieting sense of something missing.

Although few, there are indians in the cities of Colombia, however, in full native dress and long hair braids: Otavalos from Ecuador, selling their shawls to native and tourist alike. They stand out like the proverbial sore thumb, islands of exotic color in the mass of mestizos and mulattos who make up the cities' populations. Even in the tropical coastal towns of Cartagena and Barranquilla, these Otavalos move around in their heavy blue ponchos, refusing to remove them lest they lose an obvious advertisement of their origin.

Of those with whom I talked, one, José Morales, was a cousin of Alonzo Muenala (CRT - 15), and another, José Segundo, thought he was related to Alonzo's family. They had come to Colombia, not only to see the country, but also to take advantage of a better business situation. Colombian wool is about half as cheap as that which they can buy at home, and, after travel costs have been discounted, their profit from the sale of shawls is slightly greater than in Otavalo or Quito.

Both the José's planned to spend six months in Colombia,

and then return to help on their farms. After them, others in their families would come for the experience as well as the profit. Neither had any idea of settling abroad permanently, but looked upon their travels as a profitable adventure.

The shawls which they carried were woven in Bogotá, where several Otavalo families have set up small workshops, using machine powered looms. In their discussions of the business, there was a hard commercial flavor, from which one imagined the meetings of these Otavalos given over to calculations of costs of materials, labor, transportation, lodgings and food, balancing these against potential profit, and planning an itinerary to coincide with the heaviest inundations of tourists. The selling price of a shawl is flexible, being adjusted to changing manufacturing costs and to the demand which fluctuates with the idiosyncrasies of the tourist season. It struck me that their approach was well suited to Colombia, which takes pride in the development of its industries and other non-agricultural enterprises.

Not the least of the Otavalos' worries when I met them was that the tourist, especially the ship traveler who came ashore for a few hours in a place like Cartagena, might not know that they were from Ecuador, and so be less inclined to purchase a shawl. To help in this, they had been learning a little English so as to be able to explain their origin, as well as to quote prices. Since the numbers which they knew went only to ten, I gave them the rest up to twenty. When José Segundo asked for those to thirty, his companion said, "Don't be silly - no one is going to buy that many things."

They also made themselves small signs to be worn in their hats which read "Ecuadorian Textiles for Sale," explaining that although this was somewhat misleading since the shawls were woven in Colombia, they were, after all, made by Ecuadorians. Whether this gimmick increases their sales remains to be seen, but at the time it appealed to their selling instincts.

## II.

Despite the air of energetic, aggressive business activity in Colombia's cities, and the interest of the government and businessmen in increasing current industrialization, two-thirds of the nation's people are farmers, pastoralists, foresters and fishermen. They live a quiet, generally isolated existence in the vast rural areas of the country, and to this day some 50% are illiterate.

In common with its southern neighbors, Colombia lacks

sufficient personnel and schools to educate this rural population. Various local and foreign agencies are engaged in attacking this need, but their work to date is neither extensive nor intensive. This is not so much the fault of intentions or know-how, but is traceable rather to the isolation of rural inhabitants and the lack of effective communications between the several parts of the nation.

After five hours of bone rattling travel over a road haphazardly composed of a few paved stretches and a multitude of rock and dirt sections, the town of Sutatenza comes into view as a collection of thatched adobe huts and narrow earth streets. At first sight, it is indistinguishable from all other such towns along the road, until one notices a group of modern buildings, fresh in their white paint, surrounded by concrete streets which take up where the unpaved ones terminate.

It is as if part of Bogotá had been transplanted bodily to this remote village in which some fifteen hundred farmers live in dismal surroundings. In a sense this is the case, for the buildings are part of the operation of Radio Sutatenza, a radio station whose sole function is education through daily broadcasts to rural communities everywhere in the country, and which has a first class radio plant staffed by able technicians, two of whom have worked with the Vatican radio. The whole place exudes an urban competence which does not jibe with the immediate environment.

The beginnings of this phenomenon go back to 1948, when the then pastor of Sutatenza, Father Joaquín Salcedo, thought that the illiteracy of his parish might be lessened through radio teaching. His location was ideal to test this idea. Sutatenza is 80 miles northeast of Bogotá, and while not absolutely inaccessible is reached only after a long journey over a casual roadbed. The region around the town is agricultural, maize and potatoes being the principal crops. The inhabitants were 80% illiterate in 1948, and cultivated their fields and led their lives in much the same fashion as has been current for several centuries. They were as effectively out of touch with developments in other parts of the country as if they had been living behind a huge mountain wall through which no roads passed.

The greatest difficulty which faced Father Salcedo was that the farmers lived in scattered households, separated from each other by great distances. For one man to cover this area on an educational campaign was an impossibility, so Father Salcedo, with a small transmitter in his house in Sutatenza, built three crude receivers tuned to receive only from his transmitter, and placed these in homes where one member of the family could read and write. With

these "instructors" ready to aid him, he began to broadcast lessons in reading and writing, which were heard not only by the family in whose home the receiver had been placed, but also by neighbors from nearby farms who attended the sessions for short periods.

Encouraged by the response, Father Salcedo interested the Church authorities in his work, and during the next three years, a standard program of courses was worked out, and the transmitter rose to a power of 1000 watts. In 1953, this was replaced with a station of 25,000 watts, making Sutatenza the third most powerful broadcaster in Latin America. By this time, the government, as well as the Church, was contributing funds to the operation.

Today there are 6500 radio "schools" as they are called, scattered throughout the rural areas of Colombia, giving instruction to 100,000 adults. The pattern followed in setting up one of these schools is much the same in all cases.

The organization selects a house in a given locality which is relatively easy to reach for the other farmers, and in which the head of the family is literate and willing to act as instructor under the guidance of the local parish priest. A receptor is installed which can receive broadcasts only from Sutatenza. Here, other families gather at various times during the day to attend the sessions.

The current program begins at six in the morning, with elementary instruction in reading, writing and arithmetic, followed by a brief period given over to geography and history. After this, the men go off to the fields, returning at five thirty to listen to basic notions on agriculture, handicrafts, music and suggestions for group activity. During the afternoon, from four to five fifteen, a special program for women is presented, which deals with child care, hygiene and the facts of malaria prevention and treatment.

The enthusiasm for Radio Sutatenza has grown during the years, and today Father Salcedo, now Monseignor, can count with an annual budget of five million pesos (about 1,250,000 dollars at the free rate). UNESCO has taken an active interest in the program, and under its auspices, Father Salcedo was able to explain its work to the United Nations, which recently signed an agreement with the Colombian government by which the UN will assist Radio Sutatenza with technical aid.

Certainly the personnel at Sutatenza are enthusiastic, and filled with plans for future activities, among them the training of teenagers to act as teachers (auxiliares) to replace the limited number and talents of the family heads presently presiding over the

radio schools.

I visited Sutatenza in the company of Dr. Pedro Nel Saavedra, in charge of education in hygiene for the Interamerican Public Health Service, and Dr. Peñaloza, of the Ministry of Finance. Dr. Saavedra was to examine the possibilities of establishing a public health center in Sutatenza to service the local population, and to see if some program for amplifying the present instruction in hygiene over the radio could be worked out.

The suggestion for this came from Father Salcedo who is interested in offering the facilities of the station to any agencies which can make good use of them. Although I never met Father Salcedo my companions agreed that he was a man of energy and ideas, and that Radio Sutatenza was his consuming passion. Later, in Bogotá, he was described to me as "one of the ugliest men alive, but with a kind of El Greco force within," and as a "clever and convincing man, who's gotten the government to increase Sutatenza's budget every year, although no one is really certain of the practical achievements of the program as yet."

During our stay we were shown the various appendages of Radio Sutatenza, among which the most interesting were two school buildings, including dormitories, for boys and girls under eighteen who are being trained as auxiliares. Selected by parish priests from all parts of the country, they are brought to Sutatenza to be taught directly what the radio teaches indirectly. After this training, they return to their homes, and take over the function of radio teachers.

One priest had reservations about the success of these students when they returned home. Chosen as they were by local priests from among those "who had been helpful to the Church and to the pastor," he felt that they may not be the most popular or effective members of their communities. Further, he was dubious about too much "Catholic action" and he felt that these students might easily mistake their roles, especially under the influence of an ambitious local priest, and turn out to be propagandists for Church doctrine rather than teachers of non-religious subjects.

On the other hand, the fact that they were better educated than their fellow villagers might enhance their prestige and effectiveness. Yet, even here, they might suffer having to face the envy and perhaps active hostility of those who would resent this very fact. The overall advantages, however, probably were in favor of the program, because, at a minimum, it acquainted these youngsters with notions of hygiene, personal conduct and the value of education, which, in most cases, was totally lacking before they came to

Sutatenza.

In general discussions later, I raised the question of some such program as Radio Sutatenza being developed to deal with illiteracy among the indians of Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador. Although there was majority agreement that the type of operation developed in Colombia could be transferred to other countries, several people cited certain difficulties which might come up.

The first was the problem of language. With the high rate of monolingualism among the Andean indians, especially among the women, such a radio station would have to decide first whether it could best use Spanish or Quechua (and perhaps Aymara) in its broadcasts. Whichever was used would give a priority and approval to the broadcast language which in turn would affect the indians' response to it and to the program. "Wouldn't such a station, using Quechua let's say, tend to encourage the formation of an indian community even further removed than now from the national life? When, actually, its purpose should be to interest the indian in participating in the activities of a culture whose language is Spanish." But if not an indian language, then what to do about the large numbers of people who could not understand Spanish.

A second, and more delicate, problem was that of sponsorship. In Colombia, the station had grown out of the initial unaided efforts of a rural priest, and seconded by Church funds and approval. Later, once the organization had taken shape, other groups entered the picture. The point was that unless the organization was granted a kind of neutrality, it might become a tool for various pressure groups, especially political ones.

Underlying this comment was an attitude that the Church was best qualified to be the manager of rural education. I refrained from questioning this directly, but pointed out that I had met many priests in my travels through the Andes who were quite incapable of being of any use to the hypothetical program since they were hardly in sympathy with the indians in their own parishes, and in some instances not much better educated than the illiterates in their charge. I added that I had been impressed by the caliber of the Colombian priests whom I had met, and that perhaps they could not realize the problems faced when the clergy was ill prepared for and out of sympathy with an indian education program.

There was a mixed response to this: a sigh of relief that Colombia at least could count upon an enlightened clergy; some criticism of the type of parish priest who lives an unexemplary life; and a reiterated conviction that, despite occasional defects in its personnel, the Church was still a good institution to undertake the kind

of rural education we were discussing.

Later, when I mentioned this to some Colombian friends in Bogotá, one of them laughed and said, "Don't be fooled by the sincere men: they often overlook the worst corruption because they think life should be good and priests dedicated. It's awfully hard to change human nature even in the Church. There's a story about a parish priest who spent most of his sermon time berating the Liberal party. Finally, he was called down for this by his bishop, and told that, no matter how Conservative his sympathies, the pulpit was no place for political speeches. He returned home, and the next Sunday announced the wedding feast at Cana as his text. He explained that during the feast the wine gave out, and that the Good Lord changed water into wine so that the festivities could continue. 'And,' the priest added, 'the only people present who got drunk and made fools of themselves were the Liberals.' "

The third major problem touched upon was the cooperation of the Andean indian in an education program. Radio Sutatenza had little trouble with this, finding rather that the farmers were eager to learn practical things. However, Colombia had one advantage over Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador: it was highly mesticized, and did not have a large unassimilated indian population. Some wondered how the indian of the Andes would accept the introduction of the radio into his home, knowing that it committed him to listen to but one station, and to hear a program dictated by an external agency, one almost certainly to be identified with the non-indian world.

Withal, the final consensus of opinion was that there would be no harm in trying, and that such an organization as the Andean Mission could send representatives to study the operations of Radio Sutatenza.

What bothered me throughout the time spent at Sutatenza was that there seemed to be no information available on the success of the radio education, although it has been running on a large scale for at least five years. It's one thing to tell a farmer on the radio how to care for his cow, another for him to follow this advice; or, how to construct a privy if the tradition of using it does not exist in the locality. There is no guarantee that such suggestions will be followed. In spite of this, from what I could gather, no serious evaluation has been made of the radio's work - which impressed me with Father Salcedo's powers of persuasion even more.

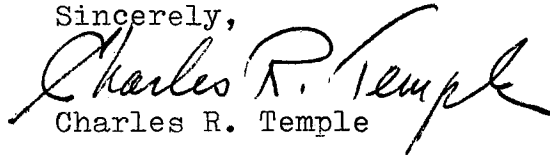
Nonetheless, the very existence of Radio Sutatenza in Colombia is impressive, and its history and future activities deserve

attention, both for its accomplishments in Colombia and for the possibility of similar programs in other countries which contain large illiterate rural populations.

## III.

In passing, I'd like to note that Colombia has a happy possession in the city of Cartagena. The onetime port through which flowed the gold, silver and other treasures of the Andes on their way to Spain, it is today still very much intact in its walled old city, fortresses and an amazing underwater wall which was built by the Spaniards to close off one of the harbor entrances. When the trade winds are blowing, it is pleasantly cool, and an ideal place for sightseeing and a few days relaxation swimming and taking the sun.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Charles R. Temple". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Charles R. Temple

**Rec'd New York 5/21/56**