

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

CRT - 4  
Saving and Spending  
in the Andes

Hotel Ferrocarril  
Cuzco  
Peru  
September 6, 1955

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

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The traveller in the Andes of Peru and Bolivia soon becomes aware of the essential sparseness and bleakness of the land through which he is journeying. To an eye accustomed to the richness of the New England countryside the Andes in their higher reaches seem to be but sketches for a landscape abandoned ages ago by a tired creator.

The Altiplano shared by Peru and Bolivia is an extreme example of this. It is bare of tall trees (except the eucalyptus introduced some eighty years ago), sparse in flowers and heavy only in scrub brush. After a time the eye is exhausted by the weak red of the soil, the faded yellow of the grass and the dull browns and grays of the hills. None of these colors has much strength to compete with the fierce glare of the sun in the clear atmosphere - and one can see as far as the horizon without any trouble. The sensation of a washed out land is intensified by the cold strong wind which sweeps incessantly across the flat land and seems to suck up its substance.

The valleys of the Andean cordilleras which I have seen so far are more favored than this high plateau. They are protected to some degree from the wind, offer more vegetation and have the psychological advantage of being enclosed spaces rather than open plains.

It is not easy to live in these plains or valleys, although in some of the latter rivers run which make the tilling of the soil less arduous. In general, the soil is weak and water is lacking in good supply, which means that the farmer must work hard and carefully to earn his subsistence.

Yet the Altiplano and the intermont valleys of the Andes



are among the most densely populated areas of both Peru and Bolivia and have been for centuries. Not only does this surprise the newly arrived observer for whom the inhospitability of these areas is the first impression, but also it has the effect of intensifying the struggle for adequate subsistence by increasing the number of persons who must be fed from the produce of a lethargic land.

For the indian farmer who lives in the Andes under these conditions conservation has become a natural habit. He has no abundance to encourage him to waste food or energy. Every scrap and slop which is left over from any meal is used for the next, and the pigs of the family have to fend for themselves. (Indian wives are adept, however, in cooking only enough for one meal.) Lacking refrigeration and other storage facilities, food is preserved in ways which render it somewhat unpalatable to foreign tastes but which keep it edible for long periods of time. For example, meat is dried and becomes what is known as charqui, while potatoes are exposed to the cold night air, ending up still in whole form but colored gray, black and purple veined, or being pulped into black chunks called chufio.



Andean Farmer. Peru

Water is utilized for cooking and drinking but not for bathing and the indian is understandably dirty. Urine is often used in its place - especially by the women to wash their hair, and sometimes babies are bathed in it. This lack of bathing does have one advantage: it probably cuts down the incidence, already high, of respiratory diseases among the Andean indian.

Clothing, once woven or purchased, is repaired, patched, and repatched until it falls apart of its own age. Again the lack of ample water helps to preserve clothing for it is spared too much of the rough beating on rocks given it by the women. After a time it also becomes impregnated with dirt and body oils affording a greater degree of protection from the cold.



I have seen many examples of the indian's talent and drive for conservation since I have been in the Andes but two incidents are particularly sharp in my memory.

On August 7 I attended Mass in the Chapel of the Virgin of Copacabana, standing on a high hill halfway between the town of Cliza and the city of Cochabamba in Bolivia. The chapel overlooks the artificial lake of Angostura created when the valley's hydroelectric plant was installed. The shrine was built under the auspices of Franciscan monks and made possible by the contributions, large and small, of the population of the valley. It departs from the usual construction in the valley being built of stone and concrete rather than adobe. It is still unfinished but the altar with its shrine (made of metal foil) of the Virgin is completed.



Andean Farmer. Peru

The Virgin of Copacabana is close to the indian of Bolivia for she is twin to the dark skinned Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico, having appeared to an indian on the Island of Copacabana in Lake Titicaca in 1581. He fashioned her first image after one of his own people and in so doing made her a more proper object of worship for the indian than any of the fair skinned saints brought by the Spaniards.

Her feast day is highly regarded by the indians and the congregation at the Mass I attended reflected this. Made up mostly of women, it contained only a small number of gente decente (and these mostly from Cliza, who took advantage of a picnic on the lake to hear Mass in the chapel) and was almost completely campesina.

Kneeling on the dirty tile floor near me was an old campesina woman, her dark brown skin crinkled with age. She was enveloped in a full black shawl which hid most of her body. During the consecration an egg rolled from under the shawl and fell



to the floor, breaking into two neat halves. The old lady placed the shells against the wall and then delicately picked up as much of the yolk and white as she could in her fingers and swiftly pushed them into her mouth. With one quick glance to see if anyone was watching she scraped up the residue, wiped her hand on the shawl and turned her attention to the Mass again.

Three weeks later I visited the community of Chincheros in the Altiplano northeast of Cuzco in southern Peru. The Crédito Agrícola Supervisado (CREAS, "Supervised Agricultural Credit"), an agency of the Peruvian government, maintains a station there to give and administer farming loans and to teach new agricultural techniques. The staff also includes a young woman, Mary García, who teaches sewing and new kinds of weaving to the indian women, feeds the children powdered milk and washes their faces.

While I was in the sewing room and indian couple brought their ten months old baby to Mary for treatment. The child was vomiting, coughing heavily, had a fever, running eyes and a desperate panting respiration. A doctor visits Chincheros on Thursdays to hold a clinic and, this being Friday, Mary asked why the parents hadn't come in then, to which there was no answer. She complained to the father

Mother with sick  
child. Chincheros.



that he had waited much too long and that if the child should die it would not be due to the medicine which she could give. The man nodded, while the mother rocked the child back and forth never taking her eyes off his agonized face.

The engineer in charge of the station joined us and said to the father that he cared more for his animals than for his children. The man shook his head in agreement, then asked Mary how much the pills would cost. The engineer threw up his hands and inquired what difference that made when the child was nearly dead. Then he suggested that the CREAS truck coming in the afternoon





might take the baby to the hospital in Cuzco. The father again again asked about costs; the engineer again threw up his hands. After a brief discussion between the parents the trip was finally agreed upon.

"Of course, he'll probably die on the way, but that's the fault of all you people," was the response. Mary spoke to the mother asking her why they had delayed in coming for advice. The answer was that they had hoped the baby would improve and that they had little money. To me this seemed a variation on the conservation theme for even sickness was subject to the saving of money until it became serious.

Impressed as I had been by the indian's passion for saving, I was at first puzzled by its opposite - excessive spending - equally a part of Andean life. The indian of the Andes is in some instances as conspicuous a consumer as was ever dreamed of by Veblen. Coca, aguardiente and chicha may account for as much as 40% of a family's cash expenditures. In addition the expenses of the many fiestas in which the indian participates - for births, marriages, on saints' days - are heavy.

Cash income, aside from the limited sale of agricultural products and some woven goods, comes from the raising of domestic animals - the alpaca being the most lucrative. The money gotten from the sale of the wool is often quite large and many of the indians, who otherwise appear poor, may have substantial cash savings, which they often hoard after the fashion of the French farmer (incidentally presenting the government with the problem of how to get this money back into circulation).

Occasionally this accumulation of money is dramatically demonstrated. In 1950 an hacienda lying in the sierra beyond the Paucartambo Valley (north and east of Cuzco) was up for sale. The indians who worked as tenant farmers, numbering about 1000, on this hacienda came forward and offered to purchase it for themselves. The asking price was \$25,000 which the indians were prepared to put up in cash. They were refused and the farm went to two nearby hacendados.

How a man saves or spends his time, resources and income is often, however, outside so-called logical considerations. The old lady of Angostura who risked infection to eat her broken egg worth one and one-half cents put twenty cents into the collec-



tion taken up for the chapel. The farmer of Chincheros who waited until his child was nearly dead for medical attention agreed to a hospitalization which might cost him as much as five dollars, whereas a visit to the Thursday clinic would have cost nothing except the few cents charged for the pills. Both, moreover, would probably spend a good part of their incomes and energies in fiestas during the year.

Still, chewing coca, drinking and participating in fiestas make life pleasanter in the hard Andes. Much has been written about coca: that it helps the indian fight fatigue and dulls his sensibility to the rigors of his environment; that it may even contain various vitamins which supplement those of his limited diet. After all is said and done, however, the slightly narcotic effect of coca may be the most important consideration for its user.

Fiestas have multiple functions in sierra life. They are rituals which formalize and approve the individual's status and actions in the community, and at the same time they express the community's solidarity and continuity. A good part of the year's trading and sales are accomplished during fiestas, and they provide an excellent opportunity for fraternizing, gossiping and general social intercourse.

The contrast between indian saving and spending was perhaps best explained for me while traveling across the Altiplano from La Paz to Guaqui (Bolivia's port on Lake Titicaca) by a middle aged indian woman sneaking a ride in the first class coach of the train. She was handsomely dressed in a rich silk violet shawl and a silk skirt of a deep purple shade. Her ears, throat, wrists and fingers were burdened with gold and silver jewelry (one of the principal forms of investment for the indian woman of the Andes).

After several bottles of beer we were chatting fairly easily and she told me something of her life as the daughter, the wife and the mother of Altiplano farmers. It was hard to see her in her present finery in one of the adobe houses standing solitary in the vastness of the Altiplano through which we were passing but the details she gave were unmistakably accurate and vivid.

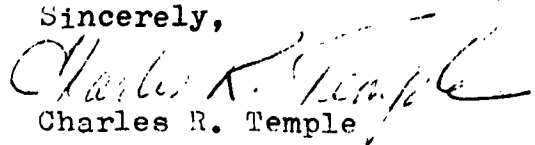
She was on her way to attend the wedding of a younger brother and hoped that the celebrations would be elaborate and long. I remarked that this must be expensive for all concerned



and she agreed. Then, holding out her glass for more beer, she told me that the wife of a gringo agricultural technician had once visited her home. The woman asked her why she spent money on clothes, jewelry and fiestas when the family's diet was so poor and the house needed so many improvements.

"I didn't give her an answer, but I'll tell you, young man, that there isn't much else to spend money on, and a person has to be happy in this life, doesn't he?"

Sincerely,



Charles R. Temple

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