

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

CRT - 7
Sandals and Onions

c/o American Embassy
Lima
Peru
November 1, 1955

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

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The prevailing winds over Lake Titicaca blow from east to west. They are cold winds and penetrate every crack and ill fitting door jamb in the houses of Puno. Even in the warmth of the noon sun a person shivers when the wind is blowing strong. But with this cold the winds bring moisture to the west shore of the lake so that it and the hinterland of the Altiplano are richer in vegetation than the land on the Bolivian side of Titicaca - not extravagantly so for nothing seems overly generous in the thin air of the altitude but enough to make the western side seem less inhospitable.

Hills roll along the lake edge and where they descend to the level of the plain hollows and valleys exist which are good for the raising of crops. In one of these small valleys south of Puno lie the fields of the community of Ichu, made up of the ayllu Ichu, Pusulaya, Tonohuiri Grande, Tonohuiri Chico and La Raya.

On either side of the fields of Ichu the hills shoot up,

Street in
Ayllu Ichu.





The Fields
of Ichu.

and there on the rocky slopes the people have built their adobe houses. Five thousand persons, who till the soil and raise sheep, a few llamas, pigs and cattle, live in Ichu of the five ayllus. It cannot be said that the many dogs which roam through the streets are raised - they just appear year after year and fend for themselves, which seems to gift them with an aggressiveness vented mostly on strangers.

When I visited Ichu last month, the inhabitants were in their fields and the houses were deserted but for the guardian dogs. The only noises came from the schoolhouse on the edge of ayllu Ichu where mischievous children were being instructed by a patient but obviously long suffering teacher.

From the hill miniature people and animals moved over the fields below. The people were plowing with wooden implements dragged by heavy oxen, breaking clods with a long hammer shaped stick and planting seeds in the grayish brown earth. Men and women, with a sprinkling of small children, were all engaged in these tasks. The tempo of their activities was as each group found comfortable: sometimes quick and energetic, sometimes slow and laborious. At any moment a man might stop his plow animals and sit down to chat with his wife or nearby friends or to play with a child.

Watching these farmers of Ichu it seemed as if they were neither more nor less that the typical farmer of the Altiplano beginning the year's agricultural cycle. Once down among the workers,

however, this impression quickly vanished. What struck me first was that most of the men and many of the women used Spanish well, an unexpected thing in Southern Peru where one often encounters whole communities in which only Quechua or Aymara is spoken. The bilingualism of the women was even more interesting since it is generally true that the indian woman of the Andes knows little Spanish. Even in Cliza Valley in Bolivia which is heavily bilingual and which prides itself upon its progress the woman of the household continues to speak only Quechua.

A Maryknoll priest, Father Murphy, who lives off and on in Ichu, undertook to introduce me to various people. Among them was a young man named Juan. Father Murphy asked him why he hadn't attended Mass for the last few Sundays. Juan replied that he had been in Arequipa but promised that he'd be at Mass during the coming three weeks and after that he had to make a trip to Lima. Another man offered that he too was between trips but hoped that Father would understand that he always heard Mass on Sunday wherever he was.

Having just come from the sierra around Cuzco in which I met indians whose traveling, if at all, was confined to a narrow local radius, these were surprising statements. I asked Juan the reason for his trips and he told me it was to sell sandals. He waved to a stack of automobile tires in his yard near the edge of the cultivated plain. From these Juan cuts soles to which leather or rope thongs are added to make the sandal common to the indians of Latin America.

These sandals are sold in markets throughout Peru from the far south to the far north. There is no middleman in this trade for Juan sells them himself, often accompanied on his trips by his wife. From their sale he derives a substantial cash income, a thorough knowledge of Peru (much greater than that of many wealthy Peruvians I have met in Lima and other cities) and he learns to speak Spanish well as a matter of course.

From what I could gather, nearly every man in the community had traveled to some part of Peru outside the Altiplano. This male commercial specialization is matched to some degree by the women in the sale of onions. A good part of the fields are planted with these each year, and the harvest is taken in great man sized bundles to various Altiplano markets by the women of Ichu. There is a lot of movement then in and out of the five ayllus, especially during the months between planting and harvesting.



Old Woman
of Ichu.



Plowing the
Fields.

A curious aspect of this commerce is the change which comes over the icheño when he reaches a city like Arequipa or Lima. He shucks his homespun and sandals and puts on a suit and shoes. Father Murphy, who has met icheños in these cities, said that they are quite different people there acting very much like urbanites who have never been outside the city.

Yet, each man returns to Ichu after his business is completed and seems little changed. The icheño has a reputation for being inhospitable to strangers and for being fiercely proud of his village and its life. He will not marry outside the five ayllus and few migrants are permitted to enter the community as permanent residents. No amount of contact with the non-icheño world through his sandals and onions trade seems to dampen his enthusiasm for Ichu, nor his conservatism with regard to change in its way of life.

This proud standoffish community did succumb a few years ago to the genial, casual but sincere approach of the Maryknoll fathers and it is now one of the most vigorous units in the parish of Puno. At the priests' request the icheños even went so far as to build a road over the pampa to their village to accomodate the parish's battered station wagon. Without the road access to the village over the plain is impossible in the summer rains. But few others besides the priests are tolerated in Ichu. The other foreign fixtures on the landscape are the teachers and the gobernador, a government appointed official who oversees the community's functioning.

Ichu with its stability of traditional behavior mixed with its extraordinary mobility brings up the problem I touched upon in a previous letter (CRT - 6): why the indian deliberately ignores things and attitudes from the world outside his community and his culture. In this case it might be supposed that the icheño who after all assumes non-indian dress in the cities he visits would be less vigorous in his refusal to forbid the entry of new items into the catalogue of his daily life, but this is denied by the material inventory of the five ayllus which is meager and standard.

The icheño's attitudes and opinions on the world outside his community are in line with this. In these he seems to be rather like a boy and a world's fair: a dazzling experience to be enjoyed often but not something to be taken home to become part of everyday life. Being privy to the white-mestizo world has not caused any profound change in the icheño's stubborn adherence to his traditional world.

It is not a simple black and white psychology, however: the *icheño*, out of habit or spite or fear, may praise the benefits of the tried and proven while taking happily from the non-indian world something which is totally foreign to his culture. A tractor to plow the entire community's fields was under discussion when I was there.

In this connection it is significant that such a novelty is accepted only under the auspices of someone the indian trusts. The priests in Ichu have been able to persuade the indians into alterations in their behavior patterns because they are regarded as sympathetic men. In one or two instances, suggestions made by the gobernador have been rejected only to be approved when presented by the priests.

The answer to the problem mentioned above is at best a conjectural one (although no one in Peru hesitates in offering his own unequivocal answer). Ichu does indicate this, however: that mobility and wide ranging travel do not automatically incite changes as one might expect. The collective knowledge and experience of this community is extensive and varied but most of it remains in a category of a kind of passive vocabulary of behavior.

For the reasons why this vocabulary is not activated one has to reckon with the overburdening exploitation of the indian in time past and with the crippling of any movement toward cultural change. Until recently the governing caste of Peru has not seriously wanted great change in the labor pool at its disposal lest the advantages of a superficially inert, easily manipulated indian population be lost.

Along with this external repression, a tenacious nativism, defensive as much as anything else, seems to have grown up among the indian populations of southern Peru. This nativism perpetuates the traditional and is highly resistant to alteration given the continuation of the status quo.

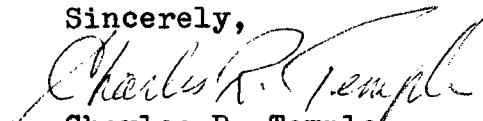
How long this screen against the outside world would last should present conditions be altered is another aspect of the problem. The shattering of the usual restraints upon campesino activity in Bolivia since 1952 has produced a vigorous native movement in that country among the rural populations in which the campesino is hastening to take over much of the behavior and status patterns of the ejected ruling caste.

The people of Ichu who will resolve these problems eventually depart considerably from the version of the Andean indian represented by Valentín Champi of Mollamarca (CRT - 5) who comes closer to approximating Hubert Heering's statement: "[In Peru] apathetic indians still farm their little plots, work with little or no pay from their masters, get drunk on chicha, are poisoned by the incessant chewing of coca (cocaine), and are held to their tasks by custom more powerful than law." (A History of Latin America, p. 521.)

Through their sandals and onions the icheños are constantly exposed to extra-community stimuli which make them something more than simple Andean farmers. The customs to which they hold are not blindly accepted but deliberately evaluated and maintained, within a framework of great experience and relative sophistication.

But the important consideration is not how different they have become from Valentín Champi, but rather what is the point at which the accumulation of these differences generates changes propagated by the icheño himself and not forced upon him by external agencies. My own impression is that within the next ten years, Ichu and communities like it in the Altiplano may provide the answer to this query.

Sincerely,



Charles R. Temple

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