INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WHM - 14
Fiesta at Paucartambo

Hotel Ferrocarril
Cuzco, Perú
July 23, 1955

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

Dear Mr. Rogers:

In the days of the great road systems of the Inca Empire, the "tambos" served as inns, dispatching points and army garrisons. According to William Prescott [1] "the tambos were erected, at the distance of ten or twelve miles from each other, for the accomodation, more particularly, of the Inca and his suite, and those who journeyed on public business. There were few other travelers in Perú." Perhaps the most important "tambos" were those lying on the roads traversing the country from the Capital at Cuzco to the four regions of Tawantinsuyu, the Inca State. Named Ollantaytambo, Limatambo, Paqareqtambo and Paucartambo, they occupied strategic positions some fifty to seventy-five crow-flying kilometers from the Capital. The chasquis or couriers could easily reach any one of them in a day's running.

Last week, we made the trip to Paucartambo, now capital of a province, to witness the fiesta held in honor of one of the town's two heavenly patrons, the Virgin of Carmen. There were three of us: Dr. Oscar Nuñez del Prado, an ethnologist from the University of Cuzco; Luis Barreda Murillo, his assistant; and myself. We left Cuzco early one morning loaded down with cameras, recording machines and cameras, sleeping bags and extra gasoline. The road followed a small stream that runs down the center of the large basin that lies to the southeast of the city. On the floors of the valley and the slopes beyond, hacienda owners as well as small community farmers had used every inch of land they could for agricultural purposes. Some of the hillside patches of barley and wheat were so steep that a man could easily fall off them unles he held on with one hand and worked with the other.

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La Virgen del Carmen
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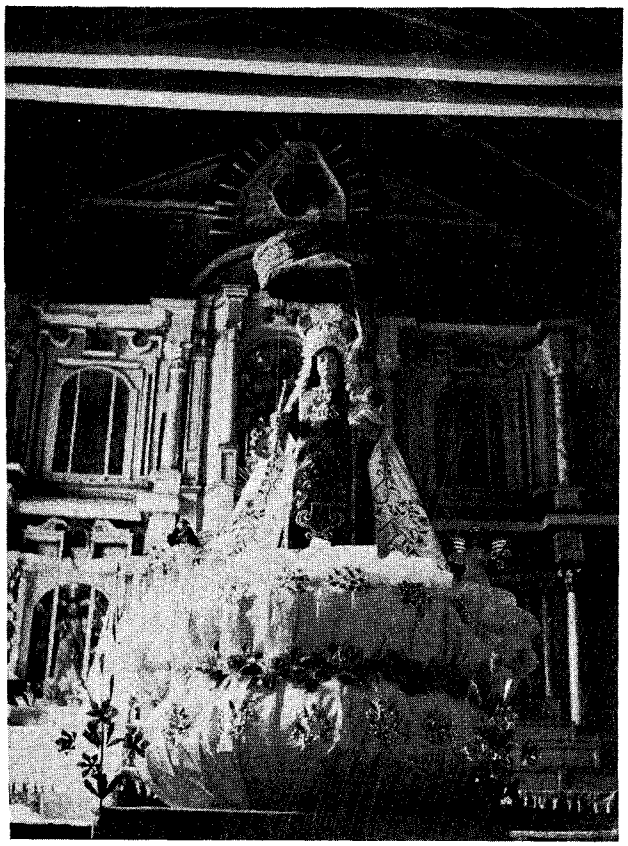

After an hour's jouncing over the washboard "highway", we turned off onto a narrow road and began climbing out of the basin. A few minutes of driving within a few feet of a drop which increased from hundreds to thousands of feet as we snaked up the cliff convinced me that the "autoridades competentes" had been geniuses when they declared this trail a one way road. If at that moment a truck had appeared around one of the hairpin curves, negotiating the descent in the usual Peruvian style - motor turned off, transmission in neutral - this area generalist would have become a general aerialist in short order.

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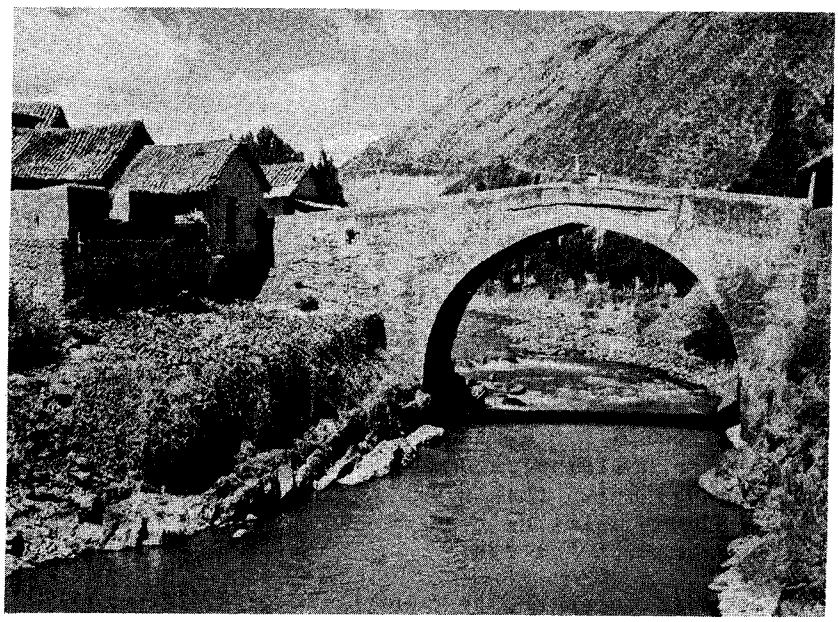
1. The Conquest of Perú

At the top of the cliff, the road turned northeast, taking us through rolling barren country typical of the puna 2. . Even at 4,000 meters, the land was being cultivated by communities or ayllus of Indians. In each town that we passed, groups of men were working in the fields with their digging sticks or patching up the holes in that portion of the road which lay within their community boundaries. In these ayllus, labor is performed by the community, and the men work together on each project or individual plot of land. Off on the far slopes, the women were herding sheep, sitting in the sun on the hillsides, nursing their babies or spinning brightly colored yarn on their primitive whorls. The old people sat in the doorways of the windowless huts and watched us go by.

As we came down out of the altitude onto a broad pampa, I noticed several black-winged yellow flickers moving in their uneven flight among the roadside cactus. I asked Nuñez del Prado about them. "They are called haq'acu in Quechua", he told me. "There is a belief prevalent among the Indians around here that the haq'acu is a magical bird; he can increase a woman's reproductive powers and make her children strong. In this region, pregnant women drink a soup made of haq'acu to make their milk more abundant." 3.



This bridge was built during the reign of Spain's Charles III

The road neared the end of the pampa. We had one last glimpse of the great peaks of Wallawalla and Ocangaty glinting blue in the high sun, and then they dropped down into a country of valles cerrados - actually canyons thousands of feet deep, each one with a silver ribbon of river threading the valley floor, each one green with eucalyptus groves, brown with barley and yellow with the patches of wheat or quinoa (WHM - 13) that hung off the almost vertical slopes. This country is the beginning of the great river erosion that has created the spires and gorges, the cliffs and minarets of the montaña - that green forest which slopes down to the flat jungles of the selva proper. From this point high on a canyon wall down to the improbable land of greenery and air sweet with the smell of plants and tumbling water is a scant hundred kilometers, if you follow the rivers below you in their fast drop to the northwest. If you head northeast, it is just a matter of crossing one range of mountains and you are standing at Tres Cruces. Below you, the montaña drops away as a giant curtain to the jungle, and you can look out to the east and see land that has never been explored by man.

The road took us from one canyon to the next as it followed the tributary streams of the Rio Paucartambo. On a point high above one bend stood a group of round stone towers about ten feet high. They were chullpas, the graves of the ancient tribes. I had seen them before in Chucuito near Lake Titicaca, but these were in a better state of preservation, some of them them with their roofs intact. We would have stopped to explore them, but a large truck was highballing down the mountainside on our tail, and I wanted to keep as much space as possible between us.

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2. The term puna is applied to the high rolling country above 4,000 meters.
3. I am using here a modern method of spelling sounds. "c" is pronounced "ch" and "q" is a "k" made deep in the throat. The apostraphe signifies a break in the word.

A half hour of winding down a spur canyon brought us within sight of Paucartambo. On the slopes above, men were stacking sacks of barley near the main buildings of a prosperous looking hacienda. Potatoes were being harvested on the hillsides, potatoes whose ancestors were the grandfathers of all potatoes in the world, Irish or otherwise. Cattle were grazing on the valley floor by the river. An ancient bridge built during the reign of Charles III of Spain (second half of the eighteenth century) spanned the Mapacu river, and beyond it were the whitewashed heavy-doored colonial houses of the town. The pickup truck negotiated the inverted "V" of the bridge, and we stopped in a corner of the tiny plaza.

My first impression of the town was that it was clean - cleaner than Arequipa, much cleaner than Cuzco. The streets were narrow, most of them too narrow for a car. Behind the great doors of the houses were patios built in the colonial style, *each room opening on to the courtyard. There were no internal hallways or stairwells*, so that the patio was the focal point of life within each house. Puppies, guinea pigs and children scampered on the paving stones, safe in the enclosure of the open court.

We ate the noon meal in a fly-specked pension looking out on the plaza. Indians were flocking in from the hinterlands, the men dressed in knee-length pants, ponchos and chullos or stocking caps, the women in long dark skirts, bright blouses and the omnipresent montera or pie-shaped hats. A paucartambino hacienda owner sitting with us told us that most of the Indians tried to look as poor as possible when they came to town. "It's because of the police," he said. "If the police see an Indian all decked out in finery, they will ask him for his brevete. The chances are that he will not be carrying any papers at all, and they know it. But if he looks well-dressed enough to be able to pay the fine for being without his brevete, they will stop him and threaten to throw him in jail unless he gives them some money. Ahora bien, I will show you what I mean. I see one of my Indians over there in the plaza." The hacienda owner went to the door of the pension and signalled to "his" Indian, a bowlegged man wearing a red poncho. "Hamuy!" said the hacendado in Quechua. "Come here!"

The Indian bobbed his head and shuffled over to the door. He started to speak but saw that his "owner" was in no mood for talk and so stood in the doorway looking at us, nervously shuffling his bare feet.

"This is what I was talking about," said the hacendado. He turned the poncho inside out, jerking the Indian around so that we could get a better view. The reverse side of the poncho was a masterpiece of weaving and intricate design. Beneath it the man wore a black tunic - an unqu - one of the few Incaic garments still in use today. "My Indians come from near Q'eros," said the hacendado. "In that region they still observe some of the customs of the Incas. It's probably the last place in this country where you can still see these customs in operation."

Dangling from the man's belt was a large pouch made of llama fleece. The Indian caught me staring at it and went into an elaborate pantomime. He stuck his hand into the pouch, placed it to his lips and began to chew. The pouch was his coca bag. In it were several ounces of dried coca leaves and a ball of llipta (WHM - 9). Coca

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Mother and child fiesta-bound
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Above: The C'uncu conjunto dancing in the Plaza. Note headdress and wire face masks

Right: The Qolla conjunto. Note woolen masks and women's hats. Harp with huge sounding board is typical mestizo instrument of the region

Coca had stained the man's lips dark green. The hacendado let the edge of the poncho fall, covering the finery beneath with the drab red cloth, and the Indian shuffled away into the crowd in the Plaza.

After lunch, Luis Barreda and I walked over to the church to set up the recording machines. In the back of the church by the altar stood the image of the Virgen del Carmen, a doll-faced girl dressed in bridal white, shaded from the elements by a parasol held by a tired looking angel. Decorated candles guttered in the draft before the image. In the flickering light we could make out the tortured wooden images of Christ on the cross, faded paintings of the famous Cuzco School and, in a small niche in the wall, the tongue of some bishop of the region famed for his oratory. On the stone floor behind us several Indians were kneeling and praying. I had heard that the indios were deeply and fanatically religious, that the zealous friars of the Conquest had done their job well; but I wasn't prepared for the look of blind devotion on the faces of these people, kneeling and muttering their prayers in the half-light, asking blessings from the greatest Patron of them all.

The sound of flutes and drums in the street brought us running out of the church. Obeying the ancient customs, the conjuntos of dancers and musicians were preparing to salute the important places in the town before they gave themselves up to the spirit of the fiesta. They would dance in front of the church, then in front of the Sub-prefect's office, then make a tour of the Plaza. That done, they would be free to perform wherever and whenever they pleased. We placed the recording machines on the church steps and waited.

The music came closer, and

A Diablo dancer in full regalia.

suddenly the streets leading to the church were filled with masked children and spectators. Behind them came the first conjunto, dancers first and then the musicians. Weaving in two files down the street, the dancers strutted to the thin, oddly beautiful music. They wore black boots, white pants and colored shirts. Over their faces were heavy plaster masks - masks with pink cheeks and blond moustaches! In the center of the group, a ludicrous bride and groom, both masked, wheeled and cavorted. This was the conjunto Aoqa Chileno, a satire dating from the War of the Pacific (1879-83) when a group of Chilean prisoners of war were brought to Paucartambo to work on the roads. The sight of these light-skinned men in their high boots was evidently too much for the paucartambino sense of humor. The conjunto Aoqa Chileno (enemy Chilean) was formed and danced in the festival of the Carmen each year. Some time ago, the band disappeared from the scene, but was revived recently by the society of town grain dealers as their contribution to the festival. The effectiveness of the Aoqa Chilenos as a burlesque of the Chileans can be measured by the fact that a chileno lecturer travelling in these parts a few years ago demanded that the conjunto be abolished on the grounds that it was damaging to international relations between the two countries.

The Aoqa Chilenos danced on the atrium of the church to the music of their hired orchestra of harp, small guitar, snare drum and two wooden pitos or flutes. The bride and groom jigged up and down the lines of stomping, booted dancers, pausing now and then to wave at the crowd.

Each conjunto took its turn in front of the church doors. First, the Aoqa Chilenos. Then the C'uncus (see footnote 3) dressed as mythical savages from the selva. These were the Kapaq C'uncus, the rich savages, wearing feather headdresses, masks of fine wire mesh, and bright embroidered skirts of cotton and silk. In their hands they carried unstrung blackwood bows, the only piece of equipment to be found in reality in the Peruvian jungle. In the countless figures of their dance, they performed singly, in pairs, and in a quadrille which bore a startling resemblance to a Scottish sword dance (using crossed bow staves instead of blades). After the C'uncus came the conjunto of the Contradanza, dancing the old Spanish figures in costumes that satirized the dress of the colonial period. Then came the Negros, a stomping band of men wearing black and gold masks and long robes, and carrying wooden staffs carved into the shape of a clenched fist. Then the K'acampas and the Waka-Waka and the Qollas. This last group was made up of men dressed as women, dancing a mincing dance, weaving strands of wool on their miniature whorls. The Qollas acted as official minstrels to the Virgin. They were the only group that sang, and their songs were plaintive prayers to the Carmen - simply constructed songs made beautiful by the liquid sound of the Quechua in them.

As each conjunto performed, it was attended by a host of youngsters and adults. These were the maq'tas - the masked clowns of the festival. They scampered through the crowd pinching women, tripping men, stealing fruit from the vendors, teasing the dancers. One man carried the traditional suylu, the skinned lamb. He dangled it in front of the crowd, petting it, feeding it candy. The maq'tas kept up a constant patter of jokes spoken in Quechua, keeping the crowd laughing and feeling happy.

The star performers, however, were the devils - the Diablos. They wore masks similar to those of the Bolivian devil dancers, and their costumes were decorated with glass ornaments and embroidered with serpent designs. Their dance figures were complicated and well performed. Behind their heavy masks they chirped and chattered

like crazy monkeys. In the afternoon, the "gente decente" or decent people of the town led a parade of dancers and awestruck Indians through the streets to the church. This was the ceremony of the cera apakuy, the offering of the candles to the Virgin. Women carried flowers and miniature dolls dressed as the Carmen, and the men held decorated tapers in their hands.

The seating order inside the church was a mute illustration of the way society operates in this small (population: 1,700) provincial town. At the front near the altar sat the upper class, the decent people.- men on the left, women on the right. Behind them sat what Nuñez del Prado terms the "mozos", the mestizos. Behind the mestizos, the cholos or westernized "town" Indians. At the door of the church, kneeling on the stones, the "indios" made their devotions. The town band stood in a corner ready to strike up a march when the priest had ended the service.

All afternoon the dancing went on. When the sun dropped behind the high canyon walls, bonfires were lit in the streets against the cold of the mountain night. The people gathered at the chicha stalls and watched the chattering Diablos as they ran and jumped through the flames. In the Plaza, an elaborate display of fireworks was going on. Castillos or bamboo platforms supporting every imaginable type of fire cracker and pinwheel rocked and shuddered as the fuses were touched off. Several of the castillos were constructed along a religious line; effigies and portraits of the Virgin were constantly appearing amid the smoke and explosions of the "fuegos artificiales". Pinwheels and rockets occasionally went astray and crashed into the crowd, but spirits were too high to be lowered by bruises and blistered skin.

In the night, the dancers still paraded in the streets. Listening to the music that penetrated the thick walls of our room, we could name each conjunto as it passed by the simple, hypnotic melody of the pasacalle (street song). Long after I had crawled into my sleeping bag, I heard the thin wailings of the pitos outside in the night.

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Fireworks display: a burning cross in the night

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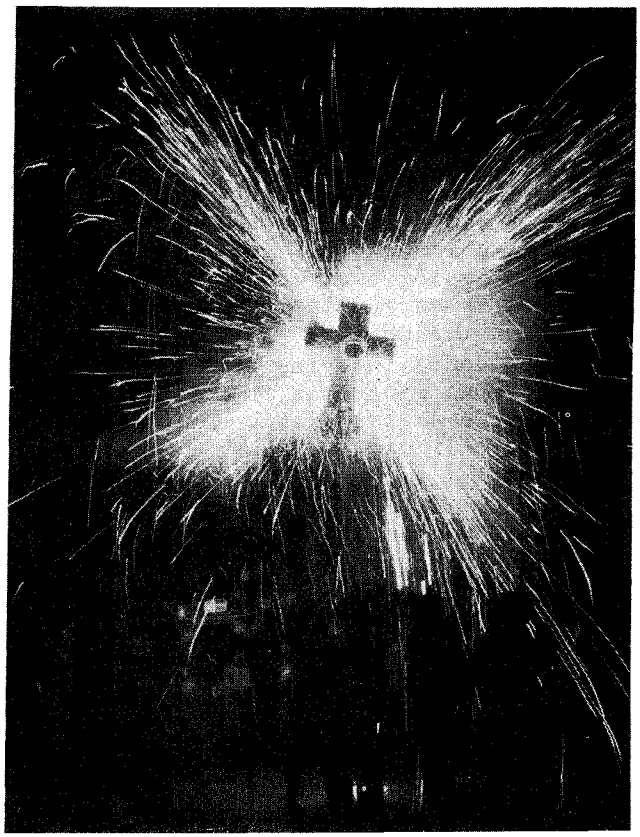

The festival lasted four days. In the early mornings, masses were sung to the Virgin. She was carried to the ancient bridge, and the people knelt and wept as the priest prayed to the four winds of the province of Paucartambo for benedictions to fall on the land. The C'uncus and Qollas staged a mock battle and a mock burial, and the sponsors of the fiesta built a platform in the Plaza from which they threw fruit, bread and other largesse to the crowd. Everything proceeded according to traditions that have their roots in the very beginnings of Spanish occupation. Then, after the festival, Paucartambo went back to being herself - a tiny provincial capital, cut off from the rest of the country by the canyons and cliffs that surround her.

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The Fiesta de la Virgen del Carmen is expensive. Moreover, the cost is borne by one family - the Karguyqq. Every year, a man is chosen or volunteers to sponsor the forthcoming fiesta. He must pay for food and fireworks, entertainment and the necessary church supplies (including the rich dresses which clothe the Virgin). The man and his family may well be bankrupt when the bill comes due, but the position of Karguyoq is still sought after for the immense social prestige it holds. This year, the family

Ordoñez acted as Karguyoq. Their bill, according to Nuñez del Prado, will come to about 30,000 soles (US$ 1,500). Of course, they had been aided by contributions from friends and the more devout members of the congregation. Nevertheless, the burden of the expense lay on Sr. Ordoñez' shoulders, and 30,000 soles is a tremendous sum to pay out, be a man rich or poor.

The business of financing the conjuntos is another expensive proposition. Each conjunto is in reality a social club. It has its president and its dues-paying members, its traditional dances and costumes. The cost of the costumes - each Diablo costume costs over one hundred dollars - and the fees of the hired orchestra (usually made up of Indians) are often prohibitive, and for that reason many conjuntos have been forced to go out of business. If it had not been for the guild of grain dealers, for instance, the Aoqa Chilano group would not have been able to dance in this year's fiesta.

I have mentioned that Paucartambo has two patron Virgins. The story of the two "patronas" is the story of the "casta" system working at its most efficient level. In the days of the Viceroys and the Spanish kings, the Indians and the upper class feuded as to which Virgin should be the patrona of the town - Rosario or Carmen. The argument was brought before the representatives of the King, who decided that the Virgin of Rosario was the rightful patrona. The representatives also decided, however, that in view of the fact that the Rosario was worshipped by the Indians and not by the "gente decente", the latter should be given a sop to appease their aggrieved feelings. The upper classes, therefore, were permitted to continue worshipping their particular patrona, the Virgin of Carmen. Thus it is that each year on the sixteenth of July, the mestizos and blancos hold their fiesta in honor of the Carmen while the Indians watch from the sidelines. On October the seventh, the roles are reversed, and the "gente" are the spectators.

The fiesta of the Virgen del Carmen, therefore, is a festival sponsored by the "decente" and performed almost entirely by mestizos (the exceptions being the Diablo and mageño conjuntos, which are made up of upper class young men). The only Indians performing in the fiesta are the hired musicians. The mestizo conjuntos dance - for the sake of devotion to the Virgin - until they drop, while the crowds of Indians lean against the walls of the buildings, drink chicha and watch the frenzied activities in the streets. This is the only time of the year when the social roles are reversed, when the Indian relaxes and the mestizo works.

Sincerely,

William H. MacLeish

William H. MacLeish

Received New York 8/5/55.