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The Indians of Puno

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Dear Mr. Rogers:

The high pass at La Raya is a boundary between two topographical worlds, two ways of life. To the northwest lie the wide, rich valleys of the Department of Cuzco, gentle in climate and fertile in soil. Groves of willow and eucalyptus trees line the river courses, and fields of maize stand yellow in the sun. Crops are relatively abundant in these valleys, protected as they are against the driving winds and hail storms of the highlands. To the southeast lies the altiplano, the great uneven plain the average altitude of which is well over 12,000 feet. Stretching for thousands of square miles toward the mountain chains to east and west and the shores of Lake Titicaca to the south, the Collao plateau is a hard land for its human inhabitants. No maize grows in its higher regions, and the fierce frosts, rains and winds scour the pampas unhindered by tree or bush. Only the coarse grasses of the altitude thrive in the hostile climate. The rivers of Cuzco break through the eastern mountain wall and create an economically important link between sierra and jungle, but the streams of the altiplano form a closed system of waterways which meander aimlessly over the face of the plain and flow into the gulfs and bays of Titicaca. There is color in the Cuzco valleys - the green of eucalyptus, the yellow of Scotch broom, the red of the flowering pisonay trees - but there is little variation in the dun gray of the altiplano. The rocks, the earth, even the towns are uniform in their drabness. Yet, for all its harshness and monotony - perhaps even because of it - the altiplano has bred a race of people quite different in temperament from the placid, submissive Indians of Cuzco.

The gollas, the inhabitants of the Collao, fall into two main groups: Quechua and Aymara. Each group has its own language, its own customs. Quechuas inhabit the northern provinces of the Department of Puno, the region of the vast, feudal haciendas; Aymaras are concentrated in the provinces of Chucuito and Huancané bordering on the shores of Titicaca. According to the statistics of Agustín Guevara Velasco¹, Quechuas make up 54% of the Indian population of the Department (92.35% of the total departmental population is Indian, 7.52% white and mestizo). In general, they are apt to be more docile, more adaptable to western ways than the prouder, more independent Aymara. It is a stroke of historic irony that the descendants of the citizens of the great Inca Empire which conquered the Collao plateau should, in turn, be more susceptible to the culture of the Conquistadores than the racial group which their ancestors subdued so many centuries ago.

1. Apuntes Sobre Mi Patria, Editorial Rozas, Cuzco, 1955

In examining the causes for the don't-tread-on-me attitude of the Aymaras, one point becomes apparent in the beginning. The traveller taking the road south from Puno to Chucuito, Ilave, Juli and the Bolivian border passes through hundreds of crowded ayllus and clusters of tiny fields; but not one hacienda does he see. This absence of the latifundio system is, in a large part, responsible for the feeling of independence shared by the campesinos of the area. Never having been subjected to the whip of the colonial hacendado, the lakeshore Indians preserved their spirit intact through centuries which saw the indios of neighboring districts humbled and enslaved. True, the province of Chucuito was taxed to death by the Church and local representatives of the Crown, and Huanacáné contributed its share of workmen for the death trap mines of Carabaya; but in the lakeshore districts of the two provinces, the feudalistic oppression of the Spaniards was felt indirectly. Today, the community, ruled by its Indian lieutenant-governor, is the basis of an independent society which is inclined to remain aloof from the governing minority of whites and mestizos. A misti who enters an Aymara ayllu during a fiesta is apt to find himself surrounded by a pack of snarling dogs and a ring of openly hostile faces unless he is well known by the inhabitants of the community. During week days when the men are working in the fields, women and children of the isolated villages hide in the rocks when they see a stranger approaching.

Another factor involved in the independent attitude of the Aymaras is a climatic one. Planting crops in the altiplano, according to one informed puneño, "is like buying a ticket in a lottery". Frost, rain or hail can clean out a small farmer in one afternoon. In order to support himself and his family, the Aymara must engage in activities other than the basic agricultural ones. He must resort to the commercial and industrial fields, on a small scale, to reinforce his yearly earnings. If he is lucky enough to own land, he plants his fields in the beginning of the sierra summer. Then he leaves his community, usually in the month of November, and travels to the cities to work as an unskilled laborer. He may go to the coastal cities to buy wool or other articles which he will sell at a profit when he returns (the campesinos of Ichu, a village near Puno, travel each year to Lima to buy used tires for their sandal-making industry). In any case, he is absent from his ayllu from November until April or May. When the harvest season approaches, he returns to his tierra with the fruits of his labor in his pocket. If his harvest is a good one, he has made himself a double profit; if crops have been destroyed by rain or frost, he has a monetary reserve to tide his family over until the next year. Forced by the climate of the region to become a travelling salesman, the Aymara has learned how to take care of himself in the world of the misti. Socially, he is in a more advanced position than the Juan Quispes of the Cuzco valleys, whose absolute reliance on the produce of their fields is seldom threatened by frost and hail. Assured of enough to eat, the Quispes rarely venture from their land, are consequently less subject to the outside influences which have moulded and strengthened the Aymara. The campesino of Chucuito has first-hand knowledge of what is going on outside his ayllu; he is a farmer-businessman, at home in the silence of his fields or the babble of the market place.

One of the most profitable enterprises in the lakeshore districts is the force-feeding method of fattening cattle. The lakes and marshes of the altiplano abound in tatora reed and water plants, the bases

of the force-feeding technique. Campesinos and their children work from dawn to dusk along the shores, gathering the plants with long poles and piling them in the bows of their reed balsas. The father of the house buys one or two thin bulls, usually in the northern provinces or the Department of Cuzco, and tethers them in his small courtyard. Each member of the family is assigned a specific duty, and the force-feeding begins. Totora and a water weed known as llacho are pressed, dried and treated with sugar or salt. An exact quantity of the fodder is placed in front of the bull at regular intervals during the day - enough to keep him eating around the clock without losing his appetite. From time to time the diet is changed from llacho to totora or barley grain. Families lucky enough to own a few feet of lake shore (property boundary markers made of stone or dried reeds extend well out from the shore line) drive their cattle into the water and let them browse on the weeds, neck deep in mud and water.

Three months of continuous eating and enforced inactivity is usually sufficient to ready the animals for one of the innumerable cattle fairs which are held regularly throughout the region. On Saturdays and Sundays the pampas are dotted with the moving shapes of fattened cattle being herded toward one central point. At the famous Ilave fair, the plain is black with cattle moving in from all directions. Men sit on the ground, chew on blades of ichu grass, and talk shop. On the shadeless pampa, they sell their animals to the highest bidder. If he is lucky, a man who bought a bull for forty dollars in the north may sell it for one hundred at Ilave. I have been told that over 80,000 head of fattened cattle are exported by the Indian communities of the Department.

In looking for clues which explain the aloofness of the Aymara, you must not forget the look of the country in which he lives. The silent pampas of the altiplano, the clear, meandering streams, the lonely reaches of Titicaca, and the weird spires of eroded rocks - all these things have an effect upon his temperament. A man cannot be overly garrulous in a silent land. Although nominally Catholic, the Aymara is more attached to the place spirits which rule over the river fords and hills than to the benign but distant God of the priests. In order to break him of his paganistic offerings to these spirits, the priests have erected crosses in the spots which they are said to haunt. But in reality, the campesino who bares his head when crossing a river or passing a hill is doing so not out of respect for the Christian symbol standing in plain sight; his action is an effort to placate the place spirits, who might take offense and send hail and lightning to his farm if he does not give them their due by removing his hat, leaving a few leaves of coca for them, or showing his respect in some other manner.

In a few communities, Adventist missionaries have been more successful than the priests in giving the Indian a sound religious basis. The co-ordinator of nuclear schools in Puno told me that he often teases Aymara friends about being Adventists in a Catholic country. In many cases, he said, his friend would pull out a Bible and show him the portions of the text on which Adventism is based. The Aymaras who have been chosen as members of Adventist parishes have been good pupils. They can read and write and, most important, they do not chew coca or drink alcohol. Crime rates in the parishes are low or non-existent. Whether they agree with the right of a

Protestant sect to practice in a Catholic country, most puneños with whom I talked praise the work of the Adventist preachers. Even the most ardent Catholics are forced to admit that the Peruvian priests have not been as successful as the Adventists in improving the community life of the Aymara while educating him in the basic doctrines of a Christian religion. I have been told, however, that the Adventist movement is losing ground under the attacks of some Catholic bishops and their pressure groups. Most of the foreign missionaries have left the region, leaving the work to the Indian pastors whom they have trained. Although the new pastors are dedicated and, in the main, hard working, the flavor of Adventism, brought in by the white preachers, is being lost.

If the Aymara is comparatively rich in the pocket, he is poor in land. Family plots have been divided among the sons of each generation until they have shrunk to ridiculous proportions. One informant told me that he knows of two brothers who own a strip of land exactly two furrows wide! Needless to say, they are forced to take turns farming the strip. In the district of Ilave, the lake-shore pampas are so crowded with huts that from a distance the plain appears to be forested with groves of stunted trees. In most villages in the area, land simply cannot be purchased at any price. Lucky is the man who owns land, and luckier still if it will support him. The problem of overpopulation is severe enough now, but it will reach disastrous proportions inside of fifty years. Overpopulation has resulted in a growing exodus of campesinos from the Department to the coastal cities; in Lima and Arequipa, slum areas are overflowing into the surrounding desert. The Indian immigrants are forced to live like animals; when they are struck down by tuberculosis, intestinal or venereal diseases, they insist on returning to their tierra ("mi tierra" to the homesick Indian is the solution to all his problems). The infections of the cities are thus brought into the ayllus, sometimes with serious results.

The Ministry of Education and other organizations are at present trying out several measures which, they hope, will solve the related problems of overpopulation and emigration. The campesino must be persuaded to stay put, and he must be weaned from his reliance on his land, however tempered by experience in commercial fields that reliance may be. The local officials of the Ministry of Education are working with a few communities, showing them the advantages of a village industry which will supply a steady income and replace an unsteady agricultural economy with a sound industrial one. Two large looms were recently given to one village, with the result that the community is now turning out blankets which find a good local market. In the future, the Ministry plans to introduce livestock as a communal enterprise. Butter, cheese and lard will be produced and packaged by the villagers, along with milk and meat. The Puno market has always been almost devoid of these items, due to the lure of higher prices offered by the coastal cities. An interrelated system of home industries plus the introduction of modern farming methods might act as a brake on the emigration of campesinos from the Department. If applied in each village, the plan might ease the tensions caused by overpopulation. Coupled with resettlement programs such as the Tambopata project, it could effectively solve the altiplano's greatest difficulty.

The Quechuas living in the northern provinces of the Department have of necessity followed a somewhat different path than the Aymara..

The vast tracts of pampa which they inhabit was divided early in the colonial period into haciendas - land holdings so large that even today their owners are rather hard put to it to tell where their boundaries lie. Originally termed encomiendas (plots of land and groups of Indians given over to a Conquistador for safekeeping by the Spanish Crown) the haciendas of today have done little to purge themselves of the inefficient feudalism inherent in their social and economic structure. There are a few modern-minded hacendados who live on their land, buy machinery and fertilizer to improve it, and import blooded livestock to fill out their herds. But the majority of hacienda owners are content to live in their Lima or Arequipa town houses, leaving the administration of their property to a mayordomo. The results are obvious: haciendas located in the northern section of the Department of Puno are being milked dry; every cent of profit that can be squeezed out of the land is taken out of the Department instead of being reinvested in hacienda improvement. If the land suffers as a result, the Indian tenants suffer to a greater extent. Faced with existence in an area dominated by feudalistic social customs and hostile climate, they are chained to a level of social progress as primitive as it is stagnant. Unlike their counterparts in Cuzco, they cannot be assured of enough to eat at the end of each harvest season.

Perhaps the greatest evil of the hacienda system in Puno - a region suffering from acute land shortage - is the inefficiency of its land distribution. Only a small portion of the total holdings are actually in use at any one time; the rest lies idle for months and years, of little use to the hacendado and of no use to the thousands of Indian families to whom the tiniest field is worth its weight in diamonds. Redistribution of this excess land would go a long way towards solving the current shortage; but redistribution smacks of expropriation, and among the conservative circles in Perú who have followed the progress of the Bolivian agrarian reform movement with fear and apprehension, expropriation is a fighting word. The Government has the power to expropriate the land holdings of an hacendado who can be proved guilty of crimes committed against his tenants or wilful neglect of his property. But it is usually impossible to prove a man's guilt in such matters, especially when he may have influential friends in Lima.

The yoke of Spanish colonialism was much harsher in Puno than in Cuzco; the efforts to throw off that yoke, therefore, have been longer and bloodier in the altiplano. Puno's history of Indian uprisings does not compare with the great battles which occurred on our western frontier during the last century. Less organized than the Sioux or Cheyennes, the Quechua and Aymara were just as dedicated in their purpose. For three years - from the revolt of Tupac Amaru to the death of his nephew, Vilcapasa - the Indians held out against the Spaniards. In March of 1871, the city of Puno was besieged by the rebels. For three weeks they occupied the hills ringing the town, shouting and blowing their pututus (conches). In May of the same year, the puneños evacuated the city and began a long march to Cuzco, harrassed by the climate, open targets for the Indians who ranged along the flanks of the column.

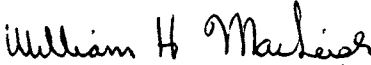
The major revolts of the 1870's were never repeated. Hacendados were murdered and small towns attacked, but never again did the campesinos muster in large forces to defend their rights. Some fought in the wars of Pumacahua which touched off the Peruvian independence

movement, but the only true attempt to overthrow the mistis and their hated feudalism died in 1873 when two Dominican priests betrayed Vilcapasa to his enemies. The last disturbance in which blood was shed occurred in Huancañé in 1921 - a minor revolt which ended with the machine gunning of the campesinos by units of the Peruvian army. The spark of revolt is still alive in some quarters, noticeably in Aymara districts, but the chance of it developing into something more than the wilful destruction of misti property or lengthy legal battles in the crowded courts seems slight at this time.

The Peruvian government, however, is worried about the proximity of Puno to the Bolivian frontier. The campesinos of Ilave, Juli and Yunguyo recognize no national border. Many of them have relatives living in Bolivia, and not a few have served in both Peruvian and Bolivian armies, thus providing themselves with citizens' rights in both countries. Smuggling is a major business in Puno, and the Indians often act as agents for the contrabandistas. But the smuggling of cosmetics and watches is not what worries Lima; the infiltration of agrarian reform ideas from Bolivia is much more harmful to the security of the country. To stop any foreign attempt to foment revolutionary activities in the Department, the army garrison in Puno has been augmented by the addition of troops from Cuzco and other areas. The city is alive with soldiers.

Friends who have visited La Paz have told me that certain Bolivians have boasted about the success of their propaganda campaign in Puno. To check on this claim, I asked two informed men - one an educator and the other an American priest who had lived in the area for five years - about the extent of the pro-agrarian reform movement in the Department. Both men told me that the infiltration of Bolivian propaganda had been negligible so far, especially in the strategically important province of Chucuito. Because there are no haciendas in the lakeshore districts, because there is little enough land to go around, let alone distribute among the campesinos, the effect of the propaganda on the chucuiteños has been slight. Perhaps in the future, the agrarian reform movement will arouse the interest of those Indians living in districts farther removed from the Lake, but in the meantime, the presence of Chucuito as a buffer zone will, in the minds of my two informants, hinder the growth of any organized, Bolivian-style movement for some time to come.

Sincerely,


William H. MacLeish