

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Dear Peter,

"Sarajañani," or "Let's go," barked the Aymara campesino known as Tata José, and we shoved off to set sail. Tata José scrambled to the bow of his small, cedar-hulled boat and pushed down hard on a weathered pine staff to loosen the prow from a clutch of rock and weed that bound us to this southern bank on the shores of Lake Titicaca, the world's highest navigable lake at 3,812 meters above sea level. With a grunt of satisfaction, Tata José watched the prow spring free, and then motioned me to take up the oars and bend my back to bring us about in the "tortora" filled shallows. Tortora is an emerald green, hollow reed that has been used by the Aymara for centuries to construct everything from yampus -- the woven reed skiffs that moved Swedish adventurer Thor Heyerdahl to scratch his head and wonder about the origin of Andean peoples, and then sail in a huge yampu from Peru to Polynesia in the 1950's to sound out his theories -- to the thatched roofs of their adobe and stone dwellings. Tata José shouted again, this time calling my attention to the island ridges looming above the Lake an hour's voyage to the west. "K'aya markax Cumanáx markawa," he shouted, pointing to our destination, the Aymara community of Cumaná.

A sunny day on Lake Titicaca, rare during the rainy season, had produced a brilliant azure horizon above the distant island. Tata José gave up the tiller for a moment to raise a crude canvas sail the height of his four meter mast, eager to catch the southerly gusts that normally blow across the Lake's surface during the Altiplano summer. Clustered around the mast were five "warmis", or Aymara women, busily checking the bright orange, yellow, red, purple, and blue striped "awayus", or shawls, that held the morning's purchases of food bought in the market town of Batallas, 15 kilometers inland, to supplement what could not be grown on the island. The women grinned and laughed at the sight of me taking a turn at the oars from under their felt derby hats. Next to his mother sat Elias, a skinny 13 year old who had taken it upon himself to act as my island guide and Aymara interpreter ever since I first visited Cumaná last November. Elias joined me at the oarlocks just as a puff of wind filled the sail, and together we pulled up the oars as we lurched forward to break the calm waters of the Lake. With nothing to do but sit back and wait, Elias leaned his head over the gunwhale to shriek in delight everytime he spotted one of the large, lime-green frogs that could barely be distinguished from the tortora on this end of Lake Titicaca known as "Vinamarca", which rarely reaches a depth of more than five meters.

Other sailboats heading for the same inlet that separates Cumaná from the mainland Altiplano looked to race us across the Lake, but actually, handling one of these boats is a simple affair that allows for little maneuver. With no swinging boom that would allow Tata José to tack against the changing wind, Elias and I were occasionally forced to row again. Tata José only had to man the helm, dipping often into the bag of coca leaves he had brought along, the leaves to stuff in his mouth for a good chew. And sure enough, Tata José was yelling out to relatives on the shores of Cumaná within the hour. On either side of us, barrel-chested Aymara balanced themselves aboard yampus, harvesting tortora with three meter long scythes, the scythe blades cut from old tin cans supplied by international aid agencies. Aymara women waded along the rocky banks, their great woolen skirts hiked up to the mid-thigh, pulling in the bunches of cut reed with rakes fashioned from the branches of eucalyptus trees that dot the island. Some of the reed would be stored to dry in the mid-day sun, the rest would be fed immediately to the cattle grazing nearby. Looking up, I saw Aymara children ascending the ridges to take their flocks of sheep to pasture. We were in Cumaná.

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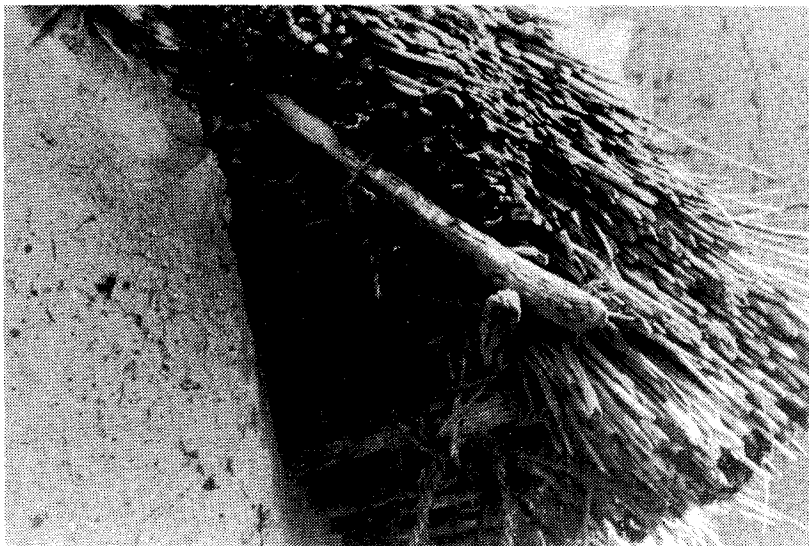
I first journeyed to Cumaná three months ago, then to observe traditional Aymara rituals centered around the celebration of "Todos los Santos", (All Saint's Day) and "Fieles Difuntos", (Loyal Dead). Wrapped up as I was in moving on to the mining center of Potosí where Quechua is spoken, I had never entertained seriously the idea of working in an Aymara community before that November trip. Perhaps I was unduly influenced by the academic scuttlebutt that had painted such a dark portrait of these Altiplano peoples. And contemporary scholarly description of the Aymara is not always much more heartening than the gossip. For the record's sake, I offer you a sample, taken from La Altiplanicie, a 1965 monograph written by the respected Bolivian historian and geographer Manuel Rigoberto Paredes:

The Indian commonly possesses clear intelligence, an admirable abundance of common sense, an animated presence and a firm will; [the Aymara] has the resistance to undertake work no matter how hard it may be, and is exceptionally laborious. But in his relationship with the white man or mestizo, he is suspicious and not given to trust easily, being both hypocritical and astute in his ways. These people, particularly in the rural populations, are characterized by a lack of culture, often supposed to approximate a state of savagery. In reality, however, intimate observation shows that such apparent savagery is only superficial, and that the [Aymara] understands perfectly well the modern meaning of civilization ....

I did not think it unnatural then, to ask myself whether I would be allowed the opportunity to observe with intimacy. Or as I feared, would I be dismissed as an intruding "q'ara", that reviled species of white man that I described earlier in my essay on the Ayllus Rojas [WLM-8]?

As it turns out, I need not have worried. I arrived on the 1st of November with Emilian Ylaya, who grew up in Cumaná before joining the migratory trend to leave the country for the city and work for the Institute

For the Aymara of Cumaná, life continues much as it did before the 1952 Revolution, and in some cases, as it did before the Spanish Conquest of Alto Peru in the early 16th Century. Top: Close-up showing the eave of a typical Aymara dwelling thatched with dried tortora. A tortora roof lasts anywhere from two-five years; a thick bed of straw is spread atop the tortora to provide further protection during the rainy season and an added measure of insulation against the heat of the sun at this altitude. The cross timbers are cut from eucalyptus trees, which were introduced to the Altiplano by the Spaniards. The walls are most often made from adobe bricks composed of mud, straw, and pebbles. Middle: A farsight from an old John Deere, this Aymara farmer employs two strong bulls and plenty of sweat to break the hard Altiplano earth with a handmade, wooden plow. Ahead of the plow, his wife pulverizes large clods of dirt with a heavy staff; behind her husband trail two relatives planting seed in the newly tilled rows. No fertilizer was used. Fields frequently lie fallow for as many as five years to give the topsoil time to recover the nutrients spent in just one cultivation cycle. Below: An unforgiving landscape that demands the best of men. In the background, a snow-covered summit of the Cordillera Real peaks over the smaller ridges dominating the topography around Cumaná. Summits in the Cordillera Real average between 5-6000 meters above sea level. Temperatures in June are so frigid that Aymaras speak of boulders cracking under the cold spell. Barely visible in the ridge to the left are the terraced cuts of now abandoned andenes that were once the mainstay of agricultural production when the Inca ruled these mountainous lands.



of Aymara Language and Culture in La Paz. Then we had crossed the Altiplano overland, arriving in Cumaná via a rock bridge that villagers built to insure the passage of trucks during the harvest. The bridge is rudimentary, and is often flooded over during the rainy season. The village is small; some 90 families live on the grounds of what used to be the hacienda of Israel Ballivian, descendant of General José Ballivian, the latter Ballivian honored for his victory over Peruvian forces at Ingavi in 1841. Indeed, not far from Cumaná, on one of the other 26 islas found on the shallow end of Lake Titicaca, the family of General Hugo Ballivian -- head of Bolivia's ruling military junta from 1951-1952, -- owned a hacienda on the isla of Paco.

But there was little talk of haciendas and history that first day. Quite simply, I just settled in to watch after we had unloaded the truck of the three gunny sacks of specially prepared breads that would be given out to neighbors and relatives during the Todos los Santos celebrations. Emiliana set herself to preparing us a late lunch and I introduced myself to Don Pedro, her 72 year old father. Don Pedro speaks no Spanish, but we struggled with each other amiably enough. Once the introductions were over though, I had to be content to observe again, since my Aymara was in its beginning stages. I inspected the low-ceiling and walls without windows in the smoke-filled room that served as a kitchen. Fearful that I would dirty my trousers, Don Pedro rushed out of a storeroom carrying two sheepskins for me to sit on. Emiliana had lit a small fire already, using as fuel the dried branches of brush cactus found on the island. Occasionally she would also toss into the fire a dried dung chip; in most Altiplano communities, the dung chips are much more plentiful than brush, and guarded carefully for kitchen use. Emiliana's stove and other kitchen tools were simple (see sketch below) but effective. Both the stove and pots were made of red clay, fired to resist the heat of cooking. The stove had one opening into which the brush was cast, and two holes on top, over which were set the clay pots to boil potatoes. Even more so than on the coast of Peru, potatoes are the staple of the Altiplano Indians' diet. William Carter, former member of the Institute's University Field Staff, has noted that over 300 different potatoes are cultivated. Of these varieties, most fall into the "bitter" category; that is, they are too bitter to be eaten raw or fresh. But because this bitter potato can resist the harsh climate of the Altiplano and be cultivated at altitudes of up to 4300 meters above sea level, it is the favored tuber. And Altiplano societies found the answer to the food storage question thousands of years ago when they discovered freeze-drying. As Aymaras have described the process to me, bitter potatoes are spread out on the ground during the most frigid nights of the year in June and July. Since the daylight hours are often extremely hot, and this is the dry season, the process of first frost, then heat, serves to rid the potato of its starchy water. The Aymara also step in to aid nature by walking barefoot over the potatoes to speed up the dehydration process. After a week to 10 days, the Aymara campesino is rewarded with a bundle of potatoes that can be stored from three to five years without turning rancid.

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#### SKETCH OF AYMARA KITCHEN TOOLS

clay pot, known as  
p'uku



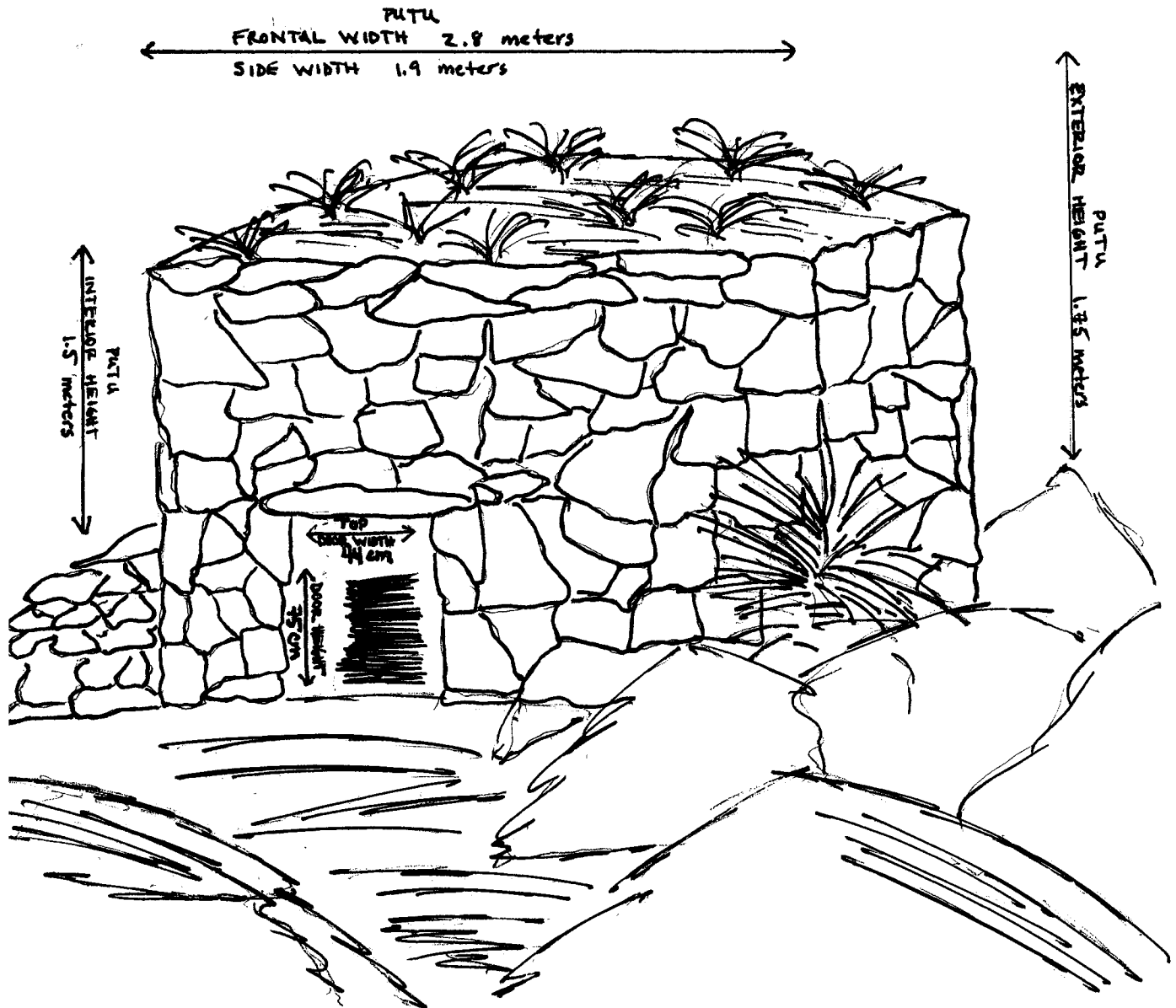
small grinding stone,  
known as "wayk'aña"



red clay stove,  
known as "q'iri"



## SKETCH OF A PRE-COLUMBIAN "PUTU"



Hundreds of years before Conquistador Alonzo de Mendoza founded the city of La Paz in 1548, Altiplano natives lived in stone and mud dwellings like the one pictured above. These Pre-Columbian peoples were forced to enter their homes bent over; the door was framed intentionally low and windows were forgotten altogether in order to survive the blasts of "wallik t'ayawa", or cold winds, that swept the Altiplano. The family cooked, conversed, and slept in the same small area. Today, these "putus" are used as shepherds' outposts. And, as I know from personal experience, they make great shelter in case of a sudden downpour.



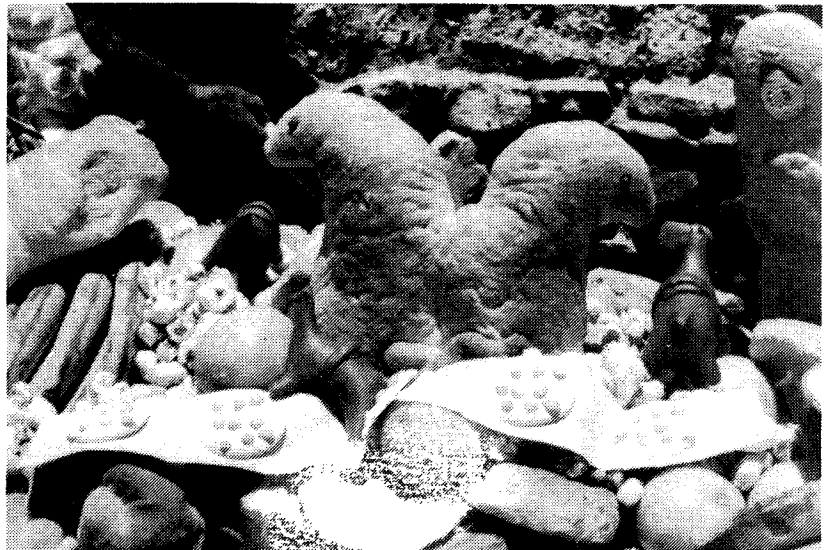
On the afternoon of Todos Los Santos, the Aymara of Cumaná marched in pilgrimage to honor their dead in the village cemetery. In Don Pedro's family, food had been set out in his dead wife's favorite room all morning, so that, as one relative told me, "she may eat her fill before we celebrate her passing." Scores of other Aymara joined us in the cemetery; the ritual is observed for three years after a loved one dies. Top Left: Don Pedro adorns the tomb of his wife and lights a candle as part of the vigil. While other families paid their similar respects, young boys circulated through the cemetery, singing songs of praise for the dead in exchange for piece of bread and a bowl of soup. Top Right: Don Pedro's "cuñada", or sister-in-law,



Andrea, bows her head and prays into her derby hat before eating the food which has been given to her by another relative. At first, the Aymara were reluctant to share the food with me, until they realized that a prayer said in English is a prayer like any other. Bottom right: Positive proof that grief and love know no cultural boundaries, Don Pedro weeps over the tomb of his wife.



The day following the cemetery vigil, villagers hold back their tears to feast and dance in a celebration known as Fieles Difuntos. Tables are laden with special breads and jungle fruits to become the centerpiece of the day's festivities. One Aymara called the day, a "Communion with life." Top: My 13 year old sidekick, Elias, and his friend Roberto strike a pose during a break in the dancing. Their flap-eared alpaca hats, or "lluch'us", were made by older men in the community. The multi-colored "awayus" that drape their shoulders are woven on handlooms by women in Cumaná. They are both holding a "pinkillu", one of the most common wind flutes played on the Altiplano. The flutes are hollowed by hand from sugar cane or bamboo, depending on the whim of the craftsman. Middle: Detail of the centerpiece and the specially prepared breads. In the right-hand corner is visible a roll decorated with a paper maché face. Along with the miniature llamas surrounding the chicken-shaped roll in the middle, these "t'antanaka wawa" are favorites with young Aymara children. The llamas are made from quinoa, the high protein grain unique to the Andes. Bottom: Like other Andean countries, Bolivia suffers from a chronic shortage of priests to attend rural communities. Unperturbed, these young villagers don fake beards, sunglasses, and ragged clothing to play the part of mediators between the living and the dead. In a ceremony not unlike a Catholic mass, these youth recited prayers while sprinkling water and waving incense over the food to consecrate the feast against evil spirits that might disturb the peace of the dead. At least for the living, it seems to have worked. The day ended as the family rushed down to the Lake shore to dance in the twilight.



From what I observed in Cumaná, the Aymara often eat their food without the aid of silverware. This surprised me since I never observed this practice while working on the coast of Peru three years ago. Of course, a meal composed entirely of potatoes does not really demand silverware. Rather, the Aymara peel the cooked potatoes and chat at the same time; the meal takes on a rhythm all its own in the process. I did find it more difficult going with noodles or soup, however. One welcome difference between the Altiplano Aymara of Bolivia and the coastal Quechua of Peru was that I felt no pressure to eat everything in sight. Instead, if a guest is offered more than he can eat at one sitting, politeness and respect require him to take the uneaten food home to be consumed later. Food is usually eaten without drink, although the community does enjoy potable water, since the Danish Embassy constructed a filtration tank three years ago.

Once that first meal was over, and in the months to follow, I took the opportunity to explore the island. The fields that hug the Lake shore were once the prized lands of Señor Israel Ballivian. Before the 1953 Agrarian Reform, the campesinos of Cumaná were almost exclusively limited to cultivating the higher parcels of land that lie between the ridges. Once the Ballivians left during the hectic and dangerous days (for landowners) of the Revolution, the villagers reasserted their right to these lower-lying plots of land. It is quite fascinating to ask village elders about the Revolution and the early days of Agricultural Reform, if only for all the contradictory answers I hear. Everyone with whom I have spoken asserts that the Ballivians were reimbursed by the villagers themselves for the land, but no one can agree on how much was paid, or how an agreement was reached. Probably closer to the truth is that the Ballivians never returned to the hacienda for fear of losing their lives and the land was simply divided among the Aymara according to their ancient notions of the ayllu. Even on those Altiplano haciendas where land was purchased by the campesinos according to the terms set up under the Agrarian Reform, payments were of a token nature.

Thirty-six years later, those campesinos who own land on the Lake's edge are better off than their neighbors who only own land on the hillsides above the village. Tata José, the campesino with whom I sailed across the Lake, is one such owner. He is also one of the few in Cumaná to own a sailboat; the boats are made-to-order in Tikina for approximately US \$300. While that is not an exorbitant sum, it does stretch the pocket of the majority in Cumaná who have cash to spend only during harvest time. For the rest of the year, these campesinos live off the potatoes stored in the previous season's harvest. Those villagers who own yampus also fish for "pejarey", a small white fish, to augment their mainly starch-filled diet. Campesinos who are lucky enough to own cattle rarely slaughter the cattle for themselves since they have no way to store the meat for lengthy periods of time. Instead, the cattle are taken to Batallas to be sold at the livestock market. A cow sold for meat fetches around US \$250; a bull sold for work can be worth as much as US \$500. A small sheep is much cheaper: \$US 20.

While string and lima beans are the predominant crops cultivated near the Lake's edge, potatoes and cereals are usually reserved for the higher plots of land. I have climbed the ridges around Cumaná various times to inspect the remains of once flourishing "andenes". Andenes is the name given by the Incas to the terraced plots cut out of the sides of mountains to increase agricultural production in the Andes. Depending on the slope of a ridge, the andenes I have seen in Cumaná range in size from 2-3 meters wide by 10-15 meters long. The terraces are often bordered with stone, a resource



found in plentiful supply all over the Altiplano. Just as with my questions about the Agrarian Reform, getting answers to my inquiries about historical cultivation practices has not met with great success. Most campesinos know that the andenes belong the Inca epoch, and that they were once used with great productivity, but the conversation usually ends there. When asked why they do not exploit the arable surface of the andenes now, they most commonly reply that it is too taxing to haul seed and plow up the steep inclines.

Having carried a wooden plow on my shoulders over the top of a ridge that rose 200 meters above the level of Cumaná (about 3900 meters), I can empathize with the campesinos' reluctance. But I think it also has something to do with a lack of cultural memory. To the lasting disaster of the Andean indigenous peoples, the Spanish conquistadors were not the gentleman planters that settled North America's Tidewater coast. The lure of gold, not the production of food, caused the blood to run in a conquistador's veins. Thus, throughout the expanse of their newly won empire, the Spaniards who administered the colonies preoccupied themselves with securing labor for work in the mines. In addition to the "mita" introduced to insure steady (and compulsory) labor for the mines in Potosí, agriculture was also adversely affected by the plagues (brought by the Spanish from Europe) that wiped out more Indians in the first century after the Conquest than the Spaniards could have hoped to behead or draw-and-quarter. And so the irrigation canals and andenes fell into disuse; in some case, they were even consciously destroyed. Today, the physical evidence of these canals and andenes is usually found in ruins, often times more useful to an archeologist writing his Ph.D. thesis than to an Aymara or Quechua.

During one December stay in Cumaná, I was working my way up a ridge when I fell into the pleasant company of a young Aymara named Gregorio. Gregorio is one of the few young males to stick it out as a farmer on the island. Most men with whom I have worked in the fields are at least 35 years of age; indeed some are nearing their 65th year. But noticeably lacking is an abundance of campesinos who are 25 years of age. Gregorio and I talked about Cumaná's labor shortage, the meaning of the 1953 Agrarian Reform, and what it is like to stay in the countryside while all his friends leave for what they hope will be a better future in Bolivia's cities. When I asked Gregorio why the community had allowed the andenes to remain grown-over and neglected, even after the 1952 Revolution, he remarked bluntly, "There is no incentive to increase production when agricultural prices are so low. And my father tells me that after Señor Ballivian left the hacienda, nobody wanted to work like before. Everyone does what he wants now; there is no unity. And we, the young ones, we have so little voice. Even if we did, and wanted to change, where would we get the credit to buy tractors, to buy fertilizer? Frankly I am waiting for my father to die. He does not understand the world I live in. I've worked in Brazil; I know things can be different. They have to be different. Things cannot go on as they have for the last 30 years, with us just getting by year after year. I won't live like that." While I do not want to put words in Gregorio's mouth, his own statements make me wonder if the men who drew up the Agrarian Reform and led the 1952 Revolution overlooked the possibility that the Aymara and Quechua who had been held in bondage for four centuries might not know what to do with a freedom granted practically overnight.

I mulled further over Gregorio's words as the two of us continued to walk up the ridge until we reached its summit and I saw before me a

rectangular plain, marked off with a meticulously built stone wall. It is here, with an unparalleled view of the snow-laden Cordillera Real to the east, Peru to the north, La Paz to the south, and at night, the "wara-waras", or stars of the Milky Way blazing overhead, that the older men of Cumaná have come in recent months to pray for rain. One December morning when drouth still seemed to threaten, I awoke to hear the cries of an Aymara announcing a meeting of village elders to join him on the ceremonial plain that afternoon to pray for a thundershower. I do not know if it was the communitarian appeal to the Pachamama or not, but the rivers on the Altiplano have been raging with the current of rain water ever since. But one thing is certain: the Aymara and their Quechua brethren throughout the Andes would not be in such dire straits today if conquistadors like Francisco Pizarro had understood the benevolent meaning of civilization in their own century. Today the only savage living on the Altiplano is the howling wind.

As ever, *W.L. Melvin*

Right: One of 400 engravings included in the letter from the Peruvian Indian Waman Puma to Spanish King Philip III, circa 1615. From 1583-1612, Waman Puma traversed the Andes, collecting the history of the Inca Empire and the Spanish Conquest. He also made notes so as to advise King Philip III on the improved administration of the New World, arguing that Spain's administrative success would depend on the incorporation of Andean institutions and peoples into the mainstream of governance. Pictured here is an Inca governor inspecting the state of the renowned Inca road system. Remnants of these stone-paved roads still exist on the island of Cumaná.

[Except as otherwise noted, all sketches and photographs are by W.L. Melvin]

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