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Latin America

The Epic Struggle of Indigenous Andean-Amazonian Culture

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Text of a presentation for the Latin American Studies Association Conference to be held September 5-8 in Montreal, Canada.

Over the course of more than 10,000 years, the rich biodiversity of the Andes-Amazon region has created a culture that is closely interlocked with Pachamama (Mother Nature). This culture is marked by deep knowledge of nature and is highly agricultural. Ours is one of the seven zones of the world to have originated agriculture. It has yielded the greatest variety of domesticated species.

This has given rise to a cosmic vision different from the Western outlook that views the creator as a superior immaterial spirit who created man in his image and likeness and created nature to serve him. For the indigenous cosmic vision, humanity is a daughter of and part of Mother Earth. We must live in her bosom in harmony with her. Each hill or peak, each river, each vegetable or animal species has a spirit.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Boliviandem2.jpg>]

Indigenous, collectivist mentality is strong enough to have endured solidly through 500 years of invasion and the dictatorship of individualism.

The Quechua and Aymara name for the campesino community is ayllu. It is bound by strong ties, many expressed in work (ayni, mink'a, faena) [1] and in all aspects of life. The community is not restricted to persons. It entails a close communal relationship with cultivated species, with medicinal species, with animals and plants that tell cultivators about seasonal variations [2], and, more broadly, with all animal and vegetable species, with rain, and with the land.

The development of agriculture and tending of livestock, which in other latitudes led to slavery and feudalism, led in Abya Yala (the Americas) to new forms of collectivism. In the Andes zone it led to a state that extended over the territories of six present-day countries – Tawantinsuyo (called “empire” by the invaders out of the same ignorance that led them to call the llama “big sheep.”)

It's true that the new forms of collectivism gave rise to privileged castes and wars of conquest. But in no part of the continent was production based on slave labor or the feudal system.

- For more than 10,000 years our culture domesticated 182 plant species, including around 3,500 potato varieties.
- Our people know 4,500 medicinal plants.
- Tawantinsuyos planned agriculture based on a system of watersheds and micro watersheds or basins.
- They built long aqueducts, taking care to avoid land erosion.
- Terracing was practiced on the slopes and “waru-waru” [3] in the altiplano (highlands) [4].

- Special technologies were used from zone to zone.

Across the entire Tawantinsuyo territory they created storage buildings (qolqa) to supply food to the population whenever some climatic shift undermined agriculture.

Although there were privileged castes, hunger and misery did not exist. Orphans, persons with disabilities, and the

elderly were cared for by the community.

The invasion

The backbone of this social organization, of the agricultural infrastructure and food reserves, was crushed by the invasion.

Europe was then passing from feudalism to capitalism. The invasion was a capitalist action. They came looking for spices, believing they had reached India. They found none, but did find gold and silver.

Mining had existed as a marginal activity, but it now became the center of the economy. To exploit the mines they used a system worse than slavery. The slave owner is concerned about the health of his slave just as he's interested in the health of his donkey. The mine owner in Peru received annually a certain quantity of indigenous people in order to "indoctrinate" them. Regardless of how many of them died, the next year he would receive the same number. Hence, youth and adults were sent into the mines and never left until they died. Because of this, young indigenous people committed suicide and mothers killed their children to free them from torment. This practice diminished following the Tupac Amaru rebellion.

Agricultural work took place through a feudal system. The Europeans took the best lands from the community and converted them into latifundios (huge estates or latifundia). Community inhabitants became serfs on their own lands. They had to work freely for the feudal lord in exchange for permission to cultivate a small plot for their own needs.

For many reasons a huge decline in agriculture took place:

- Canals, terracing, and waru-warus were destroyed because of ignorance and lack of care.
- Until this day no planning in terms of watersheds and micro watersheds has been carried out. Chaos took hold and persists.
- With the importation of foreign domestic animals to the zone, the environment deteriorated. The auquenidos (camelid) [\[5\]](#) cut pasture grass with their teeth, but cows, horses, and sheep uproot it.

The invaders vented their superstitions on our crops. Our agricultural mentality didn't suit their cultured ways. So the "exterminators of idolaters" went after plants like the papa, also known as Santa Padre (Holy Father). They renamed it patata, the word used in Spain. This passed into English and other languages as "potato." They also damned kiwicha or amaranto (amaranth). The coca plant, which the famous doctor Hipólito Unanue called the "supertonic of the vegetable kingdom," is to this day the target of superstition and excessively harmful prejudice in "refined" circles.

The invaders pillaged the food stockpiles located across the territory to cope with times of hunger brought on by climatic irregularities.

Taking their behavior as a whole, we find that European imposition of hunger and misery "their cultural contribution" was even more deadly than their massacres and the smallpox they spread among us.

Rebellions and republic

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From the beginning, our people rebelled against the invaders. Numerous insurrections took place, beginning with Tupac Amaru II's rebellion. It spread all the way to Bolivia and lasted even after his cruel torture and assassination.

Later the so-called *Revolución de la Independencia* took place. It did not signify any noticeable change for the indigenous population.

The generals of "independence" were awarded "haciendas" (the new name for the feudal latifundia), "Indians" and all.

The hacienda system consisted basically of the free labor of the colono (serf) for the hacienda. There were other aspects to this serfdom.

The colono had to turn over some of his animals that grazed on natural pastures to the master. He made long treks with pack mules burdened with hacienda produce. They lasted days and he had to sleep out in the open. The owner mistreated him physically and morally. He could jail him and rape the women. The serf's children did not go to school either because they had to work, or there were no schools, or the master forbade it.

Our land struggle in the 1960s

The hacienda feudal system lasted until the second half of the last century.

The spread of capitalism to the countryside weakened it in many ways:

- New large-scale mining absorbed labor from the haciendas.
- New mechanized latifundia expelled the serfs and employed an agricultural proletariat.
- New high-priced crops required more labor time, pressing the hacienda owner to demand more work from his serfs and to expel them in order to take over their plots. The serfs, on the other hand, needed more time for their own labors and resisted the theft of their plots.

We organized ourselves to struggle against the new outrages. Given the intransigence of the landlords, the struggle became a fight for possession of the land.

Our defensive action not only set us against the landlords but also against the government which defended the feudal system.

In over 100 haciendas we refused to work for the landlords. But we continued to work our own plots. This was in practice an agrarian reform. The government repressed us with arms and we defended ourselves with arms. The military government of the day crushed the armed self-defense; but it took note that it would be impossible to re-implant feudal serfdom. It opted to pass an agrarian reform law "only in this zone" legalizing campesino possession of the land. But indigenous campesinos in other zones of the country rebelled and took over haciendas. This was violently repressed, but could not be effectively contained. Hence, a subsequent reformist military government felt obliged to decree an agrarian reform at the national level.

In this way, we took advantage of capitalism's weakening of the feudal system to take over the land. In this same epoch the Brazilian campesino movement was shattered. Capitalism triumphed there. Its victims are now struggling courageously in the "Landless Workers' Movement."

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For this reason Peru is, with the likely exception of Cuba, the country of the continent with the greatest proportion of landowners, either of communal or private plots.

Some campesinos from the epoch of struggle for the land feel the qualitative change. "Now we are free," they say. They consider that breaking down feudal servitude also broke them free from the yoke that had gripped them.

Following the rupture they worked for education, building schools and paying men and women teachers. Later they fought to get the state to pay them. They built health centres and fought to get the state to pay for health services.

They got the vote and elected their own mayors. They fought against mining pollution. They struggled to assume in a collective manner police and judicial functions, to replace corrupt cops and judges. They fought against corrupt authorities of any stripe " and for many other things.

They feel that breaking from feudal servitude freed them to spread wings and carry the struggle forward.

Current struggles

Most current struggles of indigenous campesinos are against the killing of Pachamama, Mother Earth; against depredations by the large companies, mainly mining, but also petroleum and gas. Previous Peruvian governments were servants of feudal lords; today they serve the great multinationals. They act against the Peruvian people and against nature.

Living conditions are another cause of struggle. There is more and more unemployment, and the standard of living is falling. In the countryside this is due to excessively low prices for farm products. This is linked to the struggle against the Free Trade Agreement with the United States that will demolish our agriculture for the benefit of large, subsidized imperial firms.

The indigenous movement, together with the rest of the Peruvian population, is fighting against corruption and to get their own representatives into local governments. People often suffer betrayals because there is no system for authentic democratic control.

Our allies

The indigenous movement is not alone. Although it is the most vigorous and persevering, it is not unique. The rest of the people are struggling together with us.

Intellectuals called indigenistas, whether indigenous or not, merit special mention. Ever since the oppression of the original peoples of our continent began there have been individuals who have struggled against it and to defend our culture.

The work of Father Bartolomé de las Casas is known.

In Peru there were notable political figures like González Prada and Mariátegui. Writers like Clorinda Matto, Ciro Alegría, José María Arguedas. Painters like José Sabogal. Musicians like Alomía Robles, Baltasar Zegarra, Roberto Ojeda, Leandro Alviña, and so on.

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The meaning of our struggle

We are defending our culture in its diverse aspects: our cosmic vision, social organization, our rituals and agricultural know-how, medicine, music, language, and many others.

We do not claim that our culture is superior to others. We are struggling to stop it from being considered inferior.

We want to be respected as equals.

We have been educated to harmonize equality and diversity. Peru is a mega-diverse country, both geographically and demographically. We have 82% of the world's 103 natural life zones. Our inhabitants speak 45 different languages. The great Inca Sun God celebration was not exclusive. It had a procession of different peoples with diverse gods. The notion of "one God" did not exist. We are for the equality of the diverse; we are against homogenization (igualitarismo).

On the one hand we respect diverse individualities and particularities. On the other, we oppose individualism. Ours is a culture of solidarity.

We don't seek a return to the past. We know we must make the best in general of advances in human culture.

That does not contradict our resolve to go back to our own roots. Our past will be vividly present in our future.

We love and care for Pachamama. We fervently yearn to return to basing our economy on our rich biodiversity, through agriculture and natural medicine, along with any modern advances that do no harm.

We don't want our social system to be based on the deep-seated, antisocial individualism that the invaders brought here. We intend to recover and strengthen at all levels the vigorous, collectivist solidarity and fraternity of the ayllu, making use, as well, of universal knowledge that is not harmful.

We dream that the past 500 years of crushing blows are just a passing nightmare in the ten thousand years of building our culture.

About Hugo Blanco

This essay was first published in Spanish (under the title Nuestra Cultura) in the magazine Sin Permiso in its June 2007 edition. Sin Permiso (www.sinpermiso.info/) is a Spanish-language quarterly socialist magazine and a monthly e-zine edited by a multinational team that includes the author.

Hugo Blanco was leader of the Quechua peasant uprising in the Cuzco region of Peru in the early 1960s. He was captured by the military and sentenced to 25 years in El Fronton Island prison for his activities. While in prison, he wrote [Land or Death: The Peasant Struggle in Peru](#). It was published in English by Pathfinder Press in 1972 and is must-reading for anyone who wishes to understand the liberation struggles of peasants and indigenous people in that region.

An international defence campaign that gained the support of such figures as Ernesto Che Guevara, Jean-Paul

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Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Bertrand Russell succeeded in winning his freedom. After a period in exile in Mexico, Chile, and Sweden, Blanco returned to Peru where he won election to the national parliament on a united left slate. He has continued to play an active role in Peru's indigenous, campesino, and environmental movements, and writes on Peruvian, indigenous, and Latin American issues.

The article was translated Phil Cournoyer. In the 1960s Cournoyer participated in the worldwide defence campaign to win Blanco's freedom and a decade later coordinated a cross-Canada speaking tour of the Peruvian indigenous leader.

Other articles by Hugo Blanco available in English on the internet include:

[Bolivia: a Different Revolutionary Process](#)

[Chile: The Lesson that Venezuela Learned?](#)

[Peru: The "Indian Problem": From Mariátegui to Today](#)

[1] These terms from a collectivist language are not translatable to an individualist. Ayni means the mutual lending of work, as collective activity for the benefit of an individual. Faena is collective work for collective benefit. Mink'a is asking for a service with profuse and warm urgings.

[2] There are "signs" that tell indigenous campesinos how climate or weather conditions may change or how a given crop may fare. Abundant or poor blossoming of a forest plant, the coloration of snakes, the height of bird nests, the greater or lesser brilliance of a constellation, etc.

[3] Waru-waru is the practice of alternating belts of elevated fields and ditches (or swales); planting is done on the elevated belts. This has the function of avoiding floods in rainy years. In dry years water held in the ditches is used for irrigation. Heat absorbed by ditch water during the day helps to counteract cold nights at frost time.

[4] *Translator's footnote* - A good description of this agricultural technology can be found [here](#). Here is an excerpt from the essay Environment and Nature in South America: the Central Andes: "The local agro-pastoralists constructed raised fields systems or waru-waru (Waru waru) and sunken smaller garden patches or qochas (Qochas) to address these problems. Construction of raised, ridged fields, with swales or canals between the ridges, resulted in ridge-top areas above the waterlogged soils in the rainy season, eliminating rot among the tubers. Both the qocha system and the intervening canals among the raised fields trapped rainwater, which was curated through the dry season to provide a continuing water supply.

"In addition to managing moisture, these systems also ameliorated temperature extremes. Thus the raised field patterns, and furrows in the qochas, were constructed either parallel to, or perpendicular to, the path of the sun, an orientation which permitted maximum solar energy capture by the water. This water kept the fields slightly warmer at night, and often radiated enough heat to prevent frost damage while the surrounding unmodified grasslands suffered heavy freezes."

[5] Auquenidos (camelid) are animals found in the Andes mountains, relatives of the camels. They are also called camelidos in Spanish. In Peru there are four different auquenidos: llamas, alpacas, vicuñas and guanacos. Llamas and guanacos are beasts of burden, while alpacas and vicuñas are used for their wool.