

THE AYMARA OF  
THE BOLIVIAN ANDES:  
A Review of Six Films\*

VIRACOCHA, THE CHILDREN KNOW, POTATO PLANTERS, ANDEAN WOMEN, THE SPIRIT POSSESSION OF ALEJANDRO MAMANI, MAGIC AND CATHOLICISM. (Hanover, New Hampshire: The American Universities Field Staff Documentary Film Project.)

The six films under review, all devoted to the study of Aymara society in Bolivia, form part of a series of twenty-seven documentaries entitled "Faces of Change" made under the auspices of the American Universities Field Staff with the aid of a grant from the National Science Foundation. The films were directed by Hubert Smith, with the help of Neil Reichline, Manuel DeLuca, and Michael Akester. They were produced by Norman M. Miller, and Richard Patch acted as an advisor. Each of the films is to be accompanied by an essay written by an authority on the particular aspect of Aymara culture examined, and so far, three have been completed: Dwight B. Heath for *Viracocha*, and William E. Carter for *Potato Planters* and *The Children Know*.

All six films are set in the small towns of Ayata and Vitocota, approximately a day's travel by land northwest of the capital city of La Paz. As Carter is at pains to point out, these two communities are not necessarily typical of the region, far less of Bolivia. Ayata, a mestizo town, is connected to La Paz by a difficult but graded road, and both towns are situated at a *cabecera de valle*, which affords their agriculturalists the opportunity to cultivate a variety of crops in various ecological and climatic zones. Thus the local diet may not be typical of the one consumed by the Aymara in more uniform parts of the *altiplano*. Population pressure and land hunger also seem to be lower than in most Aymara communities.

This review is divided into two unequal parts: First, a resumé of the films; then, a comment on their use, approach, and purpose.

In *Viracocha*, mestizos and campesinos (Indians) relate to one another, talk about one another, and demonstrate their mutual feelings of dependence, distrust, and contempt. Various exploitive mestizo personalities are encountered including a local landowner who hires campesino labor by the day and alternates between scorn at their customs and caution in what he says about them; an urban merchant-trader; the agent of an absentee landlord; and some churchmen. The most effective scenes, perhaps, are those in which members of the two social groups talk to one another. When a group of campesinos alone discuss the nearby

\*I owe thanks to T. and P. Higgins, H. Jeroslow, S. M. MacLeod, and T. Schorr, all of whom offered me their comments on some or all of these films. In spite of their help, I am responsible for this essay.

mestizo town of Ayata I felt that the effect was slightly less genuine. The campesinos deplored the old days of serfdom and fixed obligations before the 1952 revolution, expressed scorn for the life styles of the inhabitants of Ayata, and compared the people there unfavorably with a more "progressive" town of the region (Chuma). The most artificial effect was produced by the long interview with the mestizo landowner, who was quite obviously "set up." His role was to be the "bad guy in the black hat" (it deserves to be as simplistically expressed as this). The landowner was asked leading questions by an outsider to the two communities, and his answers were ridiculed and given the lie, in parenthesis, in the subtitles. This was the most glaring example of one sided commentary in any of the films, although the church sexton was also somewhat of a one dimensional caricature (I will return to this later).

Throughout *Viracocha*, the prepared student will find illuminating and well thought out vignettes: A mestizo dances in an "Indian" procession, a return to origins which both disgusts and embarrasses his *chola* wife; alcohol seals all bargains and contracts, but before imbibing one campesino throws a few drops to the ground "para la pachamama," the earth mother; market barter exchanges are extremely ritualized, with the seller adding just a little more (in this case, dried fish) than was originally "agreed." Heath's essay will aid the student in understanding these essential details, but for this and many other parts of all the films, a careful preparatory lecture and a question and answer period afterward will also be necessary.

Rural education is the theme of *The Children Know*, and once again mestizo-campesino relations and difficulties are the unifying thread. The children, most of whom attend the Vitocota school, are not presented to us in great depth. Carter's essay provides most of the background cultural material, and the emphasis in the film is on school and the schoolroom, other public functions, festivities and games, and the characters of two individuals—the schoolteacher and a visiting "doctor." Once again the contrast between "good" and "bad" is brought out by the filmmakers. The schoolteacher, a complex individual, is presented as an unimaginative, oppressed, inhibited man, unsure of his place or his profession, unlikely to break rules, and conscious of hierarchy and class. But basically he does his best, works away at a thankless task, sympathizes with the poor and the diseased (at least when not faced with higher authority), and works, in his own small way, for a better life for the children and their parents. The "doctor," presented as almost totally evil, performs his job hastily and incompetently, and has nothing but scorn for the children whom he is supposed to be treating.

The scenes within the school and the school yard emphasize the rote learning in Spanish used among Aymara speaking children; the difficulties encountered by dominant forces in La Paz and elsewhere in implanting their messages of patriotism and national solidarity in an unbelieving, indifferent peasantry; the mutual suspicions between the campesino and mestizo schools; and the farcical nature of many acculturative attempts in culturally divided nations.

The highly satisfactory film *Potato Planters* emphasizes the central role of the potato in the lives of the Aymara campesinos and has much to teach us about the effects of monoculture on people's lives. The endless discussions of the types

of potatoes, when to plant them, how they will grow and how they have grown in the past, are skillfully blended with the rituals of planting, the preoccupation with astrology and weather, and the talk of upcoming fiesta. The observer sees how the religion of the agriculturalist is tied to the seasons and to the success or failure of his crops and flocks, and how daily drudgery and routine can be intellectually and emotionally transformed by the complexities of ritual and belief.

Three episodes in this film have unique charm and interest. The inside of an Aymara house is presented as the inhabitants sit down to a meal. While they eat they discuss potatoes. This is the only film of the six in which the inside of a house is examined. Another meal is eaten in the fields during the day's work. Here the surprise is not so much the picnic quality of the meal, but the casual, unstructured nature of the conversation and exchanges. People interrupt, change the subject, or allow topics of conversation to lag, without much formal attention to rank, male dominance, or the subordinate position of women and children. In contrast to *Viracocha* and *Andean Women*, one gets an impression of comfortable affection and casual friendliness among family members. The third episode involves field boundary markers. It is noticed that they are in the wrong place, and worry is immediately apparent. Suddenly, the audience is dramatically aware of the supreme importance of land, and of the scarcity of it. Altogether this is an excellent documentary, and Carter's introductory essay is detailed and informative.

The *Andean Women* has two main themes: The division of labor between men and women, and the ways in which people's perceptions of their roles may differ from actual practice. Men and women among these Aymara see women as weaker, subordinate helpmates, engaged in spinning and weaving, the preparation of meals, and the feeding of animals. In practice, women play a substantial role in hoeing and planting, and as far as marketing and financial management of family affairs are concerned, their role is clearly dominant. Once again these clear, unambiguous, and well designed statements about the dissonance between perceptions and reality are marred by the filmmakers' tendency to propagandize. In one scene women are shown earning the family's money in the market while two males stand idly by wishing it were all over so that they can go to a fiesta to get drunk. Surely the message of all the films is that this is hardly an idle society, and by even slightly moralizing about drinking, the filmmakers adopt the condemnations that both campesinos and mestizos level at one another. To drive home the "message," the film ends with an elderly man bullying two young girls away from a well where he wants to draw water. Thus the theme of the film is confused. The paradoxes and contrasts between Aymara men and women's cultural perception that women are inferior, with all this means as far as forced marriages and male cruelty are concerned, and the reality of female economic and social effectiveness, is blurred by simplistic moralizing about exploitation and the work ethic.

*The Spirit Possession of Alejandro Mamani* stands somewhat apart from the others. It is the story of an old man's struggle against madness (possession by evil spirits), a struggle which leads to suicide. The confusion felt by the old man (when none of the recognized helpers of his past, such as family or ritual, seem able to help) and by the family (when a rich and respected member of the community is

reduced to such ineffectiveness that he is finally a nuisance) is blended with periods of lucidity when the old man goes about his daily work in the fields and makes his will in front of the *escribano*-teacher and the assembled members of the family. The matter-of-fact yet formal way in which Mamani's worldly goods are discussed and divided is well presented.

In *Magic and Catholicism*, a bad year for potatoes is followed by a truck crash in which lives are lost. Nevertheless, the mourning family has responsibilities. It is the feast of Santiago and they have roles to play and duties to perform during the fiesta. Several features of Aymara society emerge during this film. One is made aware of the close connections between drinking, dancing, and religion and one realizes that religion is not only a public function but also an intensely personal relationship with the supernatural. A mourning woman harangues the effigy of Santiago, and even strikes it to elicit a response. The film audience sees syncretism progressing as ceremonies take place both in the church and on a nearby hilltop. Many of the church ceremonies deal with personal affairs, life and death; the more "pagan" ceremonies on the hilltop deal with the earth and its crops. One also sees the workings of acculturation—even the band's instruments are a mixture of the traditional Bolivian and the western.

Two scenes tell of the importance of religion to the campesinos, and one of them, once again, reveals the close ties binding potato agriculture and the supernatural. In the first episode, some celebrants at the fiesta discover that Santiago's arm has been damaged. What will this mean to the village and its people? Will the crops fail? Will sickness and misfortune be their lot for the coming year? The situation is partly resolved by blaming the children: One of them, they say, must have knocked against the statue during horseplay. Although the schoolteacher, when summoned, refuses to go along with this easy solution, it is obvious that most feel easier with this explanation of a troublesome event. The other episode is the search for omens of the fate of the coming year and its crops. While the men involved are not above a little self-deceit—the artifacts involved in the ceremony are searched several times in the hope that they will turn to the desired solution—yet it is obvious that this is a very grave and vital matter to them.

I have two criticisms of this otherwise excellent series of films. For some time now, anthropologists (and, perhaps, other social scientists) have been preaching the values of and the necessity for cultural relativism. Few would claim that it is attainable, but most admit that it is an important goal. The filmmaker is presented with a difficult task, admittedly, as he seeks to show cultures in their own context and with their own priorities. First, like all of us, he has his cultural biases to guard against. He has the limitations of time, a constraint that one wishes were felt by some of the more long-winded authors in the social sciences, which means that his selectivity, and therefore his danger of bias, has to be greater. He also has the problem of opportunity and limited capital, which the filmmaker experiences in a particular way. To give a simple example, it is easy for a writer to say that the burial of coca leaves at the beginning of the planting season is an essential part of the agricultural and ritual round. The filmmaker has to *be* there and has to catch it that once, with all the nuances of ritual and facial expression, or wait another year. Nevertheless, it is his task, especially if he is making a

pedagogical documentary, to prevent his own culture from playing a major role in the film. In this respect I feel that these films, in a few significant places, do fail. The questions asked are all too often the questions which western society is asking about itself. What is the solution to the problems posed by the class struggle? How does alcoholism affect personality and productivity? What are the ramifications and effects of the unjust exploitation of women? But these are not necessarily the cultural priorities of Aymaras. In fact, in spite of the pressures from La Paz and beyond, these are problems which the Aymaras conservatively ignore, or answer in a minor key in their own unique ways.

This criticism is not entirely fair. The sponsors of the series announced explicitly in one of their pamphlets that those involved "have sought to capture a sense of truth that would not only lead to an understanding of unfamiliar cultures, *but also cause Western audiences to ask questions about their own societies*" (italics mine). Let us admit, at least, that if we start asking questions about strangers with our own preoccupations and self-improvement in mind, then our view of the strangers will be, *a priori*, distorted.

Which concerns my second point: Some of the "western" preoccupations have led inevitably to oversimplifications. I have referred already to the problem of "good guys and bad guys"—this kind of caricature is all too frequent. While the schoolteacher and Alejandro Mamani are presented as complex, laughable yet admirable, weak yet strong characters—as people who puzzle us, disturb us, and yet, possibly, teach us—nevertheless, too many of the mestizos (the "bad guys") are simply papier maché villains. An audience reared on the unidimensional villains of television will recognize, and loathe, the landowner in *Viracocha*, the quack doctor in *The Children Know*, and the sexton in several of the films. The purpose of these films, however, is not to elicit cheers or boos from the audience at appropriate moments. It is to educate; and to educate is to inform about the immense complexities of human motivations and character.

It would be unjust to end this brief review on a critical note. These six films are obviously intended for an audience of senior high school students or for freshmen and sophomores in colleges and universities. As an introduction to alien cultures at this level, "The Aymara of the Bolivian Andes" series performs many useful tasks. The introductory essays, if they remain of the high caliber of the three already written, will be valuable aids. Teachers who wish to introduce their beginning students to the variables of Aymara religion, agriculture, family life, and social distinctions, will find very little of what they need to be missing. To use these films effectively, however, the teacher must consider them as supplementary material. They do not replace detailed, objective analysis of the deep complexities of all human life and behavior.

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