

An Ethno-Geography of the Peruvian and Bolivian Aymara.

Allen Reid

Dr. Tillman

Geography of Latin America

12/3/09

The Aymara are a people who have historically lived in the Altiplano highlands of Bolivia and Peru, especially around Lake Titicaca. They are a people who have been under self-, Incan, Spanish and national or republican rule. At the height of their civilization on the southeast portion of the lake was Tiahuanaco, a major urban area and the center of religion and trade in the Andes. Up in the Altiplano the Aymara face many natural hazards such as the extreme cold, famine and the destruction of crops or domesticated animals by natural predators such as the puma. They look physically massive without being large and are hardly ever fat, with their height seldom getting passed five foot two for males. The Aymara language is in a unique classification with Quechua as a descendant from the Jaqi linguistic family. It is also the native language of about one third of the population in Bolivia. The concept of space and time that the Aymara have is especially interesting. Aymara religion is an extremely developed form of syncretized Catholicism and shamanism, although Protestantism is having a growing influence. The Aymara today live in the same places as their ancestors, mostly dwelling in small extended family homes. They survive on a staple of potatoes (chunu), quinoa, barley, and onions. The beautiful weavings of the Aymara are what brought them into economic contact with other native tribes and the Spanish. Today the Aymara in the altiplano appear to be increasing in numbers but are connected only by traditionalism, agriculture and name. Some Aymara have incorporated western culture and technology into their lives, but most would rather keep to themselves. They are at the same time starting to gain a stronger political presence and more concessions from the government so as to be able to live their life in the traditional way they desire.

I. Ethnogenesis

The Aymara people have a unique pre-contact history. They have lived in the Lake Titicaca area for thousands of years and some of their first culture hearths include Qaluyu and Wankarani. Their most well established culture hearth was based in Tiahuanaco and lasted from 400-1200 A.D. Tiahuanaco was the capital of their empire that spanned westward from the Altiplano to present day Bolivia and Peru, to the coast of Chile and into the southern parts of Bolivia. Tiahuanaco decline and the Aymara lost influence and eventually was conquered by the Incas around 1430 A.D. By 1542 the Spanish Viceroyalty of Peru included all of the Aymara territory.¹ In the late 1700s and early 1800s there were various rebellions against the Spanish and by the 1800s the Spanish were gone and independent nation-states had formed. Today the Aymara live mostly in the high Altiplano of Peru and Bolivia but their numbers and influence have declined substantially since their empire centered around Tiahuanaco.

Why the Aymara chose to live around Lake Titicaca is unknown, perhaps the climate was different in the past. Nevertheless the area allowed for the development of an economy based on domestication of camelids such as the llama. These animals would serve both an economic and sustenance purpose throughout Aymara history. In fact, camelids were the primary source of food, warmth and fuel for them. History of the Aymara shows that these animals helped them become a great civilization centered around Tiahuanaco, influencing areas from Bolivia to Chile and Argentina. Around 400 A.D., southeast of lake Titicaca is where Tiahuanaco, capital of the Aymara civilization reached its peak. It was probably developed as a central city to facilitate trade between

¹ Steward, Julian H. ed. Handbook of South American Indians: v2 The Andean Civilizations (Cooper square, 1963) p509

the Pacific coast and the Amazon. The Aymara experienced a huge population growth due to the increase of food brought through Tiahuanaco by llama caravans. Until the Inca grew to become a major empire centered in Cuzco, Tiahuanaco was actually the most important city in the Andean area, it was even the religious capital of the Andes. However this golden age of the Aymara ended and the people were divided into various independent states in a period known today as the “Chullpa period.” Because of this division, they were easily conquered by the Inca in 1430.

The Inca came along in a time when the Aymara were divided and weak. After the fall of Tiahuanaco the Aymara were separated into 12 different kingdoms, referred to as the “Collas.”² The Incas used this to their advantage and conquered them in the 15th century. Unlike other nations they conquered, they did not try to completely control the Aymara but simply put them under tribute. There would be several conflicts among the two groups until the Spanish arrived in less than 200 years to take control of the area and form the viceroyalty of Peru.

The Aymara culture started off in the Lake Titicaca area and spread outward. The city of Tiahuanaco, was a major culture hearth, being on a trade route between the coast and the mountains. This facilitated the spread of the Aymara to more of Bolivia, Peru, and to parts of Chile and Argentina and as far west as to the coast. However when they were conquered by the Inca, and then later by the Spanish, their population was reduced greatly, as well as their distribution throughout South America.

² “Aymara” Minnesota State University Mankato. <<http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/prehistory/latinamerica/south/cultures/aymara.html>>

Map 1 "Geographic Distribution of the Aymara Language"
 (Produced on Wikipedia using map from CIA factbook and information from Promotora Española de Lingüística (<http://www.proel.org>) and from Aymara Uta (<http://www.aymara.org>).



Map 2--"Archeological sites and Spanish colonial towns in the geographical area of Aymara influence." (Campbell *Aymara Weavings* 1983)

II. Evaluation of Habitats

The main settlement of the Aymara lies in the Altiplano area surrounding Lake Titicaca, some 12,500 feet above sea level.³ The Altiplano is a highland basin in between two Andean mountain ranges, the Maritime Cordillera and the Cordillera Real in northern Bolivia and southeastern Peru. The main body of water in the Altiplano is lake Titicaca, with all its tributaries and rivers. It is “an often stormy body of water,”⁴ which overflows to the southwest into the Rio Desaguadero, the upper part of which makes up part of the border between Peru and Bolivia. This lake is of extreme importance to the Aymara who live nearby, providing both fish and good cropland. The city of Tiahuanaco is located at the south-eastern end of the lake but is nowhere near as glorious as in the past.

In the Altiplano it is extremely cold and windy, yet dry and desolate. The climate makes the place very hostile and inhospitable and one of the few places in Latin America where corn cannot be grown. Famine is common and even influences their negative attitudes toward each other (La Barre 1966) as well as aspects of their religion. The rainy season is between December and March, and though at times intense rain may fall, most every year there is at least one month during this period in which less than a millimeter of rain falls. This unique climate also is home to certain plants and animals not found in many other areas of Latin America.

There is a unique variety of flora and fauna here. The puma and plateau wolf are natural predators and the andean condor is also seen preying on small animals. By far

³ La Barre, Weston. *The Aymara Indians of the Lake Titicaca Plateau, Bolivia* (American Anthropologist 1948) p11

⁴ Ibid

the most common are llamas and alpacas which were bred for food, energy and wool. Fish are common in the lake and serve as food for some Aymara. Not many trees grow in this region, only near the lake and by sheltered valleys.⁵ Perhaps one of the most important plants is the “enea” or “totora” reed which furnishes food and medicine⁶ to the Aymara as well as material for boats and houses (One World 2009). Other flora include grass for the llamas and crops such as potatoes and onions. Because of the harsh climate there are not as many species of plants and animals in the Altiplano as in the rainforest or in other parts of Latin America.

III. Population Characteristics

The Aymara “give (the) impression of being massive without being large, sturdy without being muscled.”⁷ There are not many fat Aymara though their appearance has a “stunted dwarf like quality.”⁸ Their physical features appear out of proportion with their small feet, large head and long torso. Even as such they are not very tall, men and women averaging slightly over five feet. One peculiar feature about the Aymara is that unlike other native people in Latin America, they do not tattoo, paint, or “scarify” themselves. Their language is also as unique as their appearance.

Their language is that of Aymara, of which some 19% of the population of Bolivia speaks (Barks 2009), consequently it is also one of that country’s three official languages (along with Spanish and Quechua). One researcher classified Aymara along

⁵ Ibid p18

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid p41

⁸ Ibid

with Quechua as, “a separate group within the Andean subfamily of (the) Andean-Equatorial language family.”⁹ One unique feature about their language is their concept of time. They speak of only two times, the future and present/past. “The aorist tense refers to all non future actions.”¹⁰ They view the future as what is unknown and everything else as what is known. Their concept of time is that of the future being behind them, since it is what they cannot see. Anything that has happened already or is happening is something they can see, and thus is ahead of them. Also embedded into their language is the custom of using uncertain terms for anything that has not been personally witnessed or experienced. If one does not use this nonpersonal knowledge in speech, the Aymara would consider that person as either a liar or arrogant because they have not personally experienced what they are referring to. An appropriate phrase would be “Adam says he has a headache,” rather than “Adam has a headache.” (Hardman 1981). The Aymara’s view on time, and their usage of phrases of nonpersonal knowledge is reflected in their view and practice of religion.

The Aymara have a very developed religious system consisting of witchcraft, curses, superstitions, spirits and more. This system was probably developed in the city of Tiahuanaco during its golden years and was continuously passed down until the present generation. Magic is an everyday part of life for the Aymara, they use it both to protect themselves and their property against evil spirits and to curse their fellow Aymara. This complex religious system probably developed out of fear. From the times of Tiahuanaco all the way up to now they have been under an authoritarian form of

⁹ Swanson, Eleanor C. and Robert O. Lagace. "Society-Aymara" University of Kent at Canterbury. The Centre for Social Anthropology and Computing <http://lucy.ukc.ac.uk/EthnoAtlas/Hmar/Cult_dir/Culture.7828>

¹⁰ Hardman, M.J. The Aymara Language in Its Social and Cultural Context (University Presses of Florida 1981) p33

government, whether it was under the Inca or under their own kin group leader (ayllu). This, combined with the horrible weather develops in the Aymara a constant and almost paranoid fear. They fear they are always in danger and so they use magic in their attempt to try and control their life. It is used especially in order to ensure good crop yields. Catholicism was also advanced during colonial times but the Aymara simply syncretized it with their religion, “integrating the new without ever discarding the old.”¹¹ The Aymara believe in a creator god but they have little interest in him because they feel that the lower deities help them in a more practical way.¹² Protestant missionaries have been successful in evangelizing the Aymara by showing, through the Bible, that the Creator God is “not far from every one of us.”¹³ Even with Protestant missionaries, many still hold to their native religion syncretized with Catholicism.

IV. Settlements

The Aymara are distributed all along the Altiplano in Bolivia, Peru, Chile and Argentina, with the majority in Bolivia and Peru. Groups and tribes are separated by mountains and long distance and so have developed cultural characteristics distinct from each other. These separate groups develop different dialects and are not especially connected with each other politically or socially. It has only been in recent times that the Aymara have been able to band together to form a powerful force working for social change in Bolivia.

¹¹ Osborne, Harold. *Indians of the Andes: Aymaras and Quechuas* (Harvard University Press 1952) p131

¹² Nordyke, Quentin. *Animistic Aymaras and Church Growth*. (The Barclay Press 1972) p13

¹³ Acts 17:27, King James Bible

In previous times they dwelt in compounds, which consisted of a very large extended family living together. However when the Spanish forced a form of capitalism on them they became more individualistic and European, though the remnant of communal living was never eradicated. Today many Aymara prefer the communal housing structures and it is rare to find single Aymara living in their own homes. Usually families live together, and when the sons marry, it is typical for them to bring their wives back to live with them in parent's compounds until a decision is made to make a home for themselves. Typical houses of the Aymara are "oblong turf-block, one room huts, gabled and thatched," (La Barre 1966) meaning that they look a bit rectangular and have straw or branches as roofs and are held together by a sort of homemade glue. The homes look very much indigenous, as other native groups construct dwellings in a similar manner.

V. Agriculture

In the Altiplano the land is usually either too wet, or too dry, and is cold most of the time. Notwithstanding the difficulty, the Aymara have been able to develop frost resistant crops such as potatoes (eaten in the form of a dark corky substance called chunu), quinoa (from a plant of the spinach family) and barley. The growing season is short and moisture disappears from the surface of the soil quickly. They have overcome this with the introduction of the ox and plow and other agricultural technologies. These technologies have also helped to expand the area that they could farm. Historically the main crop has been potatoes but ever since the elimination of the haciendas in the 1950s, the onion has developed into the staple food.

Other subsistence activities include fishing and crafting, specifically weaving. Weaving has flourished with the Aymara for a long time. Their specific style, technique and design remained the same until the end of the 19th century at which point the quality and integrity significantly declined.¹⁴ Camelids, such as llamas and alpacas, gave them a lot of wool to make clothes with. With the weather being as it is, warm clothing was essential and so weaving developed quickly. Beside the practical purpose of the cloth, it was also perhaps the major player in the spread of Aymara culture. Because of its beauty, the weavings spread to the Pacific coast and down into southern Bolivia in the days of Tiahuanaco. Under Inca dominion some of the best cloths were made and burnt as offerings to the gods. The Spanish also knew and appreciated the weavings of the Aymara people, however they forced them to change their style of dress to conform to Spanish modesty laws. To the Aymara, weavings were considered valuable as it was what represented their culture, life and history. Accounts are told about how they would leave animals and gold but would burn warehouses full of cloth rather than allow them to fall into the hands of the Spanish.¹⁵ Today, many pieces of cloth are carefully stored and only brought out for important rituals. The Aymara do not weave like they did in the past, but there has been a growing interest in traditional methods of cloth making in recent years.

The Aymara entered into an economic market when Tiahuanaco was their major urban area, but ever since the Incan domination, that city has not flourished again. Since the early centuries A.D. they have been mostly under the control of one group or

¹⁴ Adelson, Laurie and Arthur Tracht. Aymara Weavings: Ceremonial textiles of Colonial and 19th Century Bolivia (Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibit 1983) p38

¹⁵ Ibid p15

another: the Inca, then the Spanish and then under their respective republican governments. For the last couple hundred years their agricultural and textile goods have been produced mostly for their conquerors, either under tribute or hacienda. It has only been in the last 50 years or so that the Aymara have been allowed to work and produce for their own use. Generally speaking the Aymara have no interest in returning to the national or global market, preferring to keep to themselves in the Altiplano. Though due to their poverty they may be forced to somehow integrate back into the economy.

VI. The Future

The future for the Aymara is looking to improve. According to one researcher in the 1950s, the future of the Aymara depended on “the white states which they form an unwilling but necessary part.”¹⁶ He mentioned three possible paths their future could take. Two views he says are extreme and unlikely to happen are that the Aymara would die out or that complete mestization (mixing between them and those descended from the Spanish) would occur. However what is happening is that the Aymara, through education and social reform, are slowly being brought to a point in which they “may exercise an active and positive function, economically and socially, in the countries in which they preponderate.”¹⁷ The Aymara have already been introduced to aspects of western culture including cars, and some Aymara have incorporated them into daily life. Others however have chosen to shun most of western culture in favor of the traditional

¹⁶ Osborne, Harold. *Indians of the Andes: Aymaras and Quechuas* (Harvard University Press 1952) p232

¹⁷ *Ibid*

agricultural life. Today they fight for more improvements in their lives, including improved working conditions, and opportunities for education and health care.

The native agricultural lands and traditionalism may be what unites them most as a culture. Though the various Aymara groups in Bolivia and Peru share a common language and heritage, most villages are still distant from each other, both geographically and socially. There are varying degrees of adaptation of western culture among the Aymara, some embrace it wholeheartedly, while others shun it altogether. Though the younger generation of the Aymara are more likely than the others to try and assimilate into their respective countries. But whether they utilize western technologies or not, the Aymara generally are happy in their traditional agricultural communities and for the most part, do not wish to integrate into the “mainstream” Bolivian and Peruvian culture and government.

Bibliography

Adelson, Laurie and Arthur Tracht. Aymara Weavings: Ceremonial textiles of Colonial and 19th Century Bolivia. Washington District of Columbia: Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. 1983

"Aymara" Minnesota State University Mankato. Minnesota State University Mankato E-museum. Web. 12 October 2009 <<http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/prehistory/latinamerica/south/cultures/aymara.html>>

Barks, Charis "Population of Bolivia" BoliviaBella.com. Bolivia for kids. Web. 31 October, 2009 <<http://www.boliviabella.com/population.html>>

Buechler, Judith-Maria. The Bolivian Aymara. New York: Holy, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. 1971.

Hardman, M.J. The Aymara Language in Its Social and Cultural Context. Gainesville, Florida: University Presses of Florida. 1981

Kolata, Alan L. Valley of The Spirits: A Journey Into the Lost Realm of the Aymara. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc. 1996

La Barre, Weston. "The Aymara: History and Worldview" The Journal of American Folklore Jan-Mar, 1966 (130-144). JSTOR. Web. 9 October 2009.

La Barre, Weston. The Aymara Indians of the Lake Titicaca Plateau, Bolivia. American Anthropologist 50.1.2 (Jan 1948). Print.

Nordyke, Quentin. Animistic Aymaras and Church Growth. Newberg, Oregon: The Barclay Press. 1972.

Osborne, Harold. Indians of the Andes: Aymaras and Quechuas. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. 1952.

"Reed Boat Baskets" One World Projects. Web. 31 October, 2009 <<http://www.oneworldprojects.com/products/reed-boats.shtml>>

Steward, Julian H. ed. Handbook of South American Indians: v2 The Andean Civilizations. New York, New York: Cooper Square Publishers. 1963

Swanson, Eleanor C. and Robert O. Lagace. "Society-Aymara" University of Kent at Canterbury. The Centre for Social Anthropology and Computing. Web. 12 October 2009 <http://lucy.ukc.ac.uk/EthnoAtlas/Hmar/Cult_dir/Culture.7828>