

## RADIO SAN GABRIEL AND THE AYMARA PEOPLE (La Paz, Bolivia)

### Introduction:

In October of last year, the XV Interamerican Congress of Catholic Education was held in Buenos Aires under the theme of "Educating People according to their cultural heritage". The organizers, realizing that this theme was the same as the operational policies of Radio San Gabriel, invited it to participate. The article which follows is nothing more than a synthesis of what was presented there and which was so very well received.

We shall try to present it here in two parts:

1. The geographic and historical features of the Aymara people.
2. The cultural traits of the Aymara people and Radio San Gabriel's educational response.

### Geographical features

About 2,000,000 Aymaras are distributed along the eastern and southern shores of the Great Titicaca Lake. More than half of them are in Peru and the rest in Bolivia. Some 30,000 inhabit even the heights of the Andes in Chile. Their base is the great plateau of Altiplano, whose height oscillates between 3,800 and 4,000 meters above sea level. On its eastern side it is adorned by the very beautiful Cordillera Real of the Andes with peaks up to 7,000 meters in elevation.

The zone which the Aymaras inhabit is cold and dry, with very cold weather in the winter and strong winds in August. Its five months of intense rains are followed by blue skies the rest of the year. The land is dry and without rivers but there is an abundance of water below the ground.

On its slopes, sheep, llamas and vicunas graze; in some places there are good herds of cattle.

The farmers grow potatoes as their principal crop and quinine as an additional product. Barley and beans also grow here and small hot-houses for vegetables have been springing up.

The Aymara dry and freeze meat (charki) to conserve it as they also do with potatoes (chuño).

They make their own clothes from the wool of sheep, llamas, and alpaca.

They are a self-sustaining people with neither technology nor industrial production.

### Historical features

The history of the Aymara people is lost on the horizons of time. They talk about different original groups, one of which — the most important — is that of the TIA-WANAKU, whose splendor dates back to the eleventh century and whose archeological remains are admired by tourists today.

In the thirteenth century they suffered a conquest by the Quechua Empire of the Incas and the region took on the name of Qollasuyo (qolliris). In the Sixteenth century the Spanish arrived and since the nineteenth century (1825) they have lived under the rule of an independent republic.

They themselves say that "they have experienced living under submission, subjugation, and exploitation, but that they have never been truly conquered". It seems that out of the mouth of each one who dies can be heard the voice of one of the oldest representatives of the Aymara Rebellion, TUPAK KATARI (1781): "I die, but tomorrow I shall return changed into thousands and thousands".

Now they already have nascent political parties: "The Tupak Katari Revolutionary Movement" (MRTK) and the "Movement of Indigenous Tupak Katari" (MITKA).

### Culture and education

I shall try to present a brief synthesis which will encompass the educational work done by the Church in behalf of the Aymaras, and specifically, the work done by Radio San Gabriel.

This radio station, founded by the Maryknoll Fathers 32 years ago, has been under the direction of the Brothers of the Christian Schools for the past ten years. The educational philosophy which orientates this work is "to educate the people according to their cultural heritage". This is sustained by the consideration that "an indigenous cause cannot grow without its roots", and let us get right to the point.

a) The *family structure* is the firm nucleus of this people's persistence over the centuries. That is why the Church and Radio San Gabriel conduct their spiritual ministry in deepening the conviction of the "Christian family", since almost 100% of the Aymaras are believers. Of late, with strong financial backing, an avalanche of Protestant sects have appeared and this has confused, alienated, and divided the people. The RSG is at present studying strategies for confronting this new invasion.

b) The base of the Aymara social structure is the *AYLLU*. A group of families-even though they may live at some distance apart- make up a real "COMMUNITY". When they group together, they make up a little town.

Well then, the RSG bases all of its educational work in the *CENTERS* in which the "participants" group together. If, for example, they receive some personal evaluation, it is only for the purpose of encouraging and stimulating group action. Before reaching any kind of a decision, they say, "let's talk this over", in other words, let us consult the community.

For its evaluation, Radio San Gabriel relies strongly on "*communitarian certification*". It suffices that three authorities of the Ayllu testify in writing that the "participant" has finished his work, for example, in farming, animal husbandry, or craftsmanship, for the RSG to recognize it as such.

c) *JILAQATA* is the ancestral authority within the Ayllu. (However, nowadays it is not recognized by the government). The Jilagata is nominated for one year and his authority is respected by the Community. He receives no financial remuneration and is assisted by a Council of Secretaries.

Radio San Gabriel requires that each Community Center name a Leader who will direct and animate the educational work of the participants. This Leader receives no salary from the Community, from the Radio station, or from the government. The Radio station provides qualifying courses and provides the textbooks free. In the fu-

ture, this ought to be the line of service provided by the Church's religious activities moderators.

d) The economy of the Aymaras is centered on the principles of SOLIDARITY, RECIPROCITY, and PARTICIPATION.

Through the *AYNI*, help is freely given to those who need to build a house, for example; the one benefited becomes a part of the support group when others need his help. Through the *MINK'A* they lend support to the work of others, receiving in return only something in kind. In the *Ayllu*, there is more "community land" than land belonging to families.

Radio San Gabriel does not give away anything free. All the material and services have to be paid for by the participants, even if it is only a token minimum price. The Aymaras maintain that "nothing has done us so much harm as paternalism".

e) The Aymara people's idea of religion is eminently cosmological. The *PACHAMAMA* (earth) is the one who offers food to their children, it protects them during their sojourn, and receives them in death. The mountains and the heights are sacred *APUS* and *ACHACHILAS*, and to them, equally as to the earth, "payment" is offered and they are celebrated with "*ch'allas*" and even with "*Fiestas*". Among the offerings, the *WILANCHA*, the bloody sacrifice of animals, occupies the first place.

Radio San Gabriel tries to see in the *Pachamama* the sign of what is called the "incarnate and committed presence of the faith" in what is "labored at and celebrated as a community". In the *WILANCHA* it sees the "presence of God among His people" and the "announcing of the sacrifice of the true Lamb" in the Holy Eucharist, in which the Aymaras are so fond of participating.

f) The Aymara people are singers par excellence. During religious ceremonies they sing for long hours the hundreds of "*Q'OCHUS*" whose melody and lyrics they themselves compose. It is said that the songs, the music, and the dances which they present during their fiestas are the best expressions of their authenticity and liberation.

Radio San Gabriel, which has already contributed by the printing of 300,000 copies of their religious song book (between 1970 and 1984), sees in this a challenge to do the same thing with songs with are not of a religious nature. On Saturdays, even though we dedicate the entire morning to it, we cannot listen to the dozens of musical groups which present themselves to the radio station, having come from far away and at their own expense. The groups play *pinquillos*, *zampoñas*, *bombos*, and even guitars and small native guitars called *charangos*.

g) We could say the same thing about the artisan production of tiles and ceramics which RSG is encouraging with its "System of Adult Self-education at a Distance" (SAAD-RSG) and with the future "handicraft markets" and "handicraft exportation".

h) The *AYMARA LANGUAGE* has been preserved over the centuries. Although nowadays, almost all of the Aymaras are bilingual, all of them continue speaking their own particular dialect. The Aymara language is agglutinative and has already been experimented with for simultaneous translation, with it being the Matrix. Its algorithmical character leads the Aymara mentality to be rigidly logical in its view of things.

Radio San Gabriel, as a proof of its respect for the culture of the people, has the Aymara language and grammar in its curriculum. Even the certificate of literacy, recognized by the government, which RSG presents is a *BILINGUAL DIPLOMA*.

i) In the citadel of Tiawanaku, the richest archeological relic is the *PUERTO DEL SOL* which Posnazky declares to be the "great page of ancient astrology". On it engraved in high relief are the movements of the sun and moon, solstices, the equinoxes, and the constellations.

Radio San Gabriel respects the knowledge of nature possessed by the Aymaras and is one with them when they maintain that "previously we did not suffer because we were following nature". Each year RSG prints thousands of calendars in which information on the rhythms of nature are features.

j) Finally, and as the last feature, we wish to point out the extraordinary riches which the Aymaras possess in *NATURAL MEDICINE*. The *Q'OLLIRIS* plants, which grow almost to the height of the *YATIRIS* plant, are excellent cures for illnesses and traumas and the *THALIRIS* is capable of curing illnesses which border on the psychosomatic. Their herbs are their inexpensive home remedies and are always within reach of their meager standard of living.

More than 90 per cent of RSG's medium wave and short wave broadcasts are in Aymara. It provides its listeners with many prescriptions for natural medicines. As one of its health projects, it maintains a Center of Natural Medicine in the vicinity of Tiawanaku.

## Conclusion

What a commitment the government, the Church, and, in our case, Radio San Gabriel, have made in accompanying this people which, after eight centuries of domination have not bowed their heads, so much so that in their songs they call themselves: "the mighty race", "the noble race", "the sleeping Giant".

In the *PROJECT OF THE AYMARA PEOPLE*, which is still in its embryonic stage and which Radio San Gabriel is trying to crystalize, we speak about *A JUST SOCIETY BASED ON BROTHERHOOD*, even though we are convinced that this will never succeed without "returning to their roots".

We are advised to respect their "language", their "spiritual solidarity", and their "love of nature". We are invited to multiply all means when it comes to "developing their culture". They seek from us "education and liberation", and they seek "full potential and production".

Radio San Gabriel in more than fifty different programs tries to echo these needs and invites these people to participate in everything from formal educational services to a gamut of daily enriched programs such as news, advice, stories, tales, songs, musical combos, religious activities, native music, lessons, Aymara fiestas, agricultural, animal husbandry, and craftsmanship training. At present a *CENTER FOR LEADERSHIP TRAINING* (Ch'o-quenayra) is being set up. There is also a plan for an *AYMARA BANK*, somewhat along the same lines as the already existing *AYMARA POST OFFICE*. Eventually, there will be an *AMARA TV*.

Does this not seem like establishing a ghetto? No, it is not. It is a question of harnessing the tremendous strength of this people to bring about in Bolivia and throughout Latin America a dynamic force capable of realizing truly revolutionary changes without weapons or violence.

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