Mistis and Indians: their Relations in a Micro-Region of Cuzco

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IN THIS WORK, we wish to show that in some areas of the Cuzco sierra relations between “mistis” (persons of urban orientation and residence) and Indians (predominantly rural dwellers) often have their roots in their ethnic affiliation and in their cultural identification, and that these determine their mutual behavior.

It is probable that our observations in this micro-region are not generalizable to similar areas. However, we would like to stress that to refer to all the inhabitants equally as “peasants,” because they obtain the major part of their income from agriculture, are oriented toward self-sufficiency rather than investment, and stand in a subordinate position in relation to the national society (Wolf, 1966), is not the most adequate way to understand certain concrete types of interrelations.

In this situation, it seems that ethnic rather than other identifications determine the dominant position of the mestizo or misti, and the subordinate one of the Indian or gente de la altura (high-country people). These relations are subject to a whole range of attitudes implying inferior status, including a discrimination which borders on racial prejudice.

This does not exclude the existence of other types of relationships, such as class relations, in other rural areas, or at the national level.

The Micro-Region

Kaykay is a small district of the province of Paucartambo, Department of Cuzco. The name applies both to the district and to the settlement which serves as its capital. As political and administrative center, it has jurisdiction over mestizo settlements and numerous Indian communities. Among the mestizo centers, the most important are Vilcabamba, Huancarani and Huásac. The relation between the capital and these centers is fairly competitive because Huancarani as well as Huásac are trying to supplant Kaykay as district capital. The best placed center in this contest is Huancarani, which at present is in the midst of commercial expansion and demographic growth. Its position along the Cuzco-Paucartambo-Qosñipata road is undoubtedly an advantage, that, for example, has given rise to its Sunday market. This market was created a little

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1 The Peruvian census classifies as urban the population of all administrative centers down to the District Capital level, even though some of these towns may have no more than a couple of hundred inhabitants. This definition is followed here. (Ed. note)
over ten years ago, and has now become an important commercial center attracting merchants and customers from as far away as Cuzco and from practically all the surrounding Indian communities. It covers a radius of 80 kilometers, including people from Qatqa and Ocongate which belong to the Province of Quispicanchis.

The chances that Huásac would become a dangerous competitor are smaller, because it is by-passed by the main regional road (the Cuzco-Paucartambo one). Huásac did have the advantage when communication was through the old pack trail, but the motor road by-passed it. Its size, and the quality of its houses and churches still reflect some of its former importance.

Kaykay's situation is similar to that of Huásac; it is also by-passed by the Cuzco-Paucartambo road, being linked to it by a 3 kilometer side road. If present trends continue at the same pace, one can predict that, in a few years, Huancarani will have replaced Kaykay as District Capital, or that Huancarani will have become an independent district.

The situation we are describing is based on data collected in 1965. At present (1973) the two haciendas, Mollepata and Qollotaru, on either side of Kaykay, have been expropriated by the Office of Agrarian Reform. The benefits of this event for the mistis of Kaykay will be insignificant because few of its inhabitants were serfs or laborers in the haciendas. The latter were worked by Indians from the higher elevations. Qollotaru drew its labor from the captive community of Champa. In both haciendas the key personnel, such as the foremen, came from Kaykay, and so did a few of the laborers needed for additional work at such times as harvesting, sowing and plowing with oxen.

The settlement of Kaykay is located some 35 kilometers from Cuzco (of which 30 are paved at present), and 3.5 kilometers from Huambutio, a railway station on the Cuzco-Puno line.

It is situated at 3100 meters of elevation, along the Vilcanota River, where the "Sacred Valley of the Incas" begins. The climate is pleasantly temperate, with a few days of frost in June. This intermediate altitude zone between 2500 and 3500 meters (called Qeshwa) allows the cultivation of maize, and fruit like peaches. Maize is the main crop. Potato growing is less widespread, and is limited to certain fields on mountain sides. Consequently, many of its potatoes have to be obtained from the Indian communities by means of barter or labor services. Misti women earn the main part of their monetary income by retail trade in the near-by Huambutio railway station, and commercial trips to the neighboring towns such as Urcos and even Cuzco. Women are more active than men in retail trade, and the only two local stores are run by women.

Fields are small. Each nuclear family owns dispersed plots. The most valuable ones are in the "plain", which is the flat stretch between the river and the town. Few are irrigated. Land on the neighboring hills is communally owned.

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1 This situation explains why the mistis of Kaykay did not participate in the peasant meeting held in the main square of Cuzco in November 1973. The delegation of Kaykay was made up entirely of Indians from the communities, without any mistis.