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# grassroots development

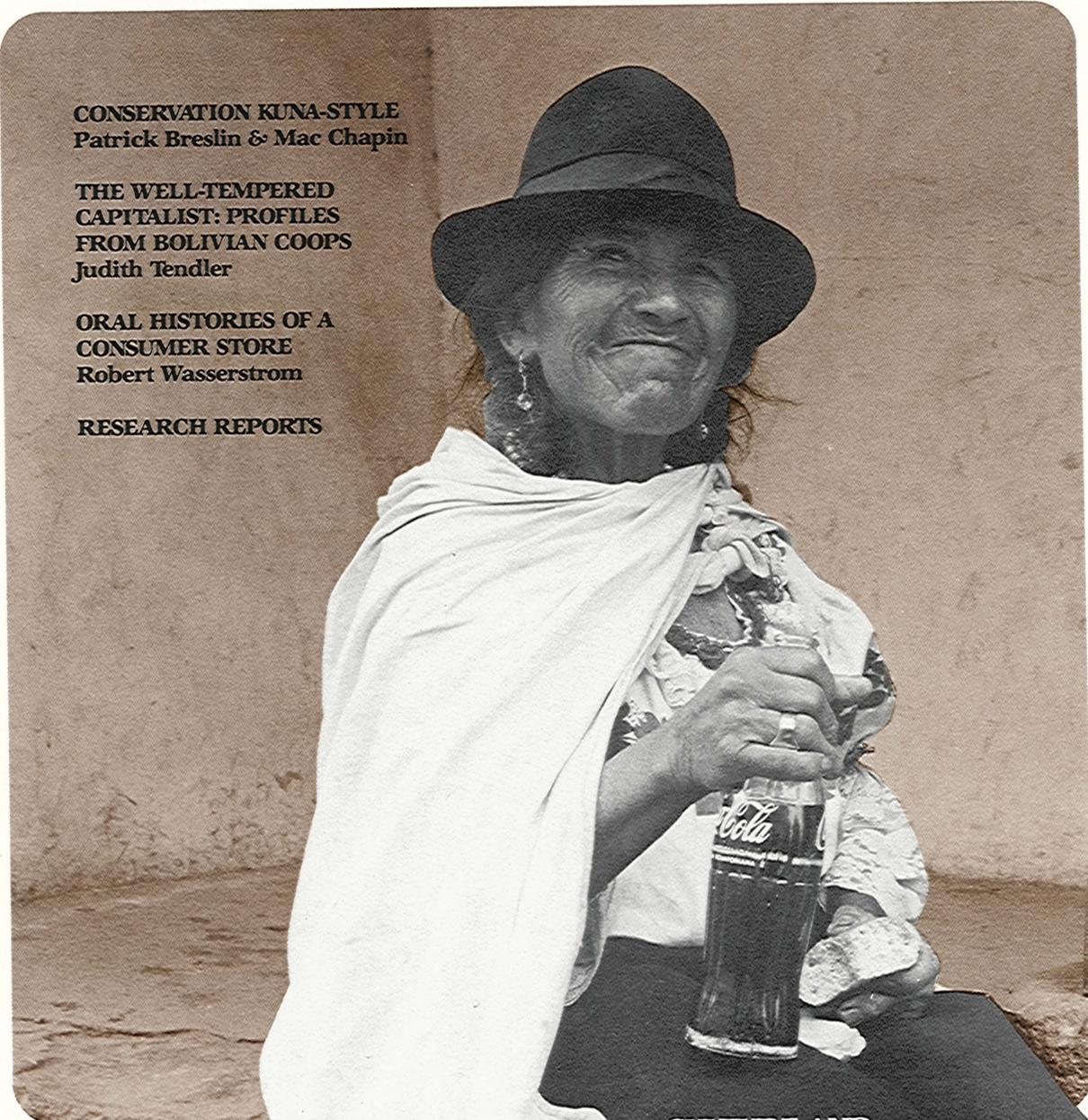
JOURNAL of the INTER-AMERICAN FOUNDATION

**CONSERVATION KUNA-STYLE**  
Patrick Breslin & Mac Chapin

**THE WELL-TEMPERED  
CAPITALIST: PROFILES  
FROM BOLIVIAN COOPS**  
Judith Tendler

**ORAL HISTORIES OF A  
CONSUMER STORE**  
Robert Wasserstrom

**RESEARCH REPORTS**



**CULTURE AND  
ECONOMIC SURVIVAL  
IN LATIN AMERICA**

**ARIEL DOREFMAN**

*Grassroots Development* is published twice a year in English and Spanish by the Inter-American Foundation. The journal reports how the poor in Latin America and the Caribbean organize and work to improve their lives. Its purpose is to explore how development assistance can more effectively contribute to self-help efforts. Articles in *Grassroots Development* draw primarily on the experience of the Inter-American Foundation and the groups that it assists. However, submissions by persons outside the foundation are encouraged. Prospective contributors should write for "Instructions to Authors."

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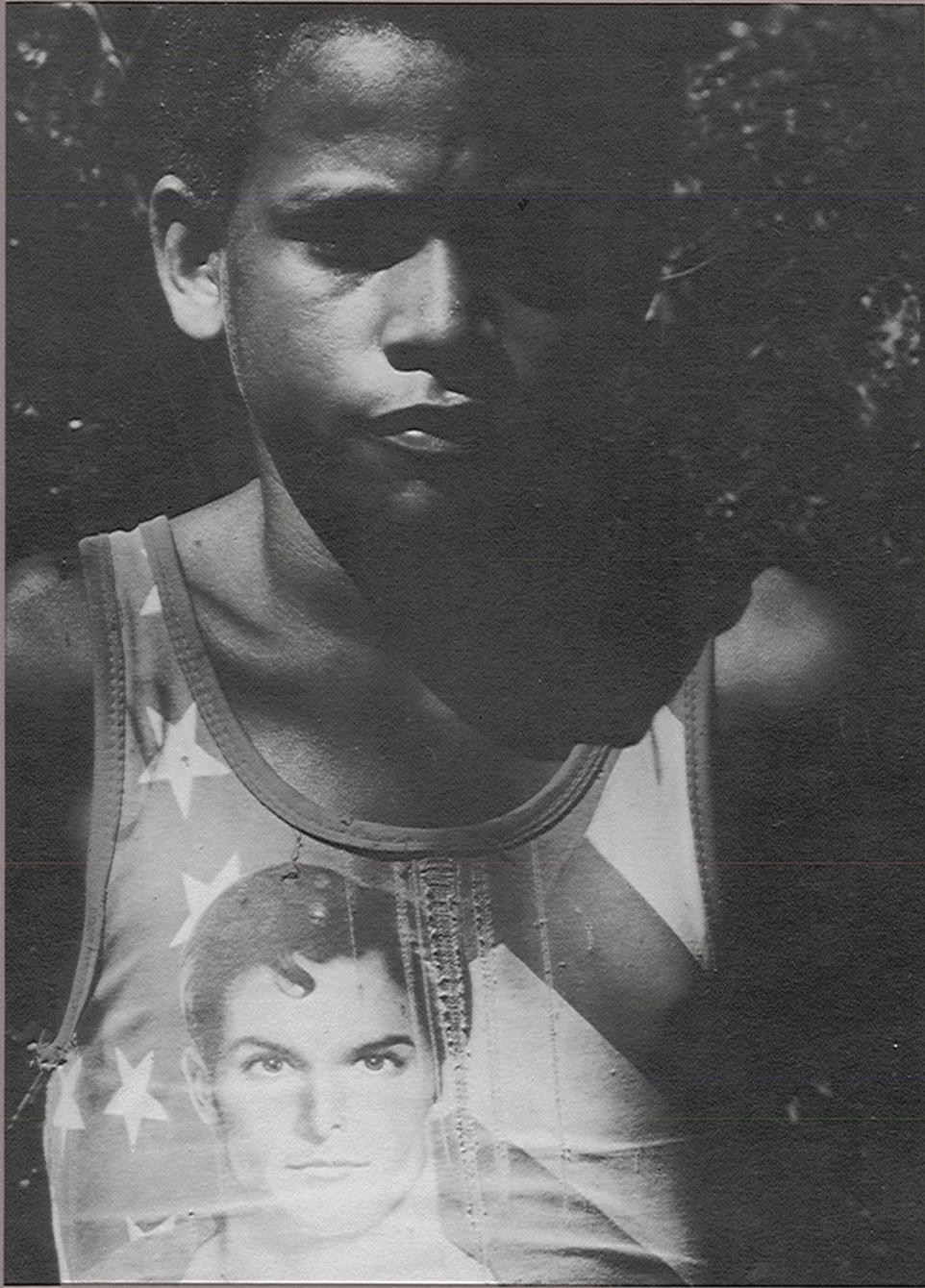
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Grants made by the Inter-American Foundation are normally directed toward improving the material well-being of the poor. But the foundation also assists a small number of projects—involving less than two percent of its funding—that are directed toward a less obvious kind of well-being: enriching cultural forms and expression among the poor. Some of these projects reinforce awareness of ethnic or community identity; others try to preserve and build upon common history that is being lost; others allow the poor to participate in new forms of artistic expression.

The assumption underlying these projects is that culture is related to development. The idea is a challenging one to the foundation, for it suggests that there is another—perhaps even a better—way to reach the poor: investment in self-respect and identity rather than investment in products and services.

But is cultural investment really “as good” as investments in tractors, seed, and land? And if people are culturally strengthened and vitalized, does this contribute significantly to better organizations, higher productivity, and enhanced material welfare?

Recently IAF asked Ariel Dorfman—a distinguished poet, novelist, and essayist—to take an insider’s look at this troublesome issue. A native Chilean who has spent the past 11 years abroad, Mr. Dorfman has written extensively on popular culture and the arts. In a recent *Newsweek* he is described as one of Latin America’s six greatest living novelists.

In the spring of this year, Mr. Dorfman visited six countries, looking for the link between culture and economic survival. With the eye of a novelist and essayist, he encountered a provocative cast of characters—and a perplexing, often painful, and all-too-real set of problems.

ARIEL DORFMAN

## BREAD AND BURNT RICE: CULTURE AND ECONOMIC SURVIVAL IN LATIN AMERICA

—for Julio,  
who would understand

When Christopher Columbus, on his first voyage of discovery, sighted one of the bays of what would some day be called the Dominican Republic, he thought his dreams of unending riches had finally come true. The hills surrounding that coastline were alive with silver, glinting in the sun. It was only later that he understood the elaborate illusion: the white, shiny leaves of the llam-llam trees were turning over under the breeze and glittering with sunlight.

Almost 500 years later, not even the illusion persists. Only the name—*Puerto Plata*, Port of Silver—reminds the visitor that this place once promised resplendent wealth. The hills have lost their forests, and as the magic year of 1992 approaches, committees are planning campaigns to convince the townspeople to plant new trees so that the hills can blaze as they did for the Admiral half a millenium ago. But the lives of the people who are to do the planting are as bare as the hills themselves. With over 30 percent unemployment in Puerto Plata and the prices of sugar, cacao, coffee, and tobacco (“We export what people consume after meals,” someone confided to me) plummeting in the international market, many of the inhabitants of the town are not looking toward the land to provide their futures but toward the same sea that brought Columbus. Though in an ironic reversal of historical expectations, it is no longer Columbus who dreams of natives clad in silver, but the present-day natives themselves who expect the silver to sail into their lives aboard the boats that periodically chug into Puerto Plata. Well if not silver, then dollar bills. These boats do not carry Columbus. Instead, they are brimming with vacationing Americans on a “Love-Boat” tour.

Watching “Love Boat,” however, does not prepare passengers for what they will encounter once they descend the gangplank. The screen (and the tourists’ brochures) conveniently omit the waves of people out to sell whatever they can: a stream of trinkets, mementoes, t-shirts, smuggled goods, drugs and, of course, their own bodies.

In that first reception, the visitors will not see children. If they think that this is because all of Puerto Plata’s young are at school, they will have the chance, as the morning advances, to find out just

how wrong they are. At that very moment, hundreds of kids are playing hooky. They don’t come to the docks because they know that the police will arrest them if they approach the boat; but in the rest of the tourist rounds—the marketplace, the monument to the Independence, the gift-shop street, the boardwalk, the central plaza—bands of ragamuffins between the ages of six and fourteen will mercilessly badger the visitors in broken, pidgin English. Some will hawk wares (newspapers, sweets, peanuts) or services (shoe-shining or window-wiping), but the majority will quite simply beg.

These kids do not know that the hills they were born in were once supposed to be lined with silver. All they know are the makeshift shacks, open sewers, the garbage. By the time they are three, they have explored the mud streets where they were born; between four and five, they have made their first journey to the boundaries of the ravine; and by six or seven, they have already joined a street gang and their new career has been launched. Most of them continue living at home, often contributing more than their parents to the family income. Beneath the undercurrent of playfulness, there is, therefore, a desperate relentless rhythm to their efforts to coax money out of the visitors.

A typical scene: a tourist descends from a van and a flower is immediately deposited in his hair. He brushes it off, as if it were a fly. With extraordinary celerity, the flower is replaced in the man’s hands. He lets it fall, not looking at the child. Ten minutes later, when the man comes out of the gift shop, bearing a ship in a bottle, the same boy is waiting with the same flower and the same persistence. Even after the victim climbs back into the van, the flower keeps on coming through the window. At the next stop, another boy will repeat the ceremony until finally this tourist or another one—wearied, perhaps compassionate or amused—will fork over a coin. The pestering will stop only after he is safely back on the dock. But that is not the last he will see of the urchins. When the boat casts off its moorings, the terms of the truce seem to be magically lifted, and a flock of barefoot waifs materializes, as if out of nowhere, ready to call for the last quarters from the ship.

Several years ago, the tourist promoters began to complain and threatened to cross Puerto Plata from their itinerary (after all, they had promised their clients paradise and not a tropical version of *Oliver Twist*). The police had gone into action. Often beating them up, they would round up as many of the boys as they could find on the days when the boat arrived, and would either shut them up in a patio without food or water until the callers departed, or would cart the offenders off to a faraway beach from where it took them hours to make their way back home.

Several of Puerto Plata's most prominent citizens were outraged. Led by Doña Ana, a magnificent, grandmotherly widow of over 70, and Denis Paiewonski, one of the main coffee exporters, they have set up Integración Juvenil, a program that deals with abandoned children in a different way. This group of citizens is currently operating two houses in Puerto Plata. One, Los Almendros, is for children who have not dropped out of school and do not beg on the streets, having some economic means of subsistence. These boys have organized into cooperatives to buy material for their activities (shoeshine paste or newspapers), and in the afternoons they come in for training in subjects not taught at school. The other house, Los Flamboyanes, is for kids who are in more serious trouble. They need "intensive attention," in order to learn some basic skills and the habits that they lack. The boys, between nine and fourteen years

*After all, they had promised their clients paradise and not a tropical version of Oliver Twist.*



The "love boat" pulls into Puerto Plata.

of age, spend six months here, sleeping over once in a while, getting three square meals a day and medical assistance. They are taught how to read and write, along with math, history, and current events. The kids I saw were inventing songs and little plays, drawing, learning how to take care of their bodies and their environment, learning to be good sports and wait their turn, discovering the importance of respecting someone else's opinion. They also get agricultural training at a farm operated by Integración Juvenil, which should eventually help the program gain a measure of financial self-sufficiency. Attendance is voluntary, and boys who have succeeded in changing are expected to help the others.

The results so far have been good, though it is too soon to really surmise how far-reaching the effects will be. As Delia Gutiérrez, the director of the program, pointed out as we wandered the streets of Puerto Plata for several days, I had not once seen any of the "graduates" there. Most of them are in school, and some are even holding down responsible jobs as clerks, mechanics, and errand boys. There were signs, however, that these jobs, provided by friends of the program, might soon be exhausted. This doesn't seem to worry the 21 boys who are presently at Los Flamboyanes: they already understand that, only two months after they have entered the program, they are different from those of their friends who continue on the streets.

To have come so far has not been easy. These lads are undernourished and, often, overdressed. They are wary of adults, from whom they have come to expect abuse and disrespect. They do not seem to fit into their own age categories. In one sense, they seem younger than they really are. Considering their psychomotor functions, their hand-eye coordination, their habits of hygiene and socialization, their immoderate need for affection, they are definitely immature. Their drawings are the sort we would expect of children under four. Their speech is slurred, they cannot identify colors, they don't know how to hold a fork. But in another sense, their lives have aged them far beyond their years. They have experienced a share of sex, misery, police harassment, and violence that other children and even many adults have never had to face.

But the boys do not come to the program only with handicaps. On the streets, in order to survive, they have acquired certain skills and, moreover, values, which will stand them in good stead in their adult incarnations. They are extremely vivacious, observant, and alert; they are critical and tend to voice their own frank opinions on matters; they value group solidarity and will care for the weakest; and they honor their promises. But perhaps their most prominent trait is feistiness, a certain pride in their own capacity. A 10-year-old shoeshine boy—it is true that he was the president of the Shoeshine Boys' Club—was not put off by the fact that I am a writer and chal-



Bogotá street children sniffing gasoline.

lenged me to a spelling game. "So what?" people may ask, "All children do that." Except that most children reckon that the adult will let them win or, at least, show respect for them during the game. In that boy's world, adults don't let children win. Since birth, he has been told that he is garbage, the refuse of society, and should be unable to challenge anybody to anything. And yet, he is able to look at himself without despising his own history.

This defiant attitude—ready to take on the world if necessary—is reflected in the word that Dominicans use for street kids—and for other outlawed or deviant elements of society. They are called *tigueres*, which is a deformation of *tigre* or tiger. Although the word refers to an outsider from a lower class, it can be used either as a slur or as a compliment. Very often, the speaker will employ the word in both senses in a single conversation. One of the kids who had been especially dangerous, provocative, and almost criminal was described as a "terrible tiguere." But a bit later, the same person laughingly recounted how the boy managed to extract himself from a thorny situation by sheer wits and guts: "That kid was one hell of a tiguere."

Everybody I talked to in the Dominican Republic, whether bank manager or slum woman, seemed ambivalent about the term. It may well be that this mirrors (or masks?) an ambiguity that Dominicans feel about themselves. These boys, after all, inhabit the margins of a

society that the industrialized world often writes off as inconsequential and hopeless. All the Latin American countries whose cities are overflowing with abandoned children have been defined with some of the words reserved for the outcast young: backward, irresponsible, immature, wild, ungovernable, unpredictable.

The way in which Integración Juvenil treats children has, therefore, implications that exceed the immediate program. It rejects the reformatory-authoritarian approach, which supposes that the child can be "saved" by making him repent of his past life, scorn what he has learned in the street. Delia Gutiérrez stresses the need to reject that self-hatred and build on the self-respect that the child already has created for himself—the knowledge that, in spite of each degradation, he is still a valuable human being. The identity he has forged in those years of suffering will be necessary to face the years ahead, which may turn out to be just as difficult. Because of his street experience, the boy rejects that state of apathy and fatalism that plagues so many adults in underdeveloped societies. Juan Bosch, one of the Dominican Republic's leading politicians and its most famous writer, has called this process *aplatanamiento*: people who live as if they are two-dimensional in a multidimensional world, people who live as if they are pressed down to the earth and squeezed dry and who do not dare utter the word "tomorrow."

These boys can, of course, discard *aplatanamiento* because they are, for the moment, sheltered. An institution like Integración Juvenil guides them as they work out how to integrate and unify their subculture with the new proficiencies and customs required to become stable members of society. But what will befall them later, when they have left that refuge?

Or to put it another way: is society ready to make room for that sort of person? The reactions in the community are not heartening. Naturally, most of the people I talked to outside the project proclaimed the whole process a "miracle"; but there seemed to be more relief at getting the kids off the streets than understanding how this had come to happen. Hardly anyone, for instance, seemed to think it was up to the community to find the kids decent jobs. "Integración Juvenil took them out of the gutter," one person confided to me. "Now it's the task of Integración to keep up the good work and make sure the kids don't backslide."

Because Los Flamboyanes has only been fully operational for a year and a half, it has not even begun to face the major problems that will appear when more *ex-tigueres* begin to graduate and cannot find jobs. But if it is too soon to seek an answer to such questions, and to more complex ones, in Puerto Plata, there are other places in Latin America that might furnish clues. To travel to Bogotá, Colombia is like boarding a time-machine and being able to peer into the future that might await the *tigueres* of the Dominican Republic. For 17 years now, Javier de Nicoló, an Italian-born Roman Catholic priest, has been working with *gamines*, the Bogotá name for street urchins.

The *tigueres* seem innocent, perhaps even angelical, compared to the *gamines*. The latter have long since left their families and native villages, are much older in general, and make their living, primarily, not by begging, but by stealing. Pickpocketing, purse-snatching, petty thievery, and as time goes by, perhaps a major burglary with an adult gang or even homicide. Most of them are also drug addicts, who are initiated into sniffing gasoline fumes, go on to marijuana, and end up using *bazuka*, a cocaine derivative that is inexpensive in Colombia. *Gamines* commonly suffer from exposure, jailings, and rape.

Father Javier has built up an extended network of houses to care for the runaway children, attending thousands of them, some for as many as 12 years. At this moment, the foundation he heads operates, with the help of a band of devoted followers, a dozen establishments geared to diverse age groups and needs. It has also branched out into other cities in the country, has recently opened a home for girls, is the owner of an industry that will serve as a technical-training high school, and is planning a small metropolis in the jungle.

Of all these places, the most impressive is a complex of work-

shops, dorms, buildings, and gardens in the barrio of La Florida, on the outskirts of Bogotá. Over 500 students currently live and work there, finishing their high-school studies. At its entrance gates, one can read the proclamation: *REPUBLICA DE LOS MUCHACHOS DE LA FLORIDA*. And the complex functions, indeed, as if it were an independent republic. The boys are self-governed, electing from within their own ranks officials subject to recall and responsible for the facility's cleaning, repair, and administration. The boys run a primary school system and police themselves. They also have a coop store, cafeteria, bank, and their own currency. ("We may have to devalue soon," one of the older students told me offhandedly.)

It is hard to believe that these young men—now between 14 and 23 years of age—were ever gamines. Of course, they arrived at La Republica only after many intermediary stages and steps. They came by way of other houses, where they learned the sort of skills that their faraway Dominican brothers are learning at this very moment, interrupted by many returns to the streets.

Of all the boys I spoke with—and I spoke with hundreds because they insist on endlessly chatting with each visitor—not one had avoided the temptation of going back to his roaming life after being admitted to the program. Because the streets—as Carlos Palacios, the charismatic and hard-working "mayor" of La Florida, explained to me—are attractive. There they are able to earn, according to the participants, "at least 12 times more" by stealing than by working, and it is easy for them to imagine themselves, someday, through crime or through smuggling, treating themselves to the imported consumer goods that their parents could never hope for. The street is where extreme deprivation and outlandish gratification meet. I was surprised to hear from some of the *muchachos* (young boys) that they loved lasagna and filet mignon. Where did they learn to eat that? "The swanky restaurants, so we would not disrupt their clients, used to feed us the leftovers," explained Leonardo Ramírez, who is now in charge of public relations.

The program, of course, cannot proffer lasagna and filet mignon to the boys, nor can it guarantee a future of videocassettes, computers, and sports cars. But the boys all remember friends who left one time too many and did not come back. It was often the death of those friends in shootouts with the police or other gangs, or of a drug overdose, that convinced these boys definitely to make an effort to stay off the streets. And they were helped by the way in which the program was able to organize their new life around some of the most alluring traits of their former culture and existence. The gamines, for instance, join into bands, basic economic units that hunt, steal, and forage together—organs of survival and self-defense. The boys in La Florida are assembled in clusters of 16, called tribes or clans, where they work together, criticize each other, demote and promote, evaluate, and share. La Florida also imitates the freedom and mobility of street life. The boys hate being shut in and are easily bored. They are constantly being shuttled around, from dorm to schoolroom to industry to farm. Their "free time" is full of the same feverish movement, and their minds seem correspondingly alert, creative, and quick.

The three days I lived among them was a dizzying experience. They are perpetually shaking hands, jostling against you, touching, saying hello and good-bye, almost, I thought, as if they were reassuring themselves that all this was not a dream and they would not awaken in a matter of minutes huddled among dogs and other boys on a street corner. They are interested in everything, demanding one's opinions on the Middle East and the Sandinistas, on romantic poetry and the origins of jazz. They seldom agree with the established opinions held in society and don't seem scared to voice their objections. When I had dinner one night with a group of residents, most told me that they preferred García Marquez's journalism to his novels. Though disagreeing strenuously, I found this exchange refreshing. Before speaking, they did not stop to think whether what they were saying was fashionable or correct. They didn't give a hoot for the Nobel Prize. I pressed for details: What *did* they like then? And when they answered, as their first selection, Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*, I confess that I patronized them, smugly suggesting that

maybe the books they were interested in were only extended TV novels that did not make their imaginations expand. And then I asked what other books they liked, expecting more bestsellers. "*The Stranger*," one of them said, while the others nodded. "Yes," added another, "by Camus, a French writer. Have you heard of him?"

La Florida was full of such surprises, shattering my preconceptions, teaching me that these kids did not fit into the categories I had prepared for them, just as they had not fit into the world their parents had prepared for them.

What Colombia has in this program, therefore, is a veritable human treasure. These children fled not only the inferno of their parents' homes but also a preordained and limited future. They dared to change their lives. Millions did not take that step and stayed on, accepting the beatings and then walking meekly down the roads that society had already traced for them. These are the most rebellious, critical, anti-authoritarian, adventuresome, self-reliant human beings that the Colombian poor could generate—the ones who did not fit in. "They preferred," as Padre Javier dryly contended, "a life of misery with freedom to a life of misery without freedom." In theory, they should be able to inject a much-needed vitality and wisdom into Colombian society. They exhibit an unlikely but potentially creative combination: a high-school education along with an extreme experience of rejection. ("Anything that could happen to anybody," one of them told me, "happened to me.") The community should welcome their leadership qualities, their resourcefulness, their knowledge of suffering and how it can be overcome.

In practice, however, their reception has been lukewarm at best. When they leave the program, they are at a decided disadvantage. Other than some clothes and a couple of books, a watch, maybe a radio, they own nothing. In a country with a high degree of internal migration, they seldom know (and may not care) where their families are. They are stigmatized both by their past record of delinquency and by scars on their faces from the skin diseases associated with malnutrition, the sores that healed improperly. But above all, what gets them into trouble are the very qualities that they retain from their wanderings, the ones reinforced by their years in La Republica. Employers tend to be wary of young men who discuss why something must be done, who are critical and self-assertive, who protest when they are unfairly treated, who speak their unconventional minds. With unemployment in Colombia—as in other Latin American countries—on the rise, employers can be selective in an increasingly tight job market.

There are, naturally, a series of success stories. Youngsters have gone out into the world, studying and working simultaneously, getting by on one meal a day. Some of these graduates are married and manage to make a decent living. Around 30 university scholarships have been provided for those who show promise. A *muchacho* who once sang *boleros* on buses and who is now an accomplished trumpet player in the Republica's orchestra will be studying to become a professional musician at Bogotá's Music Academy. Other scholarship recipients are studying accounting, medicine, economics, and law. But the price they pay is that, at an age (the mid-20s, after all) when most young people are already living independently, they must keep on residing at La Florida, and this may continue for years to come. "My professors at the university," an engineering student told me, "said that I should give up the part-time job I was holding and spend all my time studying."

And he knows that he is fortunate. Others have not been able to go even that far. "Even before I received my high-school diploma," one of them explained, "I applied for a job. As a salesman, a construction worker, a printer, a machinist, a travel agent: you name it, I tried it. Nobody would take me." And so this young man, like others, came back to the program. He works, with a dozen of his former classmates and streetmates, in the Industria, banging out boilers for export to the United States, still dreaming of being something else, but in fact regressing to the refuge that he entered many years ago.

Of this group, only one was living independently. He works at the Industria but has managed to rent a room for himself in a house in a

barrio in Bogotá. His landlords are always berating him. He uses too much water to wash himself and his clothes. Now, he cannot read at night because they save money by cutting off the electricity that goes to his room. This situation symbolizes the problems that the ex-gamin faces. The habits internalized by this young man are no longer those of the urban poor from which he escaped and to whom he must return.

These muchachos expressed the fact that they did not have a meaningful existence at home by running away when they were kids. Ten years later, willing and able to become active, productive members of society, they are once again misfits. This time they react, not by going back to the streets, but by going back to La Florida, which has become their real home.

"Of course, we know that this is not good for us," one of them told me when I pointed out that this relationship was probably stunting them, not allowing them to test their education in the world outside. "I can't marry. I'd like to, but I can't. I can't make ends meet for one stomach, let alone two. Not to mention a *barrigoncito*." And he pats his nonexistent wife's imaginary pregnancy. "But what are we to do?" another of them asks later. "I always said to myself: the only way to learn how to swim is to jump into the pool. Then I realized that there was no water in the pool."

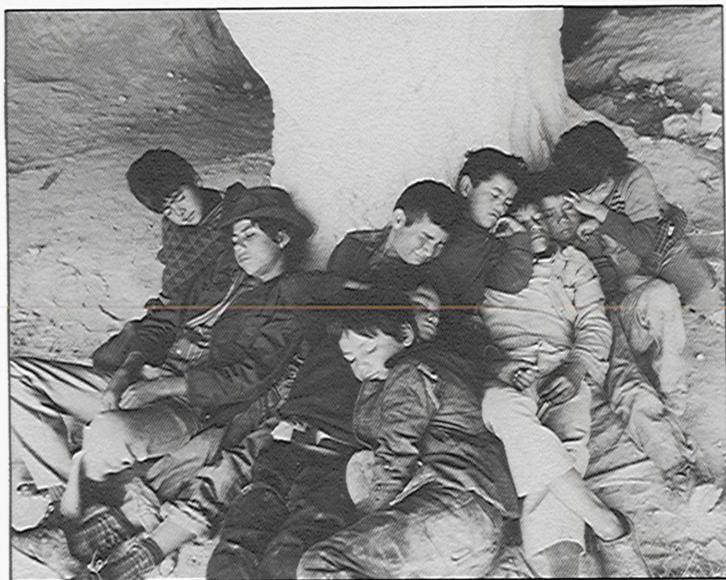
Padre Javier is trying to fill the pool with water.

His most ambitious project is what I would call (though perhaps he would not) a utopia in the jungle. The program now owns land near the steaming beaches of Acandí, where thousands of square feet have already been cleared, a permanent encampment built, and dozens of young settlers live for a month at a time. In practical terms, this is a stepping-stone for some of the recalcitrant muchachos. But someday Padre Javier intends to set up a self-sufficient city there, a version perhaps of Skinner's Walden II, where he can extend to some of his boys—and their spouses—a civilization outside the misfortunes of history, where the future will not depend on charity, grants from institutions, favors from friends who have to be persuaded into giving an ex-delinquent a temporary job. A better República will then continue, unmolested, in a faraway corner of the real Republic of Colombia.

This dream expresses both the colossal success of the program and its limitations. Success because these boys are now in a sense overqualified, ready to change the world. But also limitations because, many years after the boys have left the streets, the same conditions that first turned them into gamines are still prevalent: the same stratified, unjust world rises up to meet them as young men. Faced with this, the padre, like a biblical patriarch, would like to emigrate with that part of his extended family that doesn't fit anywhere else, creating a sort of alternative womb or superior nest where he can continue his nurturing, the father to a thousand boys. That is what he is used to. Wherever he goes, he is surrounded by a maelstrom of shouting, hugging, snuggling, smaller boys and a merry-go-round of questions and greetings from the older ones, as if all were celebrating a marathon he had just won. "I'm a *chupadera* (a baby bottle)," he said to me, and I had the impression that he would somehow find the time to answer each boy, to ask about each problem, to console every need.

This man is not only a dreamer; he has also kept a foot placed squarely on the ground. He has begun workshops for the boys to learn how to build their own housing. He is beginning a program for those who have been unable to leave the streets, funding a cooperative where they can market the tin and cardboard that they collect. And above all, there is the Industria. "When these boys have a technical diploma, instead of a mere high-school one," he explained, "we'll get them better jobs." And meanwhile, the muchachos will always have a legitimate and significant role to play inside the project itself, as instructors. Who could better help the newest arrivals than people who have belonged to both worlds?

Yet even if the supply of money were as endless as the gamines—thousands still roam the alleys and avenues of Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, and millions more are waiting in the barrios—the project cannot expand indefinitely. At some point its aspirations must clash



Colombian gamines sleeping in a cave.

The only way to learn  
how to swim is to  
jump in, but there is  
no water in the pool.

Street children about to enter La Florida. Padre Javier, upper left (white hat).



with the unfair social and economic structure. "The gamines are only the tip of the iceberg," said another of the padres, whose unenviable task is to place the boys when they graduate. "We are addressing the most visible, aberrant aspects of the system. But it is the system itself which must change."

And as if in echo, Padre Javier said later that day: "How do you get the father to stop beating his children and treat them with respect? He's exploited or unemployed. He gets drunk. He was beaten as a child. Now it's his turn, and he's been taught it's the macho thing to do. To reign over some little piece of the earth, even if it is a frightened, helpless child."

These educators of abandoned children are aware, then, that at the very instant when one child is being taught how to draw or recite or add, hundreds more are being born who will not have that chance. "This is where it all starts," Delia Gutiérrez had said as we walked through the mud and the buzzing flies of a Puerto Plata barrio, "and this is really where it should be stopped. Before the children even get to the end of the street, there should be a club or a project to take care of them—and their parents—in their own neighborhood."

There are, of course, such projects in Latin America. The best of them, which are unfortunately not the majority, implicitly share the assumptions behind Integración Juvenil and La Florida: they be-



Earning a living on the streets, Bogotá.



Brass section of the band, La Florida.

lieve that the dispossessed—no matter how destitute or powerless—have nevertheless a rich culture of their own. These programs do not always propose the creation of awareness as an objective but generally imply that this awakening will automatically accompany efforts at organizing or changing the social environment. At times, however, certain efforts will more explicitly state the need for "consciousness-raising," suggesting that it is all too often the lack of understanding about the circumstances and problems of their world that disenfranchises poor people, making them feel helpless before, and uninterested in, the development plans imposed by experts on high.

Many of the alternative efforts consider—and in this, once again, they join Integración Juvenil and La Florida—that of all the vehicles that stimulate creativity, art is the most effective; and of the arts, the performing arts are the most powerful. The same forms of expression used as a centerpiece for the education (and one could almost add, the therapy) of neglected children—drawings, ceramics, songs, riddles, literature, but above all, theater and dance—are being employed in uncounted communities in every Latin American country.

There are two ways that these projects develop. In one, the people of the community are treated primarily as consumers of culture previously created elsewhere—that is, as readers, spectators, viewers.

In the other, art is seen as springing from the tradition and experience of the community itself. In many ways, the division is misleading: popular art frequently borrows from the more formal genres, while artists who train and stimulate grassroots cultural groups are the very ones who have on other occasions come to present their own creations. But even though both functions often coexist, there usually is a tendency to emphasize one approach, investing it with more effort, time, and resources.

For instance, Teatro Gratey, with whom I rode up and down the Dominican Republic for four days, does a wonderful job of training local groups. Gratey serves an extended bunch of amateur theaters: trade union troupes in the sugar mills and the *bateyes*, barrio groups in Santiago and Santo Domingo, a campesino ensemble in the sierra. But no matter how much they enjoy their work as teachers, the members of Teatro Gratey are more concerned with how their own art can affect the community.

Other theater groups feel that they can no longer continue making valid aesthetic statements if they do not settle down in a barrio and devote most of their energy to a community. One such group is Joven Teatro, which operates in Villa Primero de Mayo, a marginal barrio of some 40,000 people near the town of Santa Cruz in Bolivia. The three actors (there were eight before defections diminished their ranks) do not live in the comfort of the city, some miles away,

Even if the supply of money were endless as the gamines, the project cannot expand indefinitely.

but have settled into a house that serves as theater and residence, and hopefully as a workshop to train local people.

When I arrived there, Joven Teatro was in the midst of a crisis. A year and a half ago they had left La Paz—where they were moderately successful as a semi-professional troupe. They could and did survive the censorship and repression during the García Meza dictatorship (they even spent a brief stint in jail when—what else could a theater group do?—they did not heed the decree that prohibited more than two people meeting at any given time), but what they could not stand was the general lack of interest by their public. "It was merely entertainment for them," explained Matías Marchiori, the Argentine-born director of the group. "What we were representing had nothing to do with their lives or, for that matter, with ours." During the next months, they began working with cooperatives, schools, and peasant associations in La Paz. They used drama, especially puppets, as both a way of opening their audience to discuss problems and as a way of helping the group to break out of the closed circuit of elite culture. But they were already looking elsewhere.

Invited to Santa Cruz to perform, they spent several months visiting different neighborhoods until they finally decided upon Villa Primero de Mayo as just the place to set up a community center for stimulating the self-expression of the barrio dwellers. The villa had

an enormous number of problems—from water supply and transportation to drug abuse, unemployment, and inadequate health care. It was also a sort of microcosm of Bolivia: a mixture of people from different regions, ethnic groups, and languages. It was near Bolivia's fastest growing city, Santa Cruz, but far enough away to avoid being uprooted by the authorities or absorbed into an urban ghetto. Joven Teatro was sure that a house where the *pobladores* could interact culturally and meet physically would help them to deal with their problems. By generating popular enthusiasm, self-confidence, and awareness, the group would be able to reach the villa's adolescents, who would afterward become trainers themselves and branch out into the rest of the barrio.

"When we arrived," one of the actors (who comes from an Ayмара working-class family) confessed, "we had visions of changing Bolivian culture, triumphantly showing how art can unleash the energies and the minds of ordinary people."

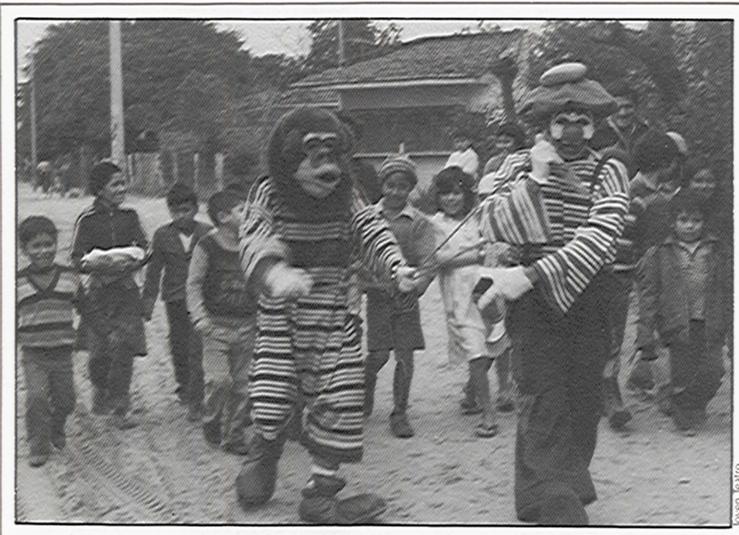
The house they bought and began to renovate seemed a symbol of their ambitions. In its previous incarnation it had been a headquarters that the secret police had shared with the local plainclothesmen. Where *pobladores* had once been beaten, narcotics had been distributed, and who knows what else had happened, there would now rise a cultural center. During the first months the actors worked hard at building a stage, turning the existing rooms into workshops, and constructing new rooms in the back for their own use. But the adolescents did not come, or they came once and then disappeared. Rather than being enticed into theatrical training or simply having their consciousness raised by watching performances, the teenagers sought entertainment in the four ramshackle discos of the villa, in the innumerable shacks where gambling, dice, and bingo are played, in the *pitillos* and the *bazuka*, or—if they were more spiritually minded—in the churches thriving like mushrooms. The truth is that in the whole villa not one adolescent was found who understood that theatrical work could address the community's overriding problems.

I could see why this indifference had surprised the group. It ran counter to their experience (and to mine): that the *muchachos* were the one age group always available for culture.

Joven Teatro was discovering a clause to the unwritten law that governs cultural activism among the poor (a law whose operating principle I had also come to understand many years before, when I worked with nonformal education in the Chilean slums): if the community does not already have institutions that function permanently, if a series of channels have not been previously opened, then cultural projects can become blocked. On paper, the Villa Primero de Mayo had dozens of such organizations. In reality, they were fragile, inefficient, and nonrepresentative.

Under those circumstances, the Casa was seen by the barrio dwellers as exotic and alien. No one helped the actors to finish the center. They ended up working for months on the construction, mortaring each brick and hammering each nail by themselves. They gave benefit performances in Santa Cruz to raise money for the wooden benches on which the people would sit once the theater was ready. But as one member said, "The people were so apathetic, it was unnerving. We were forced to revise our plans."

Teatro Joven began to work with the only segment of the population that seemed genuinely interested in anything: the younger children. The puppets enticed them in. Several dozen periodically converge on the Casa to learn how to draw or play the guitar, and many more have received rudimentary theatrical training, using improvisations as a way of developing a critical vision of community problems. The afternoon I was there, a group of children was rehearsing a play with puppets that they themselves had manufactured. These are extremely marginalized kids, a step removed from the street urchins I had already encountered. Their parents are not overly enthusiastic about their work here, often pulling them out of the classes so they can do something "useful," like help sell goods, clean house, or take care of their siblings. In spite of this, and the undernourishment, and the want of sanitation at home, and the subeducation they are receiving at school, they had found in themselves enough



Drawing children into the Casa, Villa Primero de Mayo.

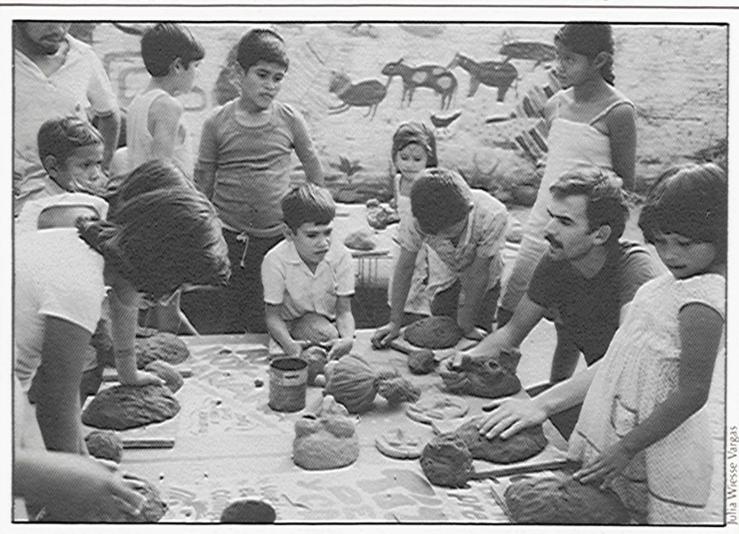
discipline and fantasy to produce an amusing fairy tale in which a group of woodsmen are outwitted by a pair of villains until they pool their forces and save their trees. Long live ecology and solidarity!

That victory seemed, nevertheless, precarious. It may have been my imagination, but I could almost feel the shadows of the past—the brutality and corruption that had once resided in this place and could so easily be readmitted—encroaching on the Casa. But it was not only ghosts that seemed to threaten. There was nothing imaginary about the three prostitutes who had clambered up on a tree in the next lot to watch the show. They were the only adults present. Not one father or mother had come to see their own kids perform—even if it was only a general rehearsal, I expected at least one parent to make an appearance. Almost as soon as the performance began, a nearby *chichería* turned up its radio full blast. “*Vamos a la playa*,” the radio blared, “let’s go to the beach,” and a little girl next to me, absorbed in the fairy tale, nevertheless sang “*vamos a la playa*” underneath her breath.

A bit later, a circus parked in the vacant lot behind the Casa began to advertise that evening’s show. The arrival of the Circo del Tony Agapito to the villa had, in fact, meant that Joven Teatro had to suspend the performance of some short Chekhov plays by a visiting troupe. “We can’t compete with the circus,” they said.

*We’re here to stay.  
We’ve left our lungs  
in this place.*

Making puppets, Joven Teatro. Matías Marchiori, right.



Half an hour later, once the children had all gone home and the first stars had come out, another strong competitor erupted on the scene. One of the two local cinemas began to announce its program: a Kung Fu and a Pedro Infante twin bill. “From beginning to end,” a disembodied voice shouted, mingling with the preaching of Evangelicals on nearby street corners, the medley of radios, and the circus barker, “Action! Emotion! Romance! We promise you not one minute of boredom!”

“That’s a promise we can’t deliver on,” Marchiori told me, smiling but also pained. “Who knows? Perhaps the children you saw here this afternoon will be able to make the difference. Instead of the two or three years we had planned on to make a real start, it may take 10, 15.”

“So you’re not going back to La Paz.”

“We’re here to stay. We’ve left our lungs in this place.”

This fierce determination keeps cropping up when the three actors talk about their work, but moods of puzzled despondency and silence often follow. Their depression is not merely the result of having set themselves a series of overly ambitious goals, which could then be adjusted. When the troupe came to the villa, its members were not only seeking a place to give generously of themselves to others, but they were seeking new aesthetic challenges. They

wanted to break ground with a different sort of language, new subjects and audiences. But instead of inspiring the villa, they feel stultified and cornered by the atmosphere. Instead of giving a voice to the voiceless, they appear to have lost their own. They blame this on the time they have spent administering the center, going to meetings that lead nowhere, on weeks of bricklaying.

To me, these are pretexts. The actors thought that by coming to a barrio they could answer the question of how to create a socially significant art form and have found, not surprisingly, that the answer refuses to make itself easily available. Their artistic crisis—to give it a name—has been accentuated, I believe, by some circumstances beyond their control. They are outsiders in a villa which is, in itself, in flux. They are sure that they would not have faced such odds in La Paz, where the people are “more organized, more mobilized.”

But the next day, in La Paz, I understood that this is not that city's only advantage. More important, its barrio dwellers have kept their ethnic and linguistic roots, and this gives any cultural group working with them a folk tradition on which to build, a view of art as an essential, almost inseparable component in the struggle for identity—and therefore for survival. It may well be that what attracted Joven Teatro to the villa in the first place—the uprootedness and alienation of its inhabitants, the fact that they have cut themselves off from their past—is precisely the obstacle that blocks plans for artistic development.

On the other hand, other cultural projects that I visited have done exceedingly well with people who are as materially deprived as the misery-stricken residents of the villa. Often, but not always, a strong ethnic strain explains why these endeavors have prospered. Often, but not always, ethnicity is one factor that makes people less vulnerable to the degrading influence of the contemporary urban wasteland.

One month before watching the youth of the villa contending with the temptations of the circus, karate movies, and punk rock, I had been privileged to climb some stairs that led to the second floor of a modest two-story building in Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic and be greeted by 30 school-age children dancing to rhythms beaten out on drums brought to the Caribbean by their African ancestors. Their bodies were flowing with energy and joy and—yes, above all—with pride. Watching the easy grace of their movements, the self-possession of each step, it is almost impossible to connect these youngsters to the shantytowns where they live and from which they had had to walk many miles that same day, as they do three times a week in order to rehearse.

At this performance, the parents are present. Like so many Dominicans, most of them hold only part-time jobs; but they have missed meals to buy those immaculate polka dot dresses for the girls, the stiffly ironed white shirts for the boys. “I brought the girl here myself,” one father tells me later. “Her mother taught her some of the steps they were dancing.” Other parents confirm that the children are doing research in their neighborhood, collecting the typical dances, rhythms, songs, rituals, legends that people still remember. And just like in the Bronx, where kids are breakdancing instead of knife-fighting, the amount of drug-taking has diminished noticeably in the barrio since children have become involved in their own culture.

But this Ballet Folklórico Infantil is merely the appetizer. Next comes the Teatro Popular Danzante, whose members, now in their 20s, started out almost 10 years ago like the children I have just seen. They are presently a group which, I believe without exaggeration, could rival any folk dance company in the world. It is not merely the perfection of the coordination, the richness and variety of the customs and folklore evoked: what is astounding is the sheer energy that the dancers let off, the sensual celebration of life by people who have been denied the traditional forms of power. Though I do not care for the word, what came to my mind over and over was the idea that these swirling, trembling, sweating people were *royalty*.

If they are royalty, I thought to myself, there is one among them who must be their queen. Nereyda is middle-aged and plump; and yet this woman dances as if she were commanding the stars and the

earth. I had to remind myself that Nereyda must work during the day in a beauty salon. It is only on weekends and evenings that she can dance herself and train the hundreds of young people, rescuing the music and folk traditions of the Dominican poor.

This has meant, fundamentally, exploring the island's African heritage, and it has been a painstaking enterprise. Ask any Dominican black for his or her identity card. Under color it will read “*canela*” (cinnamon), and under race, “*indio*.” All the Indians, of course, were exterminated very shortly after the followers of Columbus decided to extract from them the silver that could not be found blooming in the trees. Today you can find Indians only in the remains on display at the archaeological museums and in the identity cards. The blacks were imported to take up the work the ghosts could no longer do. And black blood is more or less in everybody's veins by now. But in spite of the popular saying, “*Aquí, cuando suena la tambora, el que no mene la oreja, mene la nalga*” (when the drums roll here, whoever does not waggle his ear will be wagging his butt), a prevailing myth insists that Dominican identity has a predominantly Hispanic heritage.

Although the struggle has been going on since independence, it was only after the downfall of Trujillo that a major movement calling for a return to the roots of popular culture began to gain ground in Dominican art. This movement seems to have been born simultaneously among the intellectuals and in the people themselves, who organized *clubes culturales* (cultural centers) in each barrio and in the farthest villages. These centers provided fertile ground where Nereyda and many other artists in theater, literature, and graphic arts could do their work. She and they participated in the outreach program of Casa de Teatro, perhaps the major nongovernmental cultural institution in the Dominican Republic, which had been born from the need of local artists to celebrate their own productions at a time when the Balaguer regime was bringing in foreign performers and ignoring national groups.

Currently, Nereyda and her troupe are doing most of their work away from the capital, crisscrossing the Región del Suroeste. Comprising a third of the republic's territory, this is the poorest, most arid, most overlooked area in the Dominican Republic. Nereyda shows up in the lost reaches of the swamps and hills, places where no roads lead, complete with her make-up and dresses and orchestra (headed by Tío, who in his daytime incarnation is a butcher). When her group performs and the spectators begin to join in, she gently allows them to teach her the new steps, the old usages, the vibrant melodies and legends of each place. She has hundreds of local groups going and is gradually building the first Ballet Folklórico Regional.

Nereyda's success is at least partially due to the cooperation of the program of the Instituto de Desarrollo del Suroeste (INDESUR), the government agency in charge of developing the region. Although economic problems are staggering (the per capita product is half the already meager 1,006 pesos of the rest of the Dominican Republic), Rafael Díaz, INDESUR's director and a poet himself, has included in his strategy for development a vast cultural program. He has funded poetry workshops, libraries, local theater, and scores of other activities; but it is the ballet that is the “apple of his eye.” He feels that one of the main problems of such a “backward” region is that it has no real existence or presence for the rest of the Dominicans. He hopes that the ballet will serve as a kind of cultural ambassador for that region, just as so much of Latin American art and popular culture has found an audience in the industrially developed world.

But real communication and visibility can only occur if the performers are not categorized as merely picturesque or touristic. That is, the campesinos of the region must learn to see themselves in a different way. They must become—and art is the passport—like each of the dancers in that modest building that I visited the afternoon when the children danced in Santo Domingo: able to judge themselves not from the outside eyes that despise and omit them, but from their own joyful, resounding bodies. Able to affirm that they are not phantom leaves on somebody else's dream trees, or

Poor people tend to be treated as if they were incomplete and sick, needing to be brought up to date. Almost as if they were children.

dust on somebody else's road, but alive and real and significant. I cannot be sure, of course, whether such poetic proposals have been formulated in quite this way in INDESUR's strategy sessions, but it is heartening nevertheless to see an official development agency trying to solve some of the social problems of a region by mobilizing its artistic resources and going for help, not to the intellectual experts on the subject, but to an unpretentious barrio group such as Nereyda's.

What is fascinating about these experiments, and several others that I visited, is that they run contrary to some of the most deep-seated prejudices in Latin America (and elsewhere, may I add) about the poor and on how to deal with poverty. The cultural strategy values what the dispossessed already own: the rich and complex traditions that have been stored and expanded during generations; the fact that they are whole and healthy human beings, that they are—what a surprise—*adults*. Poor people tend to be treated as if they were incomplete and sick, needing to be brought up-to-date, elevated, illustrated, cured of the plague of ignorance that handicaps them. Almost as if they were children. If they would only “grow up” and acquire the knowledge “normal” for their age, then development and well-being would automatically follow. If only they could imitate the people in the more developed and fortunate nations. The most curious and quaint characteristics may, naturally, be preserved, as in a time capsule or a museum supermarket, but prosperity demands a conversion to a different lifestyle and thought-style and emotion-style, a more modern view of the world.

Nowhere has this opinion been more widespread than in countries with large numbers of Indians. In the two such countries that I visited—Ecuador and Bolivia—some significant changes have been underway for some time now, but Indians are still hustled, scolded, discriminated against, and generally talked down to as if they were immature, retarded, or incapacitated. In 1830, the first Constitution of Ecuador called the Indians “*una raza abyecta y miserable*” (an abject and miserable race), and though the words are no longer official, the sentiment remains. Vast segments of the population devoutly believe that Indians are inferior. A few hours after I arrived in Riobamba, in the province of Chimborazo in Ecuador, a woman shared with me the following “hilarious” story. It seems an Indian boarded a bus and—rather than negotiate his way to the back loaded down with market goods—decided to sit in the front. When the driver insisted that he move to the back, the Indian kept shaking his head, saying that he did not want to occupy the last seat. As time was being lost in the discussion, a passenger piped up and suggested that the driver tell the man that he was not being offered the last seat in the back, but the first seat in the last row. “And off he went,” the woman said, chuckling. “*Son tan atrasados estos indios.*” (These Indians are so backward.)

The woman was a high functionary of the Ministry of Education who had just arrived from Quito to inspect the very literacy program that was trying to alleviate the situation she had just described with such amusement. She was blinder than Columbus. He had only mistaken the leaves on trees for silver. She was unable to see the treasure that was being unearthed in front of her very eyes. She did not realize that the illusory Indian she was portraying in her anecdote was being replaced by a different sort of person. Instead of the underdeveloped children who could be tricked by a driver and a passenger and talked about as if they could not understand or as if it did not matter even though they did manage to understand, what I found in Chimborazo were fully grown up people who happened to be Indians and who refused to go to the back of any bus.

That same afternoon, at the *feria* (market fair) of Salerón, high up in the lush, green, overworked hills surrounding Riobamba, an Indian named Luis gave me another version of the same story. He spoke in slow, halting terms, without the relish of the woman I had spoken to that morning. Below the plodding monotony of his voice was a resolute stubbornness and security. “They would always send us to the back of the bus,” he told me. “Now we say no and we simply sit down. We know our rights. They can no longer swindle us when they weigh our produce or make us wait in line for long

hours or make us sign documents that cheat us. Things are different now." His hand sweeps the air to include not only the magnificent volcano Chimborazo, which acts as a god and a guardian of that valley, but also the 600 or so Indians who are buying and selling at the market fair, which they now manage themselves. "Before, the middlemen took all our money. Now we know how to do our own administration and accounting."

What has changed life for them substantially is the *programa de alfabetización*, the campaign against illiteracy. They have learned to read and write Spanish, which is, of course, the language of power and commerce in that country. But first they began to tackle Quechua, the language in which they live their everyday life, in which they joke and express their emotions, in which they organize and reason and elect their officials and educate their children. This means, as Carlos Moreno, the head of the literacy program told me, that "the campesinos first become literate with words that describe the situations they are suffering and that, reflected upon, contain possible solutions. The first word that is written is *yacu* (water) because it is the lack of campesino control over water that determines their powerlessness. By the time they have read the first 15 core words, ending with *huanuj* (death) and *tsajama* (farming), they have in a sense reinterpreted their condition from a critical point of view." By mastering the transcribed word that depicts the reality, they are advancing on the road toward making reality itself different.

To further stimulate that awareness, the program, as do so many other socio-development projects in Latin America, uses art. Two groups of actor-musicians, all native-speaking Quechuans studying in Riobamba, have visited over 500 *comunidades*, performing and helping to create similar, though less-accomplished, groups in each place. They call themselves *Feria Educativa*, perhaps as a way of stressing that knowledge can also be exchanged, bartered, and hawked like argicultural products. The performers will often pass by a *comunidad* before the literacy campaign starts, as a way of motivating people or—as in the play I saw—to accompany a process that has already begun.

That evening, *Feria Educativa* played to a packed audience of some 400 huddled men, women, and children. The performance was based on a migrant's sufferings in Quito. Juan, the protagonist, was like the Indian in the story that the inspector from the Ministry of Education had told me: always ready to be cheated, exploited, ignored. He went to Quito to get some extra money, hoping also to bring back a little radio that his wife wanted. He brought back, instead, some bad experiences. The audience seemed saddened but would burst into laughter when Juan's misfortunes were evidently due to his excessive naiveté. After the play, several men stood up—and addressing the children especially—recalled how they had been treated this way some years ago. Now, the need to migrate was diminishing because the agrarian reform had opened up more land. But the land was insufficient, and many men still had to leave. This time they were not so easily fooled in the city because they had learned to read and write Spanish.

As the men talked, the women kept up a constant, low hum in the background. I was distracted, then bothered, until one of the educators explained that it is really beautiful if you understand the sway of the language. The men's speeches and the women's murmurs formed a second sort of play-ritual, the women often anticipating the men, almost foretelling their reactions, and then later, as if in an echo, discussing how to prevent the recurrence of migration, reminding each other of the hardships they had endured.

I am, in general, mildly hostile to theater with a message. As a writer, I tend to mistrust art that denounces a situation and hopes that social change will follow once people see how desperate their plight is. But that night, inside that freezing, windswept Evangelical church, wrapped up in a blanket that one of the performers had given me, catching sight of the moon-silvered sierra outside the open windows, that night among those people and their warmth, I set aside my aesthetic preoccupations and enjoyed the play along with them. These messages were not being sent by people from outside: they were returning to the community its own experience, and

I could feel the vibrations passing through the audience. Theater among them was more sacred and more primitive than for me. Nor did they leave me out. Just as Nereyda had, one month before, at the end of her performance, asked me, the foreigner and friend, to share her rhythm and her steps, so now the unwed women of that Quechua *comunidad* came to ask me and the people who were accompanying me to dance.

It was that sense of communion which I had come to Chimborazo to find.

Under Moreno's guidance—he is called *El Jefecito* by the Indians of the region—the program has recognized that people are not educated only by what they formally learn but by the way in which they produce their food and by the way in which they organize. A series of economic and social projects have been set up, based on the 1,200 Indian educators who are in charge of the literacy program and who now constitute an extended network of community organizers. Although these activities were primarily economic—bakeries, artisan workshops, *locales* for the making of traditional clothes—each had, nevertheless, cultural implications.

What fascinated me above all was the idea of the communal bakeries. Here, I thought, I would be able to witness the marriage of cul-

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ture and production. On a first, immediately perceptible level, the bakeries were generating employment, helping to enrich the quality of the local diet, and making profits that could then be plowed back into the educational and social programs. On a second level, the communities were being provided with "working classrooms," where people could learn lessons in management and self-confidence.

But I was interested in a third and, I presumed, deeper level. Bread is a sacred food in most civilizations, and the way in which it was baked, I hoped, would hint at a link to the Indian cosmology. I kept conjuring up the notion of a traditional, wood-burning, adobe-like oven: the kind that the forefathers of the present campesinos might have once used.

I could not have been more perplexed on my first visit to a *panadería*. There it was: a shining, modern, metal monster that ran on gasoline. The ancient one I had imagined, it seems, was not only more expensive to build and operate, but fueling it meant cutting down trees needed to prevent soil erosion. Furthermore, such an oven had never been extensively used in that part of the Andes. Bread was not even baked until the Conquest. The man in charge did not seem nearly so interested in debating how his forefathers had made bread as in impressing upon me the exactness of his accounting methods and the immaculate cleanliness of the bakery's operation.

I was duly impressed. There can be no doubt that an industry such as this one provides the community with skills in the manage-

ment and allocation of a much-needed cash flow. Yet I had expected something more; and later, when I looked at what had happened to the handicraft and cottage industries, I wondered again about the relationship between culture and production. Instead of emphasizing cultural rescue, what seemed to matter most—and with their poverty, who was to blame them?—was jobs. New skills were being taught—shoe-repairing, hat-making, haircutting—to replace services previously bought in the cities.

Still, the oven nagged at me, and I kept on interrogating people about it, hoping to find something behind my original intuition. Finally, on my last day in Riobamba, a Saturday when the program offers a sort of open house where scores of representatives from the *comunidades* come—as if in a *feria intelectual*—to discuss their programs, problems, and solutions, I found the germ—or was it a seed?—of an answer.

José Balla Parco, a campesino leader from El Cebollar Alto (The High Onion Field), recited the benefits from the bakeries. We were squatting on a sun-drenched terrace, talking in low tones as if something intimate and confidential were in our conversation. I asked him through my translator if they had ever baked bread before the new ovens. Once every year, he answered, on the second of November, the Day of the Dead: that day every family bakes and offers bread to the dead in the cemetery. More important, they offer it to the living, especially to the smaller children who run from house to house, giving them bread in the name of family members who have died. (A sort of Quechua “trick or treating?”)

I paused to think this over and a series of thoughts rushed out. I did not stop to phrase them in a way that would be “understandable.” I just let the ideas pour out. Did not this mean, I asked, that every day had become a bit like the Day of the Dead, as if they were being resurrected in the bread that he and his community now baked and ate together?

The translator answered, yes, that I was right.

Of course, this may have been a form of politeness. An Indian will not lightly contradict a blond, white foreigner. But it seemed important that the same campesinos who once shared bread on the Day of the Dead now share, every day, not only the loaves but the work that goes into them. Every man in the community volunteers a free day of his time, establishing a permanent and stable communal labor force. This form of cooperation institutionalizes and regularizes the *minga* (traditional community workday), which has long existed among the Andean Indians. Traditionally people pitch in together once in awhile to meet community needs (building a road or an aqueduct, harvesting) or personal needs (constructing a house for newlyweds). Each *minga* invariably ends with a fiesta; and any fiesta worthy of the name, according to anthropologist Louisa Stark, must offer bread to the participants—as well as chickens and oranges. These foods, bought in stores, are associated with the dominant white culture. Bread, therefore, has always been a real and expensive treat.

Did this mean that the campesinos were now using the bread they baked to celebrate their own liberation—eating each morning the food once available only to the man above? Wasn't the bread, like their new literacy, a symbol renewed each day that said Indians too could stand on their own feet and breathe their own words as well as the words that had been alien to them for so many centuries? And wasn't each day in which they were masters of their own destiny, in a sense, a fiesta? After all, countless development projects have failed here and elsewhere because they simply do not interest the people involved. Couldn't this be an explanation of the success of these bakeries, a self-affirming process—beyond economic gain—that is steeped in the culture and ceremonies of the participants?

I began to see that my idea of an old, traditional oven was faulty because I had searched for the foundations of the culture in its artifacts and not in more long-lasting and significant attitudes, values, and ways of working. The bread, though baked in a metallic and up-to-date contraption, has meaning because it is rooted in the Indian vision of the world. Understanding that this vision has been and still is being violated, the Chimborazo literacy program does not

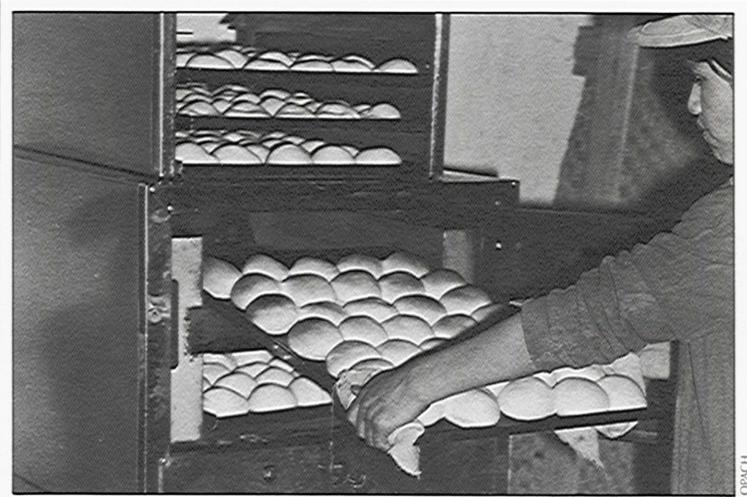
proselytize “modernization” as the primary goal for Indians. Oppressed people cannot be given marketable skills and opportunities without simultaneously strengthening their identity, because it has been precisely that identity that allows them to retain some core of their humanity in the midst of the overbearing humiliations of their lives.

In the Ecuadorian case, this respect for the Indian means teaching how to read and write Quechua before Spanish. In Bolivia, a different literacy program does not teach Spanish at all, but only Aymara. (There are 12 million Quechua speakers in the Andean countries, and 3 million Aymara, of which 1 million are found in Bolivia—if we are to believe the census.)

Under the auspices of the Instituto de Lengua y Cultura Aymara (ILCA), a nongovernmental organization dedicated to studying and promoting the Aymara language, thousands of adolescents and adults who already know how to read and write in Spanish are now becoming literate in their own native language.

This is an extraordinary undertaking.

When the Spaniards came, the only thing that the Indians kept intact was their language, which they clung to and preserved with a remarkable fierceness and sagacity. Who could have dared to anticipate that these people would continue to speak their own language 500 years after their power had been wiped out, their temples de-



Bread from new oven. Communal bakery, Chimborazo, Ecuador.

stroyed, their bodies reduced to subservience? And that, because their language was only oral and did not possess an alphabet, they would do this without the aid of writing? And that now, at the end of the 20th century, having resisted assimilation and acculturation, these Aymara people are transforming the oral language into a written one, trying to accomplish in a few decades what other languages took centuries to develop?

The man behind this renaissance is a small, unassuming, copper-faced man named Juan de Dios Llapita. Born in an Indian community, he did not speak Spanish until he was 10 years old. He learned of the beauties and trials of the earth and his race in Aymara.

It hurt him, and still does, that his native language is despised and that even many of his own people reinforce this idea. “I speak often to Aymaras who don't think it is important for us to read and write our own language,” he says. “I tell them that we are men.” He is sitting at his desk, absolutely unprepossessing, his hands clasped motionless. He speaks with utter simplicity, but he is not talking as one would to children. Rather, it is as if he were stating some immutable scientific law, as if he were pointing out that leaves move when the wind blows. “We have everything that men have: a heart, a stomach, a family. Our head is not empty. Why do we act as if it were empty? Do we know how to think? Do we know how to speak? Of course. We speak and we think all the time. Why should we not

have a written language like all other languages?" As he looks out onto the Plaza Alonso de Mendoza, where ILCA's offices are situated, I wonder if he sees the irony: after all, Mendoza, whose statue stands in the middle of the Plaza, founded La Paz in 1548 and inaugurated the troubles of Llapita and his forefathers. Or is the irony only in my head? Perhaps for the Aymara, ILCA's location is proof of the triumph of the language that was not supposed to survive the dead weight of the stones and the statues of the past, which, if they could, would continue to overshadow the present.

ILCA was founded in 1972, but Llapita's key insight occurred years before: he realized that the main obstacle to an Aymara written culture was the lack of an authentic alphabet. Two alphabets did exist. One was created by missionaries in order to evangelize, and the other, in the late 19th century, was designed to do away with the Indian "problem" by teaching them Spanish. Neither system conformed to the sounds of the Aymara language, imposing on it phonemes that did not exist and ignoring phonemes that did. An Aymara learning his own language with those alphabets would have encountered a deformed, dwarfed, unrecognizable version of what he spoke. By restoring to the language its legitimate structure, an authentic process of *alfabetización* could take place.

That process has thrived, though it has not been untroubled. External obstacles, such as geographic dispersion and student attri-

## Wasn't the bread, like their new literacy, a symbol renewed each day?



tion due to economic problems, are severe but seem surmountable. What is more worrisome are the psychological barriers. As I flitted from one center to another on the altiplano, I got the impression that some people, especially the *promotores*, were very enthusiastic but that others were lukewarm if not downright indifferent. Perhaps they were not ready to articulate their thoughts to a passing stranger, but I sensed some inner reserve—even puzzlement—especially in several classrooms of adolescents. In the silence, it was hard to be certain if the students were clear about the real benefits of being educated in their mother tongue. On the other hand, their own testimony hung eloquently from the classroom walls. Those same youngsters had hung up their first Aymara bulletin boards, each a mosaic of student work in devastatingly glorious colors. The little pieces of paper pasted side-by-side told legends and stories from their community, named the flowers and the hills, recounted heroic episodes from national history. All in Aymara.

One group was visibly bursting with energy and eagerness, a group of mothers gathered in one of the most remote neighborhoods of La Paz. Traditionally, women have been the guardians of the language. They have kept Aymara alive and have transmitted it to their children. This particular group was furious on the day I visited because, for the third time in three weeks, the *promotora* had not appeared for the lesson in Aymara. Now a discussion was under-

way to see if she should be replaced.

As the women debated, a calm whirlwind of activities continued: rugs and cloth were being woven; wool was being spun; here and there, mothers shifted their suckling babies from one breast to another or toilet trained other children. Somehow, the peaceful harmony of that scene, the naturalness with which the conversation seemed to be one more everyday act, helped me to understand that there was nothing abstract about their need to learn how to write in their own language. Slowly, passionately, they began to talk about that need. They felt that their oral language was becoming increasingly deformed and that learning how to write it was a way of correcting and purifying it. And they also felt that they spoke Spanish poorly, in a half-tongue. By learning to write Aymara, they would differentiate it from Spanish and speak that language better. They understood how important it is to defend their ethnic identity and how vulnerable their children are to assimilation. They knew that kids can easily drift away from the community and its values and that language acts as an anchor.

Each woman had her say and spoke at length. There was no interrupting her, not even to beg for a quick translation. The words spilled out, one after another, on and on until the last period. Since Aymara is a polysyntactic language that constructs its sentences by adding suffixes to a root, the complete meaning arrives only at the

p'isapa		UTJIW MANQANATAKIXA 
	t'anta	T'imp'u.
ch'api		Challwa luxru (walla-qi).
	k'an'ka	Saxta.
q'asa		Warxata.
		P'isqi. 

AYMAR P'AMILLA  
 Aymaraxa  
 awk taykaxa  
 wawanakapampiwa  
 jaki.

Awk taykaxa  
 yapu yapuchi  
 jilir wawanakapaxa  
 awk taykaruwa  
 yapuchaña yarapi.

Sullka wawanakasti  
 waka awati  
 iwija awati  
 umsa wavuniraki.

JDY/1983

chacha      warmi



An Aymara primer.

end; so my waiting paralleled the structure of the language itself. Listening, I could visualize the words massing and snaking in my mind like the walls of the ruins of Tiwanaku—the oldest and greatest civilization in pre-Columbian Bolivia—where the giant stones fit, one next to the other, with a balance and perfection that does not detain their liquid energy.

This dynamism, however, presents another sort of problem. Aymara culture is full of songs, riddles, proverbs, prayers, poems, legends, even popular theater, but nothing has been fixed on paper. The rural teachers, the promotores, the students remain uncomfortable with the written word. Yet as words are written, the spoken language will be modified, and the structure of Aymara will change: that is inevitable, a law of linguistics. What will happen then to certain traits that only exist in oral culture? How will they cope with scripted literature? But this is a dilemma for the future, when the language begins to develop a written tradition, when the Aymara start translating—why not?—Shakespeare and Dostoevsky, when the Indians begin writing original books in their native language.

For the moment, however, the Aymara are obsessed with memory and making up for centuries of lost time. What for ages had existed only in that fluid, unfixed zone of remembering must now be transposed and riveted. ILCA has organized meetings for elderly Indians to transcribe their stories, many handed down from ances-

tors no one living has met. In turn, each alphabetization session begins to resemble those bulletin boards I saw in the school high up in the altiplano or these meetings of elderly Indians. The promotores also act as researchers into the communities they serve, collecting wisdom and customs, fixing them to paper before going on their way. This is the stage of culture, after all, that the Greeks went through with Hesiod and Herodotus.

I was astonished at their work. Don Francisco, for instance, showed me just one booklet he had produced out of one of the communities where he had been working. First came a section on agriculture: what the community produces, how farmers prepare the earth, the sicknesses of domestic animals and how to cure them. Then came several pages on plants, medicinal herbs, and their uses. Names, names, names . . . of the hills, of the rivers, of the islands on Lake Titicaca. Words for the wild animals and the birds that fly and nest. The identification of each stage of infancy and adolescence and maturity and the role of each person at each stage. Behind each name is a story; and behind each story is a person, a voice, a memory. Every community is elaborating its own booklet. And this reminded me of Homer: to keep the past from being lost, each community is preparing a history of itself, as far back as the elders can remember.

Nurturing this capacity of a people to relive and therefore reinter-



Aymara elders after sharing stories with Juan de Rios, right.

pret their own history may be the single most important achievement of these literacy programs. Indian stories of resistance and rebellions, heroes and heroines, of the wars they lost and the memories that they did not lose have been suppressed in the official textbooks. Without that connection to the past, the marginalized person is unable to construct a significant future.

This need to write about what had happened, so that it would not be forgotten, so that the dead would live again, is something I also found in Ecuador. José Balla Parco, who had pointed out to me the relationship between bread and the Day of the Dead, has devoted his life to the rights of the Quechua nation. When he was 22, he was expelled from the Hacienda San Martín, where he was born, because his constant agitation and attempts to organize others had made him a nuisance. Many years later, educated through the literacy program of Chimborazo, the same Indians who were scared by his activities recognize that his ideas were right but, unfortunately, "ahead of their time." Balla Parco thinks, on the contrary, that these are not his personal insights but a renewal of the collective past. This revival has been a struggle. As a child, Balla Parco was sent to the hacienda school and was punished each time he spoke a word in his native Quechua. For hours he was made to kneel on stones till he bled; thistles were stuck in his tongue. He almost came to hate himself for being an Indian. Yet, if he finally was able to overcome that

experience and become a great communal leader, it should not be surprising. His grandparents had told him stories about Plácido Parco, a great uncle who, at the beginning of the century, had led the campesinos against one of the most powerful landowners of Ecuador. José Balla Parco has not let that story die. He has spent long months meticulously researching the past so that it would continue to inspire future generations.

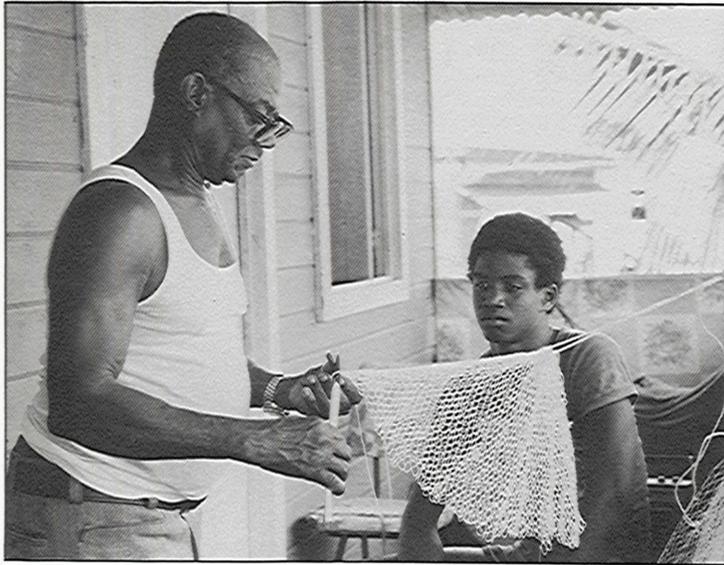
I found this same emphasis on people researching their own heritage as a complementary part, or necessary consequence, of nearly every project that I visited; but in only one, in the province of Talamanca on the Atlantic Coast of Costa Rica, was that sort of approach the axis around which a whole educational program was built.

During the last three years, high school students have been investigating their own communities, using their weekends and leisure hours to talk to relatives and neighbors. In attempting to uncover the past, the students have also discovered a more inhabitable present, different—because more clearly seen—from the one that most of them, until this project, only desired to escape. They wrote up their reports and published them in their own magazine, *Nuestra Talamanca . . . ayer y hoy*, of which three issues have appeared. The Costa Rican Ministry of Education, which is partly financing the project, has distributed the magazine to schools throughout the land, hoping that it will be imitated elsewhere, but above all, using the periodical as a way of informing the rest of the country about Talamanca (somewhat in the way that the authorities of INDESUR promoted a regional ballet in the Dominican Republic). Because the rest of the country—predominantly white and Spanish-speaking—knows little about its Caribbean coast and does not show much interest in knowing more.

Talamanca mixes races and languages in ways not usually found, at least in these same proportions, in Latin America. There are whites, of course, but they are a minority. Traditionally, they were the elite of the province, the people who held the high administrative or commercial posts. More recently, there has been an invasion of *precaristas* (poor white peasants in search of land). And then in the jungle there are Indians, also a minority, who still speak their native tongues, the most important tribe being the Bribri. And finally, the majority: descendants of English-speaking blacks who migrated from the Caribbean islands. First, they came as ex-slaves in the early 19th century, and then as masses of workers for the United Fruit Company. For most of their history, the Talamanqueños have lived in isolation from the rest of the nation. In fact, until 1948 there was an unwritten law that forbade blacks from traveling to San José.

Among the articles that the boys and girls have written, several document the means of transportation used by their forefathers. Like the characters in García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Talamanqueños were obsessed with communicating with the outside world and demanded roads. And like the people in Micondo, now that the roads have come, they are not sure whether it was such a good idea. Residents discovered that the benefits that followed being linked to the world—such as more education and health care, more efficient marketing of local products, some electricity, a few phones—have been accompanied by a series of disasters. The province was opened to the disintegrating elements of contemporary life: deforestation and pollution, the dying out of fish and fauna, the land being bought up by speculators or by the German and American hippies who have also introduced their drug culture to the area. Although the roads cannot be directly blamed for the worst catastrophe of all—the plague of the *monilia* that has withered the cocoa leaves—residents tend to see a mysterious, perhaps magical, link between the penetration of the modern world and the sickness that destroys their crops. But the greatest worry is for the young. The road that allows so many strangers—and strange things—into Talamanca is the same road that the young take to leave in droves.

The educational project hoped to reverse the trend towards deracination and migration by getting those young people to learn about their community. The idea came to Paula Palmer, a North American teacher who visited Cahuita (a village in Talamanca) for a



Arnold Heidekamp

Bobby Walter, a Puerto Viejo fisherman, shows student, Jorge Hudson, how to make nets.

## You may not care, but we do.

High school students surround Bribri Indian informant (in hammock) in his thatch and palm-bark house. A student's aunt (standing, right) translates.



Paula Palmer

couple of days in 1974 and who so fell in love with the place and its people that she decided to stay after being offered a job teaching English at the local school. She soon found herself listening in wonder to the stories that people wove about the past and would go back to her house and spend hours writing about them in her diary. Eventually, she began to work on a book. In *What Happen: A Folk-History of Costa Rica's Talamanca Coast*, the people themselves spin out the old and recent history of the region through vibrant, spicy folk-telling. "I thought," says Paula, "if I am that fascinated, why can't the young feel the same thing? Why not get the students to start researching their own roots? What better way to involve them in the community and get the community to realize all the cultural strength it has in its own heritage?"

The erosion of that heritage had been worrying the leaders of Talamanca for some time, and when she took her idea to COOPETALAMANCA (a cooperative of small farmers formed in 1978 to obtain agricultural supplies and services), it was well received. Most of COOPETALAMANCA's members understood that the cooperative had to go beyond the marketing of coconuts and cocoa and address the issue of the community's ultimate survival as an independent, organic entity. Although unconvinced that Palmer's plan might really change things, they decided to back it. "She's mad, I thought," confessed Paul Rodman, the president of COOPETALAMANCA. "I didn't think it could be done . . . But it's worked. I can see the difference in the kids. Several of them weren't interested in anything. Then they started to ask questions, to care, to find out how this had been made, how that had got here. That was the sort of education they needed. Not an education that takes them away, but one that lets them belong. And now they do seem to be getting involved."

Other members of the cooperative are not so sure that the trend has been reversed. George Hansell, one of the members who most enthusiastically supported the project, wonders if its effects will last. "The young people are different nowadays," he told me. "They no longer love the land or respect the sea as I was taught to do. They're pretty boys who don't care to do a day's work. As soon as they're old enough, they're off to the big city, ready to buy all the things they have seen the tourists wearing and using."

George is not so old himself. A jolly, vital man in his late 30s, he still lives in a house on the same beach where his great-grandparents landed over a century ago. "In the daytime they fished and then used the same net at night to keep the wild beasts away. They're the ones who planted the coconut groves. I planted my first tree when I was five. My granny showed me where. And now the government comes and tells us that nature planted the trees by the sea and that they belong to everybody. 'Oh, how pretty!' they say. They don't know that we have protected these trees for over a hundred years. They don't seem to realize that those trees are my farm. That law is a disaster."

George is probably right about the law, but he may be wrong about the young people. Zeidy, an energetic black teenager, told me that she had done her research precisely on the law that George so categorically rejects. This law mandated state ownership of the first 200 meters inland all along the coastline, ostensibly to control tourist development and protect resources. "Who could preserve the coast better than the people who have done so all these years?" Zeidy asks. "Those beaches are beautiful because our ancestors made them beautiful." She rejects provisions of the law that prohibit farming and house repair on those first 200 meters. "It wasn't researched properly," she says, implying that the authorities might have studied the matter with her own thoroughness. "If they had taken the trouble to speak to the people and find out our history, they might not have made such a misguided policy. If you want to reach the branches, first you've got to go through the roots. You've got to find out where you came from, how your ancestors lived, what they did, or you're lost." And yet, this same Zeidy was originally one of the skeptical students. She had heard about the educational project and was not interested. "What did I care about history?" she said. "I thought I knew everything that I needed to know. Why should I waste my time on something boring?"

When she finally did begin to work, she underwent a deep conversion. As with so many young people that I spoke to and who had been through similar experiences, she does not intend to leave Talamanca. She is now, in fact, one of the busiest organizers in the committee against the law she investigated.

Her story is not unique. I was only able to speak to a dozen of her former classmates. Most are, after all, dispersed now over hundreds of square miles of rugged terrain; but those I did meet were bursting with energy and initiative. One of the girls was setting up an artisan cooperative based on her research; another was trying to learn more about medicinal herbs, yet another had decided to restore a sacred area in the bush where her Indian forefathers had worshipped.

Not all the cases involved the rediscovery of racial roots. Paula Palmer told me the story of Jorge, who had never been a distinguished student. Jorge had joined a weekend expedition of several students that had journeyed into the remote forests of the Bribri. Except for Ana, whose parents lived there, none of the group had ever been to that area or spoke the native language. When the party finally arrived, after hours of walking, they looked like a pack of muddy scavengers—shoes bursting, clothes ripped apart, bodies dizzy from fatigue. They sat and listened to Doña Apolonia, a 91-year-old Indian speak in Bribri to Ana's parents. "We couldn't understand a word," Paula recalled. "And then, suddenly, Doña Apolonia told a joke and Ana and her mother and father roared with laughter, and we all joined in. And that was an essential moment. We had been so impressed by our differences, how distant we all were, and now we saw the common humanity. You should have seen Jorge's face. It was . . . well, transfigured."

Doña Apolonia then sang a lilting, sad song. Her guests understood the sorrow without grasping the meaning of each word. "When we returned to the school with the cassette," Paula continued, "even before we translated it, Jorge wanted to listen to the cassette. He listened to it every day and then kept on listening later—when we found out that Doña Apolonia had sung that she was sad because she could not communicate with us. Jorge even got a photograph of her. The other kids began to tease him. You know, 'Jorge's in love with his own grandmother,' that sort of stuff. But he didn't seem to care. He said that he wanted to learn Bribri. He didn't say 'the Indians have got to learn Spanish.' Or English. Not at all. 'We've got to learn Bribri,' he said. And in fact, we have started Bribri classes for the first time at the high school. One of the students who worked on the magazine is the teacher."

And Jorge?

Though he has now graduated, he still wants to continue writing. He recently offered an article for the next issue of the magazine; but that issue must, naturally, be used for new students. So his needs, and those of so many other young people who continue to use the skills they learned to explore their own reality, may soon lead to the founding of a small monthly newspaper or a radio program. The energy continues to boil over, demanding new projects and initiatives.

All these graduates have, in fact, been so successful that this year's batch of students no longer harbors any disbelief regarding the program. When I visited them, in fact, they were getting ready to go on strike if the government did not send promised funds that would allow the program to continue. The students were desperate to begin. Having already selected their projects, they told me that even if the money was not forthcoming (the funds, by the way, were allotted a week after I left), they were going ahead anyway. Two boys intend to research the sports that their grandfathers used to practice. "Maybe we can revive cricket," one of them said. "Maybe we can play as they did in the past." Another kid was intrigued by the techniques that the Bribri used for their mud artisan work. Yet another wanted to find out about the nutritional properties of wild animals. And so it went. The catalogue of their intentions was as variegated as the incredible mixture of races that was evident in their faces: Indian noses, green eyes, and curly hair on black skin. Some were going to study the former campesino organizations to see if something could be learned for the present struggles; others were going to look at the dances of the Bribri; one girl was going to

ask her mother to help find out how the founding settlers of Cahuita had lived; another girl purported to know an old man 120 years of age who could illuminate for her the voyages from the Caribbean islands; yet another had decided to write down the legend of the Teribe, a serpent that had become a man; and much more.

Such enthusiasm was difficult to resist. But I decided to test it. "What if I were to say," I told them by way of provocation, and my voice became steel-hard, "that what you are investigating is of no interest whatsoever." They were silent, watching me. "Let's say that I come from San José," and I stood up and went to the door, left the room and then reentered, acting out my role, "and I walk into this room and say, 'Who cares about your culture? Why should I care about it?'"

One of the boys stood up and met my eyes. He knew this was a game. Or did he? "I would answer you: 'You may not care, but we do.'"

I could not have invented a better, more simple answer. He was contradicting me, which is always a promising sign that someone, especially if he or she is poor, really believes in what they are doing. He was proclaiming that the opinions that might come from the outside world, the world that held power over his *provincia*, that dominated his life, and that was so attractive and full of consumer goods and wise enough to produce them and offer them, were less important than his own opinions and those of his community.

He was sure of his own culture.

*Culture*. It is a word I have used often in these pages without definition. Perhaps I did not want to get trapped like Columbus into foretelling the form of treasures that I had not yet seen, but the term is as elusive and slippery, as difficult to pin down, as the silver in the llam-ilam trees. Thus far, each time I have employed that elastic word, I have been careful to confine it to an anthropological meaning: culture as a way of life, not as an artifact. The kids of Talamanca, Puerto Plata, Bogotá, and Santa Cruz, the Indians of Bolivia and Ecuador, the peasants of the Sudoeste in the Dominican Republic—each group, in order to emerge from a depressing marginality, has had to depend on its own culture. That living tree, with all its foliage and secret inner growth, provides the foundation for the self-awareness that allows the exploration of individual or group identity without which there can be no autonomous goals or real economic participation. Here are the real El Dorados—forests of them—which Columbus and so many of his followers missed as they searched for riches.

Culture, of course, can also be used as a synonym for art, and we have seen that art is, indeed, frequently part of that exploration of identity. When the Dominicans dance, when the Quechua sings, when the Aymara tells a riddle, when a tiguere recites a *décima*, none of them sees art as being essentially different from their culture as a way of life. It is an activity at which some may be more talented than others but which, in order to be enjoyed, requires nothing more than membership in a community. The aesthetic code is embedded in the social code.

But if one were to ask these same people how to tell if someone is "cultured," they would look elsewhere. They would probably point to a person who consumes certain elaborate aesthetic and intellectual products that professionals have created. If pressed, uneducated people might also notice that those products are not usually marketed by their creators, that the products are not easily comprehensible, and that to delight in them implies a certain status, a sign that one belongs to a certain class or caste. They might add that they do not normally consume those products, but that if they were better educated, they probably would.

Although there is a deep dividing line between what we could call elite culture and culture as a form of popular consciousness, in Latin America that line is less deep and sundering than might be assumed at first glance. Without delving deeply into the matter, it can be safely stated that some of the best Latin American art, music, drama, and literature could not have been created if the authors had been isolated from their countries' popular traditions or life. This does not mean that those works are automatically accessible to large

masses. Some artists did not intend to extend beyond the range of a relatively selected audience. But many of our most enduring and relevant works of art have either been created with a vast public in mind or could potentially appeal to that public if only the means existed for reaching it.

A small outreach experiment underway in Argentina demonstrates, I believe, the value of finding those means. *Gente y Cuentos*, as its title indicates, brings together people with stories. The people are men, women, and adolescents who reside in two working-class neighborhoods in Quilmes, a town on the far periphery of the industrial belt that skirts Buenos Aires. Most but not all of these people are literate, though they generally restrict their reading to newspapers and magazines, penny novels, and comic strips. One or two had previously read a couple of the authors offered to them, but the majority did not even suspect the writers' existence. Now, once a week during the last year, the group has been given the opportunity to gather in a community center and enjoy, for the first time in their lives, short fiction by Argentinian and Latin American writers such as García Marquez, Rulfo, Galeano, Manuel Rojas, José Luis González.

The model for this experiment was developed by educator Sarah Hirschman in her work with Hispanic communities in the United States. Sessions consist primarily of free-wheeling, in-depth discussions of a story. The participants have no academic training or literary background, so their analysis of the meaning of each fiction is always related to their own lives. Readers illustrate their ideas with anecdotes, legends, and experiences and will often also spend some time arguing over problems that are alluded to in the stories. To keep the conversation from drowning in a sea of anecdotes, Lucas (a university graduate student in literature) helps to steer it back to the fiction, but his presence remains discreet.

The sessions are lively and amusing and produce a veritable x-ray of the lives of the urban poor. Unfortunately, I am not at liberty to describe any of this in detail. So that people could speak freely without the sense of being "used" or "studied" by reporters or academics, the sociologist Mary Feijóo—who coordinates this project out of the Centro de Estudios de Estado y Sociedad, a research center in Buenos Aires—has reached an agreement with participants that bars concrete reporting about their names, activities, and backgrounds until they themselves authorize written accounts. Mary, who has gained their trust by working with the community for several years in their efforts to redress a housing swindle, feels that this guarantee gives participants some control over how their lives are presented.

If I am restrained from presenting the savory and spicy interchange among the cast of characters, I can, however, explain in general terms what they derive from the sessions. In a first, most obvious sense, the new readers are being given the opportunity to develop certain communication skills and to simultaneously realize that they have, in their memories, valuable instruments with which to understand their problems. Speakers lose their timidity, become more adept and fluid verbally, and learn how to voice their opinions publicly with conviction, logic, and coherence.

Mary Feijóo and Lucas believe that the participants are able to bring to community affairs some of the awareness of the social problems voiced in the sessions. But other outreach programs that are not based on stories might have transmitted those skills and heightened that awareness equally well. What is innovative about this project is its use of fiction. The stories that are read are real enough, enough like personal experiences, for readers to recognize the connections to life and feel included; but the stories are far enough removed, or should we say imaginary enough, for the readers to establish perspective. As they work on the fiction, trying to understand it, they have no choice, as Sarah Hirschman points out, but to work on themselves: they cannot hide from the implication of each tale if they want to enter into a dialogue with it. The story forces them to use their experience but, at the same time, frees them from it, creates a distance from which they can confront and explore their lives. It breaks the mental and emotional barriers with which they

have blurred their problems, the categories into which they have been boxed since birth, the confining names conferred by others and, therefore, commits their full creativity as human beings.

It may be that the stories can help in this process of liberation because the people read them without expecting any immediate, practical return or profit. What they got out of the sessions, everybody repeated to me, was sheer pleasure. After having spent two or so supposedly useless hours discussing a literary text that had not been meant for them, they felt—dare I use this word in an article about the poor in Latin America?—*happy*. Not satisfied with their condition or passive about their luck: simply happy that they had been able to anticipate and exert in literature the freedom they could not find in society.

Gente y Cuentos, therefore, seems to be an experiment in democracy and pluralism, in self-respect and mutual tolerance. In a sense, the most appropriate metaphor for what happens during those sessions is the Argentine institution known as *mate*. *Mate* is a strong herbal tea that is passed around in a gourd during long conversations. One person prepares it and the rest sip its contents. Then it is the next person's turn to fill the gourd with boiling water and sugar and more tea leaves. Around the circle, again and again. The mate,

One person  
prepares the *mate*  
and the rest sip  
its contents.  
Around the circle,  
again and again.

like the story, belongs to everyone, just as music belongs to whom-ever dances to it. People can meet around a story, irrespective of age, politics, religion, geographical origins, and the participants in Gente y Cuentos were a disparate bunch. That some of them had more formal education than others conferred no advantage: there is no final authority on the meaning of the text. It is open to as many interpretations and opinions as there are readers and experiences. In a word, these stories do for these people what art should be doing for millions were they not excluded from the circuits through which it habitually flows.

By proposing that much of high art can indeed be understood and recreated by marginalized groups, this project complements and makes explicit the promise of all the others that I visited. It answers many questions: once people have become literate, once they have begun to emerge from marginality, what do they read, what is available to them, how do they continue to grow culturally, how do they relate to that enormous expanse of the world outside? That is, can they escape being forever enclosed in the nostalgia of their own past and heritage, making folklore into a prison? Gente y Cuentos supposes that, with the right methodology, a whole reserve and universe of culture can be opened to everyday people.

Thousands of miles to the north, in the Dominican Republic, the multifaceted Casa de Teatro shares that certainty. Since 1974, when it was founded, it has been trying to prove that culture does not have to be the exclusive domain of the rich, the powerful, the already educated. This has meant, as we have seen with Nereyda's

ballet, that it encourages local groups in the barrios to develop their own folk culture, giving them recognition, assistance, and a national outlet. A frantic outreach program, both to the general public and to the poor of the countryside and the city, has been underway for years. By promoting scores of exhibitions (ceramics, sculpture, photography, paintings), by sponsoring puppet shows and drawing classes, theater festivals and recitals, by publishing the books of promising young authors and recording the songs of experimental musicians, the Casa de Teatro has become something like an extra-official Ministry of Culture.

Unlike Gente y Cuentos, the Casa also looks beyond the finished products to the producers themselves: if culture is a meeting place, a cultural institution must help artists and intellectuals to find each other, to associate in cooperatives and pool their resources, and above all, to coexist. "We are the sons and daughters of the Casa," a number of the most prestigious Dominican cultural figures declared when we met in the Casa's spacious colonial house, just a few blocks away from the cathedral where Columbus is supposedly buried. The Casa is a meeting place in another sense. It has opened its doors to people of the most diverse ideas and ideological tendencies, stimulating what it calls a "*guerra de ideas*" (open forum), where unpopular views can be presented and debated publicly. This has often meant that the Casa has had to sustain a "*guerra*" that has nothing to do with ideas. During earlier years of repression, it was machine-gunned and raided by the police, painted over with obscene graffiti, and attacked viciously in the press. Less violent means of persuasion have also been tried: offers of government subsidies and contributions from various political parties. Even though always on the verge of bankruptcy, the Casa has rejected these overtures and managed to maintain its financial independence by relying on private donors and an extended staff of volunteers, most of them artists.

That the Casa has survived in a society as dramatically polarized as the Dominican Republic is testimony to the dynamic and remarkable man who is its founder and who first had the crazed intuition that such a project could work. Freddy Ginebra has kept the Casa alive by pouring all his spare time, and all his savings, into it. But not even a stubborn man like Freddy could have accomplished this much through will alone. His vision of a haven where people and artists could come together touches the deepest needs of Dominican and, indeed, of Latin American culture.

"It's strange what happens with culture," Freddy told me. "Even while it is being singled out for persecution and proclaimed as transcendental, it is also dismissed as ornamental and secondary whenever funds must be raised. Thousands of dollars can be spent to fly in a foreign rock star, and then hardly a cent is spent on local talent. For us in the Casa, culture cannot be postponed like that. If we lose our culture, we have nowhere to go; we lose the meaning of life."

If the Casa was born in order to give culture the central role it should have in the history of the Dominican Republic, it still has a long distance to travel. "*La cultura no se come*," a government minister recently told a group of actors who had come to ask for help. *You can't eat culture*. His words have been echoed by innumerable officials and economically powerful people all over Latin America. In Chile, intellectuals and artists had heard similar statements so often that when we decided to found a cultural magazine during the Allende years, we baptized it *La Quinta Rueda*. Culture is the *spare wheel* of the car: you never know you need it until you get a flat.

But as none other than a cabinet official has used an image associated with food to indicate the reason for neglecting culture in the Dominican Republic, perhaps it would be more appropriate to find a metaphor from the culinary world to justify island culture. Several times when I ate typical dishes, we were served rice and, in a plate apart, the burnt rice that is stuck at the bottom of the pot, the sort that must be scraped with a spoon. "This is the best part," my friends would hungrily exclaim. "*El concón*." *Concón*. What better image to describe Dominican culture? Nobody pays any attention to it, it's all charred and fragmented and left over. But the part that is thrown away in other places or is considered a nuisance for washing

The burnt rice  
that is stuck at  
the bottom of  
the pot.

is what tastes best, the indispensable ingredient to make the meal tasty.

And yet, a time may soon come when the *concón* will no longer exist. If people begin cooking with teflon pans, the burnt rice at the bottom could become a memory of the past. This is exactly what many artists in the Dominican Republic fear could happen to their own culture: that it could disappear and homogenize as their society modernizes, become a mere repetition or imitation of what is being expressed (and cooked) in more "advanced" nations, which have far more power to disseminate their own cultures and lifestyles.

The pressures that countries such as the Dominican Republic face have been described succinctly in a report prepared by a committee of Inter-American Foundation representatives who explored the consequences of social change:

The processes of industrialization, modernization, and urbanization in the Western Hemisphere have provoked a massive geographical dislocation of people and a profound disorientation in their ways of thinking and leading their lives. A part of these processes is a strong tendency toward cultural homogenization, propelled by policies of national integration and by increasing international communication and commerce. The values of the urban consumer society, promulgated by the mass media as well as by personal contact, radiate from the national metropolises which, in turn are heavily influenced by the international metropolises of the United States and Europe. The tastes and mores of the economically affluent urbanites of the Western world and their preferences for consumer goods set the standards . . . (If someone wants to achieve political, social or economic mobility, he or she will feel pressured into) . . . conforming to or assimilating the dominant cultural patterns . . . (which means that) . . . large numbers of people with other cultural origins find themselves in a situation of having either to shed the culture that gave their life meaning as they proceed into the 'mainstream,' or to recede more and more to the periphery of their national society.\*

But this dominant trend encounters a countertendency. The people themselves, and many of the artists, try to strengthen their own cultural roots, giving birth to a renewal of traditional folklore or the exploration of new forms of art that can contribute to national identity. Casa de Teatro has been able to grow, in spite of all its troubles, because it is part of this movement that searches for autonomy. The artists and intellectuals who use the Casa as their headquarters see the Dominican Republic at a cultural crossroads, fighting for survival as an independent cultural entity. With the zeal often found among missionaries, they are going about the task of saving their nation from the danger of cultural disintegration.

The difficulty of this monumental task can be illustrated by the work of Teatro Gratey, a promising group of nine talented and imaginative young actors who, under the direction of Danilo Ginebra, Freddy's brother, have been exploring the many ways in which theater can fortify and develop the self-image of Dominicans. As I already mentioned, they are offering training and technical assistance to a number of semi-professional and amateur groups across the country. Most of these groups pinpoint a particularly serious issue afflicting their communities: alcohol or machismo in the barrio, fraudulent land deeds in the countryside, corrupt trade union leaders in the sugar mills. They hope that by holding a mirror to those situations, people will feel compelled to analyze and organize.

These groups see theater as auxiliary to the ongoing political and economic struggle of the poor. The theory behind this strategy is that if you get across the right message, people will finally be edu-

\*Patricia Haggerty, Robert Mashek, Marion Ritchey, and Steve Vetter, "The Arts and Social Change," *Journal of the Inter-American Foundation* (Third Quarter, 1979) p. 2.

cated and see the light. Gratey itself has engaged in that sort of theater, especially during the tense Balaguer years, when the members of the company were jailed or harassed. When they called themselves *gratey*, it was a deliberate provocation: *gratey* is a Dominican version of poison ivy. "We wanted to make the audience itch," Danilo told me. "But also to think. One of our goals was to rescue forgotten episodes of our history. That was when we staged *Mi primera huelga*, which portrayed the first general strike by Dominican workers."

Gratey still presents this play from time to time, as well as others from earlier years, but they have also begun to explore new ground. With Nereyda, they have created a drama called *Tambores y Libertad* that exposes the tormented history of Dominican blacks, from their first arrival as slaves from Africa to the present day. The company is also interested in contemporary events. Their next play will be called *Regina Express*, after the name of the ship that used to smuggle Dominicans illegally into Puerto Rico. The plot recounts a day when captain and crew, to avoid discovery by the authorities, drowned their "illicit cargo" in the hold so that they wouldn't cry out during a surprise inspection.

This fascination with history has recently taken a strange and surprising direction. Feeling the need to study the Dominican theater of the past, the nine actors researched material for a book and slowly

Only one stated  
the intention to  
study medicine.  
Escape, escape, escape.

came to realize that a number of plays had been lost or forgotten. "The first important play after the independence," Danilo Ginebra explained, "was called *Antonio Duvergé*, and it tells the story of one of our founding fathers who was shot because he defended our right to an autonomous existence. We are hoping to stage that play next year." Meanwhile, this year they are already showing *Almas Criollas*, a *zarzuela* from the last century that has not been seen for 100 years and that, after exhausting detective work, had to be pieced together from different manuscripts.

Audiences, who are used to the group's outspoken social criticism, are astonished at such an apparently innocuous play: a rich city boy comes to the countryside, falls in love with a peasant girl, and finally persuades her to marry him and leave the rural youth she is promised to.

Gratey feels, however, that it is doing several important things with this play. While restoring a lost part of Dominican cultural heritage, the company is enlivening its repertoire with décimas, songs, and dances from the past. The drama also has undercurrents—generational conflicts, stifling patriarchal authoritarianism, the role of a field hand who has been adopted and feels outcast—that are still prevalent and can be given a contemporary twist. Finally, blacks were cast as the rural family victimized by the outsider.

The original play, of course, had an all-white cast. The new version lends to a love story racial overtones and tensions that it did not have a century ago. But these complexities mean that after the per-

formance is over, it is crucial to hold a *foro* in which people can discuss the work and draw conclusions. The troupe informed me that this is when they discover whether the audience has understood some of the play's more subtle messages or seen it as mere entertainment. A peasant woman, for instance, stood up one night and stated painfully that she recognized herself in "the mother" who was silenced and maltreated by "the father."

Unfortunately, the night I saw the play at the Santo Domingo barrio of Los Minas, the discussion was cancelled because of a pair of disorderly drunks in the audience. More is the pity, because the reaction during the performance was not what I had been led to expect. Though the audience was nearly 90 percent black, most people—fired by the enthusiasm of a noisy clique of adolescent girls—cheered the white city boy on and booed his black rival. The teenagers seemed oblivious that they were, in fact, symbolically rejecting the dark-skinned men who would someday be the fathers of their children. They had bought the dream that the mass media and the billboards had sold them, apparently thinking that it was desirable for a poor, black Cinderella to rise in the world by marrying out of her class and race. Perhaps it was the way the play had been cast, or perhaps the audience was merely rooting for lovers, but it seemed to me that instead of making people more critical of racial stereotypes, the performance unwittingly reinforced them.

Not that this reaction by the girls in that slum area was so unexpected. I had seen or would see similar illusions at work everywhere I went in Latin America. Just three days before, I had walked next to an adolescent who had once been a street urchin in Puerto Plata, who was now rather smartly dressed and whistling jauntily along. When I asked about his evident self-satisfaction, he replied that he had just spent a couple of nights with a lady tourist from New York and that he would soon follow her home and make it big. He then did a couple of steps that could have been from a Michael Jackson number (he didn't sing the theme from *Midnight Cowboy*, of that you can be sure).

A month later I asked some other Michael Jackson fans—girls who used to roam the Bogotá streets—what they wanted to be when they grew up. Four wanted to be TV actresses; three wanted to be singers; one wanted to be a fashion model; and six—yes, six—wanted to be airline stewardesses. Only one stated the intention to study medicine. Escape, escape, escape. Here and in the ramshackle *discos* of Santa Cruz and in the barrios of Quilmes and among many of the Indian children in Ecuador and Bolivia, everywhere the overpowering need to escape. For each spectacle that Gratey performs, for each reading of the *cuENTOS*, for each alphabetization session, for each kid asking about the origins of calypso music in Talamanca, a TV show is aired that reaches millions and sells the opposite values, perceptions, and consumer models while insinuating that the solution to the swamp in viewers' lives is to forget their own culture.

This seems to me to be the major limitation of all the efforts that I witnessed on these trips. None of them dealt with the mass media that are, after all, the fundamental way of shaping emotions and minds in our era. A cultural industry was lacking, of that everybody was conscious. "But how do we extend beyond face-to-face contact?" they kept asking. Of course, any immediate possibility of access through official networks or by creating an alternative mass media seemed remote. The costs would far exceed the current budgets of even the best-organized group. Indeed, rather than expanding, I found that all the projects were cutting back. Instead of looking for videotape, they were desperately scrounging for scotch tape. The generalized economic crisis, which affects Latin America at all levels, hits the perpetually underfunded cultural level hardest. These projects are kept going by the extraordinary self-sacrifice and determination that the participants have shown. Little relief is in sight.

The question, of course, is how can anybody justify investing in cultural initiatives on a continent where so many people need housing, medicine, food? How can anyone prove that these projects lead to some significant and palpable betterment in the lives of the dispossessed?

She was suggesting  
to me that hope  
is contagious.

To provide that proof is exceptionally difficult. Let's go back to that Gratey performance in the slums of Las Minas. Was it typical of what usually occurs? In fact, I witnessed something quite different when the company presented the first act of *Almas Criollas* to 3,000 campesinos who had spent several days discussing their problems as delegates at their First National Congress. The audience—mostly men, a few women, and no adolescent bobby-soxers—identified with the country folk in the play rather than with the rich white suiter. In fact, they entered so deeply into the fiction that one of the campesinos, who had been unable to recite his *décimas* to the Congress because of the late hour, was integrated by Gratey into the play, giving him a chance to perform as if he were one of the actors.

Watching this second, almost opposite reaction to the same play, I was puzzled. How could I judge Gratey's success or failure? Given the performance in the slums and the one at the campesino Congress, which was real, which illusion? Where was the silver, where were the trees? Who knows what else I may have missed on this trip, how much I misunderstood, how much I overinterpreted, how much I molded what I saw into what I wanted to see? But even if I—or some independent evaluator—could construct a reasonably accurate picture of what is happening, can the question that I did not want to ask when I began this trip and that I tried not to ask during the writing of this article and that I kept postponing until presenting all the projects, can that question now be answered: how do we measure the success of a cultural project?

The statistics, even when they are available, provide little help because it is not the quantity so much as the quality that matters. Of course, we can cite the many kids who no longer roam the streets, the reformatories that have been closed, the rises in production in this or that region. Who can doubt that the fewer illiterates in a society, the better things should go? Yet, the real advance consists in having made some people feel more human. How do you measure that? How do you measure the amount of dignity that people accumulate? How do you quantify the disappearance of apathy? With what machines do you evaluate someone's rediscovered identity, the power that they now feel to set their own goals and not merely take what others are willing to hand down? With what graphs would you chart the curves of increased memory, increased self-reliance, increased group solidarity, increased critical awareness? And how long must you wait before all the evidence can be presented and judged?

I returned from my trip with these same unanswered questions.

I also brought back a counter-question asked by a wide assortment of people who wondered whether it was possible to develop their country, their region, their neighborhood, or themselves for that matter, without first—or simultaneously—developing their capacity to produce thought, emotions, and communication. In other words, they asked if one can set out to raise the standard of living without respecting the quality of living, if it is worth expanding economically if one is not also expanding morally and aesthetically. None of the people who asked this question had fallen into the trap of nostalgia. In a continent where the desire for escape is so pervasive and the past is such a nourishing fountain, I had feared that many would see the solution to our problems in turning our backs on the contemporary world. But not one of those people rejected modernization. (For those who must clean the bottom of the pot, after all, it may be good not to have too much burnt rice.) Neither did they accept modernization indiscriminately. I feel that Paul Rodman, in Talamanca, spoke for them all when he put two fingers together and said: "We've got to have progress. But the progress has got to come without losing our hold on the past." And when he rubbed his two fingers together as if he were rubbing together the future and the past to celebrate a valid present, it was as if many other fingers and hands were making the same significant gesture, hoping to combine economic well-being with cultural autonomy.

Can this sort of synthesis be achieved? Once again, I only have tentative answers because what I am really asking is whether poor and oppressed people can shape the social, political, and economic world around them. Each of these projects starts out in a remote, in-

significant, troubled spot of Latin America, and even when the program manages to give the people who live there a better way to cope with their integration into the anguished fabric of mainstream society, it cannot guarantee that society will not end up frustrating and suffocating the people that it purportedly wants to welcome. What I mean is that, ultimately, if these projects are to be truly effective, the society in which they flourish must adopt the projects' philosophy and vision as a model for development.

I am not suggesting, of course, that programs of this sort must wait until major social change has occurred in the larger society. On the contrary, they can serve as models and examples of what can be accomplished under the worst of circumstances. The projects, invariably, perhaps inevitably, are born in the most secluded, least influential sectors of their worlds. They are so isolated, indeed, that the promoters of one program rarely have any notion of the existence of the others. *Gente y Cuentos*, for instance, would be a splendid way of complementing the work done with the gamines of Bogotá, just as the methods discovered in Talamanca would undoubtedly be valuable if applied in Bolivia. The sadness of this loneliness is tempered by the fact that the participants are rarely depressed about their possibilities of changing the universe beyond the boundaries of their small corner. They are sure that the strength and the example that they are creating will radiate and grow. In all of them I discovered an unmovable faith—fanaticism, I would call it, were it not so patient and gentle—in the capacity of ordinary human beings to control their own lives. They do not seem to care that the effects of the projects they are working on may, unavoidably, take many years to be seen. As Paula Palmer put it to me: "When someone is touched, as these kids have been, how can you tell what the final consequences can be? Who can say how this girl or that boy will help to change the world, will fight against injustice, will participate in decisions, will become a leader?"

She was suggesting to me that hope is contagious.

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The first objects that the boys who come into the program in Puerto Plata draw are ships. Enormous, lopsided, primitively sketched tourist ships. There is often a blue sea around the ship; at times, a plane in the air. But never a human figure—not a man, woman, or child.

I examined the drawings that those same kids had made six months later, when they were about to leave the program. No ships. They had depicted the countryside, trees, flowers, animals, and—once in a while—human figures, mostly children dancing or playing.

I was particularly moved by the drawing of a solitary human being inside a star. It had been done, I was told, by the boy who had been the most rebellious tiguere of the port, perhaps the king of the urchins, the one who seemed most destined to a life of crime.

But one drawing moved me even more. A boy had drawn the ocean. A wide expanse of blue with waves and birds and fish. A small figure on the beach.

Not a ship to be seen.

Instead of himself disappearing and being swallowed up by the tourist ship, the child had decided to make the ship disappear from his drawings. I cannot know if he has been able to eliminate that ship from his plans and his dreams as well.

But surely it is not too much to hope that the rest of Latin America can begin to draw like that child who used to roam the streets of Puerto Plata and beg for coins?



Della Goffé

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In Panama's virgin rainforest, Kuna Indians are encountering a threat to their cultural—and material—survival: the steady advance of slash-and-burn agriculture. Encroaching settlers are turning jungle into desert. Patrick Breslin, a novelist, and Mac Chapin, an anthropologist, describe how the Kuna are adapting to this challenge by turning part of their reservation into a forest park and wildlife refuge that includes research facilities for scientists from around the world.

## CONSERVATION KUNA-STYLE

PATRICK BRESLIN and MAC CHAPIN

When a Kuna Indian awakens on one of the small coral islands off the Panamanian coast where most of his people live, his gaze wanders past the thatched houses of his neighbors, out over the low-riding canoes of farmers headed for their mainland plots, and then across a mile or so of shimmering water to a mass of green forest rising, virgin and luxuriant, to the ridge of the San Blas mountains. At his back, the sun climbs above the calm Caribbean, and its first rays strike the tufts of mist snagged like fleece in the clefts of the hills. For generations, this dawn panorama, serene and unchanging, has greeted the Kuna people.

But if he were standing atop the 2,400-foot-high San Blas range, the view down the other slope would be less reassuring. Large swaths of thick vegetation have fallen victim to the machete and the torch. Ash-gray tree trunks stand above the denuded landscape, skeletal remnants of the once-towering jungle.

For several years now, peasants from the increasingly arid interior of Panama have been slashing and burning—implacable as soldier ants—toward Kuna land. Cattle drove many of them from their previous homes when ranches, producing beef for the international market, expanded onto farming land. And cattle are close behind them again. In three or four years, when

the newly cleared and shocked land will no longer support subsistence crops of bananas, rice, corn, and manioc, farmers will plant pasture and try to sell their holdings to the ranchers. In a few more years, the ecologically fragile soils will be so leached that even cattle-ranching will fail. The tracks of this future already can be read on the San Blas' southern slopes and lower ridges, where the erosion that will inevitably claim all the cleared acres has already begun.

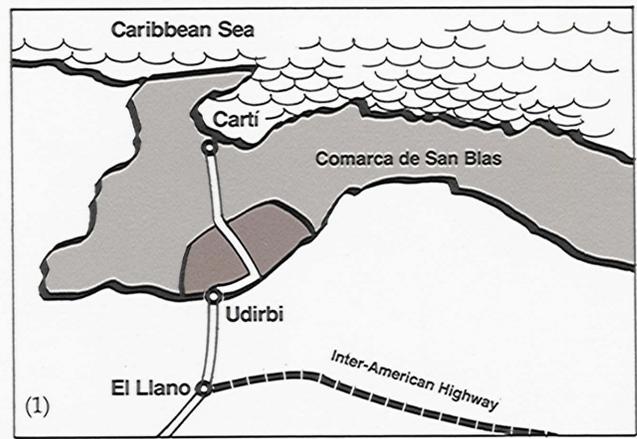
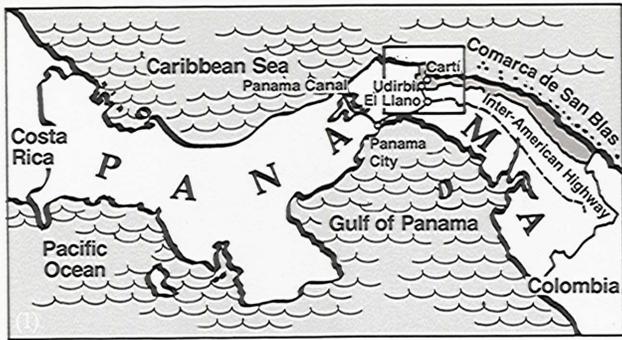
Panama's land-hungry peasants are involuntary recruits in the massive army of uprooted settlers that is on the march throughout the tropics. If unchecked, this process will complete the destruction of the world's tropical rain forests in our children's, if not our own, lifetimes. Some 900 million hectares of tropical moist forest remain; but it is disappearing, according to a 1981 United Nations satellite study, at a rate of 7.3 million hectares a year. Other, more pessimistic estimates put the annual loss as high as 20 million hectares.

If the tropical forests disappear, countless plant and animal species will vanish, many of them before man has had a chance to name, much less study them. About half the world's estimated 5 million to 10 million plant and animal species are found in tropical moist forests. Yet according to the

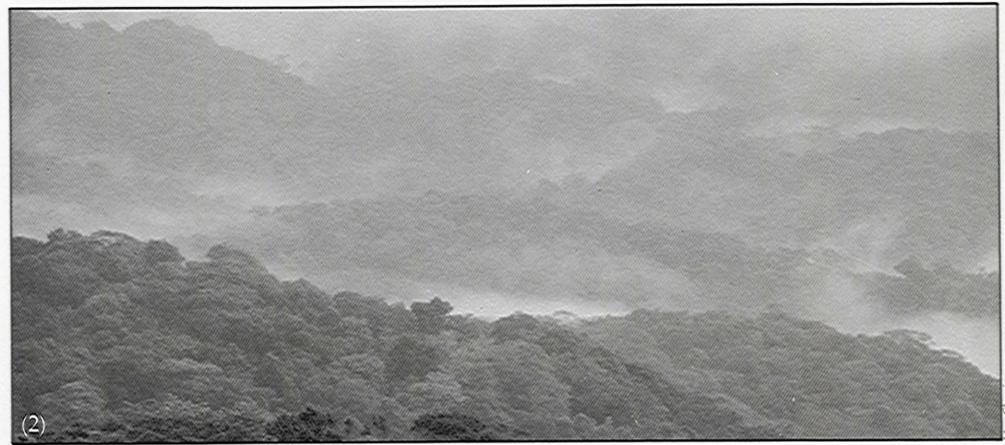
U.S. government's recent report, *Global 2000*, as many as 1 million of those species could be extinct at the end of the century.

In many parts of the tropical world, the assault seems uncontainable: expanding populations, central governments driving forward with development schemes, the spread of agriculture and ranching for the export market, the resulting concentration of land ownership that forces peasants to strike out for the frontier, all pose threats to the forests. But in Panama, a well-organized native people, with support from the scientific community and a host of international agencies, may be able to save one of the last remaining virgin rain forests in Central America. The Kuna have decided to turn part of their reservation into a forest park and wildlife refuge with research facilities for scientists from around the globe. When the administrative and housing center opens to scientists in late-1984, Udirbi will be the first park of its type in the world created and run by an indigenous group.

The Kuna are one of the few indigenous groups in all the Americas to survive the impact of the white man with their cultural and political autonomy intact. When the Spaniards made their appearance in the early 1500s, Kuna territory encompassed large tracts of the Darién jungle, spanning



The Comarca de San Blas, the traditional homeland of the Kuna Indians, stretches more than 200 kilometers along Panama's Atlantic coast. The inset beside the accompanying map shows the location of the Udirbi Park (1). Mist-shrouded rainforest within the Udirbi Park (2). Aerial view of a Kuna island village, with the coastal plain in the distance. Virtually all farming occurs on the mainland, within a few kilometers of the shore (3). Kuna farmer standing amid his densely intercropped forest "farm." He carries freshly harvested manioc roots; his crops include coffee, cacao, bananas, pineapple, chile peppers, and fruit trees (4). Two Kuna girls wearing their everyday dress: *mola* blouses, strings of multi-colored beads, and wrap-around printed cloth skirts (5). Dancers with pan pipes and gourd rattles performing in an island community (6).



Marc Chaplin



Marc Chaplin



James Howe



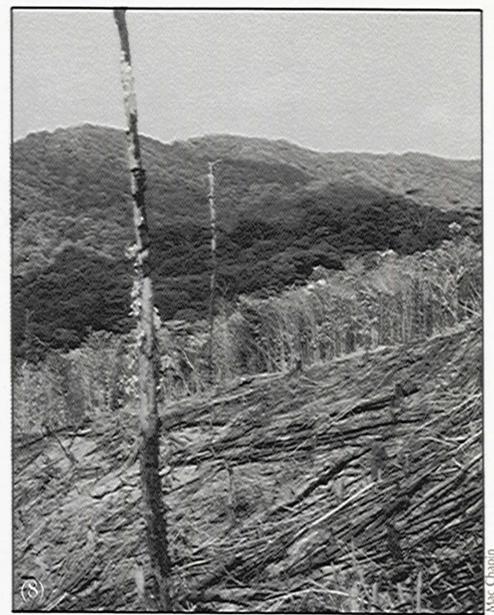
James Howe



James Howe



Marc Chapin

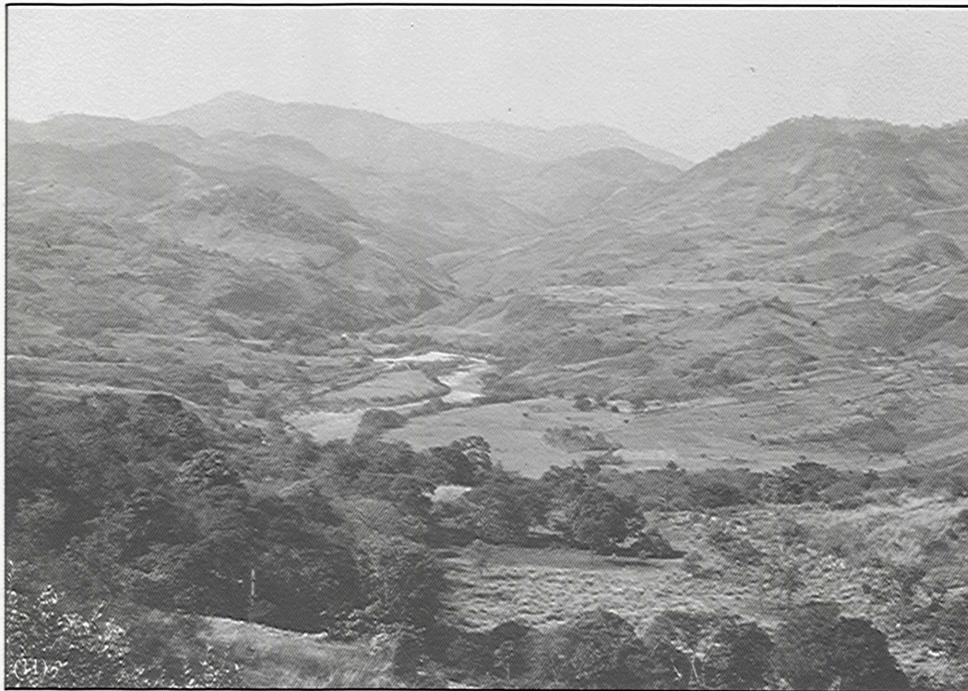


Marc Chapin

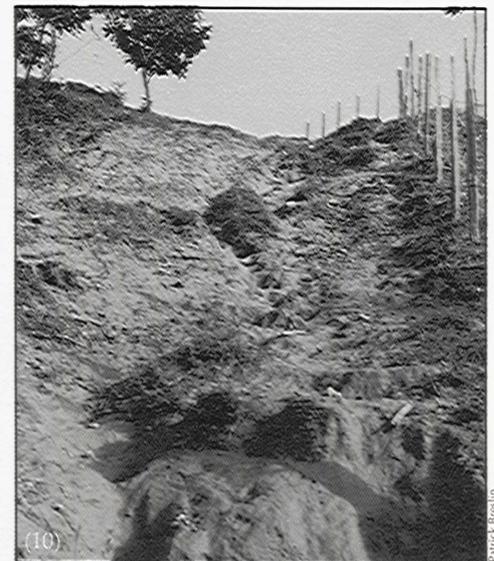


Marc Chapin

Much of the land on the southern slope of the Continental Divide is being deforested. The El Llano-Cartí road, which snakes through the hills toward the reservation, is a mixed blessing. Although it gives the Kuna easier access to the rest of modern Panama, it also serves as a conduit into Kuna territory for peasant colonists who are being pushed out of the heavily populated interior provinces. Forests within reach of the road have been devastated (7). Subsistence farms are carved into the virgin forest by slash-and-burn techniques (8). The fragile soils beneath the tropical forest are soon so leached that agriculture becomes unprofitable for the colonists, and the land is sold to beef exporters (9). With the trees cleared for cattle grazing, gulleys erode the land during the heavy seasonal rains. Where this is occurring along the El Llano-Cartí road, the land will be soon be virtually useless (10). Each year more and more virgin rainforest becomes arid and barren as cattle ranchers advance steadily into the mountains (11).



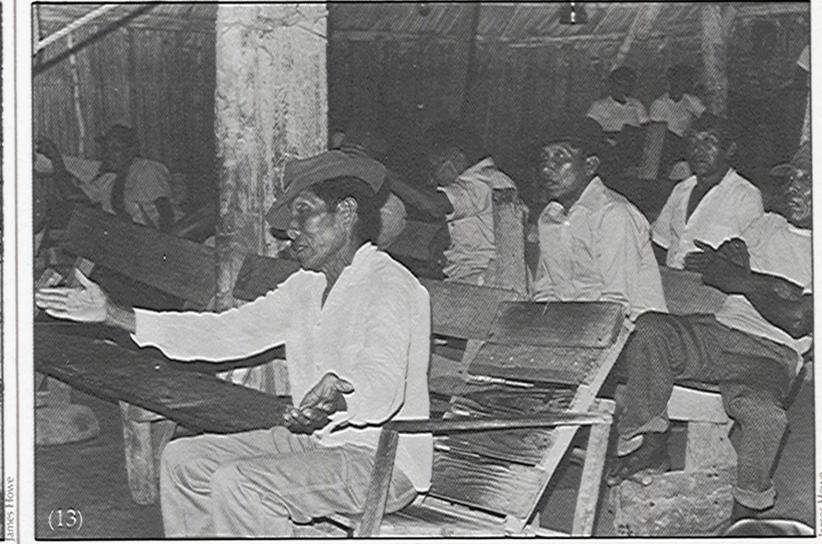
Marc Chapin



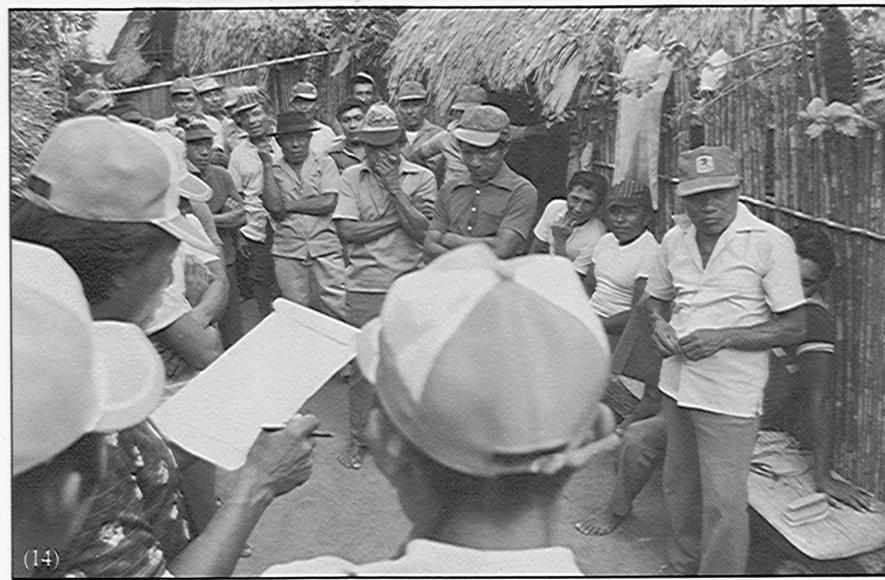
Patrick Breslin



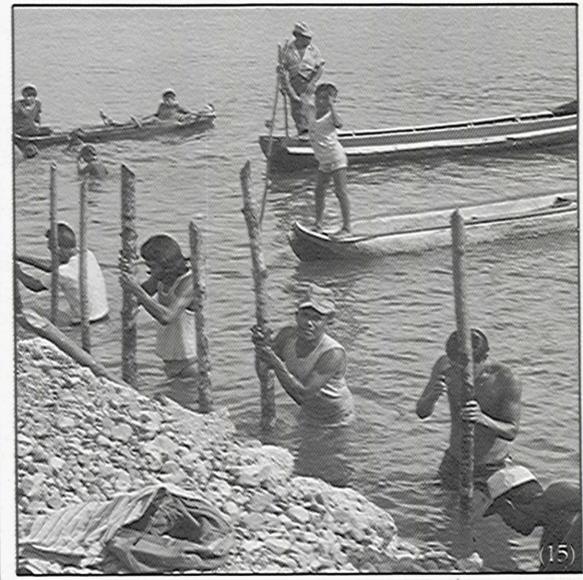
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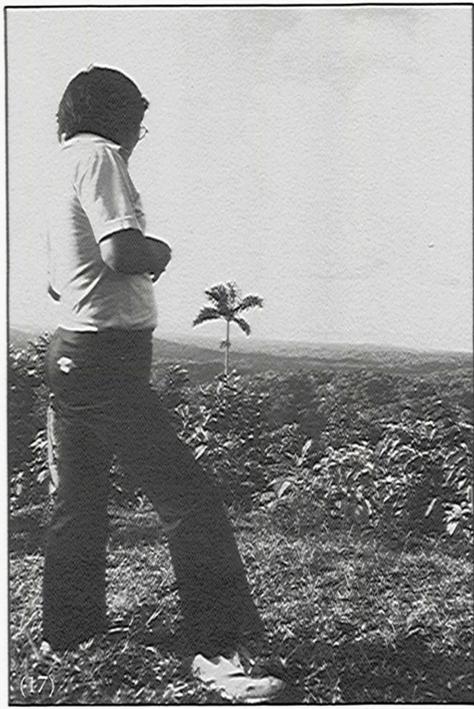


(15)

The Kuna have maintained their ethnic and political autonomy through their highly developed sense of organization, which pervades all aspects of community life. Kuna island villages are as tightly knit socially as they are physically (12). Virtually all construction—of individual homes, wharfs, community buildings—utilizes the shared-labor of collective work groups. Nightly meetings—to resolve and discuss major community issues—are held in village congress halls. Chants relating the history of the tribe are regularly performed during these sessions (13). Roll call is taken in the street as a work group discusses a project that is under way. All healthy adult males are expected to participate in this project; those who do not are fined (14). Men set posts for a landfill on the edge of an island village where a clinic will be built (15). Men returning to their boats after working on a communal farm (16).



(16)



Patrick Breslin

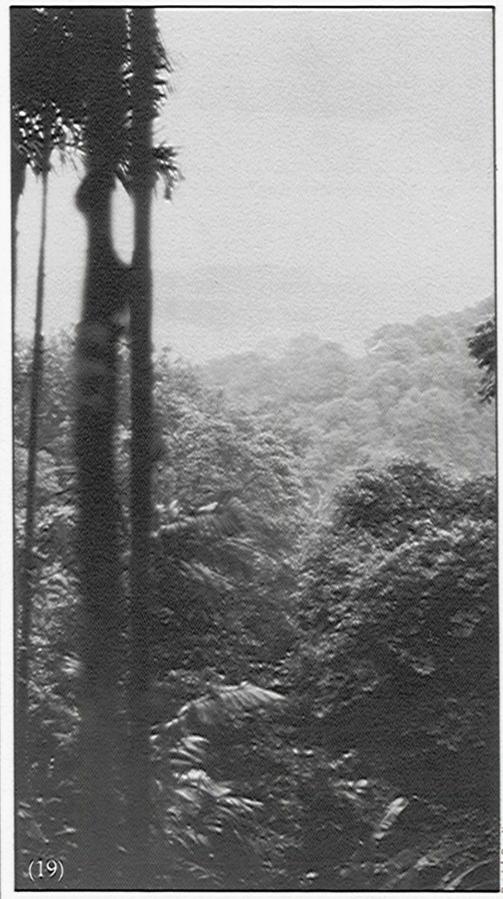
Standing on a knoll where park facilities will be constructed, Guillermo Archibold—Udirbi's technical director—looks toward the coast of San Blas, more than 20 kilometers away (17). A *nuchu*, or tutelary spirit, standing guard at the gate of the Udirbi Park. These carved wooden figures are traditionally kept in Kuna homes to ward off dangerous spirits (18). The lush forest of the Udirbi Park, located within two hours of Panama City by car, offers both scientists and interested laymen access to an ecologically unique and virtually unstudied area (19). Kuna boy poling his dugout canoe across the shallow coral reefs offshore; in front of him loom the forested foothills, then the mountains of the Kuna reservation (20).



Patrick Breslin



James Howe



Patrick Breslin

... the Kuna have  
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the isthmus from the Atlantic to the Pacific coasts. Over the centuries the Kuna have retreated into the Comarca of San Blas—a thin band of jungle running some 200 kilometers along the Atlantic coast, east to the Colombian border. Today, some 30,000 Kuna live spread out among more than 60 villages located on small islands hugging the coast or at the mouths of rivers.

Living in this jungle fastness, which until recently could only be reached by small plane or launch, the Kuna have evolved into the 20th century largely on their own terms. Never conquered nor subjugated, they are the sole masters of their territory. According to Panamanian law, no non-Kuna can hold claim to land within the reservation. While tourists flock to the islands to photograph the Kuna and buy beautiful, reverse-appliqué *mola* blouses, tourism is locally controlled and regulated. If travelers spend the night in San Blas, they stay in hotels owned and managed by Kuna.

Although the Kuna are in many ways insular, they are by no means strangers to the modern world. Since the 1930s, thousands of Kuna men have worked in what was formerly the Panama Canal Zone and in Panama City. Kuna women dressed in their traditional wrap-around skirts, red-and-yellow head scarfs, and exotic *mola* blouses are a familiar sight on the bustling streets of the capital. And the Kuna are easily the best-educated tribe in Panama, and perhaps in Central America. Many Kuna students study at the National University and abroad, and the number of professionals has grown steadily during the past decade.

At the same time, the Kuna have not been so enticed by foreign ways that they have lost sight of their roots. They govern themselves according to custom, resolving disputes and making decisions in town meetings that are held nightly in most villages and in semi-annual General Con-

gresses of local representatives. These traditional institutions bind the Kuna together as a nation and set the tone for everything in San Blas.

From the very beginning, the Kuna have approached the West more like careful department store shoppers than awe-struck primitives. They have an instinctive ability to search through the wares of Western culture, pick out those ideas and techniques that seem useful, and then tailor them to their own traditions. They approach the world with confidence, assured of their own worth and even superiority. So conscious and proud are the Kuna of their culture, so fluent in discussing it, they can sound at times like a convention of anthropologists. And in all their discussions, the Kuna invariably stress the identification of their culture with a specific expanse of land—the Comarca of San Blas.

"We say that this land is our mother," Leonidas Valdez explained. Valdez is the second-ranking of the three *caciques*, or chiefs, who are the principal spokesmen for the entire Kuna people. "And the land is also the culture. Here are born all things necessary to our culture: the fronds we use for the puberty ceremonies, all the foods gathered for our communal feasts, the materials our artisans use, what goes into the construction of our houses. All of it comes from the forest. If we were to lose this land, there would be no culture, no soul."

A threat to any part of the Comarca is instantly perceived by the Kuna as a threat to their survival as a people. Growing out of a deep-seated respect for the land and a quiet determination to protect it, the Udirbi park is an example of how the Kuna utilize new ideas and techniques to serve old values.

Indeed, greater numbers of policy makers throughout the world are beginning to view their natural resources in a similar light. Until recently, people and governments in many tropical countries consid-

ered their rain forests as obstacles to be conquered if their nations were ever going to break the shackles of poverty and underdevelopment. In Latin America, the pillaging attitudes brought by the avid-for-gold Spanish and Portuguese conquerors in the 16th century have persisted into the present. After much of Latin America won its independence early in the 19th century, its urban intellectuals continued to regard the vast wildernesses of the southern pampas, the wastes of the Chaco, and the great jungles of the Amazon basin and Central America with a mixture of fear and fascination. The wilderness was supposedly the realm of the savage: it was the untamed, backward side of the Latin American character, which the intellectuals contrasted with the civilized traits of the Europeanized city. To the popular imagination, the jungle was dangerous terrain—teeming with mysterious and fatal diseases, predatory animals, and hostile Indians armed with venom-tipped darts. But there too were the futures of their countries, the riches that would one day lift them into the ranks of the wealthy nations. Latin America was the continent of tomorrow, and the path to development would inevitably cut through the wilderness.

Although the rain forests had been penetrated since colonial days in pursuit of gold, rubber, precious woods, cacao, and other riches, a full-scale assault could not be mounted until the middle of the 20th century, when medical advances neutralized most tropical diseases. Equally important, national populations were growing rapidly along with popular aspirations for a better life. Pressures intensified on a land-holding system that left most productive land in the hands of a few rich families. As the clamor for land reform grew, governments sometimes found it politically easier to push colonization of untouched jungle than to attack the basis of economic and political power. During the past three

decades, many Latin American countries have embarked on ambitious campaigns to open up their previously almost-inaccessible wilderness areas. Brazil hurled itself into the Amazon basin by carving out a brand new capital city 600 miles inland. Peru envisioned a road east of the Andes that would open up its Amazonian provinces.

In Panama, the zeal for development was personified in the figure of General Omar Torrijos, Panama's strongman ruler from 1969 to 1981. One day, four years ago, his helicopter skimmed over the San Blas rain forest towards a meeting of Kuna leaders on the island of Narganá. The sight of so much virgin forest impressed Torrijos, and later that day, when he rose to speak in the Congress, he chided the Kuna leaders:

Why do you Kuna need so much land? You don't do anything with it. You don't use it. And if anyone else so much as cuts down a single tree, you shout and scream.

A Kuna leader named Rafael Harris stood and responded:

If I go to Panama City and stand in front of a pharmacy and, because I need medicine, pick up a rock and break the window, you would take me away and put me in jail. For me, the forest is my pharmacy. If I have sores on my legs, I go to the forest and get the medicine I need to cure them. The forest is also a great refrigerator. It keeps the food I need fresh. If I need a peccary, I go to the forest with my rifle and—pow!—take out food for myself and my family. So we Kuna need the forest, and we use it and take much from it. But we can take what we need without having to

destroy everything as your people do.

According to Aurelio Chiari, administrator of the Udirbi project, who tells the story with great relish, Torrijos was left speechless. He could only stride across the Congress hall and wrap the Kuna leader in an emotional bear hug.

Increasingly, history and scientific research confirm the Kuna view of the rain forest: it is a source for a multitude of beneficial products, but at the same time it is something fragile that must be cared for. As developers lured by visions of great wealth have cut their way through tropical forests, the true ecological vulnerability of those areas has become apparent. To the layman, tropical forests conjure up images of inexhaustible fecundity, of lush, irrepressible growth. Plants spring up overnight, pushing their trunks and stalks a hundred feet into the air and sprouting leaves of elephantine size. The most varied forms of insect and animal life buzz, chatter, hoot, and shriek. Panama, for example, has more species of birds than the United States and Canada combined. A square mile of rain forest can contain as many varieties of plants as all of the British Isles.

Despite this amazing variety, the fecundity turns out to be literally skin deep. Top soil in the jungle is often just inches thick, and because of the constant rain—over 250 inches a year around Udirbi—it is rapidly leached of most nutrients when the forest cover is cut. The towering trees, the thick vines, the giant ferns must all draw their nourishment from shallow root systems that efficiently recycle whatever drops into their maw. It takes only hours for a fallen leaf in the grip of surface feeder roots to decompose back into its constituent elements.

When the forest is cut, left to dry out, then burned, there is a temporary enrichment of the top soil by the nutrient-laden

With a fine sense of geopolitics, the Kuna realized that the point of maximum danger was a place called Udirbi.

ashes. But the continuous cycle of regeneration that supports the rain forest has been sacrificed. Food crops planted by settlers suck up the soil's limited store of nutrients; the tropical rains wash away more; and within three years or so, the soil is exhausted, capable only of supporting grass. If the land is hilly, erosion will soon eliminate even the grass.

Until recently, Kuna lands seemed safe from this specter of a grim and swift passage from jungle to farm to pasture to desert. Although less than 100 miles from Panama City, the Comarca is sheltered behind a mountain range cloaked with almost impenetrable jungle. It was practically inaccessible by land until a branch road from El Llano on the Pan American highway opened about 15 years ago. The road brought a gradual influx of settlers, who opened farms along its flanks. But the real threat first appeared in the 1970s, when the government launched its "Conquest of the Atlantic Coast," a campaign to open up the largely unsettled Caribbean side of the isthmus to landless settlers from the interior provinces. As part of that campaign, the El Llano road would be pushed over the ridge and down the northern slopes of the San Blas to Cartí on the Caribbean coast.

From the start, the Kuna were of two minds about the El Llano-Cartí road. Plane trips from Panama City were becoming ever more expensive as the cost of fuel rose in the mid-1970s, and the journey by launch out of the port city of Colón was lengthy and uncomfortable. The Kuna welcomed the prospect of easier movement for themselves and their goods between San Blas and Panama. But the tribe also worried about encroachments from peasant squatters moving steadily nearer to the southern rim of the reservation. With a fine sense of geopolitics, the Kuna realized that the point of maximum danger was a place called Udirbi, where the new road would enter the Comarca. It was there that they

had to establish a presence.

In 1975, Guillermo Archibold, a young leader with experience in agronomy, went to Udirbi with a small group of volunteers to found an agricultural colony. Udirbi, named for a palm tree common in the area, is in premontane rain forest near the summit of the San Blas mountains. When not blanketed with rain clouds, the site offers a spectacular view across more than 20 kilometers of jungle out to the Gulf of San Blas and the densely populated islands of the Cartí group. The terrain is broken, a jumble of steep hills quite unlike the flat, sunnier land near the coast where Kuna farming is concentrated.

Archibold and the volunteers started by planting staple crops—corn, manioc, bananas, and yams. The results were disappointing, so they switched to tree and bush crops—coffee and cacao, peach palm, cashew. Most would not grow in the cool, wet climate; those that did were stunted. Attempts to raise pigs, chickens, and cattle also failed. In early-1981, frustrated, the colonists consulted forestry specialists from the Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza (CATIE), a regional agricultural research and teaching center based in Costa Rica. The CATIE foresters soon confirmed what the Kuna had already discovered the hard way: the land at Udirbi was unsuitable for agriculture and would best be left in its virgin state.

It was then that the idea emerged to make the entire top of the mountain ridge at Udirbi into a park. Over the next two years, the Kuna consulted with scientists, foresters, and technicians from a wide variety of institutions: CATIE; the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI) in Panama; the Center for Human Ecology in Austin, Texas; the Tropical Science Center in San José, Costa Rica; the Agency for International Development (AID); and the Inter-American Foundation. The foreigners quickly became enthused about collab-

Even as the Kuna reached out for assistance, they made sure the project remained firmly in their control.

oration with the Kuna in developing a forest park, and the project picked up momentum.

Even as the Kuna reached out for assistance, they made sure that the project remained firmly in their control. AID provided funds to train Archibold and his followers in park management at CATIE's headquarters, and during this time a plan took shape. By mid-1983, the Kuna had the key elements in place: they had selected a planning committee of young Kuna professionals and enlisted financial and technical support from local and international institutions. The Udirbi project was launched on a scale that outstripped earlier hopes. What had started almost a decade before as a spontaneous yet vaguely conceived indigenous effort to protect the reservation from invasion had become a full-fledged and complex campaign aided by a prestigious lineup of international allies.\*

Though they start from radically dissimilar world views and have become involved in the park for very different reasons, the scientists and the Kuna are discovering that they share a common goal—preservation of the virgin forest along the crest of the Continental Divide. For scientists, the Udirbi park offers a large expanse of previously unstudied forest with a great diversity of unique flora and fauna, including some 80 endangered species.

For the Kuna, the idea of preserving the virgin forest for research is not foreign, even though their rationale differs from that of biologists. They already keep small reserves of virgin forest on land that is often ideal for agriculture and located on the mainland near their coastal communities. According to the Kuna, these un-

touched reserves are domains belonging to potentially malevolent spirits prone to rise up in anger if their homes are disturbed and attack entire communities. No farming is allowed within the boundary of the spirit domain, and certain of the larger trees may not be chopped down. The Kuna believe that the spirits string their clotheslines in the branches of these trees and become justifiably furious when they are felled. These "spirit sanctuaries" are true botanical parks, since they may be used by medicine men who are gathering herbs.

Not only did the idea of a park at Udirbi fit with Kuna culture; the pragmatic Kuna were also quick to see that it would serve their goal of protecting the Comarca as well as, if not better than, an agricultural community. The main body of the park will cover some 20 square kilometers of virgin forest, with clearly marked boundaries permanently patrolled by Kuna forest rangers. Nine are presently receiving training at the site. Some of the rangers will be Kuna members of the Panamanian National Guard assigned to the park. Others will be trained as guides for the scientists who will eventually visit the site.

Except for technical assistance from CATIE, part of which is financed by the World Wildlife Fund, the entire direction of the park is in Kuna hands. Guillermo Archibold, the young leader who has been involved in the Udirbi project since the first days of the agricultural community, is the park's technical director.

The presently rustic facilities at Udirbi will be improved during 1984 to accommodate scientists willing to rough it to pursue their research. More permanent and comfortable facilities are planned to house between 40 and 50 visitors as well as park personnel. The housing will be built on a high knoll at the original Udirbi site, with its spectacular view. The only infringements on the virgin forest will be nature trails and observation sites and several substations for scientific research. Archi-

\*The institutions which are funding the project include the Inter-American Foundation, the Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza, the World Wildlife Fund, the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, and the Agency for International Development.

"That's the beauty of  
working with the Kuna.  
If their Congress accepts  
an idea like this, then  
they'll do it."

sects are working closely with project staff to develop a design for the new buildings that will fit into the environment and reflect native culture.

These new facilities will serve not only scientists engaged in research projects, but a special kind of visitor the Kuna hope to attract—the "scientific tourist" drawn by the uniqueness of the region, the great beauty and variety of the plant and animal life. Bird watchers, for example, are most definitely welcome.

Thanks to the new road, the park will offer scientists and visitors an unusual combination: a pristine rain forest that is only two hours from a major city with a busy international airport. For scientists, an added bonus includes nearby laboratories and photographic-processing and communications facilities—much of which has grown out of the presence in Panama for more than 60 years of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute.

"There is a great unexploited potential for scientific tourism in Panama," said Ira Rubinoff, STRI's director. "Because this is a narrow isthmus, there is an enormous concentration of species of animals and birds. The bird flyways are funnelled through here. There are few places like this left in the world, and the great attraction, of course, is that there is a good prospect for this being saved. That's the beauty of working with the Kuna. If their Congress accepts an idea like this, then they'll do it. You can count on it."

Brian Houseal, a young park management specialist who works as full-time consultant for the Udirbi staff, emphasized that the Kuna's new park will not only preserve virgin forest and facilitate basic research but also will provide unique opportunities for applied studies of agricultural techniques appropriate to tropical areas. "Again, there's so much we need to learn," he says. "The models of land use now current in the tropics are really not suitable. Some temporary use is gained from the

land, but the end result is destruction. You just have to look at the other side of these mountains to see that. We need to study the techniques used by groups like the Kuna, who have lived in these areas for centuries without destroying them. They've developed technologies that are appropriate for tropical agriculture."

"We must control this chaotic use of tropical land," Rubinoff says. "The Comarca is a good example of using the tropics in a planned way. There are areas, like the park, which should be a reserve. There are other areas that are perfect for agriculture. But we need to learn how to use that land. At least now we know that the way to approach tropical lands is through seduction, not rape."

The Kuna, of course, have always known that. When the Kuna stand on their home islands and contemplate the jungle-shrouded slopes of the Comarca, they gaze, according to oral traditions, at the "green-clothed" body of the Great Mother, who is the Earth. Those histories say that in the beginning she came naked. Her union with the Great Father produced all of the vegetation—which became her "garments"—the animals, and finally humans. Each season, the Earth replenishes her supplies of living things: plants grow and flower, and yield fruit; fish are delivered from the Earth's body in rain-choked rivers and turbulent seas; and animals fall from the clouds that float low over the jungle. The act of periodic regeneration, together with nurturing and maternal protection, are themes that find expression throughout Kuna culture. If the Udirbi project ultimately succeeds in preserving the virgin rain forest of San Blas for scientific study and for future generations, the main reasons will be the Kuna's careful husbandry of their values and their special relationship with the land—reverential, affectionate, and intensely personal.

*PATRICK BRESLIN is a writer who has lectured and published extensively on Latin America. His two novels are Interventions and The Whalebone Gate (forthcoming, 1985). He holds a doctorate in political science from the University of California at Los Angeles. MAC CHAPIN is an anthropologist who is IAF representative for Panama. He was a Peace Corps volunteer on the San Blas Islands and returned there for his doctoral research on curing among the Kuna. His article, "Udirbi: An Indigenous Project in Environmental Conservation," will appear in a forthcoming special publication of Cultural Survival.*



Wilhelm Kenning

Campeños selling coffee to "Bella Vista" coop.

Judith Tandler carried out a comparative study of four associations of peasant cooperatives in Bolivia, in collaboration with Kevin Healy and Carol Michaels-O'Laughlin. The resulting full report, *What To Think About Cooperatives: A Guide From Bolivia*, challenges some traditional assumptions about the nature of cooperatives. In this article, a chapter taken from the full report, she shows that even though cooperatives may sometimes behave like "selfish capitalist" enterprises—and have a limited membership, entrenched elite leadership, and restricted member participation—certain features of their environment and of the tasks they undertake will play an independent and important role in determining how widely or narrowly these organizations "spill" their benefits.

JUDITH TANDLER  
in collaboration with  
KEVIN HEALY and  
CAROL MICHAELS O'LAUGHLIN

## THE WELL-TEMPERED CAPITALIST: PROFILES FROM SOME BOLIVIAN COOPS

Some people think that cooperatives are cumbersome instruments of development and do not work very well. Others say that even when cooperatives are successful, they tend to become self-serving "capitalist" enterprises that benefit a small elite and ignore or exploit the poorer members of the community. Cooperatives that farm the land collectively are frequently cited as an example of such "selfishness": as soon as these groups start to do well, it is said, they close their ranks and shift their work obligations to outside, low-paid laborers whom they will not allow to join the coop or to unionize. This "selfish capitalist" critique of coops is commonly heard from those who would like the benefits of donor support for coops to be distributed more widely. And it is also heard from coop promoters themselves, when they become disappointed with the "lack of community concern" displayed by the successful cooperatives they have created.

In this article, we look into the second group of complaints about cooperatives. We test the critics' hypothesis of a strong correlation between success and "selfishness" by reporting on a group of four moderately successful coop associations in Bolivia. The critics, it turns out, are often correct in saying that when coops become successful business enterprises, their activities tend to benefit a decreasing number of people. But this phenomenon is not necessarily inevitable. Instead, as we want

to show here, the attributes of the social and economic environment of a cooperative can temper the tendencies of an entrenched coop leadership to act only in its own interests. In fact, the collective production endeavors most frequently cited by the critics of coop "selfishness" actually seem to have a built-in tendency to become more exclusive—while some other types of coops and coop activities have "natural" tendencies in the opposite direction. In what follows, we will show how the environment of coops can determine the tasks they choose to undertake and, in turn, the extent to which benefits are spread widely or narrowly.

### CROPS AND THEIR SOCIAL CHARACTER

Some activities undertaken by coops, including the groups visited by us in Bolivia, obviously exclude the poorer members of a community: services benefiting farmers exclude the landless (though they may increase employment opportunities for the landless); access to credit may exclude those without secure title to their land; investment credit for agriculture (often for establishment of perennial crops) can exclude poorer farmers because only the better-off can afford to wait several years until the returns to such an investment materialize. To what extent did elite control of the groups we studied cause the poor

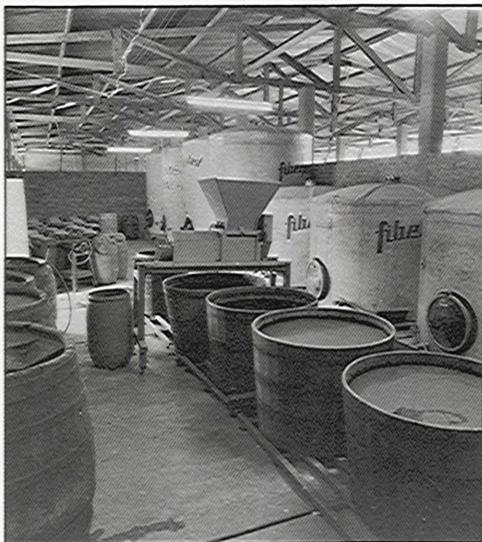
to be excluded—and to what extent were other factors more determining? In some cases, as the following examples show, control by the better-off together with structural factors caused the exclusions to occur and to escalate. In other cases, structural factors worked in the opposite direction. COINCA is a good place to start.<sup>1</sup>

*COINCA: grapes vs. potatoes.* COINCA's winery is its only marketing and processing activity. The 130 grape-growing members (out of 400 total) are the only ones to receive regular technical assistance from COINCA, all necessary inputs, and an assured market. Since investment costs for establishing a vineyard are high, the grape-growing members are a better-off minority.<sup>2</sup> COINCA pays considerably less attention to the annual crops grown by the poorer farmers of the area, the most important being the potato. (Its fertilizer-supply operation is a significant exception, since fertilizer is used mainly on potatoes in Ta-

<sup>1</sup>COINCA (Cooperativa Integral Campesino) is a 400-member association of 20 coops in the highland valley of Tarija. It was founded in 1975 by Acción Cultural Loyola (ACLO), a Jesuit social action agency.

<sup>2</sup>In 1978, per-hectare investment costs for establishing a vineyard were US\$5,000 (Kraljevic 1978:20). The 130 grape growers have a total of 25 hectares in grapes, including six hectares in collective holdings. This gives a rough average of one-fourth of a hectare per vineyard.

Wine vats at COINCA warehouse.



Cane being loaded for transport to mill, CCAM.



rija.) No attention at all is paid to corn, the cultivation of which is a sure sign of poverty because it is grown disproportionately by those without irrigated land.

COINCA's emphasis on grapes was not only the result of elite self-interest. The steps necessary to do something for grape growers were easier and more obvious than they were for potatoes and other important annual crops. The growing of wine grapes pointed to a feasible processing activity, which represented a compact project appropriate for donor financing—equipment and technical assistance for a winery. With wine grapes, moreover, one could realistically aspire toward a forward integration of production that would increase added value markedly—from cultivation of the grape to marketing of a final product that could be stored easily and indefinitely. In contrast to table grapes, moreover, wine grapes required no storage capacity of COINCA since wine grapes have to be crushed within hours after harvesting. The making of wine, finally, greatly reduces the volume of the product; together with the need for only one central processing facility, where the final product can also be stored, this means that the physical and

technical requirements for storage capacity are relatively simple.<sup>3</sup> If grapes had not had such desirable characteristics, the self-interest of the grape-growing leaders may not have been sufficient in itself to direct coop activities toward grapes and to generate successful results.

Unlike wine grapes, potatoes offer no neat project—even though they would have been a desirable investment in social terms. Not only were potatoes produced by most peasant farmers in Tarija, but they

<sup>3</sup>To market table grapes is much more difficult than wine grapes, of course, given that table grapes require both refrigerated storage and fairly rapid sale to final customers. It is interesting that COINCA is now exploring the possibility of taking on this more difficult marketing task to complement its wine-making activities. It plans to sell the grapes it does not use in wine-making for direct consumption, which would free its grape-buying from the limitations of its wine-making capacity. This would extend the benefits of this new and better market to more peasant producers. Taken as a second step after wine-making, the more demanding task of marketing table grapes probably has more of a chance of succeeding than if it had been taken on from the start.

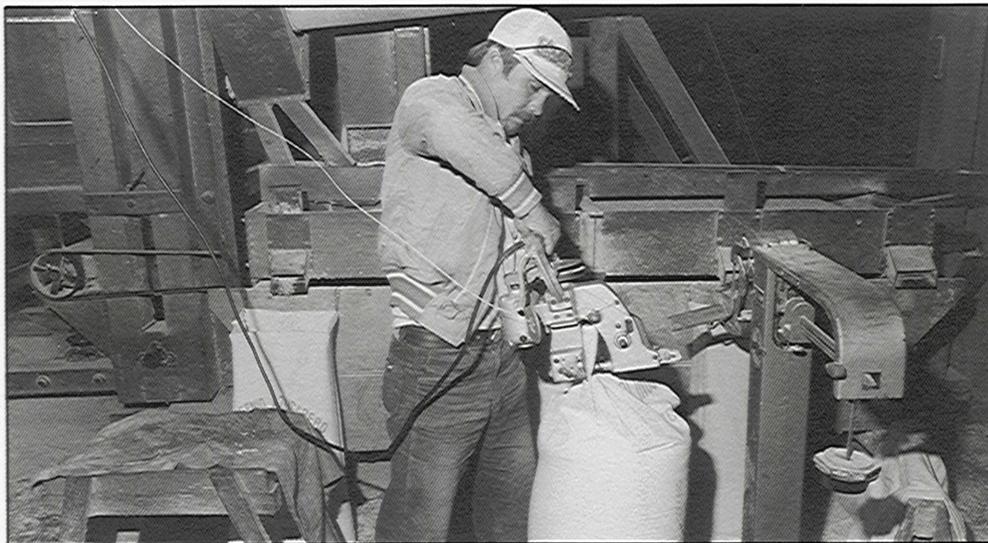
were one of the few profitable peasant crops in the region. Potatoes were also one of the few peasant crops in Bolivia for which fertilizer use was profitable and, partly for this reason, were second only to wheat in productivity increases during the 1963-1972 period.<sup>4</sup> Though the storage and the marketing of potatoes would therefore have been an obvious step for COINCA, with the potential for spreading benefits widely, it was a difficult one. Peasant farmers in the Altiplano of Bolivia traditionally store potatoes in the ground, putting them through a thawing and freezing process that allows them to be kept for long periods. This is not possible in the high valleys of Tarija, with their altitudes lower and their temperatures warmer than those of the high Andes. The storage and marketing of potatoes in Tarija would therefore be a major infrastructural and marketing task—organizationally complex because of the

<sup>4</sup>Yields increased from 4,974 kg. per hectare in the 1963-65 period to 6,767 kg. in 1970-72. Yield increases were due mainly to intensive use of fertilizer, irrigation, and improved seeds (Wennergren & Whitaker 1975:119).

Quality check of freshly hulled rice, CCAM.



Sealing and weighing sacks of hulled rice, CCAM.



need for many decentralized storage facilities, and requiring considerable marketing skill because of the need to decide when it is best to sell.<sup>5</sup> The stored product, moreover, would still have to compete with the Altiplano potatoes that are marketed in Tarija. The forward integration of potato production, then, was in no way as feasible as that of wine-grape production.

In deciding how grapes came to receive more attention from COINCA than potatoes (or corn), one finds it difficult to separate out the structural aspects of the two crops from the self-interest of the better-off leader-growers. The role of self-interest, moreover, is even more diffused by the fact that only five of the 28 communities with COINCA member groups had soil quality

and drainage conditions suitable for grape cultivation. This weakens further the "elite explanation" as the sole reason for COINCA's attention for grapes.

CCAM: *cane vs. rice*.<sup>6</sup> CCAM provides another example of the interaction of leadership self-interest and structural factors in determining how a coop behaves. CCAM is run by a minority of better-off cane growers (12 percent of the membership), who are distinguished from the poorer members whose main source of income comes from the cultivation of upland rice. In Santa Cruz, cane is competitive with upland rice only where the cane lands are de-stumped, where plowing is mechanized, and where market access is excellent—mainly because cane must be crushed within hours of cutting and because the relatively low value of cane per

unit weight requires that transport costs be minimized by reduced distances and good roads.<sup>7</sup> Cane is therefore beyond the reach of those who are remotely located or have little capital. Predictably, then, CCAM's cane growers are distinguished from the other members by (1) the greater accessibility of their lands to roads and processing facilities, (2) the financial capacity to have invested in de-stumping and land-leveling, and (3) the ability to buy tractors or pay for tractor services.

Consistent with these crop traits, the five CCAM coops that are closest to the cantonal capital of Mineros have all of CCAM's cane growers who fill all the leadership positions and who are most represented at CCAM meetings. This contrasts sharply with the seven other groups, which are all in remote locations and grow

<sup>5</sup>COINCA actually did make a small effort to market potatoes and corn but was unsuccessful. It lacked adequate storage capacity and had to rely upon its producer-members to sell their own produce at stalls in the capital city's central market, something they had never done before. ACLO is now planning a potato storage project, to be presented to the IAF for funding, which would involve the COINCAs of Chuquisaca and Potosí, as well as Tarija.

<sup>6</sup>CCAM (Central de Cooperativas Agropecuarias Mineros, Ltda.) is an association of 12 coops with a combined membership of 309 people. CCAM was founded in 1972 by a Maryknoll priest. The association is located in the eastern lowland region of Santa Cruz, a center of Bolivian agricultural growth during the past 20 years.

<sup>7</sup>A study of crop location in Santa Cruz found that distance from the road was a good predictor of the type of crop: cane was closest, then bananas (which deteriorate less quickly than cane after harvesting), and then rice, for which transport costs are only six percent to 12 percent of the price received at the mill (Wennergren & Whitaker 1976:91-92).

rice rather than cane. (Cane growers usually grow some rice.) The rice farmers, whose lands are located far from adequate roads and from cane-milling facilities, cultivate rice on non-stumped lands under a system of slash-and-burn agriculture. These poorer farmers are found, in great part, on "the other side" of a large river, which has only a pontoon bridge that cannot be crossed at all during some weeks of the rainy season. In none of the three other coop environments visited in Bolivia was there such a marked distinction—in cropping systems and geography—between the poorer and the better-off farmers.<sup>8</sup> The influence of CCAM's better-off leaders, then, was clearly reflected in the activities first undertaken by their association.

Most of CCAM's founder-leaders were not growing cane when the coops were formed. Because they had accumulated some capital, however, they were on the verge of making the transition from shifting agriculture to stable, "mechanized" farming. CCAM gave them the means to make the move and sustain it through (1) the purchase, out of donor funds, of a cane quota at a nearby sugar mill,<sup>9</sup> (2) the acquisition of trucks, tractors, and trailers to transport members' cane to the mill, and (3) the establishment of an equipment-rental service for clearing and cultivating.

Unlike the processing of wine grapes, cane-milling was not a "natural" next step for the federation, because the investment

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in equipment is high and the operation is complex. If CCAM wanted to get into agro-processing and "integrate forward," rice-milling was a more feasible next step, even though rice might not be among the strongest interests of the cane-grower leadership. And rice was grown by better-off and poorer peasants alike—just as were potatoes in Tarija. Thus although the self-interested behavior of the better-off founders determined that CCAM's first activities would benefit only cane-growers, the nature of the various enterprise possibilities—and the socio-economic structure of crop production in the area—determined that the next "obvious" income-earning activity for the coop would benefit the poorer rank-and-file as well as the better-off leadership.

#### WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY?

Certain social constraints on the coops also played a role in limiting the pursuit of self-interest by their small leadership groups. Coop leaders were concerned about community reaction to coop behavior, particularly with respect to the setting of prices for inputs, merchandise, and services. They often felt obligated to charge less than the going price for an item—even if that meant selling at a loss—in order to live up to their image as an institution in

service of the community. Similarly, coops with trucks felt particularly reluctant to charge the full prevailing rate to passengers (as opposed to what they charged for freight), in order to maintain the image of the coop truck as being "on the side of the people."

There are various other examples of this public sensitivity. When El Ceibo felt it could no longer keep down the rate it charged for its truck services, it felt it had to first hold a series of community meetings to "educate the people" about the necessity of raising the rate.<sup>10</sup> Bella Vista also spoke of having to explain its "truck crisis" to the community so that people would understand the need to raise rates.<sup>11</sup> And the coop leadership breathed a sigh of relief for having a strong external justification for the action—i.e., without the coop's having increased truck income to pay off the loan installments, the truck would be repossessed. El Ceibo's decision to distribute the profits of its cacao-processing plant to the non-members as well as members from whom it bought cacao was taken, in part, so that the non-members "would not say we're making money off them." El Ceibo charged lower hauling rates to farmers taking their produce to market than to those whose cacao it was marketing itself: the latter rate could be higher because it was "hidden" in the margin between Ceibo's buying and selling price, whereas the rate charged to farmers was explicit, and therefore had to be lower so it would be seen as "fair."

<sup>8</sup>This distinction is described more carefully in Hale (1978:13-16) and Maxwell (1980:164-168).

<sup>9</sup>In 1976, CCAM used a donation from Bread for the World to buy a 12,000 ton quota at a local mill for 100 Bolivian pesos a ton. It was impossible for small farmers to purchase these quotas individually even if they had the resources. The mill quotas are the result of a government program that allocates quotas to the various mills, and requires that the producer purchase a share of equity in the mill in order to obtain the right to sell to that mill. The donation received by CCAM for this purpose was large enough to buy a quota that the federation has never filled.

<sup>10</sup>El Ceibo (Central Regional de Cooperativas "El Ceibo," Ltda.) is an association of 18 coops in the Alto Beni with a combined membership of 350 people. It was founded in 1976 by four small village groups that banded together to market cacao, the region's primary cash crop.

<sup>11</sup>Bella Vista (Cooperativa de Ahorro y Crédito "Bella Vista," Ltda.) is a single coop of 200 members that is located in the higher coffee-producing zone adjacent to El Ceibo. It began in 1969 as a savings-and-loan coop and has steadily expanded and diversified its activities.

The most interesting example of concern for community image comes from El Litoral, a member coop of El Ceibo. Litoral was situated on the side of the Alto Beni River that had to be crossed in order to market cacao. Litoral had become the only provider of motorized canoe-transport service crossing the river at low prices, which meant that all the cacao producers on that side of the river sold their cacao to Litoral, as the agent of El Ceibo. Litoral was concerned that the yearly distribution of profits from cacao-buying to its small membership (15 persons) would provoke criticism by non-members. It therefore devised the following scheme, in order to ward off that criticism: it planned to set aside a fund of "non-member profits," to be calculated on the same basis as member profits—i.e., proportional to the seller's share of total cacao bought by the coop. When the time would come for the annual distribution of profits among members, the non-member shares would be announced but put aside in a fund for community projects, such as the building of a school, a church, or a soccer field. If non-members did not want to "lose" their share of the profits to community projects, they would have to join the coop, making the same capital contribution that members had made. If they gave up their profits, of course, the community would benefit. In either case, Litoral would be spreading its good fortune outside the existing membership.

Litoral's idea was an ingenious one. By committing a share of its profits to projects that would benefit the whole community, the coop was spared from criticism that it was behaving like a "greedy capitalist." At the same time, this community-minded offer constituted an incentive for non-members to join so as not to "lose" their profits. No matter what the individual non-member's decision, the coop could not lose: it offered profits to non-members in a form that they could not receive unless they became members—and if this offer was rejected, the coop was still beyond re-

**El Ceibo  
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to lend a truck  
on occasion  
for free.**

proach because these unclaimed profits would be selflessly spent on projects of benefit to the whole community.<sup>12</sup> Litoral's offer, finally, removed one of the major risks of joining and contributing to a coop—that one would get nothing in return. It allowed the non-member to take a wait-and-see attitude until the receiving of benefits was a certainty. Though this would not be a successful approach to getting a coop started—since everyone would

<sup>12</sup>Note the difference between Litoral's and Ceibo's form of sensitivity to being looked upon by the community as exploitative. Ceibo offered its profit distributions to non-member sellers of cacao without requiring anything in return, and thus removed any incentive for them to become members. Ceibo, of course, had a lot more to worry about than community image: it was trying to secure a supply of unprocessed beans for its processing plant, so it could not afford the risk that non-members would not be attracted to join by a Litoral-type offer. Also, Ceibo needed to pay the equivalent of a price premium for this non-member supply—a premium that might have been canceled out by membership charges.

Note also that Litoral's offer appeals to the "individualism" that many coop supporters rail against—by encouraging the non-member to take his profits, rather than let them revert to a community project. ("If you join, you'll get your money; if you don't and the community gets a school, you lose.") It is this kind of "individualism" that coop promoters like ACLO and other church-affiliated action groups find disappointing.

prefer to wait and see—it certainly might be good for expanding a successful one like Litoral.<sup>13</sup>

There are other examples of coop sensitivity to pressures to behave with a community conscience, even when responding to these pressures might not be particularly good for the coop. The Bella Vista coop owned a small plot of land that it planned to use in the future for agricultural experimentation. One day, the community was looking for a site to build a new school, took note of the vacant plot, and pressured the coop to donate it to the community. The coop did so grudgingly, feeling it had no other choice. A similar story can be told about El Ceibo, which owned a small truck that it felt obligated to lend to the community school, whenever asked, without charge. Though Ceibo had agreed to do this long ago, in return for the donation of a used truck from a donor, the donor had long since departed, and Ceibo would not necessarily have had to continue respecting this obligation. But it felt that it could not deny the school the use of its truck and still be looked at as a "responsible community institution." A final example of community conscience is El Ceibo's pride in telling how its truck had been the only one allowed to carry produce to La Paz when farmers had shut down the roads to truckers in protest against increases in transport costs and other national policies. Ceibo felt

<sup>13</sup>The petroleum-purchasing coops of the U.S., which were the most successful of the agricultural-purchasing coops there, had the same problem as Litoral and resorted to a similar mechanism to overcome it. Like Litoral, they needed non-members to patronize their services in order to achieve economies of scale. As an incentive, they therefore gave patronage refunds to non-members in the form of credit on a share of stock in the coop. When the credits built up to the value of a share of stock, the non-member became a shareholder with the right to cash refunds (Fite 1965:14). This same tactic was used by the Farmers' Alliance Exchange of Texas (Knapp 1969:64).

that its past behavior as a "responsible" community institution—and the fact that it had not "gouged" its truck passengers—had accounted for its being viewed as on the side of the peasants, even though its truck was crossing their strike lines.

In some situations, then, coops feel constrained from behaving in a self-serving or exploitative way in the communities where they operate. Indeed, among the groups studied, financial management problems resulted just as much from excessive concern about the displeasure of members and the community as from excessively self-serving behavior. This could be seen in the reluctance of coop leadership to be rigorous about credit collection; in the difficulty that consumer stores had in *not* selling on credit, even when it was known that credit led to their ruination; and in the fear of raising prices of coop services and goods to near-market levels, even though not to do so would cause losses and even though buyers were already being provided with substantial non-price benefits.

#### CONTROLLING THE LEADERSHIP

How do we explain the deference to community opinion by coops that were run by an entrenched and better-off leadership? Part of the answer lies, again, in the nature of the activity. Many of the examples of sensitivity to community perceptions come mainly from "spillover" activities—trucking, marketing, input and consumer merchandise, sales, and agro-processing. In these activities, the coop is dependent on non-members for a large part of its purchases or sales, and the activity and its prices are out in the open. These activities "spill" benefits to non-members and, by their very nature, force a greater community-minded discipline on the coop. This contrasts with activities like credit or collective production projects, which involve only members. The "anti-capitalist" rhetoric of coops and their promoters also contributes to community-minded behavior.



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Although the rhetoric may not always be accurate, and though it sometimes causes coops to make unsound decisions, it provides the community with a solid description of how a "bad business" behaves. The rhetoric gives the community a specific guide as to how to judge the coop's future actions as an enterprise.

A coop's concern about how it looks in the eyes of the community also has to do with social norms about a leader's responsibilities and the extent to which individual wealth should be shared. Orlove (1982) and others have commented upon the unusual sense of community and degree of work-sharing in the highland communities of Bolivia. Although none of the studied groups was located in the highlands, three (Bella Vista, El Ceibo, and partly CCAM) were made up of migrants from those areas, who had often resettled as communities and continued to maintain their traditions in the new homeland. Coops with entrenched and better-off leaders in these kinds of communities may have been less prone to self-interested or exploitative behavior than they would have been in less homogeneous and close-knit social settings.

The location of member coops at the lowest political-administrative level—the village—also contributed to the influence of community norms on coop behavior. The

focus of coop-promotion efforts at organizing in villages rather than towns might be looked at as overly decentralized; it requires a large investment in forming and servicing each coop, which will have only 10 to 20 members. In order to reduce the high cost per organization formed, it would seem to make more sense to create fewer and larger groups at higher administrative levels. But these cross-community organizations would lose the benefit of the close-knit social fabric of the villages, and the influence that these social norms exert in channeling coop behavior in community-minded directions.

ACLO, the facilitator organization that founded COINCA, was very aware of the advantages of organizing in small communities. It explicitly avoided setting up coop headquarters in rural towns because experience had shown that the merchants, traders, and professionals of the town elites usually captured coop leadership.<sup>14</sup> The town location would set the stage for a conflict of interest between the leadership elites and peasant farmers—with the farmers wanting their coop to bring about reductions in the prices of marketing, transport, and merchandise, and the merchants and traders wanting the opposite. In small communities away from the towns, ACLO believed, non-farmer elites would not be around to take things over; the smallness of the area to be organized, with its greater social and economic homogeneity, would be more conducive to community-wide membership and participation.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Healy (1982:16-17). Healy cites the case of another peasant association in southern Bolivia—Agrocentral in Chuquisaca—where member coops and their consumer stores were located in towns and where membership was open to all, resulting in "instant social domination" by town elites (1978:9).

<sup>15</sup>ACLO's concern and experience is not particularly unique to southern Bolivia. In a study of organized community life in rural Saskatchewan in Canada, Lipset (1971:246-7) stresses the importance of the fact that positions in community

Though the coops of the studied groups were in fact located in communities away from merchant and professional elites, the leadership was still in the hands of better-off farmers, and membership represented only about 15 percent to 20 percent of village households. ACLO, however, was not completely wrong: though the better-off were just as much in control in the villages as they would have been in the towns, the village leaders nevertheless shared more interests with the rest of the community, since all were farmers. Also, the smaller size of the communities would have been more conducive to the perpetuation of traditions of the better-off taking care of those less well off. The more decentralized location of the village coops, then, made for a greater commonality of interests between the better-off leadership and the rank-and-file, though not necessarily for a more participatory or all-embracing membership.

Understanding the community-minded forces to which certain coops are subject helps us to describe the coop federations better. The federations, that is, were led by various leaders who were all grounded in community settings that exerted considerable social control over them. The control was exerted through custom, in other words, rather than participation.<sup>16</sup> Needless to say, we are describing this system at

organizations were held by farmers and were closed to members of the urban middle class. He contrasts this to many other rural North American areas, where community institutions serving farmers are controlled by the middle class of the rural towns.

<sup>16</sup>ACLO would describe this community-minded behavior in a different way: it says that the newly enlightened community should act as a unit and not as a series of individuals, and that therefore the coop leader acts for the community (in principle) in the councils of the federation of member coops. This seems to be even further from reality than the participatory view of what happens, since the coop leader is elected by a membership that is only a small percentage of the community and therefore does not represent its interests as a whole. I am saying, in contrast,

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its ideal, when coop leaders showed community-minded as opposed to self-interested or exploitative behavior. That the system can sometimes work in socially beneficial ways, without much participation, is attested to by some of the positive outcomes we have reported here. The likelihood that the social environment will produce egalitarian results, in sum, can be used as another criterion—more accurate, sometimes, than "participation"—by which donors can decide which coops and which activities to support.

#### THE CAPITALISTS AND THE CHRISTIANS

So far, our discussion has helped to explain the persistent and perplexing differences between coop rhetoric and reality: the rhetoric of participation vs. the reality of entrenched leadership, the rhetoric of a coop working for the good of the whole community vs. the reality of the excluded bottom 40 percent, the "anti-capitalist" rhetoric of the coop vs. the reality of its suc-

cess (when successful) as a capitalist enterprise. How could such striking differences between rhetoric and reality have come about? Much of this difference can be traced to a strange blend of two ways of thinking about cooperatives. One rests on the North American experience with cooperatives in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and the other harks back to an early Christian vision of cooperative society. This blend is best explained by starting with a story about ACLO and COINCA.

COINCA disappoints ACLO. ACLO, a Bolivian Catholic social-action group that founded COINCA in Tarija, was keenly disappointed over the way COINCA turned out. A cooperative, ACLO says, should be an expression of the community and not the sum of a particular number of individuals, each out to improve his own lot through cooperative action. In a federation of such coops, each coop delegate is meant to represent the community as a whole, not the group of individuals that comprise the coop nor the faction that elected this particular leader. Coop activities, in turn, should benefit the whole community, not just some individuals. The distribution of coop profits to members is undesirable, in this view, because it appeals to "selfish individualism" rather than concerns for the community.

It is not surprising that ACLO spurned its own creation when COINCA later became involved in a coop federation's typical activities—credit to individuals, input-purchasing, a winery, and collective production projects—almost all of which were hoped to yield profits for distribution to members. Though ACLO grudgingly commended COINCA's performance with the store and the winery, it also deplored the "capitalist" consciousness that brought this success about. "COINCA cares less about the community," ACLO complained, "than it does about the price of grapes!" It was as if ACLO had wanted COINCA to be successful at a business that

that though the coop leader has been elected by a minority, which may even have played a passive and clientelistic role in his election, he is sometimes forced by social custom and the structure of the activities taken on by the coop to act in a way that is in harmony with community interests.

benefited peasants without having the business mentality it takes to make that kind of success—a kind of immaculate capitalist conception.<sup>17</sup>

In fairness to ACLO, it should be pointed out that it conceived of COINCA as a second-best approach to organizing peasants under circumstances that discouraged political organization among peasants. Cooperatives were seen as the only form of peasant organization that would be tolerated, given their “innocent” aim of going into business. Creating a cooperative federation as a substitute for rural unionism, it would seem, was bound to leave ACLO disappointed on political grounds, no matter how successful COINCA’s enterprises and no matter how much this success was benefiting peasants.

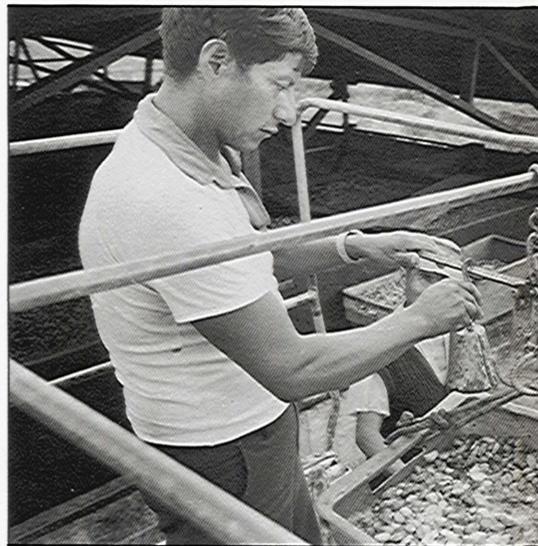
Though ACLO’s disappointment with COINCA can be understood in this specific context, ACLO’s position is common to a general way of thinking in Latin America about cooperatives. Partly because of the influence of Catholic and Protestant churches in organizing Latin American coops, the cooperative is viewed as taking the community back to an idealized, pre-capitalist condition, where people lived in harmony and worked collectively. Collec-

<sup>17</sup>ACLO’s critical attitude about COINCA was held more strongly by its leadership than its staff. Tensions of a similar nature have arisen between ACLO and the other peasant federations it has created in southern Bolivia. A perhaps more important reason for these tensions than “selfish” behavior by coop leaders is the gulf that eventually develops between many urban “broker” organizations like ACLO and the peasant groups they create, after the new groups become strong enough to assert some independence. This issue is discussed in Orlove (1982), and Scurrah & Podestá (1982). The latter discussion of broker organizations and their progeny is remarkably reminiscent of relations between COINCA and ACLO.

Campeños dropping off coffee in “Bella Vista” warehouse.



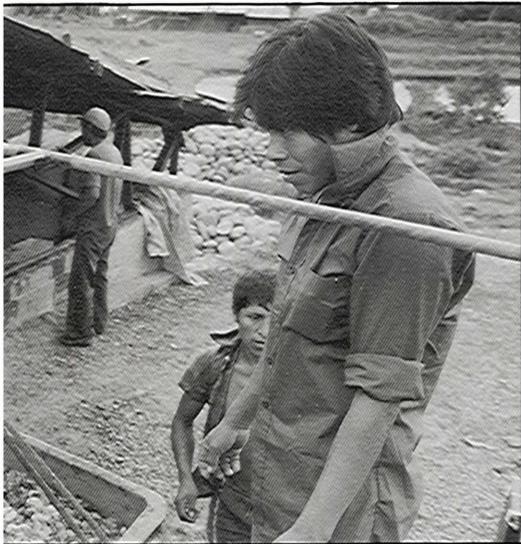
Cacao being weighed for sale, El Ceibo.



tive production efforts are depicted as a return to a “natural” state, which has been corrupted by the advent of capitalism and its glorification of individualism.

Even the more reformist expression of the Christian view, which admits to conflict between peasants and other interest groups, usually does not concern itself with differences of class interest *within* the community where the cooperative is organized—except, perhaps, for the identification of a few “bad” middlemen, whom the rest of the community will be against. There is no room in this view, that is, for differences of interest between landholding peasants, landless workers, tenant farmers, or women heads of household. A cooperative headed by a peasant landholder, like all those studied, is supposed to be able to orchestrate the harmony of the whole community. ACLO’s emphasis on cooperative education, and its disappointment with COINCA’s seeming lack of interest in the subject, were consistent with this view of the harmonious community: it was necessary to teach people to see the value of collective endeavor and the drawbacks of individualism if they were to undertake community projects to which they would all have to make sacrifices and from which they would benefit only as a group.

*The North American forebears.* With U.S. development assistance to Latin America starting in the 1950s, the “Christian” view of cooperatives was put together with a cooperative form based on the North American experience with agricultural and consumer coops in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The organizational form, the concrete goals, and the technical assistance came from the North American experience, while the vision and the rhetoric were fed by the Christian ideal. Therein lies one of the reasons for disappointment with cooperatives that are successful as enterprises. Except for a few cases, the U.S. cooperative movement celebrated individualism, and the possibility of buying into it through collective action. The patronage refund is a good example: according to the Rochdale model, coop stores were *supposed* to charge market prices, even when the margins of private merchants were high, and return the difference to members in the form of patronage refunds (Cerny 1963:205, and Knapp 1957:343). In this way, one would give people a strong (and individualistic) incentive to join the coop, instead of “losing” the social gains through lower prices available to the whole community, members and non-members alike.<sup>18</sup>



Recording rice and coffee sales, "Bella Vista."



CCAM rice silo.



North American rural cooperatives did not presume to represent any wider interest group than landholding farmers. Of course, farmers made up a large part of the rural population, but nobody assumed that their interests were in harmony with those of agricultural laborers, tenant farmers, craftsmen, or others. Indeed, the U.S. cooperative movement had no compunctions about declaring the tenant farmer—who represented the bulk of poor U.S. farmers in the 19th and 20th centuries—to be com-

pletely outside the pale. "Cooperatives grow [only] where freeholders live," it was said, because tenant farmers always need immediate cash, don't have enough to invest in coop facilities, and always are in danger of having to leave their farms (Miller & Jensen 1957:463).

Even among landholding farmers, the North American progenitors of the Latin American coops represented medium and large farmers, while poor farmers were distinctly not included (Lipset 1971:201-205, 276, and Marshall & Godwin 1971:27). The highly successful cooperative movement of western Canadian wheat farmers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, for example, did not include the poorer farmers of the region, who were ethnically and religiously different Roman Catholic immigrants from Eastern Europe (Bennett 1973). The established agricultural coops of the southern United States gave little help to coops organized among poorer farmers in the 1960s: the established coops refused membership to black farmers, would not hire black employees, would not sell to the new coops, and would not lend to them through their coop banks (Marshall & Godwin 1971:38).

The North American coops that were organized around marketing and consumer

merchandising—the main activities of the Bolivian coops—were in many cases either apolitical or conservative. Though the consumers' coop movement was "anti-monopolist," for example, it was not anti-capitalist; supporters were not interested in working toward changes in the country's economic and social structure (Fite 1965:15, and Bennett & Krueger 1971:351). Though farmers' movements and coops railed against exploitation by outside and usually urban interests—banks, grain brokers, railroads—they were not interested in questions of exploitation within their own communities (Bennett 1973:2.6). In fact, the importance of these outside "exploiters" in mobilizing farmer protest has been said to have prevented the development of a class consciousness *within* rural North America during the 19th and early 20th centuries (Lipset 1971:48-49). Finally, North American farmers belonging to cooperatives were said to espouse "cooperative-collectivist" principles only when they were in trouble, but would vote "individualist-conservative" as soon as they were out of trouble (Bennett 1973:215-6). The North American coop movement, in sum, did "not advocate a basic change in capitalistic institutional structure" but sought simply to extend the

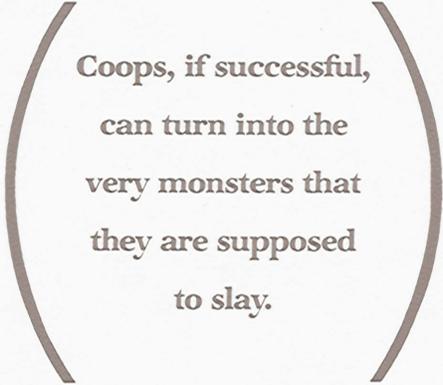
<sup>18</sup> Another important reason for this tenet of the Rochdale model was that price-cutting, it was feared, would provoke paralyzing retaliations by private merchants (Knapp 1969:52, and Cerny 1963:205). The Bolivian coops seemed to take just the opposite approach to this eventuality: they loved the idea of charging lower prices and thereby raising the private merchant's ire. An interesting exception to the Rochdale rule of high prices and high patronage dividends was the U.S. Farmers' Alliance, which believed in selling goods at cost. The gain in reduced prices, the Alliance argued, could "benefit the whole class, and not simply those who had surplus money to invest in capital stock [i.e., the coop members] . . ." (Knapp 1969:65-6). The Alliance, in other words, seemed to show a greater social consciousness (though perhaps less realism about the competition's power to retaliate) and an interest in providing spillover benefits.

benefits of capitalism to a larger number of persons (Bennett & Krueger 1971:351).

These descriptions of North American cooperativism seem more like the coops we visited in Bolivia than the Christian vision of harmonious, all-embracing community institutions. The North American descriptions are consistent, for example, with El Ceibo's and COINCA's justifications for not formally participating in peasant strikes against the government and the truckers. "We're in business," they said, "not politics. We don't want to bring everything down on our heads."

The North American coops would probably have disappointed the holders of the harmonious, all-embracing vision of communities—as well as people with hopes that coops could be an instrument of class consciousness. Unlike ACLO, the North American cooperativists did not envision a group "that would represent women, landless peasants, and small-farmer interests" (Michaels 1982:1). Unlike ACLO, moreover, the North Americans would not have been disappointed at having created an institution that was "more exclusive, with male members having the only voice or voting power" (*Ibid.*). That the North American coops were individualist and comprised of better-off farmers, of course, does not mean that they did not spill benefits over to non-member groups. But it does mean that the North American model on which the Latin American coop is partially based in no way presumed an inherently collective community spirit.

The North American cooperative, then, makes a strange bedfellow for the Christian vision of a pre-capitalist, collectively oriented community. Clearly, the two models can overlap, to the extent that landholding farmers represent a large proportion of the community, or when spillover benefits are high, or when membership is large. But many people will not have the time or capital to participate in collective production endeavors; the landless, the tenants, and the women will be excluded from coop



**Coops, if successful,  
can turn into the  
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to slay.**

membership and, sometimes, exploited; even among the landholding farmers, the coops will be joined mainly by the better-off. Though these outcomes are consistent with North American coop history, they are disappointing and surprising to the holders of the Christian vision.

#### LINKING HOPE TO HARD REALITY

Why should it matter to donors that social action groups are sometimes disappointed about the way Latin American coops turn out? The subject is important only because donors themselves have absorbed the Christian vision of the cooperative, at the same time that they have given it the concrete form of the North American model. It is the donors who are disappointed when the coops they have supported look like their North American predecessors; it is the donors who dread that the coops they fund will turn out, under close scrutiny, to be dominated by elites. For this reason, the fit between the hopeful vision of coops and the historical experience from which they are copied is a difficult one. And it is important to understand that farmer opposition to powerful middlemen and transporters may be a more potent mobilizing force for Latin American coops—as in the North Ameri-

can case—than a perceived harmony of community interests. To the extent that these outside forces are a more significant cause of poverty than internal exploitation, the coop may represent a significant mechanism for raising incomes throughout the community.

The uniting of rural communities in cooperatives against "the outsider" should not be interpreted to mean that the whole community is being benefited, or that strong socio-economic differentiation does not exist within the community. Coops, if successful, can turn into the very monsters that they are supposed to slay. They may preach the rhetoric of participation and community mindedness, while in truth catering to a small and better-off portion of the population they say they represent. As we have seen, these coops may still engage in activities with high spillover benefits. This will depend, as we have seen, on the characteristics of the task and the socio-economic environment, and not necessarily on a concern for social impact.

Donors can influence the breadth of impact of their coop projects by choosing to support activities that tend to spill benefits more widely. Identifying the "good" activities and the coops that do them, as seen above, will not be enough. Though the good qualities may seem to inhere in an activity, they will often be present only at certain stages of a coop's history and only in certain social and economic environments. Donors, therefore, will have to be alert to changes in the benefit distribution of the activities they finance, and be careful not to accept uncritically the dramatic historic symbolism associated with the starting moments of these activities. Donors should also stand ready to encourage the taking on of tasks that, though "good," may not have been appropriate or feasible at earlier stages of coop history.

It is easy to overlook the opportunities for coops to move into activities with greater social impact because critics get vocal, when coops have early successes,

about behavior that is "too capitalistic" and "too elitist." In the fray, no one notices that the coop's entrepreneurial successes may have set the stage for new activities with the potential for spilling benefits widely. And coop rhetoric against exploitation has become so internalized by coop leaders that they may be quite interested in undertaking socially beneficial activities in order to protect their images. Donors can have influence, at these moments, simply by expressing a preference for one activity over another.

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Agricultural produce being brought to market, Versailles.



What prompts the formation of a cooperative? What are the personal experiences that lead to collective action? In the following excerpts, three cooperative activists tell the story of how a community-run store emerged from their lives and the lives of their friends.

This is the final article in a series of organizational oral histories by Robert Wasserstrom. His complete volume, *Grassroots Development in Latin America and the Caribbean: Oral Histories of Social Change*, will be published by Praeger Press early in 1985.

ROBERT WASSERSTROM

## STARTING A CONSUMER STORE: ORAL HISTORIES FROM COLOMBIA

Most of the rural families living around the town of Versalles—on the rim of Colombia's prosperous Cauca Valley—are subsistence farmers with limited cash incomes. The area's few storekeepers charged high prices for consumer staples and paid little for locally grown crops.

Several years ago, the 15 members of the Grupo Precooperativo de Servicios Múltiples de Versalles pooled their savings and decided to open a consumer store. To augment their start-up capital, they applied to the Inter-American Foundation, and a grant of \$47,500 was approved in June 1977. The group then invested in a truck and began buying goods wholesale in cities like Bogotá, Cali, and Pereira. Their original inventory soon expanded to a full line of foodstuffs, vegetables, meat, fruit, and building materials.

At the same time, members decided to

use the truck to market such native products as *tomate de arbol* (a kind of tomato) and *lulo* (a citrus fruit), which were previously shipped to Bogotá or Cali. Transportation and handling costs were shared accurately and fairly among all producers. The store itself received a profit of 10 percent, which was used for working capital.

As the following interviews reveal, members of the Grupo share a common history of participation in peasant organizations, small farmers' associations, government programs, and social action projects sponsored by the Catholic Church. With few exceptions, these organizations originated during the political turmoil of 1948 to 1966, known as *la violencia*. Unlike many of its neighbors, however, Versalles was fortunate enough to be spared the worst upheavals—mainly because the area was remote and inhabited by small farmers

who had relocated from other places. In addition, the local parish priest organized discussion groups that focused upon the themes of reconciliation and social justice. Most of the men who later founded the community store were involved in that process.

Drawing upon this experience, members of the Grupo Asociativo—who have attended countless seminars, workshops, and special courses on leadership and cooperative management over the years—are determined to chart their own path. "Of course, we're willing to work with anyone who wants to help the community," says one of the founders, Delio Cortez. "But if they impose any political conditions on us, then we part company." Or as his friend Luis José Gallego put it, "We didn't ask anyone for permission to build a store; we just decided to do it by ourselves."



Mitchell Demburg

*"All I knew about was work."*

**Delio Cortez, founder and organizer**

I was born in Risaralda, but I wanted to get out and see the world—you might say I was looking for adventure. So when I was 22, I got married and moved to Versalles. When we arrived here, we settled a good distance from town: about five hours on foot.

Unfortunately, like most small farmers, we began to have a lot of children. Being so poor, we often had to eat *zapallos*, the wild berries usually used to fatten pigs. My family got malnourished: my children's stomachs, all swollen; the girls losing their hair. When that happens around here, people say it's the evil eye, which is what I believed. Finally someone said to me, "You know what's wrong with them? They're hungry: you don't give them enough to eat. Children need decent food." But where was I going to find the money? I decided I'd have to work harder, clear more land and plant lulo and tomatoes.

All I knew about was work. After a while, though, I began to play soccer with some of my neighbors. It reminded me of when I was growing up and so I joined the team, despite being very shy—too shy. If the priest or someone with a little education spoke to me, I was too embarrassed to answer. I didn't even go to Mass out of fear the priest would look me in the eye.

But playing soccer made me get along with other people. That's how I met Don Eduardo Giraldo. He would stop and say things like, "My friend, maybe someday we'll see you at one of our meetings!" Of course, I held back, but he kept insisting. He introduced me to his friends and eventually they brought me to a workshop on human relationships.

This workshop was a terrific experience, even though it was hard to speak in public. By the time I went home again, something in me had changed. I started to attend village meetings. At first, of course, I said little: I still felt out of place. But I kept going and soon joined a group called Community Action. After that, I got involved in several different projects and eventually I was the one organizing others. If something had to be done, I would speak with the priest or the mayor or the school inspector or our friends in other villages.

Then, just when I was about to bring in my first harvest, I was evicted and lost my farm. I didn't know anything about the law, of course, and I think this person just wanted to steal my crops and the improvements I had made. I remember when it was time to take my testimony, the judge called me aside and said, "Listen, in a few minutes we're going to ask if you work for the man who has claimed this land. I can't tell you what to answer, but if you say you don't work for him, then you're trespassing and these policemen will have to remove you. That's all I can say; think about it—I'm only trying to help." I thought it over and decided to follow his advice.

Sure enough, they asked me, "Do you work for Mr. So-and-so?"

I replied, "Yes, your Honor, I do."

What happened was this. It turned out that this man didn't have a valid title, but I had just forfeited all my rights. They had set me up to get rid of me.

When they came to evict us, my wife was sick in bed and couldn't get up. I told the policemen, "If you try to touch her, you'll have to kill me first."

They must have taken pity on us because they said, "We can't do this. Let's give him another week to get ready."

"If I can have another week," I said, "I'll go by myself."

They gave me the extra time, and I moved into Versailles. When I got here, the priest asked if I wanted to help him as an organizer. Now, I didn't know what an organizer was: I thought maybe this was the person who rang the bells and dressed the saints—like a sacristan. So I said, "No thanks. I may be poor, but I'd be ashamed to do something like that. It's not my kind of work."

Fortunately, he understood what I was thinking so he added, "I'm not asking you to work in the church. What I want you to do is come out with me to the villages and talk to people. You speak their language." You see he was trying to establish a cooperative for citrus growers.

In the end, it didn't work out. But, a few of us who had been involved in the citrus cooperative kept meeting in the cafe. We talked about starting another group, kept thinking about what we had learned and how to use it. Then one day someone said, "Nobody is going to put money into this project unless we take the lead. Let's each contribute 1,000 pesos and see what we can do."

But how could we find 1,000 pesos apiece? We made a gentlemen's agreement that each of us would set aside so much a month until the quota was met. A few people managed to save 1,000 pesos but others didn't. At the end of the year, for example, some would say, "Oh, I forgot all about it." But we raised the money—one man even had to sell a pig for his share—and even found two more members.

At that point, we asked ourselves, "What can we do with 11,000 pesos?" The only answer we found was to start a store: there just wasn't enough money for crop loans or marketing. At that point, my friends said, "Since you've had more contact with the priest and people like that, why don't you look into things?" I talked to

one of the big merchants in Pereira and sure enough, he sent us a truckload of goods, which got us rolling. We put 7,000 pesos into our inventory; it cost 4,000 more for shelves and other expenses.

After that, a friend of ours told us about the Inter-American Foundation. At first, we didn't believe it, but after all, there was nothing to lose either. As the saying goes, "You never know until you try." So we put together a proposal. When the letter arrived saying that our request had been approved, I was overwhelmed—and a bit scared. Now we really had to go through with it.

The first thing we did was form a "pre-cooperative." We did this for many reasons. For example, government regulations say that any cooperative that has more than 500,000 pesos must hire a certified accountant, who of course earns that much in salary every two or three months. That means small cooperatives can never meet the requirements for legal registration. But "pre-cooperatives" and associative groups are exempt from the rules, which is why we didn't try to create a real consumer coop.

Of course, that has drawbacks too. For example, we asked the National Cooperative Bureau about building a plant to process our tomatoes. Their representative said he couldn't help us unless we formed a real cooperative. We told him, "If we set up a cooperative, it will ruin us. Can't we work with you if we agree to run the project on a cooperative basis?"

"No," he said, "we can't work with pirate organizations like yours."

He called us pirates, but he's wrong. We are Colombians: we contribute to our country like everybody else. So, we couldn't come to any agreement, and that's a shame because sometimes the bureau's technical assistance is excellent.

This hasn't been our only problem. We haven't been able to avoid politics com-

pletely: now and then, our members have pulled strings to get a job. We don't approve, but sometimes it's a necessary evil. Nonetheless, our organization is strictly nonpartisan: we don't support or oppose anybody. We're willing to work with anybody who wants to help the community; but if any political conditions are imposed, we part company. Actually, most groups pay more attention to us now than they did when we were directly affiliated with them. Because when you're a member, what do you do? Everybody wants to be president of the organization and share the spoils with friends. Then as soon as you're elected, someone else comes along and tries to take it away from you. You spend your time fighting with your own members and lose sight of the real problems.

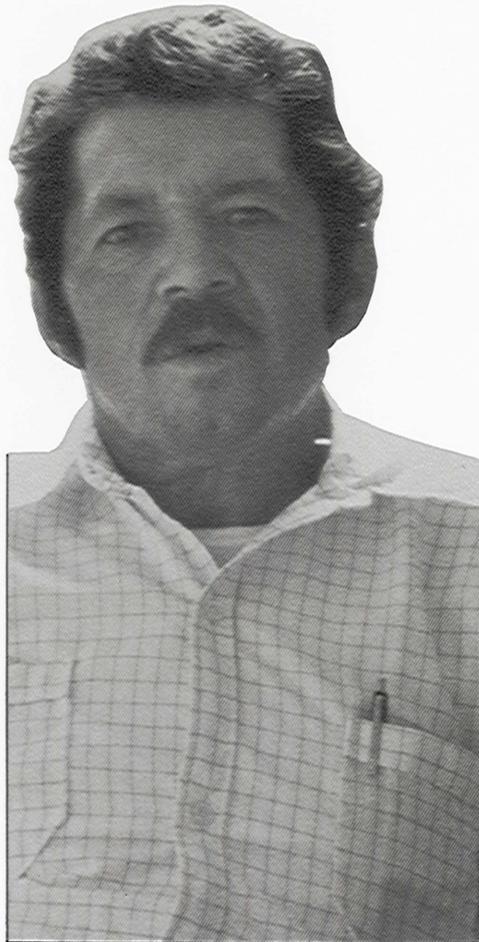
Of course, we've also made great progress in some areas, particularly in selling our tomatoes. At first we had a very hard time. We would take a truckload up to Bogotá, but the wholesalers there were well organized and told people not to buy from us. Then the wholesalers would come to us and say, "We'll buy your food for such-and-such a price." Naturally, the offers were much less than the real value. I also found out that dealers lent money to a few farmers who put up their land as collateral and got exclusive rights to buy their crops. That's how wholesalers like to do business. In the beginning, we were tempted to do the same thing until we figured out it would ruin us.

Lending and borrowing is always tricky, and we've had a problem with some members who don't like to repay their loans. That has to change. For example, say I'm the manager and here's my friend, Pedro. He owes the coop some money but if I ask him for it, he gets mad and storms off. If he gets really angry, he doesn't come back. But if the manager of the Agrarian Fund lends Pedro some money and then slaps a lien on his farm, Pedro still says hello to him, hop-

ing some day to get another loan. That's a serious issue in every organization, not just this one. The only solution we've come up with is to create our own savings and loan fund.

The same thing crops up when we buy tomatoes from our customers. They run short of money and ask us to advance some cash against their harvest. But we don't have the resources for that, so they say, "So-and-so lends me money." Now, the storekeepers around here keep a little box to show you while they swear, "Fill this up and I'll pay you for a full load." The poor farmer doesn't know any better; he pockets the advance and goes home. When the harvest is in, he fills a sack with tomatoes and brings it to the storekeeper. Suddenly the big crates they really use are dragged out and the storekeeper tells the farmer that his entire crop doesn't cover the debt.

They also pull other tricks like putting spoiled tomatoes in their crates. Things like that violate our principles because we try to help both the farmers here and the people who buy our products at the other end. Which is why we've been thinking about organizing consumers' cooperatives in Bogotá; we could deliver our goods directly and stop being middlemen. That would solve many of our problems. We've been in contact with people in the barrios about many ways they could pay lower prices for goods. We'll just have to see what happens.



Jeffrey Fox

*"I've always been concerned with social questions."*

**Luis Jose Gallego—"Don Jota"—  
founder and member**

I got married at 24 and, for awhile, everything was fine. Then my mules got stolen and I had to come down to Cali and look for another job. Luckily, I bumped into someone I knew, and he asked me if I wanted to drive his mules. I tried it for a few days and made enough to scrape by. I stayed with it until he asked me to manage his farm. After 10 years, I came back to the village and began farming on my own.

The first thing I noticed was that we had no school, not even a place for people to spend their free time. Most of the men ended up playing billiards and drinking. So I got a few people together and we laid out a soccer field. Since the men were busy coming to meetings or working on the field, they didn't have time to hang around and drink. After that, people began to look

up to me because I made sure that the work got done.

Later on, our priest encouraged us to form a village committee. So we invited one of his assistants to come down and tell us how to get started. At the very first meeting, I was elected president. Our biggest concern was building a school, and we did. Then we decided to do something about the fact so many houses lacked fresh water: people had to get it from ravines. We asked the Coffee Growers' Federation to help us construct an aqueduct. They sent out a surveyor and promised us a hand. In the end, the system cost 80,000 pesos. We put up 16,000 ourselves and had our own water supply.

I don't know, I've always been concerned with social issues: not just organizing, but also helping other people get together. When we formed the village group, we set up a Small Farmer Development Committee on our own initiative. We got the idea after a meeting in Versailles with the town council and an organizer from Community Action. In those days, I was a village representative and many of us had been invited to town hall. When we arrived, we heard that our meeting had been postponed until 10 a.m. At 10 o'clock they told us, "The meeting with village representatives will be at 2 p.m. We only want to see members of the town committee now." So I asked the men we were talking with why everyone hadn't been asked to the same meeting: didn't we all face the same kind of problems? At that point, the organizer from Community Action came out and said, "We're all part of the same group but we have to separate the urban from the rural chapters." We didn't like how this decision had been made without us, so we decided to form our own Development Committee. We didn't ask the government for permission—we didn't ask anybody for permission—we just wanted to do it by ourselves.

*"I've never liked being dependent."*

**Eduardo Giraldo, founder and member**

When we first came to Versalles, it was a pretty violent place. The civil war between the liberals and conservatives had begun in 1948 and it was a real disaster. After all, every family had both liberals and conservatives. So when we moved down to our new farm, I began to attend the weekly meetings our priest had organized in the schoolhouse. He told us, "We're all human beings. We have to work together, we have to act together across party lines to defend our rights." That's how we began: every month we would meet in one of the villages and talk about how we should stop the killing, help each other out, and serve the whole community. And little by little, we managed to change people's minds.

It was about this time that the Peace Corps arrived and sent us a volunteer. Bruce helped us organize a cooperative for fruit growers. Until then, we produced a lot of fruit but could never get a good price for it. Sometimes you'd come into town with your entire crop and the storekeepers here would say, "We're not buying today. We have too much already." So I began to work with Bruce: I came in from the farm and became the manager. But Bruce was the coop's real manager: I didn't know anything about bookkeeping, so he did the accounts. I was extremely impressed with him because of the way he lived: he was very well educated, very honest, and straightforward in every respect.

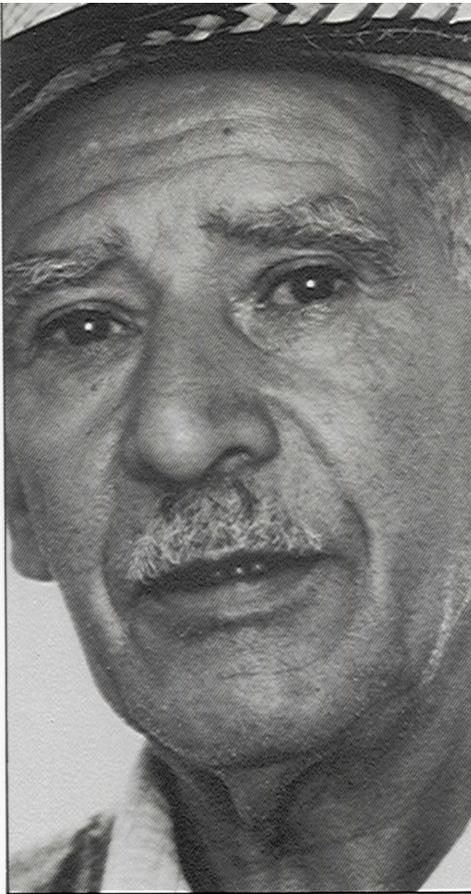
After the Peace Corps left, we kept going on our own. By that time, we had things pretty well organized. What finally put us out of business was the epidemic that destroyed our fruit trees. Of course when

people stopped growing fruit, they also dropped out of the cooperative. In other words, they didn't really understand what they had won: they just wanted to divide up the assets. Some of us tried to keep things alive by setting up a store, which we ran ourselves for a little while. We even hired an accountant to put it on a firmer basis. But our expenses were greater than our profits and pretty soon it went under, too.

That experience left a bitter taste in everyone's mouth and we became completely demoralized. No one even wanted to hear the word "cooperative." But a few of us decided to meet every week after church—just get together and talk for an hour, half an hour, about whatever seemed important. Every Sunday without fail we'd air our problems, and if there weren't any troubles to discuss we would improvise a talk on some theme: human relations or justice or economics—principally economics. We did that for a whole year.

At the same time, we also joined the Small Farmer's Association. They organized workshops on different subjects, and we learned a great deal from them. But in the end, they turned out to be just like other groups that have their own political agenda.

We decided that we needed an organization of our own, one that would be completely independent of any political party. Everyone was entitled to his political opinion but not in the group. Through the Small Farmer's Association, we had met other



people like ourselves from all over the valley: maybe 88 or 90 people from many different places. We began to hold meetings of our own in Cartago and Buga. Eventually only a handful continued to attend: nine people would meet regularly to talk about what was happening in their villages.

There was something good, though. All of us agreed that we should do whatever we could to alleviate some of the misery around here. About a year went by, and then we recognized that we weren't really getting anywhere. "What should we do?" we asked. "Why don't we form another cooperative? Maybe it will work this time. But let's not call it a cooperative, even though that's what it will be."

Then, our friend Gustavo Herrera, who manages the San Felipe cooperative—COPROAGRO, I think it's called—told us about the Inter-American Foundation. We said, "You'll have to help us with the proposal, because we don't know anything about it." He gave us a hand, and a few months later, a representative paid us a visit. At first, we were a little reluctant to accept help from anybody because everyone told us our independence would be undermined. (I've never liked being dependent; I hate to take orders from other people.) So, when we went with Marion to the bank, we asked about the strings. "The only thing the foundation requires is good bookkeeping," she said. We were delighted: what we really wanted was to run our own organization. Usually no one helps you unless they can tell you what to do.

ROBERT WASSERSTROM is a senior associate at the World Resources Institute in Washington, D.C. These interviews are excerpted from *Grassroots Development in Latin America and the Caribbean: Oral Histories of Social Change*, to be published by Praeger Press. The book includes oral histories of seven organizations that have received IAF support.

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# Research Reports

## Capsules of Four Recently Completed Research Projects



### Flooding in Paraguay

—William M. Barbieri

Four times during this century the Parana and Paraguay Rivers have overflowed their banks, inundating large areas of central and southern Paraguay for years at a time and leaving thousands of families destitute. The most recent flooding began in 1979. Three years later, when the waters began to subside, an estimated 66,000 people had been affected in urban and rural communities throughout the country.

To assess the damage and develop appropriate strategies for assisting the survivors, the Social Apostolate Section of the Paraguayan Episcopal Conference commissioned the Sociedad de Análisis, Estudios y Proyectos (SAEP)—a prominent national research center—to conduct a detailed survey. Their study, "The Social Effects of Floods in Paraguay," provides quantitative data on the number and location of flood victims, develops social and economic profiles of the affected population, and outlines basic criteria that should be considered in designing relief programs.

Although floods in Paraguay occur with regularity, this study represents the first systematic effort to examine their social and economic consequences. The authors point out that unlike some natural disasters that are "classless," these floods have had their greatest impact on the poor.

There are several interrelated reasons why floods do not cut across class boundaries. The rapid expansion of agro-industrial enterprises and the purchase of large land tracts by domestic and foreign investors have forced many small farmers to abandon their rural subsistence plots and migrate to metropolitan areas. These cities are growing rapidly, and urban land values are skyrocketing. Consequently, many recently arrived migrants are swelling the tide of poor urbanites settling in the outskirts, where flooding is common. Public services in these peripheral settlements are scarce or nonexistent; and in contrast to other residential zones, government authorities do not require deeds or construction permits for building. Just as these people are the ones most affected by floods, they are also the least insulated from economic downturns.

Most residents lack steady employment and must earn income from a variety of odd jobs, which are generally short-term and highly unstable. Yet the residents of these areas are not affected uniformly by cyclical flooding. An extensive survey of victims revealed that the degree of physical and eco-

nommic dislocation depends not only on proximity of dwellings to river banks but on where and how people earned their livelihoods.

As part of the process of assessing relief needs, researchers constructed a typology of flood victims, dividing them into four different categories based on geographic location and the degree of loss. Survey data revealed that the largest percentage of victims lived on the fringe of cities in the eastern part of the country, where floods are not long-lasting. Most of the people in this group are employed in a variety of low-paying and unstable activities in nearby areas that are unaffected by the rising waters. Although most of these residents must relocate temporarily until rivers have receded, they continue to earn some money.

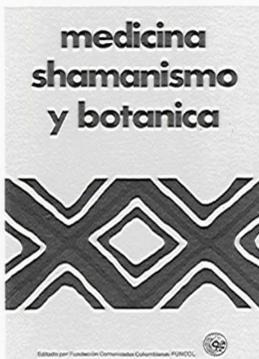
A second set of victims in this region, far less numerous than the first, are affected only by particularly high flood waters. Their homes are usually constructed farther from the river banks, and their economic position tends to be more stable than that of the first group. As a result, the degree of physical and economic damage sustained tends to be less severe, and most residents are able to recuperate relatively quickly.

In the northeast as well as on the perimeters of Asunción, the effects of flooding are more severe. Victims in these two zones frequently lose their homes and are displaced for years at a time. Yet because most depend on jobs in the service or construction sectors of metropolitan areas, they too are able to continue working.

This is not the case, however, for large numbers of people in the western half of the country and in the southeast, where flooding has the severest impact. The majority of the affected population in these regions are subsistence farmers. In addition to suffering the total loss of their homes, they lose their livelihood when their land is inundated.

In conclusion, the authors stress that the problems caused by floods are magnified by the social and economic conditions of the affected populations—conditions that leave poor Paraguayans particularly vulnerable to natural disasters. Relief programs, to be successful, must also help to incorporate low-income people into the national economy so that they find more stable employment outside the areas subject to regular flooding.

*Efectos Sociales de las Inundaciones en el Paraguay. Cuadernos de Pastoral Social (2), Equipo Nacional de Pastoral Social, Conferencia Episcopal Paraguaya, Asunción, Paraguay, 1983. Copies may be obtained from Sociedad de Análisis, Estudios y Proyectos, Casilla Postal 93, Asunción, Paraguay.*



## Traditional Medicine in Indian Communities of Colombia

—Josh Reichert

The techniques and rationales that Indian healers use to diagnose and cure illness have long interested the development professionals who work with indigenous peoples. Sociologically complex and technically sophisticated, native health systems not only offer potential insights about the causes and treatment of diseases but also provide valuable clues about the social, political, and economic fabric of Indian life.

In Colombia, as in many Latin American countries, mestizo farmers are rapidly colonizing lowland areas where many tribes traditionally planted crops, hunted game, and gathered food. Widespread malnutrition has made it more difficult for these Indians to ward off and survive the new diseases brought by the settlers. The remoteness of the areas and the lack of health care facilities further aggravate the problem. In response to rapidly deteriorating levels of health, the Fundación de Comunidades Colombianas (FUNCOL)—a nongovernmental organization that provides legal and health-care services to Colombian Indians—launched a series of alternative medical programs in 1979 to assist communities in the lowland departments of Arauca, Meta, and Vichada.

*Medicina, Shamanismo y Botánica* is an anthology that grew out of two workshops organized by FUNCOL in 1980 and 1981 to evaluate these programs and revise their methodology. The authors—including anthropologists, native healers, and health professionals—explore how western medical techniques and facilities can be combined with traditional practices to provide better health care to Indian communities.

The volume is divided into four sections. The first assembles case studies that illustrate how indigenous peoples view health and sickness holistically. Western physicians often diagnose and treat sickness in strictly physiological terms. In contrast, the authors point out that many native societies consider illness to be symptomatic of social imbalance: it can only be explained and treated within the broader context of the community's religion, family organization, politics, and work.

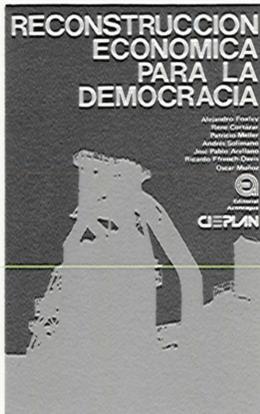
In the second section, doctors and homeopaths with extensive experience in Indian communities examine problems that arise when large-scale health programs that were designed by and for the mainstream society are imposed on a minority. These profession-

als stress that western medicine (particularly homeopathic practices) can usefully treat certain types of disorders, but they also emphasize that the cultural and ecological context of Indian life must be understood and that community members must be involved in the design and implementation of health care programs if they are to be effective.

The third section discusses the medicinal properties of various psychotropic plants used by native healers. It also discusses how a more detailed understanding of this traditional knowledge might expand western pharmacology.

The final series of articles examines four alternative health care programs that are being implemented in several Colombian Indian communities. Unlike previous institutional delivery systems, which were often designed by central planners with little knowledge of the intended beneficiaries and then carried out by government functionaries, all of these programs began with detailed investigations of local medical practices and everyday community life. Community members helped design, execute, and evaluate each program, and specific activities were tailored to the particular health needs of each beneficiary group. Equally significant, the health workers in these programs are consciously attempting to use traditional techniques and medicinal plants. Western institutional approaches are introduced at a pace and scale that does not overburden the adaptive ability of the local population. Finally, the authors note that while the final results are still unknown, the highly participatory nature of these programs, combined with their fundamental respect for patients and their societies, offers a new and promising model for health care that could also be applied to other types of development programs for indigenous communities.

*Medicina, Shamanismo y Botánica*, Fundación Comunidades Colombianas, Bogotá, Colombia, 1983. Inquiries may be directed to FUNCOL, Apartado Aéreo 92099, Bogotá, Colombia.



## Economic Reconstruction and Democracy in Chile

—Ramón E. Daubón

In 1975, the Chilean government began to implement a new series of measures for liberalizing the country's economy. The *modelo*, as this series of measures came to be called, borrowed heavily from monetarist theory and from "supply-side economics." In practice, that meant rigidly controlling growth of the money supply, easing restrictions on imports, privatizing public services (such as social security), diluting the monopoly power of labor unions, decentralizing administration in the public sector by making block grants to local governments for social services, and pegging the foreign exchange rate to the U.S. dollar.

The inflow of foreign capital accelerated between 1976 and 1982, leading to a ballooning foreign debt. Most of the money was borrowed by the private sector and was owed primarily to private foreign banks. Despite this infusion of capital, productive investment declined sharply because most of the money was used for speculative financial investments, takeovers of business firms, and the importation of consumer durables. By 1982, with a worldwide recession underway, the economy was in severe crisis. The rates of unemployment, business bankruptcies, and nonperforming bank loans reached unprecedented heights.

Informed criticism of public policy was severely limited and usually confined to academics and professionals. In this volume, leading economists from the Centro de Investigaciones Sociales para Latinoamérica (CIEPLAN) present a series of articles that recommend new policies and a new direction for the economy.

These articles link economic recovery to a rebuilding of democracy. Foxley discusses the weaknesses of the monetarist model as applied to Chile and offers a series of economic measures required for the transition to democracy. Cortázar discusses the rights of labor under a democratic regime and available options for improving the job stability and living standards of workers. Meller and Solimano present a complementary piece that discusses how to create new employment and protect worker's rights. Arellano addresses the problems of how to finance development and restructure the banking system, while Ffrench-Davis focuses on the financial and economic problems of Chile's large foreign sector. The book ends with Muñoz' description of a proposed strategy for reindustrialization.

*José Pablo Arellano, René Cortázar, Alejandro Foxley, Ricardo Ffrench Davis, Patricio Meller, Oscar Muñoz, and Andrés Solimano. Reconstrucción Económica para la Democracia. Santiago, Chile: Centro de Investigaciones Sociales para Latinoamérica (CIEPLAN), Editorial Aconcagua, 1983. Inquiries may be directed to CIEPLAN, Casilla 16496, Correo 9, Santiago, Chile.*

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