Saints and pagans

Laurence K. Daughters

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Saints and Pagans

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May 20, 1983

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Date       Signature       Larry Daughters
The final completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the supportive friendship of Elliott Rubenstein and the loyal assistance of Richard Zakia.
THESIS PROPOSAL

for
The Master of Fine Arts Degree

College of Graphic Arts and Photography
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

TITLE: Saints and Pagans
PURPOSE: A profile study of Quechua speaking Indians in the highlands of Ecuador.
SUBMITTED BY: L.K. Daughters

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SCOPE AND BACKGROUND OF THESIS:

The Andean highlands, from Cayambe in Ecuador to Nevado Illimani in Bolivia, form a series of transverse ranges intervened by a labyrinth of valleys and plateaus. Here on high patchworks of land along massive mountains, camouflaged by shifting patterns of light and shadow, communities of people as the Aymara, Quechua, and Cara Indians have built their homes and places of sustenance. Few traces are left of their highland empire, once known as "Tahuantinsuyu" or "Imperio Inca", but their culture endures today in remote Andean regions, rooted to an elemental relationship with nature and sustained through mythical and religious beliefs.

From a personal interest generated out of my own past experience living in this region, I propose for my thesis to travel to the highlands of Ecuador and make a photographic study of Quechua Indians. Within the planned ninety day span of my trip, I will observe and record the human qualities of people in this region, their religious customs, and the landscape around them, rendering a personal view of their experience.

Since a study of this nature should encompass not merely Quechua speaking groups in Ecuador but other Indian communities in the mountain plateaus of Peru or the altiplanos of Bolivia, I wish to submit my thesis as work in progress with the expectation that my own ancestral relationship to South America and my interest in the ancient diversity of this region will encourage me in the future to make further documentations.
PROCEDURES:

In preparation for this project I have read material on Andean culture and assembled myths and legends indigenous to the region. This collection, along with research I will undertake in Quito, will eventually aid me in the presentation of my thesis.

Pending financial considerations I plan to leave for Ecuador in the beginning of June and establish contacts in Quito with Ministerio de Asuntos Indigenas, sociologists and photographers who advocate an interest in Indian culture, and Peace Corps volunteers working in the highland area. During my stay I intend to be frank and open about my objectives, offering to share the process of my work with individuals or institutions who might find it of use.

After studying the geography of the provinces of Cotopaxi and Chimborazo I will do the bulk of my shooting there through the months of July and August, working with 35mm cameras and high speed black and white film. My final thesis presentation will consist of twenty to twenty-five prints, possibly captioned with verse or legends pertinent to the area I will be working in.
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PREPARATION:

My interest in this project might be traced to past experiences in South America, where my childhood imagination was inspired by country legends, living among people who had a frontier spirit and a sense of myth. These influences from the past may have emerged today in my own photographic work, which often concerns itself with rural people and places.

Several years ago, while on free-lance assignment in Ecuador, I became interested in Andean Indians whose life in straw-thatched huts on the mountains seemed to affirm a traditional relationship with nature. My stay at the time had only been transitory, but the experience of photographing in the region had lured me enough to eventually submit a thesis proposal for a three month study there.

I wanted this study to be less a photojournalistic report, concerned with timely news or social problems, than a personal essay that would explore religious tradition and the character of the landscape. In my last trip to Ecuador I had learned that many saints were equated with deities of nature, as a carry over from past Incaic traditions, and that rural people still confused the God of the Catholic Church with Pachamac, traditionally a supreme Andean deity regarded as the soul of the universe.

Through my forthcoming work, I hoped to focus on these beliefs and gain a feeling for people who seemed to extend them-
selves to the limit of the world, finding relationship between their soul and the soul of nature. I hoped to explore the region not merely as a geographic location, but as a spiritual experience.

Knowing that three months were hardly adequate to make a conclusive inquiry, I decided to present this project as work in progress, anticipating that it would complement in the future an ongoing photographic interest of mine in rural man and the rural landscape. Also, to keep objectives unified within a limited period, I proposed to concentrate on the Andean provinces of Chimborazo and Cotopaxi in the southern part of Ecuador—an area accessible from Quito where I could maintain geographic continuity and photograph people with common traditions and dress. (See map following page)

In addition to these general preparations, I obtained background information on the people I intended to photograph that would provide me with a better understanding of their past and a more stable point of reference for my photographic objectives. To this effect, inquiring in various local libraries, I discovered that rural communities in the provinces of Chimborazo and Cotopaxi either descended from ancient native kingdoms who ruled prior to the arrival of the Incas, or came from Peru during a time of Inca expansion, when conquered tribes were uprooted or replaced by loyal subjects from Cuzco. These forceful migrations seemed to have made Quechua the dominant lan-
language in the region and diffused local culture and identity. When the Spaniards arrived in the sixteenth century the exploitation and suffering imposed on the Indians caused many of them to escape up to remote areas of the highlands, where their language was preserved in isolation of the outside world and a general mistrust of Spanish culture affirmed itself. While Catholicism was adopted in the indigenous tradition of borrowing religions from conquerors, it was modified in each region to include a group of saints representing local deities of nature. This form of Catholicism seems to have become a relevant part of Indian expression and, in whatever manner it was practiced, offered spiritual faith against oppression and the rigors of the land.

DEVELOPMENT:

With this information as a source of perspective for the theme of my work, I departed for Ecuador in June and set up base in Quito through the hospitality of friends. There I visited people who could share firsthand experiences working in the area I intended to photograph. At the same time, I traveled to the provinces of Chimborazo and Cotopaxi to establish contacts with rural communities and become familiar with landscape, weather, and lighting conditions. Through a process of personal selection, as the weeks unfolded, I concentrated on communities like Salaron and Mocha, on the outskirts of Riobamba, where local people seemed less affected with biases for outsiders and the mountain landscape favored the visual backgrounds I looked for. To reach these places I often had to travel on the back of a
heavily loaded truck through winding mountain roads, which became muddy and slippery on rainy days as happened on one occasion when our truck started sliding on turns, seemingly out of control in spite of the driver's dubious efforts, making it safer to jump off and continue journey on foot.

People's receptiveness in these rural areas often seemed to depend on the attitude of the community at large toward outsiders and their previous experiences with them. In the fields of Salaron and Mocha, farmers were generally trusting and friendly, even applying the polite custom of coming up for a handshake by covering their soiled hand with their poncho or offering their wrist. In other places, like Tixan and Gua-mote, they were suspicious and sometimes hostile to the idea of being photographed—a behaviour not uncommon where political feelings had developed against outsiders, partly encouraged by the preachings of local priests or the resentments of mestizos.

In spite of underlying influences, as I had more occasion to interact with rural Indians, I became aware of a duality in their personality—quiet, suspicious, and often pretending ignorance toward outsiders, with their own kind they tended to be tolerant, playful, and more expressive of their emotions. I soon realized that in order to obtain photographs representative of their nature, I needed to apply discretion and work out a relationship based on consent and trust. While my knowledge of Spanish helped considerably in ordinary communication, the fact that I learned with time a few phrases in Quechua became
more important in gaining their acceptance. Traveling by myself, without a team of researchers, also made it easier to establish individual relationships; and the fact that on first acquaintance, if the situation seemed appropriate, I would reverse roles allow someone to hold the camera, see me through the viewfinder and press the shutter helped to dispel a sense of mistrust and some basic illusions about the use of the equipment.

In spite of different approaches with rural people, including later remittance of pictures when I returned to the States, I realize now in retrospect that it would have been easier for them to understand my work had the process of sharing images taken place more immediately on the field. In future projects I hope to resolve this matter by setting up a rudimentary darkroom near where I'm photographing, or carry to isolated places a Polaroid camera so that people can understand more effectively my intentions and participate in the process of the work.

Aside from traveling to communities like Salaron, Mocha, and Tixan, I also visited Cuicuno (near Saquisili), Cajabamba, and Sicalpa Antiguo (south of Riobamba) towns that have been for years market and ceremonial centers for outlying rural areas. I tried to plan these visits so they would coincide with feast days like Corpus Christi, St. Peter, or St. Paul, when rural processions were organized in honor of a local saint and it was possible to photograph musicians or masked dancers participating in religious rituals.

In these towns the hardship of Indian life manifested
itself more visibly, and it was not uncommon to find a cripple or a musician begging on the street, poor people contributing money to a church collection, or a woman weeping in the outskirts of town on a cemetery field. This melancholic side of Indian life seemed to be complemented by the plaintive theme of processional music, which was frequently played off key on primitive instruments and emitted a lonely haunting quality in the empty spaces of the surrounding country. It was a mood that was also conveyed in the language of Indian songs and verses, as I was to discover on subsequent research in Quito, and seemed to have enough relationship to what I was witnessing through my own photographic work that, eventually, I decided to select the following fragments as prologue and epilogue respectively to my visual exhibit at RIT:

You are happiness made life
I am increasing sadness;
A white cloud, the lightest one
A sweet fountain of pure water.
You will be my sweet deceit,
I will be your dark shadow.

Taqui fragment

The moon and the year travel and pass away
Also the day, also the wind
Also the flesh passes away to the place of its quietness.

American Indian

While some of the events I recorded in Ecuador were common, daily occurrences, my intention was to convey a spiritual feeling for the region through the refrain of people's religious customs and the mood of the rural country. To this effect, in certain images,
environment was given priority over a subject's individual personality, so that people sometimes appear distant and remote scaled against the immensity of the landscape. Even the choice of black and white prints over color, to record a way of life seemingly far removed from the modern world, was designed to complement the theme of the images and project less a sense of timely news than of timeless age and history.

No attempt was made in my photographs to describe impartially all aspects of Andean life, and a magazine editor would be hard pressed putting them into a journalistic story. While it was impossible to disassociate feelings from certain situations I witnessed, those scenes that dramatized social problems, for instance, were recorded if they complemented more realistically the theme of my thesis, without intending them to make a social exposé. In a photographic study of this kind, different points of view about the people and the region could have been explored, but with limited time and a need to keep images cohesive, it was important that I concentrate on those aspects of Indian life carrying personal significance for me.
TECHNICAL NOTES:

Cameras and Lenses: Nikkormat FTN and Nikon F, with 28mm Nikkor, 55mm Macro Nikkor, and 135mm Vivitar; Leica M4, with 50mm Summicron and 35mm Summilux. The Nikon F was kept in Quito with other equipment and supplies as a reserve camera. While most of my shooting was done with Leica and Summilux occasionally I used the Nikkormat for landscape and portrait work if I needed a lens I didn't have available for the Leica.

Light Meters: Metrastar and Gossen Pilot. When necessary meter readings were taken with the Metrastar - its relatively small angle of acceptance made it particularly useful in situations where I needed separate measurements of light. The Gossen was kept inoperative as a backup meter.

Film and Development: Tri X with Rodinal 1:50 dilution. Film was exposed 3/4 to 1 stop under recommended speed and compensations were later made in development to reduce negative contrast. This was particularly useful for scenes photographed in the strong light of the mountains where land and sky illumination had to be matched.

Enlarger and Paper: In the past I had grown accustomed to working with the rich tones and grain patterns of Agfa Portriga printed with Omega D series condenser light. But for my thesis prints I used an old Focomat (Model I) enlarger and discovered that under its slightly softer condenser illumination I needed the more pronounced grain pattern of Brovira paper.

From the outset I opted to work with 35mm equipment, considering its portable light-weight handling for travel, for photographing unpredictable changing patterns of landscape light,
and for human interaction in uncontrolled situations where it was necessary to record people's activities as they lived them.

Before the start of the trip I ran tests on various types of films and developers to determine a grain pattern for enlargements of 35mm negatives. I exposed strips of Tri X and Ilford HP4, HP5 film to the same subject under the same lighting conditions, processed them with FG7, Rodinal, and D76, and after printing enlarged segments of each series of negatives, decided that a Tri X-Rodinal combination produced a desired grain pattern that emphasized texture and created an impressionistic effect on the image.

Both my Nikkormat and Leica had been through considerable use prior to the project, so after having their shutters tested by a technician to determine their actual speeds, I verified them with a test roll of color slide film, matching exposure accuracy with shutter calibration. In this manner when I arrived in Ecuador I could avoid the slow and awkward use of a meter, exposing according to pre-established test results and my own experience with the latitudes of Tri-X film.

In Ecuador I also kept daily field notations, roll by roll, recording exposure readings and variations that might have to be taken into account later in development, as well as shutter speed information for evaluating differences in image resolution handholding the Leica and the Nikkormat. Also, other notations describing subject matter photographed proved invaluable for as-
sessing the direction of my work, distributing time equally between places, and planning better my traveling itinerary.

LOGISTICS AND SUPPORT:

From the very beginning when I needed endorsements for my proposal the confident and generous support of Dr. Robert Johnston, in the manner of a free-lance assignment to complement my thesis objectives, proved as much a moral as a financial lift. Also a significant overseas contract from Anne Bringsjord to photograph Peace Corps volunteer activities in Ecuador, as well as a contribution from my father to compensate for last minute travel expenses, served to bolster this project.

Other assistance in matters related to legal residency allowed me to resolve unexpected problems. While the procedure of getting a sixty-day tourist visa to enter Ecuador had been merely routine, it became quite another matter to apply for a longer permit that would include the three to four month trip I planned. The Ecuadorian consul in Washington D.C. was busy in his office with two female friends when I went to request a residency permit, and not being very interested at the time in taking up an application of that nature, he persuaded me it would be simpler to travel to Ecuador as a tourist and request longer residency once in the country. This cost me many visits to the Ecuadorian Foreign Ministry in Quito, waiting behind long disorganized lines, paying advance fees for an application that I learned eventually had simply been filed away.
Pressed by the realization that my sixty day tourist visa would expire, I went to visit a friend my family had known several years back, Gen. Marcos Gandara, former military junta president. His call to an officer in the Foreign Minstry re-activated my application and obtained the residency permit in one day.

Other people in Ecuador also provided indispensable support. The Bonilla family, whom I knew prior to undertaking this project, in the traditionally hospitable manner of highland Ecuadorians, invited me to use their home as a base of operations where I could leave baggage in safekeeping and find lodging on return trips from the country; also Eduardo Guide, a young photographer for National Tourist Offices in Ecuador who was assembling a visual library on Indian customs, imparted much useful information concerning the nature of highland communities and his experience photographing them; while Wolfgang Schuller, a freelancer on assignment at the time for Geo Mundo, was as generous in his personal friendship as in having me partake of his contacts with indigenous families.

Finally, when my field activities were completed after I returned home, the time consuming work of mounting and framing images, and printing posters and invitations for a thesis presentation, would have been impossible without the unfailing help of my wife Sofia.
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