

INTRODUCTION

Travelers from the Northern Hemisphere who arrive on the Pacific coast of South America encounter, looming before them, the Andes. One of the most impressive and starkly beautiful landscapes on earth, this broken terrain stretches five thousand miles from the mists of Tierra del Fuego and the Antarctic Sea to precipitous peaks in northern Colombia and Venezuela that plunge into the Caribbean. The Andes straddle the equator and sit squarely in the world's tropical zone. Yet due to the great height of this land mass (surpassed only by the Himalayas), the Andean mountain chain creates the conditions for an amazing diversity of climates. Along the mountains' western edge stretch the barren deserts of the Pacific coast; on the eastern slopes lie verdant rain forests; within the rugged, rocky uplands of the central massif are found moist alpine meadows, high, arid steppes, and temperate, lightly forested valleys.

Due in part to this ecological diversity, the Andean region has been the scene of one of the most fascinating successful attempts at creating the level of social complexity that we distinguish with the label "civilization." In all of human history only a few cases of independent civilizational development have occurred. Andean civilization, which evolved largely unaffected by currents from other centers of complex culture, is in that select group. The process stretched over more than four thousand years, with its early begin-

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nings in coastal fishing villages and the highland ceremonial centers of migrating hunters and incipient farmers.¹ Population movements, religious proselytization, economic exchange, warfare, and political expansion all apparently contributed to the emergence of such celebrated Andean cultural traditions as Chavín, Nazca, Moche, Chimú, and Tiwanaku. Over this long period of contact and communication, involving moments both of expansion and contraction and of greater and lesser unity, Andean peoples came to share widespread patterns of cultural practice and expression whose common themes spread from one area to another and underwent continual restructuring. Especially in the core of the central Andes, the area from what is today Ecuador through northern Argentina, we find a coherent culture area that has retained considerable unity into the contemporary period.

Political evolution in the Andes a thousand years ago led to the creation of Wari, an expansive, all-inclusive state which united scores, perhaps hundreds, of local ethnic groups. Processes of independent political growth and dissolution finally reached their zenith in the great state of Tawantinsuyu, the Inka Empire. This Andean experiment in civilization was abruptly cut short by the military incursion of another rather hybrid empire—Spain. Spawned by the centuries-long struggle against Islam, which spread into Spain from North Africa, fiercely Catholic in a puritanical way, and a major entrepôt for expanding mercantile capitalism, Spain came to the Andes. Or, rather, Spaniards came, drawn from various social classes and accompanied by their slaves, wives, priests, and concubines, and, naturally, their horses. They descended upon the ancient cities and shrines of the Peruvian coast. They climbed to the villages and *estancias* of the high Andean valleys and on to the cold and windswept Altiplano, the high intermontane plateau. They came for gold and silver, which they found—especially the latter. They came to convert the heathen to the Catholic faith. They came to rule; and rule they did, and in some ways, still do, in spite of the fact that the Andean republics have all been independent from their former colonial masters for well over a century and a half.

Change—and the conflicts and struggles that precede, accompany, and follow it—is the essence of the human condition. Change

has certainly not been lacking in the Andes. But what of the great Andean civilizational experiment? Has it been erased by subsequent events? As we shall see in the coming pages, the answer to that question is quite clearly “no.”

Andean history did not come to an end with the Spanish invasion and conquest. It continues today in the lives of the protagonists of this book, the Yura of central Bolivia. The Yuras' way of life represents one manifestation of an Andean solution to the human condition. As a people the Yura have retained and reformulated many aspects of the original Andean worldview. Yet this retention is not an anachronistic throwback to bygone days, a result of lack of contact with the wider world. It is, I will argue, a cultural strategy, one that is perhaps not consciously chosen, or even verbally articulated, but a strategy nonetheless.

As we shall see, the Yura appear to be culturally conservative; they cultivate with care an identity and a pattern of social life that draws heavily on their Andean past. This strategy has united them for centuries as they faced, first, Spanish colonial domination and, subsequently, the ruling hispanicized national elite which at present controls the Bolivian economy and the structures of the republican state. For centuries the Yura have confronted (as have other Andean peasants) a dominant class which denigrates them and decries their “ignorance”; it has exploited their labor, expropriated their agricultural products and animals, and stolen their lands—not to mention taken their lives. The Andean world which the peasants of Yura have constructed in the late twentieth century must be seen in terms of the reality of the domination they face. Their efforts to maintain autonomy and a unique identity are for them a form of cultural resistance.