The Aymara and Uru Indians of the Peruvian Altiplano

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In the Altiplano area of Peru live some of the more primitive dwellers in a land of great contrasts. The sod houses in this part of the country are acclaimed as among the most primitive in the world. These windowless structures ward off freezing cold and heavy rains. Such is the land of the Aymara.

Out in Lake Titicaca are "islands," perhaps among the strangest in the world. They are formed of *totora*, a reed, and they seem to float. On these islands are the Uru Indians, some of whom speak Aymara and some of whom speak Quechua. Far from being "uncontaminated" by civilization, these island dwellers reflect nearly as much acculturation as do their neighbors on the mainland shores of the Lake.

The Uru Indians have been called the "Race of the Totora," for they depend in so many ways on this reed. Their man-made island is built of totora. Their boats are of totora. So are their houses and the lean-tos that protect their animals. Their animals eat the reed, and so do the people. This same vegetable matter is dried, woven, and used for pallet or sail, or for fuel for cooking.

Besides the tender heart of the totora plant, the Indians have fish and a kind of barley for their subsistence level food. Wild birds and bird eggs supplement the diet, and very occasionally mutton (fresh or dried) or a chicken will add a bit of culinary variety.

In addition to a pottery stove, which is just large enough to accommodate two pottery pots, the meager inventory of the family treasures will include usually a few dishes and jars, a *metate* and *mano*, and a few broken pottery vessels.

The vast extent of Lake Titicaca does mitigate the extreme cold of the Altiplano for the Urus. But one finds it difficult to admit that the reed houses could be classified as "adequate." The same must be said of the thin, worn, tattered and patched clothing of these Indians.

Surrounded, as the Urus are, by the Aymara Indians, and in more or less constant contact with them it is not surprising to find them becoming more acculturated to the ways of the Aymaras.

The Aymara Indians, who inhabit most of the territory surrounding Lake Titicaca have a bleak place to call "home." At an altitude of 12,000 feet the high plateau extends from horizon to horizon, scarely broken. Basically an agrarian people, these Indians live constantly in fear of their own "Four Horsemen"—draught and flood, hail and frost. International, as well as national, agencies have frequently listed the Puno district around the Lake as a disaster area.

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In one particular place, between Juliaca and Huancane a sodhouse type of dwelling has developed—possibly due to the fact that there are no trees—in which no wood is used. The sod blocks are cut from the bleak prairie and allowed to dry in the sun. The base of the house is about 15 feet square, and approximately five and one-half feet high. With a bit of mathematical ingenuity the Indians place a conical top on this square base. The sod blocks are laid turf-side down, and by omitting one or two of the blocks—in the top of the cone shaped roof—a tiny slit space serves for ventilation purposes. A bit of llama or sheep's hide can be stuffed into the small opening to keep out the bitter cold night air.

Some of these houses have no doors, but, more frequently, a few rough planks will be nailed together and placed before the opening to serve for a door. Occasionally one finds a touch of real elegance when a small entry way has been added to the door, and capped with a small corbelled arch. All of this architectural splendor will be made of the same sod blocks. A sod-house is assembled in a day, and will last about 20 years.

Of the domesticated animals that one finds with the Aymara Indians—and the list includes dogs, cats, chickens, sheep, pigs, alpaca, an occasional horse, etc.,—the most valuable seem to be the llama. His wool serves for clothing, his hide serves for mattress or blanket, the proximal end of the tibia is used for an awl in weaving. The meat is a rare treat. Most of the llama's life is spent in service as a pack animal. The slaughtering of a llama is reserved for a special occasion or for a sacrifice. The antiquity of the llama on the Altiplano scene is attested to in bas-relief carvings found on the *chulpas*, a pre-Incaic tower-tomb.

An item of ordinary trade in the market, the llama hide sells for about two dollars—and it costs almost that much to get one tanned well. But this is only one of the hundreds of items to be offered for sale or barter in an Aymara market. Other items include everything from corn (dried or cooked on the cob), to potatoes (fresh or frost dried *chuños*), to amulets (carved stone or dried llama foetus) for love or money; everything from fresh fish to pottery vessels and itinerant merchants' trinkets.

In a summary of this sort many details have to be omitted, and one can do little more than to indicate the rich potential awaiting further academic research. The linguist can find a few people who know the vanishing language of the Urus (which for all practical purposes has disappeared), as well as the currently spoken Aymara and Quechua. The archeologist has the rich Highland tradition including Tihuanacan ware to uncover and explain. The physical anthropologist has every sort of material from ancient artificially deformed crania to the Andean types of people to work with. And, of course, the ethnologist encounters innumerable problems with these Peruvian Primitives.