

THE SOUTH AMERICAN INDIAN AS A
GEOGRAPHIC STUDY

WILLIAM H. HAAS, NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

South America offers many surprises to the traveller, but none of them is more arresting than those which relate to the Indian. He gives an atmosphere to the west coast countries which has no counterpart anywhere. At first sight of some of the world's famous ruins, such as Sacsahuaman, Ollantaytambo, Tiahuanaco, and others, there comes an almost irresistible conviction that the builders of these tremendous structures with their huge blocks of stone were of a better blood than that of the modern Quechua or Aymará with his sullen and hopelessly sad hang-dog expression. Nevertheless, the near ancestors of these spiritless people were a part of the proud and powerful Inca Empire.

The contrasts between a brilliant past and a sordid present is in constant juxtaposition. The resourcefulness of the ancestors, their activity, application, and conceptions of big things are everywhere as evident as the filth, the poverty, and the degradation of the descendants, making the contrasts all the more striking. It is hard to believe that living in the same general physical environment in contact with a superior, at least a more advanced race, should have produced such a marvelous change in such a remarkably short time.

It is not surprising, therefore, that for many years the belief existed among most investigators that the Incas, the Chibchas, the Mayas, the Aztecs, and our own Mound-builders were of a different racial stock than that of the Indian of today. Little by little, however, an overwhelming mass of evidence has accumulated, which shows that all belong to the same stock, and that practically all their cultural evolution, as shown in major and minor antiquities, has taken place in the New World. This has been done in a comparatively short time, for we have no undisputed evidence of glacial man in America. Various evidences tend to show that the American Indian came to this continent shortly after the stone polishing stage had been inaugurated in the land from which he came.

To the student of geography these facts are interesting and vital, for this means that the progress evolved in the New World has been, very probably, as distinct from any Old World development as though it had originated on another planet. The Indian is a product, therefore, of the American environment, and the differences in advancement can be explained only by the differences in the natural conditions which made certain advances possible. A study in this field ought to be productive in working out fundamental geographic relationships, which here should be found in their simplest forms.

The field of investigation, however, is not an easy one, for much is still unknown. The student of geography needs to know, rather definitely, how much of the development of this culture was accomplished under the Asiatic and how much under the American environment. What cultural elements did this migrant bring with him on which to start? Have all the cultural elements of both continents come from the same or from different groups, or migrations? After their arrival on these shores, did their dispersal come at once before a local development had taken place, or was the dispersal due to slow spreading from the periphery of the group? Can certain similar elements of culture originate simultaneously in far distant places, or when such are found, may they have been transmitted by contiguous groups and may they be traced to an original center? These and a host of other questions must be answered before the Geography of the American Indian can be written.

The non-Anglo-Saxon sections of the New World offer by far the best conditions for such study. Even in the regions north of the Rio Grande much still can be found out concerning the life relationships of the American Indian, but it is to be regretted that so little attention is paid along lines of investigation where facts readily attainable now will disappear most probably in this generation. However, in South America the general lack of white development in many sections offers possibilities of study entirely unknown here, for even now some of the countries are more Indian than white.

When one speaks of the American Indian in South America, it becomes necessary to explain the term used.

In the Indian countries little or no distinction is made as to blood relationships. The distinctions arise from the great contrasts among the people in wealth and social position, and are very sharply drawn. To find statistics on the "Indios" or "Mestizos" does not mean Indians or mixed bloods but merely those of the lowest and next lowest rank, those without wealth and social position. Anyone with sufficient leisure, who can maintain his family without work, belongs to the white class. Possibilities of change from one class to another are rare, as opportunities for the accumulation of wealth by the poor are few. A class division, therefore, may be made, into one with opportunities and into one without hope. The latter group for want of a better name may be called Indian.

Mixing of bloods has gone on without any sentiment against it ever since the time of the "Conquistadores", so that there are, very probably, few native whites without some strain of Indian blood, and likewise few Indians, except in some of the undeveloped sections, that are free from admixtures. The number of pure blood Indians in the plateau countries is much greater than pure blood whites. The Bolivian census for 1900 gives the Indian population as 48.42 per cent of the total and the white as 14.64 per cent, the rest being mestizos. These figures representing classes may be fairly correct, but the absolutely pure white population is probably less than two per cent of the total. The figures show, however, the dominance of the Indian blood in the life of the Republic.

If there is such a thing as cultural evolution controlled or modified, at least largely, by the environment, then there should be such a thing as regional cultures brought about by regional activities,—in other words, a regional geography of the American Indian. South America has been divided into four major cultural areas on the assumption that the activities based on the getting of food are the most fundamental. These culture groups are as follows: (1) the Chibcha in Colombia, agriculturists of the upland type; (2) the Manioc in the Amazon basin, agriculturists whose main food was the roots of the mandioeca; (3) the Guanaco, in the Pampas of Argen-

tina, hunters whose activities were much like those of our plains Indian; and (4) the Inca, on the high plateaus of Peru and Bolivia, agriculturists whose progress far outstripped that of any others.

If such a classification is legitimate from a geographic point of view, then the geographer has a large field before him and some serious problems. Why was the evolution so slow here even in the most progressive sections when compared to Old World development? It seems incredible that the Indian lived here without much progress while civilizations in the Old World rose and fell. The natural environment of the western world, for the most part, seems to be stimulative enough now. Climate and topography were then much the same as now. The available resources, of course, are immensely greater now than then, and probably will continue to multiply as methods are discovered to use the resources locked up for the present. Were the migrants a dullard group, driven from their old environment by the more progressive and thus in their wanderings reached a new world? The evolutionary trend has not been in that direction, for many a full blooded Indian has shown great brilliancy along certain lines.

Whatever the geographer of the future will find, one of the most striking facts is that the descendants of that most advanced group, the Incas, are at present in the most pitiable condition of any group in either continent. Their poverty is great, with little or no possibility of changing their status under present conditions. This is not due to laziness or lack of energy, but largely due to a vicious system in which they find themselves. Their condition is well nigh hopeless and if they have a philosophy it is one that accepts the inevitable. Their "chicha" is their curse as it undermines their physical and moral welfare. It is also a blessing in that it enables them to forget a sordid world and to conjure up a new one with hope. Their "coca" dulls their minds and sensibilities and makes of them little else than a beast of burden. However, it also dulls the gnawing pains and the recollections, if there are any, of ancient splendor. The environment is powerless now to stimulate for there are other forces which dominate.