

# Potatoes and rituals

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Photo: Gloria Miranda Z.

*Decorated oxen during ploughing festival of San Lucas.*

**Family relationships are important in Andean culture and cosmovision. In 1996 Talpuy conducted a study on family relationships in the Mantaro Valley of Peru. A year later co-ordinated activities began between Talpuy and a programme on sustainable agriculture (ILEIA) in the same valley. In this context Talpuy conducted a study on the role of cosmovision in potato production and its relevance for Participatory Technology Development (PTD). This article reflects the main findings of this study.**

Grupo Talpuy is a NGO that has been working for 18 years in the Mantaro Valley investigating and promoting Andean science and technology. Cosmovision is a central element that guides all their activities. Talpuy's mission is rural development and the ecological management of watersheds in economically resource-poor communities. Talpuy has two major objectives: first to develop material for education and second to consolidate farmers' technical knowledge. 'MINKA', their magazine, has become a major tool in the communication between farmers. Talpuy's 'Education and Communication approach' includes three levels of interaction with farmers. During the first phase of motivation, farmers are lead towards a deeper understanding of the principles of their so-called essential indigenous knowledge, knowledge for day-to-day survival. In this knowledge there are non-visible details that are often difficult to understand. Questions like why crop rotation is important or the life cycle of liver fluke are explored. External (conventional) knowledge is thus used to link with and strengthen farmers' essential indigenous knowledge.

In the second phase of developing knowledge, the farming family analyses how their knowledge is built up of several elements, the relation between these elements and their potential for problem solving. Farmer leaders develop into experts on local Andean technology. The final stage of organisation is to stimulate

farming families in organising activities in their community.

## **Candles, coca and chicha**

In Pucará, one of the study areas in Mantaro Valley, cosmovision is expressed with rituals throughout the agricultural cycle. At specific times the farming family requests support from *Pachamama*, or Mother Earth, God, Jesus Christ and their own patron saints. There are various rituals at specific moments during the potato cultivation cycle. These moments are reflected in festivals, story telling, riddles, jokes, even clothing, handicraft and poetry. Potatoes are considered to be alive and have needs that are similar to humans: they feel, observe and require attention and care.

Generally the mother or a woman known to have with 'the best hand' is responsible for sowing. Sowing is best carried out by a woman with many children. However she should not be menstruating.

One day before sowing potato *velacuy* is performed: the enlightenment of the seeds. At 8 or 9 o'clock in the morning the family comes together for a ceremony. Different potato varieties are displayed and flowers, coca leaves and candles are added to them. While chewing coca leaves together, the mother speaks the following words: "Dear seed, I will sow you in many plots, I will take you from your home, tomorrow you will be in the field".

*Pachamama* is asked for her blessing.

"Mother Lake and Father Mountain, please bless our harvests. I offer my life energy to you". The way the candle burns predicts the outcome of the harvest. If it stops burning there will be difficulties. If the candle has black smoke, the potatoes will contract disease. If the candle burns brightly, the potatoes will grow well. During this ritual cigarettes are smoked. These give further indication of how the crop will develop.

*Chicha*, the local maize brew, is shared by those present at the ceremony. The first sip is sprinkled on the floor. This is an expression of a specific sentiment: "Earth, you and I will together serve this cup". Coca leaves also reflect what will happen to the crop. When leaves are taken from a bag with the part that receives sunlight facing it upwards, it is a good sign. If many leaves emerge upside down problems can be expected.

The family uses the signs given by of candles, coca and cigarettes as a code or message and this helps them to do their work with more dedication and with more awareness of what might happen. Some families also visit a *laya* or Andean priest and perform a special ritual with him. In earlier days, this was a very frequent practice. The *laya* prepares a special table on which wine, raisins, peanuts, flowers, fruits, biscuits, sugar, sweets and coca leaves are displayed. When this is offered to God, the saints and *Tayta Huamani* or the sacred mountain of the region, it en-

sure a successful growing season not only for the potatoes but for all crops.

### Ploughing and sowing

Before ploughing the land, another offering is made to Tayta Huamani to ensure good harvest and prevent frost. These are the main threats to the potato crop. Coca leaves, flowers and fruits are placed in a corner of the plot and people pray 'Our Father'. Then the best tubers are selected and perfectly formed coca leaves are placed where new sprouts will emerge. This offering is accompanied by the name of the plot and the mountains that protect it: "Tayta Huamani, take this *coquita*". Then the tubers are covered with earth. Families in Pucara say: "Performing these rituals helps the plots and seeds grow better if they are planted in a happy mood".

When seeds are being planted the women decorate their hats with flowers. Flowers are also scattered around the fields and new furrows are decorated with rose- and coca leaves. The potatoes are expected to flourish in a way that reflects this abundance. When the potato tubers are placed in the furrow any sign of sweating is carefully observed. Sweating is another positive sign. The family celebrates planting with extensive meals. During the ploughing festival, known as San Lucas, oxen are decorated with flowers. The marriage of two good potatoes, a large one representing male and a smaller one representing the female, is another ritual. Both tubers are decorated and tied together before they are covered with soil.

### Harvesting and storage

During harvest, rituals are performed thanking Mother Nature. An offering is displayed in the corner of the field before

harvesting. Coca, cigars, liquor and chicha are offered to thank for what has been granted and to request a good harvest. Two large potatoes, selected as father and mother, are blessed during the Catholic mass. All their 'children' have to be protected during storage. Nobody is allowed to eat these sacred potatoes and children are not allowed to play with them.

In some regions families put different varieties of potato on a small plate and cover them with flowers. Dahlias are particularly popular. These flowers are buried amid piles of potatoes. Dry flowers indicate that the potatoes are losing their vigour. During times of shortage, the mother of the family ties a broom to her waist and repeats: "In this time of shortage you will feed us. Here you will be, this is your home. Until August, until the last harvest, you will stay with me". Then the potatoes are trustfully covered with the broom in the belief that they will last until the next harvest.

### Spirituality in the Andes

Andean cosmivision reflects how people perceive their fellows, their ancestors, nature and the divine world. Cosmovision involves a harmonious form of being, thinking and feeling, in which everything is inter-related. We should not limit cosmivision to spirituality and religious festivals. It is much larger than this and includes aspects of productive, social and economic life. An important element of Andean cosmivision is the mutual help between individuals and families and the structured network of social relations. These Andean traditions are closely integrated with Catholic belief and practices introduced during the Spanish conquest.

The layas or Andean mystics do not

openly promote their activities. They are selected for their personal qualities and their ability to relate to Pachamama or Mother Earth. Andean spirituality, however, is not restricted to the activities of the layas. It is generally expressed in the way people pay tribute to Pachamama in every day life. Being able to relate to Pachamama and offer her respect comes first, other elements follow.

The influence of terrorism, embodied in Sendero Luminoso, has had a negative influence on the spirituality of rural Peruvians. Violence has damaged people not only materially, but also socially and spiritually. The colour of life has been lost. Today people are trying to recover from these experiences and to re-encounter the expressions of cosmivision and spirituality whilst celebrating festivals and working together in harmony with nature. During the violence they were unable to do this because of fear and economic difficulties. Today there is more trust and cosmivision helps people find themselves again.

### Cosmovision and participation

A good understanding of the cosmivision in the area is indispensable for farm experimentation. Questions can be asked, like what are the characteristics of cosmivision, what are its limitations, what changes occur over time, what is its potential and who are key persons, healers and mystics? Normally, participatory processes focus on the material world and to a lesser extent on the social world. The spiritual dimension is not often included. On basis of their experience and research, Talpuy has developed a method of rapid assessment.

When an experiment is designed, indicators from cosmivision that relate to agricultural production need to be included. During a workshop in November 1998, the partners in the ILEIA programme, CEAR (another NGO working in the Mantaro Valley) and Talpuy identified steps that will ensure a co-ordination of their work. With the help of traditional knowledge and cosmivision, they act on the reality of peasant life and aim to improve its quality. Workshops will be organised to exchange methodological experience. Exchange visits of farmers will be arranged to strengthen farmer-to-farmer learning. An inventory of cosmivision related key persons also seems worthwhile. The challenge is to develop more methodological insight and to go beyond general anthropological and sociological reflections.



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Photo: Gloria Miranda Z

One day before sowing, tubers are selected for the Velucy ritual.