

# Traditional food and healing

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Photo: Talpuy

**Talpuy has been working with indigenous farming communities in the Mantaro Valley, Central Peru, for about 15 years. Recently, together with Compas, it has been focusing on the Andean cosmovision of traditional food and medicine. This article presents the perceptions rural women about the relationship between food and health.**

Talpuy started working on the relationship between food and health after an event organized in 1997 by the Club of Mothers and Young People in the area. The event, a 'Contest to rescue traditional foods' lead many women to reflect on the food available in their area. As one woman put it: " We have so much here and we did not realise it! We barely need the city!" .

César Paredes Alfaro, a high school student observed: "In spite of the limitations of the countryside, our lands and animals give us the food we need to preserve our health. The prayers and the culture of sharing of our parents also help. It is us, the young people of the villages, who have to rescue and develop what has been lost, always thinking about the future..."

## Andean food

Fortunita Romero, Marina Porras, María Ames, Coronación Salcedo and Olga Remigio live with their families in the communities of Santa Rosa de Potaca, Carhuapaccha and Viquez. Altitudes in their villages range from 2,800 to 3,700 meters above sea level. They expressed their ideas about the relation between food and health. They indicated that in the communities of the Mantaro Valley food is consumed in order to preserve the health of the people, as well as the land and the animals. Moreover, food is used in rituals and festivities in order to preserve

the health of *Pachamama*, or Mother Nature.

In every village particular habits exist associated with the potatoes, corn, meats, fruits, herbs, vegetables, and other Andean foods. With these foods one can live in good health; other foods can make people sick or even kill them. There are different types of food: food that is eaten on a daily basis, food consumed every now and then, food for festivities, food for guests, food to cure diseases and food to pay *Taytacha*, or Father God.

According to the Andean classification system, plants and animals are organised in opposite pairs, like top-bottom, male-female, and cold-hot. Foods are classified in a similar way for their use in the treatment of diseases. For example, 'cold' foods are used to cure 'hot' diseases and vice versa.

## Perception of health and disease

According to the Andean cosmovision, people are healthy if they work, consume good food and if they live in harmony with Nature, animals, community, family and friends. When there is harmony with *Pachamama*, there is peace and prosperity.

When a person falls ill, it is a sign that there is no harmony between the *Pachamama* and one's body, soul and spirit. In order to get well, one can receive treatment from traditional healers,

like the *layas* or indigenous priests, the 'ones who know'. These healers can help their patients by asking the sacred hills, the sky and the sun to return health. In return the patient has to promise to mend his or her ways.

## Food for healing

The great variety of food available in the Andes does not only provide nourishment, but also good health. An example of a healing food is *tocosh*, a type of rotten potato that has a high natural antibiotic content. *Tocosh* is used for bronchial diseases. Other traditional foods like dehydrated potatoe, or *chuño*, are used by people who need to build up their strength after being ill. Roasted skunk and cat meat are used for bronchial and lung problems. These meats, as well as pigeon soup, can also help cure anaemia.

When women do not want more children they will eat the meat of a female *cuy* (*cavia porcellus*), an indigenous species of guinea pig. If they want to have more children, their husbands will drink the soup and eat the meat of a male *cuy*, an animal with many sexual hormones.

All over the Mantaro Valley nervous diseases are cured with a *cordial*, a drink made from wild flowers, which is sold in markets and at street corners. Herbal teas can be used for good or evil. The herbal tea called *rakiraki* is used to separate people, just as the *ratarata* tea is used to

join them. There are also forbidden food-stuffs according to the patient's age. Young boys should not eat too many eggs, for example, because this can lead to them liking sex too much when they become adults.

### Living food

In these Andean communities there are many customs involved in producing, harvesting and storing food. Food is treated like a living being. The women explain: "We care for our food at all times, for it is sacred. If we have no food, if we waste or spill it or do not respect it and love it, then the Taytacha gets upset and angry". "Pachamama tells us when we should sow, harvest, or if there will be enough rain. Animals, flowers, plants, even the water and the clouds give us signs. When we lift a stone and see drops of water under it, then we know it is time to start sowing".

"We believe that everything in Nature is alive. That is why the corn, potatoes, the water, the sun and moon can feel, and be happy or sad. When you throw a rock into the lake, it gets angry and hail will fall". "I feel sad when we sell or exchange our potatoes and hope they will be well taken care of". "One must only take what food is necessary and never waste it or give peoples' food to the animals. If we do that, we will have problems during the next harvest. Things will be scarce or will be spoilt. Moreover, we must never mix raw potatoes with cooked ones, for that is like putting a living man next to a dead man".

During the harvest, people in the Andes prepare *pachamanca*, which is a traditional dish from freshly harvested products cooked with heated stones under the ground. "When we eat from the pacha-

manca, we taste the sweetness of corn, beans and the potato. Everyone helps everybody else and we exchange food. The pachamanca can also tell what will happen. If there are too many heated stones, there will be a period of scarcity. If the meat is not well cooked when the pachamanca is opened, a member of the family will die".

### The sacred coca leaf

Coca leaves are always present on the altars. It is an indispensable food offering to the Pachamama and the Saints. It is also a tranquilliser and medicine for indigestion and coughs. Coca is also used to diagnose disease and to see what will happen in the future. During a ritual those who can read coca leaves observe their shape, colour and the way the leaves fall.

By exchanging foodstuffs with other communities, the people consume products grown at different altitudes. "Since we almost always eat without spices, we taste their different flavours. We can tell which community has produced the corn, beans or potatoes. We know them from their taste, colour, shape, size and their softness when cooked."

"When we have harvested more food than we need, we exchange it with other communities. In this way we complement and vary what we eat. Before we leave to make the exchange, we pray to find food and that our neighbours will receive us well. When we pass a *Tayta Cruz*, a cross on the top of a hill that protects the village, we place a small stone beneath it. Then we say: "Make me find potato and corn!" Only then do we go on to make the exchange or buy what we do not produce ourselves.

### Something is happening

Not all communities practice these customs and many of them are being lost. Many children are undernourished. The institutions that donate food, like the National Program of Food Support, are often conditioning their food aid to the support to a political party.

According to the women: "We think that receiving food is not good. Generally, the food we receive is of a lower quality than the food we produce ourselves. Many times the food arrives dirty, sometimes it has expired or is contaminated. We waste time and neglect our land when we wait in line to receive these donated food-stuffs. They give us bread today and hunger tomorrow."

Sometimes the rural families, especially the youngest ones, prefer to sell the dried vegetables and the eggs of their chicken to buy noodles and rice in the market. Unlike their parents, they do not believe in the importance of rituals and how food can provide possibilities for health and healing. They say: "You live way behind, mother, just sow! Why do you pray and give thanks to Pachamama if the potatoes will grow anyway!"

### Projects with food and health

Faced with this situation, many institutions are presently developing projects based on Andean cosmovision and culture. Some universities and rural development government organisations, that once considered Andean culture and technology as an obstacle for development, are now beginning to take more interest in the matter.

Talpuy has assumed this task in the Mantaro Valley in a cooperative way, and has joined the Compas-Huancayo Platform. The organisations in this platform are committed to revitalizing the Andean culture, cosmovision and technology in order to promote sustainable human development.

In the case of Talpuy, we have been working on food technologies and the relationship between food and health. These traditional food technologies, used to prevent diseases, may help to reduce the level of undernourishment and disease.

In this way, we can promote the consumption of Andean food crops as well as revitalise aspects of traditional Andean medicine.



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Photo: Talpuy

The *laya*, or traditional healer, buries a gift in the agricultural field, to pay the Pachamama after the harvest